

# Franz Kafka unmasked

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To Catherine Cerdelli-Orcajada



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" The decisive moment in human evolution is perpetual. This is why revolutionary spiritual movements are within their rights in declaring everything that precedes them null and void, because nothing has happened yet. "

Franz Kafka, Diary, October 20, 1917

"Not yet born and already forced to walk the streets, to talk to men."

Franz Kafka, Diary, march 15, 1922



## Foreword

It is in a double sense that we can say that Kafka advanced masked :

- In the work that he himself published, the thinker, the fighter to the death that he is, does not openly reveal himself. He does not feel ready, he remains in the strange.

- The man, Kafka, was naked in the face of the truth. He had no possessions in this world, not even his body. However, he still had to live. Like all of us, but much less than most of us, he accepted a few protections, a few masks : his profession, his friends, his literary inclinations.

There are two Kafka.

There is the artist-writer, the one with a passion for literature and writing, the one who published, during his lifetime, a body of work that could be classified as "minor literature", whereas Kafka's project, far from falling into this category, was intended to be crucial.

And there's the seeker, the thinker, the one who is obsessed with finding the right soil within himself to be born and to live,

the one who considers that he is not yet born, that he has died in this world, that he is the survivor, that he can be a beginning, that he can be the one who is authentically born.

There is a relationship and a tension between the artist and the thinker. In the work he published or planned to publish (his great unfinished novels), the artist did not want this relationship to be clear and direct.

Kafka and Heidegger shared a great deal in common. Had Heidegger read Kafka ? Most probably, although he did not let on. Kafka is there, at man's earliest departure, at birth ; his life is nothing but birth, beginning.

Here, it is all about the thinker, the wrestler to the death.

## Introduction

### My reading of Kafka

I did not like Kafka's three great unfinished novels – *The Trial*, *Amerika*, *The Castle*. They bored me. Once the tone was set, after thirty pages or so, it went round and round in circles, just as, quite literally, K. went round and round in circles around the castle. Inspired by his very real strangeness in the world, Kafka delivers stories that are beyond comprehension. They can be seen as a form of humor through the absurd. We can try to interpret them, to find autobiographical elements in them. During the period when Kafka was fashionable, prominent authors did not fail to do so. Many readers, however, appreciated this strange literature, certainly because it is strange.

The only novel of Kafka's that I liked was the one that, because of its number of pages, is considered to be a short story: *The Metamorphosis*. I will leave aside *Investigations of a Dog*, which I consider to be a philosophical essay. It takes up, in another form, less difficult to read, though still peculiar, certain themes of *Description of a fight*, which I classify in the same category. Aside from his diaries, Kafka is most open about his work in *Investigations of a Dog*, although still hidden under the guise of a dog. But here, interpretation is essential : canine society

represents human society, and the narrating dog is Kafka. This unnecessary transposition facilitates Kafka's expression as an artist, reluctant to play the philosopher or thinker. The thinking that emerges from *Investigations of a Dog* is close, incredibly close, to that which would appear, a few years later, in the work of Heidegger.

We know that Kafka did not like his novels. We know which of his works of fiction he preferred : *The Verdict*, *The Stoker*, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Penitentiary Colony*, *A Country Doctor*, *An Artist of Hunger*. If he preferred them, it was not because they fulfilled his main objective better than the others. He preferred them because they suited his taste as an artist : written in one go, inspired, emerging from the depths of himself, almost from his unconscious. To Felice, on June 2, 1913, he wrote :

" Do you find any sense in *The Verdict*, by which I mean a straight, coherent, easy-to-follow sense ? I don't, and besides, I can't see anything in it that I can explain. "

On September 25, 1917, he wrote in his diary :

"I can still derive some temporary satisfaction from works like *The country doctor*, assuming I manage to write any more (highly unlikely). But I can only have happiness if I succeed in lifting the world into the true, the pure, the immutable."

That's Kafka's main objective ! His project is to bring the world "into the true, the pure, the unchanging". This should be taken literally. The ambition is enormous. A few days later, on November 10, 1917, he wrote :

" So far I haven't taken note of the decisive things, the river that I am still forms two arms. The work ahead of me is enormous. "

At the time, he did not even have seven years to live.

Basically, there is no change between the Kafka who wrote *Description of a fight* in 1903, the one who started a diary in 1910, and the one who, towards the end of his short life, in 1922, wrote *Investigations of a Dog*. Unity of thought, stability of state of mind, that is the observation we can make. The only differences are in the mastery of style and the form of expression. The artist refines and confirms a remarkably sober style<sup>1</sup> that he perfects quickly. The background is stable. But what is it ? Is it simply the desire to give his all to literature, to the detriment of family life ? Is it his fear of loneliness, which is the corollary of this choice ? Or was it his strangeness as a German-speaking Czech Jew ? Or, as we've read here and there, his foreknowledge of the catastrophes to come, his prescience of a world of bureaucrats and automatons ? None of this, although the solitude of the man who wants to devote his life to his work, without being distracted by the ordinary world, and in particular by family life, is a recurring and important theme. Kafka hesitated, then chose the work. But what does it say ?

Kafka thought he had failed. He had not conducted the enormous work he had planned. If he wished for the entirety of what he had written to disappear, it was because he was aware of his failure relative to his original, excessive ambition. On

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<sup>1</sup> In an article included in the collection *The Hidden Tradition*, Hannah Arendt describes Kafka's style as follows : "In relation to the infinite multiplicity of possible styles, Kafka's German is like water in relation to the infinite multiplicity of drinks. His prose is characterized by nothing in particular ; there is nothing in it to enchant or fascinate ; rather, it is the purest communication, and its only unchanging characteristic - as we can easily see - lies in the fact that what is communicated to us is communicated in a much simpler, clearer and more economical way than it ever could have been."

January 21, 1922, just over two years before his death, he wrote in his diary :

" No task, as far as I know, has ever been so difficult for anyone. One could say : it's not a task, not even an impossible task, not even impossibility in itself, it's nothing, it's not even so much a child as the hope of a sterile woman. But it is nevertheless the air I breathe for as long as I have to breathe. "

This book is not a biography of Kafka. It focuses on the thinker Kafka, not the artist. It emphasizes that part of the work where thought is expressed most directly, most in line with the major objective.

There are two Kafka. There's Kafka the artist-writer, the man with a passion for literature and writing, the man who, during his lifetime, published a body of work that could be classed as "minor literature", whereas Kafka's project, far from falling into this category - the characteristics of which, on December 25, 1911, in his diary, he tried to establish by thinking of Jewish literature today, in Warsaw and Prague, and certainly not of his own to come - was intended to be universal. And then there's Kafka the seeker, the thinker, the man obsessed with finding the right soil in himself to be born and to live in, the man who considers that he has not yet been born, that he has died in this world, that he is the survivor, that he can be a beginning, that he can be the one who is authentically born. There is a relationship and a tension between the artist and the thinker. In the work he published or planned to publish (his great unfinished novels), the artist did not want this relationship to be clear and direct. On January 22, 1918, Kafka wrote in his diary (third in-octavo notebook) :

"The point of view of art and that of life are, even in the artist, different points of view.

Art flies around the truth, but with the firm intention of not burning itself. Its talent lies in finding a place in the dark void where, unbeknownst to us beforehand, the rays of light can be powerfully intercepted."

The artist, in his published work and in the great unfinished novels, took precedence over the thinker. The thinker remained in the background to obey artistic imperatives, but also because he didn't feel ready to openly declare his pure and simple truth to the world ; he didn't want to burn himself. He will never be ready. Kafka stepped forward masked. The thinker reveals himself in his diaries. *Description of a fight* (including *Contemplation*), his early work, and *Investigations of a Dog*, his mature work, are, from this point of view, to be set apart. In these two works, which have so far received little commentary, the major themes of his struggle and research are clearly present, albeit masked by formal artifice.

Kafka's thought is close to that of the future Heidegger. The difference between the two thinkers is one of philosophical and artistic culture. Heidegger is the erudite thinker, the professor of philosophy whose aim is to unveil the truth of being. Kafka is the artistic thinker, whose aim is to live, and to make the world live, according to the same truth of being that he wants to bring to light - it is in his flesh and without concession to the world that he came into contact with Being. Basically, the thinking is the same, the questioning is the same. The meaning that Kafka gives to the word "beginning" or "birth" is the same as that which Heidegger will give to them, a little later and independently.

## Chapter 1

### A trickster unmasked

*Contemplation (Betrachtung)* was one of Kafka's first published texts, in 1912. The first story in *Contemplation* is entitled *Children on the High Road*. This story is truncated. The unpublished ending recounts the crucial moment that marks the end of Kafka's childhood, beginning with : "It was time ! ". Until that moment, marked by "It was time !", Kafka had been a child like any other. For all of us, without exception, childhood is the first world, a common world, just as the ordinary, future world of adults will be common - to almost all of us. Kafka will never join this ordinary world. Suddenly and inexplicably, he left childhood to join the world of madmen "who never sleep". This he decided to keep to himself.

The next story in *Contemplation* is entitled *A trickster unmasked*. Precisely what comes to mind when we ask why Kafka did not publish the end of *Children on the High Road* - without which, it must be said, the text is of little interest - is that he did not want to unmask himself.

This story, *A trickster unmasked*, as published, is mysterious. It is no more interesting than its predecessor. One wonders what

this character, the trickster, whom the narrator cannot get rid of, could possibly want. But there is another version of this story, longer, richer and, above all, clearer. It can be found in the diary, written at the beginning of November 1910. The unmasked trickster's aim is to lure people away from the ordinary world. We also understand that this unmasked trickster is none other than an avatar of Kafka. In short, Kafka hesitates on the threshold between two versions of himself : worldly and solitary.

It was on August 8, 1912, as the diary indicates, that Kafka completed, to his "greater or lesser satisfaction", the version of *A trickster unmasked* that was to be published in *Contemplation* at the end of 1912. On August 11, he notes :

" Once the book is out, in any case, if I don't want to dive into the real thing only by the fingertips, I'll have to keep much further away from reviews and critics. "

If you are wondering what governs Kafka's choices when he anaemizes his texts in this way, with a view to publication, the answer lies here. It is the fear of critics and publishers that keeps him away from the real thing. He would like to "dive into the real thing", body and soul, but he thinks this would be poorly accepted, poorly read. It was with great scruples that he gave these watered-down texts to his publisher, Rowohlt, to whom he wrote on August 14, 1912 :

" I enclose the small prose pieces you wished to see ; there are probably enough to provide a small volume. While I was gathering them for this purpose, I sometimes had to choose between appeasing my sense of responsibility and the desire to have, myself, a book among your fine works. It's true that my choice was not always made in all purity. Now, naturally, I'd be happy if these things pleased you enough to print them. After all,

what is wrong with these pieces is not such that it can be discerned at first glance, even with the greatest habit and intelligence. Doesn't the most widespread individuality among writers consist in the fact that each of them has his own particular way of concealing the worst in himself? "

On August 20, Kafka notes :

" If only Rowohlt would send [the manuscript] back, if only I could put it away and consider it all null and void, so that I could simply be as miserable as before. "

Kafka's self-censorship is not without remorse since it is not done "in all purity". In the end, he wishes he had never been published at all. It is the "appeasement of his sense of responsibility" that is sacrificed by publication. Kafka admits that, like many writers, he has concealed, in his own way, "what is worst in him". This cannot be a bad quality of style. Bad style cannot be hidden. On the other hand, when it comes to style, the artist Kafka has no hesitation about what is good or bad; he does not compromise. He is very modest about what he has to say. He is afraid of talking too much about himself. If he says what he has to say too abruptly, he is afraid of affronting literature, which should be all about delicacy, all about discreet allusion, all about images that leave the reader free to imagine, interpret and dream. He is afraid that his own strangeness, too bluntly exhibited, will not be understood as it should, as he would like, and will be rejected. He prefers to show, without explanation, certain effects of his strangeness rather than the strangeness itself, with its whys and wherefores. This is how he intends to trap critics. He does not believe them to be sensitive to the reasons for this strangeness or interested in understanding it. This modesty is extreme, excessive. For all these reasons, Kafka's first draft is

already full of restraint. However, it describes a way of being, a position in relation to the world, a mandate that the author would have towards this world. Kafka is afraid of being unmasked before he has had time to say more and better, before he himself has had time to really begin, before he has had time to be born. On March 15, 1922, two years before his death, Kafka wrote in his diary :

" Not yet born and already forced to walk the streets, to talk to men. "

Kafka may never have been born.

Where and when will Kafka say more and better ? Is it in his diary ? He says in his diary that his ambition is enormous, that he has not really begun, that he does not want to miss this beginning he carries within him. On September 15, 1917, he notes :

" You have, if such a possibility exists, the possibility of making a beginning. Don't waste it. "

What he leaves the public, for the moment - but this moment lasts - is a thin, baroque literature, where the trickster, in Kafka, does not let himself be unmasked.

It is in the diary version of this unmasked trickster that we can read some of the most beautiful pages written by Kafka. Pages which, it's true, do much to unmask him :

*" From society, I promise myself everything I lack, especially the organization of my forces, which would not be sufficient for the kind of exasperation that constitutes the only possibility for this street bachelor. As far as he's concerned, he's already quite content if he manages to maintain his physical person, which is pitiful*

*to say the least, to defend the few meals he eats, to avoid the influence of others - in short, if he retains everything that it's possible to retain in this dissolving world. But what he loses, he tries to regain by force, even if transformed, even if diminished, even if only apparently his former self (and this is the case most of the time). His nature is therefore suicidal : he has teeth only for his own flesh, and flesh only for his own teeth. For without a center, a profession, a love, a family, income, i.e., without keeping oneself roughly in front of the world - on a trial basis only, of course - without in some way deconflicting the world with a large complex of possessions, it's impossible to protect oneself against momentarily destructive losses. This bachelor, with his thin clothes, his art of prayer, his tough legs, his dwelling he's afraid of, and with everything else that makes up his fragmented existence, destined to emerge again this time after a long time, this bachelor holds it all together in his two arms, and if he catches some tiny trinket at random, it can only be by losing two that belong to him. This, of course, is the truth, and nowhere is it purer. For the man who truly presents himself as an accomplished bourgeois, the man, therefore, who travels the seas in a boat with the foam in front of him and the wake behind, i.e. all surrounded by large effects, unlike the man on his few bits of wood that still bump into each other and make each other sink, he, this gentleman and bourgeois is in no less danger. For he and his possessions are not one but two, and whoever breaks what binds them together breaks him in the process. Our friends and we ourselves are unrecognizable in this respect, because we are completely masked ; for the moment, I am masked by my profession, by my real or imaginary sufferings, by my literary inclinations, etc. But I, precisely, feel my own*

*identity. But it's precisely me who feels my own inner self far too often and too violently to be satisfied, even half-heartedly. All I have to do is feel it for a quarter of an hour and the venomous world flows into my mouth like water into a drowning man.*

*Between the bachelor and me, there's hardly any difference at the moment, except that I can still think of my youth in my village and that, if I want to or even if my situation simply requires it, I might still be able to reject myself on that side. But the bachelor has nothing in front of him, and therefore nothing behind him either. In the moment, it makes no difference, but the bachelor has only the moment. It's in this time that no one today can know any more, because nothing can be destroyed like this time, it's in this time that he has failed, while he was constantly feeling his way to the bottom, as one suddenly becomes aware of a tumor, which until then was indeed the last of the things belonging to our body, not even the last since it didn't seem to exist yet, and which, now, is more than anything we possessed in our own right since our birth. Whereas up until then, our whole person was focused on the work done by our hands, on what is seen by our eyes and heard by our ears, on the steps taken by our feet, we suddenly turn in the opposite direction, like a weathervane on a mountain. Instead of running away at that time, even in the latter direction - flight being the only way to keep him on his toes, and his toes the only way to keep him in the world - he lay down like the children who lie here and there in the snow in winter, to freeze to death. He and those children know that it's their fault, that they have lain down or bent in one way or another, they know that they shouldn't have done it at any cost, but they can't know that after the transformation that is now taking place in them in the fields or in the*

*city, they will forget all past faults and all constraints, and that they will move in this new element as if it were the first. Forgetting, however, is not the right word here. This man's memory has suffered as little as his imagination. Only, they can't move mountains; so here's the man outside our people, outside our humanity, he's continually starving, nothing belongs to him but the moment, the always prolonged moment of torture, never followed by the spark of a moment's rest; he always has only one thing: his suffering, but nothing on the whole face of the earth that can pass for a remedy; he has no ground other than what his two feet need, no support other than what his two hands can cover, so much less than the trapeze artist in the music hall, for whom a net has still been stretched below.*

*The rest of us are held together by our past and our future. We devote almost all our leisure time, and how much time taken from our profession, to getting them up and down and into balance. What the past lacks in breadth, the future makes up for in weight, and at their end, indeed, they can no longer be distinguished from each other; later, early youth lights up, as does the future, and the end of the future is already given to us in all our sighs, is already the past. And so the circle we walk on almost closes. Certainly, this circle belongs to us, but only for as long as we hold on to it ; if we stray from it just once through some absence, some distraction, some fright, some astonishment, some weariness, and already it's lost in space, we had our noses plunged into the river of time, now we're moving backwards, past swimmers, present walkers, and we're lost. We are outside the law, no one knows it, and yet everyone treats us accordingly. "*

The one who faces the truth is the one who lives without a protective environment, the bachelor. What hides the truth from us is all our ordinary bourgeois possessions : professions, family, income, past, future. The truth appears when we are naked. This is the meaning of the word "unmasked". Kafka lives naked, unmasked - even if he makes sure that his publications do not show him as such - even if he still protects himself a little behind his profession and his literary leanings.

