

KAFKA'S WORLD

Born in Prague in the twilight years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Kafka (1883–1924) has become the supreme prose poet of 20th-century anxiety. His enigmatic parables—dark, angst-ridden works such as “The Metamorphosis,” *The Castle*, and *The Trial*—have been taken up by critics of every stripe. To Freudians, they demonstrate a thwarted Oedipal rage; to Marxists, the alienation of capitalist society; to existentialists, the loneliness and dread of man in a Godless cosmos; to all sorts of religionists, the desperate search for God. Here, novelist Milan Kundera, himself a former resident of Prague, argues that Kafka uncannily anticipated man’s spiritual condition in a world that was to emerge after his death—the world of the totalitarian state.

by *Milan Kundera*

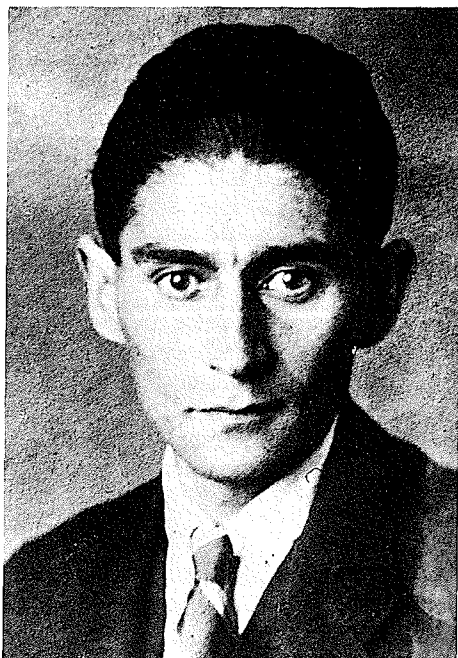
Poets don't invent poems
The poem is somewhere behind
It's been there for a long long time
The poet merely discovers it.
—JAN SKACEL

In one of his books, my friend Josef Skvorecky tells this true story:

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 his 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. His secretary, coming into his office, is shocked to see him: My God, she

A photograph of Kafka taken during the early 1920s. The son of an overbearing merchant, Kafka struggled with feelings of inadequacy all his life. Yet—despite his nocturnal literary labors—he proved to be a competent lawyer for a state insurance agency. Kafka fell in love several times, but he never married. He died of tuberculosis on June 3, 1924, not long after urging his closest friend, Max Brod, to destroy his last writings.



says, you're back! I don't understand—did you see what they wrote about you?

The engineer sees fear in his secretary's eyes. What can he do? He rushes to the *Rude Pravo* office. He finds the editor responsible for the story. The editor apologizes; yes, it really is an awkward business, but he, the editor, has nothing to do with it, he got the text of the article direct from the Ministry of the Interior.

So the engineer goes off to the ministry. There they say yes, of course, it's all a mistake, but they, the ministry, have nothing whatsoever to do with it, they received the report on the engineer from the intelligence people at the London embassy. The engineer asks for a retraction. No, he's told, they never retract, but nothing can happen to him, he has nothing to worry about.

But the engineer does worry. 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*. This term, drawn from an artist's work, determined solely by a novelist's images, stands as the only common adjective for situations (literary or

real) that no other word allows us to grasp, situations to which neither political nor social nor psychological theory gives us any key.

But what is the *Kafkan*?

Let's try to describe some of its aspects:

One: 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. He is therefore in the same situation as Kafka's Joseph K. before the Court, or the Land-Surveyor K. before the Castle. All three are in a world that is nothing but a single, huge labyrinthine institution that they cannot escape and cannot understand.

Novelists before Kafka often exposed institutions as arenas where conflicts between different personal and public interests were played out. In Kafka the institution is a mechanism that obeys its own laws; no one knows now who programmed those laws or when; they have nothing to do with human concerns and are thus unintelligible.



Two: In Chapter Five of *The Castle*, the village mayor explains to K. in detail the long history of his file. Briefly: Years earlier, a proposal to engage a land-surveyor came down to the village from the Castle. The mayor wrote a negative response (there was no need for any land-surveyor), but his reply went astray to the wrong office, and so after an intricate series of bureaucratic misunderstandings, stretching over many years, the job offer was inadvertently sent to K., at the very moment when all the offices involved were in the process of canceling the old obsolete proposal. After a long journey, K. thus arrived in the village by mistake. Still more: Given that for him there is no possible world other than the Castle and its village, his entire existence is a mistake.

