

Kafka's Shame



In a family bound together by its parents there is only room for very specific people, those who answer to very specific requirements...if they do not correspond, they are not perhaps repudiated...but they are damned or engulfed or both. *Kafka in a letter to his sister Elli, 1921.*

I had lost my self-confidence where you were concerned but in return I had acquired a boundless awareness of guilt. *Kafka in "Letter to his Father", 1919.*

Kafka's childhood was characterised by conflict and difficulty. Dominated by a powerful father and a submissive mother, traumatized by the birth and death of two brothers before he was five years old, and these aggravated by his mother's responses to these events and relationships, it is not surprising that he was internally conflicted in his adult life and that he continued to experience problems in his relationships. Kafka died at the age of forty-one, and knew for years that he would succumb to tuberculosis. He therefore consciously wrote about his illness as well as about his problems with women in his many letters and diaries. Additionally, the willingness of

family and friends to talk to neighbours has offered an especially rich territory for exploration by biographers and commentators.

Kafka was tortured all his life by a father-complex, a guilt obsession, which is the material of some of his shorter tales. His family belonged to the assimilated Jewry, cut off from the Hebrew community and not at home among the Germans. His culture was German, but in Prague, his home, it was a minority-culture, and his political and social sympathies went to the Czechs. He worked as an Insurance official, and always fretted against his duties. He detested bureaucracy, and had a sneaking admiration for it. He had socialist sympathies, but admired the efficiency of the capitalist entrepreneur. He was a Zionist without religious faith. He was a vegetarian and inclined to fads like nudism or anthroposophy. He was often ill, and the last years of his life were largely spent in the isolation of sanatoria. All his life his will seemed to be lamed, and he seemed only to be able to know and suffer, never to master difficulties.

At the centre of his fiction is not a problem of logic, but spiritual anguish. His novels are about a human fate, a human bewilderment, human suffering; this suffering grows deeper as his characters discover that their quest grows more and more intangible and elusive as they struggle towards their goal.

The Trial

In *The Forgotten Language* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1951), Eric Fromm begins by questioning the meaning of Joseph K.'s arrest, noting that K. is aware of being arrested by the police as well as of being blocked in his development. K. was "aware that he was wasting his life and rotting away fast". Fromm discusses the "authoritarian conscience," whose virtue is obedience and greatest crime disobedience. Fromm finds them both in the novel -- symbolically represented, respectively, as the Inspector and the

Priest, and in the court, the judges, and assistants. For K., “the source of all good was believed to be outside, and the problem of living was to avoid the risk of losing the good graces of this source. The result is an absence of the feeling of his own strength and intense fear of being threatened with desertion by the person or persons whom he is dependent upon”. Fromm writes that “K. had a vague awareness that he was wasting his life and rotting away fast. The novel then deals with his reaction to this awareness and with the efforts he makes to defend and to save himself. The outcome was tragic; although he heard the voice of his conscience, he did not understand it. Instead of trying to understand the real reason for his arrest, he tended to escape from any such awareness”. Fromm, although he does not label these feelings and cognitions as related to experiences of shame, identifies all of the significant components of the shame experience: an internal sense of the self as bad, a conviction of abandonment, and internalised superego persecutors. However, the most significant source of shame is the knowledge, that cannot be allowed into consciousness, that K. has not used his capacities for self-development: he has been caught in a state of arrest.

The Trial has the same basic pattern as The Castle. It differs in so far as the question which concerns Josef K. is not whether he is accepted or refused, but whether he is innocent or guilty. But in attempting to reach a conclusion he is confronted by an organization of court officials very similar to that which operates from the castle; he is given the same kind of contradictory information by self-styled initiates, and entangled in the same web of doubts and certainties. In particular, it is noticeable how he is convinced from the outset that the court is hostile to him, corrupt, revengeful, senseless and incapable of human consideration. His denunciatory speech at his first examination, before he has had time to learn anything of the normal procedure, is an indication of his tendency to draw rash conclusions. Similarly, K. is told repeatedly that while he is certainly arrested, that does not in itself mean that he is accused, yet he begins to assume his own guilt as a necessary implication of his arrest. True, this assumption comes naturally

when it is made by almost everyone else around him. Yet the official in charge of his arrest is explicit; 'I cannot tell you by any means that you are accused, or rather I do not know if you are. You are arrested, that is correct, I do not know more than that.' It transpires that the competence and procedure of the court are quite unfathomable, and K. protests with indignation against the whole affair. Much of K.'s terrible suffering is related to the unfavourable deductions he makes from simple facts, he is guilty, or shameful, before he begins.