One only decides to be celibate - that is, according to Kafka, unprotected - when one decides to live by facing the truth. Before confronting the truth, you have to know that there is a truth that is different from the ordinary truth, and that it is not easy to accept. In other words, we must already have an essential knowledge of it. But this truth is not immediately given to us. Before it arises in us, if it arises at all, there is carefree childhood. After childhood, and in its continuation, there is the ordinary, bourgeois world of adults (armed with possessions, however modest). Before it appeared, "we were focused with our whole person on the work done by our hands, on what is seen by our eyes and heard by our ears, on the steps taken by our feet". And then "we suddenly turn in the opposite direction, like a weathervane on a mountain". The exposure takes place "suddenly", and this "suddenly" can take place, without further explanation, "through a forgetfulness of ourselves, through distraction, terror, astonishment, weariness". In the deleted part of *Children on the High Road*, the first text of *Contemplation*, this "suddenly" is marked by "It was time !", and Kafka bids farewell to his comrades, farewell to childhood.

Kafka feels that childhood has deceived him. It hid the truth from him. Naively enough, he blames his parents, his educators - in short, the whole of society. In one of his earliest diary entries, on July 19, 1910, he writes :

" When I think about it, I have to say that in many respects, my education has done me a lot of harm. This reproach is directed at a whole host of people, namely my parents, a few members of my family, some of the regulars in our house, various writers, a very specific cook who took me to school for a year, a whole host of teachers [...], a school inspector, passers-by who walked slowly, in short, this reproach slips like a dagger through the whole of society and, I repeat, no one, unfortunately, no one can be sure that the point of the dagger will not suddenly appear in front, behind or to the side. I don't want to hear any objections to this reproach, I've already heard far too many, and as, moreover, I've been refuted in most of the objections, I include them in my reproach and declare that in many respects my education and this refutation have done me great harm. "

The most violent of his trials was directed against his father, in a famous letter he wrote to him. He also took it out on philosophers, particularly in *Investigations of a Dog*. The latter trial is certainly more deserved, as the "others" have little to do with it. They are in the same boat. They have had the same upbringing as Kafka, and despite Kafka, that is not about to change. Our nature tends to ensure that the act of being goes smoothly, as if nothing had happened. Childhood plunges us into the synthetic unity of the world from which, perhaps - is it luck or misfortune ? - we'll never escape. The role of philosophers, in principle, is to rub shoulders with the truth - to lay themselves bare to it - and to strive to tell it to us. Instead, according to Kafka, they pretend to tell us, but tell us stories, keep us asleep, reinforce the synthetic unity of the world. Kafka's reproach is undoubtedly aimed primarily at Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, with

whom he had some knowledge<sup>2</sup>. These three are likely to be among the seven singing dogs. Here's what he has to say about the philosophers in this excerpt from *Investigations of a Dog*, in typical Kafka fashion :

*" ... , the music gradually invaded everything... Falling from all sides, from above, from below, from everywhere, on the spectator, it flooded him, crushed him, annihilated him with its fanfares so close they were already far away ! And again you were free, because you were too exhausted, too crushed, too weak to hear any more ; but even freed, you could still see the seven little dogs performing their figures and jumps; you wanted, despite their reserve, to question them, to get explanations, to ask them what they were doing there - I was a child and always thought myself authorized to question anyone - but no sooner had I prepared myself for this, no sooner had I felt the dogs' familiar good touch, than their music burst out again, taking away all my consciousness, threw me hither and thither in spite of all my pleas, to finally remove me from its own power by throwing me into a palisaded circle that had hitherto escaped my attention and now imprisoned me ! Cramped in, unable to raise my head, I was still able to breathe a little, even if the music continued to blare freely further on ! Truly, more than the art of the seven dogs, which was incomprehensible to me, inexplicable even, and out of my reach, I was amazed at their courage to offer themselves so totally and openly to the task they had taken on, to quietly endure what was beyond their strength, without*

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Klaus Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka, Years of Youth (1883,1912)* : "He regularly attended only the famous soirées of Madame Fanta...In addition to more advanced joint studies of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Fichte's *Principles of Science* and above all Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, many lectures were devoted to the natural sciences...".

*breaking their backs. Now, it's true, as I observed them more closely, I discovered from my refuge that they worked not so much calmly as in extreme tension; those paws that seemed to move with such assurance, never ceased to tremble with anxiety at every step they took; they stared at each other as if stricken with despair, and their tongues, always under control again, immediately popped out to hang limply out of their mouths. It couldn't have been the anguish of success that upset them so ; whoever dared to embark on such an undertaking, whoever succeeded, could no longer be afraid..., but afraid of what ? Who was forcing them to do what they were doing ? I couldn't contain myself any longer: they seemed to me to be mysteriously disarmed, and so, in the midst of the din, I shouted my questions at the top of my voice. But they - strange, strange ! - didn't answer any more than if I hadn't existed ! Dogs not answering a dog's call ? What an offence against good manners; as unforgivable to young dogs as to old ones ! Perhaps they weren't dogs at all ? But how could they not have been, since I could hear the slight exclamations with which they encouraged each other, pointed out difficulties, warned each other against mistakes ; since I could even see the last and smallest of them, to whom most of the exclamations were addressed, often squinting my way, as if he would have liked to answer me, but restraining himself because it wasn't meant to be ? But why this prohibition ? Why this time-if it wasn't to be as our immutable laws dictate ? This is what revolted me to the point of almost forgetting the music. These dogs were breaking the law; great magicians though they were, they were under the law. As a child, I understood this very well. But from my safe haven, I noticed something even more serious. They had good reason to keep quiet,*

*at least out of a guilty conscience. For what a strange way music made them behave ! I hadn't noticed it yet: they'd rejected all modesty, the wretches ! They were both supremely ridiculous and indecent. They walked upright on their hind legs ! Horror ! They proudly flaunted their nakedness, and if, for a moment, they obeyed their good instincts and put their front legs down, they were literally terrified, as if it were a fault to obey their nature ! "*

Philosophers are therefore at one with the world as it is. If they lay themselves bare, that is, if they pretend to tell us everything, it is in order to comfort us and the world in the balance of nature. Kafka would like to destroy this peace, this balance, to shake the world out of its lethargy. He puts it bluntly in this diary entry dated January 28, 1922 :

" A little dizzy, tired of lugging, there are still weapons I use very rarely, I reach them with such difficulty, I don't know the joy of using them, I didn't learn it as a child. And if I didn't learn it, it's not just because "it's my father's fault", it's also because I wanted to destroy the "peace", the balance, and therefore I had no right to let someone be reborn beyond me while I tried to bury him below. "

This someone who tends to be reborn beyond Kafka is Kafka himself, a Kafka who, using the ordinary weapons of protection, would have joined the common world which, precisely, he seeks to destroy.

Philosophers, who live close to the truth, certainly have their doubts about the solidity of the world, but the mission they set themselves, according to Kafka, is precisely to avoid these doubts for ordinary people, to keep us immersed in natural

synthetic unity. They recite their lesson, but do not like to be asked the questions that made them dizzy in the first place. They are afraid. They are afraid that this vertigo will take hold of the crowd who, like them, will not be able to master it. The watchword, then, is to let nothing of what they have seen transpire. Let us listen, for example, to Kant's admission<sup>3</sup> :

" The unconditioned necessity we so indispensably need, as the last support of all things, is the true abyss of human reason. Eternity itself, under whatever sublime and frightening image *Haller* has depicted it, does not strike the mind with so much vertigo; for it merely measures the duration of things, it does not *sustain* them. The thought that a being, whom we imagine to be the highest of all possible beings, can somehow say to itself : I am from all eternity ; outside me, nothing exists except by my will ; but *where am I from ?* Here everything collapses beneath us, and the greatest perfection, like the smallest, floats unsupported before speculative reason, to which it costs nothing to make both disappear without the slightest impediment. "

Kant emphasizes the verb "sustain". Philosophers guarantee this support. Kant does so through the Ideal of Pure Reason :

"But an ideal of pure reason cannot be called impenetrable, since it can offer no other guarantee of its reality than the need for reason to complete all synthetic unity by this means."

But Kafka does not want a support that is merely an *a priori* idea, an idea that supports us without our knowing it, that allows

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<sup>3</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, III, 409

others to remain "in the air without falling"<sup>4</sup>. He wants to create this support himself and share it with us. He is naked, he is free, he wants to create his own ground and law on which to stand and live. Instead of completing the synthetic unity of nature, as philosophers do, Kafka wants to begin by destroying it, so that he can truly *begin*, by himself, and get us started with him through his writings. Such is the titanic mandate he has given himself. The enemy is the *natural*.

All the themes touched on in the unpublished version of *A Trickster Unmasked* are recurrent in the diaries (in-quarto or in-octavo notebooks) as they are in *Investigations of a Dog*. For example, the idea of using only the minimum amount of space in the world, to avoid succumbing to its attraction - "it only has as much floor as its two feet need" - is found in a note (in-octavo notebooks) dated February 1, 1918 :

"Two tasks at the beginning of life : to restrict your circle more and more, and to make sure constantly that you are not hiding somewhere outside."

This idea - monstrous, according to Kafka himself - of "regaining by force, even if transformed" what he has lost, i.e. rebuilding, according to his own will, the world he has previously destroyed, is found in several places. In *Investigations of a Dog*, we read :

"My goal, my questions, my research, I would say to preserve the image, certainly tend towards something monstrous. It is by force that I want to obtain this union between all dogs...".

On February 11, 1918, he notes (notebook in octavo) :

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Description of a fight* : "We hold ourselves up in the air without falling, we flutter, even worse than the bats !"

" To live means : to be in the midst of life ; to see life with the gaze in which I created it. "

The ambition to create life and its laws himself is further detailed in this note of February 25, 1918 :

" It's not inertia, unwillingness, clumsiness - although there's a little of all that, for "vermin is born of nothing" - that makes me fail or not even fail at everything : family life, friendship, marriage, profession, literature, it's the lack of soil, air, law. To create them is my task, not so that I can make up for what I've neglected, but so that I haven't neglected anything, because this task is worth another. It's even the very first of tasks, or at least its reflection, just as climbing a height where the air is scarce, one can suddenly find oneself in the reflection of the distant sun. And it's not an exceptional task either ; it's certainly been done many times before. To what extent, however, I don't know. As far as I know, I didn't bring any of the qualities required by life, only human and general weakness. Thanks to it - and in this respect it is an immense strength - I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of my time, a time which is very close to me, which I never have the right to fight, but which I can represent up to a certain point. To its few positive elements - as to the extreme negative that capsizes and joins the positive - I had no hereditary share. I have not, like Kierkegaard, been guided through life by the already weakened hand of Christianity, and I have not, like the Zionists, just grasped the last fringe of the flying Jewish prayer shawl. I am an end or a beginning."

Kafka's "immense strength" is his freedom. He is free from Judaism, Zionism and Christianity. Free, too, from idealism, scientism, and positivism. Nothing positive sustains him, not even that "extreme negative", nihilism, which would be a kind of positive. With him, in him, all that has been comes to an end, and room is made for a beginning that will be his own. In the same vein, this diary entry dated November 1, 1921 :

" To dispose freely of a world while having contempt for its laws. The act that imposes the law. The joy of obeying it.

But it is not possible to impose the law only on the world, while the new legislator would be free, with everything remaining as it was in the past. This would not be a law, but an arbitrary, seditious act, a self-condemnation. "

If Kafka is free, he aspires to a law that he would impose on himself. The current, ordinary law, which is a law of silence, was not properly chosen by men, freely consented to. It came about naturally, smoothly, without beginning, in continuity and habit. Speaking of his own kind, Kafka says in the *Investigations of a Dog* :

" We are those whom silence suffocates - who, truly thirsty for air, think only of breaking it. The others seem at ease in silence, but this is only a semblance."

Kafka's project is in no way political. It is about spiritual laws. His problem is not to reform society. It is not that he lost interest in politics. He followed Czech political life with interest and attended many meetings of socialist or even anarchist movements, but he was never a militant. Likewise, he never embraced Zionism.

His project is to modify man's relationship to existence, to Being. He wants to detach them from the past and the future and expose them to the moment. He could not stand it when others, people, everyone, acted as if nothing were wrong, as if it were normal and obvious to live, as if the major problem were to "get on with life", for example by "playing soccer". On October 16, 1921, he notes :

" Sunday. The unhappiness of a perpetual beginning, the lack of illusions that everything is only a beginning and not even a beginning, the madness of others who don't know this and play soccer, for example, to get "ahead", your own madness buried inside you as in a coffin, the madness of others who see it as a real coffin, i.e. one that can be transported, opened, destroyed, exchanged for another. "

There was no beginning because life is a perpetual restart. Everything came naturally, smoothly, and continues like this, continues in order to continue, by any means, as long as we achieve something in life, in order to still have the possibility of continuing. On January 16, 1922, he notes :

"... impossibility of enduring life or, more exactly, the continuity of life. ... the inner watch runs in a diabolical manner, the outer continues in a jerky manner its ordinary march."

Nothing important ever happens, has ever happened. All the so-called revolutions have changed nothing. Kafka wrote in his diary on October 20, 1917 :

" The decisive moment in human evolution is perpetual. This is why revolutionary spiritual movements are within

their rights in declaring everything that precedes them null and void, because nothing has happened yet. "

Note the adjective "spiritual". The decisive moment, though it may come at any moment, has not yet taken place. Kafka wants to be the beginning that hasn't happened ; he wants to be born at last. He does not want life to rest on the oblivion of being.

When I say this, how can I not think of Heidegger ? Heidegger, however, believes that a start was made in Greece with the pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides in particular ; a start transformed, in his view, into a false start with Plato and Aristotle (who certainly figure among the seven singing dogs in *Investigations of a Dog*), with idealism and rationalism; a start that, very naively, he would have liked to revive, in Germany, at the time of his rectorship. There was no more common departure from Heidegger's thought than there was from Kafka's thought or writings. They started nothing. They simply testified, each in their own way, but in a beautiful way, to the fact that there is no nothing. They testified to the fact that an instant is enough for man's being to reach eternity. This eternity certainly has little to do with time and is undoubtedly timeless. These testimonies are gold for all those who, like them, emerge and receive the shock of Being. Nor was there a Greek departure in the time of Heraclitus and Parmenides. They, too, simply bore witness.

If Kafka did not impose a law on the world, he gained his freedom and remained free. It is on this observation that *Investigations of a Dog* ends, after a final salvo against those philosophers and scholars who didn't help him :

" In front of a scientist (I've got the proof, alas !), I would fare very badly in a scientific examination, however easy it might be! Leaving aside what I've already said about my life, the reason for this lies first and foremost in my scientific ineptitude, my lack of vigor

of mind, my poor memory and, above all, my inability to keep the goal of science constantly before my eyes. I admit all this to myself, and not without some satisfaction! For the underlying reason for this ineptitude seems to me to be an instinct, and certainly not a bad one. If I wanted to boast, I could even say that this instinct has precisely destroyed my scientific abilities : wouldn't it indeed be most curious if I were able to demonstrate average intelligence in the ordinary events of everyday life, which are by no means the simplest, and above all if, in the absence of science, I were able to understand scientists quite well, as evidenced by the results I have achieved - even though I am *a priori* incapable of setting foot on the first step of science ? It was this instinct which, perhaps in the name of science, but a different science from the one practiced today, - in the name of a supreme science - made me value freedom more than anything else in the world. Freedom ! Of course, freedom as we know it today is a puny plant. But still, freedom, still a possession... "

This supreme science is Kafka's ability to lay himself bare before the truth, to look it in the face. That is what it means to be free.

## Chapter 2

### It was time !

*" In the village, the grown-ups were still awake, and mothers were preparing the beds for the night. It was time ! I kissed the comrade closest to me. To the next three, I simply extended a careless hand and ran up the road without anyone calling me back. At the first crossroads, when I could no longer be seen, I'd turn across the fields and into the forest. I wanted to reach the Southern Town, of which our village has a saying :*

*- There live people - just think - who never sleep !*

*- And why is that ?*

*- Because they never get tired.*

*- And why is that ?*

*- Because they're madmen.*

*- So madmen never get tired ?*

*- How could madmen be tired ? "*

The first sentence of the text above is the last in the story entitled *Children on the High Road in Contemplation*. What precedes it, in *Contemplation*, is a description of children's

games in the evening before moms beat the drum for bedtime. What follows was found in the manuscripts Kafka entrusted to Max Brod. But it is here, in this sequel and ending, that the story really comes into its own. It begins with : " It was time ! " This beginning is Kafka's true beginning, or, as Kierkegaard<sup>5</sup> would call it, his second birth. Kafka did not want us to hear the exclamation that marks this beginning.

For the other children, this is the end of playtime for tonight. They will be back to play tomorrow. For Kafka, this hour is unique and fateful. It is the end of his childhood. Childhood was a kind of paradise, the first world. Its end is a beginning. This is no ordinary beginning. Kafka abruptly leaves the world of childhood to enter another world, which he calls here the world of madmen "who never sleep".

For most of us, childhood does not end in an instant. Strictly speaking, there is no end to childhood. For us, there is the blurred period of adolescence, with its uncertain beginning and end. Insensibly, we become adults. From childhood to adulthood, there is no real break. There is continuity. Man changes as his body changes, gradually. The key events are physiological and social. They are anticipated, expected, and accompanied. More secretly, adults become aware of their finitude. The child was not unaware that there was death at the end, but he did not think about it, it was not for him, not yet. For the adult, the world is above all one of survival. Earning a living, postponing death as far as possible, forgetting about death, are the major concerns. Survival for survival's sake is the implicit course of action.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* : "In the instant, man becomes aware of having been born ; for his previous state, of which he has no claim, was not to be; in the instant, he becomes aware of the second birth; for his previous state was not to be."

With this example, Kafka justifies the fictional hypothesis developed by Kierkegaard in his *Philosophical Fragments*, which corresponds, of course, to the Danish philosopher's own experience.

