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KAFKA'S NARRATORS

A STUDY OF HIS STORIES AND SKETCHES

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interest more deeply towards his work in itself, rather than as an example of a general trend, and I rapidly became immersed in the questions of Kafka interpretation. For I found that not only is his narrative method very subtle, intricate, and puzzling, but also it is diverse, and I came to believe that, in the great mass of contrary interpretations, some faults were due to a failure to understand the narrative perspective he chooses, some to a tendency to judge a work by implicit reference to an inapposite model, and some to an assumption that his stories conform to one model when in fact Kafka is continuously inventing or adopting modifications.⁸ In many ways the problems of the Kafka story are the problems of the modern novel: the peculiarity of his impersonal narrator, his unease over the composition of a story, the difficulty he had over his endings, his growing preference in his later works for an identified personal narrator and even for the present tense in place of the preterite. But his work is at the same time so unique that it seemed an injustice to consider his work simply as an example of a general trend, and this all the more so since the peculiarities of his narrative forms and their modifications arise not out of a theory of story nor out of a theoretical interest in experiment but out of the requirements of his themes, his need to transmit the sense of his experience. So my work came to concentrate on Kafka's works, on the narrative structure in the first place, but also on the secret of the structure, that is, the secret of its coherence, which meant that where necessary I had to speak of interpretation. Though I have conducted, and ask for, a close study of Kafka's text, I hope it will be evident that I do so not out of grammatical enthusiasm but out of a search for meaning.

When I set out, I intended to include a chapter or chapters on Kafka's novels. But I have come to the conclusion that these large and intricate works cannot be adequately discussed in so small a space, especially since the vast quantity of critical studies on them requires careful attention too. So I have, somewhat reluctantly, decided to limit my own study to the shorter stories and to content myself with occasional brief references to the novels.

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'The judgment' ('Das Urteil')

I start with the narratives told by an impersonal narrator – often ill-named the omniscient narrator – since Kafka employs this agency for his earliest short stories 'The judgment', 'The metamorphosis' (both written in 1912), and 'In the penal colony' (1914), and for the three novels.

The narrative perspective in the first two is not so consistent as later stories and more difficult to sum up. It is clear that it has much similarity to that of the novels since the objective voice that tells the story normally chooses the chief character's angle of vision and, while communicating to us the latter's thoughts, wishes, feelings, and intentions, can in the main describe the other characters and the physical settings only in so far as the chief character knows them. Most readers feel the last sentence of 'The judgment', referring to the stream of traffic crossing the bridge as Georg falls into the river, and the last pages of 'The metamorphosis', describing the recovery of the Samana family after the death of Gregor, as a dislocation of style, since elsewhere throughout both stories we are so tightly held within the orbit of the chief character. But this feeling is not fully justified, and the objective narrator, the objective viewpoint immanent in these endings, appears at many moments of the story. If I now proceed to disentangle the stylistic evidence for the narrator's objective viewpoint, as distinct from that of the character, I do this only in order to assess the effect upon the meaning of the story that this double perspective produces. It is best to examine the two stories separately, though they show very much the same features.

The first paragraph of 'The judgment', in which Georg Bendemann and his home are described from outside, might seem to be a conventional introduction to the story. It creates a

mood of uneventful idyllic innocence on a Sunday morning in spring, a row of inconspicuous houses, a lovely outlook, and a young man putting his letter into an envelope 'with playful slowness'. With the second paragraph we enter into the troubles and questions of the story and at the same time into the perspective of Georg, for it is through his thoughts that we are introduced to the friend in St Petersburg and then, in a long passage of free indirect speech, to his internal debate about what he should tell the friend. So the narratorial opening is not without thematic function, even if it is only a means to make the coming gloom more striking by contrast. But there are also narratorial intrusions later. As Georg goes to see his father about the letter, we are told about their habits since the mother died (p. 26).¹ This also must be narratorial, and the brief description of their daily routine, a close association at work and home lacking all intimacy, is more than a sort of stage direction, for it creates in us a feeling of inert cohabitation that bears an objective judgment on them both. It is consonant with this that the description of Georg's final flight to the river also is an objective, not subjective account, even more emphatically so through the two striking similes – Georg hurtles 'as over a tilting surface' and he clutches the railing of the bridge 'as a hungry man clutches at food' (p. 32).

