Five. The World of Law as Pasteboard Mask

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CHAPTER FIVE

The World of Law
as Pasteboard Mask

Hark ye yet again—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?

Captain Ahab

1. Franz Kafka: Nonentity and the Tragic

The metaphor of captivity is obviously an apt one for the modern tragic visionary. It establishes him as outlaw, with the ethical world as his enemy and his judge, and fixes his role as the unyielding rebel who must continually try to thrust through the wall with which society contains him. Or his captivity may be viewed as metaphysical, with all of existence seen as an imprisonment within the blankness of enigmatic nothingness that threatens at any moment to strike. Is there a way in which both social and metaphysical levels may be urged at once, with the first seen finally as a symbolic reduction of the second? If so, the rebellion of the prisoner must be seen also as more than anti-legal, as one made not against the rest of us but in the name of
the rest of us against the universal imprisoning agent that, implacable, threatens all alike.

The meaning of Kafka's *The Trial* rests precisely on how this issue is resolved: who is the imprisoning agent and in accordance with what law does he imprison? Or we may put it in terms of Ahab's metaphor: how reasoning is the unknown thing and what is its relation to its unreasoning mask? We seem to be offered the choice of approaching the novel politically or theologically. That is, we may view Joseph K. as innocent and the Court as exclusively irrational and unjust; or we may view K. as guilty and the Court as rational and just, even if its rationality and justice are incomprehensible to K. The first approach would seem to neglect the considerable evidence in the novel pointing to K.'s guilt as the second overrides the absurdities and contradictions of the Court as well as the evidence of its rottenness.

Of course, if one tries hard enough, he can manage all the evidence without giving up his hypothesis. Thus the political reader could say that K.'s frequent awareness of his guilt argues for rather than against a political interpretation, that it is not a sign of the Court's justice but a symptom of K.'s brain-washing by the ruthless organization that has badgered him into submission. And whatever hints there may be that the Court knows what it is doing—if they are more than the delusions, distortions read in by K.'s tormented soul—could be seen as suggesting the purposeful and even single-minded malevolence that lurks deceptively behind the seeming indifference of bureaucratic caprice. Thus one interpretation of Ahab's "reasoning thing" that tricks us and even lulls us with "the unreasoning mask." On the other hand, the theological reader could even more simply dispose of all arguments by merely reading all evidence for K. or against the Court as further indications of the inscrutability of the ways of God to man. The more absurd and the more unacceptable, the more conclusive it is in pointing to the Kierkegaardian deity and his trembling subject.

But how finally convincing are these claims? Is it not sophistic to make quite so free with Kafka's feverish insights,
to unbend so blithely these involute coils that struggle to project Kafka's tortured imagination? Would he have made the problem of guilt seem so primary and developed it so carefully if he meant it all to be read as mere neurotic distortions? Or would he have shown the Court's contradictions to find expression in a corruptness that takes unquestionably obscene forms if he merely wished to emphasize its apparent absurdities? Are the details of the novel so casual and Kafka's shocking specification so wayward that they allow us to dismiss all indifferently as so many examples either of the cruel toying with K. or the austere baffling of him?

What can be gained by our worrying Kafka's details as if they were significant in their selection? Mainly, in being more attentive we could be more empirical instead of forcing *The Trial*, for all its complexity and, more important, its dramatic urgency, into a prearranged allegorical scheme. The more thoroughly we dwell on these details the more difficult it becomes to translate them convincingly into any single conceptual pattern. But we may be wrong if, seeing the disingenuousness of straining to marshal them to prove an argument, we rather consign them to the miscellaneous absurd that disguises an unambiguous theological commitment or to the senselessness that calls for psychoanalysis rather than criticism. And it is not mere obscurantism to urge that the novel resists systematic interpretation. We learn painfully that our intellect must suffer anticlimax upon anticlimax. Each time we meet someone apparently on the inside, the promise of illumination evaporates once again into the airiness of contradiction. Finally, in the Cathedral, we are certain that the Priest is about to present us with the key—and so he does, except that it locks closed doors instead of opening them. For every possible explanation of a crucial moment in his parable, an alternative and opposed explanation is also advanced. And the two are left standing side by side, so that this scene turns out to be but another version of our earlier disappointments at the hands of well-meaning informants like Huld and Titorelli, whose explanations of the workings of the Court also
Franz Kafka throw up obstacles to every approach that is confidently undertaken until only the riddle remains before us, unapproachable but still beckoning from afar, still thrusting forth its elusive and delusive emissaries.

Kafka's method is not to be confused with the dialectic of Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* when he tries to approach the inmost secret of the *Akedab*, the Abraham-Isaac story. For there the many possible meanings eliminate each other in order to point to a final interpretation that is to be seen as inevitable. There is a way right up to the parable, and one only. For Kafka there is only the irreducible dramatic complex that is his fable, Aristotelian and not Aesopian. It will not open to any discursive probing. If his terms do not translate into a single answer, it is not because he perversely and mockingly prefers to hide it but because he has not got it. As a poet who thinks in images, Kafka as fable maker sees the maddening nest of possible and yet incompatible relations as somehow being out there in experience, embedded in it, but beyond rational extrapolation. He is not an allegorist, not because he will not be one, but because he cannot. Indeed, it often seems that, unlike many poets, Kafka would have preferred to be one. Perhaps as a would-be allegorist, it is his inability to find a solution that causes the unfinished state of his work, so that in the strange case of Kafka metaphysical incompleteness causes aesthetic incompleteness. Often, as we saw, for example, in Gide with his "state of dialogue," philosophic confusion can, through the tension generated by the conflict, allow the poetic realm its power and its balance. But not so for Kafka, dependent as he was upon an allegory that would not come. Yet it is our blessing that it would not, that his struggles with the mass of paradoxical possibilities only created absurdities beyond which he could not move even as within them he could not rest. For what he thought of as his failure is, by very reason of that failure, of indispensable help to us.

The most serious problem that concerns K.'s guilt must, then, be approached from below, from the details of the novel,
and these more from the narrative itself than from mere occa­sional admissions by K. or continual insistences by the Court. Ev­idence of the latter sort that stems from direct testimony occurs in abundance from the start: from that time K. seemingly without reason considers the possibility of suicide and blurts out, “But this isn’t the capital charge yet,” (14) and from the early claims by the not very respectable warders that even the lowest Court officials can make no mistake and “never go hunting for crime in the populace, but, as the Law decrees, are drawn towards the guilty . . .” (10). But we need more narrative sup­port if we are to know how we are to take these apparent confessions and claims, since there is so much in the novel to counteract them. K.‘s guilt is most persuasively revealed by his failure of the test he undergoes through the story. He has of course been similarly guilty before his arrest. We must remem­ber that, if the most fearsome characteristic of the Court under which K. suffers is its mystique of hierarchy, this is precisely the characteristic of his role in the Bank that K. has most cherished and throughout the novel tries to protect. After his preliminary interview with the Inspector, K. is left greatly disturbed by the discovery that all has been witnessed by three of his bank clerks and, even more, by the fact that the Inspector refers to them as his “colleagues”:

These insignificant anaemic young men . . . were actually clerks in the Bank, not colleagues of his, that was putting it too strongly and indicated a gap in the omniscience of the In­spector, but they were subordinate employees of the Bank all the same. (21)

It does not occur to him that the Inspector does not bother to recognize these trivial distinctions, perhaps out of a self-im­portance that characterizes the Court’s mystique of hierarchy,

against which K. is bitterly to complain and of which his own is a reflection. And later, back at the Bank, he tries to relax:

Once order was restored, every trace of these events would be obliterated and things would resume their old course. From the three clerks themselves nothing was to be feared; they had been absorbed once more in the great hierarchy of the Bank, no change was to be remarked in them. K. had several times called them singly and collectively to his room, with no other purpose than to observe them; each time he had dismissed them again with a quiet mind. (24)

The dull "aesthetic" routine of K.'s life must be restored, the routine of the Bank and even the routine of the evenings:

That spring K. had been accustomed to pass his evenings in this way: after work whenever possible—he was usually in his office until nine—he would take a short walk, alone or with some of his colleagues, and then go to a beer hall, where until eleven he sat at a table patronized mostly by elderly men. But there were exceptions to this routine, when, for instance, the Manager of the Bank, who highly valued his diligence and reliability, invited him for a drive or for dinner at his villa. And once a week K. visited a girl called Elsa, who was on duty all night till early morning as a waitress in a cabaret and during the day received her visitors in bed. (23)

It is just this loyalty to his routine role that leads him to betray a rare human impulse. The moment occurs during the nightmarish scene in the lumber room where K. discovers the original two warders about to be whipped, apparently because of his complaint against them. Since K.'s struggle is not with the pitiful creatures but with the Court, he feels called upon to intervene on behalf of Franz and Willem. He tries to bribe the whipper without immediate success. But K. breaks off the possibility of further negotiation when, after Franz shrieks at the first stroke and the bank clerks are about to appear, he slams the door on the scene. And to protect himself further he turns
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the clerks away, accounting for the noise as “only a dog howling in the courtyard” (110). Earlier in the scene K. had told the whipper, speaking of his concern for the warders, “I could simply leave, shut this door after me, close my eyes and ears, and go home; but I don’t want to do that, I really want to see them set free . . .” (109). Of course he does do precisely what he wanted not to do as soon as his intervention threatens to compromise him. After turning his back on the scene, K. laments how, if Franz had controlled himself and thus given K. a few more moments with the whipper, he would probably have succeeded in liberating the warders.

