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The Individual and the «Spiritual» World in Kafka's Novels

Abstract

Following an earlier essay by the same author on 'Perspektivismus und Parabolik' in Kafka's shorter prose pieces, this article gives a description of the structure of Kafka's novels in terms of the concepts 'the individual' (cf. Kierkegaard's 'individuals') and 'the spiritual world' (Kafka: «There is no world but the spiritual one»). Joseph K. and the land-surveyor K. become individuals by leaving the world of everyday life and passing over into the incomprehensible spiritual world of trials and a village-castle community, in the same way that Karl Rossmann had passed over into the 'Nature-theatre of Oklahoma' before them. And they remain as individuals, since in this world they struggle to hold their own. As they can only employ their intellect as an excessive mania for calculation in this struggle, any interpretation of the novels must end in the seemingly unanswerable question: how can such a struggle lead, on the one hand, to a free and rational form of existence and, on the other, to some form of relatedness with those strange spiritual worlds? This question has a direct bearing on the main conclusion of this essay, namely that the role of the parable becomes more and more important from one novel to the next: that is to say, the spiritual world attains universal validity for Kafka and proves to be the only world where life has any meaning.

Keywords

Franz Kafka, novels, spiritual world, spiritual

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE «SPIRITUAL WORLD» IN KAFKA'S NOVELS

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I

In Hermann Broch's novel *The Death of Virgil* a scene occurs in which the Emperor Augustus and the dying poet argue about the nature of reality. The Emperor puts forward the claims of concrete reality, whilst the poet argues the cause of the spirit. The Emperor says:

«...one cannot live in a morass of images...»

«Let us not forget that there is such a thing as reality, even if we ourselves are limited to expressing it in images and to shaping it thus... we live and that is reality, simple, unadorned reality.»

Virgil does not answer the Emperor directly - rather his reply comes in the form of an inner monologue:

Only through the image is life to be grasped, only through the image can the image be expressed; the chain of images is infinite; only death is imageless. The chain stretches out towards death, as if it were the last link, and yet something already beyond the chain - as if all images were only made for death's sake, to somehow grasp, in spite of everything, death's absence of image....(1)

This most impressive passage in Broch gives us a glimpse of an understanding of language and reality which I wish to pursue in this study. The view is not presented simply - rather it appears in a perspective which is, as it were, «refracted.» If we look at

Kafka's text «On Parables» (B 96),(2) then a similar «refraction» is present. Broch's Emperor Augustus, representing the world of political pragmatism, concedes to the poet and his world of images a certain right to exist. . But what he calls reality and life is something quite different. Reality has for him its own laws which, if broken, bring down punishment. Virgil, on the other hand, claims universal validity for his world of images and declares the force of its irresistible challenge. The challenge is also directed to the «man of action» and is delivered in the name of life and of a meaningful way of dying.

In twentieth century literature, Broch is by no means alone in raising such a claim. One could indeed reduce the whole of modern poetics to a single formula which would read: from image to image, from mirror to mirror, from likeness to likeness. As Rilke says in his poem «To Hölderlin»:

*To linger, even among most familiar things,
is not our part; for from the already fulfilled
images the spirit plummets to those waiting, empty...(3)*

This formula can be applied structurally to Kafka's work. And yet the representatives of modern literature are far from being of one opinion here. Hermann Broch's Virgil lives, thinks and speaks entirely within his images. He spins himself a cocoon of them. He is swept away by a lush poetic language which can, like music, numb our rational consciousness. Kafka, on the other hand, seems to want to show us in every sentence that he sees language as inadequate to the task of creating the poetic world which he envisages. His fundamental experience is: that we have no proper language for our images. In Kafka we see the problem of language and reality at its most acute. Broch still has the concept of the symbol. He can still write in more or less secure possession of an older theory of meaning. In other words, for him everyday language can rise above its own banality of expression. It can come close to saying the «ineffable» whenever an artist applies to it those means, such as musicality, that make clear that the words are being used not in their «real» meaning - but in a way that is somehow above ordinary reality.

Now, for Kafka the writer has one great difficulty. He can no longer use language «for purposes of comparison.» None-

theless, Kafka writes narratives using images; he writes parables. This is generally accepted in Kafka criticism. The image as parable has a different sense from the passage I quoted from Broch at the beginning. I should like, for the purposes of this study, to define the parable as follows: it is a narrative using images towards a practical end. The text of a parable always culminates - whether implicitly or explicitly - in the instruction: «Go thou and do likewise.» In Kafka we find this imperative expressed at a very salient point, namely at the end of the text I mentioned earlier, «On Parables»:

«... If you were to follow the way of the parables, then you would have become parables yourselves and thus already free of your daily burdens.»

