

KAFKA AND MYTH OF TRISTAN

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THE Kafka novels, taken as an extended allegory of love, form an unusual counterpoint of two themes: that of the quest for love and that of the trial by father. The Kafka protagonist is at once the pilgrim dedicated to the search for love, and the defendant persecuted by the Court-father. The quest motif involves guilt because it is, by the nature of the Oedipus situation, identified with defiance of the father. The theme of trial by father is, therefore, an inevitable consequence of the theme of the quest for love. On the surface, the accusations of the Court are generally vague and mysterious; more deeply, their implication is that the defendant (as son) is engaged in the pursuit of love, and that this pursuit is *per se* defiance of the father. The attitude of the protagonist to these accusations, which is never simple and always ambivalent, provides an insight into Kafka's deepest meaning.

This vision of life as quest for love and trial by father finds fullest expression in *Amerika*.¹ Two main lines of symbolism dominate the novel. The first relates to the love-quest of Karl Rossmann, the second to his conflict with authority. The two themes are linked in the initial sentence: Karl has been expelled to America by his father as punishment for his seduction by a servant girl. At once the figure of the father disappears and is replaced by successive symbols of authority, all male—Uncle Jacob, Pollunder, Green, Delamarche, and Robinson—each a symbol of the father in a new form.

In Chapter I, the role of father-image is assumed by the stoker. He symbolizes irrational, absolute power. He treats Karl harshly, quite without pretext, and his victim responds first with fear, then with affection. He scrambles into the stoker's bed, strokes his fingers, kisses his hand. With the appearance of Uncle Jacob the father-image assumes more definite shape, combining overtones of both trial and quest. Despite their ultimate antagonism, there is an element of affection in the relationship between nephew and uncle. Karl daydreams of surprising his uncle in his bedroom in the morning, and of finding him there in his nightshirt, not "full dressed and buttoned to the chin," as he had always known him. At dinner with Pollunder, Green explains to the company that Uncle Jacob's "affection for Karl was too great to be called the mere

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1. For a number of the ideas developed in the analysis of *Amerika* I am indebted to Charles Neider, *The Frozen Sea*, Oxford, 1948.

affection of an uncle." In Chapter IV Uncle Jacob gives way as father-image to Pollunder. In the latter's car Pollunder and Karl "sat close together" and held each other's hand. Karl "had no eye for anything but Mr. Pollunder's dark waistcoat."

But, as the hold of Pollunder and Green over Karl weakens the powerful male symbolism of the first part (comprising Chapters I-III) recedes. The authority exercised over Karl by the successive father-images, and hence also his affection for them, diminishes. The section opens with a vivid male symbol: the Statue of Liberty, sighted in a burst of sunshine, with the arm holding the *sword* erect "as if newly stretched aloft." It is dominated by images of male authority, all of whom are unmarried (Pollunder, the father of Clara, is never mentioned in connection with a wife and seems not to have one.) The stoker and Uncle Jacob, being single, are available for Karl's affection; Pollunder and Green, being a pair, are less so. Karl had been disgusted by Johanna Brunner, the woman who had seduced him before his emigration to America. At the close of the section he responds, however inadequately, to the appeal of Clara.

The second stage of Karl's development is initiated by his encounter with Delamarche and Robinson. Like Pollunder and Green, these two form a pair and, consequently, are inaccessible to Karl. Hence his relationship with them is closer to the norm than his relationship with either the stoker or Uncle Jacob. His feelings of hostility and love are both diminished. After the symbolic loss of the photograph of his father, Karl finds himself independent. Freed temporarily from associations of guilt, he achieves a state of platonic neutrality in his relations with both men and women.

In Chapter VI the motif of ambivalence reappears. Robinson, alone with Karl, becomes accessible to him. Karl degenerates rapidly. Indications of the predominance of inversion abound. Immediately the father-image of authority reappears in the prosecution and trial of Karl by the Hotel Occidental, his final conviction and discharge. Inversion accompanies submission to the father-image (who is generally its object), because submission means frustration of the quest.