There is the same double perspective in the presentation of the characters. We see and hear them only in so far as they appear to Georg, we know their thoughts only as their behaviour and speech indicates them to Georg, through our repeated identification with his angle of vision. But here too the narrator may add something, an observation from outside the character. Thus we are twice told that Georg forgets a resolution 'for he constantly forgot everything', once with a simile: 'forgot it, like pulling a short thread through the eye of a needle' (pp. 31, 30).

Usually the two perspectives are not clearly separate but more subtly interwoven; in many cases we are not able to be sure in what perspective a particular statement stands. The reason for this is the extensive use of free indirect speech and,

more particularly, the modern form that Kafka's free indirect speech takes.²

The thoughts, inner reactions of most characters are given directly, as they themselves express them in speech, and indirectly as inferences from their behaviour. The narrator has immediate access only to Georg's thoughts, and only in his case can he use introductory verbs like 'he thought, imagined' etc. followed by reported speech. If the thought or intention of the other characters is detected, it is legitimised as an inference from their expressions and behaviour. Free indirect speech is therefore almost completely reserved for the main character, and for him it is indeed abundantly used.

Just as Kafka follows an old convention in the reproduction of thoughts by putting them in direct speech enclosed in inverted commas, as if they were spoken, so he also often uses the conventional indices that betray free indirect speech and leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to the source of the statements concerned. Thus he can open a passage with exclamatory questions that transfer the reader to the consciousness of the character (pp. 23-4). Or statements can be accompanied by an explicit 'he thought', 'he believed', 'he remembered', 'he felt' (*er dachte, er glaubte, er erinnerte sich, er fühlte*), which clearly define from whose mind they emanate. Sometimes we may be misled on first reading, though closer attention reveals the subjective nature of a statement. For instance: Georg, undressing his sick father, 'reproached himself with having neglected his father. It would certainly have been his duty to keep an eye on his father's change of underwear' (p. 29). We might first read the last sentence as the comment of the narrator, but realise that it is one of the 'reproaches' that Georg makes himself. Similarly later in that paragraph: 'Doch jetzt entschloss er sich kurz mit aller Bestimmtheit, den Vater in seinen künftigen Haushalt mitzunehmen. Es schien ja fast, wenn man genauer zusah, dass die Phege dort... zu spät kommen könnte.' ('Yet now he swiftly decided with all certainty of purpose to take his father in to his future household. Admittedly it seemed, if one

looked more closely, that the care he intended there might come too late.) The *schien* must mean that it seems to Georg (*ihm schien*), the *ja* indicates his argument with himself, and *mit aller Bestimmtheit* is not the statement of the narrator, but indicates what Georg himself thought about his resolve. Verbs and particles that indicate an inner debate – like *sollen*, *dürfen*, *vielleicht*, *ja*, *doch*, *sicherlich* – frequently betray the subjective character of the statements concerned and their presence can justify us in taking associated neighbouring sentences as Georg's thoughts in spite of their having a normal objective-narratorial form. This is the case with the paragraph on p. 24 that follows a series of exclamatory questions and concludes with a repeated *vielleicht* ('perhaps') and similar words – *wahrscheinlich*, *jedenfalls*, *zweifellos* ('probably', 'in any event', 'doubtless'), all of which tell us of Georg's thoughts and persuaded us to read the earlier part of this paragraph in the same way. Thus, too, in the following paragraph, it is not the narrator who thinks that the figures of the friend's business in St Petersburg are *verschwindend* ('dwindling') compared with the size of Georg's own turnover, but Georg, and we properly understand that word as a slightly arrogant, impatient expression of his feelings with regard to this friend.

