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1. "'You,' I Said . . . ": Kafka Early and Late

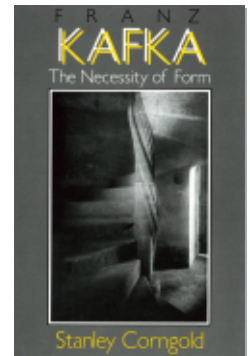
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PART I

Kafka's Career

Chapter One

“‘You,’ I Said . . .”: Kafka Early and Late

If Kafka was to such an extent entirely himself, even in the monotonous sense of having nothing in common with himself, this is even truer of the writer of the *Diaries*.¹ His language there neither develops nor declines: from the start it has found its voice, an elegant, otherworldly literalism; from the start it has closed with its own great themes, so that the relation of early to later parts of the *Diaries* is not the serial relation of beginning and end in narrative but the prefigurative relation of part to whole in the hermeneutic circle.

Kafka's intensity is present in an early diary entry, which reveals powers of analysis (especially the analysis of the inner life of writing) of so formidable a moral and metaphysical tendency that they can be assumed to inform the novels as well, although they are occulted there by different feats of social invention and rhetoric.² The entry, written sometime between July 19 and November 6, 1910, when Kafka was twenty-seven, is found on the seventh page of Kafka's German diaries (DI 22). It begins “‘You,’ I said” and consists mainly of a dialogue between speakers called “I” and “he” (“he” is later termed “this bachelor”). The venue is an open city street or alley, and the time, “really very late.” Despite the fact that these voices issue out

1. Kafka warned Felice against “the monotonous blur of . . . [his] personality” (LF 211).

2. I find striking the distinction between the spiritual brilliance of the confessional writings and the novels' travesties of grayness.

of human bodies, it is hard to conceive of the speakers as empirical personalities; the relation of intention to bodily gesture is too odd or incoherent.

"You," I said and gave him a little shove with my knee (at this sudden utterance some saliva flew from my mouth as an evil omen), "don't fall asleep!"

"I'm not falling asleep," he answered, and shook his head while opening his eyes. . . .

"It's really very late," I said. I had to smile a little and in order to conceal it I looked intently into the house. [DI 22–23]

This house will be crucial: there a gathering is taking place which "I" wishes to join. The possibility of his "ascending" is the first important subject of the conversation. The bachelor declares that "I" could try to go up the stairs, but it is pointless; if he does go up, he will soon enough find himself back on the street. On the other hand, he says that "I" should not hesitate on his account.

"I" does, however, hesitate; it matters enormously to him whether or not the bachelor is telling the truth. The bachelor has specified the danger of the ascent, and "I" may be identified and rejected from a place of ineffable splendor. When the bachelor next reveals that, indeed, he has not been telling the truth, "I" finds his voice. He speaks the speech that dominates the entire dialogue—an articulation of the differences between the bachelor and himself, elaborated in a web of images and categories powerfully prefiguring the discourse of existential thought.³ To this harangue the bachelor replies with a feeble

3. I write this *pace* Theodor Adorno, who in "Notes on Kafka," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Spearman, 1967), pp. 245, 248, considers as "existentialism" and of little account most of what has been written on Kafka, for it fails to respond to "the principle of literalness as criterion." Gerhard Neumann, too, in "Umkehrung und Ablenkung: Franz Kafkas 'Gleitendes Paradox,'" in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Heinz Politzer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), p. 508, identifies as a "misunderstanding" the view that "Kafka's work belongs in the sphere of Existenzphilosophie." He does, however, suggest that its concern for a "more primordial logic" of reversal and slippage might "show the traces of existential thought." An important thrust of Gerhard Kurz's *Traum-Schrecken: Kafka's literarische Existenzanalyse* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980) is, as its title suggests, the fundamental kinship of Kafka's work with existentialist thought and Expressionist poetry. This is a view I share. See my "Angst und Schreiben in einer frühen Aufzeichnung Kafkas," in *Franz Kafka Symposium*, ed. Maria Luise Caputo-Mayr (Berlin: Agora, 1978), p. 60: "From the outset Kafka's work is saturated with fundamental existentialist themes like anxiety, guilt, selfhood, interpretation, fiction."

complaint about his solitude. “I” thereupon withdraws from the dialogue. At the close, his words appear without quotation marks; the I has become a persona virtually identical with the narrator. And it is this persona that plainly declares the bachelor to be a menace to life.