On August 21, 1913, Kafka wrote in his diary : "Today I received Kierkegaard's *Book of the Judge*. As I suspected, his case, despite essential differences, is very similar to mine, or at least he is on the same side as me in this world. He confirms me as a friend. "

Adults take on ordinary conventions and make immemorial habits their own. This is the age of the law of silence. This silence, which we ordinary men of the world do not hear, surprises those who, like Kafka, suddenly appear. In *Investigations of a Dog*, Kafka returns to this silence that reigns in the adult world :

"You complain about the dogs, your brothers, about their silence on essential questions ; they would know, you claim, more about life than they admit, more than they want to admit ; and this silence they keep, and whose reason and secret they naturally also keep silent about, poisons your life and makes it unbearable for you ; you should change it or leave it, no doubt ! but you yourself are a dog, you too have the knowledge of dogs ! Come on ! Speak up ! Don't just ask, answer ! Who's going to resist you if you talk ? The canine society will unite its voice with yours, as if it were waiting for just that ! And then you'll have truth, clarity and confession in spades ! The roof of this lowly life, which you so disparage, will open, and all of us, dog against dog, will rise to sublime freedom ! And if we don't succeed, if everything gets even worse, if the whole truth turns out to be more unbearable than the half-truth, if it's confirmed that the taciturns are in the right as maintainers and guardians of life, if the faint hope we have now turns into dreary despair, well, too bad, the word is worth the effort, since you don't want to live as you can ! Come on, why reproach others for their silence and observe it yourself ? "

For Kafka, everything changes in an instant, and that is when he begins to perceive the silence of men. We must always return to this fundamental moment if we are to understand it. This is

the moment he wants to stay at. He has never been able, nor wanted, to forget it. This moment is the starting point of his entire struggle, which was also a struggle against oblivion. He wants to come back to it, to start again from it, and only from it, if possible. For him, the struggle consists precisely in bringing this possibility to light.

This is the moment of choice. We must take the right path. The world, our world, has already chosen. It chooses for you. The father, in particular, is there to set an example. Kafka will always resent his father for never having told him that such a choice existed and for having chosen for him, for having imposed a path, his path, the common, implicit path.

In reality, you do not have a choice, you do not have it anymore. Perhaps we never did. The choice has been swept under the carpet. Nobody talks about it. It is this silence that Kafka blames on his father, who for him represents the authority of the world. Why didn't his father, and with him all the others - his teachers, his educators, the passers-by in the street - say anything to him? Their speeches, however self-assured, say nothing about it. In a note whose manuscript bears the date January 14, 1920, but which undoubtedly belongs to *Description of a fight*, Kafka writes :

" It was, at that time, a kind of farewell he was saying to the illusory world of youth, which, moreover, had never deceived him directly, but only through all the surrounding authorities and their speeches. "

The secret of choice is unbearable. This father, who lives with such assurance and conviction, who speaks so loudly and clearly, must know this secret ! The secret of a self-assured life, of a life that no longer questions itself, the secret of Canaan, is and always will be missing from Kafka's life. That is why he rejects Canaan, his father's quasi-obligatory, unspoken world,

and will always want to return to that first moment that precedes the world and ordinary human existence. This moment of the first possible decision - but has anyone ever made such a decision ? - he wants it to be the moment of his decision, to be truly born, to seek to be truly born, which, it seems, has never yet been done.

To be truly born ! What does that mean ? Life, all of life, for Kafka, should only be a birth. We are never born. Birth takes place with and in death. In the world of men, in Canaan, people are born prematurely. As soon as they reach a certain age, it is decided that they are adults, that is to say, made, complete, good for service, good to play themselves the role of father, the role of the one who in turn imposes the choice, who shows the ordinary way, the only way.

To be born is to come to be ; it's a miracle. Not to see this miracle is not to be. To be born is to be born with Being, at the same time as it. Words betray here. In particular, the word "time" in the phrase "at the same time" in the expression "to be born at the same time as being". It is not a question of common, linear, passing time. It is not exactly chronology. Rather, it is a question of synchrony, or even more precisely, identity. Rather, "at the same time as Being" means : Being is, precisely because you are born. Your birth is the birth of Being. There is no other. It is always the same. This is it. Yours. Being is thanks to you, because of you, it is you. You are replaying the first birth of Being. Being has never been born better than with you, here and now, and Being is only birth.

Unfold your wings slowly, infinitely slowly. Be Being itself. To lose nothing of this extraordinary event we have been given to share, of which we are the center, a center with multiple instances, but unique : to be. To be born is to access Being. Who can say they have been born ? Any birth that is accepted, i.e. considered accomplished, is a birth that is simulated, forgotten,

aborted. In the all-too-fast passage, something is forgotten, and it's not nothing : it's Being.

For the rest of his life, from the moment of " It was time ! ", Kafka would remain ahead of his own birth. He would not budge. He refused and rejected all worldly temptations. This is both his vantage point and his battleground. What he will discover, as he stands there and observes the world playing out without him, is that there is no such thing as the Secret. The assurance of the world is a sham. His own father is an impostor. What holds the world together in its apparent self-assurance, what makes the world a Canaan, a promised land, is habit and imagination. Habit generates mechanical busyness, automatisms, carelessness, and forgetfulness. Imagination generates hope, hope made up of all kinds of hopes, each naiver than the last, often based on science and technology, on Progress, on a better future, on social ascension, on a more distant death, on more assured survival of its own.

Kafka's ambition was truly titanic - he was afraid of it. He wanted to create a real ground for the world of men, a ground not built on habit and imagination, a ground built on the truth of being and freedom. To do this, we had to go back to the first morning, the morning before the choice, wait there, see there, fight there.

Madmen, by definition, are outside the norm. The ones Kafka joins never sleep. But that does not mean they are tired. The sleep they refuse is the sleep of the ordinary world. For them, the world sleeps and locks itself into its dreams of survival, progress, and comfort. They know no time for normal people. Insomnia is not a problem for them ; they watch while they watch. This City of the South is the city of another time. For these madmen, time is just an instant, the instant of birth.

The embrace of the nearest comrade, at first sight anodyne, is in fact extremely moving<sup>6</sup>. It is a farewell. It is a break-up. The other children go home because it is time. It is time for Kafka too. But it is not the same. For him, it is the end of childhood. Kafka's careless hand feigns negligence. Childhood, represented by the other children returning home to play tomorrow, will not call him back. Kafka leaves and it doesn't notice a thing ; it carries on as before, without him. Leaving childhood behind, he will not return to the ordinary world.

When the time comes, you are alone. No one knows what is happening to you. The question is : has anyone ever experienced this ? Is it an illness, a monstrosity, that's coming ? Wouldn't it be better to hide it ? The others seem so sure of themselves ! Wouldn't it be better to join them and melt into the crowd ? And as quickly as possible, before the discomfort gets any worse. And so the hour passes, soon to be covered over, definitively buried.

Grégoire Samsa, the hero of *The Metamorphosis*, had the particularity, in his hour, of not being able to hide his nascent monstrosity. It was obvious. Everyone could see it. Even his family, even his boss. He was out in the open. Grégoire Samsa's hour was that of his obvious metamorphosis. But that is what an hour should be! It is a birth, a passage, a radical transformation. It is the birth of birth. It is the revelation of birth in progress, the revelation of the body that is suddenly there. To have a body ! What could be more extraordinary, more surprising, than to have a body, with hands, fingers, a tongue, a skin that demarcates a boundary with the outside world ? No less strange than having legs, elytra, and mandibles. What is fantastic about Grégoire Samsa is that what everyone else keeps carefully suppressed inside themselves - the sudden appearance of the body - was out in the open for him, without him being able to do anything about

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<sup>6</sup> In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard, evoking the decisive moment, writes : "But how can one take leave without sadness in the soul ?"

it. Others, especially his family, were surprised. For Gregoire Samsa, the hidden, inner metamorphosis that is usually ours was an outer metamorphosis, a real metamorphosis of the body, impossible to hide. Is it so unreal ? Isn't it true that for some of us, at the end of childhood, a gap is created between ourselves and our bodies that we can't bridge ? They believe this gap is there for all to see. In fact, it ends up being visible to everyone, so obvious are their difficulties and discomfort. Some of us never manage to reclaim our bodies. On October 30, 1921, Kafka wrote in his diary :

" What connects you to these solidly delineated bodies, to these speaking bodies endowed with blinking eyes, more closely than to any thing, say that penholder in your hand ? Could it be that you're the same species as them ? But you're not their species, which is why you raised the question.

The solid demarcation of human bodies is horrible. "

Now that his time had come, Gregoire Samsa's birth was being shamelessly flaunted in the face of the world. This disgusting spectacle had to be stopped. As soon as the monster was dead, everything fell back into place : hope, the hope that helps us to live, the hope that repels death, ordinary hope, soon reclaimed its rights. *The Metamorphosis* is the story of a birth in broad daylight, impossible to pass over in silence, but ultimately, as always, defeated, smothered, swept away, resolved.

A short text entitled *The Return*, whose date of composition I do not know, imagines Kafka's return to the family home, long after the escapade in the land of madmen. Neither text, the escapade nor the return, is autobiographical since Kafka hardly ever left his parents' house. In spirit, however, that is how it happened. Kafka did not leave but became a stranger in his parents' house. In his diary on October 25, 1921, he notes :

" My father said I should play or at least watch the game ; I refused on some pretext. What did this refusal, so often repeated since my childhood, mean ? What this invitation to play opened up for me was communal life, social life to a certain extent. "

Here, in its entirety, is *The Return* :

*" I've come back ; I've passed the gate again and look around me. It's my father's old farm. The pond in the middle. A heap of old, out-of-use utensils tangle at the foot of the staircase to the attic. The cat on the banister is on the lookout. A flap of cloth, once tied to a stick for play, rises in the wind. I'm back again ! Who's going to welcome me? Who's waiting for me behind the kitchen door ? The fireplace is smoking; coffee is being prepared for the evening meal. Does all this sound familiar ? Do you feel at home ? I'm not quite sure. This is my father's house, but how indifferent and cold all its parts seem to each other. Each one seems to be prey to particular worries that I've either forgotten or always ignored. What can I do for them ? What am I to them, the son of the old farmer, my father ? And I don't dare knock on the kitchen door, I only listen from afar, and standing up, lest I be caught eavesdropping. And since I'm listening from afar, I can't make out anything, I can only hear the faint ticking of a clock - or, perhaps, I only believe I hear it from beyond every day of childhood ? Apart from that, what goes on in the kitchen is the secret of those who are there, the secret they keep from me. The longer you wait outside the door, the stranger you become. What would it be like if someone - right now - were to open the door*

*and question me ? So, the one who wants to keep his secret - wouldn't I be the one ? "*

By not publishing the end of his text, Kafka is indeed the one who wanted to keep his secret. He was saving it for later, for when he was ready. He knew his task was enormous, impossible even.

## Chapter 3

### From one world to another, a translogical dialogue

Kafka published only two extracts from *Description of a fight* (in 1909, in the magazine *Hyperion*). The fight in question takes the form of dialogues between Kafka and Kafka. Kafka goes by various names : the Obese, the Devotee, the Drunkard. What happens in these dialogues is identical to what happens in *A Trickster Unmasked* : one of the two protagonists tries to convince the other that he belongs to the same world as he does, and that he should therefore not persist in trying to live in the ordinary world. The struggle described in *Description of a fight* is the struggle between these two worlds, between Kafka tempted by the ordinary world and Kafka inhabiting another world - another world of which we know nothing, but which we will learn later, in the work to come, is still to be constructed, that it is for the moment only a desert, the ground zero of birth and knowledge.

The quotations that follow, taken from the conversation between the Obese and the Devotee, show how Kafka jumps abruptly from one world to another, from one logical space to

another, while remaining logical in each of these mutually contradictory worlds. This translogical dialogue allows us to discover Kafka's worlds, the struggles these worlds wage within him, and the impossibility of communication between them.

Childhood, the first of these worlds, stands apart. It is an obligatory passage, chronologically first, common to us all, and which we must all leave behind. We keep it as a memory. In his writings, Kafka often returns to childhood, to the "eternal time of childhood"<sup>7</sup>. Through this period called "adolescence", we leave childhood without much abruptness, to gradually and naturally join the ordinary world of adults. The major difference, apart from the blossoming of sexuality, is that in the adult world, time is no longer eternal. Adults recognize finiteness and have to live with it. The ordinary world of adults, which follows on from childhood, is, in Kafka's enumeration, the first world, the one he calls "Canaan", the promised land of Moses, the world of his father. Kafka never entered this world, our world. He remained at its threshold.

The dialogue between the Obese and the Devotee shows us, on the one hand, the essential differences between Kafka's own world and the ordinary world, and, on the other, a third, supposed, hoped-for world, which he believes he can guess through a brief sequence of the existence of two women - his mother and a neighbor. Let us read this extract, which I call a "translogical dialogue".

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<sup>7</sup> *Diary*, October 18, 1921 : "Eternal time of childhood. Again a call of life."

## ENTERTAINMENT

or

how it is demonstrated

that life is impossible

b) Beginning of the conversation with the Devotee.

[...]

*In front of me, my devotee was smiling. Then he fell on his knees and said, grimacing sleepily :*

*- At last, I can betray you a secret : why I let you approach me. Out of curiosity, out of hope ! Your gaze has comforted me for a long time now. From you I also hope to learn the reason why things fade around me like snowflakes, while for others the smallest shot glass on the table is as stable as a monument !*

*When I didn't reply, and only an involuntary flinch crossed my face, he asked :*

*- You don't think it's the same for the others, do you ? Don't you ? Listen to this : one day, as a little boy, after my short nap, I opened my eyes, still unsure of my own life, and heard my mother, from her balcony, ask in her most natural voice: "What are you doing there, my dear ? What heat !" From the garden, a woman replied, "You see, I'm tasting it on the grass." They spoke without thinking, in a daze, as if this woman had expected the question and my mother the answer !*

*Thinking I was being interrogated, I reached into my trouser pocket, as if looking for something - in fact, I wasn't looking for anything, but I wanted to change my position to show interest in the conversation ! - I added that I didn't believe in its authenticity and assumed it was imagined for the sake of the cause, however obscure it might be ! Then I closed my eyes, as the light was so bad and tiring for my eyes !*

- *You can see for yourself ! Take heart ! For once, you agree with me ! And in your selflessness, you've approached me to tell me so. I lose one hope, but gain another !*

*[...] It's blowing one of those little south-westerly winds today ! The tip of the belfry is describing little circles of it up there ; all the shop windows are shaking and the lampposts are bending like reeds; the wind is swelling and twisting the Virgin's mantle on its column. Doesn't anyone notice what's going on ? Instead of walking on the pavement, men and women are soaring through the air ! When the wind stops, they too stop and exchange a few words, then bow, and go their separate ways. But when the wind picks up again, they're all in the air at once, unable to resist. They may be forced to hold back their hats, but the joy shines in their eyes and they have nothing to object to ! Only I'm afraid ! At last I was able to say to him :*

- *This story about your mother and the woman in the garden, to tell you the truth, I don't find it all that curious. Not only have I heard and experienced many similar stories, but I've often been directly involved. It's all very natural ! Don't you think that, standing on this balcony in summer, I could have asked the same question as your mother, or answered her like the woman in the garden ? The banal incident !*

*When he heard me, he finally seemed to calm down and told me that I was well-dressed, that he liked my tie, that I was very thin-skinned and that confessions only make sense when you retract them<sup>8</sup>.*

*[...]*

e) Continuation of the conversation between the Obese and the Devotee.

*[...]*

*My lips were dry and betrayed me, when I finally said to him :*

- *Couldn't we live any other way ?*

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<sup>8</sup> The extract published by Kafka in the magazine *Hyperion* in 1909 ends here. The Third World is not mentioned. Kafka, as always, stays masked.

*- No, he said with a sibylline smile.*

*- But then why do you pray in church at night ? I asked, while between him and me collapsed everything I'd been holding up to now as if in a dream.*

*- Oh, why talk about it ? When night falls, no one who lives alone is more responsible. We're afraid that things will happen : that our bodies (who knows ?) will disappear, that men will be what they seem in the twilight, that we won't be able to walk without a cane..., so we say to ourselves that it might be a good idea to go to church and pray at the top of our voices, so that from all those eyes on you, a body is born !*

*At these words, I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and burst into tears, broken in two.*

*He stood up and kissed me :*

*- Why are you crying ? You're tall. That's very nice. You've got long hands that pretty much obey you. With all that, how could you not be happy ? I'd advise you to always wear sleeves edged in black... Come on, don't cry any more ! I try to comfort you, and you persist in sobbing ? You put up with the difficulties of life quite reasonably...*

*The objects we encounter are, to tell the truth, unusable : war machines, towers, walls, silk curtains... etc., and it would be a great astonishment to us, if we had the time to notice ! We keep ourselves in the air without falling, we flutter, even worse than the bats! But when a fine day comes, who can stop us from saying : "Ah, my God, what a beautiful day ! " - settling down on our land and living by our own consent !*

*Thinking about what he was saying cut my tears short. " It's nighttime, I thought, and no one can reproach me tomorrow for what I can say now, so these are only words escaped from sleep ! "*

*Then, aloud :*

*- Yes, that's right. But what was there to talk about ? Certainly not the color of the sky, since we're in the bowels of a corridor !*

*No, but we could have. Aren't we absolutely free to talk, since we have no other purpose or truth than to joke and amuse ourselves... But wouldn't you like to tell me again the story of the woman in her garden ? What an admirable and intelligent woman ! May she be a constant example to us all ! How I love her, and how lucky I am to have met you ! It's been a great pleasure talking to you, and I've learned things I'd perhaps wanted to ignore until now. Very happy for me, very happy !*

In this conversation between the Obese and the Devotee, there is a strong reference to another dialogue, which took place between two women, the Devotee's mother, and her neighbour<sup>9</sup>.