In the *Kafkan* world, the file takes on the role of a Platonic idea. It represents true reality, whereas man's physical existence is only a shadow cast on the screen of illusion. Indeed, both the Land-Surveyor K. and the Prague engineer are but the shadows of their file cards; and they are even much less than that: They are the shadows of a mistake in the

Milan Kundera, 59, novelist and essayist, currently lives in Paris. Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, he attended the Film Faculty of the Prague Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts from 1948 to 1950, when he was expelled from the Communist Party. Active in support of the "Prague Spring" reforms of 1968, he was forced to leave his native country seven years later. Among his many novels and short-story collections: Laughable Loves (1974), The Joke (1969, 1983), The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1980) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984). This essay is drawn from Art of the Novel, copyright © 1986 by Milan Kundera. Translated from the original French by Linda Asher. English translation copyright © 1988 by Grove Press, a Division of the Wheatland Corporation. Published by arrangement with Grove Press.

file, shadows without even the right to exist as shadows.

But if man's life is only a shadow and true reality lies elsewhere, in the inaccessible, in the inhuman or the suprahuman, then we suddenly enter the domain of theology. Indeed, Kafka's first commentators explained his novels as religious parables.

Such an interpretation seems to me wrong (because it sees allegory where Kafka grasped concrete situations of human life) but also revealing: Wherever power deifies itself, it automatically produces its own theology; wherever it behaves like God, it awakens religious feelings toward itself; such a world can be described in theological terms.

Kafka did not write religious allegories, but the *Kafkan* (both in reality and in fiction) is inseparable from its theological (or rather: pseudo-theological) dimension.

Three: In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov cannot bear the weight of his guilt, and to find peace he consents to his punishment of his own free will. It's the well-known situation where *the offense seeks the punishment*.

In Kafka the logic is reversed. The person punished does not know the reason for the punishment. The absurdity of the punishment is so unbearable that to find peace the accused needs to find a justification for his penalty: *The punishment seeks the offense*.

The Prague engineer is punished by intensive police surveillance. This punishment demands the crime that was not committed, and the engineer accused of emigrating ends up emigrating in fact. *The punishment has finally found the offense*.

Not knowing what the charges against him are, K. decides, in Chapter Seven of *The Trial*, to examine his whole life, his entire past "down to the smallest details." The "autoculpabilization" machine goes into motion. *The accused seeks his offense*.



One day, Amalia receives an obscene letter from a Castle official. Outraged, she tears it up. The Castle doesn't even need to criticize Amalia's rash behavior. Fear (the same fear our engineer saw in his secretary's eyes) acts all by itself. With no order, no perceptible sign from the Castle, everyone avoids Amalia's family like the plague.

Amalia's father tries to defend his family. But there is a problem: Not only is the source of the verdict impossible to find, but the verdict itself does not exist! To appeal, to request a pardon, you have to be convicted first! The father begs the Castle to proclaim his daughter's crime. So it's not enough to say that the punishment seeks the offense. In this pseudo-theological world, *the punished beg for recognition of their guilt!*

It often happens in Prague nowadays that someone fallen into disgrace cannot find even the most menial job. In vain he asks for certifica-

tion of the fact that he has committed an offense and that his employment is forbidden. The verdict is nowhere to be found. And since in Prague work is a duty laid down by law, he ends up being charged with parasitism; that means he is guilty of avoiding work. *The punishment finds the offense.*



Four: The tale of the Prague engineer is in the nature of a funny story, a joke: It provokes laughter.

Two gentlemen, perfectly ordinary fellows (not “inspectors,” as in the French translation), surprise Joseph K. in bed one morning, tell him he is under arrest, and proceed to eat up his breakfast. K. is a well-disciplined civil servant: Instead of throwing the men out of his flat, he stands in his nightshirt and gives a lengthy self-defense. When Kafka read the first chapter of *The Trial* to his friends, everyone laughed, including the author.

Philip Roth’s imagined film version of *The Castle*: Groucho Marx plays the Land-Surveyor K., with Chico and Harpo as the two assistants. Yes, Roth is quite right: The comic is inseparable from the essence of the *Kafkan*.

But it’s 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 a joke, into the horror of the comic.

In the world of the *Kafkan*, the comic is not a counterpoint to the tragic (the tragi-comic) 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. The engineer loses his homeland, and everyone laughs.