What is the light that glances off this grimacing text?⁴ What can it be if not, in part, rays scattered from the source of Kafka’s greatest concern in 1910: the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of his destiny as a writer, his great intimation, his hope?⁵ For in 1910 Kafka could look back on at least a dozen years of literary activity that had not gone entirely without recognition. In 1907 he had written the novel-fragment “Wedding Preparations in the Country”; and before 1908 he had composed various prose sketches, several of which appeared in the magazine *Hyperion* in 1908 and were subsequently to appear in the volume *Meditation* in 1912. Some pieces mentioned in his diaries as part of a “mountain,” a “mass,” were avowedly destroyed by Kafka, and others have been lost. But enough of his literary ambition had been realized for Max Brod to assign Kafka in 1907—before he had published a line, yet not as a joke—that “sacred” place alongside Heinrich Mann, Wedekind, Meyrink, and Blei.

For Kafka, however, writing was always an ordeal. Not to write was to risk going mad from the vapidness of experience, but to write was perhaps to discover that here too lay only a devilish seduction. It was crucial to contend with literature. Thus, in 1910, after “five months of my life during which I could write nothing that would have satisfied me . . . it occurs to me to talk to myself again” (DI 12). With these words (preceded by a few paragraphs) Kafka begins the *Diaries*. The purpose of his diaries is therefore marked out from the start: to articulate a self in order to liberate writing, but only that self and as much of that self fitted to the purpose of liberating writing. “My condition is not unhappiness . . . not weakness, not fatigue, not another interest—so what is it then? That I do not know this is probably connected with my inability to write.” To get to the bottom of it, Kafka determines that “every day at least one line should be trained on me, as they now train telescopes on comets. And if then I

4. This light is Kafka’s image for what is true. “Our art is a way of being dazzled by truth: the light on the grotesquely grimacing retreating face is true, and nothing else” (DF 41).

5. Kafka wrote his fiancée several years later: “I have no literary interests, but am made of literature. I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else” (LF 304).

should appear before that sentence once, lured by that sentence . . .” (DI 12).

These passages constitute a starting point. In one sense Kafka—an “I”—already possesses himself (he identifies the “I” as perplexed, as ignorant of its state). But in a more important sense, he does not possess himself (he does not know what this state is). Now it is at “me”—the unknown state—that lines shall be aimed; and as aiming implies an aimer, the initial division is repeated: at an obscure astral referent a detective authorial consciousness aims sentences. Its purpose is to draw into existence a new modality of itself as a reader, a watcher of the skies, which will instantly vanish into the writer.

These sentences, it is important to stress, do originate from an “I.” The subject exists apart from the writing self if only as the consciousness of a lack—of an empirical state that is not yet evident. It exists practically as the intention to deploy words to shape this lack or lure shape into it. The purposive character of this language distinguishes it from the language that is supposed to arise after this need has been filled in. This first language, the psychological language of the ego, has a purely instrumental value. The literary language that this tool means to liberate has no assigned use value except to attest unavoidably to the history that precedes it—namely, to the merely instrumental and incomplete character of its precondition of empirical self-possession. Literary language here asserts the insufficiency of the existential (*existentiell*) project, never mind that the project is successful in luring hither the empirical personality and even in incorporating it.⁶ On the other hand, the state of mind Kafka suffers or enjoys in

6. “Literature does not fulfill a plenitude but originates in the void that separates intent from reality. The imagination takes its flight only after the void, the inauthenticity of the existential project, has been revealed; literature begins where the existential demystification ends” (Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, rev. 2d ed. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983], pp. 234–35). During most of his life, Kafka regarded empirical self-reflection as by and large a vacuous enterprise—especially from the standpoint of writing fiction. In empirical self-reflection, language is used as a tool. Where its use breaks off is a matter of chance, since what is certain is that it cannot achieve its end. To do so would be to coincide with its object, but it cannot coincide with the empirical or any other kind of self, which is not an object but an agency of transformation. “With respect to language,” writes Claude Vigée, “one can hold two positions. . . . Either one views language as a tool for doing work—in this sense, language, exactly like other things, will, in a certain finite sense, work and even work very well, but at this point it is done with. That is the finitude of language, which makes no further claim; at the end of the

poetic activity has a nonintentional character: in a word that he will invent later, it is a state of being, *Schriftstellersein*, being as a writer; but it falls out of an order of uses. The diary text cited above, which just precedes the story “‘You,’ I said . . .,” is exemplary: it shows Kafka wishing to be cured of his “neurasthenia” in order to write; he does not write stories for self-help.

