Suppose Max Brod had executed Kafka's last will and testament. His novels (Amerika, The Trial, and The Castle) and his confessional writings (his diaries, notebooks, and many letters) would have been lost forever. Kafka might be remembered as the author of seven very slim volumes of short stories and novellas. Or would he be remembered at all, and would his stories have achieved greater prominence than the prose of such contemporaries as Friedrich Adler, Wilhelm Schäfer, and Emil Strauß, whom Kafka read and admired? Precision in cruelty and the impassive connection of the routine with the terrible, extraordinary event are qualities of other Expressionist writers and in general of the sensibility of central European literature in the first two decades of this century. As early as 1907, Max Brod assigned to Kafka a place alongside Heinrich Mann, Frank Wedekind, Gustav Meyrink, and Franz Blei in a "sacred group" of German writers "who adorn the

1. The immense irony of Kafka's last behest, asking Max Brod to destroy all the published work and many of the unpublished manuscripts, is that Kafka knew it would fall on deaf ears. Of all the faithless literary executors in the world, Kafka could have found no one less likely than Max Brod to execute such a will. In this matter Brod figures as Abraham: he defies the moral order of keeping faith with mankind in order to respond to what he takes to be a divine injunction to value supremely Kafka's poetic personality. To him Kafka incarnates at once the human and the sacred order.

2. At various places throughout his diaries, Kafka acknowledges the value of these writers and their works.
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most varied sides of existence with their art and their cruelty." It is easy to perceive the logic of this grouping, but the qualities that Kafka shares with Heinrich Mann and Gustav Meyrink do not go far toward explaining how the modern sensibility has become Kafkaesque and how—as we learn to see more of what is in Kafka—modern literature, writing, and thought about writing will be grasped as Kafkaesque.

Is Kafka’s distinction, then, due chiefly to the salvaging of three unfinished novels whose transparency is the fortuitous result of the great horror of modern history—the technical application of political terror? This would be a standard and, I think, irreproachable literary judgment. In one’s gratitude to Max Brod, one would slight his editorial liberties, pass swiftly over his allegorical and sentimental misreadings of the novels, and praise him for the rescue of Amerika, The Trial, The Castle: for holding up to the world a mirror of its cruelty, its deadly evasions, its crazy syntax, its hatred of ecstasy—and its only mute aspiration, for its voice speaks from the cage.

To hold to this view, however, is to restrict Kafka’s work to the most accessible features of its scene and its rhetoric. Such bad dreams then predominate as the mechanical frenzy of the Hotel Occidental, the anaerobic antechambers of the Court, the brutish miasma of the taverns in the precincts of the Castle. We hear mainly the tergiversating rhetoric, the devilish confusions and hesitations of the officials, covering impatience and murder. These worlds, meanwhile, are registered with an odd attentiveness to detail and bewilderment at large

3. This sentence appeared in Brod’s review of Franz Blei’s play Der dunkle Weg (The dark way) in the Berlin newspaper Die Gegenwart, February 7, 1907. Gerhard Kurz assembles valuable information about the way modern central European writing begins in a mood empowering writing—the mood of the aesthetic movement; see Traum-Schrecken: Kafka’s literarische Existenzanalyse (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980). But Kafka’s art serves not the adornment of the empirical person but rather its total reduction and extinguishing.

4. To what extent should Kafka be understood as having created his own reception? Or is his distinction more nearly the lucky harvest of a world grown exceptionally fertile in terror? Neither one. Kafka helps create the “description” of an experience of terror whose existence thereupon confirms his work for its clairvoyance. For further discussion of this question of authors and literary movements, see Chapter Ten.

5. Kafka’s most marked contribution to modern art and culture is to the way in which the subject of writing has become Writing, the way in which reflection on the act of writing has become ontological, not psychological, ranging from metaphysical reference to technical aspects of its production.
by the hero in whose perspective the reader is lost; his wandering gaze creates a mood of anxious distraction.

If this is the usual account of Kafka’s importance, it excludes too many features even of the work published in his lifetime, for many of his stories are (in Martin Greenberg’s helpful definition) thought stories, not dream stories; and the intensity with which ontological distinctions are made in a piece like “Josephine the Singer” would disappoint the reader of good will who had come to Kafka’s last volume for a final arraignment (say) of judicial murder.

