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FRANZ KAFKA'S "DAS URTEIL":
AN INTERPRETATION

J. P. STERN

1.

"Das Urteil" is one of the few stories Kafka was proud of having written and continued to find satisfactory; with it begins the work of his maturity. It was composed in the night from 22 to 23 September 1912, and published later that year.¹ It is dedicated to "F," Felice Bauer, whom Kafka had met for the first time that summer; the peculiar irony of the dedication is patent to any reader.

I have chosen it for interpretation for three closely connected reasons. First, as an outstanding and outstandingly clear example of the way Kafka draws autobiographical material into his fictions.² An interpretation of the story should therefore illuminate one side of his literary undertaking, the other side of which is the fictionalizing of his autobiographical and private writings. Secondly, the story is characteristic of a preoccupation central to the overwhelming majority of his writings and patent in their titles—his preoccupation with guilt, punishment, and the law according to which these are connected and assessed. It is, clearly, a moral preoccupation. Thirdly, the story is an early but accomplished example of a certain rather puzzling but if anything even more characteristic narrative manner of conveying that preoccupation: a way of writing which seems to be especially designed to insinuate and establish the connection between a certain kind of action or state of being and its punishment in the face of the reader's expectations to the contrary. For all its apparent simplicity, this narrative manner amounts to one of the most astonishing inventions in twentieth century German and European fiction.

2.

The fact that all Kafka's important works are marked by strong autobiographical elements is one among several reasons why any interpretation of them should proceed with particular caution. They remain of course fictions. There is, however, an especial temptation to read into them attitudes, ideas, and evaluations not found there but in his diaries, letters, or other documents. The autobiographical pendant to "Das Urteil" is Kafkas's "Brief an den Vater," written seven years later. I shall quote from it here because it provides several pointers to an understanding of a story that is difficult, not in order

to impose on the story an evaluation and a meaning derived from "Der Brief" but missing from the story itself (which is what many critics have done). The story is as complete as any Kafka ever wrote. How complete *that* is, we shall see.

Kafka's letter to his father, which was never sent,³ is intended to describe and account for the unhappy relationship between father and son, and it does this mainly by analyzing specific episodes ("Vorfälle") from the son's childhood and adolescence. Here is one of these episodes:

Ich winselte einmal in der Nacht immerfort um Wasser, gewiß nicht aus Durst, sondern wahrscheinlich teils um zu ärgern, teils um mich zu unterhalten. Nachdem einige starke Drohungen nicht geholfen hatten, nahmst Du mich aus dem Bett, trugst mich auf die Pawlatsche⁴ und ließest mich dort allein vor der geschlossenen Tür ein Weilchen im Hemd stehn. Ich will nicht sagen, daß das unrichtig war, vielleicht war damals die Nacht-ruhe auf andere Weise wirklich nicht zu verschaffen, ich will aber damit Erziehungsmittel und ihre Wirkung auf mich charakterisieren. Ich war damals nachher wohl schon folgsam, aber ich hatte einen inneren Schaden davon. Das für mich Selbstverständliche des sinnlosen Ums-Wasser-Bittens und das außerordentlich Schreckliche des Hinausgetragenwerdens konnte ich meiner Natur nach niemals in die richtige Verbindung bringen.⁵

There is no need to expatiate on the nature of this traumatic experience (which reads like a textbook case from *Imago*, Freud's contemporary psycho-analytical journal⁶), but two aspects of the letter-writer's description of it need emphasizing. First, his scrupulous, perhaps over-scrupulous attempt to see the event from the father's point of view. There was in all probability no good reason for the child's complaining (which, moreover, is referred to quite coldly as "ich winselte"); the horrendous action (which, for the father, lasted only "ein Weilchen") is not called wrong or unjust; and, in any event, ("wohl schon" again impersonates the father's attitude), the action had its intended result. We shall see that this concern to say all that is to be said on the other (here it is the father's) side is not a piece of empty rhetoric, but a substantial part of the narrative manner. The second remarkable thing about the passage is its brief and simple yet circumspect statement of that dominant preoccupation which I have mentioned at the outset. No objective law or conception of justice is invoked: "I, according to my nature, could not properly connect" the supposed crime with its terrible punishment. . . . In story after story

this attempt to connect will be made, but we shall see that in the course of the attempt the narrator will muster all conceivable evidence against its being successful.