In all these respects Kafka's use of free indirect speech is essentially the same as that which we meet in nineteenth-century novels and rests likewise on a clear distinction of an objective narrator from the subjective character. It shares some of the uncertainties that dog this form, especially those arising from the fact that its syntax is identical with that of a narratorial report, its tenses are normally the same and the characters referred to in the third person, while it lacks the verb and conjunction ('he said, thought that') that identify normal reported speech. Thus Georg may, in the thoughts ascribed to him, seem to think of himself not only as 'he' but even as 'Georg', not as an infantile self-address but simply as a stylistic device, needed because 'he' might apply to someone else. Thus, 'quite contrary to Georg's intention' (p. 25) is not a narratorial

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intrusion but Georg's own thought. At the same time it is a marked feature of free indirect speech that it can alternate very freely, from sentence to sentence, with objective narrative, so that we cannot always be sure which is intended. On p. 24 we read a reference to the death of Georg's mother, and the addition of 'which had occurred some two years previously' must be a bit of information the narrator conveys to his reader rather than a thought in Georg's head; while on p. 25 the explanation that his fiancée was 'from a well-to-do family', that at first sight seems also to be a narratorial explanation for our benefit, turns out to be the phrase that Georg has used in his letter to his friend, so we recognise that here his thought is quoting the smug phrase intended to excite his friend's envy or silence his disapproval.

But this paragraph shows problems of perspective that are not traditional, and needs closer examination. After the first sentence that tells us that Georg had hitherto not been able to bring himself to write to his friend about his betrothal, it continues:

Oft sprach er mit seiner Braut über diesen Freund und das besondere Korrespondenzverhältnis, in welchem er zu ihm stand. 'Da wird er gar nicht zu unserer Hochzeit kommen', sagte sie, 'und ich habe doch das Recht, alle deine Freunde kennen zu lernen.' 'Ich will ihn nicht stören', antwortete Georg, 'verstehe mich recht, er würde wahrscheinlich kommen, wenigstens glaube ich es, aber er würde wahrscheinlich geschädigt fühlen, vielleicht mich beneiden und sicher unzufrieden und unfähig, diese Unzufriedenheit jemals zu beseitigen, allein wieder zurückfahren. Allein – weisst du, was das ist?' 'Ja, kann er denn von unserer Heirat nicht auch auf andere Weise erfahren?' 'Das kann ich allerdings nicht verhindern, aber es ist bei seiner Lebensweise unwahrscheinlich.' 'Wenn du solche Freunde hast, Georg, hättest du dich überhaupt nicht verloben sollen.' 'Ja, das ist unser beider Schuld; aber ich wollte es auch jetzt nicht anders haben.' Und wenn sie dann, rasch atmend unter seinen Küssen, noch vorbrachte: 'Eigentlich kränkt es mich doch', hielt er es wirklich für unvernünftig, dem Freund alles zu schreiben. 'So bin ich und so hat er mich hinzunehmen', sagte er sich.

(He often spoke to his fiancée about this friend and the special relationship that he had with him because of their correspondence. 'So there is

no question of his coming to our wedding', she said, 'but after all I have the right to get to know all your friends.' 'I don't wish to upset him', Georg replied, 'don't misunderstand, he would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel awkward and inferior, perhaps even envious of me: certainly he would be discontented and have no way of shedding his discontent, and then he would have to go back on his own. Do you know what that means - to be on one's own?' 'Yes, but could he not learn of our marriage in some other way?' 'I cannot prevent that, but, given his way of life, it is unlikely.' 'If you have such friends, Georg, you ought not to have got engaged at all.' 'Yes, that's a guilt we both share, but I wouldn't have it any other way now.' And when she, breathing faster under his kisses, still managed to interject 'but even so it does actually offend me', he thought that there could be no real harm in writing everything to his friend. 'That's the way I am and he'll have to accept me on those terms', he said to himself.)

