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Clearly, the work of Franz Kafka cannot be reduced to a political doctrine of any kind. Kafka did not give speeches but fashioned individuals and situations. In his work, he expressed a *Stimmung* or sense of feelings and attitudes. The symbolic world of literature cannot be reduced to the discursive world of ideologies. Literary work is not an *abstract conceptual system* similar to philosophical or political doctrines but rather the creation of a concrete imaginary universe of individuals and things.[1]

However none of this should be an obstacle to making use of the passages, bridges, and subterranean links between his anti-authoritarian spirit, his libertarian sensibility, and his sympathies for anarchism on the one hand, and his principal writings on the other. These passages provide us with privileged access to what can be termed the *internal landscape* of Kafka's work.

Kafka's socialist leanings were evident very early on in his life. According to his childhood friend and schoolmate — Hugo

[1] Cf. Lucien Goldmann, "Materialisme dialectique et histoire de la littéra-

Bergmann, they had a slight falling out during their last academic year (1900–1901) because "his socialism and my Zionism were much too strident."[2] What kind of socialism are we talking about?

Accounts by three Czech contemporaries document Kafka's sympathies for Czech libertarian socialists and their participation in some of their activities. During the early 1930s, Max Brod was conducting research for his novel *Stefan Rott* which would be published in 1931. In the course of his investigations, one of the founders of the Czech anarchist movement — Michal Kacha — informed Brod that Kafka used to attend meetings of the *Mladych Klub* (Youth Club) which was a libertarian, anti-militarist, and anti-clerical organization with which many Czech writers including Stanislav Neumann, Michal Mares, and Jaroslav Hasek were associated. This information was later "confirmed by another source" and he incorporated it into his work. In his novel, Brod recounted that Kafka:

> often attended the meetings of the circle and sat there without saying a word. Kacha liked Kafka and called him "Klidas" which can be translated as "taciturn" or, more precisely in the Czech vernacular, the "colossus of silence."

Brod never doubted the veracity of this account which he once again cited in his biography of Kafka.[3]

The second testimony comes from the anarchist writer — Michal Mares — who had gotten to know Kafka from frequently running into him on the street since they were neighbors. According to Mares' account published by Klaus Wagenbach in 1958, Kafka had accepted his invitation in October 1909 to come to a demonstration

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ture," *Recherches Dialectiques*, Paris: Gallimard, 1959. pp. 45–64.

[2] Hugo Bergmann, Memories of Franz Kafka in *Franz Kafka Exhibition (Catalogue)*. The Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem. 1969. p. 8.

[3] Max Brod, *Franz Kafka*, pp. 135–136.

while, this essential dimension of social reality will continue to be conjured up by reference to Kafka's work.

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against the execution of the Spanish libertarian teacher — Francisco Ferrer. In the course of 1910–1912, Kafka attended anarchist conferences on free love, the Paris Commune, peace, in opposition to the execution of the Paris activist — Liabeuf, which were organized by the Youth Club, the anti-militarist and anti-clerical Vilem Koerber Association, and the Czech Anarchist Movement. Mares also claims that Kafka had posted a bail of five crowns to get his friend out of jail. Like Kacha, Mares stressed Kafka's silence:

> To the best of my knowledge, Kafka belonged to none of these anarchist organizations but, as a man exposed and sensitive to social problems, he was strongly sympathetic to them. Yet despite his interest in these meetings, given his frequent attendance, he never took part in the discussions.

This interest is evident from his reading — Kropotkin's *Speech of a Rebel* which was a gift from Mares, and the writings of the Reclus brothers, Mikhail Bakunin, and Jean Grave. It also extended to his sympathies:

> The fate of the French anarchist, Ravachol, or the tragedy of Emma Goldman who edited *Mother Earth* touched him very deeply.[4]

This account initially appeared in a Czech journal in 1946 in a slightly different version and passed without notice.[5] In 1958, Karl Wagenbach published his remarkable book on Kafka's youth which was the first to shed light on the writer's ties to the Prague libertar-

[4] Michal Mares, "Comment j'ai connue Franz Kafka," published as an appendix to Klaus Wagenbach. *Franz Kafka: Années de jeunesse (1883–1912)*, Paris: Mercury of France, 1967). pp. 253.

