

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

“ROARING WITH LAUGHTER, YET DESPERATELY UNHAPPY”:  
KAFKA’S CRUEL & UNUSUAL COMEDY

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SPRING 2017

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for baccalaureate degrees  
in English & Philosophy  
with honors in English

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## ABSTRACT

The writing of Franz Kafka has often been characterized as desperate and hopeless. Thus, the humorous and comic aspects of Kafka's writing, while acknowledged, have been deemphasized, or sometimes even disregarded entirely by generations of critics and readers of his texts. This thesis will attempt to demonstrate that Kafka's humor is central to his writing and claims that we cannot even begin to fathom the deeper meaning of Kafka's writings until we start to explicate and clarify his comic sensibilities. In particular, this thesis examines the relationship between humor and power in Kafka's texts. Kafka's laughter is frequently aimed at authority—it mocks the ridiculousness of authority and disempowers the powerful. Kafka's laughter, then, is profoundly rebellious and anti-authoritarian: it deconstructs and dethrones power by revealing the absurdity of authority's sway over all of us. Kafka's comedy lends us a lens through which we may finally become aware of the absurdity that is present in daily reality. It raises the veil and reveals authority for what it really is: an elaborate and ridiculous ruse.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
INTRODUCTION: SEARCHING FOR KAFKA.....	1
CHAPTER 1: KAFKA’S LAUGHTER .....	11
<i>Mocking Superiority, Deriding Authority</i> .....	11
<i>Kafka’s Comedy of Despair</i> .....	17
CHAPTER 2: FARCE & FEAR: KAFKA’S SHORT STORIES .....	25
<i>Ridiculous Rituals: Obeisance and Surrender in “The Refusal”</i> .....	25
<i>Trapped in the Joke: Kafka’s Cage</i> .....	31
<i>Kafka’s Legal Satire: Absurd Advocates and Ludicrous Laws</i> .....	41
CHAPTER 3: THE BUREAUCRATIC COMEDY OF THE CASTLE .....	50
<i>Buffoonish Bureaucrats &amp; Comical Cogs</i> .....	52
<i>Waiting for Deliverance: Kafka’s Last Laugh</i> .....	61
CONCLUSION: KAFKA’S COMIC CONSCIOUSNESS.....	66
WORKS CITED .....	72

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Lisa Sternlieb for her invaluable guidance and advice during the process of writing this thesis. I would have never been able to write a thesis quite like this one if it were not for her encouraging me to chase wild ideas and to write fearlessly. I would also like to thank my family and my friends for all of their love and support throughout my college career, especially Eileen Orr, Edward Orr, Megan Samar, Sean Samar, Nora McLaughlin, and Matthew Weyl. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, William McLaughlin, who always had a great sense of humor, and whose laugh I miss dearly.

## INTRODUCTION: SEARCHING FOR KAFKA

Who is Franz Kafka? We could generate many answers to this question, but it is hard to say whether or not we could consider any of them definitive. Kafka's life and persona are abundant with so many incongruities that it becomes a seemingly impossible task to make a comprehensive and cogent record of them. "How do we compose a complete and coherent account of a personality with so many often contradictory aspects: the writer, the Bohemian Jew, the bachelor son, the would-be celibate, the lover of many women, the lawyer, the Austrian, the Czech, and the failed novelist who is perhaps the most influential novelist of the twentieth century?" (Gross VIII). Perhaps the elusive and seemingly indefinable nature of Kafka's personality and work is what keeps our attention; perhaps it is the continuous divulging of the new and mysterious ways in which the Kafkaesque materializes and manifests itself in our evolving surroundings that maintains such critical interest in his work.

Do we think we know Kafka? He is often characterized as alienated and antisocial; plagued by anxiety and fear; tortured by self-doubts; emasculated and impotent; haunted by trauma; and powerless in the face of authority. While there is undoubtedly some degree of truth in each of these characterizations of Kafka, there is also evidence to suggest that Kafka was quite social and even had a lively nightlife<sup>1</sup>; rather than being merely self-doubting, he may have been

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<sup>1</sup> "These exhausting nights cannot have afforded [Kafka] much pleasure; they took him away from the more lasting satisfactions of reading, writing, and reciting...Nevertheless, he was not the doleful hanger-on, listlessly drinking with the others, as he claimed to have been in his later years. On the contrary, it appears that over the course of two or three years, the wine bars in Prague invigorated him and flooded him with relief that he was able to enjoy an unaccustomedly easygoing contact with women" (Stach, *The Early Years* 327-328).

quite aware of his genius, and this awareness may partly be what made him so self-critical<sup>2</sup>; and while he may have struggled in sustaining relationships with women, he had no shortage of them.<sup>3</sup> Despite all efforts, Kafka's life and work has repeatedly confounded and resisted interpretation and remains a puzzle that we still struggle to put together.<sup>4</sup>

So where should we search for Kafka? We could begin with his stories. However, then the question is: which ones? The ones that Kafka approved to be published?<sup>5</sup> Or the ones he

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<sup>2</sup> “Did Kafka at any point intuit his reception? The stereotypical answer is: of course not. He was just ‘a little clerk,’ the author of works whose central figures are colorless nobodies, a writer unknown in his own time, a failure in life and art. None of this is true. The first thing to say about him is that he is a genius, and he would be the last person to dispute this fact... In a book titled *Paganism, Christianity, Judaism*, Max Brod—Kafka's friend, editor and fervent booster—called Kafka a ‘Diesseitswunder’—a miracle occurring down here, on this side of the heavens—adding that the existence of Kafka—as a miracle—and a Jew—argued for the superiority of Judaism as a religion. Kafka read this book, saw this claim, and replied to Brod, stating that none of the evidence that Brod had adduced argued for the superiority of Judaism but—notice! —he did not bother rebut the description of himself as a down-here miracle” (Corngold and Gross 3). This portrait of Kafka suggests that he was aware of his potential, and was only so harsh on himself because he desperately wanted to realize that potential. Rather than being self-doubting, this portrait makes Kafka seem almost intolerably boastful—although history has shown that his boasts would be justified.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka seems to have had many romantic trysts with women, and the three most notable ones of his life—with Dora Diamant, Felice Bauer, and Milena Jesenská—were passionate and meaningful for him. Nevertheless, Kafka never quite settled himself into any lasting relationship, and spent much of his life in fleeting one-night stands with prostitutes. He wrote to Max Brod once: “Nobody can stand me and I can stand no one, but the latter is only the consequence... It is a long time since I have been so deeply unhappy without an explanation... I had a desperate need to find someone who would just touch me in a friendly way that yesterday I went to the hotel with a prostitute. She is too old to still be melancholy, but feels sorry, though it doesn't surprise her, that people are not as kind to prostitutes as they are to a mistress. I didn't comfort her since she didn't comfort me either” (Stach, *The Early Years* 334).

<sup>4</sup> “Albert Camus once said that ‘the whole of Kafka's art consists in compelling the reader to re-read him.’ Since the interpretations of Kafka are many and the search for the meaning of his stories seemingly endless, the reader will return to the story itself in the hope of finding guidance from within” (Glatzer, *The Complete Stories* 459).

<sup>5</sup> “Kafka authorized the publication of only seven slim volumes during his lifetime, approximately 40 pieces in total, many of which are shorter than a single page. His entire authorized output is well under 400 pages of text... After Kafka's death in 1924, his close friend and executor Max Brod reconstructed all of the unpublished texts” (qtd. in Litowitz 115). While we should certainly be grateful to Brod for his reconstruction of Kafka's texts, it's virtually certain that Kafka would have been deeply dissatisfied with the publishing of his unauthorized works as they appear currently. Kafka was a perfectionist when it came to his writing, perhaps to a fault; while being a perfectionist seems to be a prerequisite for any good writer, Kafka took this tendency to near self-destructive extremes. It's not unreasonable to conjecture that, had Kafka not contracted tuberculosis and had he had more time to mull over and critique his texts, he would have burned them himself in a fit of self-effacing despair.

wanted to be burned?<sup>6</sup> Kafka certainly has scattered pieces of himself amongst them, but it is no simple task to find where an author has hidden himself amongst his fictions--especially an author as elusive as Kafka. Perhaps we should try mining his letters to see what we can glean of the slippery Kafka. His romantic letters to his lovers may reveal something more human and frail about him. But how shall we tell if Kafka is only posturing? How can we tell if his words are genuine and not merely false flattery? But this objection is moot, for surely Kafka cannot be putting on airs in the letter to his father. But why shouldn't Kafka be merely playacting in such a letter? For perhaps Kafka felt quite pressured to alter his persona when speaking to his father to better gain his approval. Instead, shall we consult the conflicting and multitudinous biographical accounts of Kafka? We can consult the literary historians, who perhaps were too far from Kafka to discern him through the fog of myth that surrounds him; or we can turn to the personal accounts of those who actually knew Kafka--who may, unfortunately, prove to be too close and intimate with him to perceive him without prejudice or presupposition.<sup>7</sup> If none of this helps us

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<sup>6</sup> On his death bed, Kafka wrote to his friend: "Dearest Max, my last request: Everything I leave behind me...in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and others'), sketched, and so on, to be burned unread; also all writings and sketches which you or others may possess; and ask those others for them in my name. Letters which they do not want to hand over to you, they should at least promise faithfully to burn themselves. Yours, Franz Kafka." (Kafka, qtd. in Litowitz 115).

<sup>7</sup> "The first biography of Franz Kafka was published in 1937 in Prague. It was written by his friend Max Brod and bore the subtitle *Memories and Documents*. This biographical account was not compiled on the basis of independent historical, biographical, and literary research; instead, Brod was analyzing his own memories, letters, and diaries, and supplementing them with rambling conversations with family members and Kafka's unpublished notes...Ludwig Hardt, an elocutionist who had known Kafka well, wrote that Brod acted like a guardian in his biography, as though he had misgivings about leaving the reader alone with Kafka. Walter Benjamin's reaction was far more caustic...Benjamin's scathing critique was aimed primarily at Brod's lack of distance from his subject: he faulted Brod for harmonizing Kafka's texts and attempting to discredit any other possible interpretations, even future ones" (Stach, *The Early Years* 222-223). Another intimate biographical account of Kafka was written by Gustav Janouch and is titled *Conversations with Kafka*. Much like Brod's biography, this one has also been criticized for inaccuracy: "...Janouch's book is riddled with factual errors, including the dating of supposed conversations in Prague at times when Kafka was away in the countryside. Janouch himself admitted that he never recorded the source of any of the numerous quotations from disparate readings and conversations that he

to see Kafka more clearly, then maybe we can learn something of him from the numerous appropriations and adaptations of his life and work. There is an over-abundance of interpretations and iterations of the Kafkaesque for us to consult; the secondary and derivative literature that uses or references Kafka is enormous, and we could likely spend the rest of our lives searching for him there, wandering in the endless footnotes, bibliographies, and marginalia. All of this shows that Kafka has indeed permeated our public consciousness for some time now—but is the Kafka in our collective consciousness the *real Kafka* who was once out there in the world? If all of this fails, perhaps we should guiltily, and even in a morally questionable manner, pore through Kafka's diaries and peep in on his private inner life—an idea that Kafka, like most of us, would have probably found mortifying. However, maybe we will find the ever evasive Kafka hiding somewhere in those personal and hermetic records, and the treasure of catching him will make all of our compunction worthwhile. But then even this search is likely to show us little more of Kafka than a glimpse of him in flight—we will finish our hunt for him, not only empty-handed but even more enervated and weary than before, further lost in his labyrinth and unable to retrace our steps.

But would Kafka have it any other way? It is only fitting that the search for the “real Kafka” should itself be a cruel and Kafkaesque joke—exasperating, frustrating, draining, and seemingly hopeless. Any reader attempting to understand Kafka on a deeper level must inevitably run the gamut of these emotions<sup>8</sup>, for part of understanding Kafka means understanding how he often saw life: as exasperating, frustrating, draining, and seemingly

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jotted down in his notebooks. His treatment of Kafka's supposed anarchist past illustrates his unscrupulous method of composition” (Harman, “Kafka's Unreliable Friend”).

<sup>8</sup> “Kafka teaches us modesty. Anyone who tackles him has to anticipate failing. There are innumerable secondary texts in which the gulf between the explanations offered by the author and the interspersed Kafka citations is so huge that a shudder runs down the reader's back” (Stach, *The Decisive Years* 10).

hopeless--as an interminable series of trials, an unceasing and increasingly demanding succession of tests.<sup>9</sup>

This may lead one to think that Kafka and his writing are hopelessly dreary and irredeemably miserable to read. But only the novice reader of Kafka will retain this kind of image of him, for the genius of Kafka lies in his ability to transform the most mundane and inevitably dull aspects of life into something full of beautiful grandeur—to turn the humdrum and bleak monotony of technological and bureaucratic modernity into a vision that is simultaneously terrifying and magnificent.<sup>10</sup> There is no denying that Kafka's writing is full of the dull and colorless melancholy of what he saw as life's punishing tediousness. However, as this thesis aims to show, Kafka counters this tedium by imbuing it with a comic liveliness—he brings an absurd comedy down upon the routine ennui of modern life.

Despite the numerous portraits of Kafka, this is the portrait that tends to get left out of all of the quasi-mythological images that have been painted of him: Kafka the comic, the humorist,

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<sup>9</sup> “From this perspective, of course, any particular examination was merely one stage in a far more comprehensive, permanent examination that was life, and [Kafka feared his] ignorance could be revealed at the slightest provocation. Kafka consistently integrated the sword of Damocles, in the *mask of the examiner*, into his personal mythology, and it even seems as though he infused this image more deeply into his literary texts than the legally based imagery of guilt that is today regarded as Kafka's trademark. Not all of his protagonists are confronted with bureaucratic and legal systems, but virtually all of them find themselves facing existential investigations and trials for which they are unprepared and are doomed to failure—whether or not they offer resistance” (Stach, *The Early Years* 186). Kafka endured an education in his youth the rigors of which most of us could not even fathom a child undergoing today—many would probably object to it as borderline abusive. Kafka was trained in Latin, Czech, German, and a wealth of literatures—especially the Classics—all before the age of fifteen. He was certainly more well-read as an adolescent than most college students or adults are today. To some extent, the anxiety that Kafka's schooling produced in him stayed with him for the rest of his life; he was always anticipating failure, and he always saw everything as a kind of examination that would measure his achievement and personal worth.

<sup>10</sup> “The quality of the fantastic that he perceived in the bureaucratic world allowed Kafka to do what had seemed unimaginable before: He transformed the profoundly anti-poetic material of a highly bureaucratized society into the great poetry of the novel; he transformed a very ordinary story of a man who cannot obtain a promised job (which is actually the story of *The Castle*) into myth, into epic, into a kind of beauty never before seen” (Kundera 97).

the joker.<sup>11</sup> Why is it that Kafka's humor has so often been overlooked? There is certainly evidence of Kafka's comic sensibilities: "Max Brod reported that his friend Kafka was a radiantly humorous man, whose stories provoked so much mirth among his friends that sometimes Kafka himself was helpless to continue reading them aloud, since he too was cracking up" (Whitfield 40). So why is it that readers and critics so often deemphasize the strange and freakish funniness of Kafka's writing? Why is it that we are inclined to portray Kafka as the paranoid neurotic<sup>12</sup>, rather than as the witty and droll comedian? Why is Kafka always the apprehensive brooder and never the jocular wisecracker? Kafka knew he was funny—so why don't we think he is funny? The problem may be that Kafka's comicality is foreign to our sensibilities and alien to our tastes now. So perhaps the right question to ask, rather than "Who is Kafka?", is instead this: who are *we* now in relation to Kafka? How do we continue to understand (or misunderstand) him? Why is it that Kafka's humor does not translate to our world and sensibilities when we read him?<sup>13</sup> Why are we unable to laugh with Kafka? While critics

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<sup>11</sup> "Max Brod may safely assert that if Angels were to make jokes in Heaven, they would use Kafka's language. The fact is that angels seem rather careful not to be overheard, at least when they indulge in innocent laughter. As for Kafka, whether he labored to muffle his voice remains debatable, but *the average reader does not think of him at first as particularly noteworthy for his humor*. Yet the same reader is eager to join in the peals of laughter which, we are told, did oftentimes interrupt Kafka when he was reading passages from his manuscripts to his friends. The problem is therefore not only to define Kafka's humor, but primarily to become aware of it and to approach it" (Collignon 53).