The third section forms a brilliant summation of both themes, following the trial and quest of Rossmann from defeat to a climax of fulfillment. The quest is dramatically expressed in terms of trial and conflict with Delamarche. Entering Brunelda's flat, Karl is for the first time aggressive towards

women. Delamarche checks him with a curt warning: "I expect very different behaviour from you, or else you're likely to come up against me." Throughout, Brunelda is the symbol and focus of hetero-sexual stability; her desirability is constantly emphasized, and the fertility symbolism of her person is echoed in the description of the couples making love in the windows opposite. At first Karl, thwarted by Delamarche participates only as an onlooker. But in the second of the two Brunelda fragments, both Delamarche and Robinson, who generally represents inversion, have disappeared. Karl is left in full possession of Brunelda. Together they leave the flat where she has been living with Delamarche and settle in new quarters, where, apparently, they will live together. The father has been supplanted. Karl's quest has reached the climax of its hetero-sexual phase and simultaneously his guilt-obsession, deriving from the quest itself and associated with a series of father-images before whom he is constantly on trial has subsided. The trial mechanism disappears. Karl is acquitted.

The same conclusion is restated in symbolical terms in the final Oklahoma chapter, in which authority appears—as it never does subsequently in Kafka—in a favorable light. The symbolism is unambiguous: women, dressed as angels, are the means of grace; men, dressed as devils, are the source of sin and death. Karl finds a job, a place in society. He has won his trial and fulfilled his quest.

II

The Verdict and *The Trial*, which continue the quest-theme in so far as it involves the protagonist in guilt before the father, both take the form of a dream; and both are, as such, symbolic phantasies of wish fulfillment. Hence their paranoia is expressive, not of fear of persecution, but of *desire* for it. In each case, the defendant, not the prosecutor, levels the initial accusation, conducts the trial, and hands down the final sentence. In this both differ from *Amerika*. In *The Trial*, K. (unlike Rossmann, who acquits himself) is self-convicted. After his arrest by the two warders

K. remained standing where he was for a moment. If he were to open the door of the next room, or even the door leading to the hall, perhaps the two of them would not dare to hinder him, perhaps that would be the simplest solution of the whole business.

But K. is not seeking the simplest solution. His dominating

idea is to involve himself as deeply as possible in his trial. This the priest, an official of the Court itself, admits:

The Court makes no claim upon you. It receives you when you come and relinquishes you when you go.

And this is, indeed, the course followed by the Court in the trial of Joseph K. K. appears for interrogation when he is not summoned; he is, in fact, summoned only once, and on that occasion there is no indication that another interrogation will be held. The motive force throughout is K. himself; the Court takes no action against him that he has not invited or to which he does not give his assent, except the initial arrest, and that is obviously—notice that K. has just awakened—a phantasy of wish-fulfilment. The trial is a long process of judicial suicide, to the execution of which K. freely submits. The case of Georg Bendemann is similar, and a comparison of *The Verdict* and *The Trial* leads to the conclusion that the theme of persecution, which dominates Kafka's novels (the early parts of *Amerika* and *Metamorphosis* as well as *The Verdict* and *The Trial*), is a delusion of paranoia to which the protagonist submits voluntarily because it fulfills his unconscious desire for self-sacrifice culminating in death.

The theme of persecution and guilt is closely related, in *The Trial* and *The Verdict* as in *Amerika*, to the theme of fulfilment in love. *Amerika* was the product of hope. It was begun a month after Kafka had met and fallen in love with Fraulein F. B., a young woman to whom he was engaged at various times over a period of ten years. *Amerika* is the product of the search for salvation in love. *The Verdict* and *The Trial*, in both of which the fulfilment of *Amerika* has become a capital crime, are products of the search for frustration and death.

The plot and the theme of *The Verdict*, in which the connection between love and guilt is explicit, roughly parallel the case of Kafka as it stood in 1912. Frieda Brandenfeld stands for F. B., and Georg Bendemann for Frank Kafka, as Kafka himself stated in a diary entry for 11 February, 1913. And the relationship between Georg and his father is obviously derived from that between Franz and Hermann Kafka—the weakness and dependence of the elder Bendemann reflecting, according to the standard use of opposites in dream dynamics, the strength and independence of the elder Kafka. Georg had been engaged for a month (as had Kafka at the time of writing) and, like Kafka, he imagined that he had by his engagement aroused the opposition of his father.

"Just take your bride on your arm and try getting in my way! I'll sweep her from your very side, you don't know how!"

Bendemann overcomes his son's symbolic attempt to resist his authority (by putting him to bed and muffling him in bed-clothes), charges that Georg's engagement is a disgrace to the memory of his mother (Bendemann, too, has no wife), and concludes:

"Therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning."