But at the moment when Franz began to shriek, any intervention became impossible. K. could not afford to let the dispatch clerks and possibly all sorts of other people arrive and surprise him in a scene with these creatures in the lumber-room. No one could really demand that sacrifice from him. (111)

Yet K. is given other chances to commit himself to save those whose punishment he has caused. After the clerks withdraw, he passes the lumber room and almost opens the door once more. But it is too late, he persuades himself, promising to make the Court officials pay for their crimes. Late the next day he does open the door only to find the identical scene as the day before, the whipper ready to whip and the warders ready to plead. But not again for K.: “At once K. slammed the door shut and beat on it with his fists, as if that would shut it still more securely” (113). And he orders the clerks to clean the room out, to introduce into it the order of the Bank that would render it proof to further discomforting invasions. He must have succeeded, for neither he nor we hear further of the warders he has three times denied.

Thus, despite the shock of arrest that disrupts the routine of the Bank executive’s career, he yet clings to it, unaware that in its mystique of hierarchy the Bank is essentially allied to the absurdities of the Court that madden him. Nor does he recognize that he cannot protect his role in the Bank without protecting
the Court; that he cannot secure the former without helping the latter to destroy all security; finally, that his allegiance to his pre-shock ambitions deprives him of the right to make his self-righteous claims against the mystagogic proceedings of the Court. Yet, contradictory as they seem, K. must desperately hang onto both sets of values—the pre-shock and the post-shock, those of the Bank careerist and of him who would resist the Court. Committed as he is to his defense, he is always regretfully aware of “what an obstacle had suddenly arisen to block K.’s career!” (168) As he thinks of drawing up his plea, he comes to see how much his work for the Bank is suffering at the hands of his work against the Court:

But at this time when K. should be devoting his mind entirely to work, when every hour was hurried and crowded—for he was still in full career and rapidly becoming a rival even to the Deputy Manager—when his evenings and nights were all too short for the pleasures of a bachelor life, this was the time when he must sit down to such a task! (162)

But the Bank routine does suffer as his distraction grows—and his position at the Bank (and, apparently, before the Court) worsens. Even the submerged aggressiveness of the paranoiac finally reveals itself as K. suspects plots are being laid against him and can soothe himself while thinking of the ascendency of his rival, the Deputy Manager, only with the promise: “I’m not equal to him just now, but once my personal difficulties are settled he’ll be the first to feel it, and I’ll make him suffer for it, too” (177).

K. can yet ask, in words that significantly relate the world of the Bank to the world of the Court and that link his guilt at Court to his refusal to abandon his pursuit of the Bank hierarchy:

While his case was unfolding itself, while up in the attics the Court clerks were poring over the charge papers, was he to devote his attention to the affairs of the Bank? It looked like a
kind of torture sanctioned by the Court, arising from his case and concomitant with it. And would allowances be made for his peculiar position when his work in the Bank came to be judged? Never, and by nobody. (168)

So the Court’s is not the only final judgment whose mysterious source K. must fear. The torture does indeed seem to be sanctioned by the Court, as both torture and test: perhaps every absurdity about the Court becomes a kind of punishment as appropriate for K. as those we find designed for the damned in Dante. For K.’s is not any abstract doctrinal guilt; it is a clearly specified guilt found in his acts and attitudes. We need not restrict ourselves to notions of an original sin shared with all men when the novel furnishes us with a convincing dossier—though, of course, it may be a dossier similar to those we could make on all men. K. concedes as much when, having determined to bend all his business talents to undertake his own defense and to “eliminate from his mind the idea of possible guilt” (160), he sees that in his first plea “the whole of one’s life would have to be passed in review, down to the smallest actions and accidents, clearly formulated and examined from every angle” (162). This is an admission of the extensive possibilities of guilt in what is being charged, and we have already seen in general and in detail how vulnerable K.’s life, like everyone’s, is to such austere and exhaustive probing. K.’s anxieties over these hopeless difficulties lead to his collapse before the manufacturer’s important business deal, as he gratefully sees it taken over by his hated rival, the Deputy Manager.

We are beginning to see, then, that there is also in K. that which dedicates him to the obsessive pursuit of his case and of his fight against the Court, whatever the cost to his career. For K. is also a special sort of antagonist of the Court—even a rebel against it in his unrelenting guardianship of his “rights” (161) and his dedication to matters of ethical “principle” (107). It is these opposed drives—for the Bank affairs (leading to collaboration with the Court) and against the Court (leading to subver-
sion of the Bank affairs)—that tear K. apart. They can perhaps allow us to make some sense of the paradox that finds K. both utterly unique and a mere common cipher before the Court. Of course many others besides K. have been accused, have presumably been arrested one fine morning without having done anything wrong. The essence of the Court and of the Law, especially as revealed in the bureaucratic form they take in this novel, is to treat man generically rather than uniquely. It must be granted that much of what seems unique in what happens to K. may stem from the fact that his subjective view is all we have, that each case is surely individual to the man on trial, and that for him the question of guilt and injustice is unique. In Malraux’s terms—terms that reveal his existentialist bias—K.’s is a voice we hear with the throat rather than with the ears, the voice of “the madman . . . the incomparable monster, dear above all things, that every being is to himself and that he cherishes in his heart” (Man’s Fate, 59). So in one sense the uniqueness of the commonplace K.—commonplace in the Bank and commonplace before the Court—can be traced, it may seem, to the uniqueness of his existential moment, like those of all of us when viewed by the world of law and reason, but totally unique when viewed subjectively. It is the uniqueness of his nightmare that Conrad’s Marlow will tell us one dreams alone and cannot communicate. To the extent that we are limited by K.’s view and K.’s subjective awareness, we may be foolish to look here for objective claims about the nature and extent of man’s generic guilt.

Yet much of K.’s treatment is unique, it seems, even to the special and sometimes loving pains many people connected with the Court take with him, while at the same time it is the impersonal inefficiency of the enormous machine that maddens him. This impossibly messy and corrupt octopus, the ubiquitous Court, is yet one which overlooks no one, loses no documents, “never forgets anything” (199). Left on his own to get to Court that first Sunday, K. is lost in the human wilderness of the building but decides to manage his way himself, confirming—in
what is a strange admission—that if as Willem said “an attraction
existed between the Law and guilt” (45), then he would neces­
sarily choose the alternatives that would lead him to the inter­rogation chamber. He asks fruitlessly at door after door for a
man whose name he has invented and, with no further questions
asked about the man or K.’s quest, is admitted at once and
knowingly to the chamber by a woman who tells him, “I must
shut this door after you, nobody else must come in” (47). Surely
this line echoes menacingly in the priest’s parable at the end
when the doorkeeper tells the man waiting a lifetime for ad­mittance to the Law, who wonders about all the others who must
be seeking similarly, “No one but you could gain admittance
through this door, since this door was intended only for you.
I am now going to shut it” (270–271).