<sup>12</sup> "Kafka's humor—not only not neurotic, but *anti-neurotic*, heroically sane—is, finally, a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms, a harrowing spirituality against which even Ms. O'Connor's bloody grace seems a little bit easy, the souls at stake pre-made" (Wallace 26).

<sup>13</sup> It may be the case that Kafka's humor has *literally* not been translated—or at least not in a way that does Kafka's humor justice. The English translations of Kafka that have been considered definitive for years now have come under criticism recently by Kafka scholar and translator Mark Harman for superimposing a religious interpretation on Kafka's texts: "[T]he Muirs' translation furthers the rather simplistic theological interpretation proposed by Brod...[Edwin Muir] himself was firmly convinced that literature could not survive the demise of religious belief...Those strong convictions leave their mark on the Muirs' translation, which fits a religious mold more neatly than does the original" (Harman, *The Castle* xiv). Harman also claims that the Muirs' translations tend to smooth out the ambiguities of Kafka's language. If the Muirs were trying to imbue Kafka's stories with a kind of religious solemnity that Kafka

have always noted Kafka's dark humor in their appraisals of him, his humor is usually never considered central to his work, or at least is deemphasized in relation to everything else. Most readers of Kafka would likely find the idea of *actually laughing* while reading him to be an absurd idea—why would anyone laugh while reading something supposedly as severe, dreadful, and melancholy as Kafka? This thesis aims to show--despite the average reader's protestations--that Kafka is indeed trying to make us laugh.

Kafka's humor is closely tied to and connected to his commentaries on the absurd and ridiculous failings of the legal structures, institutions, and the growing bureaucracy of his milieu. His comedy is a kind of satire of legal bureaucracy, but it is also more than mere satire—it also grieves of the ways in which modern governmental and legal systems have repeatedly failed, or even oppressed, their constituencies. Kafka's writing suggests that laughing in the face of these oppressive and authoritarian institutions was more than just an antidote to the human griefs that they produced—it was also a form of resistance, a ridiculing aimed at dismantling and disempowering the self-serious elites who paraded their power among the proletariat. By portraying institutional injustice as an absurd and darkly funny surrealism, yet also as a startling familiarity, Kafka destabilizes the notion of authority itself: authority is merely that with which we invest our reverence and our worship. Authority has no real power in Kafka's literary world—it only possesses power as long as the people of his stories continue to accept it as such in their minds. Laughter—specifically, derisive and mocking laughter—can undercut this reverence for authority, and thereby disempower those who presume to have it. Kafka's

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himself didn't instill in them, then it is not too far-fetched to believe that they also would have erased Kafka's humor in trying to create a tone of spiritual reverence. This thesis will show that Kafka was anything but reverent—rather, I will argue that his writing tends towards impudence and derisiveness, always tipping the sober and the somber into the realm of absurdity.

characters are always on the cusp of this realization. They are always quasi-aware of the ways in which the authorities that they are in awe and fear of are in actuality clownish and buffoonish fools falsely draped in the vestments of sovereignty. It is why Kafka's characters are so prone to smiling and laughing in the midst of their persecutions—they are always close to an awareness of the ways in which their injustices are farcical, ludicrous, and even cartoonish.<sup>14</sup> This is, perhaps, the tragic element of Kafka's tragicomic stories—that his characters never quite follow their laughter to its logical conclusion: they never completely surrender to its radically resistant impulse, its incitement towards emancipation, but instead fall prey to their fears. They give authority to that which deserves only their mockery, and they fail to recognize the ways in which their fear of the authority only amplifies its power. If they could see through this parody of legal and institutional power, this absurd and grotesque charade of authority, they might successfully overcome it—they might indeed even begin to laugh at it, to subvert it and resist it with their derision.

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<sup>14</sup> On being arrested, Josef K. is not sure whether to laugh or to cower in fear. He is confused and frightened by the predicament he has found himself in, but he also finds it hard to believe that his arrest is not merely a joke: "What sort of men were they? What were they talking about? What office did they represent? After all, K. lived in a state governed by law, there was universal peace, all statutes were in force; who dared assault him in his own lodgings? He'd always tended to take things lightly, to believe the worst only when it arrived, making no provision for the future, even when things looked bad. But that didn't seem the right approach here; of course he could treat the whole thing as a joke, a crude joke his colleagues at the bank were playing on him for some unknown reason, perhaps because today was his thirtieth birthday, that was certainly possible, perhaps all he had to do was laugh in the guards' faces and they would laugh with him...K. knew there was a slight risk someone might say later that he hadn't been able to take a joke, but he clearly recalled—although he generally didn't make it a practice to learn from experience—a few occasions, unimportant in themselves, when, unlike his friends, he had deliberately behaved quite recklessly, without the least regard for his future, and had suffered the consequences. That wasn't going to happen again, not this time at any rate: if this was a farce, he was going to play along" (*The Trial* 6-7). Rather than treating his arrest as the joke that he suspects it to be, Josef K. plays along with the madness and, as the novel's ending will show, does so to fatal effect. K. is cognizant of how ludicrous his persecution is, but never trusts his own comic instincts; he never calls out this authoritarian prank but instead falls for its ruse of power.

It is important that we do not reduce Kafka's comedy to political statement—his humor is fundamentally a humanism, rather than just political satire. Many readers have noted the eerie ways in which Kafka's literature has predicted and resonated with modernity--especially its institutions, structures, and its growing technologies.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Kafka did indeed sense the ways in which people would continue to become increasingly alienated from themselves in the modern world. Kafka's stories, while deeply entangled with a commentary on oppressive legal structures and bureaucratic bulwarks, are at their core about human freedom—they are about taking human agency back from the very agencies that stole it from us: the firms, the courts, the organizations, the institutions, and every other kind of societal structure which has pilfered the human capacity for autonomy. One needs only to take a brief glance at the world today to see the ways in which Kafka's prophetic message about our increasing alienation from ourselves and others has played out. We live in a world of automaticity now, one where so much functions without any need for human input. Laughter, an undeniably human phenomenon, is one way that Kafka suggests

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<sup>15</sup> Kafka's milieu was one of great technological advancement—advancements that stunned people at the time, but that most of us take for granted today. Kafka, only a young child in the midst of much of this technological upheaval, was just as amazed and astounded by these developments. Kafka's family is very likely to have seen the first moving pictures: “Kafka's generation was the first to gain access to an entirely new mode of experience, to a detached presence that was passive, repeatable ad infinitum, and disembodied. We do not know whether Franz saw the first, embryonic images in the history of film as a thirteen-year-old, the ‘Living Photographs’ that were shown in hotel ball-rooms in Prague, but the Kafkas were unlikely to have missed out on this inexpensive, family-friendly sensation” (Stach, *The Early Years* 93). However, much of this technological advancement might have later struck Kafka as signaling the degeneration of human agency: “Most striking of all were the technical innovations. Although they were not implemented at the tempo that is usual today, the remarkable cluster of these innovations at the end of the century lent them a cultural and political subtext that even the most painstaking of censorship could not blot out. They signaled the beginning of a new era that would shake off the cobwebs of the Austrian bureaucratic state...No one appears to have noticed that this new world also cast big shadows, and with the possible exception of a few engineers who looked beyond Bohemia, no one realized that electricity was a force with the potential for *automation* and hence for displacing human beings” (98, 100). This prophetic fear of mechanization suggests itself most clearly in Kafka's short story, *In the Penal Colony*, in which a man is coldly and gorily executed by a complex and frightening machine which he cannot get control over.

resisting this trend towards automaticity—this trend towards becoming more and more mechanical in our interactions with others. The laughter Kafka produces in us is often deeply inappropriate—he aims at making us laugh at events and situations which, if they were not fictional, we might feel ashamed of laughing about. However, this is precisely why Kafka’s humor is against automaticity—it refuses to play along with the manufactured conventions of comedy, the responses that have been programmed in us as “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” Kafka was not only railing against those real and tangible paper-pushing bureaucracies that frustrate us daily—he was railing against and anticipating the bureaucratization of the human psyche, the increasing compartmentalization and mechanization of the self. He saw how the individual was to be diminished by this ever-growing technological and administrative apparatus—one that subjugates human concerns for concerns of efficiency. Laughter is Kafka’s means of disrupting this ceaseless march towards an insentient bureaucratic and mechanistic society—it is his way of reminding us of our capability to still feel things, to not be so completely alienated from ourselves and others.

## CHAPTER 1: KAFKA'S LAUGHTER

### *Mocking Superiority, Deriding Authority*

In a letter to Felice Bauer, Kafka writes of a moment in which he has submitted himself to uncontrollable laughter. It is an image of Kafka that we are not accustomed to— at least not according to the mythology of him that we have created, the mythology which portrays him as irremediably sad and brooding, unable to climb his way out of his desolate despair. However, it is an image of Kafka that we should, for that reason, only heed more attentively, for it is revelatory of his undeniable humor and the way in which his comedy cuts through the gloom. Kafka's laughter is defiant: it strikes back at obedience, and it scoffs at solemnity. Kafka tells us of a moment of uninhibited freedom in his laughter, a moment in which the constraints of social decorum have melted away, leaving him alone with the exuberance of a joke that only he seems to understand:

I can also laugh, Felice, have no doubt about this; I am even known as a great laugher, although in this respect I used to be far crazier than I am now. It even happened to me once, at a solemn meeting with our president—it was two years ago, but the story will outlive me at the office—that I started to laugh!...Needless to say, like anyone exposed to clear and general scrutiny whose position does not quite correspond to his achievements, this [president] invites ridicule...First, I laughed only at the president's occasional delicate little jokes; but while it is a rule only to contort one's features respectfully at these little jokes, I was already laughing out loud; observing my colleagues' alarm at being infected by it, I felt more sorry for them than for myself, but I couldn't help it...A general

embarrassment set in; only the president remained relatively unconcerned, as behooves a great man accustomed to the ways of the world and to whom the possibility of irreverence toward his person could not even occur...unfortunately my colleague...started to make a totally unexpected little speech. At that moment this struck me as quite incomprehensible; my laughter has made him lose his composure, he had stood there with cheeks blown out by suppressed laughter—and now he embarked on a serious speech...it was too much for me: the world, the semblance of the world which hitherto I had seen before me, dissolved completely, and I burst into loud and uninhibited laughter of such heartiness as perhaps only schoolchildren at their desks are capable of. A silence fell, and now at last my laughter and I were the acknowledged center of attention...Beating my breast with my right hand, partly in awareness of my sin (remembering the Day of Atonement), and partly to drive out all the suppressed laughter, I produced innumerable excuses for my behaviour, all of which might have been very convincing had not the renewed outbursts of laughter rendered them completely unintelligible. By now of course even the president was disconcerted; and in a manner typical only of people born with an instinct for smoothing things out, he found some phrase that offered some reasonable explanation for my howls—I think an allusion to a joke he had made a long time before. He then hastily dismissed us. Undefeated, roaring with laughter yet desperately unhappy, I was the first to stagger out of the hall...Needless to say, I did not achieve complete absolution, nor shall I ever achieve it. But this matters little; I may have behaved

in this fashion at the time simply in order to prove to you later that I am capable of laughter. (Kafka, qtd. in Parvelescu 1422-1423)

I have included the entirety of this story, not only because it is amusing to read, but also because it is so useful in understanding what characterized and provoked Kafka's laughter. Its sense of shamelessness distinguishes Kafka's laughter—or rather, its shamelessness in the moment of its happening and the shame that only occurs in retrospectively examining it. It has a sinful and mischievous quality to it, and its irreverence only makes it more pleasurable to engage in. But most of all, Kafka's laughter expresses a yearning for freedom—a freedom from the bonds of sociality, from the fetters of obsequiousness which authority demands of us. Kafka's laughter breaks rules: it violates social codes and it startles our sense of appropriateness with its impropriety. It transgresses boundaries and awakens in us an irresistible urge to follow suit: like Kafka's coworkers in this episode, we too are laughing with him reading this story—we too revel in its bold and courageous sense of resistant insolence.

One cannot fully grasp Kafka's conception of power and authority until one engages with Kafka's sense of humor—until one perceives the way in which Kafka's stories create powerful figures of authority that are both fearful and laughable all at once. Despite laughter's liberating qualities, Kafka's laughter is also always apprehensive and anxious: he tries to suppress his hysterics in the episode with his boss because, while the ridiculous self-seriousness of authority is certainly funny, laughing at it is also dangerous.<sup>16</sup> So while Kafka's laughter may be wildly subversive, it also attempts to be strategic and pragmatic: it knows its limitations, and it tries to

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<sup>16</sup> Most of us have had some absurd and ridiculous boss that we have wanted to laugh at—that we have wanted to mock and deride—but didn't because we need a job and a paycheck. We envy Kafka's laughter and its recklessness—we delight in its rebellious spirit and fantasize realizing it for ourselves. And yet Kafka knew his laughter was risky too, that it put his position in his office in jeopardy. It didn't make his laughter any less satisfying though.

contain its impetus, only giving itself full room to exhale or release when its time is ripe. However, this is also part of why Kafka's laughter only becomes more uncontrolled and vigorous—for it consistently fails to veil itself and fails to contain its euphoric mockery. The more inappropriate the situation is in which to laugh—in other words, the more likely our laughter is to get us into trouble—the more Kafka urges us to give into heedless jocularity. David Foster Wallace notes that “much of [Kafka's] humor is actually sort of unsubtle, or rather *anti-subtle*” (Wallace 26). But despite its lack of subtlety, the joke always seems to go over the heads of Kafka's authority figures, much like it is lost on Kafka's boss; and this only enhances the amusement of the joke, for it confirms why we are laughing at authority in the first place—because Kafka's authorities tend to be somewhat daft and fatuous, and it is ridiculous and ludicrously laughable that they hold such power and give rise to such fear despite their doltishness.<sup>17</sup>

To read Kafka's laughter correctly, we must locate its rebellious spirit and see how it disempowers the powerful. Kafka's laughter attacks authority by exposing it—by showing us that authority is often weak and insecure, and is most vulnerable to mocking laughter because of its dour self-solemnity:

Laughter imagines raucous reversals, reminding its readers that totalitarian leaders have bodies that are subject to the same misfortunes and humiliations as anyone else's...Laughter often points to the absurd in closed societies...Laughter insists that no order is final, or finalizable: existing forms of authority are open-ended and mutable. Laughter's forms—parody, satire, absurdist art—are gestures toward

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<sup>17</sup> The self-serious officer of *In the Penal Colony*, who ends up impaling himself on the very execution machine that he gloats about the entire story, is one example of such an absurd authority figure.

freedom—if not of action then of thought, conscience, belief, and speech.

Laughter raises its middle finger and bares its ass. (Galchinsky 12)

Laughter refuses to give authority the power to fix itself permanently; it refuses to allow authority to deify itself, to create an unalterable altar to which the rest of us must bow. Michael Galchinsky correctly identifies the sense of freedom that pervades laughter and connects this liberatory quality to Kafka's humor. Kafka's stories are always marked by a feeling of claustrophobia, of the walls closing in around his characters and trapping them for good. But his humor pushes back against these walls and helps move his characters towards freedom—it offers them liberation from their ensnarement, although they rarely trust its enticements.

As has already been stated, Kafka's writings have repeatedly been read as being eerily prophetic of modern times and the global growth of increasingly technological apparatuses and alienating bureaucratic institutions. It has even been suggested that Kafka's literature anticipates and resonates with the rise of totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany—if one reads enough Kafka, this claim does not seem far-fetched at all. “There are tendencies in modern history that produce the *Kafkan* in the broad social dimension: the progressive concentration of power, tending to deify itself; the bureaucratization of social activity that turns all institutions into boundless labyrinths; and the resulting depersonalization of the individual” (Kundera 93). While Milan Kundera primarily sees the *Kafkan* manifesting itself in the totalitarian structures that had emerged in Prague and across eastern Europe, he by no means exempts democratic countries and structures from Kafka's vision:

Totalitarian states, as extreme concentrations of these tendencies, have brought out the close relationship between Kafka's novels and real life. But if in the West people are unable to see this relationship, it is not only because the society that we

call democratic is less Kafkan than that of today's Prague. It is also, it seems to me, because over here, the sense of the real is inexorably being lost. In fact, the society we call democratic is also familiar with the process that bureaucratizes and depersonalizes; the entire planet has become a theater of this process. Kafka's novels are only an imaginary, oneiric hyperbole of it; a totalitarian state is a prosaic and material hyperbole of it. But why was Kafka the first novelist to grasp these societal tendencies, which appeared on History's stage so clearly and brutally only after his death? [How is it that Kafka's works] are recognized as a sociopolitical prophecy, and are for that very reason banned in a large part of the world? (Kundera 93-94).