(B 96)

When the parables call on us to follow their command, what they want from us is a readiness to be transformed. Transformation is for Rilke the essence of all art - why else would one of his Apollo Sonnets end with the line: «You must transform your life»(4)?

If we look more closely at Kafka's text «On Parables,» then we observe that the «multitude,» who resist the command of the parables, argue just like Augustus in *The Death of Virgil*. As far as they are concerned, there may well be such things as images or parables, but above all there is reality and this must not be confused with the sphere of images. The man of action, who stands with both his feet firmly planted in life, can learn nothing of pragmatic value from such images.

II

I have written and published an essay in which I reviewed Kafka's parables--in other words, the greater part of his short prose works--and there I tried to show how the world of his parables is made up and how, in each case, the individual relates to such a world.(5) The «individuals» in Kafka tend to be portrayed with the use of psychological perspectives. When they confront a world of parable, the relationship always seems different from text to text. To take as an example one of Kafka's best known shorter pieces, «The Imperial Message» (E 169 f.),

we see that there the message sent out by a dying emperor and the individual for whom it is destined are brought in relation to one another - although the message can never arrive. The individual here obeys the implicit command of the parable by creating the message for himself in a dream. This creation signifies that he «passes over» into the world of the parable.

More relevant for Kafka's novels are the longer parables, such as «The Judgment» (E 53 ff.). Here Georg Bendemann's environment transforms itself into a kind of transcendent «anti-world» for him. Previously he seemed to have it under rational control, but its new form is beyond him. From this transcendent world the imperative reaches him in the form of a sentence of death. Unhesitatingly, he carries it out. In Kafka's work it seems to be the case that only the states of dream and death allow the doors of a transcendent world to open.

And yet, these worlds of parable are often astonishingly concrete environments. Men can live in them, make their existence meaningful in them and die a meaningful death there. «In the Penal Colony» (E 197 ff.) is a story where life and death were entirely meaningful in the past, whereas in the present we see the crisis and destruction of this world. The explorer, who reminds us of the «land-surveyor» in *The Castle* because of his profession, does not belong to this world. He is an «enlightened» person and his judgment of life in the penal colony destroys a spiritual world that was quite closed within itself. For he shatters the belief of the last representative of the spiritual order, transforms him also into an «individual,» who can no longer find that meaningful «death in the machine.» «What all the others found there» (E 234) now escapes him. Through an act of revolution - one that affects the consciousness - the spirit has been expelled from the penal colony and in that instant the world of parable ceases to exist.

This story shows one extreme possibility in Kafka's thinking: a completely antagonistic relationship between the individual - here the explorer - and a world which he completely fails to comprehend. Moreover the story shows the process of emerging from such a spiritual world, and this is relevant to the «struggle» of the main characters in *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Equally clearly, the story shows that worlds of parable do not have to be like Plato's Realm of Ideas, eternal and above time. Rather, they can be decadent and vulnerable. In this way they may be

«historical» worlds. By this I mean that the spirit can lose its function in them. Its function was to create meaning by offering redemption in death.

Between the two extremes of «The Judgment» and «The Penal Colony,» Kafka's shorter prose pieces offer a wide range of possible relations between an individual and the world he confronts. Such worlds may indeed be initially seen as concrete social reality and presented through a psychological narrative. This is the case in «The Metamorphosis» and the beginning of «The Judgment.» As Kafka's work develops, the contact between the worlds of parable and concrete reality becomes closer. In the end Kafka's position appears to be that there is only one kind of world and that this can only appear in literature as a world of parable. The individuals, whilst remaining individuals, are now drawn into the worlds of parable. This is the case in the stories «The Burrow» and «Josefine, the Singer.» That individuals can be so integrated must be seen as part of the universal claim made by Kafka's work. Moreover it tells us something very significant about the historical position his thinking occupies today.

For us in the present it is less important to see what obstacles the literary tradition presented to Kafka than to perceive most clearly what he made of his own direction. Therefore I should like to concentrate for a moment on further defining the two terms: «the individual» - «the spiritual world.»

III

By taking Kafka's work as my starting point, then, I do not understand the individual as being necessarily the isolated man of the modern age, the mind cut off from reality in the tradition of Descartes. Often Kafka's characters *do* appear like this, I admit. They seem to have shrugged off everything that bound them. They are obliged to think and act entirely from their own resources. But this type of individual shows in Kafka again and again that he can perform the action of «passing over» into a completely new and strange world. In this way Kafka's characters remind us of the view of the individual in the work of Kierkegaard and Buber. But such family resemblances are not final. It is precisely because of such resemblances that I should like to leave the concept of the individual in Kafka's work as open

as possible. In this way we will not preempt what may be seen from the novels themselves. In any event, Kafka's individuals are quite accessible to the reader by virtue of the fact that Kafka tells his tales from the individual's perspective. One can identify with Kafka's heroes if one wants to. At the same time, this closeness between reader and character may disturb the total perception of the work.

