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FRANZ KAFKA AND JONATHAN SWIFT:

A SYMBIOSIS

JONAS LESSER HAS WRITTEN of Thomas Mann's "symbiotic" relationship to Laurence Sterne, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw.¹ By Mann's "symbiosis", Lesser means that the novelist often saw himself reflected in the authors he was considering, or, conversely, that he attributed to himself (or gave to a fictional character who also had in him elements of Mann) characteristics of an author he, Thomas Mann, was presently considering. By way of example, Lesser suggests that it is, in part, himself that Mann has in mind when he speaks of the ironic and ambiguous duplicity of Laurence Sterne, whom he read as he was writing the Joseph tetralogy, and of whom he spoke in a lecture at the Library of Congress.

In a similar if more prosaic vein, Sidney Hook has written of the viewers of his television lectures on philosophy. Many, especially the less tutored of these, he came to realize, would "make immediate application of general principles in ethical and social philosophy to themselves", and would apply Hook's "abstract analyses to their own case. . . ."²

When our critical guard is down, when we read "merely for pleasure", we all occasionally find ourselves attracted to strange authors—for strange and deeply personal reasons. We "symbioticize" (or "symbiosize") as we suddenly realize that we have always felt just what our author describes. Or the author describes just what we have always tried to say. Or there is a deep, psychic current that we have in common. But always we share something—perhaps a sense of duty with Conrad; a love of birds with W. H. Hudson; a teutonophobia with Ford Madox Ford—or something else we cannot name, with the authors we read in our leisure and the authors to whom our thoughts turn naturally.

Franz Kafka was not widely read in English literature. To Dickens, he owed an acknowledged debt.³ The name of Shakespeare occurs in his writings perhaps half a dozen times. Kafka's references to Synge, Chesterton,

Macaulay, Byron, and Darwin are disappointingly curt for the tracer of literary indebtedness. And hardly another English writer is mentioned anywhere in Kafka's literary remains. It is then most noteworthy when we find Kafka referring, on several occasions, to Jonathan Swift. Certainly it is worth asking in what lay the attraction for Kafka.

To those who read him in the German, Kafka's prose style is memorable for its lucid incisiveness. There are no frills. There is no vagueness. It is as though etched in glass, clear, beautiful, very precise. A similar quality typifies the writing of Jonathan Swift.⁴ And in this similarity, we might look for cause for Kafka's inclination—except that Kafka read no English. And so we must look to the substance.

When speaking of Kafka, one must beware. Werner Vortriede's noting of Kafka's incredible juggling with the truth must always be considered carefully,⁵ but if we do grant credence to the feelings expressed in Kafka's "Letter to his Father",⁶ and if we consider it not entirely the expression of a fictional *persona*, then we may find views similar enough to those expressed by Swift. We may see, not only an instance in which Kafka could find in Swift a view congenial to his own thinking, but we can find in Kafka's other, "real" letters, occasion where he indeed misread Swift in order to bring Swift's thoughts into line with his own—a technique of violent and distorting symbiosis analogous to that described by Hook.

From his biography we know, of course, of Kafka's tortured, anxious relations with women, and of his seeming inability to give himself easily and freely and wholly. In *The Castle*, we note the puzzling, discordant, almost jolly, bawdry. And in the letter to his father, Kafka speaks of the "super-human effort of wanting to marry" (179) and states explicitly the enormosity—in fact, the pre-eminence—of the subject in his life (p. 183). Kafka then speaks of "sexual morality", and tells of an occasion:

I remember going for a walk one evening with you and Mother: it was on the Josefsplatz near where the Landerbank is today; and I began talking about these interesting things, in a stupidly boastful, superior, proud, cool (that was spurious), cold (that was genuine) and stammering manner, as indeed I usually talked to you, reproaching the two of you for my having been left uninstructed, for the fact that it was my schoolmates who first had to take me in hand, that I had been in the proximity of great dangers (here I was brazenly lying, as was my way, in order to show myself brave, for as a consequence of my timidity I had, except for the usual sexual misdemeanors of city children, no very exact notion of these 'great dangers'), but finally hinted that now, fortunately, I knew everything, no longer needed any advice, and that everything was all right. I had

begun talking about this, in any case, mainly because it gave me pleasure at least to talk about it, and then too out of curiosity, and finally too in order somehow to avenge myself on the two of you for something or other. In keeping with your nature you took it quite simply, only saying something to the effect that you could give me some advice about how I could go in for these things without danger (pp. 184-185).