What makes the "Letter" the remarkable thing it is (rather than a tedious and embarrassingly explicit exercise in family recriminations) is its literary quality. The following passage is built round a metaphor, in itself rather unpromising, of the almighty father in his easy chair. However, it is not the metaphor itself but the way it is explored that matters. For here is the place where a merely private and autobiographically meaningful observation is transformed into a literary and thus commonly valid image—the very place where a private grievance becomes art:

Du hattest Dich allein durch eigene Kraft so hoch hinaufgearbeitet, infolgedessen hattest Du unbeschränktes Vertrauen zu Deiner Meinung. Das war für mich als Kind nicht einmal so blendend wie später für den heranwachsenden jungen Menschen. In Deinem Lehnstuhl regiertest Du die Welt. Deine Meinung war richtig, jede andere war verrückt, überspannt, meschugge,⁷ nicht normal. Dabei war Dein Selbstvertrauen so groß, daß Du gar nicht konsequent sein mußtest und doch nicht aufhörtest recht zu haben. Es konnte auch vorkommen, daß Du in einer Sache gar keine Meinung hattest und infolgedessen alle Meinungen, die hinsichtlich der Sache überhaupt möglich waren, ohne Ausnahme falsch sein mußten. Du konntest zum Beispiel auf die Tschechen schimpfen, dann auf die Deutschen, dann auf die Juden, und zwar nicht nur in Auswahl, sondern in jeder Hinsicht, und schließlich blieb niemand mehr übrig außer Dir. Du bekamst für mich das Rätselhafte, das alle Tyrannen haben, deren Recht auf ihrer Person, nicht auf dem Denken begründet ist. Wenigstens schien es mir so.⁸

The scene is not without its grim humor, which derives from the consequential way in which the numerous implications—indeed all possible implications—of "the tyrant in the easy chair" are examined.

Almost any letter-writer with sufficient animus could enumerate such a list of pet hatreds ("die Tschechen, die Deutschen, die Juden . . ."). But to give that list the stamp of exhaustiveness, to frame it as an image of absolute solipsism, with its inescapable premise of "no opinion = all opinions are false" and its equally compelling conclusion, "so that finally nobody was left but you," is to go beyond the autobiographical occasion and to be engaged on a literary enterprise.

It is an enterprise that involves descriptive powers of a very high order:

Ich war ja schon niedergedrückt durch Deine bloße Körperlichkeit. Ich erinnere mich zum Beispiel daran, wie wir uns öfters zusammen in einer Kabine auszogen. Ich mager, schwach, schmal, Du stark, groß, breit. Schon in der Kabine kam ich mir jämmerlich vor, und zwar nicht vor Dir, sondern vor der ganzen Welt, denn du warst für mich das Maß aller Dinge. Traten wir dann aber aus der Kabine vor die Leute hinaus, ich an Deiner Hand, ein kleines Gerippe, unsicher, bloßfüßig auf den Planken, in Angst vor dem Wasser, unfähig Deine Schwimmbewegungen nachzumachen, die Du mir in guter Absicht, aber tatsächlich zu meiner tiefen Beschämung immerfort vormachtest, dann war ich sehr verzweifelt und alle meine schlimmen Erfahrungen auf allen Gebieten stimmten in solchen Augenblicken großartig zusammen.⁹

The vivid, poignant elaboration of this contrast is obvious. But what are we to make of that “magnificent congruence of all my bad experiences,” with which the passage closes? Kafka’s writing, like the writing of most major German authors of his time, is informed by a powerful literary self-consciousness—a consciousness of the kind of thing he is doing and of the literary ends he is pursuing.¹⁰ The insight that is here ascribed to the little boy is sophisticated. We are told that he saw how all these awful episodes of suppression and deprivation *fitted together* into one picture, and that there was something magnificent in that harmony of horrors. Was the boy really capable of that vision? We do not know. What is clear is that this is what the mature writer hoped to achieve in his fictions. This is the strange “congruence” and harmony he aimed at—again, at the greatest odds against achieving it that his powerful imagination could devise.