[5] Michal Mares, "Meetings with Franz Kafka," *Literarni Noviny* no. 15 (1946). p. 85 and after. This version is cited in the Klaus Wagenbach's other book, *Franz Kafka ins Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1964. p. 70.

ian underground. The book reprinted the account of Mares in the form of an appendix but on this occasion, the information sparked a series of polemics which questioned the credibility of its claims.

The third document is *Conversations with Kafka* by Gustav Janouch which first came out in 1951 and was republished in 1968 in a considerably enlarged edition. This account relates to meetings starting in 1920 with the Prague writer during the last years of his life and suggests that Kafka retained his sympathy for the libertarians to the very end. Not only did he describe the Czech anarchists as "very polite and high-spirited," "so polite and friendly that one is obliged to believe their every word" but the political and social ideas he voiced in the course of these conversations retained the strong influence of libertarian thought.

Take for example his definition of capitalism as "a system of relations of dependence" where "everything is arranged hierarchically and everything is in chains." This statement is typically anarchist because of its emphasis on the authoritarian character of the system and not on economic exploitation as in Marxism. Even his skeptical attitude toward the organized labor movement seems inspired by his libertarian suspicions toward parties and political institutions. Behind the marching workers:

> there are the secretaries, bureaucrats, professional politicians, all the modern sultans for whom they are paving the way to power… The revolution has evaporated and all that remains is the mud of a new bureaucracy. The chains of tortured humanity are made of the official papers of ministries.[6]

In the 1968 second edition which was supposed to have reproduced the complete version of Janouch's notes, lost after the war

[6] G. Janouch. *Kafka M'a dit*, Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1952. pp. 70, 71, 135, 107, 108, 141.

are unwilling to offer any resistance." The refusal to submit and crawl like a dog appears to be the first step toward walking upright toward freedom. But Kafka's novels have neither a positive hero nor future utopias. They only try to show the *facies hippocratica* of our epoch with irony and lucidity.

* * *

It is no accident that the word "Kafkaesque" has entered our current vocabulary. The term denotes an aspect of social reality that sociology and political science tend to overlook. With his libertarian sensibility, Kafka has succeeded marvelously in capturing the *oppressive* and *absurd* nature of the bureaucratic nightmare, the opacity, the impenetrable and incomprehensible character of the rules of the state hierarchy as they are seen *from below and the outside*. This runs contrary to social science which generally confines itself to examining the bureaucratic machine from the "inside" and taking the point of view of those "at the top," the authorities, and institutions: its "functional" or "dysfunctional," "rational" or "prerational" character.[38]

Social science has not yet formulated a concept for the "oppressive effect" of a reified bureaucratic apparatus which undoubtedly constitutes one of the most characteristic phenomena of modern societies which millions of men and women run across daily. Mean-

[38] As Miche Carrouges has perceptively emphasized:

Kafka renounces the corporate perspective of the men of law, those educated and very eminent people who believe they understand the whys and wherefores of the law. He considers them and the law from the viewpoint of the masses of poor subjects who submit without understanding.

But since he is Kafka, he raises this ordinary naive ignorance to the stature of supreme irony overflowing with suffering and humor, mystery and clarity. He unmasks all that there is of human ignorance in judicial knowledge and of human knowledge in the ignorance of the downtrodden.

M. Carrouges. In the Laughter and the Tears of Life. *Cahiers de la Compagnie M. Renaud, J.L. Barrault*, Paris, Julliard, October 1957, p. 19.

and judicial hierarchy constitutes an immense organization which according to Joseph K., the victim of *The Trial*:

> not only employs venal guards, stupid inspectors and examining magistrates … but also sustains an entire magistracy of high rank with its indispensable retinue of valets, clerks, gendarmes, and other auxiliaries, perhaps even *executioners*. I do not flinch before the word.[36]

In other words, state authority kills. Joseph K. will make the acquaintance of executioners in the last chapter of the book when two functionaries put him to death "like a dog."