The passage is stylistically surprising. It represents Georg's memory of several discussions with his fiancée that have led to his finally telling his friend about the betrothal. But these 'frequent' discussions are boiled down to one, and this is given in direct speech, i.e. a form that belongs to an objective narrator. It has been taken as a single conclusive conversation, but this is a mistake.³ The memory of the character reduces the conversations to their salient points and the narrator reproduces these in the form that best communicates the experience involved, for this purpose subjecting his separate identity to that of the character. The passage lays bare the transition from the traditional narrative situation of the nineteenth-century novel to that of the modern novel. The narrator relinquishes his separate view or identity in the interest of expressing the experience of the character, but does not thereby disappear. He re-asserts himself in his function as the arranger, the composer of the story whose presence, as we have just seen, can be detected even in those passages where he seems only to be the instrument of the character. This double function of the Kafka narrator, that of giving the experience of the character and that of narrating events, has been accurately and extensively analysed by Hartmut Binder in relation to 'The judgment' and other tales.⁴

What help towards the understanding of Kafka's story does this more precise recognition of the narrative perspective give? We cannot expect that it alone will cleanse the Augean stable of conflicting interpretations; but it may to some extent explain why there is such diversity in these and even rebuff some, especially those which result from the imposition of a preconceived stereotype upon a narrative structure that is the reverse of typical - I think of interpretations that see the tale as a religious or a sexual allegory. The clearest gains from our analysis can be summed up as follows:

1. Since Beissner first defined the narrator of Kafka's novels as 'dwelling in the soul of the character' even saying of that of 'The judgment' that he has 'completely transformed himself into the lonely Georg',⁵ critics have been able to grasp the subjective quality of this impersonal narrator and have been chiefly concerned to define more precisely the relationship between narrator and character. Thus Ellis, one of the most observant of readers, properly insists that though the narrator of 'The judgment' usually adopts the standpoint of the main character, his identity is not absorbed into that of Georg. But Ellis, no more than Sokel, comments on the significance of the occasional, truly objective intrusions of the impersonal narrator, if indeed he notices them. For instance, like Sokel he interprets the first paragraph of the story as a communication of Georg's thoughts as he sits in his comfortable study.⁶ Ellis makes indeed the valuable observation that the description of the setting is not the harmless bit of realism it has usually been assumed to be but betrays a strange confusion of mind, since the row of houses is said to be differentiated 'almost only' in height and colour, whereas such a difference would mean a marked variety. As a consequence Ellis must explain this oddity, like the 'playful deliberateness' of Georg's gesture, as a sign of Georg's mis-relationship with reality. These and other difficulties fade if we recognise that the spatial and psychological focus of this first paragraph lies outside Georg's consciousness, that this paragraph

is a comment from outside the events to be related and indeed, with its confusion and oddities of expression, is an amusingly misleading parody of a conventional story. In general, the mistake that even good critics make is not to recognise the mobility of Kafka's narratorial standpoint, which among other things allows for the frequent intrusion of humour.

2. Ellis's grasp of the prevailing subjectivity of the narrative provides the insight for the best analysis of Georg's character that exists, for he sees that ostensibly narratorial statements about his generosity, friendliness, love, consideration for his friend and his father are only Georg's own self-justifications and his means to disguise his real envy and furtive hatred of these two and to depreciate, triumph over, his rivals. But again Ellis does not differentiate clearly enough. The subjectivity of the statements does not mean that everything is false, only that every statement is suspect. Thus, we can well accept the deep falsehood in Georg's professed kindness and generosity, but we have no reason to doubt his claim that the friend's business is not doing so well as his own, or that the father is ill and incapable of leading the business. Ellis considers that Georg is a failure and a parasite on his father, the stay-at-home son of the parable of the Prodigal Son, while the Petersburg friend is the favoured prodigal. But the only basis for this interpretation is the claim of the father in his violent battle with Georg, and Ellis seems indeed to accept as true everything the father throws at the son. Quite apart from the fact that there is no external, objective corroboration of the father's charges (that he is in league with the Petersburg friend, that he has Georg's customers 'in his pocket', that Georg is thoroughly incompetent in business etc.), there is such spiteful malevolence in his behaviour that we have no right to believe either the truth of his accusations or the justice of his sentence. It is strange that the acumen that detects the inner falsity of Georg should not recognise that of the father.⁷ But, it may be argued, the abject failure of Georg in their contest and his consent to the death-sentence

prove the truth of the father's assertions. I would suggest that Georg's ludicrous evasiveness in the argument and his acceptance of the sentence are due, not to the truth or falsehood of arguments, but to the terrible conflicts of love and hate, in both father and son, that is nakedly revealed through the father's reckless malevolence, the culmination of which is the father's collapse and the son's suicide. Such an interpretation is consistent with what the narrative perspective permits.