3.

Our story has for its theme the father-son conflict. There is nothing remarkable about that, especially in view of its date of composition. 1912 is commonly held to be the first year of the Expressionist revolution in German literature¹¹ and, from Friedrich Sorge’s *Der Bettler* onwards, the father-son conflict is a favorite theme of Expressionist writers; what Kafka shares with them and with Frank Wedekind, their immediate literary ancestor, is the conveyed conviction that this is a conflict of life and death. With this goes a remarkable heightening of the figure of the father—something quite like a physical exaggeration—so that in the penultimate scene of the story he stands before us more like a giant than a human being. Numerous Expressionists were concerned to underline their meanings by ascrib-

ing to their literary characters some real or apparent physical abnormality. Such devices, too, were common to Prague German writers like Gustav Meyrink and Paul Leppin, with whose works Kafka was familiar. (It is not often realized how close he came to being stuck in that literature of provincial sensationalism; nor is the fact that throughout his life he never met a single important writer outside this circle.) In Kafka's story the sensational is avoided because the transition from the realistic to the surrealistic or fantastic is gradual. The father appears as a giant, but only to the extent that we see him through the eyes of the son.

These two things, then—the theme of conflict and the heightening of the hostile father, implying a diminution of the threatened son—are the sum total of Kafka's involvement in contemporary German literature.¹² Everything else about the story is, as far as I can see, wholly novel and original.

4

The story ends with the son's suicide by drowning:

Noch hielt er sich mit schwächer werdenden Händen fest,
erspähte zwischen den Geländerstangen einen Autoomnibus, der
mit Leichtigkeit seinen Fall übertönen würde, rief leise: "Liebe
Eltern, ich habe euch doch immer geliebt," und ließ sich hinab-
fallen.

In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu
unendlicher Verkehr.¹³

The son, Georg Bendemann, kills himself in strict and immediate compliance with his father's verdict:

"Und darum wisse: Ich verurteile dich jetzt zum Tode des
Ertrinkens!" (p. 67)

This verdict in turn comes at the climax of a violent quarrel, or rather a lethal attack which the father has been conducting against his son. The discussion between the two of them, held in the dark, airless bedroom at the rear of the Bendemanns' house in which the father has been living since his wife's death, begins peaceably enough; it is occasioned by the son's visit to his father. Georg Bendemann has come to show his father a letter which he had written, a little while before, to his—Georg's friend, who has been living for several years in distant Russia. The letter itself, which Georg is writing in the first scene of the story, appears to be intended partly to renew contact with the distant friend whom Georg Bendemann is conscious of having neglected, and partly to inform his friend that he, Georg, has now

become engaged and is about to marry a girl called Frieda Brandenfeld. And here, in the briefest outline, we have the whole story.

I have retold it backwards in order to enable us to concentrate straight away on the central issue that is bound to occupy us as readers of the story. I mean the question how reasonable, how acceptable we find the verdict of death at the end; what narrative connection we may discern between the bulk of the tale and its catastrophic conclusion; what Georg Bendemann has done to deserve such a verdict; or more generally, what is the manner of Kafka's motivation. We are asking about the nature of that “congruence” of which Kafka speaks in the “Letter to the Father.”

The model is the situation of the child standing on the dark balcony. In Kafka's account of that situation there was, as we have seen, a measure of guilt in the child's conduct. His transgressions, however, were not enough to explain the monstrous punishment, to “connect” it, as Kafka put it, with the crime. What was added, in the “Letter,” was the element of might, of sheer physical power which overrode all considerations of justice.