Can we find humor in a vision as bleak as this? Is there anything funny about the terrifying future that Kafka anticipated? There is if we consider the mode and function of Kafka's laughter. The mode of Kafka's humor is grotesque absurdity and hyperbolic ridiculousness; the function of his humor is to make what is ridiculous visible to us, to expose its absurd core and entreat us to recognize that what looks fearful is, in fact, funny and risible. Kundera suggests that the totalitarian tendencies which Kafka has implicitly warned us of have begun to emerge all around us: they have bloomed and germinated even in our so-called democratic societies, and yet we often remain so blissfully unaware of their proliferation. Autocratic authority cloaks its absurdity and makes invisible the preposterousness of daily reality under its reign. Kafka's humor impinges upon the shroud and raises the curtain: it unmask and usurps authority—it beckons us to see the senselessness in our obedience and the silliness in our submission to power.

*Kafka's Comedy of Despair*

If, as Karl Marx insisted, “history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce,”<sup>18</sup> then Kafka’s stories may very well be the simultaneous embodiment of both tragedy and farce, the contemporaneous conjoining of those historical reiterations. Anca Parvelescu suggests that Kafka was very much aware of the relationship between joy and sadness, between tragedy and farce. He suggests that Kafka saw how both could curiously coincide with one another, or how each could somehow appear similar in perception:

Kafka knows that laughing and crying are indistinguishable visually and often aurally (the German word he uses, *Heulen*, suggests a wailing cry). A face-contorting howl distorts the form of the face—*grimace* is the word that usually describes the contortion. And it produces an unseemly sound, usually referred to as *noise*. Staging a comedy of manners, Kafka laughs at the mannered rules for laughing (Parvelescu 1425)

Indeed, Kafka himself proclaims in his letter to Felice that he leaves the President’s office laughing, but also “desperately unhappy.” This leads us to an important point about Kafka’s humor: that it almost always arises out of situations of despair. Jeffrey Myers notes that “Kafka’s dark laughter, a little-noticed but important aspect of his art, erupts from scenes of humiliation, menace, and terror” (Myers 761). But why does Kafka always juxtapose his humor with scenes of such despondency? It may be, as Jean Collignon asserts, that laughter is the only weapon that Kafka leaves his forlorn characters with to defend themselves:

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<sup>18</sup> The relevance of this statement to Kafka’s humor is only apparent to me because Jeffrey Myers uses it as an epigram in his article “Kafka’s Dark Laughter”, which is cited in this thesis.

Kafka's humor...is the humor of a man both oppressed and depressed who smiles not in order to forget but to assert his independence, and makes plain his determination not to be overwhelmed by hardships: he will be defeated, he knows it, there is no hope; he will be murdered 'like a dog'<sup>19</sup>; but he can keep smiling at the whole procedure and at himself into the bargain. (Collignon 53-54).

What Collignon makes clear here is that Kafka's humor is not usually a form of comic relief—the humor is not there for the reader to forget the tragic predicaments that Kafka's heroes find themselves in. Instead, it accompanies and characterizes the unintelligible nature of Kafkaesque despair—a laugh is a natural response to the absurdity of their tragedy. If they cannot cry over their plight, the best that Kafka's heroes can do is laugh through their anguish—if they cannot fathom or process their tragedy because of its absurd unintelligibility, the only mode of sense-making left to them is to see their quandary as a comedy.

Collignon further connects Kafka's comedy to the comedy of Charlie Chaplin, in that they both mock authority, although in different ways:

Now Charlie Chaplin also laughs at policemen. These, like Ubu, are big bags full of nasty air but, unlike the king, they have bludgeons. Of course, Chaplin, endowed with unusual resiliency, will not be cowed by any amount of bludgeoning. But Kafka's heroes, although they put on a brave show, nevertheless are no acrobats and eventually take a beating. Now at the root of Chaplin's humor

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<sup>19</sup> Jean Collignon is referencing the infamous final lines of *The Trial*, in which Josef K. finally meets his brutal demise. "But the hands of one man were right at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing sight K. saw how the men drew near his face, leaning cheek-to-cheek to observe the verdict. 'Like a dog!' he said; it seemed as though the shame was to outlive him" (*The Trial* 231). Even at the novel's end, the reader remains unsure of what Josef K. has to be ashamed of, as we still have no inkling of what crime he has committed. And yet the verdict is rendered anyways—it is still plainly there for his executioners to observe.

there lurks not only a comforting sense of his intrinsic superiority over a silly and ruthless system of control, but also the hope, apparently childish, though finally vindicated, that he will manage to find the weak point in the system. Kafka's heroes, on the contrary, nurse as though they cherished it an innermost conviction that, try as they may, they are fighting a losing battle. (55)

Chaplin similarly weaponized humor against authority, but unlike Kafka and his protagonists, he did so with greater success. Chaplin overcomes and conquers the authorities which oppress him in his films—the heroes of Kafka's stories succumb to their defeat before the battle has even begun, yet smile all the while.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, much of Kafka's humor retains Chaplin's instincts for slapstick<sup>21</sup>: the stooge-like assistants to K. in *The Castle* (only sparsely referred to by their names, Jeremias and Artur) are good exemplars of Kafka's form of slapstick. They often bumble

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<sup>20</sup> “Now the trouble is that Kafka and his heroes cannot refrain from smiling, even in the most insecure positions. Max Brod tells us that at the insurance company where Franz was working, one of the officials started to brief the new members of the staff with such a pompous harangue that Kafka burst out laughing. Fortunately, the official had some sense of humor and the *gaffe* was not punished. But such leniency is unthinkable under the regime of *The Great Wall*, or of *The Castle*, or of *The Trial*. And yet the potential victims smile and laugh” (Collignon 54-55).

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Myers has also perceived a connection between Kafka and Chaplin, specifically in terms of Kafka's grotesque slapstick: “In ‘In the Penal Colony’ (its setting based on Devil's Island) the victim's disgusting behavior upsets the officer's elaborate preparation of the torture instrument and turns the execution into a Charlie Chaplin burlesque: ‘He had just, with considerable difficulty, forced the felt gag into the condemned man's mouth when the man in an irresistible access of nausea shut his eyes and vomited. Hastily the officer snatched him away from the gag and tried to hold his head over the pit; but it was too late, the vomit was running all over the machine’ and the carefully planned scenario is spoiled. The officer's exasperation grotesquely contrasts with the victim's dread” (Myers 763). Myers notes a similar kind of grotesque physical comedy that takes place in *The Castle* when K. and Frieda first consummate their passion—all while her romantic interest, and K's professed enemy, lay asleep in the next room: “Frieda and K., like two animals in heat, roll around on the floor. K., almost rousing Klamm by falling against his door, tries impossibly to retain and to lose control of himself. As they embraced each other Frieda's ‘little body burned in K.'s hands; in a state of unconsciousness which K. tried again and again but in vain to master they rolled a little way, landing with a thud on Klamm's door, where they lay among the small puddles of beer and other refuse scattered on the floor...Instead of feeling his way with the prudence befitting the greatness of his enemy and of his ambition, he had spent a whole night wallowing in puddles of beer, the smell of which was nearly overpowering’” (767).

around and irritate K. to great comic effect. In this case, K. is the authority that the assistants mock and deride--indeed, it is even their job to do so, as Jeremias confesses later:

“‘When [Galater] sent us to you, he said... ‘You’re being sent there as assistants of the surveyor.’ We said: ‘But we don’t know anything about that kind of work.’ At that he said: ‘That isn’t so important; if it becomes necessary he will teach you. But it’s important that you should cheer him up a bit. From what I hear, he takes everything very seriously. He has come to the village and right away thinks this is some great event, but in reality it’s nothing at all. You should teach him that.’”

*(The Castle 234)*

We also learn that the other assistant is lodging a complaint against K. at the Castle merely for the reason that K. has no sense of humor.<sup>22</sup> K. is portrayed throughout *The Castle* as viewing everything as a solemn and serious affair; he imbues his fight against the Castle with a kind of sacred reverence, and he wages it with an austere intensity—he is unable to see that this is not some “great event” but is in fact “nothing at all”. He views his somewhat difficult predicament as something of epic proportions and is blind to the fact that his self-perceived dire circumstances is only a raindrop amongst a storm of other bureaucratic mess-ups and mistakes.<sup>23</sup> K. gives into despair while the readers give into the absurd comedy of Kafka’s oppressive bureaucratic world; rather than lamenting the depressing and gloomy situation of K. and the other villagers, we should revel in its ridiculousness.

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<sup>22</sup> “‘What are you complaining about?’ asked K. ‘We are complaining,’ said Jeremias, ‘that you cannot take a joke. Now then, what did we do? Joked a bit, laughed a bit, teased your fiancée a bit. And all this by the way, in accordance with instructions’” (*The Castle 233*).

<sup>23</sup> The bureaucratic mistake that K. spends the entire novel attempting to rectify is that he has been called to the village as a land-surveyor when in fact no land-surveyor is actually needed. This will be explained at greater length in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

While Kafka's absurd stories do possess the element of despair, their comical absurdity seems to overshadow their tragedy. When Kafka read his stories aloud to friends, they may have often been met with roars of laughter: "Max Brod, a close friend, recalled that when Kafka read some passages to colleagues from the apparently grim *Trial*, 'his listeners laughed through their tears, and Kafka too had to laugh so hard that his reading was interrupted.'" (Myers 767). Does this mean we should read Kafka's stories as mere jokes? Kafka would certainly not have it so, as it turns out he felt quite pained by the laughter of his friends as well: "But in a squeamish letter of November 24, 1919...Kafka said their hilarity was compounded, for him, with excruciating embarrassment: 'the laughter was not pleasant; it had no apparent reason, was painful, shameful.'" (767-768). Kafka seems to have a certain ambivalence towards his own form of comedy then—he saw how his stories were funny (for he too laughed), but did not ultimately wish for his readers (or listeners) to see them just as elaborate jokes. But Kafka must have also understood how the absurd realities that he was attempting to portray in his literature would always inevitably, to some extent, be construed as jokes:

Now when confronted with an absurd situation, we burst out laughing, but we do so only because we believe that, due to this very characteristic, it cannot last. Pretty soon, we argue, the absurdity will be exploded and reason reestablished. If not, we go on laughing because we feel superior to the absurd, unaffected by it, while those responsible for it are discarded as fools. But if the absurdity affects us deeply, we either sink into despair or revolt. Now Kafka's heroes, without growing despondent or rebellious, seem to wallow in absurdity with a surprising amount of delight...Kafka's heroes stand at most on the verge of total belief, because they preserve both sense of humor and sense of authority. Therefore, they

manage a precarious kind of smile, torn as they are between complete acceptance and rebellious laughter. If the smiling hero could muster a trifle more boldness, he would grow disrespectful, burst out laughing and, though suffering as much as Candide, he would be very close to Voltaire's kind of humor. (Collignon 59)

Reason is never reestablished in Kafka's literary world, and Kafka's heroes never quite find their way out of their despair—they never successfully revolt against the cruel joke that they find themselves bottled up inside of. Perhaps we might laugh at Kafka's stories because we believe their absurd reality is detached from our own. Perhaps Kafka resents this laughter and finds his own comedy shameful because he never really believed that the absurdities of his literature were so detached from actuality—perhaps he saw that the irrational and ludicrous plight of Josef K. in *The Trial* was, in fact, a reality that was always fearfully on the horizon. Is Josef K.'s arrest truly so absurd or far-fetched? Have we not heard true stories of people persecuted and arrested for crimes they did not commit, or apprehended by an authority without explanation? There is a reason why readers of Kafka's stories have claimed they resonate with the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. It is because those histories show how the grotesquely absurd and the terrifyingly unimaginable became real—because they show how unreality became an actuality, how what was once perhaps considered an illogical and impossible conclusion eventually manifested itself as a horrifying truth. Such is the nature of Kafka's prophetic comedy—it points to the absurdity, not in our dreams or our minds alone, but *out there*, in the real world.

While Kafka's comedy is centered around moments of wretched desperation, there remains a flicker of hope in his stories—their comic sense ignites this hope:

But Kafka's hero, with immense odds against him, still preserves a faint glimmer of hope. Not that the system which has condemned him might eventually become

just or humane, but that, somehow, it will stop functioning or that, unexpectedly, something will go wrong. A peal of laughter or even a smile, who knows, might prove to be the microscopic cause able to foul up the system, or make it disappear like a bad dream. (Collignon 60)

In the grips of despondency, comedy may be the only comfort that Kafka's protagonists—or his readers—have left.<sup>24</sup> Collignon claims that the comicality of Kafka's stories becomes the means through which Kafka's heroes may seek deliverance from the system which oppresses them—rather than giving into despair, they may opt for something else: a laugh or a smile, anything which might defuse or derail what appears to be their impending disastrous fate. However, Kafka's characters never really do realize the emancipatory potential of comedy—Kafka reserves this realization instead for the careful reader of his stories, who may follow Kafka's comicality to the liberating conclusion that his characters can never quite grasp. Whatever glimmer of hope there is in Kafka's writing, it is saved for the reader rather than the actual characters of Kafka's stories, who seem to persevere not because they have hope, but only

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<sup>24</sup> In his piece titled "My Kafka Problem", Jewish-American writer Jonathan Rosen writes about his father finding comfort in Kafka's writing: "In some sense my father never stopped living in Kafka's empire. For one thing, he had a refugee's horror of bureaucracy in general and of government documents in particular. This was understandable, since when you're a refugee, a piece of paper can save your life—or end it. A piece of paper got my father onto a *Kindertransport* in 1938. The absence of the appropriate pieces of paper doomed my grandparents to death...I came to realize that, in a perverse way, Kafka's peculiar and excruciating vision was somehow comforting to my father. Kafka's work was an outer expression of things my father had experienced or felt. When you are comforted, or darkly amused, by a man who becomes a bug, then you have had a taste of how absurd and painful the world can be" (Rosen 85-86). Rosen's writing about his father's experience with Kafka helps illuminate how Kafka's writing quaveringly vacillates between joy and despair, how it swings from mirthful farce to poignant feeling. Kafka's comedic sense is perhaps most intelligible to those who can see how his absurdism simultaneously speaks in the tongues of tragedy and comedy all at once—how it somehow blends their seeming contradictoriness so that the despair and the joy of Kafka's stories become indistinguishable and inseparable. Kafka's comedy speaks to trauma and pain. but rather than resurrecting that pain, it suggests a way of coping with it—it buries the pain in its comedy.

because they have no choice. They are helplessly locked in their despair, unable to see how easily they might escape their dreadful condition if they would only learn to laugh.

## CHAPTER 2: FARCE & FEAR: KAFKA'S SHORT STORIES

### *Ridiculous Rituals: Obeisance and Surrender in "The Refusal"*

The nebulous figures of officialdom in Kafka's stories do not earn their powerful positions. While they may be the embodiment of their job or position—often identified merely as their official titles—they never execute its duties well.<sup>25</sup> Kafka creates much doubt about whether or not the inhuman functionaries of his stories actually perform any function—their jobs seem to be a ruse, a mere fanciful trick. But even this simple illusion of power is capable of inducing unease and apprehension in those who are dominated by it. While the actual statures of Kafka's officials are laughably small, the shadows they cast are terrifyingly large. The reader can become dizzy reading Kafka due to the way he oscillates between the perspectives of his authoritarian figures: they are at one moment indomitable and unassailable, and the next they are as frail and as small as those that they exercise their power on. What were once monsters have thus become men.