It therefore becomes inevitable to connect the “I” of the story “‘You,’ I said . . .” to the subject that, knowing its ignorance of its hidden side, employs dialogical language in order to precipitate a language of fiction meant to exceed itself. Its task is metamorphosis. The genre of the story is therefore mixed—and modern: via the act of writing it enacts in fact and in its topic fictively reenacts the difficulty of a subject cut off from knowledge of its state—a self that then gradually identifies its state and frees itself to write. I connect the “you” or bachelor figure to the unknown factor, a negative hidden possibility of the “I.” Certainly, the “I” of the story does consistently project its interlocutor as unknown. Thus “I” says to the bachelor: “If I just knew definitely that you were being sincere with me [were telling me the truth, *daß du aufrichtig zu mir bist*]. . . . But how could I even tell whether you were sincere with me [were telling me the truth, *ob du aufrichtig zu mir bist*]?” (DI 24; Ta 18). Furthermore, since the “I” aims to liberate writing by overcoming the resistance of its anti-self, it follows that the basic sense of the bachelor must be that mode of the self which hinders (genuine) writing, whose being is resistant to articulation.⁷ He cannot literally be part of writing, even of the language of introspection; he might be glimpsed through the telescope, but he is not part of the telescope. The bachelor can thus enter writing only as a paradox or a lie, as something basically unin-

day, one stands there with it, alone, like a beggar. . . . Or one can use the entire structure of a language as a means of resurrection. A means too, but for another end: the resurrection of ourselves from out of this finitude—this immobility” (*Heimat des Hauches: Gedichte und Gespräche* [Bühl-Moos: Elster, 1985], pp. 139–40). That is why Kafka’s diary, which confessedly arises as the project to get hold of the empirical self and hence to use language as a tool, intends to abandon its project as swiftly as possible so as to become literature. It wishes to become a site in which work arises that is precisely not “psychology.” Kafka had a horror of psychology, which he likened to a dog chasing its tail. Psychologizing, the hunter Gracchus becomes a butterfly.

7. Chapters Four and Twelve discuss further the question of the necessary distortion of the truth of whatever can emerge in Kafka’s narrative perspective.

telligible. And indeed these characteristics of the bachelor are evident in the piece: the bachelor is defined as a being frozen in the obliviousness of an early event—an experience of his “depth”—and the persistence with which he remains unconscious of his depth defines him as a “patched-up existence,” as “no better than some sort of vermin” (DI 25, 23).

These images define the bachelor—but of course they do so only elliptically and allusively. For, as Kafka wrote, nothing outside the phenomenal world can be named even approximately by metaphors (*vergleichsweise*; H 40). The obstacle to writing precedes phenomenality, is intrinsically hidden, and hence cannot come to light except as what it is not. It appears as an excessively distorted figure. Thus the “I” hastens to add: “But forgetting [or obliviousness] is not the right word here” (DI 26), conjuring, then, other qualities of the bachelor. These images, however, together with earlier ones, all converge on the meaning of radical isolation, heterogeneousness, and obscurity. The man who without any choice in the matter “lie[s] here in the gutter . . . stowing away the rain water” (DI 23), “avoid[ing] the influence of other people,” with “teeth only for his own flesh and flesh only for his own teeth” (DI 24), is finally proscribed; he is declared to stand “once and for all outside our people, outside our humanity . . . he has only the moment, the everlasting moment of torment” (DI 26). By the end of the piece he has become a “parasite” and then, finally, a “corpse” (DI 28).

Consider again this identification of the bachelor as the opaque obstacle to the life of writing. One is at once reminded of the kindred nonbeings who will afterward figure in Kafka's stories—the cross-bred lambcat and Odradek and especially the “monstrous vermin” of *The Metamorphosis*. The latter is indeed radically unintelligible: he is not meant to conjure a creature of some definite kind. This would be to experience the vermin the way the cleaning woman does who calls him “old dung beetle” But “to forms of address like these Gregor would not respond; they do not reflect his uncanny identity, which cannot be grasped in an image” (M 45). Indeed, the bachelor of “‘You,’ I said . . .” is a prefiguration of the transmogrified Gregor Samsa; he too is described as requiring for his existence certain “ceremonies amid which I can barely keep on crawling,” again, “no better than some sort of vermin” (DI 23).