This network of insolubles is connected to that other which
finds in various forms the repeated assertion that, while K. has
been arrested for guilt by a Court that has sought him out, the
arrest and the trial can take place only through K.’s collabora­
tion: only, that is to say, if he recognizes them as such. The
morning of his arrest he makes various small concessions that he
feels compelled to make even though he senses with the shrewd­ness of his business tact that he should not be making them since
they constitute an acknowledgment of the rationality and per­
haps even the justness of the absurd procedures that have begun
to unfold. And he never gets over the feeling that, if he had
insisted on his routine that morning and had recognized nothing
amiss, all would have evaporated. As he tells Frau Grubach,

If immediately on wakening I had got up without troubling my
head about Anna’s absence and had come to you without re­
garding anyone who tried to bar my way, I could have break­
fasted in the kitchen for a change and could have got you to
bring me my clothes from my room; in short, if I had behaved
sensibly, nothing further would have happened, all this would
have been nipped in the bud. But one is so unprepared. In the
Bank, for instance, I am always prepared, nothing of that kind
could possibly happen to me there, I have my own attendant,
the general telephone and the office telephone stand before me on my desk, people keep coming in to see me, clients and clerks, and above all my mind is always on my work and so kept on the alert, it would be an actual pleasure to me if a situation like that cropped up in the Bank. (26-27)

The “aesthetic” routine, the very activities at the Bank that his trial totally disrupts and incapacitates him for, could have prevented it all. The security of his own carefully nourished and cherished absurdities, of his own mystique, would have rendered him invulnerable to this assault inflicted by strange absurdities and a hostile mystique. Thanks to his routine and his living “in a country with a legal constitution,” with “universal peace” and “all the laws . . . in force” (7), K. needed never to worry beyond the aesthetic: “He had always been inclined to take things easily, to believe in the worst only when the worst happened, to take no care for the morrow even when the outlook was threatening” (7). Yet here he throws over all to recognize the trial, and recognizes it in order to commit himself to total warfare against it, although there remains that in him which would deny it and would rather turn back to the secure mystique of the Bank. In the first interrogation, too, K. insists that “it is only a trial if I recognize it as such” (51), which is what his proud self-assurance leads him to do in order to win his victory. When one week later he loses the Law-Court Attendant’s wife to the student at Court and future official, acting on behalf of the Examining Magistrate, K. “recognized that this was the first unequivocal defeat that he had received from these people. . . . he had received the defeat only because he had insisted on giving battle” (73).

His recognition of the trial and his commitment to it—in short, his forcing the issue to be joined—engage him more and more, as he moves from an indifferent acceptance of Huld as his advocate to a total involvement in Huld’s activities in his behalf and even beyond to a dismissal of Huld for not being active enough as K. takes the case into his own hands. There is finally that crucial moment in the Cathedral which is a kind of
symbolic reduction of the whole trial. K. is about to leave when
the priest’s voice rolls “through the expectant Cathedral” calling
K.’s name in words “unambiguous and inescapable” (263–264). K. has his final choice:

For the moment he was still free, he could continue on his way
and vanish through one of the small dark wooden doors that
faced him at no great distance. It would simply indicate that
he had not understood the call, or that he had understood it and
did not care. But if he were to turn round he would be caught,
for that would amount to an admission that he had understood
it very well, that he was really the person addressed, and that
he was ready to obey. (264)

And as he does everywhere else in the novel, despite his Bank­
clerk propensities, he turns to acknowledge all. In so doing he
totally abandons hope for “a mode of living completely outside
the jurisdiction of the Court” (267) and instead invites the
parable of the doorkeeper whose appropriateness his confront­
ing action has affirmed. The priest, as well-intentioned prison
chaplain bringing K. this final bitter comfort before execution,
closes by confirming the need for the recognition that K. has
continually tendered: “The Court makes no claims upon you.
It receives you when you come and it relinquishes you when
you go” (279). After all, we must remember that in the priest’s
parable the man seeking admittance to the law “is really free,
he can go where he likes . . . When he sits down on the stool
by the side of the door and stays there for the rest of his life, he
does it of his own free will; in the story there is no mention of
any compulsion” (275). And at the last moment during “the
odious ceremonial of courtesy” (287), K. knows he must
recognize the execution too, and recognize it by collaborating
with it: “K. now perceived clearly that he was supposed to seize
the knife himself, as it travelled from hand to hand above him,
and plunge it into his own breast” (287). He cannot manage it
but recognizes his failure and feels profound shame in leaving
it to the executioners. His shameful recognition of failure is his
recognition of the propriety of the proceedings, the recognition that enables him to accept the execution—and thus to allow it—despite the weakness of his lingering hopes.

One point is crucially clear: K.’s is the only case that we hear of as being brought to a final conclusion, and a final conviction. And this occurs, despite all the alternatives and all the bureaucratic inefficiency, within the incredibly brief space of a single year. For the novel begins with K.’s arrest on his thirtieth birthday and closes with his execution on the eve of his thirty-first. Thus while, as Max Brod tells us, the novel is incomplete and “in a certain sense . . . was interminable” and “could be prolonged into infinity” (296–297), in another sense it is totally finite and finished. For whatever the possible number of intermediate chapters, the end is immovably there setting its limits; and it is, for the Court, an unprecedentedly quick one.

But K. has been a most unusual accused. His attitude in the first interrogation is markedly arrogant, as the Court takes pains to inform him; he struggles with Court officialdom over the Examining Magistrate’s woman; he alone does what many have threatened to do but what none have dared do when he dismisses his advocate; and confronted with the more compromising but more tolerated alternatives of “ostensible acquittal” and “indefinite postponement,” he seems from all that follows to have determined to pursue nothing less than the unobtainable “definitive acquittal” (192). There is also that Sunday morning in the Court’s waiting room where K., feeling himself a mere visitor, believes himself nobly distinguished from the other accused, all of them sitting about so futilely and meekly in patient anticipation of nothing, simply to show their subservience. K. is certain that none of his “colleagues” believe he is one of them and is proud of the dignity he believes misleads them. He treats these meek anticipants disdainfully, high-handedly, and finally with crude violence. Angered that the one he has picked on will not acknowledge the self-possessed K. as an accused, a most unusual accused, K. proudly surmises that he is being taken for a Judge. A short time later K. returns to the hall and to the
very man he has mistreated, but he has himself been reduced to a helpless state of near collapse. A more important reflection on this scene is furnished later by Block, the commercial traveler, who disabuses K. of his misinterpretation of that first scene in the waiting room. The submissive suitors at Court reacted to K. as they did, not because they thought he was a Judge or because they were impressed with his fiery resistance to the Court, but because—consistent with an old superstition among the accused—from K.'s face, "especially the line of his lips" (219), they could tell he was shortly to be found guilty. And they reacted with horror. Here, then, is another indication of how uncommon an accused K. is, for surely Kafka is suggesting that it is the grim determination to resist absolutely that the set of K.'s lips must have revealed to the fellow-accused. And K.'s inexcusable actions toward them, together with the haughtiness of motive we see as responsible for these actions, prove the accuracy of the prophecy. Perhaps they are an anticipation of his treatment of the warders in the whipping scene we have examined.

K.'s role as both representative and exceptional—as everyman and as rebel, as man before the Law and as the man before the Law—is helpfully conclusive. There is undoubtedly a specialness and an aloneness about K.'s case, besides the uniqueness each accused must feel subjectively about his own. Not only is he outside the vast community of those who have not been accused, but he stands apart from the more limited group of the other accused. What we see of those like the deputy manager of the Bank and K.'s uncle, still living—as K. was before his thirtieth birthday—outside the jurisdiction of the Court, should convince us that they are hardly less guilty than K. If anything, they are less worthy, perhaps with a commonness that nothing could raise to the uniquely human level. We cannot help being irked by the fact that the unaccused do not respond with shock to the strange circumstances of K.'s arrest and the strange kind of Court which is trying him. Like Job's comforters, they all seem to assume that somehow K. must have been
guilty to have been arrested. The unaccused are in fact, then, protectors of the Court in that they accept its absurdities as sensible and its Law as rational. They accept K.’s guilt of a crime of which they must be innocent since they have not been accused. And since they have not been accused and they know themselves innocent, then the Court must know what it is doing in arresting K.

Undoubtedly K., in the days before he was accused, reacted similarly. Indeed, it is in his reversions to his pre-arrest psychology and in the defense of his pre-arrest respectability and position that K. has been seen to be also a protector of the Court. Those who are unaccused or who have not yet been accused have accepted the absurd as rational simply because it exists and has spared them so that they need not examine it and may rest confident of the justness of its operation. For one to be arrested is for him to be hurled by an external shock into recognizing the absurd as absurd and thus into finding it no longer acceptable now that it has picked on him. The novel thus becomes a metaphor of the awakening to what Marlow will term the “touch of insanity in the proceeding,” the “sense of lugubrious drollery” that characterizes worldly caprice.