From the moment marked by "It was time !", Kafka leaves childhood behind and enters another world, which he later named "the desert", after first calling it "the land of fools who never sleep". This world has its own truth, not only different from ordinary truth, but contradictory to it. From the desert, he observes the ordinary world of men, Canaan, his father's world. He knows it because he refuses it ; but he fears its force of attraction. It is on the threshold of Canaan that Kafka, tempted, is overtaken by those avatars of himself that are the unmasked rogue and the Devotee. Through the dialogue between the two women - they seem simply to consent to the world as it is given, with a free consent devoid of any particular hope - Kafka

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<sup>9</sup> This dialogue is taken up by Kafka from a letter he wrote to Max Brod on August 28, 1904 : The next day, opening my eyes after a short nap, still unsure of being alive, I hear my mother's voice asking from the balcony, in a natural tone : "What are you doing ? From the garden, a woman replies : "I'm tasting on the grass. " Then I'm amazed at the firmness with which people know how to take life. "

Klaus Wagenbach, in his biography of Kafka's youth, comments on this letter : "This astonishment is a conscious or unconscious recapitulation of childhood. The retrospective negation of what the child normally discovers for the first time, the very acceptance of the unusual by its simple incorporation into the accustomed. Through this abrupt refusal of a mechanical registration, even the everyday becomes elusive."

This negation is, in fact, retrospective. Kafka began by accepting everything mechanically, like other children. The sudden refusal, the change of world, dates back to "It was time ! "

imagines a third world for men, a world he will vainly try to build, a world he would have liked - it's his great writing project, never achieved - to convince us to join, through his work. As he later wrote in his diary on January 28, 1922, Kafka considered that there was no third world possible for human beings :

"Undoubtedly, it is as if I were accomplishing the desert peregrination in reverse, continually approaching the desert and harboring puerile hopes (especially with regard to women), 'perhaps I shall remain in Canaan all the same', but in the meantime I have long since arrived in the desert and these hopes are but the chimeras of despair, especially in times when, even in the desert, I am the most miserable of creatures and Canaan must necessarily present itself to me as the only land of hope, for there is no third land for men. "

He will thus admit as an illusion, as a projection of his own aims, the "intelligence" of the two women, themselves definitively returned to the ordinary.

These two dialogues reveal three different worlds. We pass from one world to another by a leap, by a contradiction. Each of these worlds is logical but is built on premises that contradict those of the other worlds. The jumps in question are translogical in the sense that they bring about a sudden change of logical space, of world, each of the worlds being contradictory with the others but internally coherent, respecting its own logic. The Devotee and the Obese only understand each other when they are in the same world, as the Obese makes random jumps, then finally jumps together into the third world, without knowing why they are jumping. Otherwise, the misunderstanding between them is total, as in a dialogue of the deaf. The Devotee wants to show the Obese that his world is not the ordinary world, for he lives, like the Obese, in another world where he owns

nothing, not even his own body. Finally, the Obese and the Devotee jointly leap into a third world, the freely consented, desperate world - desperate in the sense of a world unsupported by hope and imagination, because it needs no such support - which they glimpse through the dialogue of the two women. Here, the logic of the world is not based on the evidence of things. It is based on a freely consented acceptance of the miraculous gift we have been given. All things are as extraordinary as each other and are received as such. If life goes on, it does so based on automatisms learned in childhood. These automatisms are not ignored or forgotten as a matter of course. They are recognized as a gift and freely consented to.

The extract can be broken down into seven themes, seven successive stages :

1) *Things fade away like snowflakes, for others they are stable.*

This is the big difference between "the others" - i.e. the inhabitants of the ordinary world that we are - and the Devotee aka Kafka : in the ordinary world, everything has a meaning, a role, a place, in relation to other things ; it fits into a continuity, into a whole, into an organization recognized or imagined by men. All this - meaning, role, place in a whole - comes naturally, smoothly, in childhood and in its continuation, and imposes itself on us effortlessly, in the obvious. For Kafka, it all came undone at the moment of "It was time !" and now exists only in his memory. He feels he has been deceived. For him, everything is now unique and unrelated. It is not part of a whole. It appears to him as if it were a vertiginous first appearance. Under these conditions, nothing is stable; he cannot possess anything, not even a body. This situation leaves no rest. Kafka often aspires to this common rest that we find in the quiet obviousness of things, hoping to find its secret. The obvious ! The hunting and singing dog that Kafka dog meets at the end of *Investigations of a Dog*

clearly sees that Kafka dog lacks the obvious. Thanks to the obvious, he can act without thinking. Through his song, which is to be understood as a good old-fashioned lesson in ordinary philosophy, he tries - and seems to succeed, at least momentarily - in restoring Kafka's sense of the obvious. Here's an extract from their dialogue, in which Kafka the dog speaks first :

" - I have to leave, you have to hunt, I say. Always this :  
il faut ! Do you understand this : il faut ?

- No, he says, but there's nothing to understand ; it's obvious, it's self-evident !

- Not at all, I say. You're sorry, aren't you, that you have to make me leave ? And yet you do !

- That's the way it is, he says.

- That's the way it is, I repeated moodily. That's not an answer. What would you give up more easily, hunting or making me leave ?

- Hunting, he said without hesitation.

- Well ! I said, there's a contradiction here !

- What contradiction ? But dear little dog, don't you understand that I have to hunt ? Don't you understand the obvious ? "

Then, the hunting dog, who also happens to be a musician dog - in other words, a philosopher transposed to the human world - sings a song that brings our sick dog back to life. The philosophy Kafka is aiming at here is that which teaches ordinary wisdom, that which justifies, under the guidance of the god, the original synthetic unity of the world, that which restores tranquillity or reinforces it. It is also that which, when Kafka is not in a state of weakness, does not answer his essential questions. This hunter-musician philosopher is the guardian of the difficult and dangerous regions of the mind. His task is to chase away those

of us who stray there, endangering our own and perhaps our world's tranquillity<sup>10</sup>.

*2) ...and I told him that this little adventure seemed very curious and truly mysterious ; I added that I didn't believe in its authenticity and assumed it was imagined for the sake of the cause, however obscure it might be.*

To our great surprise, Kafka alias the Obese finds the dialogue between the two women curious, mysterious and in the service of an obscure cause. Whereas we find it banal, innocent, ordinary. We are confronted with the contradiction between two worlds. The evidence of the ordinary world is not accepted as such in the other. For us, ordinary readers, the first translogical leap has just been made. The two protagonists seem to understand each other; they are situated in the same world, which is contradictory to our own. The Obese has joined the Devotee. Listening to them, we are plunged into absurdity.

*3) Doesn't anyone notice what's going on ? Instead of walking on the pavement, men and women are gliding through the air ! When the wind stops, they also stop and exchange a few words, then bow, and go their separate ways. But when the wind picks up again, they're all in the air at once, unable to resist. They may be forced to hold back their hats, but the joy shines in their eyes and they have nothing to object to! Only I am afraid !*

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<sup>10</sup> In his *Logos* lecture, Heidegger concludes : "We can only see this lightning bolt if we enter the storm of Being. But today, as everything points out, we're only trying to avert the storm. With every possible means, we're shooting against the storm, so that it doesn't disturb our tranquillity. But this tranquillity is not tranquillity. It's only apathy, and first and foremost the apathy of anguish in the face of thought."

This " Only I am afraid ! " must be interpreted as : I'm the only human being who realizes the situation and has nothing to object to.

A diary entry from February 11, 1918, may help us to understand who are these people who hover in the air :

" The contemplative man is in a certain sense the one who lives with the world, he clings to living things, he tries to keep up with the wind. That's what I don't want to be. "

In *Investigations of a Dog*, some dogs also glide through the air, and Kafka the dog is also alone in objecting :

"Let's take the example of flying dogs. They don't have the least bit of morgue, as you might think at first glance; they need their fellow man far too much ! If you put yourself in their shoes, you'll understand. They must indeed, although not openly, which would be to break the vow of silence, seek to be forgiven in some other way for their way of life, or at least to divert our attention from it and make us forget; that's what their unbearable chatter is all about, I'm told. They always have to talk about the meditations they are constantly able to indulge in, since they have completely renounced all physical effort, or the observations they make from their aerial observatory ; and, although they are hardly distinguished by any particular vigor of mind, which goes without saying, given the ignominy of their lives - although their philosophy is as insignificant as their observations, and science, which is by no means reduced to such pitiful expedients, has little or nothing to do with them - in spite of all this questions about their *raison d'être* will always

be answered, that they contribute greatly to the progress of Science. "

Understandably, Kafka is aiming at what we today call "intellectuals", those who live - very well, quietly, comfortable in their own skin - by observing the world and explaining to us, with reference to world history, what's going well and what's going badly, and what needs to be done to make things better. In reality, they let themselves be carried along by the world, they are caught up in it, contributing, through their incessant chatter, to its natural movement. That is what Kafka does not want to be.

*4) This story about your mother and the woman in the garden, to tell you the truth, I don't find it all that curious. Not only have I heard and experienced many similar stories, but I've often been directly involved. It's all very natural ! Don't you think that, standing on this balcony in summer, I could have asked the same question as your mother, or answered her like the woman in the garden ? A banal incident !*

Kafka alias the Obese suddenly finds himself thrown back into the ordinary world. He reasons logically. He makes a translogical leap. The dialogue between the two women now seems to him, as it does to us, completely banal and natural. In reality, the Obese is able to have it both ways, to reason in both worlds. He does not know which one to choose. He believes he has to choose. He knows the ordinary world and its logic. This knowledge comes from his childhood. Here, he makes the leap consciously. He has the capacity to do so. Nevertheless, he is not at ease with this alternation. He does not master this to-and-fro in the sense that he is not comfortable in either world. Here, by playing out ordinary logic, he puts the Devotee to the test, evaluates his ability to remain like this, alone, in the desert, without possession, without anything.

5) *My lips were dry and betrayed me, when I finally said to him:*

- *Couldn't we live any other way ?*

- *No, he said with a sibylline smile.*

- *But then why do you pray in church at night ? I asked, while between him and me collapsed everything I'd been holding up to now as if in a dream.*

- *Oh, why talk about it ? When night falls, no one who lives alone is more responsible. We're afraid that things will happen : that our bodies (who knows ?) will disappear, that men will be what they seem in the twilight, that we won't be able to walk without a cane..., so we say to ourselves that it might be a good idea to go to church and pray at the top of our voices, so that from all those eyes on you, a body is born !*

The question is asked : Is there no other way to live ? Is there no other solution than the desert, the ordinary world or the translogical alternation between the two ? Finally, the devotee admits that he is not at ease either. If he goes to church to pray, it is to seek the gaze of others, so that this gaze gives him contentment and a body, it is to try and find comfort in the ordinary world. He too is not happy in the desert, nor has he found a third world. There is no longer any difference between the Obese and the Devotee. All that the Obese had maintained as if in a dream - his difference, his simulated belonging to the ordinary world - collapses between them.

6) *The objects we encounter are, to tell the truth, unusable: war machines, towers, walls, silk curtains... etc., and this would be a great astonishment to us, if we had the time to notice ! We keep ourselves in the air without falling, we flutter, even worse than the bats ! But when a fine day comes, who can stop us from saying : "Ah, my God, what a beautiful day ! - settling down on our land and living by our own consent !*

The key word is *consent*. People stand in the world by leaning on scaffolding whose props are planted in sand. They invent a protective layer of objects that are useful only in their imagination. If they knew, they would fall. Couldn't we live differently ? To live differently is simply *to consent* to the gift we have been given, to accept it as it is : a miraculous gift. Hope, imagination, and science obscure its essence. To live differently is to freely accept the miracle of the world as it is, without understanding it, knowing that it cannot be understood, knowing that there is no need to understand it. "Ah, my God, what a beautiful day ! That's the third world !

*7) Aren't we absolutely free to say what we want, since we have no other purpose or truth than to joke and amuse ourselves... But wouldn't you like to tell me once again the story of the woman in her garden ? What an admirable and intelligent woman ! May she be a constant example to us all ! How I love her, and how lucky I am to have met you ! It's been a great pleasure talking to you, and I've learned things I'd perhaps wanted to ignore until now. Very happy for me, very happy !*

There is a pleasure, a jubilation, in the pure and simple exercise of freedom. These two women are the example to follow : they base their existence on no hope, no search. They taste time as it passes. Once again, their dialogue is no longer banal. A new surprise ! A new leap. This time, the two women's way of being is seen as a new way of being in the world. They are in another world, a third world. The axiom underlying this third world, suddenly glimpsed by the Obese and the Devotee, is not, as in the ordinary world, the obvious, it is not, as in the desert, contradiction, the absolute surprise that each thing brings in relation to nothing and ultimately the impossibility of building a world, the victory of nothingness. It is *consent*. Here, the world

is a miraculous gift, an unheard-of surprise, to which man freely, i.e. consciously, consents. This world is formally identical - mathematicians say: isomorphic - to the ordinary world, although its basic axioms have a different, contradictory meaning. Things here, all things, are absolutely surprising, as if seen from the desert, but those who live here consent to their existence, to their relationships, as they learned them in childhood, as they remember them. Those who live in this third world consciously play the world and are not played by it.

The secret of the ordinary world, what Kafka (the unmasked trickster or the Devotee) lacks, is the obvious. For us ordinary people, the things, all the things around us, are self-evident, normal. From them, with the help of logic and imagination, what we need to do to live seems obvious. It is with this natural self-evidence that "we hold ourselves up without falling". Our logical space starts from these self-evident facts. These are its basic axioms. Kafka lacks these axioms. His world contains nothing obvious, not even his own body. The basic axioms needed to live, to hold on to something that we do not always question, can only be won for him by *free consent*. Kafka knows, because it is a memory from his childhood, what men take for granted, things and natural laws and, from them, the conquests of their imagination. If he consents to natural laws, he will be able to play in the world and enjoy the gift it has given him.

So, in the end, why didn't Kafka retain this received, accepted and played world as a "third earth for men" ? In reality, this played-out world was indeed the world in which Kafka lived, most of the time, with relapses, sometimes into the desert, sometimes into ordinary life. For example, this was how he lived with Max Brod and his other friends, playing and enjoying the good times. But he found himself alone. It was not a land for *all* men. He wanted to give this world to others, he wanted to live in it with others. That was his mandate. That was his failure.

If this third world does exist, it does not give itself. Kafka could only fail.

Playing the world like this, alone, Kafka did not feel at ease. He felt like a voyeur. To close this chapter, let's read this note dated September 15, 1920 :

"It's a mandate. - In accordance with my nature, I can only take on a mandate that nobody has given me. It is only in this contradiction, always in a contradiction, that I can live. But the same is undoubtedly true of every human being, for while we live we die, while we die we live. This is how, for example, the circus is covered by a canvas stretched around it, so that anyone who isn't under the canvas can't see anything. But then someone finds a small hole in the canvas and manages to see out. Of course, he has to be tolerated in this place. All of us are tolerated for a moment. Of course - the second "of course" - a hole like this is usually only visible from the backs of the spectators on the promenade. Of course - third "of course" - you can still hear the music, and then the roar of the beasts. Until at last, faltering in terror, you fall into the arms of the police officer, who is obliged by his duty to go round the circus and who has only tapped you lightly on the shoulder, to remind you of the impropriety of watching with such rapt attention a show for which you have paid nothing."

## **Chapter 4**

### **The survivor**

On October 19, 1921, Franz Kafka wrote in his diary :

" He who, in his lifetime, does not come to terms with life, needs one of his hands to ward off a little of the despair caused by his fate - he succeeds only very imperfectly - and with the other hand he can record what he sees beneath the rubble, for he sees something else and more than others, he has died in his lifetime and is essentially the survivor. That is, of course, provided he doesn't use both hands at once and more than he has to fight despair. "

What do we understand when we hear someone say that "he can't come to term with life" ? It is not an expression we commonly use. Kafka wrote : "Derjenige der mit dem Leben nicht lebendig fertig wird, ...". Word for word : " The one who with life will not end in his lifetime, ...". To end with life, for us, is to die. Kafka - for it is Kafka - is clearly not the man who does

not die in his lifetime. On the contrary, Kafka tells us that he died while he was still alive, and we need to understand what that means. In a note thought up in the context of *The Chinese Wall*, Kafka writes :

"In one of our old texts, it says : 'Those who curse life and who, for this reason, consider the fact of not having been born or of triumphing over life as the greatest of happiness or as the only happiness that is without illusion, those must be right, ...' "

Isn't "triumphing over life" the same thing as "ending with life"? According to the old text mentioned by Kafka, those who triumph over life experience happiness without illusion. The one who comes to the end with life, then, would be the one who, having gone through all its trials, no longer has any illusions about life. In such despair, he is as good as dead. Yet he still lives. We could call him a survivor. But Kafka, who has not come to term with life, who has not undergone all its trials, already considers himself the survivor. What kind of survivor is he ? This text is obscure.

What do we learn about Kafka as a survivor ? That he despairs of his fate and finds it hard to overcome his despair. But also that he sees something else, and more than others. He can see beneath the rubble. What rubble is that ? What does he see underneath ? Why does he see more than the others ? Who are these others ? It must be ordinary people, the rest of us. The questions come thick and fast. The subject is serious. For suppose you had the answers to all these questions. How will you be able to understand these answers, to understand the life Kafka died of, without endangering that same life in yourself ? Are we to admit that what Kafka is saying is his own, and that he is the only survivor of its kind ? that it is incomprehensible to us ? that these diary entries were not intended for publication ? that they were

intended for the only person who could understand them, i.e. the author himself ? that they therefore have no general significance ? How can we see what Kafka sees without becoming a survivor like him ? This understanding, which the answers to the questions could give us, could be truly fatal. For Kafka did not speak lightly. He is truly dead in his own lifetime. Someone died inside him. He who survives sees something else, sees more, and his despair is profound. And this vision is accessible only from this death, only from this survival. Either we are destined to understand nothing of what Kafka tells us, or we will die like him. To understand, here, is to die.