And then Kafka emphasizes the tremendous impact that the nonchalant cavaliness of his father's response had on him:

It was . . . a very remarkable answer for such a boy to be given. . . . But its real meaning, which sank into my mind even then, but only much later came partly to the surface of my consciousness, was this: what you were advising me to do was, after all, in your opinion and, still far more, in my opinion at that time, the filthiest thing possible. . . . And so if the world consisted only of me and you, a notion I was much inclined to have, then this purity of the world came to an end with you and, by virtue of your advice, the filth began with me. . . . And so this again was something that struck home to my innermost being, and very hard too (pp. 185, 186).

If women generally, and sex specifically, were in truth matters fraught with such traumatic association for Kafka (and the recurrent wrestling with the obsession—in letters to Milena and in the *Metamorphosis*—would suggest that they were), how little we need be surprised that Kafka should have been impressed by one peculiarly revolting passage from the second voyage in *Gulliver's Travels*. In a letter to Max Brod (August, 1922) Kafka seems to regard women microscopically, speaking of

their water-saturated, slightly bloated meat which remains fresh only a few days—actually much longer—but that is merely further evidence of the shortness of human life. How short must human life be if such meat—which we hardly dare touch because of its destructibility and its quality of being filled and rounded for the moment only (which Gulliver discovered to be thus only because of sweat, fat, pores and hairs—which I don't believe to be the case)—how short must human life be, if such meat lasts the greater part of a lifetime.⁷

Kafka's overt concern with women and with sex is striking in its anguished manifestation, but it is not, in itself, obsessive. Rather, it is an aspect of a more general concern, one that, as it appears in its many and varied guises and recurrences, does seem much more central. Repeatedly—in his stories, in his notebooks, in his letters—Kafka has stated his concern for the idea of home,

family, and the logistics of domestic management. And in the "Letter to his Father", too, he wrote, "Marrying, founding a family, accepting all the children that come, supporting them in this insecure world and even guiding them a little as well, is, I am convinced, the utmost a human being can succeed in doing at all" (p. 183). At the same time, Kafka's letter is filled with reproaches to his father, and declarations of his father's unsuitability to be his father. "You can only treat a child in the way you yourself are constituted, with vigor, noise, and hot temper", Kafka wrote, "and in this case this seemed to you, into the bargain, extremely suitable, because you wanted to bring me up to be a strong, brave boy" (p. 142). Kafka's father, the letter-writer goes on to say, did have a talent for raising children, and he would have been a suitable parent for one constituted like the father himself. But for one like Franz Kafka, the shouting and the imperiousness were too much: "I never forgot it, it remained for me the most important means of forming a judgment of the world, above all of forming a judgment of you yourself, and there you failed entirely" (p. 147). Kafka claims to have been completely cowed and overwhelmed by the autocratic cruelty of his father. Only when he was far removed, when he was "so far away from you that your power could no longer reach me, at any rate directly", did he dare move, stir, act, and think on his own (p. 151).

For some children, then, Kafka senior might have been a good father. For the sensitive Franz, he was certainly not. It was perhaps ironically a case of the wrong parent for the wrong child, rather than a case of absolute evil on the part of the father. And if these accusations Kafka made in the letter do show truly the fevered resentment of Franz Kafka against his father, it is again not strange that Kafka should have been drawn to Swift—and, in fact, to very specific passages in Swift. In the autumn of 1921, he wrote to his sister, Elli Hermann. Referring again to *Gulliver's Travels*, and either ignoring or missing the fact that Swift's views are not necessarily those of Gulliver, far less those of the Lilliputians, Kafka cites with approval the Lilliputian method of child rearing, in which it is precisely the parents who are to have the least say about their children. Parents, as Kafka points out, can hardly be said to have had altruistic motives in mind when they went about conceiving their offspring.