Other details of the piece confirm this analysis. Interesting evidence comes from the text that Max Brod prints as a variant of this diary entry (Ta 691–92). The variant distributes differently the characteristics of the speakers. To the bachelor’s question, “How long have you been in the city?” “I” replies, “*Five months*” (DI 29; my italics). Now it is not incidental that it has also been for five months that Kafka has existed as his anti-self, the nonwriter (this fact, we recall, prompted him to begin his journal). Thus the “I,” an explicit projection of Kafka’s will to liberate writing, has spent five months in the city, the habitat of the bachelor, where writing cannot survive.

What emerges is that the bachelor—and by implication the bachelor figure abounding in Kafka’s work around this period—is by no means an immediate portrait of Kafka’s social personality, the alleged futile outcast from the joys of family. The bachelor is a figurative constellation, born out of anxiety and steeped in anxiety, a monster produced from the copulation of writing and nonwriting. It can be understood only as part of a general structure necessarily entailing anxiety—the existence of literature as a domain altogether different from life, inscribing into resistant nature the hollow cipher of its itinerary: signature, womb, or wound. Literature gives birth to a new mode of being and—more visibly in this story—to a new mode of nonbeing, its own intrusive negation, the horrible complement of *Schriřtstellersein*: namely, *Nicht-Schriřtstellersein-können*.

Strange and mostly negative as these formulations may sound, they are compelled by the imagery with which in “‘You,’ I Said . . .” Kafka describes the genesis of the bachelor. This genesis is not to be understood as the metaphor of an empirical event but as the narrative of a structure of relations. The bachelor is defined by his blockage of a primordial situation corresponding to the origin of literature. The situation is one of the discovery of the “depth” of a literary existence, “the way one suddenly notices an ulcer on one’s body that until this moment was the least thing on one’s body—yes, not even the least, for it appeared not yet to exist and now is more than everything else that we had bodily owned since our birth” (DI 26).

The experience of the nonbeing of bodily life is the dialectical adjunct of literature, which Kafka will later call “the tremendous world I have in my head” (DI 288). The original assertion of literature displaces the empirical self: “If until now our whole person had been

oriented upon the work of our hands, upon that seen by our eyes, heard by our ears, upon the steps made by our feet, now we suddenly turn ourselves entirely in the opposite direction [into an element wholly opposed, *ins Entgegengesetzte*], like a weather vane in the mountains" (DI 26; Ta 21).⁸ With this revelation of what may well be seen as the "guilt" that Heidegger too defines as the "null basis of existence," everything is terribly changed.⁹ One's course henceforth can be only to initiate an act arising from this experience. If it were only to have "run away . . . even in this latter direction," it would still be to move in a way requiring a sort of exquisite balance—in Kafka's phrase, forever after being "on the tips of one's toes" (DI 16). But here the bachelor originates as the negative of this response: he is the primordial failure to respond to this experience except in a way that Kafka describes figuratively as a lying-down, a freezing, a submission, and a forgetfulness. The bachelor's new element is a nullity proportional to writing; he exists as the refusal to acknowledge his initial failure. He beds down, oblivious, in the nothingness that results from the original dislocation of literature: he domesticates anxiety.

The equation of literature with a basic dislocation of bodily life, originating a hollowness "now more than everything else that we had bodily owned since our birth" (DI 26), is confirmed by a later diary entry that explicitly links the ideal of writing with continual withering:

When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions. This was necessary because the totality of my strengths was so slight that only collectively could they even halfway serve the purpose of my writing. Naturally, I did not find this purpose independently and consciously, it found itself. [DI 211]

The bachelor is the figure for the refusal to acknowledge the ontological guilt of atrophy in all directions.

8. See Chapter Five.

9. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 331.

If Kafka is to live, it is crucial for him to conceive his own emptiness not as sheer sacrifice but as potential exchange. His ability to sustain the superior self as anything except erosion, however, is uncertain. As such the bachelor grows more menacing. Two years later Kafka writes:

My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. Nothing else will ever satisfy me. But the strength I can muster for that portrayal is not to be counted upon: perhaps it has already vanished forever, perhaps it will come back to me again, although the circumstances of my life don't favor its return. Thus I waver, continually fly to the summit of the mountain, but then fall back in a moment. Others waver too, but in lower regions, with greater strength; if they are in danger of falling, they are caught up by the kinsman who walks beside them for that very purpose. But I waver on the heights; it is not death, alas, but the eternal torments of dying. [DII 77]

This hesitation, this wavering, stripped of its moments on the heights, is the life of the bachelor: a perpetual nostalgia for what has been lost. What he succeeds in recapturing this way is “his former property only in seeming”—once his and lost. He thus exacerbates the process of universal dissolution, is perpetually in pursuit of what a dissolving world has ineluctably dissolved of him. “He has only one thing always: his pain; in all the circumference of the world no second thing that could serve as a medicine; he has only as much ground as his two feet take up, only as much of a hold as his two hands encompass, so much the less, therefore, than the circus trapeze artist . . . who still has a safety net hung up for him below” (DI 26–27).

