

Kafka's Existential Posture

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Henry Fuseli, The Nightmare





Franz Kafka

Born 3 July 1883

Died 4 June 1924

Position-in-the-world

Born into a middle-class, German speaking Jewish family in Prague (Bohemia) Education: Kafka trained as a lawyer, and eventually took up work with an insurance company. His writing was pursued within his time of leisure

Difficult relationship with his father

Was engaged, but never married

Died young, of TB (age 40)

The Text

Note on translation

The Castle, written in 1922, in a mountain village where Kafka sought refuge post-breakdown

First attempt in years to produce something substantive

Continued to work on the novel in Prague and elsewhere (“I have to give up the Castle story, evidently”)

Essentially unfinished...

Edited by Max Brod (against Kafka’s wishes) and published by Kurt Wolff in Munich

Translation by Mark Harman (in late 90s)

Prior translations have been done by the Muirs (Edwin Muir and his wife)

Harman’s attempt to “modernize” the text



Written in 1926

Historical context: Kafka writing within the Austro-Hungarian empire prior to the second world war

Two short lived Republics 1918-1920 (including a Soviet one)

1920 Treaty of Trianon: new borders set by this treaty (ceded over 70 per cent of Hungarian territory) over 3 million ethnic Hungarians were left outside its borders...

1920-1946 Interwar periods The Prime Minister of Hungary Count Istvan Bethlen (conservative) fashioned a political machine by amending the electoral law, providing jobs to expand the burgeoning bureaucracy to his supporters and manipulating elections in rural regions.

Cont.

Political milieu

- Bethlen restored order to the country by privileging radical counterrevolutionaries (positioning them within government) IFF they agreed to stop terrorizing and blatantly antagonizing Jews and leftists

- civil conflict: monarchists + communists, anti-communists, reformists

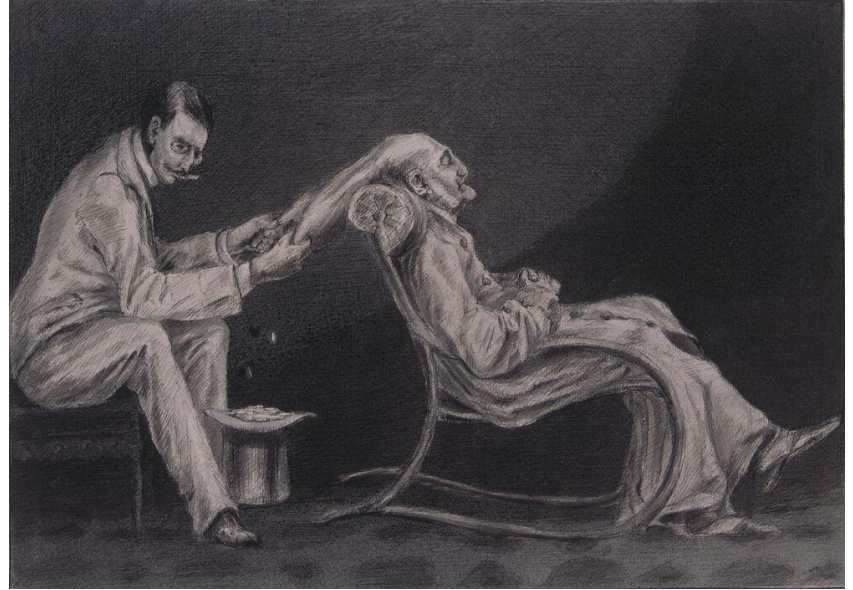
- deals made with social democrats (free political prisoners IFF anti-state propaganda ceases) in attempt to restore social cohesion

- Great Depression of 1930s disrupted this potential, politics became more conservative and reactionary...

- Kritik within Kafka

Influences

Alfred Kubin, From Quickening to Death, 1898



Influences

Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Poe, Mann, Flaubert, Dickens,
Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Kropotkin, Von Kleist,
Mirbeau

And more..

19th + 20th c philosophers and writers

In regards to our course content, can we (drawing from the materials posted) draw parallels in terms of themes, symbols, motifs etc?

Themes of Work

General Themes within Kafka's literary corpus

Melancholy

Delay

Subordination

Infinity

Within these dominant themes, many others can be drawn out

Temporal relations (delay/infinity)

Dialectic relations (subordination, Hegel's Master/Slave)

Mood/Spirit (melancholy)

Style

Kafka as a “suis generis” writer

Aporia—the dramatics of the “plot”, the unending sentences...(the Castle ends mid-sentence)

Mode:

Kafka wrote on principle in an “open-ended” manner without advance planning (chapters were added retrospectively)

Kafka’s “flow”

One can see that the sentences are quite long, demarcated only by commas (continuous sequence of experience, not wanting to interrupt the character’s thoughts...)

Impress upon the reader a certain impulse (rhythm of events/thoughts recounted)

Oral quality to his narrative style (reading aloud!)