Perhaps you are beginning to realize that you are invited to a dangerous game. To understand what Kafka says, to truly understand, is to see what he sees. To see what he sees is to leave ordinary life, to die, to be born to another life, another view. But, you may say, only Kafka knows exactly what he means. And since I am not Kafka, you do not run any risks. I can give you my opinion on what this death, this survival, this view is, but it will always be just my opinion. Only Kafka, had he wished, could have attempted an explanation we could trust. Here, he merely states a raw fact, essential for him. It could be that the explanation was the will of all Kafka's work, his struggle, his failure. He himself no longer believed that communicating his vision, his knowledge, was possible. On October 22, that is, three days later, he wrote in his diary :

" A connoisseur, a specialist, a man who knows what has fallen to him, a science, it is true, which cannot be communicated, but which, fortunately, seems to be of no use to anyone."

Note the "fortunately". This connoisseur and the survivor are one and the same. To communicate this knowledge is also to communicate the deep despair that accompanies it. Despair that,

in a way, implies or entails death, a certain kind of death. Perhaps not everyone can survive this death, this despair. Fortunately, then, this knowledge is not communicated.

On October 15, 1921, four days before the survivor's note, Franz Kafka returned to his diary. He had written almost nothing in it in 1919 and 1920. He wrote very little in the second half of 1922, a single entry in 1923, and nothing in the year of his death, 1924 (the last entries, from 1923/1924, may have been lost<sup>11</sup>). In other words, on October 15, 1921, Kafka reopened his diary for a few months. But it is not the same diary. Between October 15, 1921, the date of the reopening, and the end of January 1922, this new diary would be different, in its greater density, from anything Kafka had written up to that point. The latter date, the end of January 1922, corresponds to the moment when Kafka begins writing *The Castle*. Thereafter, the diary returns to what it has always been. The writing of *The Castle* consumes Kafka's attention. The exceptional tension that reigned in the diary during the last ten weeks of 1921 and the first four weeks of 1922 returns to its usual level. However, for three and a half months, the months preceding the writing of *The Castle*, Kafka wrote an extraordinary diary. He did so consciously. This new diary corresponds more to a decision he had taken than to a change taking place within him. The major change had been there for a long time, since a specific hour over twenty years ago. After more than twenty years of hesitation, of wandering in the desert, Kafka finally made up his mind. Here's precisely what Kafka wrote on October 15, 1921, to open this new diary :

"About a week ago, I handed over all my diaries to Milena. Am I a little freer ? No. Am I still capable of

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<sup>11</sup> Until 1933, Dora Diamant said she had kept some of the manuscripts Kafka had written during their life together. Then the Gestapo got their hands on them.

keeping a kind of diary ? In any case, this diary will be different, or rather it will lurk, it won't be ; about Hardt, for example, which has kept me relatively busy, I would only be able to write something down with infinite difficulty. It seems to me that I've written all about him long ago, or, what amounts to the same thing, that I've gone out of existence. I could undoubtedly write about Milena, but not deliberately, so that would be too much directed against myself, it's no longer necessary for me to become aware of these sorts of things through detours as I once did, I am no longer, in this respect, as forgetful as I once was, I am a memory that has become alive, hence my insomnia."

This diary will "lurk, it won't be". What will be said in it will be the essential, the hard core, the word reduced to its simplest expression, the raw, brutal truth. This truth is no longer concerned with existence as such, with its ordinary preoccupations with self-preservation and family. Kafka steps out of existence. That is the big news. Kafka sees the world from the outside, he no longer lives his problems from the inside, he will no longer talk about them. This essential word, which will henceforth be his, could well be reduced to silence, to nothing, by dint of being reduced.

The truth according to Kafka, through this new diary, will be told without detour. It is not intended for us. Will we be able to access it ? Will we have the necessary discretion, patience, experience and openness ?

Who is Kafka ? A wrestler engaged in a fight to the death, as well as an artist. There is not necessarily a link between the wrestler and the artist. In fact, there is not one to begin with.

Kafka was born an artist. He has a passion for writing, he cannot do without writing, he has a particular, but sure, taste for it. Being an artist is one of those realities that cannot be

explained rationally. To write as an artist is not to explain. For the artist, writing is more about showing, making felt what he feels. Kafka never explains anything. He takes great care never to explain anything. He is an artist.

On the other hand, and independently, on a certain day, at a certain time, which for him corresponds to the end of childhood, he discovered a reason to commit himself personally to death. This momentous event will fuel the work to come. But Kafka, the artist, did not want to reveal Kafka, the wrestler to the death. He did not want to show any link between the two. The artist is reluctant to reveal his intimate source. He lets it bubble up. He shows its most distant, most sophisticated manifestations, at the bottom of the valley, in the crossing of cities, but not the source itself. The source is the exclusive domain of the Diary. Here, in the Diary, and especially from October 15, 1921, Kafka, on the contrary, attempts to go back to the source, to be the source itself.

Even to his best friend, Max Brod, Kafka never revealed the profound origin of his inspiration. He let him believe what he wanted to believe. It is amazing how wrong Brod is when he interprets Kafka's work. Kafka was not unaware of his friend's view of his work, nor did he try to change it. He wasn't lying to him ; it just seemed impossible for him to communicate his deepest truth to Brod. I do not think he even considered it. It would not have made any sense to Brod. When the two friends were together, Kafka lent himself to a common, ordinary existence. The only one Brod knew. Through Brod, Kafka still clung to the world, still had a link with it, still managed to simulate a normal existence. What he particularly appreciated in his friend was everything that he himself lacked : vitality, presence in the world, absence of ulterior motives, ordinary preoccupations, physical and moral health, natural harmony with life. For Brod, Jewishness is the sole origin of Kafka's feeling of being a foreigner, the stranger on earth, and therefore

the origin of the work. Yet Kafka, before being Jewish, is first and foremost the man who arrives, the man who is born, the man who never stops arriving and being born. The thought of the arriving man is independent of all *a priori*, of all tradition, of all culture, of all revelation, of all religion. This independence, this solitude, makes him a stranger. Kafka certainly felt alienated from Brod, his Jewish friend. The distance between him and Brod can be compared to the distance between Kafka, the wrestler to the death, and the man revealed to us by the only work published during the author's lifetime. There is the same dissimulation. This distance is the one that separates the published work from the diary, and in particular from the new diary, the diary that "will be other". A diary entry dated September 28, 1917 reveals both Kafka's independence, his distance from the world, and the game he plays to remain unnoticed :

" From a letter to F., perhaps the last one (October 1) :  
If I examine myself thoroughly to find out what my ultimate goal is, I realize that I am not really striving to be good and to conform to the demands of a Supreme Tribunal ; but, quite the opposite, that I am trying to embrace with my eyes the whole community of men and beasts, to understand their fundamental predilections, their desires, their moral ideals, to reduce them to simple precepts and to begin as soon as possible to evolve in their direction for the sole purpose of being agreeable to everyone, and to be so agreeable (and this is where the leap comes in) that I am finally allowed, as the only sinner not to be roasted, to perform openly in the eyes of all, and without losing the general love, the ignominies that are in my nature. In short, this tribunal of men is the only thing that matters to me that, what's more, I want to deceive without committing fraud. "

The ignominies in question can be summed up as follows : Kafka, indeed loved by all, helpful, discreet, kind, honest, does not accept the world as it is. He wants to rewrite the law, and waits until he's ready to do so.

Today, October 15, 1921, Kafka is ready to be born. Today, his memory resurfaces to life. With it, the past is alive. It is there, collected. It surfaces. With it, the future is alive. It is there, sensed. It emerges. They are present, together, in the moment. A moment that lasts, that holds, that lives. Even sleep cannot interrupt it. This is birth. The intensity is strong, hence the insomnia.

Kafka is a "memory come to life". This memory speaks directly to itself, in short-circuit. It is not about communicating. It goes straight to the point. This word is delivered to us raw, through the intermediary of the diary. What is there to understand ? The enterprise of explaining Kafka's death, his survival, his view, will not, according to Kafka himself, be able to communicate this view. Here, you risk nothing. You are not in mortal danger. I am not a murderer. All this is a game, a commentary, a piece of literature.

The survivor's note is preceded by another, dated the same day, which at first glance seems unrelated. Here's the whole of what Kafka wrote in his diary on October 19, 1921 :

*" Significance of the desert path. A man who, as the head of his national organization, travels this path, with a remnant (nothing more could be imagined) a remnant of awareness of what is happening. All his life he dreads Canaan ; the fact that he is to see the Promised Land only on the eve of his death is unbelievable. This supreme perspective can have no other meaning than to represent the extent to which human life is but an incomplete*

*instant, because this kind of life could last indefinitely, and in the end it would never result in anything but an instant. It was not because his life was too short that Moses did not reach Canaan, but because it was a human life. This ending of the Five Books of Moses bears a resemblance to the final scene of Sentimental Education.*

*He who, in his lifetime, does not come to terms with life, needs one of his hands to ward off a little of the despair caused by his fate - he succeeds only very imperfectly - and with the other hand he can record what he sees beneath the rubble, for he sees something else and more than others, he has died in his lifetime and is essentially the survivor. That is, of course, provided he doesn't use both hands at once and more than he has to fight despair. "*

The note of October 19, 1921, complete this time, consists of two parts separated by a blank line. The question is how they connect. It is not impossible that they are unrelated, apart from having been written on the same day, one after the other. In a diary, ideas don't have to follow one another ; they're written down as they come. It would be easy to find, in Kafka's diary, a series of notes written on the same day, which clearly bear no relation to each other. It could also be that these two notes are strongly connected, the first leading into the second, giving it its framework through an illustration, situating its place, its scope, serving as a springboard.

The first part tells us about Moses and his journey through the desert. Moses only fulfills his destiny of leading his people to the Promised Land, Canaan, on the eve of his death. His life was reduced to this journey. Moses had no time to taste life in the Promised Land, life sought and found. Kafka generalizes. The symbolic fate of Moses is the fate of every man, of every human

life. Life is only a crossing, a search, a hope, never a fulfillment, even when the goal is reached. The end of the crossing corresponds to the end of life, but nothing has really changed, except for the loss of hope and the approach of death. The end of *Sentimental Education*, Gustave Flaubert's novel, is another famous example. It seems that this first part is within our grasp ; the meaning is clear enough. It says : human life is a crossing of the desert, the end of the crossing corresponds to the end of life, there is no duration for the time of fulfillment, no other life, for the time of fulfillment is also the time of death ; it is man's destiny not to enjoy fulfillment, to live only his hope ; the goal once reached, the essential emptiness is there, always there.

Let us reread the whole thing. Can we better understand the second part ?

What do Kafka's commentators have to say about this text ? If we compare the various analyses, we might find some common ground. I know of only one direct reference to this text. It is in the version of Kafka's Diary published by Grasset in 1945, in a translation by Pierre Klossowski. The book also includes a preface and introduction by Pierre Klossowski. On the very first page of the preface, the author quotes the second part of the text, the survivor's note. He cites it in support of the observation that Kafka never completed anything he set out to do, that he left only fragments. The sentence preceding the quotation reads : "Nothing is more poignant than this intensity, ceaselessly interrupted by dissatisfaction, ceaselessly resumed by hope, even the certainty of a totality to be conquered." The two sentences that follow say :

"Henceforth, the temptation will be great to interpret the absence of a term as the negation of it, the staking out of the path as sporadicity, the unresolved enigma, the undeciphered cryptography as complacency in strangeness and in the mystification of the absurd. Under

no circumstances can we speak of him as if he had no final vision."

Pierre Klossowski interprets "doesn't come to terms with life" as : doesn't come to the end of what he sets out to do. From this would flow despair. The rubble would then be the scattered snippets, the unusable fragments, the aborted attempts. But this in no way explains why those who do not follow through on what they set out to do see something else and more than others, or why they are dead in their own lifetime. For if he makes a new start, life also begins anew, just as a fire begins anew. Klossowski is not saying that Kafka has come to a definitive halt ; on the contrary, he's saying that he's always starting afresh, constantly renewed by the hope of a totality yet to be conquered. Such a Kafka cannot be dead ; on the contrary, he relives stubbornly, never admitting defeat, always starting afresh. Yet the survivor's note speaks of a dead, desperate Kafka, who no longer seeks to triumph over life. A Kafka who, dead in life, sees more and something else. Klossowski, on the other hand, presents a Kafka who is so stubborn that we might be tempted to believe - admittedly wrongly - that he revels in his failures, that he uses the absence of a term as a pretext for strangeness, mystification and the absurd. If it's true that we shouldn't speak of Kafka as someone who had no final vision, Klossowski doesn't seem to pay attention to the vision contained in the text he quotes : Kafka presents himself as definitively dead, desperate, surviving, but seeing more and something else.

On the last page of his introduction, Pierre Klossowski quotes the first part of the text, this time. He quotes it in support of his conclusion that Kafka's existence had been one of alienation. The two sentences preceding the quotation read :

" It had seemed to him that the experience of life as recounted in *Sentimental Education*, one of his favorite

reads, coincided with the experience of Moses. Didn't he also experience this alienation ? "

In other words, Kafka's experience is the same as that of Moses or Flaubert's Frederic. It is the same alienation. The same alienation that makes life nothing but a crossing, the end of which is also the end of life. Moses' life was typically human, says Kafka. Was it also the case for his life, he who saw more and something different than the others, who was the survivor ?

Note that Klossowski uses the two parts of the text separately, in different contexts, as if they were dissociable, unrelated to each other. On the other hand, he applies them both to Kafka himself : Kafka's experience is identified with that of Moses, symbolically human, but Kafka is also the one who does not come to the end of life, the one who died while still alive, the survivor. But the two cases are different. Moses did not outlive himself ; his life ended with the fulfillment of his destiny, like that of every man according to Kafka. Like all men, he does not enjoy his victory. Kafka says this elsewhere, in a note found on a loose-leaf page and which seems to be written in the same context as the note on Moses and on Frederic from *Sentimental Education* :

" Man's fundamental weakness lies not in the fact that he cannot be victorious, but in the fact that he cannot exploit his victory. Youth triumphs over everything, over the original imposture, over the devious diabolical invention, but no one is there to seize the victory on the fly, to communicate life to it, because then youth itself is already past. Old age no longer dares to touch victory, and new youth, tortured by the new attack that is about to begin, wants its own personal victory. This is how the devil is constantly defeated, but never annihilated. "

Kafka, for his part, did not wait until he was old to know this. As a survivor, he sees more and different than the rest of us.

How can we apply both parts of the text to the same person ? Let us face it, this passage by Klossowski, our translator of the Diary, does not do much to enlighten us. It reinforces the idea that multiple interpretations, and even multiple misinterpretations, are possible. Yet Klossowski, who quotes these texts and had therefore particularly appreciated and distinguished them, thought he had read them well.

Maurice Blanchot, a great reader and commentator on Kafka, alludes briefly to the survivor's note in an article entitled *Reading Kafka*, published in 1943. Blanchot begins with another Kafka quotation :

" Our salvation is death, but not this one. We don't die, that's the truth, but it follows that we don't live either; we died while we were alive, we are essentially survivors. "

For Blanchot, those who have died in their lifetime, those who are the survivors, are all of us. But are we survivors in the same way as Kafka, who sees more and something else than others ?

The quotation at the beginning of Blanchot's commentary is found in one of Kafka's in-octavo notebooks (part of his diaries), dated February 26, 1918. The day before, on the 25th, Kafka wrote :

" The cruel thing about death is that it brings the real pain of the end, but not the end. Deathbed lamentations are motivated by the fact that here, there has been no death in the true sense. We're content with this death, we're still playing the game."

Followed, on the 26th, by :

" Human evolution - a growth in the power of death. Our salvation is death, but not this death. "

For Kafka, then, there are two forms of death. One is salvation. The other is the common death of men, which is not really death, since we do not die "in the true sense". True death precedes true life since it is salvation. And there would be a false life, which is the common life of men, leading to a false death. If we do not live, it is because we are already dead, the living dead; we are essentially survivors. Human evolution increases this phenomenon. We only survive, as opposed to living, really living. But is it the common mortal who sees something different and more than others ? For this particular survivor, Kafka, who sees more and something else, despair runs deep. He died while he was still alive. But which death did he die of ? Blanchot offers us great help by reminding us of Kafka's phrase : "Our salvation is death, but not this death." The survivor, dead in his own lifetime, who sees something else and more than others, seems to have died the other death, the one that brings salvation as well as despair. Despair is to be understood formally as absence of hope, a state in which there is no longer any hope to be had in this life. Blanchot clearly misuses the survivor's note. He has got the wrong survivor. It's not the survivor represented by the common mortal, who doesn't really live ; it's an extraordinary survivor, dead from another death. But Blanchot sheds light on the matter with another timely quotation from Kafka.

How does this death, which is salvation, differ from ordinary death ? It takes place in the course of life, not at its end. Kafka lives his death. For us, ordinary mortals, death is always the death of others. It brings us the pain of disappearance, but it does not bring us death. For those of us who witness death, there is still hope : we still have to overcome life. We must, like Moses and Frederic, reach that point where despair and physical death

come together. We don't live in despair ; when it comes, it's also the end.

Those who have "died while alive" see something under the rubble. This rubble is the battlefield of hope, any battle over, as seen by the one who died there. What does he see, thus freed from hope, thus set apart from the old life ? The others carry on. They see them. The others, caught up in the action, caught up in the hope in progress, do not see themselves, they do not see.