The accused are the most worthy since in their necessary recognition they reveal themselves as those who are ready for the ultimate and terrorizing confrontation. When Frau Grubach tells K. of his trial, “It gives me the feeling of something very learned . . . of something abstract which I don’t understand, but which I don’t need to understand either” (36), we recognize the pre-shock complacency of one who can never be tried. But I have said K. is unique also among the accused. We see others pitifully patient in the waiting room, we meet Block at length, and we hear of others. No other trials are reported as finished, no other sentence passed. No other accused has dismissed his advocate, although we learn from Block that in a moment of impatient rebellion he too once entertained the notion of dismissing his advocate. In contrast, however, to those early spirited days, there is the harrowing scene played for K.’s
benefit when Block is made to crawl before Huld and is thankful for the opportunity to do so. The other accused, who may, like K., have begun in the spirit of rebellion, have been beaten into submission. They work for their cases continually and so does K; but they work in humility as he works in pride. As K.’s insistence on “definitive acquittal” indicates, he demands, with the firmness of a newly won rational and ethical conviction, nothing but justice. The other accused plead not for justice but for mercy, for grace—which explains why the advocate bears the strange name of Huld and why he cannot serve for K.

Albert Camus was wrong, then, in scornfully linking Kafka with Kierkegaard as among those who leapt blindly to faith instead of revolting in the face of the absurd. For in what has been said about K. we see where Kafka breaks from Kierkegaard. Those accused who bend the knee to embrace the absurd in quest of grace yet know it to be the absurd since they have passed through K’s stage of rebellion that follows upon arrest; they are less than K. and are to be contemned. The dogged and destructive rebellion is higher than the leap for Kafka since the leap is induced under pressures that make it a disguise for a “failure of nerve.”

In another way too, then, K. is both exceptional and representative. In his “stage along life’s way” he shares something with all the others even as he stands alone. There is still in him a remnant of the pre-shock mentality of all the unaccused of whom he has once been one; he is in the early stage of rebellion through which the other accused apparently have passed; and he has open to him the way of meekness taken by the others, to which he is urged but which he rejects. He will not be chastised, not even by the priest and in the face of threats, and remains in the abortive state of rebellion refusing to accept less than legal justice even while acknowledging the possibility of guilt on other grounds. He has chosen for himself the role of everyman-Jesus even though he tacitly but continually rejects the rest of mankind as he is tacitly but continually rejected by them.
We have already seen K. as totally isolated from his kind, first from the unaccused and then from the other accused. But this isolation is a reflection of the isolation of the “aesthetic,” pre-shock K. After all, as we see in what we are told of K.’s earlier life and in the scene with the whipper, the pursuit of the Bank values is hardly conducive to the warmth of personal relations. Rather, it forces persons to be reduced to things. Once arrested, however, K. feels the need to seek a new and unprecedented acceptance by others. Without exception he fails. The evening of his arrest he returns home determined to enlist Frau Grubach’s sympathies. For some strange reason he is most concerned that she shake his hand, in part perhaps because the Inspector earlier refused to. But, newly accused, he is not so easily to be taken into the human community. Frau Grubach speaks with all the sympathy that is conventionally appropriate, “with tears in her voice, forgetting, naturally, to shake his hand” (27). Considerably dejected, K. at once asks about Fräulein Bürstner in hopes of pursuing another candidate. He lies in wait for her until late in the night when he forces himself upon her in hopes of finding some intimate contact with her. Her weary indifference is beyond tolerance, but he takes advantage of it to assault her with spiritual and physical demands she can neither resist nor meet. When he asks if she is angry, she answers in a way that reveals her total lack of personal discrimination: “I’m never angry with anybody” (38). In the days and months that follow, K. pursues this first night’s advantage, but to no avail. Indeed, he never has another chance at her. She has Fräulein Montag move in with her to help keep K. off. K.’s growing paranoia, under the pressure of a groundless accusation that has capriciously singled him out, sees Fräulein Montag as hypocritically malevolent in her designs to keep him ostracized.

There are the other women who befriend him, the Law-Court Attendant’s wife and of course Leni. But invariably K. sees in them a promise that they never fulfill. He is astounded at the immediacy with which they offer themselves to him and proffer him help in his case, only each time to see them
turn with casual indiscriminateness to someone else, the Law-
Court Attendant's wife to the student pimp of the Examining
Magistrate and Leni to Block. Indeed, of Leni we learn that she
finds "nearly all accused men attractive" (231). In the scene
among K., Block, and Leni, K. is somewhat disturbed at Leni's
discussing Block in the latter's presence "as if he were absent."
But a moment later she begins to speak to Block and K. must
observe, "Now it's my turn to be treated as if I were absent"
(227). Throughout the novel, then, K. seeks a unique relation
with women, one that can humanize him, and is continually
forced to recognize that he cannot move beyond the indifference
of thinghood in their eyes. As in Sartre, sexual relations de-
humanize, prevent rather than assure any true union of persons.
But once again is not K. being punished precisely as he deserves,
since surely his earlier relations with Elsa were precisely of
this limited and life-denying sort? Once he is arrested, however,
even in the limited sexual realm K. is frustrated more than he is
fulfilled.

Fraulein Bürstner makes a final crucial appearance in the
execution scene at the end—if it is really she, for K. has his
doubts. The two executioners walk on either side of K., fasten-
ing his arms within theirs. We are told, "K. walked rigidly
between them, the three of them were interlocked in a unity
which would have brought all three down together had one of
them been knocked over. It was a unity such as can be formed
almost by lifeless elements alone" (283). We must note ironically
that K. has here achieved the only unity he has found in the
novel. But K. is not ready to accept a unity of "lifeless elements"
and can think only of rebellion, of struggling against them
desperately to the end—as he puts it, like a fly on flypaper. And
the one consolation: "The gentlemen won't find it easy"
(284). Suddenly Fraulein Bürstner appears, or someone very
much like her. It matters not to K. so long as "he might not
forget the lesson she had brought into his mind" (284). And
why should it matter whether it was uniquely she when unique-
ness was the one characteristic their relation most lacked, how-
ever strongly K. wished for it. The lesson clearly is his realization of the “futility of resistance” about which he has now come to feel there would be “nothing heroic” (284). For what reason could Fräulein Bürstner lead him from rebellion to resignation except that her appearance or the reminder of her forces him to recognize his failure to make any truly human contact? From the beginning she has been symbolic of the futility of communion in the dehumanized world of the Bank which K. has represented. In representing it he has created for himself a burden of guilt which has undercut his right to find a new human relation, to resist the Court and find a new heroism. Having followed her for some blocks while turning his rebellion inward upon himself, he now pursues her no farther since he can “do without her” (285). He yields to his new-found comrades, and the three now walk on “in complete harmony,” “in a solid front.” K. seems thankful for the union he has achieved, despite its “lifeless” forebodings, and is anxious to do nothing to shake it. When a suspicious policeman threatens to intervene in the proceedings, the executioners are intimidated and stop. But the no longer isolated K. becomes the Court’s prime protector by leading them hurriedly away from him and to safety—and, it should be added, to the quarry, the place of the execution which the safety K. has consciously afforded them can now allow them to perform.

But the resolution is more deceptive and the ending more ambivalent than this. We have seen already K.’s inability to manage the final collaboration of stabbing himself. At this point he unlearns his lesson and turns feebly, futilely, back to the humanity which has rejected him as he rejected it, which has thrown him into the unity of “lifeless elements.”

His glance fell on the top storey of the house adjoining the quarry. With a flicker as of a light going up, the casements of a window there suddenly flew open; a human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and that height, leaned abruptly far forward and stretched both arms still farther. Who was it? A friend? A good man? Someone who sympathized? Someone
who wanted to help? Was it one person only? Or were they all there? Was help at hand? (287-288)

The impossible if undying hopes for salvation are accompanied by the return of his doubts about the Court. It is this final, almost self-mocking counter-turn that leads K. to acknowledge in his last words that he dies “like a dog” (288). For humanity has not stretched forward to him and he has not stretched forward to embrace his fate, one which might allow him to transcend his unreceptive fellow man and himself as unreceptive creature. Further, his admission that he dies like a dog must recall that early scene with the whipper when he traded human compassion for Bank respectability by insisting to the clerks that Franz’s shriek “was only a dog howling in the courtyard” (110). Having slammed the door then, how could K. expect now that the window would open and the human figure stretch forward in his behalf?