This is not the situation in “Das Urteil.” Certainly not in the physical sense of the word. The father never physically coerces the son at all. What takes the place of brutal physical force cannot be anything other than the authority behind the father's command. The question then arises, what that authority is based on. The possibility of an external sanction or appeal is not broached at all. In the situation that Kafka presents to us (and this is the measure of his convincingness) it never occurs to us to ask what the father could do if the son chose to disobey his order. The structure of this authoritative situation—indeed of any authoritative situation—is based on the acknowledgment of authority by one side, by him who obeys. This acknowledgment in turn can only occur where he who obeys is in some sense, and it must here be a psychic, mental sense—weaker than the authority. And this weakness, finally, in the situation of “Das Urteil,” springs from a feeling of guilt.

5.

It is here that critics of Kafka's work usually interpolate the word “ambiguity.” They argue or imply that the ambiguity (or “ambivalence”) of the subject's situation is identical with, or tantamount to, his feeling of guilt. The argument certainly looks plausible,

but that does not make it valid. Ambiguity—here or in any wider context—is not the same either as guilt or a feeling of guilt. This much is obvious. But since Georg Bendemann's guilt is unclear, and may well turn out to be inadequate or incommensurate with the punishment that is meted out to him and that he accepts, it is then argued that it is this inadequate guilt which is ambiguous. This too, however, is a misconception. And in calling it that we have respectable linguistic usage on our side. When we read in a newspaper that an old woman has been sentenced to two years in jail for lifting a bag of sugar from a grocery store we do not commonly say that the judge has been ambiguous, but we do say that he has been unjust.

The point to insist on¹⁴ is that this whole notion of ambiguity has been badly overworked in Kafka criticism (and in literary criticism generally; but that is another story). It may well be that some of his stories *end* ambiguously, leaving two or more options open for a development that never comes. (Whether or not he wrote fictions of this kind, "Das Urteil" is not one of them.) But stories, that is connected narratives of an action however peculiar, cannot *contain* ambiguities, they are composed of elements which cease to be ambiguous the moment they are connected in a story-line. Every situation *A* inside a story is followed by "and then *B* happened." Whether or not *B* was adequately connected with *A*, *B* could only happen *as part of that story* if the choices available at *A* were either explicitly reduced to one, or can be seen to have been so reduced.

6.

And this is the case in our story. We have spoken of Georg Bendemann's feeling of guilt—not his guilt but his feeling of guilt. This is adumbrated in various ways throughout the first two-thirds of the text. A powerful example of it occurs in the third paragraph, when he considers whether he ought not to have written to his friend more fully and more candidly. Rather than quote the passage in full¹⁵ I shall paraphrase its main narrative line without following its exact wording and syntax, emphasizing merely its logical connections:

What should "one" write to such a man? One feels sorry for him but cannot help him. One may offer advice: come back, take up your old friendships again, rely on your friends. *No reason* why she should not do this. *But*: is this not an insult? Would it not be an intimation (je schonender, desto kränkender) of his failure, of the shamefulness of his return, his friend's

superiority? Anyway: *in that [wholly hypothetical] case*, is there any point in bringing him back home? Would one's advice not go unheeded? *In that case* he would remain in Russia after all, more estranged and embittered by the well-meant advice than before. But if he did follow the advice? Assuming that on his return he did fail in business and found himself pushed to the wall (natürlich nicht mit Absicht aber durch die Tatsachen)? Now he would be floundering with his friends' help and without it—find himself deprived of his home country and friends alike. Would it not be better, *in that [equally hypothetical] case*, if he remained abroad after all? Is there, *in those [hypothetical] circumstances*, any chance of his really succeeding at home? These are the reasons why, if “one” wished to maintain this correspondence at all, one could not send him any real news, etc. etc. . . .

I take this passage to be exemplary of Kafka's mode of writing, of what is frequently singled out as his “ambiguity”; there are at least two other similar passages in our story. The process of deliberation is taking place in Georg Bendemann's mind. It is nothing if not eminently reasonable. Bendemann is putting himself in his friend's position, and yet he is addressing not his friend but his conception of that friend. It is a fictive dialogue in which the one stable thing is his assumption that every suggestion (every “advice”) will be taken in the wrong way; a chess party *en solitaire*, in which he assumes that his friend is his opponent and that the opponent's every new move will be false. This is the condition—apparently the only condition—under which Georg Bendemann is capable of forming his conception of his friend.