For Kafka, the dog represents an ethical category — if not a metaphysical one. The dog is actually all those who submit slavishly to the authorities whoever they may be. The merchant — Block — forced to his knees before the lawyer, is a typical example:

> This was no longer a client. This was the lawyer's dog. If the lawyer had ordered him to crawl under the bed as if it were a kennel, and bark, Block would have done so with pleasure.

The shame which must outlive Joseph K. (the last word of *The Trial*) is death "like a dog," submitting without resistance to the executioners. This is also the case with the prisoner in *The Penal Colony* who does not even make an attempt to escape and behaves with "dog-like submission."[37]

The young Karl Rossmann in *Amerika* is an example of somebody who attempts — not always successfully — to resist the authorities. For him, this means not becoming a dog like "those who

[36] *The Trial*, pp. 45–46. My emphasis ML.

[37] F. Kafka. *The Trial*, p. pp. 193–194, 227. *Le Procès*, Paris: Gallimard, 1985. pp. 283, 309, 325, and "In der Strafkolonie," p. 181.

and recovered much later, he recalled the following exchange with Kafka:

> You have studied the life of Ravochol?
>
> Yes and not just Ravochol but also the lives of various other anarchists. I have immersed myself in the biographies and ideas of Godwin, Proudhon, Stirner, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Tucker, and Tolstoi. I have made contact with various groups and attended meetings. In short, I have invested a great deal of time and money on this. In 1910, I took part in meetings held by Czech anarchists in a Karolinental tavern called *Zum kanonenkreuz* where the anarchist Youth Club met… Max Brod accompanied me to these meetings many times but, in the main, he did not find them very agreeable… For me, it was very serious business. I was on the trail of Ravachol. He led me straight to Erich Muehsam, Arthur Holitscher, and the Viennese anarchist Rudolf Grossmann… They all sought thanklessly to realize human happiness. I understood them. But… I was unable to continue marching alongside them for long.[7]

In the general view of commentators, this second version is less credible than the first owing most conspicuously to its mysterious origins in notes once lost and now found. We must also point out an obvious error on a specific point of interest to us. By his own admission, Max Brod not only never went along with his friend to meetings of the anarchist club but was also totally unaware of Kafka's participation in the activity of the Prague libertarians.

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[7] G. Janouch, *Conversations avec Kafka*, Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 1978. pp. 118–119.

The hypothesis suggested by these documents — Kafka's interest in libertarian ideas — is confirmed by some references in his private writings. For example, we find this categorical imperative in his diary: "Do not forget Kropotkin!"

In a November 1917 letter to Max Brod, he expressed his enthusiasm for a project of the journal *News of the Fight Against the Will of Power* proposed by an anarchist Freudian — Otto Gross.[8] Neither should we overlook the libertarian spirit which seems to inspire some of his statements. One example would be the terse, caustic remark that he uttered one day to Max Brod while talking about the place where he worked — the Social Security Bureau where workers who were accident victims went to plead their cases:

> How humble these people are. They come to beg at our feet instead of taking the building by storm and stripping it bare. They come to beg at our feet.[9]

Very probably, the various accounts — especially the last two — contain inaccuracies and exaggerations. With respect to Mares, Klaus Wagenbach acknowledged that "certain details are perhaps false" or, at least, "overstated." Similarly according to Max Brod, Mares like many other contemporaries who knew Kafka "tend to exaggerate," especially as regards the extent of their close friendship with the writer.[10]

It is one thing to notice contradictions or exaggerations in these documents but it is quite another to *reject them in their entirety* by characterizing the information on the ties between Kafka and

[8] F. Kafka. *Diaries und Briefe*, Frankfurt: Fischer Publishing House, 1975. p. 196. See on Kafka and Otto Gross, G. Baioni, *Kafka: Letteratura ed Ebraiasmo* Turin: Einaudi, 1979. pp. 203–205.

[9] M. Brod, *Franz Kafka*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945. pp. 132–133.

[10] See K. Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka: Années de jeuness* ... (1958) p. 213 and *Franz Kafka in Selbstzeugnissen*, (1964) p. 70. and Max Brod, *Streitsbares Leben 1884–1968*, Munich-Berlin-Vienna: F.A. Herbig. 1969. p. 170. and *Ueber Franz Kafka*, Frankfurt: Fischer Library. p. 190.