Benjamin's "Illuminations" *Notes on Kafka*

Benjamin's Notes on Kafka:

-depictions of the modern citizen at the mercy of vast machinery of officialdom

-mystical quality (Benjamin compares Kafka's prose passages to that of physical sciences, specifically physics) i.e gravity=standing on a swarm of flies

-Reality, can no longer be experienced by the *individual-yet Kafka's work is inherently solitary*

-Kafka's gestures of terror (experienced by the individual p.ov in Kafka) are given scope by the marvelous margin, which the catastrophe will not grant us

-no doctrine, knowledge that can be absorbed or drawn out (moving away from 'wisdom')

Benjamin cont.

-Kafka sacrificed truth in order to cling to its haggadic element (Jewish literary tradition, story of Exodus)

-Parable-like quality to Kafka's work

-Beauty and misery that makes them worthy

-It is not wisdom that we find, but decay (relating to the paintings of Klee)

-Folly "folly lies at the heart of Kafka

"Someone must be a fool if he is to help, and that only a fool's help is real help"

Kafkaesque sentiment: "there is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us"

-Beauty of failure

Camus on Kafka

Absurdism

The Castle has been categorized as an “absurdist novel”

What is particular about the Absurdism of Camus (Atheistic) and the Absurdism of Kierkegaard (Faith)?

Kafka: A synthesis of gnosticism and faith?

-Re-reading: the text requires the reader to re-read (do things ever become clear?)

-How does the content provoke such an **activity**?

- “Naturalness” within Kafka (how does this relate to The Castle)? The events with transpire seem to be natural---fate & naturalness (felt more deeply when natural)

-When does it mean, for things to become or appear “natural” (it could be as simple as the “natural” tendencies of the bureaucracy to take up glacial pace, to torment...)

Kafka + Camus cont

-Camus: "*The Castle* is perhaps a theology in action"

-a soul in quest of its grace (pg.122)

-dealings with paradoxicality

-What kinds of tensions do we find in Kafka that would promote this claim (theology in action)?

-tension: basic absurdity/implacable nobility

-what is designated as fate: that which crushes the human spirit...

-freedom unto death (K. and Joseph K.)

>nameless pain that K. experiences and the others who attach themselves to its void

freedom: love our fate --to find hope--is the existential leap within Kafka (to love what crushes us)

The particularities of Kafka's existential posture

What separates Kafka from his peers?

Simone De Beauvoir's "ambiguity" vs Kafka's "absurdity"

Can Kafka resist bad faith (Sartre)?

Negative dialectics (there is an absence of hope)

Is Kafka's negative dialectic or circular teleology compatible with Kierkegaard? Others?

Kafka's radical 'alterity' (i.e Spinoza) because of Jewish Identity (influence of Jewish gnosticism)

Relations of similarity?

Camus and Kafka's absurdist posture

Gnosticism

Difficult to define...

-as defined as a valence of ancient religious ideas and systems, originating in Jewish-Christian milieus

-a Gnostic (an adherent of)

A history of "crypto-gnostics" i.e William Blake and others (needing to hide their heretical beliefs)

Why is gnosticism important for philosophy? Concern with the ontological self (Jung, Heidegger, Hans Jonas). Gnostics as "ancient relative" of existential philosophy. Any thoughts on this?

The Castle: Themes

Guilt

Delay/ Postponement

Belonging (vs Outsiderhood)

Infinity

Faith

Responsibility

Bureaucracy

Power (how would Kafka define power?)

Stratification (of class, gender not so...unless someone wants to challenge this!)

Anxiety

Distractions (Pascalian sense)

Themes cont.

-Truth (contrary to Morality--i.e the forsaken Amalie and the Barnabas family)

-Hope (against logic)

-Kierkegaard: "Earthly hope must be killed, only then can we be saved by true hope"

-Camus: "In a world where everything is given and nothing is explained, the fecundity of a value or of a metaphysic is a notion devoid of meaning"

-It doesn't seem to be the case that Kafka's themes position him outside the existential genre...

-Yet it seems difficult to place him among our other literary figures...

The Castle: Plot

Mood>Plot

-The protagonist K. arrives in a village governed by a mysterious bureaucracy operating in a nearby castle. When seeking shelter at the town inn, he claims to be the land surveyor summoned by castle authorities. He is quickly notified that Klamm (a castle official) will be his contact within the officialdom

-The first mix up= K is informed by the Mayor (who spoke to Klamm) that he was erroneously summoned and is not needed) he is offered a post as a caretaker instead

-K. Unfamiliar with the unending bureaucratic trappings of the village, continues to pursue Klamm and his original assignment

-The entire novel follows suit (hundreds of pages of mad pursuits)

-Everything seems superfluous, but it is all *essential*

“Kafkaesque”

Kafka's aesthetic legacy

Influenced many writers to follow...

Beckett, Borges, Camus, Eugene Ionesco, J.P Sartre, Abe Kobo and more

Orwell and other political writers inspired by tacit critiques of political regimes through the lens of absurdity

Jorge Luis Borges [poem](#)

Class activity

- Kafka passages + passages from philosophical texts
- Relations of Similarity? Contradiction?
- Can Kafka be classified among the existentialists so easily?
- Action: pair passages of resemblance for discussion purposes
- Existential 'spectrum'
- >where can we place Kafka?