One aspect of Kafka's humor then has to do with perspective—it is amusing to see the tables turned, to have our expectations and presuppositions upended, or to see two wildly incongruous perspectives of the same thing being juxtaposed. This form of Kafka's humor then is, although slight, a kind of comic relief for us. It is the moment when we realize we were frightened of nothing: the brief sighing exhalation when we retrospectively recognize that our

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<sup>25</sup> "This colonel, then, commands the town. I don't think he has ever produced a document entitling him to this position; very likely he does not possess such a thing. Maybe he really is chief tax-collector. But is that all? Does that entitle him to rule over all the other departments in the administration as well? In reality, of course, it was not he who seized power, nor is he a tyrant. It has just come about over the years that the chief tax-collector is automatically the top official, and the colonel accepts the tradition just as we do" (*The Complete Stories* 264). There are similarly unqualified officials and administrators who exercise power in several of Kafka's stories.

foreboding was for naught, that it was only our imaginations playing tricks on us again. Thus, the reader may be granted a perspective which reveals that the shadows of Kafka's stories are not as menacing as they first seem—that they are indeed even ludicrous and laughable.<sup>26</sup> But Kafka's characters, who fail to fully grasp the risible ridiculousness of their persecutors, never really “get” the joke—they are never quite afforded a relief. They are trapped too deeply inside of a surreal and seemingly inescapable nightmare to see just how preposterous their powerlessness is. Their tragedy becomes a comedy and is only all the more tragic because of it.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Perhaps most alien of all, Kafka's authority figures are never just hollow buffoons to be ridiculed, but are always absurd and scary and sad all at one, like *In the Penal Colony's* Lieutenant” (Wallace 26). Kafka's authority figures simultaneously occupy these seemingly contradictory roles. I am arguing however that Kafka does want us to ultimately see them as such buffoons. Their official positions of power lend them an intimidating presence, but Kafka wants the reader to see that their power is only a kind of façade; their asinine and clownish personalities trump whatever aura of power they possess.

<sup>27</sup> In his appraisal of what the Kafkaesque is, Milan Kundera tells the true story of a Prague engineer who one day finds himself in the grips of a kind of institutionalized persecution: “An engineer from Prague is invited to a professional conference in London. So he goes, takes part in the proceedings, and returns to Prague. Some hours after this return, sitting in his office, he picks up *Rude Pravo*—the official daily paper of the Party—and reads: A Czech engineer, attending a conference in London, has made a slanderous statement about his socialist homeland to the Western press and has decided to stay in the West. Illegal emigration combined with a statement of that kind is no trifle. It would be worth 20 years in prison. Our engineer can't believe his eyes. But there's no doubt about it, the article refers to him... He soon realizes that, all of a sudden, he's being closely watched, that his telephone is tapped, and that he's being followed in the street. He sleeps poorly and has nightmares until, unable to bear the pressure any longer, he takes a lot of real risks to leave the country illegally. And so he actually becomes an émigré. The story I've just told is one that we would call *Kafkan*... The engineer is confronted by a power that has the character of a boundless labyrinth. He can never get to the end of its interminable corridors and will never succeed in finding out who issued the fateful verdict” (Kundera 88-90). But Kundera also notes that the story of the Prague engineer has tones of comical lunacy in it; the engineer finds himself one day reading about his “crimes” in a paper; in his paranoia of being accused of a crime he didn't commit, the engineer *actually* ends up committing the very crime of illegally emigrating. “The tale of the Prague engineer is in the nature of a funny story, a joke: it provokes laughter... But it's a small comfort to the engineer to know his story is comic. He is trapped in the joke of his own life like a fish in a bowl; he doesn't find it funny. Indeed, a joke is a joke only if you're outside the bowl; by contrast, the *Kafkan* takes us inside, *into the guts of the joke, into the horror of the comic*... The engineer loses his homeland, and everyone laughs” (92). We cannot separate the horror of Kafka's stories from their humor--Kafka intimately blends the two in a way that is often unsettling. But whether or not the story of the engineer is viewed as horrific or as comic pertains (again) to perspective. From inside the “guts of the joke” there is certainly nothing funny about the engineer's persecution. But from the outside, any observer can plainly see how absurd and ridiculously nonsensical this story's conclusion is. Kafka's stories are indeed like this: they evoke a comedy that is both profound and cruel; they have the nature of a cosmic joke and they

Kafka portrays just such a picture of a powerlessness in *The Refusal*. The story, like many of Kafka's stories, is mundane and uneventful: the narrator tells us about his small and inconsequential town that is unimaginably far removed from the mythical and commanding frontier.

Our little town does not lie on the frontier, nowhere near; it is so far from the frontier, in fact, that perhaps no one from our town has ever been there; desolate highlands have to be crossed as well as wide fertile plains. To imagine even part of the road makes one tired, and more than part one just cannot imagine... But what is even further from our town than the frontier, if such distances can be compared at all—it's like saying that a man of three hundred years is older than one of two hundred—what is even further than the frontier is the capital. Whereas we do get news of the frontier wars now and again, of the capital we learn next to nothing—we civilians that is, for of course the government officials have very good connections with the capital; they can get news from there in as little as three months, so they claim at least. (*The Complete Stories* 263).

The oppressed townspeople are impossibly far from the nuclei of power—they have no hope of ever accessing these hubs and horizons of authority because the distance is so great that even the thought of traveling to one of them makes a person weary. Thus, the gap between having control and being controlled is made to appear insuperable—to even think of bridging that gap is already to fail, to succumb to despair and defeat. The townspeople have a conception of power and status

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reverberate with fatalistic tones of irony—for what else could produce such a terrible yet farcical end for the engineer, unless the Fates themselves had designed such a mean trick? Many would argue that Kafka's world is only meant to reflect a kind of distorted reality in which the impossible and the bizarre can play out. But the story of the engineer is a true one. Kafka's stories are not fantastic; instead, they reflect the seemingly improbable, yet actual absurdities of reality.

in their minds such that the officials' connections to the capital becomes something praiseworthy, despite how paltry even these connections are—Kafka is certainly making a joke about the frustration of uncommunicative bureaucratic hierarchies when his narrator suggests that it only takes “as little as three months” to receive word from the capital. Even so, the townspeople continue to believe this empty dream about the unreachable places of power and the deified persons who control them. They accept their fate as sealed and their positions in society as fixed.<sup>28</sup>

The story reaches its climax, or rather, its anticlimax, when the narrator tells us of a habitual community gathering around the town's head official, the chief tax collector, to petition him with their requests for little things such as tax exemptions or smaller prices for timber. The curious--and therefore characteristically Kafka--moment of the story comes when their latest petition is refused: the townspeople are ironically relieved and even satisfied with having their appeal denied by the chief tax collector once again. “‘The petition has been refused,’ he announced. ‘You may go.’ An undeniable sense of relief passed through the crowd, everyone surged out, hardly a soul paying any attention to the colonel, who, as it were, had turned once more into a human being like the rest of us” (267). This moment is also the comic heart of Kafka's story: the entirety of this short piece misleads us to believe that the townspeople are teetering with suspense and anxiety to hear a positive verdict from the chief tax collector, that they are yearning to have their appeals heard and granted—and then they are assuaged and grateful that their appeal has been denied!

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<sup>28</sup> “[‘The Refusal’ is about] the inability of ordinary people to understand the laws by which they are governed, the vast distance separating insiders from outsiders, and the paralyzing submission of the powerless” (Litowitz 123).

*The Refusal* is a joke then, not primarily about authority, but instead aimed at authority's subjects. It is Kafka's caricature of complacent defeatism, a ridiculing of the ways in which we ritualize our false contentments and barren satisfactions; it is a tragedy about how the comfort of familiarity can triumph over progress; it is about how change, even when we desperately desire and need it, can often terrify us more than stasis:

In all important matters, however, the citizens can always count on a refusal. And now the strange fact is that without this refusal one simply cannot get along, yet at the same time these official occasions are by no means a mere formality. Time after time one goes there full of expectation and in all seriousness and then one returns, if not exactly strengthened or happy, nevertheless not disappointed or tired. (267)

*The Refusal* lampoons masquerades of power and reveals the ways in which they create a recurrent and ceremonial subjugation. Kafka's narrator makes sure to reassure us that these gatherings are not a "mere formality", but that is only because Kafka wants us to see that the narrator and his fellow townspeople are oblivious to the joke being played on them—while their appeals may be sincere, they fail to recognize the way in which their honest requests have been reduced to mere routine by the power which perpetually refuses them. By portraying the absurdity of ritualized obeisance, Kafka shows us how authority plays pranks on its subjects and how it maintains itself through a mere pantomime of governing the constituents it rules over. "One is almost under the impression that the people here say: 'Now that you've taken all we possess, please take us as well'" (264). This complete giving of oneself over to power and submission to domination is what Kafka is so sharply satirizing. He is laughing at—and

compelling us to as well—the townspeople’s fear of a mere pretense of power, a repetitive sham of authority:

As on all solemn occasions the colonel stood upright, holding in front of him two poles of bamboo in his outstretched hands. This is an ancient custom implying more or less that he supports the law, and the law supports him. Now everyone knows, of course, what to expect up on the veranda, and yet each time people take fright all over again. (266)

A meaningless gesture is what induces the townspeople's fear. The colonel is only playing at power—he does not actually possess it. “[The colonel] had turned once more into a human being like the rest of us. I still caught one last glimpse of him as he wearily let go of the poles, which fell to the ground, then sank into an armchair produced by some officials, and promptly put his pipe in his mouth” (267). Thus, the falling of the poles is like the falling of a curtain to this farcical convention. The suspenseful spectacle is over, and the townspeople can now rush home to contently hide in their despair.

*The Refusal* does end on a somewhat optimistic note. But we are reading Kafka, so of course this optimism must also be laced with a deep cynicism: Kafka characteristically weaves this kind of paradox and ambiguity of feeling into his stories—it is much like the paradoxically simultaneous wave of relief and distress that the townspeople experience upon having their petitions refused. It is this disconnect in perspective—this disconnect between one self and another self—that creates such concurrent contradictory feelings in Kafka’s characters and in the readers of his stories. It is why Kafka’s stories can contemporaneously evoke laughter and a sense of fraught despondency. Thus, the story ends:

As a matter of fact, there is, so far as my observations go, a certain age group that is not content—these are the young people roughly between seventeen and twenty. Quite young fellows, in fact, who are utterly incapable of foreseeing the consequences of even the least significant, far less a revolutionary, idea. And it is among just them that discontent creeps in. (267)

The disconnect arises when the narrator discards whatever shred of hopelessness these young rebels can offer. By proclaiming that the youth cannot foresee the consequences their defiant discontent will produce, the narrator ultimately sides himself with a defeatist attitude, and smothers the possibility of resistance as soon as it begins to seep into the picture. So Kafka leaves us with a bare and minimal hope—he takes us to the brink of despair and leaves us desperately clinging to the cliff, praying that someone will come along and hoist us up.<sup>29</sup>

### *Trapped in the Joke: Kafka's Cage*

Kafka often writes about confinement.<sup>30</sup> The titular character of *A Hunger Artist* lies in a cage like an animal, where he withers unto his death, only to be replaced by an actual animal—a young panther—which somehow seems more human than he. Gregor Samsa is imprisoned, not

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<sup>29</sup> “This is no longer ‘black humor’ as Breton tried to illustrate it in his *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, but to coin a term suggested by the French phrase ‘rire jaune,’ a sort of ‘humour jaune.’ Black humor might be reserved for those who are either cynical or desperate; ‘yellow humor’ remaining the last chance of those on the verge of despair, but yet altogether immersed in it” (Collignon 60). *The Refusal* fits this definition of “yellow humor” quite well. It is not a story completely devoid of hope—its humor is not so cynical as to deny any slim chance of redemption—but whatever hope it does leave us with is meager and fragile.

<sup>30</sup> “Now nobody will deny that the Kafka hero belongs rather to the category of the prisoner than to that of the clown” (Collignon 56).

only in his room by his family, but in the alien and foreign body of a bug--a body which he struggles to make obey him.<sup>31</sup> The prisoner of *In the Penal Colony* is bound to the machine which is meant to execute him. *The Street Window*, a brief piece by Kafka, also speaks of a kind of imprisonment—except this one is ironically not severe enough to satisfy its prisoner:

Whoever leads a solitary life and yet now and then wants to attach himself somewhere, whoever, according to changes in the time of day, the weather, the state of his business, and the like, suddenly wishes to see any arm at all to which he might cling—he will not be able to manage for long without a window looking on to the street. And if he is in the mood of not desiring anything and only goes to his window sill a tired man, with eyes turning from his public to heaven and back again, not wanting to look out and having thrown his head up a little, even then the horses below will draw him down into their train of wagons and tumult, and so at last into the human harmony. (*The Complete Stories* 384)

The narrator of *The Street Window* longs to be, not necessarily always alone, but at least a master of his own solitude. However, he has no control over whether or not he will be forced to be amongst others—there is no room he can find without a window, through which the human activity will inevitably and perpetually draw him out of his self-imposed internment. What the

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<sup>31</sup> “To get rid of the quilt was quite easy; he had only to inflate himself a little and it fell off by itself. But the next move was difficult, especially because he was so uncommonly broad. He would have needed arms and hands to hoist himself up; instead he had only the numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them it was the first to stretch itself straight; and did he succeed at last in making it do what he wanted, all the other legs meanwhile waved the more wildly in a high degree of unpleasant agitation” (*The Complete Stories* 92). The first section of *The Metamorphosis* is almost entirely dedicated to Gregor’s struggle to master his new and unfamiliar shape. It is already grotesquely comic to read about Gregor’s difficulty, but the comicality of the scene is further heightened by Gregor’s more apparent anguish about being late for work—which, for whatever reason, he ridiculously prioritizes over the problem of his new anatomy.

narrator vies for is a freedom of choice. Rather than being free in the sense of being out of his cage, he wants to be free in the sense that he may stay in his cage or leave it as he pleases. His painful restraint then is not his solitary confinement, but rather that he is chained to this inevitability of being surrounded by others when he would least like to have human company. “It’s often said that Kafka’s novels express a passionate desire for community and human contact...Now, this is not only a cliché, a reductive interpretation; it is a misinterpretation...It is not the curse of solitude but the violation of solitude that is Kafka’s obsession!” (Kundera 96).<sup>32</sup> Thus, the cages of Kafka’s stories are often eagerly occupied by his characters—they are spaces of utter desolation and oppression, and yet they are, paradoxically, also refuges from the outside world which persecutes them. The droll irony of Kafka’s cages is that, as Milan Kundera writes, they are so prone to being misinterpreted. For Kafka, there is freedom in cages:

So by temperament or taste, Kafka’s [hunger] artist, who apparently does not live in any other world, neither social nor political, acts as if his only choice is to be an artist. In the freedom of his cage he’s safe to pursue his art, because it’s his calling and nobody cares. There’s an obvious bitterness here, which Kafka’s sad

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<sup>32</sup> Kafka had a difficult time finding solitude and quiet amongst his boisterous family—he wrote in his diary about how irritable he found all of their constant noise: “I sit in my room in the headquarters of the noise of the whole apartment. I hear all the doors slamming; their noise spares me only the steps of the people running between them; I can still hear the oven door banging shut in the kitchen. My father bursts through the door to my room and passes through, his robe trailing; the ashes are being scraped out of the stove in the next room; Valli [(Kafka’s sister)] asks, shouting one word after the other through the foyer, whether Father’s hat has been cleaned yet; a hushing sound that aims to be friendly to me raises the screech of a voice in reply. The apartment door is unlatched and makes a grating noise like a scratchy throat, then opens wider with the singing of a woman’s voice, and finally closes with a dull manly bang, which is the most inconsiderate sound of all. Father is gone; now the subtler, more diffuse, more hopeless noise begins, led by the voices of the two canaries. I had been thinking about it earlier, and with the canaries it now occurred to me again that I might open the door a tiny crack, slither into the next room like a snake and in that way, on the floor, ask my sisters and their governess for peace and quiet” (Stach, *The Decisive Years* 21).

professional life accounts for, but there's humor present, too, which is his vision and his genius. (Dunn 612)

Kafka once penned: "I am in chains. Don't touch my chains." Kafka always wanted most desperately to be a successful writer, and as Stephen Dunn notes, this desire was repeatedly impeded upon by his professional obligations, which would have taken up valuable time for Kafka to write.<sup>33</sup> It makes sense then as to why Kafka would perhaps so desperately want to escape into a place of solitary refuge—a place where he could write without being hampered by the mundane realities of life or being pestered by his parents' insistence that he focus on his professional career.<sup>34</sup> Kafka also wrote: "A cage went in search of a bird." The key to this puzzling aphorism may lie in the connection between the Kafka surname and the phonetically similar Czech word "kavka," which means jackdaw. The Kafkas were well aware of the phonetic

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<sup>33</sup> "It took Kafka only a few more months to realize that even a perfectly balanced schedule of work can barely bring about a fair distribution of personal resources: time and energy. He did not mention [to Felice] the horrendous degree of abstraction entailed by bureaucratic work itself, the paper plague that infects thought, then speech, and ultimately the soul" (Stach, *The Decisive Years* 293). Kafka must have had an ambivalent relationship with his professional life—to some extent, it informed most of his literary writing, but at the same time often drained him of all his creative energy.