Precisely, the first part of the text speaks of the others, of those who know only the old life, who remain in the initial struggle. Moses is a symbol of this, reaching Canaan on the eve of his death. After the battle, even if victorious, there is no time to taste victory. After victory there is nothing, there was nothing, but death that comes. The end of *Sentimental Education* offers the same conclusion. Madame Arnoux finally gives herself up, after so many years. Frederic was loved. They loved each other, they still love each other, they say it to each other at last. But life is over, the beloved's hair is white, the satisfaction of love through physical possession, for a moment considered, is no longer in season, it is too late. The day of revelation is also the day of farewell. It is not that life is too short, but that it is human. However long it lasts, it is only a moment. You get through it, and then everything's the same, you're no further ahead, victory is relative and life is over.

But this one, in his lifetime, does not come to the end of life. Because he consciously gives up before the end. Still young, he expects nothing, he seeks nothing in this life. He is hopeless in this life. He steps aside. He is elsewhere. He watches. His observatory is ideal. He sees. He is the survivor. He is the one who, if he succeeds in completing the mandate he has given himself, will create a new life. For him, as Kafka wrote on February 11, 1918 :

" To live means : to be in the midst of life ; to see life with the gaze in which I created it."

In this sense, Kafka is the survivor "of a dream made thousands of nights ago and forgotten a thousand times over", as he puts it in *Investigations of a Dog*. He, the sole survivor of the original man, has not forgotten. He still sees "the crossroads". He sees beneath the rubble the others who "went further and further astray". We think of Heidegger, who saw in the thought of Socrates and Plato the beginning of the modern way of being, the beginning of the Western waywardness.

Why and how did mankind, our forebears, go astray in this way ? Kafka tackles this question in his *Investigations of a Dog*. Here, in the diary that "will be another", two days after writing the survivor's note, i.e. on October 21, 1921, Kafka gives an essential part of the answer. He is in the same frame of mind. He doesn't go into lengthy explanations :

" Everything is imagination, the family, the office, friends, the street, everything is imagination ; and more distant or closer, the woman ; yet the closest truth is that you press your head against the wall of a cell without windows or doors. "

Family, office, friends, street, wife. The enumeration is complete. What is described here is our life, our reality. Can we live without family, without work, without friends, without love? There would still be the street, the anonymous crowd, public places, the possibility of encounter. Why does Kafka say it's all imagination ? Isn't the imaginary the opposite of the real ? Yet what he says is a list of everything that makes up our reality, a reality we couldn't do without ! We are in a paradox. Our reality is nothing but imagination ! How are we to understand this ? Is there a true reality and a false reality ? Man

has invented a reality for himself, the fruit of his imagination, and locked himself up in it as if in a prison ! Family, professional life, friends, the street, women - these are all realities imagined and then substituted for reality, in other words, they're dreams ! What is true reality, that which is not a dream ? What's left for a man who lives without family, without a job, without friends, without a woman, away from the street, avoiding all encounters ? Is Kafka this man ? Is this even possible ? How would such a man live ? Yves Bonnefoy, poet, and commentator on poets, also tells us that poetry is what delivers us from the dream. Isn't poetry generally understood as that which introduces a little dream into our daily lives ? What dream is our everyday life a prisoner of ? We thought poets were dreamers ! So dreamers aren't what we think they are !

But here's the closer truth : "you press your head against the wall of a cell without windows or doors". That "you" is us. We, the others, an integral part of daily reality, inhabitants of the world, in the midst of our family, our friends, our worries and our hopes, family, professional, love. Our hopes are illusory, we press our heads against a wall, there will be no opening, there is none, it will lead to nothing. How does Kafka know this ? Where does he see it from ? We are still in the same discussion. Life is just a desert crossing at the end of which there is nothing. Kafka is the one who sees something else, and more than the others. He is the survivor. As such, he accesses the closest truth, that is, the one least polluted by the imagination, the one that is directly accessed. This truth is "the closest". You would think you were reading Heidegger. The survivor sees the closest. Not that it is the easiest to see. It is what is most immediately in sight, what is staring us in the face, what "others" do not see. This immediate truth needs nothing to make itself known. There is no desert to cross. No baggage, no technique, no culture is needed. On the contrary, they obscure the view, they interpose an artifice. All you have to do is see. It is there. It was there. You do not have

to fight a lifetime to reach it. The struggle is not to reach, but to stay. To stay in the critical place, which is the nearest place. These topological indications are crucial. They tell us where Kafka is and where he is looking. Kafka does not need a landmark. He knows where he is staying. Writing for himself, he does not bother to guide us, he does not try anything for us, we should not have been there reading over his shoulder. Men live in imagination. Their world is imaginary, because it is far away, it is a dream world. It's a structural dream, that is to say, it's constrained, forced, carried, contained - think of the Heideggerian "Gestell". Who can do without family and work, who can do without a sexual partner ? This reality is our lot, our imposed vital structure. No one can escape it. Where does the dream come in ? It is in the hope we place in it. Kafka tells us it is illusory. We are all living the same dream. What defines our world is not so much the imposed vital structures that underlie it as the common hope, born of a common discourse, that we slip into each element of that structure.

Kafka sees what is and distinguishes it from the familiar halo that offers everyone conventions, goals, desires, occupations, a discourse manufactured by all for all. The world constantly offers us a hope that is a mirage. This is the life from which Kafka died. "All is imagination" can also be read as : all is illusion. Frederic, after Madame Arnoux's confession, looks back on his life : the essential remains the memory, the essential has passed, the essential was hope itself, the essential is still childhood, for which hope and reality merge. When the lens is finally seized, there is nothing left in the hands, the fingers open onto emptiness.

Women have an exceptional status. She is "farther or nearer". She is part of the world. In this sense, she is far, far away, an elusive dream, hope par excellence. It is Kafka's dream. For him, she is the dream of a possible return to the world, to normality. Woman is a marvel of adaptation to the world. Quite the

opposite of Kafka. This opposition fascinates him. Kafka knows that this dream is unattainable for him. Not only does he refuse it, he dreads its fascination. No particular woman could live with him. He would destroy her. He knows this. On the other hand, the woman understands. She, too, knows. Her capacity for understanding and compassion is immense. She can and does suffer. She sees and says nothing. In this sense, she is close, closer. Her role is ambiguous, dual. She plays the world perfectly, she likes to play in it, she laughs, she is playful. This power is fascinating. She is distant in her ability to play in the world, an ability that is such that we forget she is playing, that we no longer know if she is playing. She plays so well that it is she who imposes the reality of the world. So she is a long way from the fascinated Kafka. She is close through her knowledge, through the suffering she endures, through her ability to suffer in silence. She is close through her mother's gaze and through her silence.

Death watches life. It is an ideal observatory. Life is its spectacle. It never tires of it. Life is a miracle.

The past that surfaces in living memory is first and foremost childhood.

On October 18, 1921, Kafka notes :

" Eternal time of childhood. A new call of life.

It's perfectly conceivable that the magnificence of life is all around us, and always in its fullness, but veiled, in the depths, invisible, far away. It's there, not hostile, not resistant, not deaf.

If we invoke it by the right word, by its true name, then it comes. This is the character of magic, which does not create, but invokes. "

It is no coincidence that Kafka invokes the eternal time of childhood on the eve of the day he defines the survivor he is.

The survivor sees childhood, and through this gaze, he invokes it. The gaze does not create, it invokes. That is where it differs from God. The survivor knows the right word, the true name for the magnificence of life. That name is "childhood".

Childhood itself knows no childhood. Childhood does not know. Only the hope of the child, which does not know itself as hope, is acceptable. It has no name. It asks only to be as it already is. So it is not really a hope, it is a fullness. The child lives his hope, there is no gap. There is supposed to be a perfect match between form and content. It is simply a matter of one joining the other, one taking over the other, and that is the whole point of his movement. Movement implies time, but this time is unconstrained : all you have to do is stretch out your hand. This time is eternal.

Life calls. It calls to Kafka. He is elsewhere. Two opposite places call to each other. One is life, but not just any life. It is childhood. The other is death. The death of worldly hope, where Kafka finds himself. This distance between two places provides a view. All Kafka has to do is turn his gaze towards childhood. He invokes it. It is there. Absolutely there. He sees it. It calls to him. Kafka uses the right words : the eternal time of childhood. He receives the call.

The call took place, one day, in the other direction. The call of death marks the end of childhood. It was this original call, received by the child Kafka, that made him a survivor. This call is fundamental. It comes first. For those of us in time, the banal chronology is all too quickly forgotten. First, childhood. For everyone. Pure. Then the call from death. This call may not be heard. If it is heard, if the consequences are drawn, man is transformed. This event is the major event of a lifetime. It gives knowledge. It is knowledge. After it, man is a survivor.

Today, Kafka, a survivor, receives the call of life. He hears this call easily, because it emanates from a place well known to him and to everyone else. This place is childhood in eternal time.

This life that calls to him is not ordinary life, not just any life, it is childhood. The world is far away. Life is there, all around, in all its magnificence. The world can no longer see it, for it is veiled, far away, invisible. The world is lost in its dreams and can no longer distinguish the life of its childhood, which is always present, always close. It always offers itself. It is neither hostile nor resistant. It is the world that forgets it. It knows no hostility towards it. It is the world that is deaf to its call. To say that poetry is what delivers us from the dream is to say that it returns us to the magnificence of the simplest life, to our childhood. Childhood here is synonymous with plenitude. "The simple unity of things» says Yves Bonnefoy. Childhood is its own hope. It does not chase the impossible. The impossible is already there : all we have to do is see, to see what is. Childhood cannot be seen. Only the survivor sees it. He is no longer in the world. He uses his memory as an orchestra of which he is the conductor. He sees everything. He directs with his eyes. All he has to do is invoke it and, as if by magic, he who knows the right word, who sees something else and more than others, the magnificence of life appears, as it was originally given. The miracle takes place. Birth takes place.

The life from which we must die is not, of course, childhood. It is that time, which lasts only an instant whatever its real duration, which is guided by hope. This is the time that follows childhood. The ordinary end of childhood corresponds to the fall into temporality and hope. Every precise hope, as soon as it is disappointed, gives way to another, just as precise and vulnerable. This is one of the themes of *The Metamorphosis*. The physical metamorphosis of man into vermin, instead of killing all possible hope, metamorphoses human hope into beastly hope. After this appalling tragedy, which comes quite naturally, as soon as the beast is dead, the family begins to form new, human projects. This theme of hope is vividly illustrated in the diary that "will be other". On October 16, 1921, two days before the

invocation of childhood, three days before the Survivor text,  
Kafka notes :

" Sunday. The unhappiness of a perpetual beginning, the lack of illusion that everything is only a beginning and not even a beginning, the madness of others who don't know this and who, for example, play soccer to 'get somewhere', one's own madness buried within oneself, in a coffin, the madness of others who believe they see here a real coffin, consequently a coffin that can be transported, opened, destroyed, exchanged for another."

Getting somewhere ! Isn't that the leitmotif of the prevailing discourse, in the family and in society ? Anything, but to give oneself an honorable countenance, to obtain a place in society. That is what parents hope for their children. That their children immerse themselves, forget themselves, make themselves forgotten by taking on a normal colouring that does not stand out, that is in keeping with the general tone. To achieve something is in fact to drown in the mass, to fit into the general structure, to live everyone's life, to be something of this world, something recognized by this world. For example, why not become a soccer player ? Set yourself the goal of becoming a soccer player. It is just another way of getting there. To achieve what ? To survive, through a healthy, normalized situation. Endure for what ? To endure. This is certainly what is meant by the German expression that we translate as "coming to terms with life". For the parents, the problem is solved : their child endures. From the outside, his or her existence poses no problem. It does not stand out from the crowd. Nothing has happened. Everything begins. Something else begins. It is Sunday. A new week begins. The weekly diary begins again. But nothing is ever entered ! Kafka knows. We all jump from one beginning to the next, until the end, until death. Every beginning

allows us to hope, i.e. to wait, to kill a little time. This is often explicitly admitted : we have to kill time ! Time-killing business. The affair that makes time go by unnoticed, as if nothing had happened, that makes life last only a moment. Saving face, keeping a proper composure, taking a dynamic attitude, moving forward, playing soccer for example. Insanity through total absence of insanity. Quiet, consistent, logical nihilistic madness. Hobbies are treated for what they are, like coffins, and manipulated as such.

Let us recall the atmosphere of *The Castle*, that of the novel. What strikes us ? There is no time. The villagers have no past, no traditions, no plans, no references. *The Castle* is a book without references. We are surprised to learn that there is a church in the village. This church seems to be a vestige of another time, a bygone era. The elements of the novel are, on the one hand, the people of the village with their regulated activities, and, on the other, the administration of the castle and the castle itself, or rather the idea people have of it. That is all there is to it. It's the villagers' idea of the Castle, the Count and his administration, that holds everything together. It is this, and this alone, that gives the village its unity, that holds it above the void. The balance seems fragile. The mood is right for an event. Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen from the outside. The stranger arrives, determined. He knows. He is impatient. He will break everything. He will unmask the imposture. He is going to break the circle of time that seems to be hanging on by a thread. The teacher, who suspects something, is on his guard, protecting the children. They are the most vulnerable. But no ! K.'s efforts are in vain. Imagination rules. And yet, there is nothing else, there's only people's imagination, which is to say, nothing, dreams. Perhaps there is no castle and no Comte.

What if time wasn't killed ? If, in spite of healthy occupation, it stood there, untouched, before us ? We would have to take it

head-on. What does it mean to take time head-on ? It means opening our eyes, seeing. How does one go about seeing, about having seen ? It is a knowledge that, says Kafka, is not communicated and that, fortunately, seems to be of no use to anyone.

## Chapter 5

### Kafka and Heidegger

There is no mention of Kafka in Heidegger's work. Did Heidegger ignore him, or pretend to ? It is possible that he did not read anything by Kafka until 1945. In 1933, Kafka was still little-known in Germany ; then the Nazis banned and destroyed publications by Jews. From 1945 onwards, Kafka became a fashionable author. Heidegger was not concerned with fashion. In 1950, Hannah Arendt, who had renewed her acquaintance with Heidegger, gave him the gift of a collection of Kafka's works. Hannah Arendt wrote two articles on Kafka, in 1944 and 1948. The first was published in Germany in 1948 (Heidelberg), in a collection entitled *Sechs Essays*. Heidegger must have read it, sooner or later. It is possible that he discovered Kafka after 1950, but we cannot be sure.

Yet Kafka's work, which he did not publish himself, foreshadows that of Heidegger. In particular, if Heidegger read *Investigations of a Dog*, he must have received a shock. He said nothing about it.

*Investigations of a Dog* was written in 1922, at the same time as or shortly after *The Castle*. Claude David thinks this work could be an attempt at an autobiography by Kafka. If it is an autobiography, then it is the biography of his thoughts alone. Can a thinker who writes - and no longer the artist, who here takes a back seat - a thinker whose life and thought are one and the same, write anything other than an autobiography ? *Investigations of a Dog* retraces the path of Kafka's thought and questioning. In his *Biography of Franz Kafka* (1989), Claude David sums up the essence of the book as follows :

" The essence of the dog's research is the relationship - very simple, here almost simplistic - between earthly food and heavenly manna. There is a pre-established agreement between dogs and the earth : the soil gives the dogs the produce they need; the dogs, in turn, water the soil to make it bear fruit. But there is also another kind of food, usually subject to prayers and practices: manna, which is said to fall from heaven from time to time. It's this other food - complementary or essential, we don't know - that the narrator's dog has made the object of his labours; who knows, if he succeeded in his research, if he wouldn't render useless and null and void all the efforts of science ? "

Is this what Kafka really meant ? No, not exactly ! The first question Kafka's dog asks himself is : "Where does the earth get our food ?". The gist of the book is that science, for all its considerable benefits, does not answer the essential questions, that it basically does not feed us. The essential point is that everyone is silent when it comes to questioning what is essential. The bottom line is that the prevailing philosophical soundtrack is all about the obvious. But Kafka the dog, much as he would like to rest on "we must", does not see the obvious anywhere. He

therefore recognizes no "must". The resulting freedom is his most precious possession. This is the essence of the book, very Heideggerian. This short extract from *Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra* ?<sup>12</sup> could be read as a good summary of *Investigations of a Dog* :

" We men of today, because of the particular supremacy of modern science, find ourselves caught in a strange error : we believe that knowledge can be obtained from science, and that thought is justiciable by science. But the only thing a thinker can ever say cannot be proved or disproved by logic or experience. Nor is it the object of faith. It can only be brought into view by questioning and thinking. What is seen then constantly appears as what *deserves* to be questioned about. "

Let's read this extract from *Investigations of a Dog*, striking from the point of view of the convergence of the two thinkers :

"We often celebrate the general progress of canine society through the ages, and by this we seem to be thinking above all of the progress of Science. It's true that science is advancing all the time, and even with ever-increasing speed, but what's so glorious about that ? It is as if we wanted to glorify someone for growing old and approaching death ever more quickly. It's just a natural, even painful phenomenon, and I don't see anything glorious in it. I see only decadence, but I don't mean to say that previous generations were better. They were only younger, that's their advantage ! Their memories weren't overloaded like ours; it was even easier to get them to talk, and, although no one succeeded, it would

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<sup>12</sup> Heidegger's lecture on May 8, 1953.

have been easier. It's precisely this greater amount of possibility that moves us so, when we listen to the naive stories of yesteryear. Here and there we hear a word full of allusions, and we would leap up, if we didn't feel the weight of the centuries weighing down on us ! No, whatever I have to reproach my era for, previous generations were no better than the new ones, and even, in a certain sense, they were more corrupt and weaker in spirit. It's true that miracles weren't commonplace back then, but dogs weren't yet (I can't express it any other way) as doglike as they are today ; the structure of canine society was still flexible ; the true word could still have intervened, determined this structure, transformed it, changed it at will and turned it into its opposite..., and this word was there, was at least very close, everyone had it on the tip of their tongue, everyone could have had a revelation of it - but where did it go astray today ? If we pursued it to the back of our throats, it would be in vain! Our generation is undoubtedly lost and corrupt, but it is less guilty than that of the past. I can understand the hesitation of my generation ; it's no longer hesitation, it's the oblivion of a dream made a thousand nights ago and forgotten a thousand times over: who could blame us for this thousandth oblivion ? But I think I also understand the hesitation of our forefathers ; in their place, we would no doubt have acted in the same way ; I would almost say : happy are we not to have had to take the blame ! Happy are we to be able, in a world darkened by others, to fly in front of death in an almost innocent silence ! When our forefathers lost their way, they hardly thought of an irremediable error : so to speak, they could still see the crossroads; turning back was always easy, and if they hesitated to retrace their steps, it was only to enjoy their canine life a little more. It wasn't really a dog's life yet,

but if it already seemed so intoxicating, what would it be a little later ? And so they went further and further astray. Little did they know that the soul - as we know from history - changes sooner than life, and that when they began to enjoy their canine life, they already had the soul of an old dog, and were nowhere near as close to their starting point as they thought, or as their eyes, enjoying all the canine delights, led them to believe... Who can still speak of youth today ? By definition, they were young dogs, but unfortunately their only ambition was to be old dogs. They must have succeeded only too well, as all subsequent generations, including our own, the last, can testify. "

Heidegger still hears the true word in Parmenides or Heraclitus; he sees it resurging in poets, Hölderlin in particular. The fault that Kafka speaks of, he already perceives in Plato and Aristotle. It is in them, with the birth of formal logic in particular, that he sees the crossroads. Plato and Aristotle are arguably among the seven singing dogs who do not answer Kafka's questions. Heidegger gave a name, "Gestell", to that which overloads our memory and distances us from true speech. He also gave a name, "Ereignis", to the major event of a life, the one that Kafka marked with : " It was time ! ".