Georg's guilt derives directly from his engagement, which he sees as defiance of the father. At the same time, to secure conviction before his father and thus to frustrate his own fulfilment is his deepest wish. The means of fulfilment (for him) are conviction and death. Georg voluntarily submits to the sentence and attains the object of his quest in the orgasm of his death.

The structure of *The Trial* is based on the juxtaposition of two plot-strands: K.'s affair with Fraulein Buerster (paralleled by subsidiary affairs with the mistress of the Examining Magistrate, Elsa and Leni) and the trial of K. before the unseen Court, his conviction and execution. The casual relation between these two themes becomes wholly clear only at the denouement. But from the outset the relation is implied. After the arrest K.'s relationship with Elsa is (as far as we know) discontinued. This observation may be extended to two generalizations: 1) after the Arrest, no sexual relationship involving K. is completed; 2) even incompleting relationships arouse in K. a sense of guilt (externalized in the opposition of the Court). K presses his love on Fraulein Burstner, but is interrupted by the Captain, knocking on the door. Similarly the Arrest, which had also been marked by a knocking on the door, is an interruption of K.'s relationship with Elsa. In the third chapter K. presses himself on the mistress of the Examining Magistrate, but is interrupted by Bertold, a student attached to the Court, who carries the woman off. K.'s affair with Leni, nurse (mother-image) of the Advocate, is blatant defiance of the Court. As a result it deepens his guilt and intensifies his persecution:

"Boy!" he cried, "how could you do it! You have terribly damaged your case, which was beginning to go quite well. You hide yourself away with a filthy little trollop and stay away for hours."

In general, K.'s "relations with Fraulein Buerstner seemed to fluctuate with the case itself," as K. himself observes. Significantly, she reappears just before the execution. K. is determined to resist.

Then before them Fraulein Buerstner appeared . . . He suddenly realized the futility of resistance.

Throughout, Fraulein Buerstner—more than Leni or Elsa—is the symbol of K.'s crime. Her reappearance at the denouement reminds K. that his love-quest, like that of Georg Bendemann, can be fulfilled only in death, to which he therefore submits willingly. His execution by the knife, towards which he has pressed from the beginning, is the fulfilment of his desire for persecution and death. His mutilation by the Court-father is self-willed.

The meaning of *The Trial* and *The Verdict* is not that love is a capital crime punishable with death, but that the protagonist wishes it to be. For K., as for Bendemann, the fulfilment of love is death. Hence their quest for love is, in the last analysis, a quest for death. The trial formula is a phantasy created to gratify the death-wish, and is the product, as such, not of fear, but of desire. The object of the love-quest has become, not fulfilment in the ordinary sense (as in *Amerika*), but annihilation.

III

The meaning of *The Castle* derives from the central symbols of the Castle and the Village, and from K.'s attitude towards them. K. seeks salvation in the Village by reaching the Castle—so much is obvious from the text—for K., like Kafka, sees salvation in terms of integration with the community (the Village) through communion in love (the Castle).

But K.'s pilgrimage is more complicated than that. For, while his conscious and ostensible purpose is to reach the Castle, his real or unconscious purpose is to find and place in his way any obstacle that will prevent his reaching it. Like Joseph K. in *The Trial*, K. is bent on failure; he had "a rare mixture of hopelessness and constructive will," which "aggravated each other to endless complicated products." The Castle, object of K.'s quest, is a classic symbol of woman and mother. Over it presides a Count, symbol of the irrational, absolute authority of the primal father, whose permission is necessary for K.'s entry into the Castle. K.'s continual and fruitless attempts to obtain permission from the Count to occupy the position of Surveyor

of Land is clearly a corollary of the main quest theme. But K. fails to obtain permission, during his lifetime, and his surveying apparatus never arrives. He tries to telephone the Castle, but fails to make connection. Typical of the Oedipus type, K. is inadequate, deprived of heterosexual stability by feelings of guilt aroused by the opposition of the father-image. K. loses Frieda—and his hopes of reaching the Castle through her—because of his inadequacy (emphasized by his need for the Assistants), which prevents his fulfilment except in death.

In the conclusion outlined by Kafka to Brod, K. was to be granted, on his deathbed, a place in the community, despite the 'illegality' of his claim. K. achieves, in a measure, the fulfilment of his quest. But fulfilment is for him inseparable from death, is, in fact, equated with death. Like that of *The Trial*, the theme of *The Castle* ultimately identifies the fulfilment of love with death.