<sup>34</sup> "[T]here would be no actual freedom for me to choose my career, for I knew: compared to the main thing everything would be exactly as much a matter of indifference to me as all the subjects taught in high school, and so it was a matter of finding a profession that would let me indulge this indifference without doing too much injury to my vanity. Hence, law was my obvious choice" (Kafka, qtd. in *The Early Years* 197-198). Kafka regarded his professional life as merely a way of biding his time and satisfying social and familial expectations. He was, obviously, most passionate about writing, and he often tried to get minimal hours at work so he would have more time to do so. Kafka also tells a story about the kind of unfriendly teasing he would receive from his family for his obsession with writing: "An uncle who liked to make fun of people finally took the page that I was holding only weakly, took a quick look at it, handed it back to me without even laughing, and only said to the others who were following him with their eyes, 'the usual stuff'; to me he said nothing. Even though I remained seated and bent as before over the now useless page of mine, with one thrust I had in fact been banished from the group, my uncle's judgment repeated in me with almost real significance and even within the family feeling I got an insight into the cold space of our world which I had to warm with a fire that I first wanted to seek out" (Kafka, qtd. in *The Early Years* 146-147). We can plausibly surmise that this incident spells out the general feeling that Kafka's family had towards him concerning his writing. His obsession most likely was instrumental in making him a pariah amongst his working-class family, who certainly would have been averse to what they viewed as a self-indulgent and idle past-time.

connection, and Kafka's father Hermann even made it the symbol of his business.<sup>35</sup> So we may surmise that Kafka saw himself as the "bird" of this aphorism—perhaps aimlessly in flight, and longing for a place to land and settle himself into. Did Kafka ever find his cage? Or rather, as he would put it: did the cage ever find him?

The cages of Kafka's stories contain a great deal of his dark humor within them as well. The encaged hunger artist is, contrary to common sense, not merely a pitiful sight in Kafka's story but is instead rendered as something of amusement. His pain and his suffering were once a thriving circus exhibition:

At one time the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist; from day to day of his fast the excitement mounted; everybody wanted to see him at least once a day; there were people who bought season tickets for the last few days and sat from morning till night in front of his small barred cage; even in the nighttime there were visiting hours, when the whole effect was heightened by torch flares; on fine days the cage was set out in the open air, and then it was the children's special treat to see the hunger artist; for their elder he was often just a joke that happened to be in fashion, but the children stood openmouthed, holding each other's hands for greater security, marveling at him as he sat there pallid in black tights, with his ribs sticking out so prominently, not even on a seat but down

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<sup>35</sup> "Linguistic assimilation and a neutral facade were tried-and-true defensive mechanisms for the Kafkas to remain inconspicuous in their Czech milieu—even though everyone knew that virtually the entire Bohemian trade in fancy goods was divided among Jews. The fact that his own family name had a meaning in Czech came in quite handy for Hermann Kafka, and so of course the *kavka*—the jackdaw—served as the business emblem" (Stach, *The Early Years* 56). Anti-Semitic attacks and prejudices in Prague were enacted by both the Czechs and the Germans—who also happened to have much hostility against each-other as well. Many Jewish families made attempts similar to Hermann's to blend, so as to deter any more anti-Semitic antagonism.

among straw on the ground, sometimes giving a courteous nod, answering questions with a constrained smile, or perhaps stretching an arm through the bars so that one might feel how thin it was. (*The Complete Stories* 268).

Should we read this short story as metaphoric autobiography? The hunger artist, similar to Kafka, seems to impose his confinement upon himself—he concurrently withers and thrives off of his fasting, and even seems to take a kind of twisted pleasure in his wretchedness. It seems plausible to read Kafka’s story as a kind of self-deprecating joke, or as a hyperbolic caricature of Kafka’s own forlorn alienation and social self-consciousness—Kafka was, after all, quite thin<sup>36</sup>, and even felt deeply ashamed and self-conscious about his stature.<sup>37</sup> Whether or not we interpret the story to be an act of autobiography—a genre which Kafka himself was a fond reader of and even desired to write<sup>38</sup>--there is no doubt that Kafka intended his story to be deeply laced with humor. Despite the disturbing nature of Kafka’s grim fantasy, his biting and dry comedic sense manages to cleave through the anguish:

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<sup>36</sup> “We do not know whether [Kafka] was teased because of his skinny frame and uncommon height, but we do know that his mother was always gently poking him in the small of his back while spouting lay medical truisms and ordering him to stand straighter—to no avail, of course. Kafka continued to go around ‘with my back bowed, my shoulders drooping, my arms and hands ajumble,’ cursing the cheap clothing his parents gave him to wear, which seemed to draw even more attention to his ugliness” (Stach, *The Early Years* 177).

<sup>37</sup> Part of Kafka’s shame about his own appearance clearly stemmed from how he viewed himself in relation to his father’s indomitable and larger build: “I was already weighed down by your mere physical presence. I recall, for instance, how we often undressed together in one changing room. There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad. Even inside the hut I felt pitiful, not only in front of you, but in front of the whole world, because for me you were the measure of all things. But then we stepped out of the changing room before the people, you holding me by the hand, a little skeleton, unsteady, barefoot on the boards, frightened of the water, incapable of copying your swimming strokes...” (Kafka, qtd. in *The Early Years* 151).

<sup>38</sup> “In any case, I would yield at once to my desire to write an autobiography the moment I was freed from the office... Then, however, writing the autobiography would be a great joy because it would move along as easily as writing down dreams, yet it would have an entirely different outcome, a great one, which would influence me forever and would be accessible as well to the understanding and feelings of everyone else” (Kafka, qtd. in *The Early Years* 59).

Perhaps, said the hunger artist to himself many a time, things would be a little better if his cage were set not quite so near the menagerie. That made it too easy for people to make their choice, to say nothing of what he suffered from the stench of the menagerie, the animals' restlessness by night, the carrying past of raw lumps of flesh for the beasts of prey, the roaring of feeding times, which depressed him continually. But he did not dare to lodge a complaint with the management; after all, he had the animals to thank for the troops of people who passed his cage... (*The Complete Stories* 275).

Kafka's wit in passages like these may be too dark for modern readers—but it is certainly a mistake to read passages like this straight, as if Kafka were writing without any trace of irony. It should not only strike the reader that this entire situation is ridiculous, but also absurdly and cruelly funny—the hunger artist not only endures his fasting, but endures it in an environment full of ravenously hungry beasts, whom he must longingly<sup>39</sup> watch devour their sumptuous meals, and then even “thank” them for their gracious presence. Kafka's humor is merciless and brutal—it's not even a stretch to say it is sometimes sadistic. But then again, Kafka's comedy is also his diagnosis of humanity. So, while Kafka is certainly mocking his hunger artist, he is also comically censuring the spectators—in other words, all of us. He is satirizing those who were once amazed by the hunger artist's spectacular suffering and who are now disgusted by it, callously ignoring him in his painful plight.

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<sup>39</sup> [We can approach] ‘A Hunger Artist’ in terms of tropes like ‘starved for attention’ or ‘love-starved’ or the double entendre in the term ‘self-denial,’ or even as innocent a factoid as that the etymological root of ‘anorexia’ happens to be the Greek word for longing” (Wallace 26). To read Kafka's story in this way seems apt, and also seems to support the idea that it is somewhat autobiographical, given that Kafka often expressed such longing and loneliness in his diaries and in the letter to his father.

When Kafka calls his titular character the “the pampered hunger artist” or ironically asks “What comfort could he possibly need? What more could he possibly wish for?” it is the reader’s cue to recoil amusedly at such absurd suggestions. However, Kafka’s stories are also often incurably melancholic, with even the antidote of humor unable to quite fully remedy their despair. Part of the reason why Kafka’s humor may often be lost on us is that we are waiting for a comedic punchline, and there simply isn’t one. Kafka saves his punchlines, not for laughs, but for poignancy: his comedy makes us drop our guard only to be hit by an emotional wallop. The end of *A Hunger Artist* is, as such, strangely and surprisingly moving:

An overseer’s eye fell on the cage one day and he asked the attendants why this perfectly good cage should be left standing there unused with dirty straw inside it; nobody knew, until one man, helped out by the notice board, remembered about the hunger artist. They poked into the straw with sticks and found him in it. ‘Are you still fasting?’ asked the overseer, ‘when on earth do you mean to stop?’ ‘Forgive me, everybody,’ whispered the hunger artist; only the overseer, who had his ear to the bars, understood him. ‘Of course,’ said the overseer, and tapped his forehead with a finger to let the attendants know what state the man was in, ‘we forgive you.’ ‘I always wanted you to admire my fasting,’ said the hunger artist. ‘We do admire it,’ said the overseer, affably. ‘But you shouldn’t admire it,’ said the hunger artist. ‘Well then we don’t admire it,’ said the overseer, ‘but why shouldn’t we admire it?’ ‘Because I have to fast, I can’t help it,’ said the hunger artist. ‘What a fellow you are,’ said the overseer, ‘and why can’t you help it?’ ‘Because,’ said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and speaking, with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer’s ear, so that no syllable might be lost, ‘because I couldn’t find

the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.’ These were his last words, but in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was still continuing to fast. (*The Complete Stories* 276-277)

There is a deep sense of tragedy at the heart of Kafka’s jokes, and yet Kafka never indulged in pure tragedy. We might conjecture that he found it entirely too histrionic and too self-aggrandizing—such a genre only further inflated the egoistic and common human feeling of self-importance, the tendency for people to view their unfortunate circumstances as the center of the universe. Instead, Kafka’s stories revel in jokes, perhaps because jokes have a way of bringing everything down to the level of the inconsequential--because they deflate all of our vainglorious conceits of misery. Kafka is mocking those who would make a drama of their lives—those who would envision their small personal tragedies as being calamitous to Grecian proportions. I do not mean to deny, however, that Kafka engages in the tragic—he certainly does. Kafka’s tragedy, though, is always minimal and mundane, an exercise in humdrum banality that would drain the Grecian tragedy of all its cathartic and heavenly stupefaction. There is no shock and awe in Kafka, no unexpected and colorful turns of events meant to provoke an intense emotional response—only a meager and unadorned feeling of dolor, a lachrymose and lugubrious pensiveness. The traditional Grecian tragic spectacle is intended to purge us of our melancholic feelings, to incite release; Kafkan tragedy only barely brings those feelings to the surface, and then leaves us to uncomfortably grapple with them, to reconcile them on our own. But how does Kafka’s tragic sense interact with his comic instincts?

In the world of the *Kafkan*, the comic is not a counterpoint to the tragic (the tragicomic) as in Shakespeare; it’s not there to make the tragic more bearable by

lightening the tone; it doesn't accompany the tragic, not at all, it destroys it in the egg and thus deprives the victims of the only consolation they could hope for: the consolation to be found in the (real or supposed) grandeur of tragedy. (Kundera 92)

The comic of Kafka's stories interacts with the tragic in such a way that the tragedy is simultaneously heightened and diminished by the comedy--the circumstances become even more tragic for his characters in that their grandiose woes are reduced to jokes and mere gags, and yet must also not be tragic at all because they are jokes as such. Consider the spectators who laugh at the hunger artist—they view him as such a trifling joke, and this only amplifies his pain. He is trapped in the comedy of his plight—he cannot quite see how ridiculous his tragedy is because he is a prisoner to his despair. It is worth restating that Kundera says “the *Kafkan* takes us inside, into the guts of a joke, into the horror of the comic” (92). Kundera is right to suggest that the core of Kafka's stories is indeed the comic and that the comic essentially envelops the tragic and consumes all of its grandeur. And as an act of tragic-consumption, Kafka's humor does take us into the “guts of the joke” --into the gruesome and vile viscera of humanity's basest and most rapacious cravings for humor and entertainment. The hunger artist offers himself up as a meal to his spectators and is reduced to scraps, to a shell of a human being. He never takes part in the feast because he can never find the food that he likes—perhaps because he never shared his spectators' sadistic appetite to watch things suffer in cages.<sup>40</sup>

We can speculate that Kafka was fascinated and allured by cages because he viewed human beings as animalistic and cruel in their desires—that he saw a cage as a safe haven from the barbaric comedy happening outside of it. But Kafka must have ultimately felt conflicted about his

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<sup>40</sup> There is an apt word for this in German: Schadenfreude.

reclusive solitude, and perhaps the only reason he romanticized it and turned into a kind of prize for himself is because it comforted him to think of it as such. Of course, Kafka craved the company of others, and even sought it out—he was only human after all. However, Kafka most likely also viewed his frequent detachment from his family, his peers, and the world around him as a kind of inevitability—it was simply in his nature to desire to be alone. In his short story, *The Knock at the Manor Gate*, Kafka writes: “Could I still endure any other air than prison air? That is the great question, or rather it would be if I still had any prospect of release” (*The Complete Stories* 419). Kafka not only accepted his cage but embraced it. He painted on its walls, and he transformed his self-confinement into art. He fashioned his misery into comedy, perhaps because being laughed at is preferable to neglect.<sup>41</sup> Like most writers, he made himself a home in solitude and grew accustomed to its comforts.

### *Kafka’s Legal Satire: Absurd Advocates and Ludicrous Laws*

The people of Kafka’s stories are always helplessly afraid in the face of legal institutions and authorities. But their fear is always somewhat of an abstruse conundrum to the reader—we are never quite sure what it is that they fear, and we get the sense that they are not so sure either. Their paralyzed condition begins to seem like a cruel trick, a jest that they have yet to comprehend. Who will enlighten them as to the nature of this joke, and thus relieve them of its cruelty?

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<sup>41</sup> “Unable to get recognition, Kafka’s heroes prefer to be ridiculed rather than ignored. This pathetic kind of humor comes very close to tragedy, and often sobs can be overheard among the peals of laughter” (Collignon 61).

It turns out that the powerless people of Kafka's tales often do not have any messiahs to save them from their cruel and comic plight—their supposed defenders are just as much trapped in this joke as they are. In Kafka's short story, *Advocates*, the narrator is so disoriented and lost that he is unable to even quite tell where he is, and his distress is only intensified by the fact that he desperately needs an advocate, and yet cannot find one anywhere:

I was not at all certain whether I had any advocates, I could not find out anything definite about it, every face was unfriendly...I could not even find out whether we were in a law court. Some facts spoke for it, others against. What reminded me of a law court more than all the details was a droning noise which could be heard incessantly in the distance; one could not tell from which direction it came, it filled every room to such an extent that one had to assume it came from everywhere, or, what seemed more likely, that just the place where one happened to be standing was the very place where the droning originated, but this was probably an illusion, for it came from a distance. (*The Complete Stories* 449)

This passage teems with manic paranoia and lunacy. When Kafka describes the “incessant droning noise”, the reader can practically hear it—it's an all too familiar sound of modernity--and implicitly understand its maddening quality. The narrator speaks of facts but never tells us what they are; the supposed illusion of the droning noise--like every other kind of chimera in Kafka's stories--takes precedence over the facts, and is described with great circumlocution. And this circumlocution—the indirectness, the red herrings, the maze of words—weaves the fabric of Kafka's institutional and bureaucratic literary world.