When we have come to the end of this passage we have a feeling of exhaustion. It seems to us that not just every relevant but every possible point of view has been considered, every assertion once made has been taken back again. But this is not so. For we realize that at the end of it a definite platform has been reached, that we have descended one step lower than the level on which Georg Bendemann's story began. The upshot of the exhaustive argument is quite clear: the relationship appears in a very peculiar light. We ask whether in fact this is a real friend at all, whether the ties that bind Georg to him are really those of friendship. The answer we are bound to give is again clear: they are less than the ties of genuine friendship. Two pages later Kafka will again take back a part of this argument. He will show that there is enough of a bond for Georg to feel the need to tell his friend about his engagement to “a young girl from a well-

to-do family." But this again is a move which is not only a sign of a positive feeling for his friend. More than that, it is partly dictated by his fear that the friend might find out about the engagement, partly it is the sign of an anxious obligation Georg feels—friendships, we note, are not normally hedged in by anxious obligations—to tell his friend about his own more fortunate prospects, and in this sense to free himself from this friendship, to repudiate it by moving away, into married life. And so the invitation to his own wedding which Georg pens at the end of his letter *seems* ambiguous: and when, finally, he leaves the decision of whether or not his friend should attend the wedding to him, he more or less clearly expresses the hope that the friend will not come. I dwell on this detail in order to point to the extraordinary narrative triumph that is achieved here, where the words on the page are assembled ostensibly to assert proposition *A* but in reality—and I do not mean any obscure, hidden reality, but the narrative reality conveyed through the text—but in reality assert *nonA*. To assert a weak *nonA* is not an ambiguity.

But what is the purpose of this peculiar narrative feat? What is the point of asserting *nonA* through an ostensible *A*? In this complicated and yet astonishingly sparse and economical way Kafka is conveying a psychological situation of the utmost weakness, the psychic dimensions of a feeling of guilt. Such a situation, you will remember, was necessary to the structure of the story, it was necessary if the father's authority was to be effective, if the author was to show at least a foothold for that authority in the mind of the subject.

The objective facts in which this feeling of guilt is founded are few and, coming to them with our own normal way of measuring guilt, we are likely to find them trivial, inadequate. Let me briefly enumerate them. It is a fact that Georg has been neglecting his friend. He has also been neglecting his father. The dark back room is a sign of that, and so is his initially condescending tone towards the father. While making plans for his forthcoming marriage, he has toyed with the idea of letting his father live alone. Now we come to further facts: his getting ready to marry; his getting on in the world and doing well in the family business from which the father has now retired; has retired, and this is important again, at the moment when his wife—Georg's mother—died. But these latter facts cannot be counted as accruing to an objectively valid guilt as we calculate guilt, in the same way that the first set of facts I mentioned—the neglect of the friend and of the father—are objective facts of guilt. Is he guilty

because he intends to get married? Most critics say he is. But the fact is that we know too little about his relationship with his fiancée (other than the father's condemnation of it) to answer the question. The critics tell us that in ceasing to be a bachelor Georg is betraying an important ideal. We do not know. If (as we shall see) the ultimate accusation is one of heedless egocentricity, then getting married might be at least as good a way of curing that as remaining a bachelor.

In order to make George Bendemann an obedient subject to the father's authority—in order to make the subject into a victim—Kafka employs endless variations on that strange and complex narrative method we have examined. He establishes a kind of spider's web of insinuations by uniting the objective and subjective strands of guilt, so that we seem unable to distinguish between them; and at the very point where we are prepared to accept them as one—as objective guilt deserving of the punishment the hero receives—he shows us that they are not one, that the subjective strand, without which the guilt would be inadequate, is indeed subjective and arbitrary. To put it another way: the author endows a partly arbitrary ("subjective") law with the validity and power of a wholly objective law, *and shows that this is what he is doing*. Or, finally: he shows us the working of an oxymoron called "subjective law."

7.