IV

Examination of Kafka's work as an allegory of love leads, then, to these conclusions:

1. Underlying the allegory as a whole is the familiar structure of the Oedipus Complex relating the protagonist (as son), the father, and the loved object.

2. In *Amerika*, Karl Rossmann overcomes the authority of the father-image, fulfils his quest for stability in love, and frees himself from feelings of guilt associated with his fulfilment.

3. *The Verdict*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle* all reflect a failure to maintain the stability in love achieved in the earlier novel. Their common theme of persecution is an expression, not of fear, but of the unconscious desire of the protagonist for self-sacrifice and death at the hands of the father. As such, it is a phantasy created to gratify the death-wish.

4. This theme of desired persecution is closely related, through the figure of the father, to the theme of the love-quest. The fulfilment of the latter is the climax of the former: Joseph K., George Bendemann, and K. all reach the object of their quest in death, climax of their passion, and their persecution alike.

This suggests that the final meaning of Kafka's allegory is the equation of passion and death. The problem of the critic has therefore become: how do the specific characteristics of Kafka's view of passion lead him constantly to associate love with death? My suggestions are three: first, that the pattern

of the Kafka love-quest closely parallels the pattern of the love-quest in the myth of Tristan and Iseult, and that the latter is an expression of an attitude to love that has been widely prevalent in the Western mind since the development of the courtly tradition in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; second, that the crucial equation of passion and death in the Kafka myth is latent in the myth of Tristan and Iseult and in the courtly tradition, of which *Tristan* is in this respect typical; finally, that the association of love and death in Kafka is, therefore, a product, not of a private neurosis, but of the courtly tradition of love, common to the West, carried to its logical (if hidden) conclusions.

My lords, if you would hear a high tale of love and death . . .
(Belloc from *Bedier*.)

From its opening phrase, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* links love and death. It is a myth, not of the fulfilment of love, but of its passion, its suffering. In outline, the plot is simple. King Mark of Cornwall sends Tristan in quest of the woman who possesses the golden hair which a bird has brought to him. Tristan discovers Iseult and rescues her from a dragon; together they set sail for Cornwall. On the way they become thirsty, and Brengain, Iseult's maid, gives them a drink. By mistake, she pours out a love-potion, and, succumbing to its effect, Tristan and Iseult become lovers. Notwithstanding this breach of fealty, Tristan, in duty bound, yields Iseult to the King on his return. But the latter is secretly informed that Tristan and Iseult are lovers, a fact that he confirms for himself by a ruse. Tristan escapes execution and flees with Iseult to the wilds, where he lives with her for three years. On one occasion during this time, Mark, coming on the lovers while they are asleep, finds a drawn sword placed between them. Convinced of their innocence, he leaves them unmolested. At the end of three years (according to most versions) the effect of the love-potion wears off, Tristan and Iseult repent, and the latter returns to the King—though not without agreeing to continue to commit adultery with Tristan in secret. Coming to believe after a time that Iseult the Fair no longer loves him, Tristan marries Iseult of the White Hand, but remains faithful to his former love. Finally Tristan, fatally wounded, sends for the Queen, and they die together.

2. This analysis is based on the penetrating study of the Tristan myth by Denis de Rougemont: *Love in the Western World*, Book I: English translation by Montgomery Belgion; Harcourt, Brace, 1940.

But this "high tale of love and death", ostensibly a simple narrative of chivalry and romance, contains a number of significant problems:

1. Why does Tristan, who was justified, after he and Iseult had taken the love-potion, in terms of the courtly precept of adultery, deliver Iseult to Mark after his return to Cornwall, and in so doing repudiate his former act? Or, if he chose to respect his fealty to the King, why did he betray him initially?

2. Why, again, does Tristan remain the secret lover of Iseult after he has decided to respect his duty to Mark by yielding her to him?

3. Why, after their escape, do Tristan and Iseult lie separated by the sword of chastity?

4. Why does Tristan subsequently return the Queen to King Mark, even though in some versions the love-potion is still active?

5. Why, immediately after their repentance, do Tristan and Iseult once more remain secret lovers?

6. Why, though Iseult obviously still loves him, does Tristan leave her and marry Iseult of the White Hand, whom he does not love? (The excuse given—that the latter's brother, hearing Tristan sigh for Iseult, supposes him to love his sister and arranges the marriage—is hardly adequate).