In the earlier scene, in order to keep himself disinvolved with either the lumber-room atrocities or the curious Bank clerks whom the noise has summoned, K. tries to be preoccupied by opening and leaning out of the window into a little courtyard, through the darkness of which he tries to pierce to find something. So there it is K. who leans out of the window, but, we must note, in order to turn his back on humanity, not to stretch forward to it. For what he looks for in the courtyard has just offered itself to him in the lumber room and he has rejected it. Consequently, he is in effect looking only toward the final scene (as perhaps the presence of the hand-barrows in the courtyard testifies), acting out the role of the leaning figure of false promise seen by the prostrate K. At another crucial moment toward the end Kafka uses windows as an isolating force, however deceptive may be their transparence, or the ease with which they open, in promising a way for human beings to stretch forward to one another. At the start of the final chapter, as K. is summoned to join his executioners, he pauses in his room to look out of his window at those op-
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posite. What he sees should persuade him—even before the lesson Fräulein Bürstner is to teach him—that the inhumane way of his world dooms man, for all his stretching forward, never to grasp another to himself:

Nearly all the windows at the other side of the street were also in darkness; in many of them the curtains were drawn. At one lighted tenement window some babies were playing behind bars, reaching with their little hands towards each other although not able to move themselves from the spot. (282)

No wonder, then, that K. later makes one final gesture of desperate futility in response to that figure stretching forward from the window far away and far above him: “He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers” (288). It is a gesture that matches the figure’s in its abortiveness. Together the figure and K. are the babies “playing behind bars,” although the prisoner K. is now played out, since it is at this moment that the dog’s death is inflicted upon him.

There is yet another point of union between the final scene and the earlier one, in which we found K. escaping the whipper and the Bank clerks by looking out of the window. The courtyard into which the window opens seems all too much like the one in Gide that we have twice seen with Michel at Biskra. For while looking, K. becomes aware of the “faint reflection of the moon” (111). He cannot, of course, be aware of its deathlike qualities, of the fact that his actions at this moment are helping to deprive him of any right to resist the Court or to hope for human aid, are leading him to that moonlit scene at the end. In view of his lack of awareness, of the indirect relevance of these early actions, and of the distance he has to travel to his doom, no wonder this early moon is faint and is reflected (reflected, we must remember, by the closed, darkened windows). Following upon K.’s momentary reconciliation in the final scene, the moon—again as in The Immoralist and also as in Gerald’s death march in Women in Love—is in full control, dissolving all complexity: “The moon shone down on every-
thing with that simplicity and serenity which no other light possesses" (286). But K.'s indecision returns us to complexity, except that his actions during that earlier scene under a fainter and reflected moon allow him no claim to complexity, but only the death of a howling dog—the dog he created—under an awesome simplicity that has looked down unshaken.

Is this symbolic use of the moon and is this final conviction of K. to be taken as evidence that after all the Court is just and straightforward, so that the confusion is all the product of K.'s finitude and his guilt? From what I said at the start, obviously I cannot believe it is as simple as this. For we have had sufficient indication that at many points, instead of representing the purity of a demanding transcendent reality, the Court is a fearfully complex reflection of the absurdities of life that are revealed when the shock strikes. Its only purity is the purity of the distillate: the Court seems to be the extreme form of hierarchical and mystagogic absurdity pursued for its own sake, in its many-faced (or many-masked) inscrutable intention defying comprehension. This is the hierarchical and mystagogic absurdity that revenges itself on those who have unconsciously been practicing it but are keen enough to recognize the consequences of arrest. It illuminates the inanities, not of a transcendent realm, but of our sublunary one.

And what else should we expect when all we see of the Court are its tireless and wearisome activities in this world? Indeed, like a secret death it lies hidden in the very bones and marrow of the world. “There are Law-Court offices in almost every attic” (206), Titorelli tells the astounded K., who can only remember all the pre-arrest days when, with an obliviousness he shared with all the unaccused, he never knew of the Court’s existence at all. Now he must recognize that, as the painter has also told him, “everything belongs to the Court” (189). It is the doom that the world, with the cruelty of worldly existence, bears within itself. To be arrested, then, is to be forced to see through to it and, with hindsight, to be horrified at what life is as it is refracted and purified in the Court. So K., even as he
fights the absurdity the Court calls logic with his own logic—the “principle” he has discovered and must now champion—is also struck by the absurdity of the Court as a way of life, the Bank’s way of life with people scrambling for position in the mystique of hierarchy when, unknown to them, the fatal and transforming arrest can strike at any moment. For it is the arrest that reveals the unexamined way of life to have been a way of death.

But how can the Court be no more than the obscene bureaucratic monster that reflects the obscenity, bureaucracy, and monstrosity of K.’s world when we have ample and unquestionable testimony of its infallibility, its absolute care and ultimate efficiency, even its justness? Surely there is some perfect authority beyond the lowly ones we hear so much about. The Higher Court that somehow stands behind the Lower is one K. does not see and none of his well-initiated informants can report knowing about. If Huld or Titorelli speaks of higher officials, he must hasten to add something anticlimactic like “higher officials of subordinate rank, naturally” (149). Clearly, then, the Higher Court is one that transcends the phenomenal world hereabout, the social-political world that suffers from Bank-sickness. Clearly, too, its justice must transcend the shabby and arbitrary pretences of its worldly reflection—or rather distortion—in the corrupt Lower Court. We must grant so much to the theological interpretation: as the Lower Court represents the impersonal, often capricious, often cruel, and sometimes methodically irrational operations of worldly law, so the Higher Court must represent the ultimate and ultimately sublime rationale of God. Thus K. must be at once legally innocent—and in this sense he has been wrongly and capriciously seized upon—and yet in some more essential way guilty, as we all are. This guilt, I must repeat, is in the novel: not just the abstract notion of original sin but what we find reflected in his actual commission of inhumane actions, in his very assumption of an inhumane way as his way of life. Thus K.’s arrest may stem from the typical blundering of worldly officialdom, the
wrongful accusation that is one of the faces of existent moral evil, so that the Lower Court is in error and is viciously stubborn in refusing to acknowledge it. But it turns out that after all they really need not bother to, that from the supra-legalistic Higher Court view, a view that watches K. being tried through the novel, K. has been guilty after all, so that the Lower Court need never bother specifying its charge. K. specifies it for them continually from the moment of his arrest.

From the Higher Court view, then, K. is as guilty as the legally guilty, so that he has no grounds for a defense based on his innocence. K. senses as much when he plans the writing of his plea and knows he shall have to defend his every action as man. Yet he cannot accept this irrational notion of theological guilt—the guilt of a man who has broken no laws "in a country with a legal constitution" and with "all the laws . . . in force" (7). The other unaccused, persuaded of their own innocence and thus of the justness and orderliness of the rule of law since as innocent they are also unaccused, must maintain the rational assumptions that underlie their security by assuming the guilt of K. since he is accused. They will not distinguish between the lower and higher levels of the Court or, for that matter, between this Court and the normally constituted legal courts. 2 But K.,

2 The greatest obstacle for the critic who would trace without a leap the movement in The Trial from the literal to the symbolic levels is Kafka’s failure to relate in any workable way “the Court in the Palace of Justice” to “the one with the skylight” (131). K.’s use of these terms acknowledges the distinction, as does Huld’s comparison between “an Advocate for ordinary legal rights and an Advocate for cases like these” (136). I am unable to do more than dodge this obstacle since I am unable to clear it. Here is the point where Kafka’s aesthetic incompleteness shows, where the pure symbolist and the allegorist manqué struggle with each other inconclusively in the mist. How much more promising, for example, is the arrangement with which Dickens begins in Bleak House, where the legal court and the absurd court merge in the impossible actuality of Chancery. The world of social-economic reality and of nightmarish fantasy, the political and metaphysical levels have a single narrative source full enough to sustain both at once. We feel the symbol of Chancery as Dickens creates it supports an equal sense of cogency on either level.
forced to apply the rational faculty his successful career at the Bank has sharpened, erects his reasonableness into an ethical principle that resists the unreasonable demand of the Court. While sensing continually that his past way of life is somehow relevant to the question of his guilt, he yet cannot concede this relevance. Having committed no crime against society's law, he must maintain his innocence. No more guilty than the unaccused, nor differently guilty from them, he must claim to be bullied and must fight the injustice of an absolute power whose power cannot, for K., make it right. His attitude, at its strongest, approaches that of Ivan Karamazov, who rejects God's world, who returns the ticket to His paradise rather than accept it at the price of worldly injustice that defies and destroys human reason.