Now for the «spiritual world.» The expression comes from Kafka himself. He uses it in his notebooks from the years 1917-1918 and in the collection of aphorisms derived from these. It is, here, one of his most significant concepts. Kafka uses the term «world» in any case very often and with different connotations. Let us try and see what he means by «spiritual world.»

Initially there seems to be a clear opposition between this concept and what he calls «the world of the senses» (H 45, No. 57; H 49, No. 85), the «physical» (H 71 f.), the «entire visible world» (H 49, No. 86). This looks like a dualism in the idealist tradition. But there are a lot of ambivalences here, for Kafka does not think in static categories, but rather dynamically, using what Gerhard Neumann has called the «sliding paradox».(6) In this way the simple opposition I spoke of can disappear. We find instead the dialectical assimilation of the non-spiritual into the spiritual:

There is no world but that of the spirit; what we call the world of the senses is nothing but the principle of evil in the spiritual world....

(H 44, Nr. 54; cf. H 91)

This was written in December 1917, but is by no means an isolated example. It represents the exact counterpart of the artistic principle I spoke of earlier, namely that there is ultimately, in Kafka's shorter works, only one kind of world and this is entirely a world of parable. The statement is also relevant for the development in the structures of Kafka's novels. For we may say with some certainty that the dimension of Kafka's novels in which he employs his parable-technique constitutes the «spiritual world» of these works. This means that such parables elude the understanding and have no equivalents in empirical reality. How then the world of the senses could ever appear as the «principle of evil» in the spiritual world remains for the moment an open question.

There are two further aspects of what Kafka calls «spiritual» that I must mention here. Firstly, the medium of the parable is used to address a call or summons to the individual. This may go so far as to be a personal summons by name. Secondly, the world of parable represents something generally valid in contrast to the individual in his singularity. Normally this generally valid principle is called in Kafka's work «the Law.» As I have mentioned, the worlds of parable in Kafka's writing become increasingly populated environments, whilst the individual must continue to exist outside of them and in a tense relationship to them. We must not expect «the Law» in Kafka to assume tangible contents and meaning - but it does, as a generally valid principle, represent the hidden centre of these worlds of parable and a magnet which draws the individual to it.

IV

It is now time to apply what I have said generally about Kafka's thought to the novels themselves and show how the ideas derived from the short prose pieces dominate the novels thematically and structurally. In each case we shall be looking at the very clear relation which is established between individual and world. But it is characteristic of these relations that they change very significantly from work to work, and the changes occur on both sides of the connexion.

The novel *America* - «Der Verschollene» («a person lost without trace», as Kafka would doubtless have called it in the end) - still preserves the contours of the realist novel of the 19th century. Kafka himself drew attention to Dickens' *David Copperfield* as his point of orientation within the genre. A young man whose thoughts we can readily understand, who is idealistic and inexperienced in the ways of the world, someone from a respectable German home, but not a Jewish one according to the author(7) - this young man is transplanted into an alien reality. We can specify this reality as capitalist America in the early 20th century. Despite this, the novel is from the beginning in no genuine sense realistic. For a kind of surrealist light falls on the series of events that mark Karl Rossmann's way and colours them increasingly. In this way it is indicated that such events have a further dimension of meaning beyond the psychological and sociological content of Karl's encounters and experiences. Exactly

what this dimension signifies remains obscure, transcends the consciousness. In the episode with Brunelda, the seventh and last of the chapters he wrote towards the end of 1912 (A 234 ff.), Kafka almost attains the semiotic structure of his later novels as the language is here directed particularly towards an «alien» dimension of imagery and meaning, towards an excess of obscure implication.(8)

Nonetheless, this way of transforming reality into parable did not content Kafka. For, two years later he took up the novel again and employed a quite new poetic. In what Max Brod called «the Nature-theatre of Oklahoma» and made the last chapter in his edition, Kafka creates a «higher» reality which presents a level of narration over and above the empirical world. Kafka is closer here to allegory and fairy-tale than elsewhere in his work. For in shaping this world of images he places most emphasis on the «spiritual» aspect, and in this world the hero experiences all the happiness of which the real world has cheated him in a series of fairy-tale encounters. The angels blowing trumpets from high pedestals, the emptiness of the vast stadium and so on are reminiscent of early Surrealist painting, notably the Italian school of *pittura metafisica* which arose at much the same time as Kafka was writing. In a sense this school represents a «spiritual» dimension in modern painting, as - far from trying to reproduce the world we see - it used the empty spaces of the Italian market-place as a stage on which the Invisible could appear.