In the next letter, Kafka continues with the subject, clarifying what seems to have been a misunderstanding by his sister, explaining to her that the emphasis in Swift was not on the fact that children should not be grateful to their parents, but rather that parents are not to be trusted with the upbringing of their children. And then enter Kafka, the trickster, Kafka, the juggler

with mirror images, Vordtriede's Kafka, who says "I lie—always—even when I say 'I lie'." He tells his sister to remember that all this about the raising of children is only the opinion of Jonathan Swift, and that he, Kafka, would certainly not be so definite. And he follows, then, with a lengthy and indeed very "definite" exposition of the theory that parents take it on themselves to amass the power of representation for the organism that is the family—depriving the children of all power. Parents always, even when they act with the greatest "love", act in self-interest. Swift, says Kafka, does not wish to minimize parental love; it may even be strong enough to protect the children from their parents. Nonetheless, says Kafka, Swift is for removing the children from their parents. Only among the very poor may such a measure be not quite so necessary.⁸

Franz Kafka, trained in the law, had a nimble mind. And he was nothing if not a sensitive reader—nor was he normally susceptible to confusing an author with his fictional *persona*. Yet in this instance, perhaps because the ideas expressed ran so close to the torrent of his own passions, he seems momentarily to have suspended judgement and lost his critical distance and discrimination. Most college freshmen learn quickly that Gulliver's admiration for the Lilliputian economy is, itself, one object of Swift's satire. Kafka's taking Gulliver at face value, and his attributing the views of Gulliver and the Lilliputians to Swift himself, is thus indeed remarkable. By thus believing in Gulliver, by momentarily surrendering the critical censor and acting like Hook's hearers (or like Thomas Mann when the latter sees Goethe in himself, and himself in Goethe), Kafka may, indeed, be exemplifying the phenomenon of literary symbiosis—the amalgamation of one organism within another. Unless, of course, Kafka was—in his letters, in his notebooks, in his stories—writing his own modest proposal.

NOTES

1. Jonas Lesser, *Thomas Mann in der Epoche Seiner Vollendung* (Zurich: Artemis, 1952), pp. 322, 323, 327.
2. Sidney Hook, "There's More than One Way to Teach", *Saturday Review* (July 18, 1964), p. 48.
3. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg with the co-operation of Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 188.
4. Herbert Davis, "The Conciseness of Swift", in *Eighteenth-Century English*

Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. James L. Clifford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 84-101.

5. Werner Vordtriede, "Letters to Milena: The Writer as Advocate of Himself", in *Franz Kafka Today*, ed. Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962), pp. 239-248.
6. "Letter to his Father", in *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), pp. 138-198.
7. Franz Kafka, *Briefe, 1902-1924* (Frankfurt am M.: S. Fischer, 1958), p. 405. (My translation.)
8. *Briefe*, pp. 342, 344, 346.

PEDAGOGUES

Annabelle Wagner Bergfeld

Touched with this madness, one would pause to teach
 Pronouncing parables to passing throng—
 Another stand in silence on a beach,
 A third disturb that silence with his song;

Touched with this madness one could drain the cup
 The city fathers proffered him at dusk—
 Another cry, "If I be lifted up,
 I'll draw all men"—a third turns from the husk.

Touched with this madness, this one lifts no oar
 And this one lets the spade hang idly while
 A gypsy multitude beats at the temple door
 Or uses what is made to pass for style—

Touched with this madness, this one marks the flow
 Of tides and this one charts the ebb—
 With time most lighthouse keepers get to know
 How weak the sea, how strong the spider's web.