But this rooting of the symbolic level in the bedrock of a detailed social reality comes at a cost. For Rick Carstone, Chancery is more than just an oppressive social institution capable of reform; it is rather an unshakeable and suprahistorical curse upon the human condition. Totally irrational, bathed in the accretion of fogs of many generations, run by an enormous machinery of dehumanized creatures who justify what they cannot control, this monstrous collection of debris asserts itself upon the suitor before the court—born into the case or thrust into it—with the promise of a total resolution that it cannot help but frustrate and a bright future that it cannot help but blight. Its monumental absurdity that promises the clarity of order attracts irresistibly, feeds slowly and long, destroys utterly. It functions as this more than social evil, as this sphinx, for Rick, for Miss Flite, for Gridley, and for countless others, even as such symbols of the court as Krook and Mr. Tulkinghorn considerably exceed mere human dimensions. Yet there is in Bleak House another possible attitude toward the court, that of John Jarndyce, which can ensure freedom from it. Though a part of that great memorial of Chancery practice, Jarndyce and Jarndyce, by birth, "he has resolutely kept himself outside the circle" (Scribner's, 1897, II, 101). Unlike the others, he simply stays away from court and takes no interest. And it works, for he remains unaffected.

But is one free, once so totally involved, merely to wash his hands? Rick, once dragged in, insists that Chancery "taints everybody" (II, 101) with no possibility of exemption. To be born into an unsettled case is to be thrust into a senseless world that one must struggle to straighten out before the leisure of living can begin. And if the nature of the court precludes the chance of anything ever being settled, then the struggle is a
Like Ivan’s, K.’s right to rebel is sullied by his own guilt: as Ivan reveals a hatred that is responsible for parricide, so K. reveals an inhumanity that has sanctioned the injustice that now threatens him. But he does not allow any humility, any acknowledgment of his creatureliness that his history should lead him to, to supersede his arrogant defiance, nor—apparently—does Kafka want him to, if we may judge from the pitiable ones who have given over their willfulness.

We must return to examine the grounds of K.’s charges against the Court. Having said what I have about the Lower and Higher Courts, what must I say about the way Kafka relates them? How can the corrupt and inefficient Lower Court be desperate and ill-fated one but cannot be abandoned on that account. For one is not free to abandon it. Thus Chancery grows into a metaphysical entity reflecting the nature of existence as much as the legal tangles and abuses of Victorian England. But then along comes John Jarndyce to short-circuit this significance. Through the force of his virtuous will, though continually challenged he does stay outside successfully and does well to do so. All who follow him, like Esther and George Rouncewell, don his coat of invulnerability, finally manage what K. thought of as “a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court,” and with it manage a happy ending. A happier ending for all will come, presumably, when the court system is reformed.

Is the court an inevitable intrusion upon the human condition, then, or is it just an actual court and no more, one that can simply be ignored by the wise and changed by the well-meaning? It cannot be both as Dickens seems to make it. His difficulty may arise in large part from his rooting the court in reality. This raises the always delicate problem of creating symbolic levels without threatening the literal believability of the actuality from which they spring. Kafka evades the problem by postulating pure fantasy from the start, by separating his Court from the courts embedded in society. It is an easier way but a more troublesome and less satisfying one than Dickens’ could have been had he resolved his problem more consistently. Of course, one must admit that these imperfections in Bleak House may not mean that Dickens could not resolve his technical problem so much as that he wanted to appease the tastes of Victorian readers and so inserted the sentimental story of Esther Summerson to compensate for the gloom and the terror of Rick’s tragic involvement. Unfortunately, the serenely happy ending of the one totally reduced the immense capacities for vision in the other.
claimed to be an emanation of the sublime and infallible Higher Court? How can it represent the foulness that the social interpretation of the novel finds Kafka complaining about, even as it represents the austere authority that the theological interpretation finds Kafka univocally proclaiming? Yet clearly it must be and must do all this. Somehow the Lower Court is sanctioned by the Higher, even though the two seem to present such contradictory faces. Or, rather, the Higher Court presents no face but is seen only as wearing the mask of the Lower Court that contradicts it. It is, then, the “reasoning thing” that puts forth the “unreasoning mask”—an action that drives the Ahab's mad and the Ivans and the K.'s as well. They cannot rebel against the mask without rebelling against the thing that wears it; and their prideful reason allows them no alternative to rebellion. (“I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other . . .”) Prisoners all—of their reason and of an unreasonable universe through which a reasonable God arbitrarily insists on challenging them—they must strike through the wall.

The Lower Court in all its caprice is part of the cosmic scheme, then, in the sense that all worldly happenings, at their worst as at their best, are. For, at least from the human view, evil does exist in God's world. The Higher Court is testing K., trying him through the bungling Lower Court which it in a sense sanctions as God in a sense sanctions evil by allowing it to exist. Not only does the Higher allow the Lower Court to operate, but it even stands by the latter's decisions. And K., guilty even as in any worldly terms he is innocent, must struggle—from Kafka's point of view is obliged to struggle—and must fail to take the “leap” which requires the suspension of his reason and his pride. The legal, of course, is the supreme expression of the ethical. And the Court, by identifying the contradictory Lower and Higher levels and by having the one flow from the other, is insisting that the universal sway of its Law be seen as absolute. But K. has by his arrest been forced from his casual “aesthetic” existence to an ethical of his own.
A most practical and reasonable Bank executive, he has now been forced to use his talents in his own behalf, to defend himself against an absurd attack. And the well-trained rational man responds with a doggedness that his business head cannot shake, a doggedness that converts him into scapegoat. Once arrested, K.'s "aesthetic" blinders have been stripped away, leaving the absurdity of what before seemed rational and thus to be accepted as unavoidably there. It still insists on his reverence for it as the rational, since the Court's ethical claim, held to be absolute, cannot give way to man's. Still K. pits his ethical against an absurd ethical to which he just cannot submit. The essence of the ethical is its universality but, newly isolated as newly ethical, K. is left as mere individual with his ethical claims reduced to mere personal pretensions, even presumptions. His unyielding logic, held by a private and embattled arrogance, leads beyond the ethical. In refusing to yield to another logic that it cannot accept, his, like Satan's logical refutation of God's absurd demands in the Garden, leads to spiritual pride and its consequences. Though in embracing the rational K. most fervently embraces ethical "principle"—the very principle, Kafka ironically counterposes, that is responsible for the whipping of the warders (107)—yet he finally can claim no more (or less, K. would insist) than the demoniacal. For it is completely his logic, and thus unsanctioned, while his own moral history reveals his unfitness to claim an utter sovereignty from which to launch charges. And yet, as Kafka presents it, the object of his charges calls for them: the face of justice that is this frightening and this shabby even if it is the "pasteboard mask" for some (finally just?) inscrutable intention. The Kafka of The Trial may be religious, but he does not love his God, indeed is hardly ready to call him "his." For despite his disapproval of K.'s normal human failings and despite the way K. dies, Kafka will not join the Court in condemning him, out of his great contempt for the alternatives to K.

Of course all this approaches overstatement in that K. is hardly up to Satan or Ahab or Ivan. Unlike self-conscious
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demons or too conscientious moral saviors, K. begins as ethically neutral, uncommitted, if indeed he has any ethical sense at all. Further, we have seen at length and repeatedly how inconsistent his rebellion is, with what unadmirable longing he seeks to return to his most prosaic past, how his partial devotion to conformism makes suspect his fiery zeal for rebellion. We must fear even that were his rebellion to win out, he would return to the conformism of the Bank, cocky about his businesslike common sense that has put the upstart absurdity in its place. A full consideration threatens to reduce K. from a self-appointed pseudo Jesus to everyman and his vision from the tragic to the merely ironic. He never completely loses his routine and commonplace character, however drawn he is to extremity and however resolute he remains in the face of it. He is closer to Hans Castorp than to Adrian Leverkuhn, closer to the Homeric than to the Sophoclean, except that for Kafka these figures come closer to merging through a mutual reduction. K. is everyman whose logical persistence, earned in the most unromantic of affiliations, enables him to recognize extremity when it strikes—the extremity that shocks him into becoming the exceptional man who, as a would-be Jesus in search of freedom or crucifixion, rules on the courts of this world and the other world. Yet he paradoxically remains everyman to the extent of wanting to carry on in the old way which is itself Court-like. So his rebellion is keen but sporadic; he is everyman still but everyman-as-rebel. For his rebellion is the other side of his dullness; it is even the consequence of that dullness challenged and found unyielding.