There are periods of modern history when life resembles the novels of Kafka.

When I was still living in Prague, I would frequently hear people refer to the Party headquarters (an ugly, rather modern building) as “the Castle.” Just as frequently, I would hear the Party’s second-in-command (a certain Comrade Mendrych) called “Klamm” (which was all the more beautiful as *klam* in Czech means “mirage” or “fraud”).

The poet A., a great Communist personage, was imprisoned after a Stalinist trial during the 1950s. In his cell he wrote a collection of poems in which he declared himself faithful to communism despite all the horrors he had experienced. That was not out of cowardice. The poet saw his faithfulness (faithfulness to his persecutors) as the mark of his virtue, of his rectitude. Those in Prague who came to know of this collection

gave it, with fine irony, the title "The Gratitude of Joseph K."

The images, the situations, and even the individual sentences of Kafka's novels were part of life in Prague.

That said, one might be tempted to conclude: Kafka's images are alive in Prague because they anticipate totalitarian society.

This claim, however, needs to be corrected: The *Kafkan* is not a sociological or a political notion. Attempts have been made to explain Kafka's novels as a critique of industrial society, of exploitation, alienation, bourgeois morality—of capitalism, in a word. But there is almost nothing of the constituents of capitalism in Kafka's universe: not money or its power, not commerce, not property and owners or anything about the class struggle.

Neither does the *Kafkan* correspond to a definition of totalitarianism. In Kafka's novels, there is neither the party nor ideology and its jargon, nor politics, the police, or the army.

So we should rather say that the *Kafkan* represents one fundamental possibility of man and his world, a possibility that is not historically determined and that accompanies man more or less eternally.

But this correction does not dispose of the question: How is it possible that in Prague, Kafka's novels merge with real life, while in Paris, the same novels are read as the hermetic expression of an author's entirely subjective world? Does this mean that the possibility of man and his world known as *Kafkan* becomes concrete personal destiny more readily in Prague than in Paris?



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.

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?

Mystifications and legends aside, there is no significant trace anywhere of Franz Kafka's political interests; in that sense, he is different from all his Prague friends, from Max Brod, Franz Werfel, Egon Erwin Kisch, and from all the avant-gardes who, claiming to know the direction of History, indulged in conjuring up the face of the future.

So how is it that not their works but those of their solitary, introverted companion, immersed in his own life and his art, are recognized today as a sociopolitical prophecy, and are for that very reason banned in a large part of the world?

I pondered this mystery one day after witnessing a little scene in the home of an old friend of mine. The woman in question had been arrested in 1951 during the Stalinist trials in Prague, and convicted of crimes she hadn't committed. Hundreds of Communists were in the same situation at the time. All their lives they had entirely identified themselves with their Party. When it suddenly became their prosecutor, they agreed, like Joseph K., "to examine their whole lives, their entire past, down to the smallest details" to find the hidden offense and, in the end, to confess to imaginary crimes. My friend managed to save her own life because she had the extraordinary courage to refuse to undertake—as her comrades did, as the poet A. did—the "search for her offense." Refusing to assist her persecutors, she became unusable for the final show trial. So instead of being hanged she got away with life imprison-



Kafka's bleakly suggestive drawings reveal as much about his interior life as his prose does. "I've no qualifications for life, so far as I know, except the usual human weakness," he wrote in 1918. "With this—in this respect it's an enormous strength—I've vigorously incorporated what's negative in my period, which is very close to me, and I've no right ever to go against it, only in some measure to represent it."

ment. After 14 years, she was completely rehabilitated and released.

This woman had a one-year-old child when she was arrested. On release from prison, she thus rejoined her 15-year-old son and had the joy of sharing her humble solitude with him from then on. That she became passionately attached to the boy is entirely comprehensible. One day I went to see them—by then her son was 25. The mother, hurt and angry, was crying. The cause was utterly trivial: The son had overslept or something like that. I asked the mother: “Why get so upset over such a trifle? Is it worth crying about? Aren’t you overdoing it?”

It was the son who answered for his mother: “No, my mother’s not overdoing it. My mother is a splendid, brave woman. She resisted when everyone else cracked. She wants me to become a real man. It’s true, all I did was oversleep, but what my mother reproached me for is something much deeper. It’s my attitude. My selfish attitude. I want to become what my mother wants me to be. And with you as witness, I promise her I will.”