Kafka's legal work gave him an understanding of what it felt like to be apprehended by a legal apparatus while being simultaneously an outsider to all of its alienating procedures and its

archaic, indecipherable diction. We may think of lawyers (or as Kafka calls them, advocates) as being the harbingers of hope that guide the unlearned commoners through the convoluted labyrinth of our legal institutions, but Kafka's stories cast great doubt on this idea. "Kafka's outsiders never find a champion—instead, they internalize their subjugation to the point where they expect and even learn to enjoy having their claims denied. Kafka suggests a dark world where injustice not only remains unchallenged but is also actively experienced as normal" (Litowitz 107). In his work at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, Kafka must have become deeply familiar with this process of how people were routinely denied restitution by an alienating legal procedure--of how people were dehumanized and reduced to their corresponding files and documents, how they were moved around like chess pieces in a legal game they could not fathom or comprehend. In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka writes about the people the Institute served:

In my four districts—apart from all my other jobs—people fall off the scaffolds as if they were drunk, or fall into the machines, all the beams topple, all embankments give way, all ladders slide, whatever people carry up falls down, whatever they hand down they stumble over. And I have a headache from all these girls in porcelain factories who incessantly throw themselves down the stairs with mounds of dishware. (Kafka, qtd. in Litowitz 110).

This particular writing informs us of how draining Kafka's work was on his own capacity for empathy. Despite the terrible things that may have happened to the workers that the Institute served, Kafka himself seems terribly devoid of any pity for them—their mishaps only mean more work for him, more exhausting and soul-crushing paper-pushing, another gargantuan and headache-inducing bureaucratic mess to resolve. We begin to get a sense of how Kafka's work must have not only frustrated him, but alienated him from his own humanity. Kafka himself

purportedly had a great deal of empathy for others--which seems perfectly synonymous with being a writer, a profession which implicitly entails entering the mental worlds of others. But even the most empathetic among us would be enervated and unfeeling after spending days and weeks adrift in the perennially taxing and depressing oceans of legalese that Kafka had to endure.

Kafka's writing shows that he perceived the endlessness and hopelessness of legal dispute.<sup>42</sup> He saw how it seemed to never lead to resolution, but instead only further complication--not only for himself, but especially for those outside of the legal world who were unfortunate enough to one day find themselves in it. But Kafka also saw the comicality of law—he recognized how it often devolved into a frustrating farce, one in which it felt like the entire system was playing tricks on its participants. The cruelest joke Kafka has to tell about the law might be stated as this: that no one quite understands it, although some—perhaps like Kafka and his cohort at the Institute--will pretend to. The authorities of Kafka's stories claim to understand the law, but there are always hints that they are merely faking their judiciousness or making up the rules as they go along—that they too are as lost and helpless in its labyrinth. Are Kafka's legal tales, then, satirical indictments of this system which alienates everyone involved? Is he

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<sup>42</sup> The end of *Advocates* perfectly illustrates this view of the law—the view that it leads us down interminable paths and generates irresolvable difficulties: “The time allotted to you is so short that if you lose one second you have already lost your whole life, for it is no longer, it is always just as long as the time you lose. So if you have started out on a walk, continue it whatever happens; you can only gain, you run no risk, in the end you may fall over a precipice perhaps, but had you turned back after the first steps and run downstairs you would have fallen at once—and not perhaps but for certain. So if you find nothing in the corridors open the doors, if you find nothing behind these doors there are more floors, and if you find nothing up there, don't worry, just leap up another flight of stairs. As long as you don't stop climbing, the stairs won't end, under your climbing feet they will go on growing upwards” (*The Complete Stories* 451). The narrator of the story is searching for an advocate that may help cease this tiring and endless journey through a boundless and all-enveloping legal system. But he can find no advocate to guide him—he is doomed to wearily chase after a solution that perhaps doesn't exist, through corridors that will likely never end.

passing a lampooning judgment, not only on his colleagues in the legal world, but also on himself? The answers are, of course, not simple—but to some extent, it seems apparent that both must be responded to with a qualified yes.

Kafka certainly didn't see himself or other advocates as being courageous champions of the working-class and the underprivileged, although he technically would have served many of them. Perhaps Kafka would have liked to have been such a hero, since he himself came from a working-class family; but if he did have such an inclination towards valor, he must have felt that desire instantly quashed by a bureaucratic structure that made it impossible to do anything even slightly heroic.<sup>43</sup> His short story, *The New Advocate*, comically riffs on the impossible idea of heroism in the reality of working in a highly bureaucratized and stilted legal system:

We have a new advocate, Dr. Bucephalus. There is little in his appearance to remind you that he was once Alexander of Macedon's battle charger. Of course, if you know his story, you are aware of something.... In general, the Bar approves the admission of Bucephalus. With astonishing insight people tell themselves that, modern society being what it is, Bucephalus is in a difficult position, and therefore, considering also his importance in the history of the world, he deserves at least a friendly reception. Nowadays—it cannot be denied—there is no Alexander the Great. There are plenty of men who know how to murder people; the skill needed to reach over a banqueting table and pink a friend with a lance is not lacking... Many carry swords, but only to brandish them, and the eye that tries to follow them is confused. So perhaps it is really best to do as Bucephalus has

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<sup>43</sup> “Could [Kafka] have convinced anyone that [the Institute] was an outpost of social welfare? Did he himself still believe that? It was a mental cell, barren, dusty, and stuffed with files, like any other government office” (Stach, *The Decisive Years* 293).

done and absorb oneself in law books. In the quiet lamplight, his flanks unhampered by the thighs of a rider, free and far from the clamor of battle, he reads and turns the pages of our ancient tomes. (*The Complete Stories* 415)

Kafka takes the ancient and epic account of Alexander and his horse Bucephalus, and pares it down to a humorously drab legal reality. Legal combat does not take place on a battlefield but on a desk, where the advocate hopelessly hunches over tomes he perhaps hardly comprehends. The gallantry of Bucephalus is diminished to mediocrity—and with Alexander the Great nowhere to be found, there is no valorous warrior to drive this fruitless and aimless crusade. There is no sense of action--no one who knows how to use their weapons, but only uselessly brandish them. Without a fearless rider, Bucephalus apathetically retreats into his law books—there is no one with enough initiative to actually take him to the fight.

The short story that is perhaps most telling of Kafka's view of law is the aptly titled *The Problem of Our Laws*. It echoes much of the same feeling of hopeless surrender that is felt in *The Refusal*, as an unnamed narrator once again tells us of how he and everyone else is unable to understand the nature of the laws that oppress and control them:

Our laws are not generally known; they are kept secret by the small group of nobles who rule us. We are convinced that these ancient laws are scrupulously administered; nevertheless it is an extremely painful thing to be ruled by laws that one does not know...The very existence of these laws, however, is at most a matter of presumption. There is a tradition that they exist and that they are a mystery confided to the nobility, but it is not and cannot be more than a mere tradition sanctioned by age, for the essence of a secret code is that it should remain a mystery. (*The Complete Stories* 437).

What arises again in this story is the idea that the laws themselves and the power they possess is only apparent; they have no tangible reality, yet they wield great influence nonetheless--much like the chief tax collector of *The Refusal*. This power validates itself only through the mechanism of tradition—it legitimizes its dominion only by recurrently enforcing itself as such. But the narrator repeatedly suggests the possibility that these laws are nothing but illusions—that the fear they inspire may in fact be an empty and absurd fear, because it is a fear of nothing whatsoever:

Some of us among the people have attentively scrutinized the doings of the nobility since the earliest times and possess records made by our forefathers--- records which we have conscientiously continued—and claim to recognize amid the countless number of facts certain main tendencies which permit of this or that historical formulation; but when in accordance with these scrupulously tested and logically ordered conclusions we seek to adjust ourselves somewhat for the present or the future, everything becomes uncertain, and our work seems only an intellectual game, for perhaps these laws that we are trying to unravel do not exist at all. There is a small party who are actually of this opinion and who try to show that, if any law exists, it can only be this: The Law is whatever the nobles do... This view, so comfortless as far as the present is concerned, is lightened only by the belief that a time will come when the tradition and our research into it will jointly reach their conclusion, and as it were gain a breathing space, when everything will have become clear, the law will belong to the people, and the nobility will vanish. (*The Complete Stories* 437-438)

While the critical literature about Kafka has shied away from calling him a writer of social criticism, it seems hard to deny that this story carries a penetrating social commentary in tow. What may separate Kafka's satire from what we generally think about satire is that Kafka's seems to be stripped of context—in other words, the “nobility” could be any oppressive ruling class in any political context. While I do not mean to deny Kafka's satire all of its contextual richness—Kafka was undoubtedly drawing on his experience of the legal world in Prague and Eastern Europe--Kafka's portrayal of law feels as if it could be an illustration of almost any civilized society in any given time or place.<sup>44</sup> Kafka is writing a parable about the history of, not just any specific civilization's laws, but about the idea of Law itself—about how Law has been used by sovereign bodies to routinely subjugate people throughout history.

Is Kafka advocating anarchy then? Does his story suggest that the people---whomever they may be—would be better off if they would revolt against and dismantle the governing body which oppresses them? No—and to read Kafka's legal satire as such is to misunderstand the kind of critique he is trying to generate. Kafka does not abhor the idea of Law—he abhors the idea that people must be disconnected from and displaced from the very institutions that control them. His satire is aimed at those who would bow themselves down to an institution that is supposed to be of their own making:

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<sup>44</sup> Vladimir Nabokov once wrote: “The difference between the cosmic and the comic is a sibilant.” Kafka's comedy is cosmic in nature in that his jokes are not tied to any time and place, but are instead aimed at the absurdity of all of human history. There is grandiose scope to Kafka's comic sense—it is why it cannot be bound to poking fun at the particular absurdities of any given era, but instead lampoons the magnificent ridiculousness of life itself. It may help explain why Thomas Mann once called Kafka a “religious humorist”, for Kafka's humor is indeed similar to the humor of biblical and other religious texts—brutal and yet profoundly revealing of the human condition. Kafka's comedy is cosmic because it involves some of our deepest and most philosophical inquiries concerning ourselves—it laughs at our quest for purpose and meaning and the ways in which we constantly fail to even begin that journey.

[Making the law belong to the people] is not maintained in any spirit of hatred against the nobility; not at all, and by no one. We are more inclined to hate ourselves, because we have not yet shown ourselves worthy of being entrusted with the laws... We live on this razor's edge. A writer once summed the matter up in this way: The sole visible and indubitable law that is imposed upon us is the nobility, and must we ourselves deprive ourselves of that one law? (*The Complete Stories* 438).

To not be ruled by any laws is a deprivation rather than a gift. The people then appear to be trapped in an irresolvable dilemma: they despise the oppressive laws that rule over them, and yet they desperately desire for some rule of law to be maintained. And this cruel and comical paradox of their plight only makes them loathe themselves more: because they keep enabling and giving authority to that which oppresses them--because they lend power to the very system that they rail against.

### CHAPTER 3: THE BUREAUCRATIC COMEDY OF THE CASTLE

In many ways, Kafka's final novel, *The Castle*—which he never, in fact, entirely completed—is the epitome of everything else he has ever written. It is marked by all of the usual themes and images that we expect in a Kafka story—the alienated individual, the overwhelming mazes of officialdom, the dark and twisted humor—but they are heightened and synthesized in a monumental way that Kafka had never undertaken before.<sup>45</sup> It is not a stretch to say that Kafka perhaps imagined it would be his magnum opus—as towering a literary achievement as the strange and impervious Castle of Kafka's novel.

It is difficult to explain why Kafka's novel feels grand and epic in its scope, for in truth—in the way of narrative at least—not much occurs. Reiner Stach precisely summarizes the narrative of *The Castle* thus:

[It is the story of] only a man who is inexplicably tenacious about gaining a foothold in a village, a man who lies and masquerades as a land surveyor to better his chances, who gets involved with women in order to make them help him, who picks up whatever information he can get his hands on and lies in wait for hints and innuendos, who puts himself in a position to be thrown out of houses and taverns, and who even performs menial labor without coming a single step closer

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<sup>45</sup> “*The Trial* and *The Castle*, the world of officials and of peasants, and yet the same mythical universe in which neither professional status nor social standing, neither education nor experience, nor ever intellect and social perspicacity actually matter. It is the same process, guided by the same opaque rules—although not in the same phase. ‘The worlds of *The Trial* and *The Castle*,’ Roberto Calasso tells us, ‘run parallel to all other worlds but not to each other. Each is, rather, the extension of the other.’” (Stach, *The Years of Insight* 448). The worlds of Kafka's stories always seem to extend into one another in this way. All of Kafka's stories, in a way, seem to be mere instantiations of the same universe that Kafka dreamt of. Kafka's stories speak to one another. They bleed across the boundaries of beginnings and endings—which is perhaps why Kafka had such a hard time finishing any of them; because he never stopped writing about the same things, Kafka may have never seen any of his work as being quite so easily concluded or separated.

to his goal, which is the ‘castle,’ an extraordinarily complex, unapproachable, and impenetrable authority that gives the ‘land surveyor’ free rein and observes his actions from afar but refuses to grant him any unequivocal information about his status. All of this is told from the limited point of view of the protagonist, in an unhurried rhythm, with long dialogues and episodes from the lives of the villagers painted with a broad brush, and keeps leading into reflections that are both meticulous and fruitless and require patience on the part of the reader. The enormous shadow of the castle is all that holds this together. (Stach, *The Years of Insight* 426)

*The Castle* might be best described as picaresque—although its seemingly disparate episodes, save for a few, are eventually more tightly wound and tied together by the novel’s end. As Stach’s summary insinuates, the action of Kafka’s novel does not happen on the page but instead in the mind of the reader—this is not a novel of dramatic flourishes, but one of deep psychological intensity. What holds it together is, not only the “shadow of the castle,” but also the intrigue and suspense that Kafka generates through his sinuous passages of prose—which may indeed challenge the reader, but, due to the immense level of focus that they require, also force the reader to more intensely delve into the mystery of Kafka’s literary world.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Harman—whose translation this thesis is quoting and referencing—provides some explanation for his choices in translating *The Castle*. “The paragraphs in *The Castle* are extraordinarily long even by the standards of literary German. At the risk of trying the patience of English-speaking readers, I decided to retain them. . . . Kafka’s decision to embed the dialogue in the narrative and to omit most punctuation except for commas and an occasional period lends his prose a breathlessly modern tone. The relentless momentum of Kafka’s prose in *The Castle* was not lost on Samuel Beckett. In a rare 1956 interview with a journalist from the *New York Times* Beckett had the following to say about Kafka’s style: ‘I’ve only read Kafka in German—serious reading—except for a few things in French and English—only *The Castle* in German. . . . You notice how Kafka’s form is classic, it goes on like a steamroller—almost serene.’ Kafka himself could not always tell where his words would lead him: ‘Where then, shall I be brought?’ he asks himself in the diaries not long before sitting down to write *The Castle*. That is a question that we, too, constantly ask ourselves” (Harman, *The Castle* xxi). The passages of *The Castle* absorb the reader into

While it is important to note the magnificent ambition of *The Castle*, this thesis will mainly focus on the elements of Kafka's novel which intersect with humor, laughter, and jokes--of which there is no shortage. As I will show, *The Castle* has similar comic elements to the preceding short stories this thesis has examined. This becomes apparent already only a few pages into the novel when K. refuses to leave his night's lodging at the command of an unknown authority: "The young man now lost his composure, 'The manners of a tramp!' he cried. 'I demand respect for the Count's authorities. I awakened you to inform you that you must leave the Count's domain at once.' 'Enough of this comedy,' said K. in a remarkably soft voice as he lay down and pulled up the blanket'" (*The Castle* 2-3). From the near-beginning of his novel, Kafka is telling us that, despite K.'s protestations, what will ensue is a kind of comedy—albeit, a rather frightening and dark one. Nevertheless, it is important that we recognize that Kafka is not setting the stage for a searing drama, but rather an absurd and nihilistic farce. We will now examine the ways in which this farce plays out.

### *Buffoonish Bureaucrats & Comical Cogs*

K.<sup>47</sup> is initially called to the village on what seems to be a kind of mischievous lark. He is called to do a land-surveying job, but upon his arrival discovers that a land-surveyor is no longer needed. This is all explained to K. at first through a line of communication that is confusing and

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them--they grasp us and refuse to let go. Kafka's prose in English—at least as it looks in Mark Harman's translation—can go on for pages before it is finally indented into a new paragraph, or an incredible number of lines before the sentence reaches its period. This can try the typical English reader's patience, but it also generates a kind of intensity that few other authors demand.