I have spoken of the originality of Kafka's undertaking, and it is clear that this strange disposition of mind, in which guilt and feeling of guilt are conjoined without being coextensive, is apt to strike us as a thoroughly modern, twentieth century phenomenon. In a fuller account of Kafka's work it could be shown that here lies its prophetic aspect, that in showing this psychic disposition at work he is intimating the darkest parts of the psychology of terror as it was practiced in the German and Russian concentration camps years after his own death. What does not seem to have been noted, however, is the fact that this state of mind was familiar to the least "Kafkaesque" of German poets—I mean to Goethe. I know no closer parallel in all literature to what is being conveyed here than the maledictory lines that "Sorge" addresses to the aged Faust—"Soll er gehen, soll er kommen / Der Entschluß ist ihm genommen / . . ."—all the way to his "being prepared for Hell."¹⁶ But of course this is only part of the picture Goethe presents, whereas it dominates Kafka's entire vision of man.

8.

So far we have looked at the situation from the subject's point of view. But this is only one half of the story. For just as Georg descends step by step ever deeper into the abyss of his deprivation, so the father rises higher and higher in his position of authority. And indeed, the two movements are connected: the more passively and weakly authority is acknowledged, the more firmly it is enacted. When the father first appears, it is he who is weak, senile, he seems not quite right in the head. The images of neglect—the toothless mouth, the slightly soiled underwear, the unread old newspaper, the dark room—all these work both ways. They show the end of a situation in which Georg has wielded power, that has now become the situation from which spring the objective elements in his guilt, but at the same time they show the first and lowest step from which the father begins his climb to power. The father begins his ascent by doubting the reality of his son's friend. He does this in the course of a long rigmarole full of suspicions he has about transactions in the business:

"Im Geschäft entgeht mir manches, es wird mir vielleicht nicht verborgen—ich will jetzt gar nicht die Annahme machen, daß es mir verborgen wird—, ich bin nicht mehr kräftig genug, mein Gedächtnis lässt nach, ich habe nicht mehr den Blick für alle die vielen Sachen. Das ist erstens der Ablauf der Natur, und zweitens hat mich der Tod unseres Mütterchens viel mehr niedergeschlagen als dich.—Aber weil wir gerade bei dieser Sache halten, bei diesem Brief, so bitte ich dich, Georg, täusche mich nicht. Es ist eine Kleinigkeit, es ist nicht des Atems wert, also täusche mich nicht. Hast du wirklich diesen Freund in Petersburg?" (p. 60)

The function of this argument is twofold: first, and quite obviously, it does, as I suggested, show the nadir of the father's position, where he himself acknowledges that his senility causes him to forget things (an objective fact). At the same time this suspicion is the first more or less clear indication of the hostility between the two of them; and to this we must add *the accusation* that since the mother's death the son has been intent on overpowering the father. This again, you will have noticed, is slightly taken away again—"das ist erstens der Ablauf der Natur"—but the accusation remains.

But there is another reason for the father's denial of the friend's reality at this stage. It is the father's implied suggestion that as a consequence of Georg's gradual betrayal, the friend is not a genuine

friend any more, that he has ceased to exist as a friend for Georg, and this fact will therefore make it particularly consistent for the father, in his ascent on the ladder of power, to appropriate the friend, to show that he has been in secret communication with him all along, that he has been conspiring against Georg in order to bring about, in concert with the distant friend, Georg's destruction.

Again, the formulations are vertiginous: the emphasis is presumably on "Hast du diesen *Freund* in Petersburg?"¹⁷ But the subjective evaluation "he is no *friend* of yours!" is made as nearly in the form of the objective statement "there is no such person, it's all your invention and joke"—as it is possible to make it: "Du hast keinen Freund in Petersburg. Du bist immer ein Spaßmacher gewesen and hast dich auch mir gegenüber nicht zurückgehalten. Wie solltest du dann gerade dort einen Freund haben! . . ."