Like his friends among the Czech anarchists, he seemed to consider *every form of state*, and the state as such, to be an authoritarian and liberticidal hierarchy.

By their inherent nature, the state and its justice are both systems founded on lies. Nothing illustrates this better than the dialogue in *The Trial* between K. and the priest on the subject of the parable of the guardian of the law. For the priest, "to question the dignity of the guardian would be to question the law." This is the classic argument of all the representatives of order. K. objects that if one adopts this view, "we have to believe everything that the warder tells us" which to him seems impossible:

> — No, says the priest. We are not obliged to accept everything he says as true. It suffices that it is accepted as necessary.
>
> — A mournful opinion, said K... . It elevates the lie to the stature of a world principle.[34]

As Hannah Arendt rightly observed in her essay on Kafka, the priest's speech reveals:

> the sacred theology and innermost conviction of bureaucrats to be a belief in necessity for its own sake. Bureaucrats are, in the last analysis, the functionaries of necessity.[35]

Finally, the state and judges administer less the management of justice than the hunt for victims. In imagery comparable to the substitution of a sword for the torch of liberty in *Amerika*, we see in *The Trial* that a painting by Titorelli which is supposed to represent the Goddess of Justice becomes transfigured in the right light into a celebration of the Goddess of the Hunt. The bureaucratic

[34] F. Kafka. *The Trial*, p. 220.

[35] H. Arendt. *Sechs Essays*. Heidelberg: Lambert-Schneider, 1948. p. 133.

The libertarian inspiration is inscribed into the heart of Kafka's novels. When he speaks to us of the *state*, it is in the form of "administration" or "justice" as an impersonal system of domination which crushes, suffocates, or kills individuals. This is an agonizing, opaque, and unintelligible world where unfreedom prevails. *The Trial* is often presented as a prophetic work. With his visionary imagination, the author had foreseen the justice of the totalitarian state and the Nazi or Stalinist show trials. Despite being a Soviet fellow traveler, Bertold Brecht made a telling remark about Kafka in a conversation with Walter Benjamin in 1934 (even before the Moscow show trials):

> Kafka had only one problem, that of organization. What he grasped was our anguish before the ant-hill state, the way that people themselves are alienated by the forms of their common existence. And he foresaw specific forms of alienation like, for example, the methods of the GPU.[32]

Without casting any doubt on this homage to the prescience of the Prague writer, it should nevertheless be kept in mind that Kafka is not describing "exceptional" states in this work. One of the most important ideas suggested by his work, bearing an obvious relationship to anarchism, *is the alienated and oppressive nature* of the "normal" legal and constitutional state. It is clearly stated in the early pages of *The Trial*:

> K. lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who, then, dared seize him in his own dwelling?[33]

[32] Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Essais sur Brecht*, Paris: Maspero, 1969. p. 132.

[33] F. Kafka, *The Trial*, New York: Schoken, 1970. p. 4; *Der Prozess*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979, p. 91.

the Czech anarchists as "pure legend." This is the attitude of some specialists including Eduard Goldstücker, Hartmut Binder, Ritchie Robertson, and Ernst Pawel. The first is a Czech Communist literary critic and the other three are authors of Kafka biographies whose value cannot be denied.

According to Goldstücker, "the principal reason for my skepticism on the legend of a prolonged and close contact between Kafka and the anarcho-communists is the fact that in no part of the work of Kafka does one find indications that he was familiar with their thought." In his view, Kafka's attitude toward the working class was not that of "modern socialism" but rather that of the utopian socialists "who long preceded Marx."[11]

A few remarks on this strange reasoning:

1. the term "anarcho-communism" is far from adequate to describe clubs of such diverse orientations ranging from anarcho-syndicalism to libertarian pacifism.

2. Anarchism is not defined by a common attitude toward the working class (different positions exist on this subject in the libertarian tradition) but by its rejection of all authority and the state as instituted authority.