<sup>47</sup> We are only told once in the entire story that K.'s first name is Josef. For the rest of the story, he is only referred to as K. We can readily and justifiably hypothesize that this K. is in some way meant to be a new but similar representation of *The Trial*'s Josef K—both indeed find themselves in similar predicaments in which they must battle some shadowy and seemingly unstoppable institutional force.

frustrating. Schwarzer, one of the first residents that K. meets, speaks to an official on the telephone, and then communicates to K. that no land-surveyor is actually needed and that the initial call for one was a mistake--even though it would seem to make more sense just to *give* K. the telephone to speak to the official directly (*The Castle* 5). This is what the reader comes to expect of Kafka's world of officialdom—it defies sense and turns simple problems into gargantuan and irresolvable conundrums. Kafka is coaxing the reader to see the comical ridiculousness of this entire situation; nevertheless, K. does not see his situation as laughable, but only views it as being a frightening omen of the greater battle against the Castle that lies ahead:

K. listened intently. So the Castle had appointed him land surveyor. On one hand, this was unfavorable, for it showed that the Castle had all necessary information about him, had assessed the opposing forces, and was taking up the struggle with a smile. On the other hand, it was favorable, for it proved to his mind that they underestimated him and that he would enjoy greater freedom than he could have hoped for in the beginning. And if they thought they could keep him terrified all the time simply by acknowledging his surveyorship—though this was certainly a superior move on their part—then they were mistaken, for he felt only a slight shudder, that was all. (*The Castle* 5)

From the beginning of the story, K. views this battle against the Castle as a kind of chess game—he is assessing his advantages and disadvantages and constantly calculating<sup>48</sup> his next move. K.

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Harman has noted that the calculating nature of land-surveying is also meant to convey to us K's cold and calculating personality, which he has quite successfully sustained in his translation of Kafka's novel: "I have sought to make K. as calculating and self-serving in English as he is in the original. For instance, in the first chapter Kafka uses the potentially ambiguous phrase 'nach seinen Berechnungen' to describe K.'s thinking. The Muirs translate that phrase as 'by his reckoning'; I render it as 'according to his calculations' because I hear in it a covert allusion to K.'s calculating nature. Besides, the phrase may be doing double duty here; it could also refer to the ostensible occupation of K., the surveyor, the would-

is constantly on alert—he pretends not to be afraid of what the Castle might do next, but he is unable to deny the shudder that runs through him at the thought. For the reader, this all seems like a farcical prank; for K., this is a terrifying reality. K. is, as Milan Kundera says, trapped in “the guts of the joke,” unable to view its comicality from the outside but instead locked in its horror (Kundera 92).

We get a greater sense of the kind of bureaucratic mischief that K. has found himself in when he meets with the Chairman.<sup>49</sup> K. visits the chairman to inquire as to how it is that he has been mistakenly called to the village. He receives a long-winded and equivocal answer that takes up an entire chapter of Kafka’s novel—one that makes the bureaucratic mess only appear to be larger and more enigmatic than it already was. Stach concisely summarizes this comically convoluted and challenging chapter of the novel as well:

One day, long ago, the [chairman] received a surprising message: A land surveyor was being appointed, and they were to ready all plans and sketches needed for his work. A land surveyor? The [chairman] wrote back that the village sent its thanks, but it had no need of a land surveyor. But this reply went not to the original department—which shall be called A—but to another department, B, and even there it was incomplete; an empty file folder indicated merely that the subject was

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be professional calculator, who is also calculating (‘berechnend’)—a charge, incidentally, that Kafka often leveled against himself” (Harman, *The Castle* xviii). I wholeheartedly accept Harman’s reading of K. as conforming to his employment title. The other personae of *The Castle* seem to follow suit in conforming their personalities to their jobs as well: Frieda, the barmaid, is seductive and flirtatious; Barnabas, the messenger, is servile and self-abnegating; Pepi—who goes from being a chambermaid, to a barmaid, and then back to a chambermaid again—is as flirtatious and supposedly seductive as Frieda when she is a barmaid, but then is portrayed as quite slovenly and sad when she is demoted to being a chambermaid again. Finally, when K. is given a job as the local school’s janitor, he too seems to become more servile and less boastful in his behavior.

<sup>49</sup> Some translations will refer to this character as the “village mayor” or something similar. Harman translates this character as the “chairman”. For the sake of consistency and clarity, I will only refer to him as the chairman.

the appointment of a land surveyor. After months or even years, when the whole matter was nearly forgotten in the village, department B sent the empty folder back for completion. But because the original decree could not be found, the village mayor simply repeated that there was no need for a land surveyor. An extensive correspondence ensued between the [chairman] and department B, where a mistrustful official, who was not satisfied with any of the information, looked into the matter himself. Even so, the origin of the confusion could not be determined, so department B had no choice but to send secretaries to the village to determine whether a land surveyor was or was not needed. After long debates, the town council stated that no land surveyor was needed. By then, however, a supervisory department, C, had discovered that years earlier, a letter from department A had gone unanswered. This correspondence was now repeated, and the mayor replied as he had in the past—this was now the third time—that there was no need whatsoever for a land surveyor. Several more years passed by, until one evening, a stranger suddenly appeared at the Bridge Inn and—astonishingly—introduced himself as the land surveyor who had been appointed by the [C]astle. (Stach, *The Years of Insight* 449).

This excellent summary by Stach speaks to the kind of maze that K. finds himself in; the reader may follow K. down into this labyrinth, but they do so at their peril, for the logic (or rather the illogic) of Kafka's puzzles are likely to dizzy us with their serpentine twists and turns. Perhaps Kafka knew that his readers would attempt to try and parse this bureaucratic mess to find a resolution with K. But that reader is also doomed to miss the greater point of Kafka's novel: that any attempt at finding resolution by solving the puzzle is always futile—the solution is always an

illusion, just as the puzzle is itself. Kafka reserves the last laugh for the reader who realizes this—K. never quite does.

Kafka perceived how modern bureaucracy only further complicated what are at first simple and menial tasks—he saw how it disconnected people from one another, how it displaced the channels of tangible human communication and instead only permitted those lines of communication through the alienating official channels of departments and offices; he saw how what could be accomplished if we would only speak plainly to one another was made perennially and frustratingly difficult by the ambiguous language and the complex procedures of officialdom. Some might say that Kafka takes this lampooning of bureaucracy to hyperbolic extremes, that the bureaucratic messes which Kafka writes about are only exaggerations of what real bureaucratic organization is like. I would rebut this objection by noting that Kafka is drawing on his experiences of bureaucracy in writing about it, and means to portray the realities of bureaucracy rather than a comical unreality of it. Kafka himself experienced a nearly-equivalent kind of bureaucratic miscommunication like the one that the chairman describes to K.:

Several months after writing this episode of the novel, Kafka received a letter from the Prague-Žižkov tax office, dated September 25, 1922, reference number Rp 38/21, in which he was summoned to appear at the bureau and explain when the last capital contributions had been made at the First Prague Asbestos Works, of which he was a partner. Kafka replied immediately that he was quite ill and was therefore unable to appear in person, but he assured them that since 1914—the year in which his brother-in-law Paul Hermann had joined as copartner—there had been no additional accumulation of capital, and that the business in question had been removed from the company register in 1917 and had thus ceased to exist

five years earlier. After a few days, Kafka received another letter from the tax office, asking him what his message meant, and stating that they had no knowledge of an inquiry dated September 25 or of a reference number Rp 38/21. Kafka was baffled, but relieved; he had already paid plenty of supplementary taxes for the factory and had even had to request payment in installments and debt relief. Now he could finally consider the matter settled because if the official file was missing, there was certainly no official awaiting his response. That turned out to be wrong. About a month later, on November 3, the Prague-Žižkov tax office sent another letter: ‘You are requested to answer this letter, dated September 25, 1922, Rp 38/21 within eight days, otherwise we will press charges at the Prague financial district office for the purpose of imposing a fine.’” (Stach, *The Years of Insight* 449-450)

Kafka likely found something funny in the fact that he was being threatened with a punishing fine for a problem that he did not even create—that no matter how hard he tried to resolve what should have been a simple issue, he could not do so due to the lack of clear communication between the different departments of the Prague-Žižkov tax office.<sup>50</sup> Despite being dressed in all of the solemnity of officialdom, Kafka saw through the garb. He saw bureaucracy for what it was: a conglomeration of people who had just as little idea of how to solve the problem—who perhaps cannot even tell what the problem *is*—as the people outside of their organized club. He saw how bureaucratic systems threatened to make us all into buffoonish puppets, unable to act of our own accord, as rational thought would compel us to, but instead doomed to follow official

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<sup>50</sup> Kafka likely found this real-life bureaucratic mistake amusing for the same reason that K. finds his own bureaucratic mess amusing: “‘It amuses me,’ said K., ‘only because it gives me some insight into the ridiculous tangle that may under certain circumstances determine a person’s life’” (*The Castle* 63)

procedures blindly and to defy and disregard our compulsion towards common sense. In short, Kafka sensed how bureaucracy threatened human agency, how it would move the focus from human problems to problems of procedure: “Still, I think two things must be distinguished here, first, what happens inside the offices, which can then be officially interpreted this way or that, and second, the actual person, me, who stands outside these offices and is threatened by those offices” (*The Castle* 65). The bureaucrats of Kafka’s stories, like the chairman, are unable to perceive the *actual person* that stands beyond their bureaucratic issue—they are insuperably disconnected from the needs of others and hopelessly unable to see the ways in which their official decisions (or lack thereof) impinge upon the lives of real and tangible people. The needs of real people are subdued to the commands of protocol, and the officials cannot stop blindly following the procedure that has been laid out for them, even after it has become apparent that the procedure will not resolve anything. The officials of Kafka’s stories turn their human freedom over to an institutional apparatus—although it is trite to say, it is nevertheless true of Kafka’s characters: they are merely cogs in a machine.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> David Foster Wallace suggests that Kafka’s humor is in fact dependent on those idioms and ideas that we consider to be hackneyed or overused—that Kafka’s humor actually needs those truths that so many of us take for granted. “The claim is that Kafka’s funniness depends on some kind of radical literalization of truths that we tend to treat as metaphorical. I opine to [my students] that some of our deepest and most profound collective intuitions seem to be expressible only as figures of speech, that that’s why we call those figures of speech ‘expressions.’ With respect to *The Metamorphosis*, then, I might invite students to consider what is really being expressed when we refer to someone as ‘creepy’ or ‘gross’ or say that somebody was forced to ‘eat shit’ in his job. Or to reread ‘In the Penal Colony’ in light of expressions like ‘tonguelashing’ or ‘She sure tore me a new asshole’ or the gnostic ‘By a certain age, everybody has the face he deserves.’ Or to approach ‘A Hunger Artist’ in terms of tropes like ‘starved for attention’ or ‘love-starved’ or the double entendre in the term ‘self-denial,’ or even as innocent a factoid as that the etymological root of ‘anorexia’ happens to be the Greek word for longing” (Wallace 26). The idea is that Kafka’s comedy speaks to collective truths that we are all in fact well-acquainted with, but that we have pushed below the surface of cognizance. Kafka’s comedy brings those truths to the surface again—it literalizes them and makes them concretely real in a way so that we cannot disregard their significance, no matter how tired we may be of hearing them expressed. Despite dealing in tired tropes and banal realities, Kafka somehow makes them feel new and unique, just as reading *The Castle* makes a stale and timeworn expression like “cog in the machine” take on a new and profound meaning.

Kafka's comedy of this bureaucratic machine is further exemplified by a scene near the end of the novel, during which a servant desperately and hurriedly scampers around a hallway to deliver files to the officials of the Castle. It is a scene, like Jean Collignon and Jeffrey Myers have noted about Kafka's humor already, that echoes the kind of bumbling physical humor of Charlie Chaplin:

The further the work advanced, the less smoothly it went; either the list wasn't entirely accurate or the servant couldn't make out the files, or the [officials] objected on the other grounds, in any case it turned out that some distributions had to be reversed, and then the little cart went back and negotiations for the return of the files was conducted through a crack in the door... Only now did the real difficulties begin. The one [official] who considered himself entitled to the files was extremely impatient, made much noise in his room, clapped his hands, stamped his feet, and repeatedly called out into the corridor through the crack in the door the number of a certain file. Then the little cart was often left quite abandoned. One servant was busy soothing the impatient [official], the other was standing in front of the closed door, fighting for the return of the files. Both had a difficult time of it. The impatient [official] became even more impatient at these efforts to pacify him, could no longer endure the empty words of the servant, for what he wanted was not consolation but rather files; at one point one such [official] emptied, from the opening above, a full washbasin on the servant. (*The Castle* 275-276)

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This scene quickly devolves into pure and parodic slapstick—it is amusing for the reader to imagine some cranky and self-serious official having a temper-tantrum in his room simply because he did not receive the file he wanted, and Kafka certainly does not shy away from ridiculousness in describing how one official even dumps a washbasin on a servant. Yet K. and none of the servants or officials seems to be aware of how their procedure for collecting files and distributing them again has deteriorated into buffoonery—they are entirely unconscious of how ludicrous they appear and how laughable this all is.

However, this farce of cantankerous authority and obeisant servitude does have a moment in which the veil of comedy is pierced—in which the servant seems to become aware of how ridiculous these dictatorial officials are and revolts against the absurdness of their authority:

The intransigence of this servant was especially pleasing to [K.] In the battle against these stubborn little rooms...the servant never let up. True, he was becoming exhausted—who wouldn't have become exhausted? —but, recovering quickly, he slid down from the little cart and, erect, with clenched teeth, had another go at the door that had to be conquered...Since he saw that he couldn't achieve anything through an open attack, he tried another method, relying, if K. understood this properly, on cunning...Pushing aside the other servant, who was only working mechanically and was quite useless as an attendant, he began to address the [official], emphatically, in a whisper, secretively, sticking his head quite far into the room; most likely he was promising him that the other gentleman would be suitably punished during the next distribution, at any rate he often pointed to the opponent's door and laughed, insofar as his weariness allowed. (*The Castle* 278)

The servant succeeds where the attendant fails because the servant escapes the mechanistic response that the attendant cannot resist. In some sense, the servant stops being a “cog in the machine” and begins to act as a free<sup>52</sup> and rational agent, even using something like “cunning”—a trait which K. can hardly believe a person in the village possesses—to find a new way to succeed against the obstinacy of the officials. The servant rebels against an irrational and insentient bureaucratic machine by separating himself from it and by going against a ludicrous and ineffective protocol. By actually *thinking* about how to resolve a problem rather than blindly adhering to procedure, he resists being another caricature of bureaucracy, and therefore resists predictability. He escapes this comedy of authority and servitude, this farce of hierarchy, and becomes something like a rational and thoughtful being—a rare and elusive sight in Kafka’s literary world.

### *Waiting for Deliverance: Kafka’s Last Laugh*

*The Castle* is almost unbearably uneventful—the average reader will quickly become bored by how little occurs in the way of plot or how unacquainted we remain by the novel’s end with its characters’ inner lives. *The Castle* is a novel about waiting: not only because the reader waits for something—anything—of consequence to occur, but because so do the novel’s characters: K. perpetually waits for some message from a Castle official which will resolve his bureaucratic dilemma; Barnabas’ family endlessly waits to be delivered and cleared of guilt for a

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<sup>52</sup> Acquiring freedom seems central to K.’s mission in the novel, and he feels that he must fight the Castle in order to attain it: “Dealing directly with authorities wasn’t all that difficult, for no matter how well organized they were, they only had to defend distant and invisible causes on behalf of remote and invisible gentlemen, whereas he, K., was fighting for something vitally close, for himself, and what’s more of his own free will...” (*The Castle* 57-58).

crime that they didn't commit;<sup>53</sup> the villagers continuously and hopelessly wait for their petitions to be answered.