His uncertainty persists even at the close when at the last moment he turns away from the grand climax and his single transformation. He cannot manage the final acceptance he has decided upon; but Kafka, lest he mislead us into overestimating K.'s heroism, makes us feel this counter-turn as stemming from weakness rather than strength, as a turning aside from conclusiveness, as an abdication. This despite our association of the greatest weakness with those who have yielded to acceptance.
Still Kafka in his honesty wants us to recognize this choice as one between weaknesses, with his preference for K.'s arising from the fact that he so persists in the dull worldling's weakness as to convert it, in his struggle with the Court, into a kind of strength. An immovable object, he can only be removed. In this mechanized and bureaucratic world, K. is as close as Kafka dare get to an Ivan. It is a world in which heroism is so reduced in strength and stature that this piece of machinery, this cipher, this nonentity clerk, victim as he is abuser of hierarchy, must become our most satanic representative. Yet he turns out to be man too and even exceptional man in that he has the recognizing power—enough of it so that, when catapulted by extremity, he makes it to the state of the tragic visionary, however reduced a version. His vision, through diminution, is almost stopped at the boundary of the ironic, the merely pathetic and not quite comic. But thanks to the magnitude of his occasional but persistent daring, it finally slides beyond.

2. Albert Camus: Beyond Nonentity and the Rejection of the Tragic

If Joseph K. barely makes it into the tragic realm, Meursault, Camus’ “Stranger,” never comes close—or perhaps passes far beyond. If K. has tried less manfully than other prisoners in our literature to thrust through the wall, Meursault takes his only prideful consolation in his refusal to try his hand against it at all. It is not that he accepts it; he is further from acceptance than is K. It is just that, like Melville’s Bartleby, who also ends up a literal prisoner looking at a blank wall (essentially the same wall that, as figurative prisoner, he allowed to close in his world when society still thought him free), Meursault, yawning at such metaphysical problems as acceptance or defiance, simply would “prefer not to” and stares blankly.

Not that he has rejected life; far from it. Indeed, he accepts it far more exclusively, although with no more illusions, than does the tragic visionary. It is that Camus speaks from beyond
the farthest reach of the tragic vision and is trying to make a return in spite of its vision and his total awareness of it. It is as if he has got off the express of the hell-bent literature that has been concerning me and speaks to us out of its wake or, better yet, out of its exhaust fumes. His very consciousness of these fiery apocalyptic visions leads him, out of a kind of spite, to find a return to living that without self-deception may yet be naturalistic and liberal. He turns against the spirit of this very volume I work upon. If I were to imagine him watching me here and commenting upon my objectives, I would see him as having to say something like the following, but in the distinguished prose that characterizes his work: "That's the very trouble. Your very absorption with this vision forces it to a level of self-consciousness which destroys the possibility of that very authenticity which your visionaries have given up all to affirm. We have seen too many of them, these driven demoniacs. One cannot suddenly find himself being driven when he is aware from his reading and his existentialist analysis that he is supposed to be driven. And without the spontaneity of pure driven-ness this entire movement of the self is ersatz, an artificial, put-up job that hypocritically justifies a hatred of man and the political reaction that follows from it. Indeed, has not this essential insincerity, this lack of self-candor, always characterized your underground man? Has he not, after all, merely replaced the unauthentic mask he had before shown to himself as his true self with an anti-mask that could claim no more final authenticity for all its destructive powers?"

Thus in *The Fall* we have a shocking parody of the novels I have been treating. Clamence, his pride destroyed by the self-mockery that follows a cowardly failure to act, goes through the appropriate movements of my protagonists, so that we find him with great ardor dwelling upon, indeed celebrating, his sense of guilt. But it is all a fraud: in his self-consciousness Clamence is a pseudo visionary speaking out of a pseudo humility that in its perverse arrogance is more insufferable than the pre-shock pride with which we began. For he condemns himself in order
to condemn us all; and in the monologue spoken to us he must have the upper hand since, in his lamentations about self, he is more aware of human guilt than we can be. His self-abnegation becomes his weapon to hate us all, to force us to hate ourselves, and to condemn us for having less awareness than he of our depravity. Yet, of course, we are powerless against him, can have no response, since all we are confronted by is the face of humility that will multiply any accusations we can make. Thus the parody of the tragic vision that turns it on itself. As always, the parody has the advantage of understanding the psychology of its victim (and its model) and of using the very tactics that its victim has used on its enemies.

In Camus’ brilliant gambit his intention is to deny what I have seen Kafka as leaving us. I mean not merely Camus’ version of Kafka who with Kierkegaard embraces the absurd, but even my version of Kafka who holds out against the absurd although he acknowledges our guilt. For Camus refuses to allow guilt to man since, following upon the tragic vision that relies upon claims to human guilt, our consciousness of it incapacitates us for the action which Camus’ naturalistic liberalism requires. All this is relevant also to The Stranger, although only implicitly so in this early work, unsophisticated by philosophy as it is. Indeed, it is this work’s dramatic directness that makes it the most aesthetically valid of Camus’ novels and thus the most valuable for my purposes. Of course I must admit also that its use of the metaphor of imprisonment as its central symbol for the human condition makes it especially convenient.

Like K., Meursault has a most routine occupation. Commentators have universally noted that, as a clerk, he is the pure symbol of Sisyphus-man. Totally implicated in routine, indeed totally dependent on it, Meursault finds Sundays unbearable, with their uncharted freedom that demands more inventive energy than he cares to bother expending. And the greatest torture of his early imprisonment is his need to “kill time,” his need to make his way through one interminable Sunday. Meursault’s pre-prison life is largely an automatic one, then, with his
only satisfactions—indeed his only consciousness—arising from various physical sensations. The rest simply does not matter. He is the least willful of men, as if insisting that nothing at all matters. Of course it is precisely this constitutional unassertiveness that prevents any approximation to the tragic. Insufficiently active to attain to the recognition that was crucial to K.'s trial, in his passivity Meursault does not join the issue. There can be no driven-ness for one who will not commit himself to his drives.

Meursault’s only assertion is his constant one that nothing is worth asserting. All alternatives come to the same thing for him, and he cannot be persuaded, cajoled, or bullied into making a rational choice as if it mattered. All things are one and rien n’importe. To look or not to look at his mother’s dead body, to smoke or not to smoke while sitting with it, to join or not to join with Raymond in his vendetta against his unfaithful mistress, to transfer or not to transfer to the Paris office, to marry or not to marry Marie, to return or not to return to the dangerous scene with the Arabs, to shoot or not to shoot—in each case Meursault is aware of the alternatives and dismisses the choice as meaningless. In each case he chooses and means to choose thoughtlessly, either in accordance with his momentary fancy—his immediate appetites or his mild desire to take the easiest way out in personal relations without having to bother with explanations—or seemingly for no reason at all, automatically, out of a total lack of respect for the occasion that seems to force an insignificant choice upon him.

The Saturday evening before the murder Meursault encounters the “little robot” woman in the restaurant (56). The pure automatism of her being so fascinates him that he follows her out of the restaurant. She appears in the novel once again when Meursault spots her as she inexplicably appears at his trial, with her eyes fixed upon him. The reason for their mutual

curiosity is clear: she is a reflection of the indifferent egalitarian universe in which he lives, indeed is a reflection of him. Just before Meursault sees her the first time he has had two interviews, one with his employer and one with Marie. His employer has offered him the Paris transfer, expecting to excite him with it, only to be confronted by Meursault's blankness, which he cannot comprehend. Marie has offered him marriage and can respond to his maddening unconcern only by "staring at [him] in a curious way" (53). He leaves her to dine at Céleste's and at once is joined by the "little robot." When we see him display a curiosity toward her that resembles that which Marie has just shown toward him, we suspect that in the "little robot" he has encountered a more extreme version of himself, a pure reflection of that spiritless mechanical world in which he has chosen to live.