The predicament of the writer is that he cannot muster strength from literature as the immediate clarity of a sensation. “The inner world can only be experienced, not described” (DF 65). The “depth” does not assure the plenitude of literature but an anxious absence or nullity confirmed by its image: “And this depth I need but feel uninterruptedly for a quarter of an hour and the poisonous world flows into my mouth like water into that of a drowning man” (DI 25). This sense of nullity is identical with anxiety. Years later, in 1922, in a letter to Max Brod, Kafka will write a definitive testament to literature: Writing is “the reward for serving the devil,” a service that

“take[s] place in the nether parts which the higher parts no longer know, when one writes one's stories in the sunshine. Perhaps there are other forms of writing, but I know only this kind; at night, when fear [anxiety, *Angst*] keeps me from sleeping” (L 333–34; Br 384). After twelve years of service the connection of writing and anxiety, except for the somewhat darker tonality, has not changed; for in 1910 Kafka wrote to Max Brod, a few months after composing “‘You,’ I said . . .”: “This being on my own heels is still a joy that warms me—for it stirs in me that general excitement [anxiety, *Unruhe*] which produces the only possible equilibrium” (L 70; Br 68). This joy and activity nevertheless import a turn from life so radical that Kafka will name it again and again with the imagery of death. Thus he writes to Felice Bauer: “My attitude to my writing . . . is unchangeable; it is a part of my nature, and not due to temporary circumstances. What I need for my writing is seclusion, not ‘like a hermit,’ that would not be enough, but like the dead. Writing, in this sense, is a sleep deeper than that of death” (LF 279). Accompanying a movement so deeply turned away from life is the anxiety that can be experienced as the pure signature of literature or else be allowed its frigid spawn—a being whose whole meaning is to resist further metamorphosis. This is principally the bachelor, the figure for the misery of nonbeing.

Given this exegetic structure, many other elements of the story come into focus. The house into which the “I” is reluctant to enter cannot but mean, in Henry James's phrase, the house of art: “From that company,” says the “I,” “I promise myself everything that I lack, the organization of my strength, above all” (DI 24). The phrase almost certainly prefigures the passage above (DI 211) in which Kafka speaks of writing as the organizing principle of his powers. Quite consistently, the “I” terms this scene a place of metamorphosis. That the bachelor, but not the “I,” sees the house and its society as a party—its joy the tipsiness of wine, its light the brilliance of chandeliers—is a grand joke and one that makes perfect sense. To see writing as a kind of superior public life, as glory and power in reward for lesser sacrifices, is exactly the perspective best calculated to hinder this commitment. The bachelor exacerbates and arrests every anxiety generated in the self by the movement of literature.

Kafka battles for a stand. To choose literature over life is in principle to risk empowering its anti-self, anxiety at an excruciating stand-

still. But we know the outcome, as he then did not: “The tremendous world that I have in my head. But how free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me” (DI 288). At the close of this story, the “I” breaks off from his anti-self, the task of definition having been accomplished, for a time. I cannot agree with Heinz Politzer’s reading of this conclusion as a fatigued merging of the figures of artist and bachelor.¹⁰ The project should not be denied its momentary elation: the possibility of a “little attempt at independence” is realized; Kafka recognizes the bachelor for the death he implies. This victory emerges in the gradual concentration throughout the story of powers of language in the “I” and of an ever drearier everyday rhetoric in the bachelor. This movement comes to a head at the close. Here it is no longer the ruminating ego but literature that finds its voice. It conceives an ecstatic image to celebrate itself amid the devastation it inflicts or, more, amid the tribute it obtains even from the life it devastates: “Already, what protected me seemed to dissolve here in the city. I was beautiful in the early days, for this dissolution takes place as an apotheosis, in which everything that holds us to life flies away, but even in flying away illumines us for the last time with its human light” (DI 28).

* * *

What Kafka states in his confessional writing—information about his desire for an inhuman bliss—he enacts and evokes in writing fiction. Confessional writing is the immediate form of his flight from anxiety; fiction comes about as the transformation of anxiety into ecstasy. This instant marks the metamorphosis of one sort of self-loss into another.

10. Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 45.