This analogy seems to me important for an assessment of Kafka's modernity. But it was not of final importance for the writer's future development. Rather, his way leads via the technique which he developed in the earlier chapter of *America*. Where the «Nature-theatre» does remain relevant however is in the model it presents for the «passing over» of an individual into an alien, non-empirical world. This pattern is fundamental for the next two novels.

V

The bank-official Josef K., who lets himself become involved in a quite incomprehensible «court-case», receives the summons: «Follow the way of the parables» in a very literal sense. For in the scene in the cathedral, he has told to him the parable «Before the Law.» This is meant to correct his understanding of the

«Court» which no one knows and, beyond this, to influence his whole behaviour. Initially the preacher speaks of a «deception» and the parable is intended to explain to K. what this means. Such a deception can only reside in the fact that K. has not recognised his arrest as his own personal entry into «the Law.» The parable sets out to show him that he has made just as great a mistake in his estimation of and conduct towards the Court as the man in the parable makes with regard to the door keeper. Both have taken one step into an alien, spiritual world. In K.'s case this step is his acknowledgment that he has been arrested. But both continue to think and act in the manner to which they are accustomed in the everyday world and thus they rob themselves of the chance to lead a meaningful life and die a meaningful death. The critical opinion that there is no alternative offered these characters, either in the parable «Before the Law» or in *The Trial* itself, or that very alternative must lead to the same negative result, is to my mind misleading and I wish to counter it with two arguments.

Firstly, in the last chapter of the novel K. almost manages to execute a sentence of death on himself in as decisive a manner as George Bendemann in «The Judgment.» In complete harmony with his executioners, whom he immediately recognises as intended «for him» (P 266), he crosses a bridge. Here Kafka uses the same sign for a «passing over» as in «The Judgment.» Josef K. chooses the way itself and hurries ahead of his two executioners. But his behaviour has always been marked by a strange and paradoxical coincidence of obedience and resistance and so, in the last moment, there is yet another reversal. K. is not ready to bring about his own death, although this «would have been his duty» (P 271), and so dies «like a dog» (P 272).

Secondly, in one of the fragments belonging to the work, Kafka places in opposition to this factual and meaningless death an alternative version. The fragment, entitled «A Dream» (E 181 ff.) was significant enough for the author to be published separately in the collection *A Country Doctor*. Here K. has a dream in which he is instinctively drawn towards a freshly made grave where an artist is carving an inscription on the headstone. After various false starts and hesitations, K. suddenly understands that it is his own death that is demanded of him. And so he brings this about in a way that closely resembles the death of Georg Bendemann - and without any hesitation. As he, impelled by some current of force, sinks into the earth he sees his name

«in strong, ornate letters» (E 183) flash across the headstone, just as in «The Judgment» an «infinite traffic» (E 68) passes over the bridge from which George Bendemann throws himself into the river.

Why does K. fail to achieve in his waking state what he dreams in such perfection? The answer I would like to suggest here is based on the difference of genre between the short prose forms and the novels. In the short, dense parables, and in those stories which have the character of parables, the complexity of social life is usually excluded. Rather, certain fundamental problems of human existence are presented figuratively and in a kind of pristine purity. In such a context it is possible to portray the recognition of guilt, the clear verdict and the voluntary execution of sentence. The novel, on the other hand, tries by its nature to comprehend a totality. Kafka's novels show a form of existence that is heavily socially determined: it is a corrupt society against which the main character struggles, whilst at the same time his whole thinking is conditioned by it. In such a framework there can be no pure and immediate actions - neither in life nor in death.

Now we must ask: how are the two narrative techniques - that of realism and that of the parable - structurally related to one another in *The Trial*? In other words: how does the empirical world relate to the «spiritual» in the novel? At first sight they seem like two stories built one above the other in the edifice of the work. The lower story is the «real world» - the level of the daily life of the main character, and this is perfectly accessible to rational analysis. Here Josef K. is exposed to the effects of concrete social realities. It is quite clear to the reader how he has so far lived as an official of the large bank, with its hierarchical structure, and how his private life in his boarding house is composed. He is an average kind of hero, adapted to his existence, relatively successful in his job, thanks to ambition and a calculating way of behaving, but in human terms impoverished and isolated.

To remain with our image of a two-storied building: from the first sentence of the novel this «ground floor» reality which I have just described acquires, literally, an upper level. For in the moment of his arrest the world divides for K., and his consciousness reflects the division. There remains the dimension of life as he has so far lived it - the only reality he has known. Then