3. Anarchist doctrine was conceived before Marx and libertarian socialism is not constituted in relation to his work.

Hartmut Binder is the author of a very detailed and erudite biography of Kafka. He is also the most energetic proponent of the thesis that the ties between Kafka and the Prague anarchist community are a "legend" which belongs to the "realm of the imagination." Klaus Wagenbach is accused of having utilized sources "con-

[11] E. Goldstücker. "*Uber Franz Kafka aus der Prager Perspektive*" 1963 in Goldstücker, Kautman, Reimann (ed.) *Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht*, Prague, 1965. pp. 40–45.

genial to his ideology" such as Kacha, Mares, and Janouch which lack "credibility or are even deliberate falsifications."[12]

In the opinion of Binder:

> the mere fact that Brod did not learn of these alleged activities until several years after the death of Kafka… weighs heavily against the credibility of this information. Because it is almost unimaginable that Brod who had gone on two holiday trips with Kafka during this period and with whom he met daily… could have been ignorant of the interest of his best friend in the anarchist movement… If this is really unimaginable (the "almost" leaves a margin of doubt…), then why is it that the central figure, i.e., Max Brod, considered this information perfectly reliable since he used it in both his novel *Stefan Rott* and in the biography of his friend?

Much the same criticism applies to another of Binder's arguments:

> Listening in a smoke-filled pub to the political discussions of a group acting outside the law… This is a situation unimaginable for somebody with Kafka's personality. However this situation did not seem strange to Max Brod who also knew a few things about Kafka's personality… In fact, nothing in Kafka's work leads us to believe that he had such a superstitious respect for the law![13]

[12] H. Binder. *Kafka-Handbuch*, volume 1. *Der Mensch und seine Zeit*, Stuttgart: Alfred Kroener. 1979. pp. 361–362.

[13] Ibid. pp. 362–363. The notion that Kafka could have concealed some information would not have been surprising to Brod who emphasized in his biography:

Unlike myself, Kafka had a closed nature and did not open up his soul to anyone, not even to me. I knew very well that he sometimes kept important things to himself.

Nax Brod. *Streitbares Leben*, pp. 46–47.

ing determined by an impenetrable bureaucratic apparatus whose operation is controlled by procedures which remain shadowy even to those carrying out its orders and *a fortiori* to those being manipulated by it."[29]

Kafka's work is deeply rooted in his Prague surroundings. As André Breton remarked, Kafka's writings "encompass all the charms and magic of Prague" but are at the same time perfectly universal.[30] Contrary to what is often asserted, his two major novels are not a critique of the old Austro-Hungarian imperial state but deal with the most modern state apparatus. Kafka's critique of the state touches upon its anonymous impersonal character insofar as this alienated, hypostatized, and autonomous bureaucratic system is becoming transformed into an end-in-itself.

A passage from *The Castle* is particularly illuminating in this regard. In a scene which is a masterpiece of black humor, the town mayor describes the official apparatus as an independent machine which seems to work "by itself":

> One might say that the administrative organism could no longer put up with the strain and irritation it had to endure for years because of dealing with the same trivial business and that it has begun to pass sentence on itself, bypassing the functionaries.[31]

Kafka had a profound insight into the way the bureaucratic machine operates like a blind network of gears in which the relations between individuals become a thing or an independent object. This is one of the most modern, topical, and *lucid* aspects of Kafka's work.

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[29] W. Benjamin, Letter to G. Scholem, 1938. *Correspondance*, Paris: Aubier. 1980. II. p. 248.

[30] A. Breton. *Anthologie de l'humour noir* Paris: Sagittaire, 1950. p. 263.

[31] F. Kafka, *Le Chateau*, Paris: Gallimard. 1972. p. 562.

lowly soldiers, dockers, and victims awaiting execution are the people "indigenous" to the country who "do not understand a word of French." A native soldier is sentenced to death by officers for whom juridical doctrine can be summed up in a few words which are the quintessence of the arbitrary: Guilt should never be questioned! The soldier's execution must be carried out by a torture device which slowly carves the words: "Honor thy superiors" into his flesh with needles.

The central character of the novel is not the traveler who watches the events unfold with mute hostility. Neither is it the prisoner who scarcely shows any reaction, the officer who presides over the execution, nor the commandant of the colony. The main character is *the machine itself*.