A particular example of such waiting is illustrated in a scene in which all of the villagers wait for an official named Erlanger outside of the Gentlemen's Inn

It became clear that they were all waiting for Erlanger. Erlanger had already come but was still negotiating with Momus before receiving the parties. The general tenor of the conversation concerned their not being allowed to wait in the building and having to stand outside in the snow. It wasn't very cold, to be sure, nevertheless it was inconsiderate to keep the parties standing in front of the house at night, perhaps for hours." (*The Castle* 240)

The villagers' incessant waiting becomes something of an aggravating punishment—they suffer in their waiting, having to withstand the cold so that they may finally be heard. The villagers even consider constructing a building just so they may wait there instead, but even this would require that the villagers patiently wait for a decision to be made about whether or not to construct one:

On the other hand, the question of whether to construct a building for the waiting parties seemed about to be resolved; still, it was quite a severe punishment for the

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<sup>53</sup> The drama of Barnabas' family—whom are never given a surname—plays out over several chapters in the novel. To shortly summarize it: it involves a rebellious daughter named Amalia who bluntly refuses a vulgar Castle official's sexual advances. Amalia's refusal turns the entire village against her family, making them into social pariahs, ostracized and punished for what Amalia has done. Amalia is one of the few figures in Kafka's literature who successfully and courageously rebukes the authority which attempts to oppress her—unlike her fearful family, she also appears to have no qualms about being ostracized in the village, and perhaps even sees herself as being superior to the entire charade that continuously happens between the Castle and the village. "For some reason, the majority of critics have had their eyes fixed on the character of the land surveyor and have neglected Amalia, who is without a doubt one of the most impressive female figures in Kafka's entire oeuvre. She is a figure who embodies, in exemplary fashion, the antiauthoritarian individualism of the author" (Löwy 96).

landlady—people had a good little laugh over this—that the waiting-room issue required many meetings and that the corridors of the inn were rarely empty...K. found it remarkable that, though there was a great deal of dissatisfaction, nobody had any objection to Erlanger's summoning of the parties in the middle of the night. (*The Castle* 241-242)

Many meetings would have to be had before a firm decision could be made about whether a waiting room is necessary to create so that the villagers can wait more comfortably—we should see how this is quickly beginning to spiral down into absurdity. Moreover, while there is great dissatisfaction in their idling, none of the villagers seem to protest or raise an objection to the incredibly long and arduous delays—instead, they quietly and resignedly endure this ritualized and fruitless waiting.

The villagers are not the only ones left waiting in the cold. This ritual of waiting most apparently presents itself in a chapter of the novel titled—no surprises here—“Waiting for Klamm.”<sup>54</sup> It may also be the moment in which the reader realizes that K. is waiting for an answer that will likely never come:

The wait took longer than K. had expected. He had long since finished the food, it was bitterly cold, the twilight had already yielded to complete darkness, and yet there was still no sign of Klamm. ‘It can take a lot longer,’ said a coarse voice all of a sudden, so close to K. that he started. It was the coachman, who, as if awakening, stretched and yawned loudly... ‘You’ll miss him whether you wait or

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<sup>54</sup> Klamm is a top official of the Castle and K.’s greatest enemy in the novel, although he hardly even materializes as an actual character—which is fitting, as his “name could suggest secretiveness (‘klammheimlich’)” and he therefore must remain out of sight to both K. and the reader (Harmon, *The Castle* xix).

go,’ said the gentleman, whose opinion certainly was dismissive but also showed remarkable indulgence for K.’s train of thought: ‘Then I would rather miss him as I wait,’ said K. defiantly...it seemed to K. as if they had broken off all contact with him, but as if he were freer than ever and could wait as long as he wanted here in this place where he was generally not allowed, and as if he had fought for this freedom for himself in a manner nobody else could have done and as if nobody could touch him or drive him away, or even speak to him, yet—and this conviction was at least equally strong—as if there were nothing more senseless, nothing more desperate, than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability. (*The Castle* 102, 105-106)

K. finds some form of power and agency in choosing to wait—but then this power escapes his grasp in the next sentence when K. immediately “tore himself away and went back toward the house” (*The Castle* 107). K.’s search for Klamm, as the coachman makes clear, will be futile whether he waits or goes—but K.’s defiant response momentarily grants him the freedom he spends the whole novel searching for, although even that too is lost to K. the very instant that it presents itself. This endless waiting never leads to any solutions. And even when this waiting appears to grant a solution to K.—when it seems that K. has found some form of redemption, when Kafka’s prose reaches the heights of dramatic climax and it seems as though he could’ve ended this story at the word “invulnerability”—even then salvation is immediately torn away from K. and once again out of reach.

It seems right that Kafka never finished *The Castle* and that it should have no conclusion at all--that the reader must travel through the winding and dizzying corridors of Kafka’s prose only to find that its passages lead us nowhere. We wait for a satisfying conclusion but, in

Kafkaesque fashion, one of course never arrives.<sup>55</sup> There have been some suggestions for a conclusion to *The Castle*.<sup>56</sup> But perhaps to try and conclude Kafka's novel--which seems to be implicitly about the futility of waiting and about the inability to come to a conclusion--is to vandalize it. The more fitting conclusion for *The Castle* seems to be no conclusion at all. K. waits for deliverance and is wearied by his waiting. K. never even begins his journey towards salvation and yet is exhausted already—he meanders on, with no clear destination foreshadowed or in sight. And why should Kafka foreshadow anything at all? One needs light to throw shadows, and the world of *The Castle* is already nearly pitch-black. What K. wearily chases are not shadows of what is to come, but rather a barely-perceptible light in the tenebrous murk, a dim beacon which continuously retreats from his grasp. Kafka saves the last laugh for himself: its object is the reader who will fruitlessly search for a conclusion, who will uselessly hunt with K. for resolution. Kafka cynically quips: “There is hope, but not for us.” Such is the nature of Kafka's laughter: it resounds from the depths of the dark.

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<sup>55</sup> In his review of Orson Welles' adaptation of *The Trial*, the film critic Roger Ebert writes: “The [revised] ending is problematic. Mushroom clouds are not Kafkaesque because they represent a final conclusion, and in Kafka's world nothing ever concludes” (Ebert). Although different translations and editions of *The Castle* likely have ended Kafka's novel differently, Harman's translation ends mid-sentence so as to be as faithful as possible to Kafka's original manuscript. In an afterword, Malcolm Pasley notes how Max Brod tried to essentially “finish” Kafka's novel and make it appear more complete: “When Kafka died in 1924, Brod rapidly began to make his unpublished works known. He brought out *The Trial* in 1925, *The Castle* in 1926, and *Amerika* in 1927. Of his first edition of *The Castle* Brod later declares: ‘At that time my aim was to present in accessible form an unconventional, disturbing work which had not been quite finished: thus every effort was made to avoid anything that might have emphasized its fragmentary state.’ In order to achieve this he brought the novel to a close at a point which suggested to him that the hero had suffered a ‘probably decisive’ defeat, namely when K. loses Frieda...Almost a fifth of Kafka's text was thus omitted” (Pasley, *The Castle* 318-319).

<sup>56</sup> “According to Thomas Mann's version the book was to end as follows: ‘K. dies—dies out of sheer exhaustion after his desperate effort to get in touch with the Castle and be confirmed in his appointment. The villagers stand about [K.'s] deathbed—when, at the very last moment an order comes down from the Castle: to the effect that while K. has no legal claim to live in the community, yet the permission is nevertheless granted; not in consideration of his honest efforts, but owing to ‘certain auxiliary circumstances,’ it is permitted to him to settle in the village and work there. So at last, grace is vouchsafed’” (Collignon 61-62).

## CONCLUSION: KAFKA'S COMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Perhaps the reason why it remains a struggle to apprehend Kafka in his full image is that so much of his work is itself so fragmentary and broken. Given how short Kafka's life was, his oeuvre is considerably large, even with his usually economical and succinct style. One only needs to read a few pages of Kafka to recognize how painstakingly detail-oriented he was.

Everything in his stories feels as if it has a purpose:

Kafka made language a medium of self-development... There were no empty phrases, no semantic impurities, no weak metaphors—even when he lay in the sand and wrote postcards. His language does not 'flow' out of itself, nor does it ever run aground; it is controlled, like a glowing scalpel that cuts through stone. *Kafka missed nothing, forgot nothing.* There is little evidence of the absentmindedness and boredom he always complained about; on the contrary, his incessant presence of mind is almost painful to witness, because it renders him unapproachable. Someone must stay awake, but this wakefulness deprived him of a sense of home and alienated him from the world and from people, in a mundane and sometimes comical sense (Stach, *The Decisive Years* 10-11).

The wakefulness in Kafka that Stach is referring to is not metaphorical, but literal. Kafka did much of his writing late in the evening, when his family home had become quiet and when he could be alone with his thoughts.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps it is in these hours that Kafka's literary dreams

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<sup>57</sup> "When quiet had finally set late in the evening, Kafka opened the secret compartments of his desk and took out several black and brown octavo notebooks. If the room was freezing, he carried his notebooks, a fountain pen, and a small container of black ink to the living room, where the dying embers provided enough residual warmth and the silence was broken only by the canaries moving under their cloth and by the heavy, elaborately ornamented clock positioned on the sideboard" (Stach, *The Decisive Years* 39).

became most lucid and began to most fully form themselves into the words of his stories.

However, this ceaseless and heightened alertness must have also tormented Kafka as Stach suggests; Kafka had no reprieve from his nightmarish visions.

Kafka's writing is routinely described as dream-like or nightmarish. However, this characterization of Kafka is somewhat misleading, because Kafka's stories are fundamentally about reality rather than our dreams—they are about our waking nightmares and the seemingly unreal, yet ever present terrors of modern social and political life. Kafka's stories attempt to stir us from our quotidian reveries; they aim to shake us awake, to rouse us out of a cyclical and circadian resignation to what we often see as unchangeable and hopeless. There is indeed a dream-like and surreal quality to Kafka's writing—but this is only to convey the ways in which real life can begin to feel surreal. It is why Milan Kundera and countless others cannot read Kafka without being reminded of living in a totalitarian social reality—because such a reality, like Kafka's world, also possesses the unreal yet undeniable actuality of feeling powerless in the face of some ineffable and unstoppable draconian force. However, Kundera maintains that Kafka did not predict this totalitarian future: "Kafka made no prophecies. All he did was see what was 'behind.' He did not know that his seeing was also a foreseeing. He did not intend to unmask a social system. He shed light on the mechanisms he knew from private and microsocial human practice, not suspecting that later developments would put those mechanisms into action" (Kundera 99). Kafka was no seer. He was simply more awake and more conscious than everyone else around him.

The motif of sleep is rife in Kafka's stories: Gregor Samsa awakens to find himself turned into a bug;<sup>58</sup> Josef K. arises from his bed one morning and is arrested for an unnamed crime;<sup>59</sup> within moments of arriving in the village, the already exhausted and weary land-surveyor K. searches for a place to rest.<sup>60</sup> Kafka's heroes may not be able to find salvation because they are constantly incapacitated by their slumberous daze. At the very moment that K. almost finds a resolution to his struggle against the Castle, he is overwhelmed by a tiredness that renders him unable to take action or respond. An official named Bürgel gives K. a long-winded solution to his plight, one which involves sneaking up on the Castle bureaucrats in the night while they too are dazed by sleepiness:

At night [an official] involuntarily inclines to judge matters from a more private point of view, the presentations of the parties are given more weight than should be the case, entirely irrelevant considerations about the parties' circumstances in other respects, their sorrows and their fears, interfere with the judgment, the necessary barrier between parties and officials, even if outwardly still intact, begins to crumble...Surveyor, once one has done this, then the most necessary things have been done, and one must simply content oneself and wait. That was

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<sup>58</sup> "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect... 'What has happened to me?' he thought. It was no dream" (*The Complete Stories* 89).

<sup>59</sup> "Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested. His landlady, Frau Grubach, had a cook who brought him breakfast each day around eight, but this time she didn't appear. That had never happened before. K. waited a while longer, watching from his pillow the old woman who lived across the way" (*The Trial* 3).

<sup>60</sup> "It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay under deep snow...K. stood a long time on the wooden bridge that leads from the main road to the village, gazing upward into the seeming emptiness. Then he went looking for a night's lodging; at the inn they were still awake; the landlord had no room available, but, extremely surprised and confused by the latecomer, he was willing to let K. sleep on a straw mattress in the taproom, K. agreed to this...Yet before long he was awakened" (*The Castle* 1-2)

all K. heard, he was asleep, cut off from everything around him.”<sup>61</sup> (*The Castle* 262-263, 270)

The great Kafkaesque irony of this moment is that K. is too tired himself to even heed what Bürgel is saying to him. The solution is in plain sight, but K. is not wakeful enough to see it.

Despite how painful Kafka’s wakefulness may have been to him, perhaps his stories express nothing less than a fear of being trapped in reverie—a fear of being buried in unconsciousness. This fear of living unconsciously surfaces in the short story, *A Dream*:

Josef K. was dreaming. It was a beautiful day and K. felt like going for a walk. But hardly had he taken a couple of steps when he was already at the cemetery...While he was still peering into the distance, he suddenly saw the grave mound quite near his path, indeed he was almost leaving it behind him...Out some bushes there came [an artist]...With an astonishing turn of skill he managed to produce golden letters from his ordinary pencil; he wrote: HERE LIES---Every letter was clear and beautifully made, deeply incised and of the purest gold...The first small stroke that he made was a relief to K., but the artist obviously achieved it only with the greatest reluctance; the work, too was no longer beautifully finished, above all there seemed to be a lack of gold leaf, pale and uncertain the stroke straggled down, only it turned into a very big letter. It was a J...At long last

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<sup>61</sup> Erich Heller explains this convoluted plan to trick the officials into hearing K.’s petitions thus: “And while K. grows ever more weary, Bürgel delivers, in a rapturous crescendo, the message of the miracle: If a man takes a secretary of the Castle by surprise; if, in the middle of the night, the applicant, almost unconscious of what he does, slips, like a tiny grain through a perfect sieve, through the network of difficulties that is spread over all approaches to the centre of authority, then the Castle, in the person of this one secretary, must yield to the intruder, indeed must almost force the utterly unexpected granting of his request upon the supplicant” (Heller 148-149). In their semi-conscious state, Bürgel suggests that K. may trick the Castle official into granting whatever he requests. In their tired trance, the officials finally become vulnerable to such petitioning.

K. understood him; it was too late to start apologizing now; with all his fingers he dug into the earth which offered almost no resistance; everything seemed prepared beforehand; a thin crust of earth had been constructed only for the look of the thing; immediately beneath it a great hole opened out, with steep sides, into which K. sank, wafted onto his back by a gentle current. And while he was being received into impenetrable depths, his head still straining upwards on his neck, his own name raced across the stone above him in great flourishes. Enchanted by the sight, he woke up. (*The Complete Stories* 399-401).

I have been arguing throughout this thesis that humor is central to Kafka's vision. However, this is a story which feels entirely devoid of humor. There is no comical vein to this story and no dark humor to alleviate its horror, but instead it has the quality of a pure night-terror. Josef K. dreams and is swallowed into his grave. One could say he sleepwalks unto his death. Kafka was well-aware of how cruel waking life could be, but perhaps he was also aware of how easily one could drown in unconsciousness--how tempting, but also how terrifying, it would be to slip into a realm of being in which one no longer has to think or be cognizant of one's surroundings. For Kafka, to live without a sense of humor is to live unconsciously—it is to live as an automaton and to wither in somnambulation. Kafka knows the world is dark and dreary, but he would retain that painful knowledge with a sense of humor rather than give up his humor for ignorance, and one has to know pain before one can laugh. There are many terrors in Kafka's world, but perhaps nothing is as terrifying to him as the death of humor--the death of consciousness itself.

If we are unable to laugh with Kafka, or unable to understand why it is he is even considered humorous, it may be because we are no longer conscious of the kind of realities that Kafka was so pointedly aware of. If you have ever found yourself being the only person in the

room laughing—of being alone in your laughter—it is not necessarily because you lack sanity. It is because you are conscious of something that everyone else is oblivious to; it is because you perceive what others miss, or even prefer to ignore. Kafka's humor is "not only not neurotic but *anti*-neurotic, heroically sane" (Wallace 26). Rather than being compelled by neurosis, Kafka's laughter is a call to retain sanity when it appears that everyone else has lost theirs—it is a response to the illogical realities that so many learn to accept without question, a rebellious cry against all that is nonsensical in our daily lives. Kafka's comedy, then, carries with it an ethics about conscious living and imparts to us the importance of awareness. It compels us to think, to be awake. Through Kafka's humor, we become aware of the absurdity of unjust authority; without humor, we cannot possibly see through the farce. There is a courageous lucidity in Kafka's comedic sense: it refuses to be desensitized to absurdity; it refuses to stop laughing at, to stop mocking what everyone else has resignedly accepted as reality; it refuses to normalize what is ludicrous.

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