There are many texts by Heidegger that say the same thing as the extract we have just read from *Investigations of a Dog*. Let's read this passage from *Science and Meditation*<sup>13</sup>, a title that could very well also have been that of *Investigations of a Dog* :

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<sup>13</sup> Lecture delivered by Heidegger on August 4, 1953. As a whole, this lecture says the same thing as *Investigations of a Dog*. The manner is totally different : on the one hand that of the artistic writer, on the other that of the erudite professor.

"What the sciences cannot get around : nature, man, history, language, is, as this Unavoidable, inaccessible to the sciences and by them. ... We are content to indicate the latent situation. To establish what it is in itself, we would have to ask new questions. However, once we have been made aware of the latent situation in this way, we find ourselves pointing in a direction that leads to 'That which is worth questioning' - different from what is merely doubtful, and from all that is 'without question' - which, of itself, grants the clear prompting and free support, thanks to which we can respond to what is being said to our being, and call it to us. The journey to 'That which is worth questioning' is not an adventure, but a return to the homeland."

The native land is that place where an authentic beginning is possible. It is that place - or that dawn, or that morning - where memory is unencumbered, where truth is closest to us.

There are other similarities between the paths of these two thinkers. Both believe they can give their knowledge to others. They believe they can make their own beginning a beginning for all, possibly by force. Then they realize the impossibility of the task. Kafka had only one weapon : writing. Heidegger had another : his professorship.

Between February 10 and 11, 1918, Kafka recounts, in shorthand, the drama unfolding inside him, his desire to change the world and the impossibility of doing so through words, through writing. On February 10, he notes :

" It's the old joke : we've got the world, and we complain that it's got us. "

We've got the world ! We should be able to do whatever we want with it. We go where it takes us, where nature takes us, in

other words, in a perpetual restart. Yet it's up to us ! This is where Kafka wants to intervene, to change the world through words. A short piece written the next day in the same diary shows the impossibility of communication. It reads in full :

" The decisive characteristic of this world is its obsolescence. In this sense, the centuries have no advantage over the present moment. The continuity of this caducity can therefore provide no consolation ; the fact that new life blooms on the ruins proves less the tenacity of life than that of death. If I want to fight this world, then, I must attack it in its decisive characteristic, i.e. in its caducity. Can I do it in this life, can I really do it, and not just with the weapons of faith and hope ?

So you want to fight the world, and with weapons more real than hope and faith. Such weapons undoubtedly exist, but they are only recognizable and usable under certain conditions ; first I want to see if you have these conditions.

Do it, if I don't have them, perhaps I can acquire them?

Of course, but then I wouldn't be able to help you.

So you can only help me if I've already acquired the conditions.

Yes, or to put it more precisely, I can't help you at all, because if you had the necessary conditions, you'd have everything.

If that's the case, why did you want to put me to the test in the first place ?

To show you not what you lack, but that you lack something. I might have been of some use to you on that point, because you certainly know you're missing something, but you don't believe it.

So, for all the answer to my primitive question, you only provide me with the proof that I was obliged to ask it.

Still, I'm providing you with something more, something that, in keeping with your position, you can't specify at the moment. I'm providing you with proof that, in reality, you should have asked your question differently.

In other words : you don't want to answer me.

Not to answer you - that's it.

And this time, you can give it to me. "

We do not know who is talking to Kafka in this way. Let us say it is someone whose sight surpasses Kafka's, in the same way that Kafka's, who sees more and something else than others, surpasses our own. He tells Kafka that he is missing something, and that he cannot tell him what it is. He can tell him, but he would not understand because of the something he is missing. Deep down, Kafka knows this, but he does not want to believe it, just as we find it hard to believe that Kafka sees more and something else. Here, Kafka takes the problem of communication to the next level. Kafka lacks the conditions to change the world, i.e., to make himself understood by it, and, among these conditions, something to understand what he lacks.

In 1935, Rector Heidegger wanted to communicate his questioning to others, to all others, to his students, to the whole of Germany. He was certainly trying to do this with his students. His profession allowed him to do so. When he wrote his *Introduction to Metaphysics* course in 1934, he was thinking of a genuine beginning for Germany, analogous to the Greek beginning. In reality, this Greek beginning was only such a beginning, in Kafka's and Heidegger's sense, for a few thinkers of their kind, such as Heraclitus and Parmenides. While it is true that their memory was less overloaded than ours, the Greeks of

the time, as Heraclitus himself says, lived as if in sleep<sup>14</sup>. With this lecture, Heidegger really wanted to introduce others to his metaphysics, the metaphysics as he understood it and expressed it, in 1929, in his inaugural lecture *What is Metaphysics ?*. This metaphysics stands apart from traditional metaphysics, the kind that has been established in the Western world since Plato.

Through his lecture, Heidegger wants to share his beginning. He believes that the Nazi beginning is conducive to this beginning. How he could think that Hitler's madness had anything to do with his own madness remains an enigma. He saw in Nazism the possibility of a halt to nihilism - an end and a beginning - and yet it was its climax. The great thinker was also, politically speaking, a great naïf. His students were certainly fascinated by the apparent esotericism of his lecture and the passion with which he expressed it. But how many of them actually grasped it ? In the same way, many Kafka readers are fascinated by the strangeness that emanates from his novels. But how many of them understand, among the many interpretations that have flourished, where this work comes from ?

Heidegger, like Kafka, would later say that knowledge - in the sense of "having seen" - cannot be communicated. In his collection *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, under the title *Der Weg zur Sprache*<sup>15</sup>, he writes :

" So we are above all in the word and near the word. A path to it is useless. The path to the word is even impossible if we are already where it should lead. But are we there ? "

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<sup>14</sup> The first of Heraclitus' fragments says : "This word *logos*, men never understand it, either before they have heard of it or afterwards. Although everything happens according to this word, they seem to have no experience of words and facts such as I set forth, distinguishing and explaining the nature of each thing. But other men do not know what they have done in a waking state, just as they forget what they do while asleep."

<sup>15</sup> Lecture delivered in January 1959.

A few pages further on :

" It is only to those who belong to it that the *Sprache* grants to listen to the word, and thus to speak. "

Kafka's thought, like Heidegger's, takes its origin - its point of view - from nothingness. It is from the desert that Kafka sees the world, Canaan, and this desert is nothing other than the paroxysm of the world as it goes, as he sees it going, as we do not see it, as he does not accept it. The desert pure and simple, but a desert that is aware of what it is and gives itself this name, rather than a desert that doesn't see itself as such, that calls itself Canaan and that, according to the generally accepted opinion, is moving towards progress, but never fast enough towards progress. Here's how Kafka, in a diary entry dated January 6, 1920, describes his situation on the border between the world and the desert :

" Everything he does seems extraordinarily new. If these things didn't have the freshness of life, their intrinsic value, he knows, would inevitably reveal that they come from the damned old quagmire. But this freshness deceives him into forgetting what he knows, unless he takes it lightly or unravels the truth, but without suffering for it. Is it not unquestionably today, this very day, that progress is preparing to continue its march ? "

This last question is terribly lucid and ironic. Progress, today as always, is preparing to march on ! The world just keeps on going. But it's undoubtedly today that we're preparing to continue ! The hope is that today will be more effective than the day before in the march of progress, but it is purely and simply a renewal of progress : progress as usual. Kafka, always prey to ulterior motives, is wary of the freshness of life. It could make

him forget what everything he does is based on : the damned old quagmire, the ordinary world, Canaan. But if things seem so new and fresh to him, it is because he sees them from the void. From the desert, Kafka sees another world, the one he wants to be born into, the world he wants to share, unheard of. In a manuscript note dated February 15, 1920, but apparently conceived in the context of *Description of a fight*, Kafka describes how his view, rooted in nothingness ("a nothing, a dream, a state of floating"), recognizes life's audacity, its insanity ; and this is what he wants to convince others of through his writings :

" It's about this : one day, many years ago, I was sitting, rather sadly no doubt, on the slope of Mont Saint-Laurent. I was considering my wishes for life. The one that turned out to be the most important or endearing was the desire to acquire a way of looking at life (and, relatedly, to be able to convince others of this in writing) in which life retained its heavy natural movement of falling and rising, but would at the same time be recognized, and with no less clarity, for a nothing, a dream, a state of floating. Rather as one might wish to hammer a table with the painstaking care of routine, and to do nothing at the same time, though not in such a way that one could say : 'The hammer blows are for him a nothing', but : 'The hammer blows are for him real hammer blows and at the same time a nothing', which moreover would have made his hammer blows bolder, more decisive, more real, and, if you like, even more demented.

But he couldn't wish that way at all, because his wish wasn't a wish, it was only a defense, a gentrification of nothingness, a shadow of vivacity that he wanted to give to nothingness, this nothingness in which, admittedly, he was only then taking his first conscious steps, but which

he already felt to be his element. At the time, it was a kind of farewell to the illusory world of youth, a world that had never fooled him directly, but had been fooled by the speeches of all the authorities around him. Thus had the necessity of the 'wish' been proved. "

The ulterior motives are always present in Kafka's work : wasn't this way of seeing things a gentrification of nothingness, a defense against the nothingness into which he was taking his first conscious steps ? The difference between Kafka and ordinary mortals is his awareness of nothingness. For us too, life is a nothing, a dream. Hope and imagination keep us immersed in it, even though hammer blows seem like real hammer blows to us. In the end, Kafka, aware of nothingness, is merely dressing it up so as to believe himself delivered from it.

Nothingness is also, consciously, the point of departure for Heidegger's view. The instant of this awareness is the "event". Let's just quote this passage from the last chapter of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* :

" Anguish is the fundamental disposition that brings us face to face with nothingness. Now, the Being of physis is comprehensible - and in this lies the very finitude of transcendence - only if dasein, by its very nature, stands in nothingness. To stand in nothingness is not to make the occasional arbitrary effort to think it, but to define an event that lies at the origin of every affective disposition and every situation in the midst of the already-given beings. The analysis of Dasein, treated according to fundamental ontology, must make explicit its intrinsic possibility. "

Kafka marked this event by saying : " It was time ! "

That what is at work in this world is logic, the idea that it is "nothing" that there must be, that rest is the ultimate goal - in other words, nihilism on the march, as Heidegger has shown - had not escaped Kafka, who wrote in his diary on February 10, 1918 :

" You deny in a certain sense the existence of this world. You explain existence as a state of rest, a state of rest in movement. "

In the same spirit, he wrote a few days later, on February 26, 1918, this note which, in my opinion, closes the important part of the in-octavo notebooks<sup>16</sup> :

" Rest in the general ? Equivocation of the general. The general interpreted once as immobility, and the rest of the time as a 'general' coming and going between the particular and the general. Only immobility is the true general, but it is also the ultimate goal. "

This goal, nothingness, is the goal of ambient logic. If there is a pure, *a priori* Idea, in the Kantian sense, it is the one that presides over logic, the one that establishes in principle that we can know everything from natural evidence, understand everything scientifically, normalize everything, until we are no longer surprised by anything.

Kafka's battle against the natural logical slope is expressed in this diary entry, dated February 11, 1918 :

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<sup>16</sup> This important part - from my point of view - of the in-octavo notebooks runs from October 18, 1917 to February 26, 1918, a period during which Kafka makes no notes in his in-quarto notebooks, until June 27, 1919, when he begins with: "New Diary, I'm only really starting it because I've reread the old one." But the new diary would not really begin until October 15, 1921. Kafka had been staying with his sister Ottilia in the village of Zürau since September 12, 1917. He stayed there for eight months. He would later say that it was the happiest eight months of his life.

" The contemplative man is in a certain sense the man who lives with the world, he clings to living things, he tries to go at the same pace as the wind. That's what I don't want to be.

To live means : to be in the midst of life; to see life with the gaze in which I created it. "

This "I" creates life through its own gaze. To see, here, is to be.

Kafka's "religion", if we can call it that, away from all revelation, is identical to that of Heidegger. On November 30, 1917, he wrote in his diary :

"To believe means : to liberate the indestructible in oneself, or more exactly : to liberate oneself, or more exactly : to be indestructible, or more exactly to be."

Heidegger does not call this believing, but rather knowing, "knowing in the sense of having seen", he writes. What has been seen is precisely indestructible. But what Kafka means by this is that his whole religion consists in this : freeing oneself from the grip of the world, of the "Gestell", in order to see the indestructible in oneself, in order to be. Kafka's religion is the religion of Being. On December 7, 1918, he notes :

" Man cannot live without a constant confidence in something indestructible within himself, which does not prevent indestructibility and confidence from remaining constantly hidden from him. One possible expression of this hidden existence is belief in a personal god. "

Kafka, for whom the indestructible did not remain hidden, had no need to believe in a personal god.

Since it's a question of communicating sight to all the others, since, from nothingness, they see something else and more than the others, how, with ordinary language - since there is no other - can we express this other way of seeing things ? Therein lies the problem of communication faced by both thinkers.

Kafka was wary of the magic of language, hence the extreme sobriety of his own. However, he rarely broached the subject of the scope of language. Except in a diary entry dated December 8, 1917. But this note is so precise, so accurate, that I'd say it suffices to deal with the subject :

" For everything outside the sensible world, language can only be employed allusively, and never, even approximately, analogically, for in accordance with the sensible world, it deals only with property and its relations. "

Language is interior to the world. Being interior to the world, it does not deal with the world itself, it only deals with things interior to the world, their mutual relations, their properties, which are themselves things of the world. These things, these properties, relate to themselves, analogically, in a loop. All you need to do to convince yourself of this is consult a dictionary. A word, any word, is defined by analogy with other, supposedly known, words. For Kafka, located outside the sensible world - in the desert - things, the same things, therefore pointed to by the same words - this correspondence between things and words being learned in childhood, and childhood is all that connects us - are seen in themselves, without any relation to any other. So his body, his own body, is not his body ! The things Kafka sees are no longer internal to the world. They are not things of the world seen from the world, as we all are. They are things seen from the ideal logical space, from nothingness. His view is translogical. Every thing is extraordinary in the sense that it

contradicts nothingness. Kafka's word, when Kafka is not playing in the world, when he is in the desert, alludes to something in the world. The allusion points to the thing in the world that bears the same name. But this thing is to be seen in itself, unrelated.

In *Der Weg zur Sprache*, Heidegger echoes Kafka :

"What appropriation delivers through *Sprache* is never the effect produced by a cause, or the consequence of a principle... What appropriates is appropriation itself - and nothing outside of it... There is nothing to which appropriation could yet be traced, and from which, moreover, it could be explained. Appropriation is not the product (result) of something else, but the gift itself..."

Which, for the "Sprache" in question - the one Kafka situates outside the sensible world - effectively eliminates any possible analogy. What is said in this way relates to nothing else, has no possible relation to anything in this world.

What remains to be considered is how the allusions that language makes outside the sensible world function and succeed in this world. But just before Kafka's note of December 8, 1917, written on the same day, there is this detached sentence, which at first glance seems unconnected with what follows :

" There are questions we could not answer if we were not exempt from them by nature. "

That "by nature" is important. What are these questions ? To know these questions, to ask them of ourselves, we must not be exempt from them. You have to step outside your nature. Linking this note to its sequel, we need to situate ourselves outside the sensible world. How does our nature dispense us from these questions ? By propagating the obvious. Every word

in language is related to other words that define it. Thus, from analogy to analogy, natural evidence is propagated. These questions, from which we are by nature exempt, can only be approached allusively since the person asking them is necessarily outside the world.