3. It is the absence of an authoritative voice in 'The Judgment' (as in many other Kafka stories and in all the novels), both in respect to facts and to judgments and meaning, that has provoked so great a variety of interpretations. The puzzle of the meaning and even connexion of events invites a search for symbolic and allegorical structures, and since there is little authoritative control in the text, these are often based on very frail and arbitrary associations. Ellis's discussion of them, though sympathetic, shows how slight and contradictory is the 'network of Christian imagery', into which the figure of Georg as a sacrificial Christ can be fitted only on the philological principle of *lucus a non lucendo*.⁸ But there is a more general and serious error that Kafka's narrative structure invites.

Its source is not simply in the narrative perspective, for it arises also from the opacity of meaning. Most readers, like most critics, approach Kafka with the expectations that traditional works of fiction arouse, in which apparent incongruities of behaviour and puzzling contingencies are ultimately cleared up in an ending that brings understanding and order (often in a moral as well as logical sense) into the events and relationships recounted. It cannot be too emphatically asserted that in the case of Kafka's stories such expectations are totally misleading. A glance at his fables or parables like 'Kleine Fabel' ('Little fable'), 'Vor dem Gesetz' ('Before the law') and 'Heimkehr' ('Homecoming'), can warn us, for these, inviting us by their form to expect an unambiguous moral, in fact present us with an abstract model of reality that baffles our efforts to find in it a

lesson. The stories, more realistic in their form and seeming in their structure more like normal relationships and situations, also seem to promise a meaning, but as they proceed our hopes are deceived and ultimately we are left before a baffling and painful puzzle.

It is painful merely to accept this fact; even more, the influence of traditional narrative literature leads us to believe there must be a meaning, and even a palatable meaning. Even Ellis, whom I quote because of the intelligence of his examination of 'The Judgment' succumbs to this habit and provides a moral explanation of the catastrophe in terms of guilt and punishment. Georg's self-centredness and destructive hostility to others, Ellis believes, has woven him into a cocoon of falsity, of unreality, that is broken apart by his father; the sentence of death pronounced by the latter expresses symbolically the meaning of the story.⁹ This analysis of Georg's character seems to me, as I have already said, to be true; but are we satisfied with his punishment? Do we feel this to be a moral tale? Pulitzer was surely right when he wrote that there is no guilt in Georg's life that would justify a sentence of such severity, but when he calls this misrelationship 'a technical flaw' he also, it seems to me, is judging the story by a wrong stereotype.¹⁰ All such critical judgments supply that objective observer, that trustworthy narrator, that is not there in this and other stories of Kafka. But his absence is not a mere technicality, nor a mere attempt to bring immediacy into the narration; it means that an objective and authoritative moral understanding of the events is not accessible as well. There is guilt in the world, in Georg, there is consciousness of guilt, there is punishment, but though we can experience and recognise suffering and the evasive tricks men devise to deaden their consciousness of pain and guilt, yet we cannot understand why men should suffer so, nor can we see a necessary relationship between guilt and punishment. The story does not demonstrate a moral, it sets before us a moral riddle; and the title. The judgment, that is appropriate for the father and the son, to the reader must seem deeply ironic.

4. Ellis rightly says that the terms 'nightmarish' or 'dream-like' so frequently used in respect to Kafka's stories do not by themselves 'carry understanding further'.¹¹ His own explanation of the irruption of grotesque elements as products of the unreality that Georg's self-centredness requires goes some way towards the understanding of this nightmarish quality. But here again, I believe, the lack of an intrusive narrator and objective perspective plays a large part. For, immersed in the subjective perspective of Georg, the reader lacks any objective reference, any norm against which he can judge the reality of the forms that emerge. Except at odd moments, when another perspective may be suggested or when a touch of humour intervenes, the reader is held spellbound, lacking those pauses for reflexion which the more traditional narrative forms, even those with a first-person narrator, provide. This spell extends to areas of Kafka's narrative that in themselves contain no fantastic or grotesque elements, like for instance the opening passages of 'The Judgment' that describe Georg's thoughts about his friend; it is the fact that we are so deeply immersed in his consciousness that makes the fantastic elements in his great contest with his father so readily assimilable. It is real nightmare country, swarming with potent significances which we feel, though we lack the keys for their interpretation.