One explanation immediately suggests itself: that the myth of Tristan and Iseult is in reality a drama of conflict between feudal ethics and the code of courtly love. Tristan alternately gives preference to the martial and the romantic codes. He yields Iseult in the name of feudal duty. He remains her secret lover because their love is sanctioned by the courtly precept of adultery. Tristan's abduction of Iseult, after their guilt has been discovered, is sanctioned by feudal custom, in which the stronger prevails. The sword of chastity remains between the lovers as a symbol of the fealty that Tristan owes to the King. Tristan repents and returns Iseult to Mark because his feudal duty to the King demands that he do so. Tristan and Iseult once again remain secret lovers in accordance with the courtly principle of adultery. Tristan marries Iseult of the White Hand while remaining faithful to Iseult the Fair because, according to the courtly code, marriage does not involve love (which is an adulterous relationship) and may coexist with an adulterous liaison of lovers.

But this solution is really nothing but a postponement of the problem itself. The crucial question remains: why is the courtly

code preferred at the precise moment when adherence to the feudal code would have solved the difficulty in question? And why is the feudal code preferred at the precise moment when adherence to the courtly code would have proved the solution. Why does Tristan prefer on each occasion the loyalty that leads to the maximum obstruction of his love? The sword of chastity is an obvious symbol of self-obstruction. So are the numerous occasions on which Iseult returns to the King without the least intention of renouncing Tristan. The lovers deliberately obstruct their own fulfilment, and obstructions, partings, renunciations are the expression of their passion itself. There is no question of their caring for each other. Iseult herself admits this—indeed she regards as a virtue their indifference to each other as persons:

por Dieu omnipotent,
Il ne m'aime pas, ne je lui. (Bedier.)

What they enjoy, what they love, is the suffering, the passion of their joint experience. It is for that, and that alone, that they need each other. Their passion is their suffering, and its limit is their death. For each the other is the source of the sublime suffering of the exalted spirit; the culmination of their passion is the supreme act of suffering—death.

The necessity that brought forth the myth and that gave it such shape that it has caught the Western imagination for centuries was the necessity to express in symbolic terms what could not be openly admitted: the repressed wish for the purified and exalted death of passion—a desire that can be gratified only if the fact of its existence remains concealed. A myth was evolved to express what could not be expressed directly: that death is the desired object of passion. The expression of that desire, embedded in the unconscious tradition of Western culture, is the meaning and use of the myth of Tristan.

In this light, the myth of Kafka becomes coherent; its allegory of love takes form as a highly sophisticated variant of the central love-myth of Western society. The myth of Kafka is a myth of failure. The meaning of the myth of Tristan is that death is the desired object of passion. The meaning of the myth of Kafka—since the optimism of *Amerika* is transcended by the pessimism of the later work—is that death *must* be the object of passion, because passion is *essentially* masochistic: *there is no escape*. *The Burrow*, Kafka's last story, is the product of a mind possessed by this one terrifying, immobilizing

idea. There is no escape in the immobile world of nightmare, which is the world of Kafka's dream.

The substance of the Kafka tragedy originates in the logical, if hidden, implications of the courtly tradition of love, a tradition laid deep in Western cultural strata. That tragedy, in Kafka as in *Tristan*, is characterized 1) by its concentration, not on the loved object (which is not really cared for), but on the act (and the manner) of loving and on its obstruction and frustration; 2) by its concentration on self-denial to the exclusion of fulfilment (which is regarded as self-destroying); by its implicit definition of love, not as an active force, but as a passive state, a static passion; 4) by its search, not for a way of life, but for an emotional state, for passion, which is (by definition) suffering; 5) by its equation of love and the climax of suffering—death.

It was inevitable that Kafka's allegory of love, based on the conscious hypothesis that only in love can be found the means of grace, the materials of truth, and the source of life, and on the unconscious hypothesis that love negates life, should ultimately lead to dilemma and failure. For Karl Rossmann, for Georg Bendemann, for Joseph K., and for K. salvation lies in the fulfilment of love; and yet for all but the first, fulfilment of the quest is death, or, at best, a capital crime. That is their paradox: that love is a capital crime, that love is death. That is the final discovery of their odyssey. Their tragedy is that for them salvation and life and truth are attainable only in love. Their deepest faith is in love as the means of grace, the material of truth, and the source of life; their ultimate realization is that love (for them) is frustration and death. That is the final complicated product of the Kafka myth, and its deepest meaning.