Towards the end of *The Trial*, the prison chaplain tells Joseph K. a parable that stands in the Law Book of the Court by which he has been summoned:

Before the Law there stands a doorkeeper. A man from the country comes to this doorkeeper and begs for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot admit the man at the moment. The man thinks it over and then asks whether he may enter later. 'It is possible', says the doorkeeper, 'but not now'. Since the gate to the Law is, as ever, open, and the door-keeper steps to one side, the man bends down to peer through the gate. As the doorkeeper notices this, he laughs and says: 'If you find it so tempting, why not try to get in without my permission? But take note: I am mighty. And I am only the lowest of the doorkeepers. From room to room there stand doorkeepers, one mightier than the other. Even I cannot bear the mere sight of the third.' The man from the country has not expected such difficulties, the Law, he thinks, ought surely to be accessible to everyone at all times, but when he looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his fur cloak, with his great pointed nose, his long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides after all to wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to get admittance and wearies the doorkeeper with his supplications. The doorkeeper often starts little examinations, questions him about his homeland and many other things, but they are offhand questions, like

those that great gentlemen ask, and at the end he always tells him that he cannot yet admit him. The man, who has provided himself with much for his journey, applies everything, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. The latter accepts everything but says: 'I am only taking it so that you don't think you have left anything undone.' During the many years the man observes the doorkeeper almost uninterruptedly. He forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to him to be the only hindrance to his admittance to the Law. In his first years he loudly curses his unlucky fate, but later, as he grows old, he only grumbles away to himself. He grows childish, and since in his yearlong study of the doorkeeper he has even got to know the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the very fleas to help him and change the doorkeeper's mind. In the end his sight grows dim and he does not know whether it is growing darker around him or whether it is his eyes that deceive him. But in the darkness he now does perceive a radiance that breaks unquenchably through the door of the Law. Now he has not much longer to live. Before his death all the experiences of this whole time condense in his head into one question that he has not as yet asked the doorkeeper. He beckons to him, as he cannot any longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend down low, for the difference between their heights has changed greatly to the disadvantage of the man. 'What do you still want to know?' the doorkeeper asks, 'you are insatiable.' 'All men strive after the Law,' says the man, 'how is it that in these many years no-one but me has asked for admittance?' The doorkeeper sees that the man is at his last gasp, and in order to reach his fading hearing he bellows at him: 'No-one else could get admittance, for this entrance was appointed for you alone. I am now going to shut it.'

The lessons of this story are complex and seem to sum up Joseph K's position. However, there is one important difference – in the above story there is at least the presence of the Law, this sense is absent in *The Trial*.

At the age of thirty-six, Kafka wrote his long incrimination of his father, partly in self-exculpation, partly in self-accusation. In it he actually speaks of his 'lawsuit' ('Prozess') with his father, the subject of perpetual discussion with his sister:

All along you have been a main topic of our conversations as of our thoughts, not in order to think up something against you, I tell you frankly, but to talk over in all detail, with all the powers of our heads and hearts, this terrible lawsuit that is engaged between us and you, straining ourselves to the utmost, in fun and in earnest, with love, defiance, anger, repugnance, devotion, conviction of guilt -- this lawsuit in which you constantly claim to be judge while you, at least in the greater part, are just as much a weak and confused party as we are.

The above reflects significant aspects of the situation of Joseph K. He seeks 'grace', for a declaration of his innocence; he is fascinated by these courts, abhorrent as they are. He suffers from a punishment which is not his fault. Joseph K. is unable to change direction; indeed, he is set on running into the trap. Though he protests he is innocent, the charge against him becomes his most precious possession, his real title to life which is at the same time his title to death, the metaphysical counterpart of the public and private life to which Joseph K. is committed. He clings to the charge as Kafka himself clung to his illness, to his Angst. In the letters to Milena Kafka calls this paralysing Angst his real companion; it is his 'only protection'. He does not see it as something accidental, something to be cured; it is his 'substance', the 'best' in him, what is 'lovable' in him. Angst is for him, like disease, a "fact of faith", but a purely negative element of faith, without positive belief or hope.