For all this, however, we are not utterly lost; indeed if we were, the spell would be broken, for spells must have a binding quality. At moments, as we have observed, a narrator is evident, not as an interpreter or judge but as a guide who spins the thread of the story. The opening belongs to a mind that knows the outcome, that carries on the story by unobtrusive means, sets the changing scenes, describes its close. The structure of a story is that aspect of which the reader is, as a rule, least conscious and perhaps especially so with Kafka, where the narrator who guides the story's destinies refuses to appear as an authority over against the characters. Yet this itself perhaps greatly contributes to the spellbinding character of the text since it is carried

so swiftly from the opening to the dénouement and has so self-confident a structure, even though we are rarely aware of the agency that brings this about.

'The metamorphosis' ('Die Verwandlung')

For his second story, 'The metamorphosis', Kafka adopted the same non-personal narrator, and its first sentence proclaims the subordination of the narrator to the chief character. 'When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning out of restless dreams he found himself in his bed transformed into a monstrous bug.' From this moment the narrator identifies himself almost completely with Gregor, sees and hears through his eyes and ears, and accepts the truth of his metamorphosis as the victim himself must. Except in the coda of the last few pages, describing the revival of the family after the death of Gregor, almost everything we know is passed on to us via the consciousness of Gregor. To his thoughts we have direct access, the others we know as Gregor sees them through the open door and overhears their conversation. His thoughts and impressions are sometimes reported by the narrator much like his spoken words, in inverted commas introduced by such verbs as 'thought'. But they also invade many passages which, while seeming to express a narrator's view, betray the personal source by a characteristic word here or there. For instance, in the first paragraph, the last sentence might be read as a narrator's comment: 'His many - in relationship to his bulk pitifully thin - legs waved helplessly before his eyes.' But the preceding sentences have described what Gregor could see of his body when he raised his head, and we are meant to feel the 'pitifully' is *his* thought as much as the 'waved' applies to *his* vision.

The text continues:

'What has happened to me?' he thought. It was no dream. His room, a proper human room - albeit a little too small - lay calmly between its four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of materials had been spread out - Samsa was a commercial traveller - hung the

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picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and mounted in a pretty gilt frame.

The first sentence in inverted commas seems to distinguish Gregor's thoughts from the 'facts' the narrator lists. But this distinction does not hold. 'It was no dream' is evidently a conclusion of Gregor's, not the narrator's, since the normal appearance of his room proves it. Not merely 'calmly' has meaning only if thought by Gregor, also the odd phrase, 'a human room - albeit a little too small', critical and reassuring together, has meaning only if it is a rumination of Gregor's, showing the mean, carping spirit in his smugness. Other items in the room, his samples and the picture, are mentioned as his eyes travel to them, and again the expression 'pretty gilt frame' with its smugness has meaning only if it belongs to him and not the narrator. But, on the other hand, the parenthesis 'Samsa was a commercial traveller' is an explanatory communication from narrator to reader.

This narratorial passage is followed by Gregor's resentful reflexions on his unsatisfactory profession and his superiors, given in direct speech; a long passage of free indirect speech, peppered with exclamatory questions and characteristic phrases (as when the porter is called 'the boss's minion, a creature with no backbone or mind of his own', p. 58); narratorial descriptions of his behaviour as he tries to get out of bed, listens to what his family is doing or saying when the chief clerk (*Prokurist*) arrives etc.; and reproductions of the discussions Gregor hears, and takes part in, given in direct speech. None of these methods provides problems of interpretation except the narratorial descriptive form, which consistently betrays that ambiguity we have already observed in the opening two paragraphs. That is: while the narrator's standpoint is determined by the consciousness and concern of the character Gregor and he usually is concerned only to make Gregor's feelings and intentions evident, he also sometimes demonstrates a more independent purpose and indeed offers the reader the chance of becoming the objective observer he emphatically does become in