All these details, then, are assembled in defiance of any ordinary notion of verisimilitude. Kafka quite deliberately stacks the cards against himself, making the father's gradual rise to power as difficult, as ostensibly improbable as he possibly can. And what follows now could be called "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" (the title of one of Kafka's earliest stories) if it were a real fight. But the point is precisely the diminution of a fight, the ebbing away of it. As the father rises in his bed, growing as it were into a giant statue so that his hands touch the ceiling and his nightshirt barely covers his thighs (like all incipiently funny situations in Kafka's work, the joke of it is likely to die upon our lips as we follow the story), so he launches his full invective against the son's proposal to marry, which in the consistency of the accusation, but only in that consistency, comes to figure as a betrayal: "'Weil sie die Röcke gehoben hat,' fng der Vater zu flöten an, 'weil sie die Röcke so gehoben hat, die widerliche Gans,' und er hob um das darzustellen, sein Hemd so hoch, daß man auf seinem Oberschenkel die Narbe aus seinen Kriegsjahren sah, 'weil sie die Röcke so und so und so gehoben hat, hast du dich an sie herangemacht . . .'" (p. 64; we recall a passage from "Der Brief" seven years later: "Sie hat wahrscheinlich irgendeine ausgesuchte Bluse angezogen, wie das die Prager Jüdinnen verstehen, und daraufhin hast Du Dich natürlich entschlossen, sie zu heiraten. . .")

9.

Here now, in some detail, we have the double movement at work in the story: the descent into deprivation on the son's part, the ascent

to the seat of authority on the father's. The result is that we can no longer distinguish—the whole force of the narrative urges us to abandon the distinction—between objective guilt and neurosis, between objective guilt and neurosis, between guilt and feeling of guilt. And the final moment of the verdict sums up both the content of the story and the form in which the content was achieved:

. . . Und lauter: "Jetzt weißt du also was es noch außer dir gab, bisher wußtest du nur von dir! Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du ja eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch!—Und darum wisse: Ich verurteile dich jetzt zum Tode des Ertrinkens!" (p. 67)

The verdict indicates the overall content of the story. For we can now see that the entire finely-spun argument in which guilt and feeling of guilt were combined leads to this accusation; that all Georg's acts and thoughts have in common his exclusive preoccupation with himself; that he measures everything around him in terms of his own hopes and fears. It is more than egocentricity, it is a kind of moral solipsism. And the sentence "Bisher wußtest du nur von dir" is an accurate summary of his life as we know it from the story. We may think that this kind of preoccupation with the self does not merit the verdict it receives. We could hardly think otherwise and yet continue to live. Kafka on the other hand is conducting in his writings (and also incidentally, in his life) experiments in absolute morality. If Georg's life has been informed by such a solipsism, he tells us, then once that solipsim has been destroyed, that life has nothing to support it and the verdict of death is the consequential and appropriate verdict on that life. And in this way Kafka does what some of the greatest writers of all times have done: he illuminates and challenges our habitual moral judgments. But that absolute morality is tarnished—is itself liable to be challenged—since it is being administered by agents whose authority is partial and subjective only. This may not impair the validity of the summary ("Bisher wußtest du nur von dir"), but it certainly throws doubt on the justice of the verdict. It is as if the Christian moral doctrine (e.g. St. Matthew 8:28, "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart") were presented to us as the ideology of a power-corrupted demiurge.

The verdict indicates also the form of our story, in the sentence:

"Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du ja eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch!"

It serves as a kind of summary of Kafka's narrative method. The sentence *looks* as though it were an example of the ambiguity his prose is said to affect—an assertion taken back by a counter-assertion. Yet the two statements do not cancel each other out, just as the meaning of the invitation that was not an invitation was not cancelled out. For the second statement is introduced by “noch eigentlicher” and thus remains unchallenged: indeed, it is not the truth, but the truth as the father in his wrath sees it. And these—the apparent cancellation that is not a real one; the partial withdrawal that yet results in a further degradation—these are the patterns that dominate both the texture and the situational logic of Kafka's fiction.