The "little robot" also helps us answer the question that asks whether Meursault is a pure automaton or a pure feater of caprice; for somehow, in his indifference that leads to the utter equivalence of all things and people and thus in his rejection of rational control in his actions, Meursault seems to be both at once. The puppet-woman reveals to us what we, with Meursault, are to learn later more explicitly: that in the routine world of Sisyphus, where all is fated and all are alike condemned in advance, the seeming caprice of mere thoughtless response is the mask for the automatic. In declining to play a conscious role, he turns his strings over to Pattern, which finds his way for him. And so it is with Meursault's refusal to discriminate among things and people or to recognize choice in the many alternatives presented to him.

But history is irreversible, so that what reads forward as chance reads backward as purpose, if not inevitability. And all those disjunctives, in regard to which Meursault's reactions were mere tropisms, turn out at the trial to matter very much indeed. The prosecutor comments, with an irony that shouts his disbelief, "that in this case 'chance' or 'mere coincidence' seemed to play a remarkably large part" (120). He parades forth Meur-
sault's casual choices as in horror we watch them form an elaborate and damning network of apparent cause and effect. Meursault's very refusal to care is now revealed to have been necessary at each point for Chance to have it all its own way in order to weave itself into what a conventional and guilt-conscious humanity will see as Pattern. So every decision was important and Meursault should have been ever on the alert.

There is, however, one more movement to this dialectic, which concludes it in an endlessly bitter irony that confirms the whole cruel joke. After he is sentenced to death, Meursault occasionally allows himself to hope for some way to escape his fate. Perhaps chastened by the fact that the trial seemed to reveal that choices do matter, he has been humanized, or at least partly conventionalized. "The only thing that interests me now is the problem of circumventing the machine, learning if the inevitable admits a loophole" (136). Through this discussion there runs the suggestion of the exertion of human powers to find a way out, to cheat "their bloodthirsty rite," to rebel against "the rattrap," "this brutal certitude" (136). So Sisyphus is rejecting the "machine," the automatic world he never questioned. But the chaplain's visit turns him a final time, and violently. He rejects hope as dishonorable and recognizes the certainty of death, the certainty (and the hopelessness of certainty) that apparently he always had and that must have conditioned the floating, unconcerned nature of his life. And he knows that his has been the proper way after all, that choices did not matter and that all came to the same thing in the end, to man's condemnation and execution one fine dawn.

I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right. I'd passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I felt like it. I'd acted thus, and I hadn't acted otherwise. I hadn't done x, whereas I had done y or z. And what did that mean? That, all the time, I'd been waiting for this present moment, for that dawn, tomorrow's or another day's, which was to justify me. Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. He, too, knew why. From the
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dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing toward me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had leveled out all the ideas that people tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I then was living through. What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother’s love, or his God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to “choose” not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers. (151–152)

So the trial, the verdict, and the execution, which seemed to make most important those automatic decisions that Meursault originally claimed had no importance, have themselves no importance after all. The breeze from the future, ensuring the murder of man, leveled these with the rest. Meursault has come full circle, except that his experience has brought to him a consciousness and a rational justification of the way of life he had aimlessly drifted into. During the painful procession at his mother’s funeral at the start, a nurse for no special reason says to him, “If you go too slowly there’s the risk of a heatstroke. But, if you go too fast, you perspire, and the cold air in the church gives you a chill.” Meursault adds, “I saw her point; either way one was in for it” (21). During his early imprisonment, before the trial, he suddenly recalls these words and he echoes, “No, there was no way out . . .” (101). Now at the end, in his final outburst, Meursault understands the full meaning of what was being said and its consequences. Though more conclusively limited by the mechanical universe, by the machine that admits no loophole, he has yet proved himself more than robot, more than Sisyphus, in his realization of man’s condition and his willful decision neither to struggle against it nor to bend his knee to it but rather to will himself a Sisyphus man, the microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic apparatus.

Feeling in the universe an indifference that matches his own, he can only hope to be greeted at his execution “with howls of execration” (154). Almost all readers have noticed in these
final words the parody of the crucifixion. The parody is single-edged only: it seems to be nothing but bitter mockery. Yet as parody it is more appropriate than most readers have discovered. Meursault detests sympathy since in spending it upon him the sympathizer is keeping himself from recognizing that he shares Meursault's fate and that Meursault represents the total awareness which the sympathizer fears. Thus Meursault hopes for hatred, which will assure him that he is intolerable to those who hate, the indifference of his way of life a revelation they must bury with their "howls." Throughout the novel, and especially after the murder, Meursault's way has been found intolerable, fearfully so, by one "respectable" man after another, all of them morally outraged perhaps in order to hide their terror at what the world must look like through Meursault's eyes. Their howls, like those about two thousand years ago, will assure their victim that his way is believed to be a unique way, one that is hated with a fear that is the other side of admiration. The parody of the New Testament reveals also that this victim is as much a reflection, indeed an incarnation, of his cosmic order as the other one was of his rather different and happier one. Meursault parodies Christ also in his strange insistence on the indiscriminate equality of all men before the cosmic leveler. All men are brothers in being equally "privileged," in having the universal privilege of damnation. Cosmic indifference allows all to be members of "the privileged class" (152), and the belief in it makes men free, even as Meursault's mother, shortly to die, "must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again" (154). For, Meursault must assume, so close to death, she must have had the illumination he has had, the illumination that, in bestowing the belief in the indiscriminateness and sameness of all things, also bestows indifference, brother to the indifference of the cosmos. And the indifference in turn bestows freedom, freedom from will, from values, from distinctions, and most of all from guilt.

Indeed, for Camus there is no guilt. Meursault is convicted by a guilt-ridden humanity that loathes his "callousness." Tried
for murder, he is found guilty also of matricide (though his mother died of natural causes) and parricide (though it was not his father, and the son who committed it was to be tried the next day). The prosecutor draws these inferences:

“This man, who is morally guilty of his mother’s death, is no less unfit to have a place in the community than that other man who did to death the father that begat him. And, indeed, the one crime led on to the other; the first of these two criminals, the man in the dock, set a precedent, if I may put it so, and authorized the second crime. Yes, gentlemen, I am convinced”—here he raised his voice a tone—“that you will not find I am exaggerating the case against the prisoner when I say that he is also guilty of the murder to be tried tomorrow in this court.” (128)

The speech cannot help reminding us of Dostoevsky, of the dark Christianity in him that so painfully worked out Ivan Karamazov’s guilt for his father’s murder. He “authorized” it in the same way, and in so doing exemplified Father Zossima’s claim about the responsibility of each for the sins of all. Here is parody too, then, as Camus reduces the notion to absurdity, making Dostoevskyan Christianity into a kind of villain. Viewed through Meursault’s indifference, man’s guilt cannot exist as a primary evil, and condemnation is visited upon man in his essential innocence. At the end Meursault, in absolving himself, absolves all equally: the man who, “after being charged with murder . . . [was] executed because he didn’t weep at his mother’s funeral . . . That little robot woman was as ‘guilty’ as the girl from Paris who had married Masson, or as Marie, who wanted me to marry her. What did it matter if Raymond was as much my pal as Céleste, who was a far worthier man?” (152–153) He could have added the perpetrators of the frightful crime in Czechoslovakia that he read of with fascination in the newspaper scrap he found in his cell or, of course, the parricide.

The primary evil, then, is natural rather than moral evil. It arises out of the absurd universe and not out of man. Indeed,
it is rather visited upon man. Man, then, as condemned, is the victim rather than the source of evil to which in his native innocence he must respond with the dignity of indifference. This dignity chooses, not the self-pity that consolingly calls the universe evil, but the self-control that insists, whatever the nature of the universe, on calling it brother and its universal curse the privilege—bearer of freedom—that "benign indifference" can confer. Thus Camus ends in the atheist's humanism. Whatever there is of moral evil he sees as derivative, stemming from an improper reaction to the absurd, to the natural indifference we may wrongly term evil—improper in the strength with which it defies or in the weakness with which it embraces. As *The Stranger* unravels largely "to justify" the ways of Meursault, so like much of the work of Camus it was written largely to justify the ways of man. Camus' essential liberalism leads him to be angry with those who heap condemnation upon a creature already condemned by his universe. But, as Kafka has shown us, to deprive man of guilt is also to deprive him of the chance for vision. Those of our authors who are less humanistically limited could claim, in Ahab's terms, that man has more dignity, the dignity of fearless self-knowledge, when the unreasoning mask that imprisons him hides a thing of unknowable reason whose justification finds a shadow in the grudging prisoner's soul. It is this shadow that, through a dual vision, enables him to condemn himself as demon while he rebels as demigod.