The entire story is centered on this sinister apparatus which, more and more in the course of a very detailed explanation given by the officer to the traveler, comes to appear an *end-in-itself*. The apparatus does not exist to execute the man but rather the victim exists for the sake of the apparatus. The native soldier provides a body upon which the machine can write its aesthetic masterpiece, its bloody inscription illustrated with many "flourishes and embellishments." The officer is only a servant of the machine and is finally sacrificed himself to this insatiable Moloch.[28]

What concrete "power machine" and "apparatus of Authority" sacrificing human lives did Kafka have in mind? The *Penal Colony* was written in October 1914, three months after the outbreak of the Great War.

In *The Trial* and *The Castle*, one finds authority to be a hierarchical, abstract, and *impersonal* "apparatus." Despite their brutal, petty, and sordid characters, the bureaucrats are only cogs in this machine. As Walter Benjamin acutely observed, Kafka writes from the perspective of a "modern citizen who realizes that his fate is be-

[28] F. Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," *Erzaehlung und kleine Prosa*. New York: Schocken Books, 1946. pp. 181.

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In an attempt to dispose, once and for all, of the testimony of Michal Mares, Binder refers insistently to a letter of Kafka to Milena Jesenska-Polak in which he refers to Mares as a "nodding acquaintance." Binder makes the following argument:

> Kafka expressly underscores that his relation with Mares is only that of a *Gassenbekanntschaft* (nodding acquaintance). This is the clearest indication that Kafka never went to anarchist meetings.[14]

The least one can say about this line of argument is that an obvious *non-sequitur* lies between the premise and the conclusion! Even if their encounters were limited to meetings in the street because Kafka's house was close to Mares' place of work, this does not preclude Mares passing on literature and inviting Kafka to meetings and demonstrations, confirming his presence at some of these activities, and even making him a present of a book by Kropotkin on one occasion.

As material proof of his ties to Kafka, Mares had in his possession a postcard sent to him by the writer which was dated December 9, 1910. While this is impossible to verify, Mares also claimed that he received several letters from his friend which had disappeared during the numerous house searches to which he was subjected during this period. Binder does not deny the existence of this document but, pouncing on the fact that the card was addressed to "Josef Mares" and not Michal, he claims to have uncovered new proof of the "fictions" concocted by the witness. It seems totally improbable that a year after meeting Mares and attending several sessions of the Youth Club along with him, Kafka "does not even know his proper given name." This argument does not hold water for a very

[14] Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch*, 1. p. 364. Cf. Kafka. *Lettres á Milena*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988. p. 270.

simple reason. According to the German edition of the correspondence between Kafka and Milena, the original given name of Kacha was not Michal but… Josef.[15]

The entire discussion in Hartmut Binder's book gives the painful impression of being a deliberate and systematic attempt to seize upon every minor pretext. His aim appears to be to eliminate from Kafka's image what conservatives would deem the dark shadow of suspicion that he took part in meetings organized by the Prague libertarians.

A few years later in his biography of Kafka which, by the way, is a book very worthy of interest, Ernst Pawel seems to uphold Binder's thesis. In his words, it is high time that we "laid to rest one of the great myths" about Kafka. This would be the "legend of a conspiratorial Kafka working within the Czech anarchist group called the Youth Club." This legend is the product of the "fertile imagination of the ex-anarchist Michal Mares who in his somewhat fanciful memoirs published in 1946 describes Kafka as a friend and comrade who participated in anarchist meetings and demonstrations":

> This narrative is completely belied by all that is known of his life, friends, and character. Why would he have wanted to conceal his commitment from close friends whom he saw on a daily basis.[16]

This "legend" is easy to debunk because it bears no resemblance to what any of the sources in question claimed. Mares, Janouch, and Kacha (who goes unmentioned by Pawel) never said that Kafka was a "plotter within an anarchist group." Mares explicitly insisted on the fact that Kafka was a member of no organization. In any event, Kafka was not engaged in a "conspiracy" but taking part in meetings which were in most cases open to the public. As for "keeping

[15] M. Mares in Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka: Années de jeunesse*, p. 254. H. Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch*, 1, pp. 363–364. F. Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, Frankfurt: S, Fischer, 1983. p. 336 (editors' note).

[16] Binder, op cit. p. 365.