What the Party never managed to do to the mother the mother had managed to do to her son. She had forced him to identify with an absurd accusation, to “seek his offense,” to make a public confession. I looked on, dumbfounded, at this Stalinist mini-trial, and I understood all at once that the psychological mechanisms that function in great (apparently incredible and inhuman) historical events are the same as those that regulate private (quite ordinary and very human) situations.

The famous letter Kafka wrote and never sent to his father demonstrates that it was from the family, from the relationship between the child and the deified power of the parents, that Kafka drew his knowledge of the *technique of culpabilization*, which became a major theme of his fiction. In “The Judgment,” a short story intimately bound up with the author’s family experience, the father accuses the son and commands him to drown himself. The son accepts his fictitious guilt and throws himself into the river as docilely as, in a later work, his successor Joseph K., indicted by a mysterious organization, goes to be slaughtered. The similarity between the two accusations, the two culpabilizations, and the two executions reveals the link, in Kafka’s work, between the family’s private “totalitarianism” and that in his great social visions.



Totalitarian society, especially in its more extreme versions, tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent. The ideal of life without secrets corresponds to the ideal of the exemplary family: A citizen does not have the right to hide anything at all from the Party or the State, just as a child has no right to keep a secret from his father or his mother. In their propaganda, totalitarian societies project an idyllic smile: They want to be seen as “one big family.”

It's often said that Kafka's novels express a passionate desire for community and human contact, that the rootless being who is K. has only one goal: to overcome the curse of solitude. Now, this is not only a cliché, a reductive interpretation; it is a misinterpretation.

The Land-Surveyor K. is not in the least pursuing people and their warmth, he is not trying to become "a man among men" like Sartre's Orestes; he wants acceptance not from a community but from an institution. To have it, he must pay dearly: He must renounce his solitude. And this is his hell: He is never alone. The two assistants sent by the Castle follow him always. When he first makes love with Frieda, the two men are there, sitting on the cafe counter over the lovers, and from then on they are never absent from their bed.

It is not the curse of solitude but the violation of solitude that is Kafka's obsession!



Karl Rossmann is constantly being harassed by everybody: His clothes are sold; his only photo of his parents is taken away; in the dormitory, beside his bed, boys box and now and again fall on top of him; two roughnecks named Robinson and Delamarche force him to move in with them and fat Brunelda, whose moans resound through his sleep.

Joseph K.'s story also begins with the rape of privacy: Two unknown men come to arrest him in bed. From that day on, he never feels alone. The Court follows him, watches him, talks to him; his own private life disappears bit by bit, swallowed up by the mysterious organization that is always on his heels.

Lyrical souls who like to preach the abolition of secrets and the transparency of private life do not realize the nature of the process they are unleashing. The starting point of totalitarianism resembles the beginning of *The Trial*: You'll be taken unawares in your bed. They'll come just as your father and mother used to.

People often wonder whether Kafka's novels are projections of the author's most personal and private conflicts, or descriptions of an objective "social machine."

The *Kafkan* is not restricted to either the private or the public domain; it encompasses both. The public is the mirror of the private, the private reflects the public.

In speaking of the microsocial practices that generate the *Kafkan*, I mean not only the family but also the organization in which Kafka spent all his adult life: the office.

Kafka's heroes are often seen as allegorical projections of the intellectual, but there's nothing intellectual about Gregor Samsa. When he wakes up metamorphosed into a beetle, he has only one concern: in this new state, how to get to the office on time. In his head he has nothing but the obedience and discipline to which his profession has accustomed

him: He's an employee, a functionary, as are all Kafka's characters; a functionary not in the sense of a sociological type (as in Zola) but as one human possibility, as one of the elementary ways of being.

In the bureaucratic world of the functionary, first, there is no initiative, no invention, no freedom of action; there are only orders and rules: It is the world of obedience.

Second, the functionary performs a small part of a large administrative activity whose aim and horizons he cannot see: It is the world where actions have become mechanical and people do not know the meaning of what they do.

Third, the functionary deals only with unknown persons and with files: It is the world of the abstract.

To place a novel in this world of obedience, of the mechanical, and of the abstract, where the only human adventure is to move from one office to another, seems to run counter to the very essence of epic poetry. Thus the question: How has Kafka managed to transform such gray, antipoetical material into fascinating novels?