The standard picture of Kafka’s achievement omits qualities different from his flair for bureaucracy, his ear for family language, and his flaneur’s sense of the humbling ugliness of places where city business is done; it omits more than his skill, as an obsessive exegete of his own constructions, in parodying aporias. These other, essentially moral and—in the perspective of an Unamuno, a Benjamin, or a Levinas—“anti-philosophical” powers are vivid in the confessional writings, which suggest the esprit de finesse of a Jewish Pascal. Kafka’s exertions as a judge of his experience are inspired by an “inner commandment [das innere Gebot]” not unlike a dream (DF 92–93; H 111).

He is required to be the seriousness that reads his life as the instance or violation of a law of which he has only gleams. This seriousness informs what Elias Canetti calls Kafka’s “compulsive sacralization” of places and states of mind—which amounts to a “sacralization of man. Every place, every moment, every aspect, every step of the way is serious and important and unique.” Kafka’s life is required reading no matter how inauspicious and even when it mainly yields “filth.” His great concern, transparent through his disclaimer, is to strive to answer to a supreme tribunal.

He is always more, however, than the upright creature noting his

7. I am grateful to Michael Metteer for this aperçu.
9. Kafka wrote in a letter to his fiancée Felice Bauer, meaning to excoriate his own deceit, “I do not actually strive to be good, to answer to a supreme tribunal” (LF 545; my italics). That is because, he says, he really means to become the sole sinner who can parade his meanness before all the world without losing its love. But this premise belongs to the rhetoric of a letter aiming to drive Felice away.
own evasions. He is the writer who intends to bring to light a depth or hiddenness of background to experience—the irreducible strangeness of that other law. "Can it be," wrote Nietzsche, "that all our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text?” Kafka's literary works constitute a commentary on the text of the law, embodying his life in them only as it comes under its jurisdiction. "Free command of the world at the expense of its laws," he wrote. "Imposition of the law. The happiness in obeying the law" (DII 199; my italics). "Man-kind," he said to Gustav Janouch, "can only become a gray, formless, and therefore nameless mass through a fall from the Law which gives it form" (J 172). Kafka felt a quite audacious responsibility for establishing this law. Of his persona, called "He," he wrote: "He does not live for the sake of his personal life; he does not think for the sake of his personal thoughts. It seems to him that he lives and thinks under the compulsion of a family, which, it is true, is itself superabundant in life and thought, but for which he constitutes, in obedience to some law unknown to him, a formal necessity" (GW 269). Kafka's concern as a writer is the felt text supporting the palimpsest of experience, like the truth that Walter Benjamin saw, not as spread out in a fan but as lodged in its folds. In this sense Kafka's writing is the erasure of experience from the living letter of the law.

Canetti observed that "instead of offering his fiancée at least the promise of a body in place of his actual, unavailable body, Kafka puts in its place something [he calls] more truly his own: the fullness of things he has seen, things seen in the person he is courting: this fullness [of the seen] is his body." To which must be added, above all, things written. In writing things seen—better, in writing what he sees through things—Kafka sublimates his body to a nakedness of breath and light. Writing to uncover the pure textual body of the law, Kafka grows beautiful. In an early diary entry, he glimpses this I: "Already, what protected me seemed to dissolve here in the city. I was beautiful in the early days, for this dissolution takes place as an apotheosis, in which everything that holds us to life flies away, but even in flying away illumines us for the last time with its human

light” (DI 28). The work of writing dissolves the complex of experience: art, says Kafka, is “a way of being dazzled by truth” (DF 41). The light set free by such “constructive destruction” (DF 103) of experience is the light of essential human life—the law: “The Man from the Country” comes “in the darkness . . . [to] perceive a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the door of the Law” (T 269). From such a light source the writer might powerfully snatch and focus a few gleams (DF 87), for, wrote Kafka, “by means of the strongest possible light one can dissolve the world” (DF 295).