Time and again critics have identified the father-figure of “Das Urteil” with some Christian or Judaic or secular notion of absolute justice. Yet in the lines immediately following the verdict we read:

Georg fühlte sich aus dem Zimmer gejagt, den Schlag, mit dem
der Vater hinter ihm aufs Bett stürzte, trug er noch in den
Ohren davon. (p. 67)

Not only does the son descend into the pit of his degradation as the father rises to the height of his authority, but at the same time the son rises up into a sphere beyond his solipsism (“‘Liebe Eltern, ich habe euch doch immer geliebt’” are Georg's last words before he jumps to his death). Accepting the punishment he less than fully deserved, the son rises into the sphere of righteousness which the father had usurped, while the father descends towards and is sullied with the son's guilt in the act of meting out that punishment from a position of authority less than fully warranted.

Only now the pattern and the rhythm are complete—as complete as, in Kafka, they ever will be: this is the choreography of the lethal dance, the “magnificent congruence.” The movements in this strange dance belong partly to a moral scheme—to the extent that the son's guilt is involved; and partly to a psychological scheme—to the extent that his feeling of guilt is involved. The two flow into each other. The resources of Kafka's art are employed to make it as hard as possible for us to prize open the connection. Yet when we do so we are left with a father whose authority is in the last resort arbitrary—psychic force without full moral sanction. And here the story ends. In an important, not accidental way Kafka's work is fragmentary. That last gap between crime and punishment is never quite closed, an incommensurability remains and is shown to remain. To fill that gap he would have to write out the objective law (there

is no other) according to which sentence is passed; to validate it by a positive covenant, by an image of a righteous authority. Who says the father is just? There is no image of the just father. Kafka does not give us such an image. He gives us the dark side of the moon. He does little to strengthen our hope that this is only one half. His unique prose is designed to persuade us that he who reports from those parts has "nothing but [his] experiences"¹⁹ to go by, and that these experiences are limited. This is the measure of his truthfulness.

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- ¹ See K. Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka, eine Biographie seiner Jugend* (Bern: 1958), *passim*; the story was first published in Max Brod's periodical *Arkadia*.
- ² See Erich Heller's introduction to *Briefe an Felice Bauer und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, ed. E. Heller and J. Born (Frankfurt a/Main: 1967).
- ³ For details, see K. Wagenbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 339; and his *Kafka* (Hamburg: rororo, 1968), pp. 120-22.
- ⁴ "Pawlatsche" is Prague (and Viennese) German for "balcony."
- ⁵ Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (New York, 1953), p. 167.
- ⁶ "Gedanken an Freud" are mentioned in Kafka's diary of September 23, 1912 (*Tagebücher*, New York, 1949, p. 294).
- ⁷ "Meschugge" is Yiddish for "crazy."
- ⁸ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, p. 169. The passage could serve as a motto to one of the most remarkable books of our time, H. Picker's *Hitlers Tischgespräche*, ed. Schramm, Hillgruber, Vogt (Stuttgart: 1965); see, e.g., the passages on lawyers (pp. 224f), the English (p. 279), and the Jews (*passim*).
- ⁹ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, pp. 168-69.
- ¹⁰ See *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen: Franz Kafka*, ed. E. Heller and J. Beug (München: 1969).
- ¹¹ See the chapter on "1912" in Michael Hamburger's *Reason and Energy: Studies in German Literature* (New York, 1957); also Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka, der Künstler* (Frankfurt a Main: 1965), pp. 97-8.
- ¹² I leave to one side W. H. Sokels plea for Kafka's "classical expressionism"; see his *Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie* (München, 1964).
- ¹³ I quote from *Erzählungen* (unnumbered volume of Max Brod's edition of *Franz Kafka, Gesammelte Werke*), New York, 1946, pp. 67-8. This will be referred to by page numbers only.
- ¹⁴ I am here indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein's argument in *The Blue Book* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 33-4.

¹⁵ *Erzählungen*, pp. 53-5.

¹⁶ *Faust II*, Act V, lines 11471-11486.

¹⁷ See Sokel, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁸ It is in no sense a psychological statement (see Heinz Politzer, *op. cit.*, p. 96), and in every sense a moral one.

¹⁹ *Der Prozeß*, last scene.