In this respect, *Amerika* (1912–1914) represents an intermediate work. The authoritarian characters are either paternal figures (Karl Rossmann's father or Uncle Jakob) or the top hotel administrators (the head of staff or the chief porter). But even the latter retain an aspect of personal tyranny in combining bureaucratic indifference with a petty and brutal individual despotism. The symbol of this punitive authoritarianism leaps up at you from the first page of the book. Demystifying American democracy represented by the famous Statue of Liberty standing in the entrance to New York harbor, Kafka replaces the torch in her hand with a sword. In a world without justice or freedom, naked force and arbitrary power seem to hold undivided sway. The hero's sympathy goes out to the victims of this society. The driver in the first chapter is an example of "the suffering of a poor man at the hands of the powerful." There is also Thèrèse's mother driven to suicide by hunger and poverty. Karl Rossmann finds his only friends and allies among the poor: Thèrèse herself, the students, the residents of a working class neighborhood who refuse to turn him over to the police because, as Kafka discloses in a revealing aside, "workers are not on the side of the authorities."[27]

* * *

The major turning point in Kafka's work is the novel, *Penal Colony*, written shortly after *Amerika*. There are few texts in universal literature which present authority with such an unjust and murderous face. Authority is not bound up with the power of an individual such as the camp commandant (old and new) who plays only a secondary role in the story. Instead, authority inheres in an *impersonal mechanism*.

The context of the story is colonialism — French in this instance. The officers and commandants of the colony are French while the

[27] F. Kafka, *Amerika*. Frankfurt: Fischer Publishing House 1956. pp. 15, 161.

and arbitrary treatment meted out to employees by his father, he instinctively began to identify with the victims:

> What made the store insufferable for me was that it reminded me too much of my own situation with respect to you… This is why I belong, of necessity, to the employees' party.[25]

The principal characteristics of authoritarianism noted in Kafka's literary work are:

1. *Arbitrariness*: decisions imposed from above without any moral, rational, or human justification while often making inordinate and absurd demands upon the victim.

2. *Injustice*: blame is wrongly considered to be self-evident with no need for proof, and punishment is totally disproportionate to the "mistake" (non-existent or trivial).

In his first major literary piece, *The Verdict* (1912), Kafka focuses on paternal authority. This is also one of his rare works where the hero (Georg Bendemann) seems to submit wholly and without resistance to the authoritarian verdict: the order given by the father to his son to drown himself in the river! Comparing this novel with *The Trial*, Milan Kundera observes:

> The resemblance between the two accusations, condemnations and executions betray the continuity which ties together the closed familial "totalitarianism" with Kafka's grand visions.[26] The difference between them is that in the two great novels (*The Trial* and *The Castle*), there is a perfectly anonymous and invisible "totalitarian" power at work.

[25] Kafka, *Letter to the Father*, 1919, in *Préparatifs de noce a la campagne*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957. pp. 165, 179.

[26] M. Kundera, "Something left Behind," *Le Debat* no. 6. June 1981. p. 58.

things secret from his close friends" meaning Max Brod, we have already demonstrated the inanity of this line of argument.

Ernst Pawel provides another argument to bolster his thesis. Prague police records "do not contain the slightest allusion to Kafka."[17] The argument is inadequate. It is not very likely that the police would have held onto the names of all those people who attended public meetings organized by the various libertarian clubs. They would be interested in the "ringleaders" and heads of the associations rather than people who listened and said nothing…

Pawel differs from Binder in his willingness to recognize the validity of the facts suggested by these accounts in a more diluted version. Kafka really did take part in these kind of meetings but only as "an interested spectator." Moreover he sympathized with the "philosophical and non-violent anarchism of Kropotkin and Alexander Herzen."[18]

We will now examine the point of view of Ritchie Robertson who is the author of a remarkable essay on the life and work of the Prague Jewish writer. In his opinion, the information furnished by Kacha and Mares must be "treated with skepticism." His principal arguments on this point are borrowed from Goldstücker and Binder. How would it have been possible that Brod was in the dark about the participation of his friend in these meetings? How much value can one attach to the testimony of Mares since he was only a *Gassenbekanntschaft* (nodding acquaintance) of Kafka? There is no point in repeating my earlier rebuttal to these kinds of objections which lack any real consistency.