How can the use of our language, the use of the language of the world, function outside the sensible world ? Can't we say, when a particular word of this common language is chosen, that the thing referred to, even if only allusively, refers to the thing that this word commonly says ? A typical example is the word "beginning". What does the beginning of Kafka or Heidegger have to do with the beginning referred to by the word "beginning" in our dictionary ? There is a connection because it is this word and not another that should be used. Another typical example is the word "nothing" or "void". What do these words have to do with the words "nothing" or "nothingness" in our everyday language ? For those familiar with Kafka's and Heidegger's meaning of beginning or nothing, the allusion works. They understand. For others, it cannot work, because it has no relation to the things of this world, no analogy can help, no imagination will help. The beginnings and nothings of the world are relative to other things that are already there and self-evident. Kafka's and Heidegger's beginning and nothingness are unrelated, absolute. Ordinary language would therefore be capable of saying the absolute, allusively, to those who already conceive it.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Someone is coming**

Someone arrives. He has not heard of anything. He has seen nothing. Words and images immediately overwhelm him. Newspapers, radios, televisions, advertisements, relatives, friends, shopkeepers, neighbors, passers-by in the street, all pour a continuous stream of images and words over him. Everyone addresses him as if he had always been there. There is no preamble. The notion of a preamble doesn't seem to have any meaning : the flow is continuous, since always, until forever.

He has no choice. He takes the word in stride. He lets himself be carried away by the flow and acts as if he understands. He does as everyone else has always done.

Now he is adding to the flow, mixing his own words into it, confirming it, outdoing it, becoming part of it, drowning in it. He is in the world.

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Does anyone ever arrive ? Haven't we all always been there ?  
Who remembers arriving ? Haven't we all always understood  
what it's all about in everything that can be heard or seen around  
us ? Haven't we begun by understanding, by finding ourselves at  
home here ?

What kind of beginning is it where we already understand ?  
What makes it a beginning ?

We don't arrive, nor do we have to make any effort to  
understand ! As far back as we can remember, we have been  
there and felt at home.

Here in the world, when we speak of understanding, we mean  
understanding more, understanding better, understanding every  
detail if possible, understanding scientifically. We can do  
without this higher understanding and remain with our usual,  
natural, immemorial understanding, without more and without  
better, quite sufficient for living.

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If something happens one day, isn't it more of a departure than  
an arrival ? Instead of "someone arrives", shouldn't it have been  
"someone picks up" ? Suddenly, he does not understand. He  
does not know why or how, the moment before, he understood.  
All the facilities he had hitherto naturally enjoyed are suddenly  
taken away from him. He is naked, reduced to himself. He no  
longer knows what he is. He would feel as if he had arrived if he  
forgot he had been there, in the world, just before picking up the  
phone. How did he get there ? He must have been fooled !

He does not understand anything anymore.

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For the time being, he tries to let the old automatisms work. He had to get on with life, act as if nothing had happened, not attract attention.

At the same time, the search begins. What's happened ?

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What's happened ? Outwardly, nothing. The world goes on unnoticed. Whoever arrives does everything to ensure that the world does not notice. Inwardly, the change is radical.

We have to compare what we were like before with what we are like now: describe "before", describe "now", and state the difference.

"Before" has never thought of describing itself. Yes, it has ! Science does, novels do, but they do so in relation to a norm, and that norm is already the world before. So "before" describes itself in relation to itself. These descriptions are based on a common, natural achievement that is not called into question. There must be a "now" for an absolute description of "before" to be attempted. The word "absolute" takes on its full meaning here.

"Now" seems capable of describing itself absolutely. This is one of its characteristics, one of its differences. We will have to take this into account.

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Nowhere in literature can the newcomer recall such descriptions, following such a rupture. In the same situation as

his own, there seems to be no one. The newcomer begins his search as if he were the first and only.

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The search in question is not for truth in the sense of scientific truth. Truth, now, has the meaning of "power of sight". For the person who picks it up, the truth has changed, he no longer sees as he used to. Now, the truth is there. He can no longer escape it. He was not looking for it, it found him.

He asked for nothing. He was content with the truth as it was before, the one everyone agreed on. More to the point, he did not think about it. He did not know that this truth was not his own, that it was imposed on us, in the same way that their truth, similar to ours, is imposed on beetles or birds. He did not know there could be another.

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The very notion of truth has changed.

Before, truth corresponded to the notions of "true" and "false". Everything that was true, i.e. seen and recognized by all, was part of the truth. Sometimes, however, what was true became false. For example, it turned out that there was no sunset, strictly speaking, and that the earth was not the center of the universe. This change from true to false came from a better use of the common, natural power of sight. This power did not change. However, the truth was said to change.

When someone says that the truth has changed, he does not mean that the true has become false. He means that truth has become relative to a certain way of seeing, and it is this way of

seeing that has changed. The newcomer sees something else, something different.

But that is not enough. From one way of seeing to another, it is not a question of an improvement - or a degradation - that would be linked, for example, to a different education or the use of better instruments. It is another way of looking at things. Completely different.

We're still not there ! There is no difference between the person arriving and the view. This view is his in the exact measure that it is himself. Before, his view was a borrowed view. He could not suspect this since there were no others. It was a view both common and imposed, coming from elsewhere. Where it came from remains to be seen, for it remains. Whoever arrives sees it as coming from time, first, and imagination, second. Imagination, he says, is the specifically human form of logic, while time is its natural form. Time and imagination, he says, are two forms of the same logic. What does this logic have to do with our own, the logic we use for our deductions ? Logic, he says, is the idea in action. This idea is the only idea in the Kantian sense of the term. It is the pure, *a priori* Idea. He puts it this way : It's nothing, let's keep checking. The ideal of pure reason is not God, as Kant still believed, it is "nothing". What is nothing ? The Idea states that everything is nothing. What does this idea have to do with logic, with our logic ? He says that what is normal, according to the *a priori* Idea, is that there is nothing. Only nothing is obvious. The surprise would be if there were something. But logic is what produces evidence. What is logically shown appears obvious. Natural logic, time, shows us everything in the obvious. Things are always already there, and this "always already" is time itself, time without beginning. Who is surprised by the fact that there is nothing "before" ? Time has always shown us the obvious. The rupture occurs when this evidence collapses, when the Idea is finally contradicted : there

is nothing. This rupture is authentic birth. But it is personal. We do not give birth.

None of this is comprehensible to natural truth. It knows that it can vary slightly according to circumstances such as age, education, era and civilization. It is only recently that it has accepted to compare itself with animal truth, which it understands to be no more than a variation. These are the only variations the world is talking about when it comes to changing truths.

\*

In the world, truth always seeks to improve itself. It is always unsatisfied. It wants to be more complete, more certain. It hopes to become absolutely complete, absolutely sure. Yet it remains the same. The same, just more detailed, more extensive. Science will never be complete, nor will it ever be safe.

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The immense advantage of natural truth, seen from the perspective of the person arriving, is not its precision or its extent, but its commonality.

As we all see the same things, we are united by the things we have in common. We talk about all the things we see and feel together. We understand each other. This community of truth is like our house, our "home".

To the newcomer, this advantage seems unheard-of and inaccessible, breathtaking in its self-evidence, which has itself become out of reach. For him, the obvious is a mystery. His secret is lost.

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The search has but one goal : to overcome solitude, to find a community among men.

\*

A temptation emerges. To explain to the world that its truth is false. That it is inappropriate. That it is a provisional truth, a natural and forced truth that works while we wait for the real one, the one that allows us to see as we should. Curiously, in the world, natural is the opposite of forced. Because it comes softly, unnoticed, as if nothing had happened.

Can the one who arrives give the world the power of vision it lacks, and thus reform the old natural community around him, this time once and for all ?

Logic is the obvious answer. We must be able to show others what they do not naturally see. The power to see must logically be communicated. It must be possible for everyone to learn to see properly.

How do we usually make others see what they don't already see ? By demonstration. For example, nobody immediately sees that the three medians of a triangle necessarily intersect at the same point. Thanks to demonstration, everyone eventually sees it.

Demonstration is not a means reserved for mathematical or scientific disciplines. Ordinary speech also uses it constantly, even if it is not always conducted rigorously.

To demonstrate, you need to start from a common base, seen by all and accepted by all. If you start from nothing, you demonstrate nothing.

Then, we progress together, logically, towards the truth.

Hence the question for the newcomer : what does "now" have in common with "before" that can serve as a basis for a demonstration ? On what can he agree with the others ?

On nothing.

Things no longer have the same meaning. Neither do words, since words have the meaning of the things they say.

Even that "nothing" on which agreement could be reached, "before" and "now" don't see it the same way ! And even this "nothing" !

There is a "nothing" then and a "nothing" now. Now, whoever arrives is led to write this sentence, which is contradictory in itself when read by the truth of before :

The "nothing" that "before" and "now" have in common is not accessible to the "truth from before".

If this "nothing" is common to both truths, how can it be inaccessible to one of them ?

The explanation is straightforward : "now" sees "nothing", which for him is no more than an idea, whereas for "before", this "nothing" is *a priori*, always presupposed and itself participating in the construction of what is given to see and constitutes truth. The "nothing" of "before" is normative. It guides the construction of common truth, but remains invisible to it, because it lies behind its back, like a pilot fish.

Between "before" and "now", there is no logic. The "truth of now" can demonstrate nothing to the "truth of then" because it shares with it no basis, no axiom, not even "nothing".

Logical temptation must be resisted.

\*

The feeling of distress increases. It becomes unbearable.

\*

Little by little, literature opens up to the newcomer. Making his way through the planetary library takes stamina.

He discovers brothers. They have the same communication difficulties. Some of them have been recovered. They have come to say what the world expects them to say. If they have not yet received the Legion of Honor, they are waiting for it. Others have resisted to the bitter end. With them, a community emerges. It delivers, in different forms, a message that resembles his own, which he understands.

Many of the people he meets here call themselves poets and cursed.

\*

It is no longer a question of changing the truth of the world. The world changes in its own way. The world changes continuously, logically, technically.

For those who arrive, the world does not change. In the course of time and common imagination, there is indeed more and less, but what has increased, as well as what has diminished, was there and will always be there.

For him, it is this "there" itself that is the event, the unique novelty.

For him, the world begins.

That there can be a world is the extraordinary gift.

\*

The "truth before" is serious. In everything that is said in the world, it is this truth that is implied. In language and its grammar, it is not intended that there can be another truth, that there can be another meaning for the same things seen. This is not due to any deficiency in language or grammar. Grammar makes language say what we want it to say. All we have to do is agree with each other. Grammar and language depend on us. Their limitations stem from this common truth. This truth only authorizes logical extensions of what can already be said. Only logical extensions of what is already true are true.

Where does what can already be said come from ?

What is logic ?

What can already be said comes from time, the time of History as well as the personal time of each and every one of us. Neither History begins, nor we begin. History and we ourselves have always been there with what can already be said. This always already is time itself.

Logic is the Idea in action. This Idea that is within us, that guides us without our knowing it, that is *a priori*, that says that all this is nothing and that this nothing must perpetuate itself, extend itself.

The one who arrives emerges at the same time as the contradiction, within him, of the Idea. He suddenly sees the Idea. He conceives it properly. It is false. It is false, but it made the world possible.

\*

How can we agree on new rules of grammar ?

These new rules could only be validated by the community of newcomers, a community whose signs of recognition can be found in the planetary library. For the others, sentences constructed according to these rules would be nonsense.

\*

Grammar has imposed itself on us. We have no real control over it, although we have found many ways of constructing the same grammar. Civilizations are the heads of their own particular ways of constructing it.

The grammar of ordinary language has imposed itself on us through the intermediary of this truth, which has always been ours and which has never begun.

\*

The world seriously believes that there are thirty-six thousand truths, thirty-six thousand ways of seeing. The view of the East differs from the view of the West, the view of the rich differs from the view of the poor, the view of scientists differs from the view of literary scholars or philosophers, the view of Judeo-Christians differs from the view of Muslims, the view of right-wing parties differs from the view of left-wing parties.

Yet all these truths are based on a common truth. From one to the other, we can find a path in the world. These paths are research topics for the so-called "human sciences".

Some of us walk these paths in our own lives. Poor people become rich. Politicians on the right take power on the left. Slaves become despots. Catholics become Muslims.

In the world, these paths, which lead from one truth to another, are described, explained, and experienced. Truths are

interchangeable. They all stem from the same truth, from which we can agree, discuss, and demonstrate, even if it takes millennia.

It is in our imagination that the differences lie. The imagination of the West has not taken the same path as the imagination of the East.

Each animal type has its own basic truth. Animals of the same type have always understood each other and never asked why. Our animal type is the most imaginative.

\*

The seriousness of the world is made up of hope. Hope is placed in the future. The future will bring a better world.

There will be more and less. There will be more good and less bad.

The good is there and the bad too. Neither will disappear completely. Some people, seriously, say that good has its bad side and bad can have good. When will we get to the future ?

\*

Today's philosopher is a specialist in the future. He feels invested with the mission of telling where the world is going. He knows history, he scrutinizes current events, he deduces their consequences. He seriously warns us of drifts that seem wrong, and encourages the right ones. He directs change.

In principle, change is directed towards less poverty, more justice, more freedom, more peace, more creation. What do we call creating ? What can we create ?

\*

Among animals, we are at the end of the predator chain. We have no other predators but ourselves. Predation maintains a balance between species. Thus placed at the end of the chain, we seem to have taken responsibility for the natural balance. Our powerful imaginary logic is taking over from pre-human logic, in other words, the relay of time, which has done things so well.

\*

Within each species, the natural rule of life seems to be that of species survival, in addition to personal survival.

Since we are our own predators, we come to understand that it is better to deal with others. It is the best way to protect ourselves. And this applies to all levels of human organization. Democracy and human rights are the two leitmotifs.

\*

"Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you" seems to be the simplest way of stating the moral law. Anything you do that you would not want done to you is wrong.

It is often said of an evil that it is an evil for a good. The best is often the enemy of the good. The truth of right and wrong ends up being complex. But the bottom line - Reason - is simply this : safeguarding oneself and the species, maintaining the natural balance, mutual interests well understood.

\*

The newcomer knows the seriousness of the world and respects it. He himself plays the game of hope - the hope of a

better world - that underpins the prevailing discourse. But he gives himself another mandate.

\*

The word of the one who arrives welcomes, through the memory of his own distress, the distress of the one who, excluded from the world and time, suddenly comes to be.

It is patient. It waits for him.

It awaits the end of his or her childhood.

\*

Childhood is eternal. It neither begins nor foresees its end.

Only Being begins. But the meaning of its beginning is not that of the ordinary beginning. Our ordinary beginnings are always recommencements, unless they are logical continuations of what already is, but these are two ways of saying the same thing.

The beginning of Being is unforeseen and unpredictable. It also corresponds to an unforeseen and unforeseeable end : that of childhood and of the logical effect of time.

Childhood, time, and the world are one and the same.

The word of the one who arrives, outside the world, knows this end and speaks of it. Still hidden in the great library, the word stands ready to welcome the one who emerges, who seeks it, who understands it, who joins it.

No one can give another this end that is a beginning. It comes or does not come.

\*

The one who arrives understands those who, like him, arrive, even if there is no prior agreement on grammatical rules. How did they come into being ?

The signs of this grammar all say the same thing : the event, birth, beginning, Being, surprise, rupture, contradiction, solitude, the distress of the childhood body, brutality, trauma, awakening, difference, incommunicability, the difficulty of returning to the world, sight.

The list of signs that evoke the event could be long. These signs not only evoke the event itself, they also evoke the world, the extraordinary "world before", as it has been discovered since the event, since "now". It is the new view that has changed it.

The grammatical rules of this word are born with the unheard-of event.

\*

Each of these signs attracts the attention of the newcomer. The repetition of the signs confirms the general meaning and the place from which the word speaks. The reunion is jubilant. Nietzsche writes to his friend Overbeck : "A chance find in a bookshop : *Notes from an Underground*, by Dostoyevsky... The voice of blood (what else can I call it ?) was immediately heard, and my joy was extreme."

Nietzsche recognized Dostoyevsky as another himself. He wrote in his notebooks : "All philosophers ! They are men who have experienced something extraordinary."

\*

Isn't it time to stop pretending that philosophy is only reasonable, that is, as if it were logically deduced from common ideas, already seen and known by all, and available to all ?

Isn't it time we resisted logical temptation ?

\*

Logic reigned. And then it was time. A moment broke logic, contradicted it. Everything changed. There was then, and there is now.

\*

"Before" is childhood.

This noun, "childhood", should have only one meaning. We all have the same childhood. It is a gift that does not receive itself. It gives the community, the homeland. It has always been a gift because it has no beginning. Who remembers his birth ?

Biologically, physiologically, psychologically, sociologically, the child becomes an adult. The passage is one of continuity. This is where the word "childhood" takes on its ordinary meaning, because the adult no longer sees himself as a child. By becoming an adult, by entering finitude, childhood has changed its meaning. It no longer knows that it is still childhood, in the original sense that it never knew, destined to become its extraordinary sense. It is impossible to explain or demonstrate this.

\*

"Now" is birth.

The word "birth" now has two meanings : the birth of before, ordinary, whose date is recorded in the civil register, and the birth of now, extraordinary, whose date remains personal, secret. The latter is the only "something extraordinary" that can happen to us.

Birth is the irruption of Being.

Being freely accepts or refuses the gift of the world.

\*

Childhood, birth, return to the world : this is the order in which the logical epic unfolds. Life is the epic of logic.

In each of us, the epic is played out. Each of us keeps our birth within us, or rejects it, or disguises it, or finds a logical or pathological justification for it. Only childhood holds us together. What is uncommon prefers to remain silent because it is strange, foreign. Poetry and writing offer us refuge and ethics.

The refusal of birth is the source of ordinary anguish.

\*

Being contradicts logic, i.e. time and imagination.

\*

" To believe means : to liberate the indestructible in oneself, or more exactly : to free oneself, or more exactly : to be indestructible, or more exactly to be.

The German word sein means both : to be there and to belong to it."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Franz Kafka, 3rd in-octavo notebook, November 30, 1917



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