The answer can be found in a letter he wrote to Milena: "The office is not a stupid institution; it belongs more to the realm of the fantastic than of the stupid." The sentence contains one of Kafka's greatest secrets. He saw what no one else could see: not only the enormous importance of the bureaucratic phenomenon for man, for his condition and for his future, but also (even more surprisingly) the poetic potential contained in the phantasmic nature of offices.

But what does it mean to say that the modern office belongs to the realm of the fantastic?

Skvorecky's engineer would understand: A mistake in his file projected him to London; so he wandered around Prague, a veritable phantom, seeking his lost body, while the offices he visited seemed to him a boundless labyrinth from some unknown mythology.



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 antipoetic 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.

By expanding a bureaucratic setting to the gigantic dimensions of a universe, Kafka unwittingly succeeded in creating an image that fascinates us by its resemblance to a society he never knew, that of today's totalitarian state.

A totalitarian state is, in fact, a single, immense administration: Since all work in it is for the state, everyone of every occupation has

become an employee. A worker is no longer a worker, a judge no longer a judge, a shopkeeper no longer a shopkeeper, a priest no longer a priest; they are all functionaries of the state. "I belong to the Court," the priest says to Joseph K. in the cathedral. In Kafka, the lawyers, too, work for the Court. A citizen in today's Prague does not find that surprising. He would get no better legal defense than K. did. His lawyers don't work for the defendants either, but for the Court.



In a cycle of one hundred quatrains that sound the gravest and most complex depths with an almost childlike simplicity, the great Czech poet Jan Skacel writes:

Poets don't invent poems
 The poem is somewhere behind
 It's been there for a long long time
 The poet merely discovers it.

For the poet, then, writing means breaking through a wall behind which something immutable ("the poem") lies hidden in darkness. That's why (because of this surprising and sudden unveiling) "the poem" strikes us first as a dazzlement.

I read *The Castle* for the first time when I was 14, and the book will never enchant me so thoroughly again, even though all the vast understanding it contains (all the real import of the *Kafkan*) was comprehensible to me then: I was dazzled.

Later on my eyes adjusted to the light of "the poem" and I began to see my own lived experience in what had dazzled me; yet the light was still there.

"The poem," says Jan Skacel, has been waiting for us, immutable, "for a long long time." However, in a world of perpetual change, is the immutable not a mere illusion?

No. Every situation is of man's making and can only contain what man contains; thus one can imagine that the situation (and all its metaphysical implications) has existed as a human possibility "for a long long time."

But in that case, what does History (the ever-changing) represent for the poet?

In the eyes of the poet, strange as it may seem, History is in a position similar to the poet's own: History does not invent, it discovers. Through new situations, History reveals what man is, what has been in him "for a long long time," what his possibilities are.

If "the poem" is already there, then it would be illogical to impute to the poet the gift of foresight; no, he "only discovers" a human possibility ("the poem" that has been there "a long long time") that History will

in its turn discover one day.

Kafka made no prophecies. All he did was see what was "behind." He did not know that his seeing was also a fore-seeing. 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 on the great stage of History.

The hypnotic eye of power, the desperate search for one's own offense, exclusion and the anguish of being excluded, the condemnation to conformism, the phantasmic nature of reality and the magical reality of the file, the perpetual rape of private life, etc.—all these experiments that History has performed on man in its immense test tubes, Kafka performed (some years earlier) in his novels.

The convergence of the real world of totalitarian states with Kafka's "poem" will always be somewhat uncanny, and it will always bear witness that the poet's act, in its very essence, is incalculable; and paradoxical: The enormous social, political, and "prophetic" import of Kafka's novels lies precisely in their "nonengagement," that is to say, in their total autonomy from all political programs, ideological concepts, and futurological prognoses.

Indeed, if instead of seeking "the poem" hidden "somewhere behind," the poet "engages" himself to the service of a truth known from the outset (which comes forward on its own and is "out in front"), he has renounced the mission of poetry. And it matters little whether the preconceived truth is called revolution or dissidence, Christian faith or atheism, whether it is more justified or less justified; a poet who serves any truth other than the truth to be discovered (which is dazzlement) is a false poet.

If I hold so ardently to the legacy of Kafka, if I defend it as my personal heritage, it is not because I think it worthwhile to imitate the inimitable (and rediscover the *Kafkan*) but because it is such a tremendous example of the radical autonomy of the novel (of the poetry that is the novel). This autonomy allowed Franz Kafka to say things about our human condition (as it reveals itself in our century) that no social or political thought could ever tell us.