Entirely new and interesting in Robertson's book is the attempt to put forward an alternative interpretation of Kafka's political ideas which, according to him, would be neither socialist nor an-

[17] E. Pawel, ibid. p. 162.

[18] Ibid. pp. 162–163. In another chapter of the book, Pawel refers to Kafka as a "metaphysical anarchist not much given to party politics" — a definition which seems to me very much on the mark. As for Janouch's memoirs, Pawel considers them as "plausible" but "subject to caution." (p. 80).

archist but *romantic*. In Robertson's opinion, this anti-capitalist romanticism would be of neither the left nor the right.[19] But if romantic anti-capitalism is a matrix common to certain forms of conservative and revolutionary thought — and in this sense, it does effectively transcend the traditional divisions between the left and the right — it nevertheless remains a fact that romantic authors clearly positioned themselves around one of the two poles of this vision of the world: reactionary romanticism or revolutionary romanticism.[20]

In fact, anarchism, libertarian socialism, and anarcho-syndicalism provide a paradigmatic example of a "romantic anti-capitalism of the left." As a result, defining Kafka's thought as romantic seems to me entirely pertinent but it does not mean that he is not "of the left" or, more concretely, a romantic socialist of a libertarian tendency. As is the case with all romantics, his critique of modern civilization is tinged with nostalgia for the past which, for him, is represented by the Yiddish culture of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. With notable insight, André Breton wrote that "in marking the present minute," Kafka's thought "turns symbolically backwards with the hands of the clock of the synagogue" of Prague.[21]

[19] R. Robertson, *Kafka, Judaism, Politics, and Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. pp. 140–141:

If one is inquiring into Kafka's political leanings, it is, in fact, misleading to think in terms of the usual antithesis between left and right. The appropriate context would be the ideology which Michael Löwy has labelled "romantic anti-capitalism." ... Romantic anti-capitalism (to use Löwy's term, though "anti-industrialism" might be more accurate had many different versions... but as a general ideology, it transcended the opposition of left and right.

[20] I attempted to analyze romanticism in my book *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels revolutionnaires. L'evolution politique de Lukacs 1909–1929*, Paris: PUF, 1976 (cited by R. Robertson in the English translation published in London in 1979) and more recently with my friend Robert Sayre in *Revolte et melancholie. Le romanticisme á contre-courant de la modernité*, Paris Payot, 1992.

[21] A. Breton, Presentation of Kafka in his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, Paris: Sagittarius: 1950. p. 263.

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The interesting thing about the anarchist episode in Kafka's biography (1909–1912) is that it provides us with one of the most useful keys for illuminating our understanding of his work, especially his writings from 1912 onward. I make a point of saying *one of the keys* because the charm of this work also comes from its polysemantic character which makes it irreducible to any univocal interpretation. The libertarian ethos is manifested in different situations which are at the heart of his principal literary texts but, first and foremost, it can be found in the radically critical fashion in which the haunting and terrifying face of unfreedom is represented: authority. As André Breton put it so well: "No other work militates so strongly against the admission of a sovereign principle external to that of the person doing the thinking."[22]

An anti-authoritarianism of libertarian inspiration runs through Kafka's novels in a movement toward "depersonalization" and a growing reification: from paternal and personal authority toward an administrative and anonymous authority.[23] Yet once more, he is not acting out of any *political doctrine* but from a state of mind and critical sensibility whose principal weapon is *irony*, *humor*, that *black humor* which, according to André Breton, is "a supreme revolt of the spirit."[24]

This attitude has intimate personal roots in Kafka's relations with his father. For the writer, the despotic authority of the pater familias is the archetype of political tyranny. In his *Letter to the Father* (1919), Kafka recalled that "in my eyes, you assumed an enigmatic character like a tyrant for whom the law is not based upon reflection but his own person." Confronted with the brutal, unjust,

[22] A. Breton, *Anthology de l'humour noir*, p. 264.

[23] For a more detailed analysis of anarchism and romanticism, I refer you to my book *Redemption et Utopie: Le Judaisme libertaire en Europe central*, Paris: PUF, 1988. chapter 5.

[24] Breton. "Lightning Rod," Introduction to *Anthologie de l'humour noir*. p. 11.