It is, then, as the writer—writing in a condition of greatest anxiety and conscious always of the shame of distraction—that Kafka becomes the Bellarmin of his corpus.12 At heightened moments even his inattentiveness is proof against banality; whatever he writes has exactly the kind and degree of rhetorical elegance signing spiritual beauty and force: “When I arbitrarily write a single sentence,” Kafka noted, “for instance, ‘He looked out of the window,’ it already has perfection” (DI 45). Kafka makes live the lost question of genius: since it is not from labor, whence does this unflawed body of language and spirit come which fits a Kantian definition of beauty? It owes its distinction to the play of a style—and more: Kafka’s prose uncovers the lost luminousness of the spiritual body; his writing is the music of the dissolution of what obstructed it. This work of clearing is quickly rewarded by Kafka’s love of the word as a beautiful body—the sign, the letter, the printed text.13

* * *

Is there a coherent corpus of information constituting the law, a knowledge that could be recovered from Kafka’s work as a whole? If there were one, how could it be obtained without reference to the longings of Kafka’s physical body—in short, to events irreducibly personal and precisely for this reason inaccessible to “introspection”? Perhaps they can be recovered from events accessible to Kafka’s biographers. Yet readers of Kafka’s life tend to come away with a sense of gaping disproportion between the story of his empirical body and the

12. Bellarmin, the beautiful Arminius (or Hermann), is the idealized recipient of letters written by Hyperion, the eponymous Greek hero of Hölderlin’s epistolary novel (1799).
13. Kafka was particularly preoccupied with the appearance—above all, with the print, the type-face—of his books.
language of its desires. His real life, it seems, has no other story to tell than the search for circumstances propitious for the leap out of it into the uncanny world of writing. At the beginning of this struggle, however, is the curse of one who from the start found himself outside the human stall while craving a simplicity of vision and nourishment within it. Kafka found consolation in thinking of himself as the "formal necessity" of a great family "superabundant in life" (GW 269). But what is it to be the merely formal condition of such abundance? Life, to be valued as "splendid" (DII 195), must be seen—and so it must be held off at a distance. But at that remove from the family table, a body could starve.

So strong, however, was Kafka's loyalty to the truth of separation that to a remarkable degree, for one who felt himself to be forever starving in the world and would indeed starve, he did not have to spend his life disengaging himself from involvements—professional, political, or erotic—into which he fell through the distractions of his body. Between 1908 and his retirement in 1922 because of sickness, he worked in only one office (as a high-ranking civil servant at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague). He did not join and then resign from parties or societies. If he did make and break marriage engagements, he twice broke off from the same woman—Felice Bauer—and his parting from her meant essentially only a change of addressee for his letters. His biography is a repetition, a "marching double-time in place" (DI 157), of the longing for physical bliss within a mute social ritual—a longing at cross-purposes with the ascetic restraint of the writer's task that he had to take on almost from birth. In this sense Kafka lived and believed he lived under the sign of a single metamorphosis, which

14. He mentions having admired six girls in a single summer and feeling guilty toward all of them. He was reproached, however, in only one instance—through a third person.

15. When, after a fashion, Kalka broke off relations with Felice in September 1913, he began writing letters of very much the same kind to Felice Bauer's friend Grete Bloch. His last letter to Felice is dated October 16, 1917; his splendid correspondence with Milena Jesenská began two years later. In 1919 he was also very briefly engaged to Julie Wohryzek, several months after meeting her in a pension in Silesia. His father's bitter opposition to the marriage contributed to Kafka's growing doubt and anxiety.

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finally condemned his body to the autonomy of starvation, and of which writing was the goad and exemplification. This is the story told by *The Metamorphosis* and “The Hunger Artist.”

Kafka’s metamorphosis was continual and phased: it produced ascetic and participatory modes of life, varying the value and use of each of these for literature. But the revelation of contrary possibilities occurs so swiftly, oscillation is so much a constant, that through it Kafka achieves the consistency of a spinning top. “The constant variety of the forms it takes, and once, in the midst of it all, the affecting sight of a momentary abatement in its variations” (DII 229). If Kafka’s writing and physical life do finally achieve the unity of a constantly humming strife, is it on the strength of their common estrangement from the norms of family? This is a compelling view—and one that has shaped the critical interpretation of Kafka’s life and work.

Here, the consistency of both types of estrangement (of the life and of the work) and of their relation to one another suggests the possibility of a coherent recovery of Kafka. One could disclose, in Nietzsche’s words, “the secret alphabet-script” of Kafka’s bodily self in his work, especially in its literal aspect—its play with the body of the letter. It is true that Kafka’s physical life and work occur as types of separation, which, in their opposition to ordinary experience, could also appear to assert their unrecoverable strangeness. But a “German Romantic” way of dignifying such strangeness is to link it, by virtue of a Romantic horror of the ordinary, to a higher sort of life: “The world must be romanticized,” writes Novalis, “so its original meaning will again be found. . . . By investing the commonplace with a lofty significance, the ordinary with a mysterious aspect, the familiar with the prestige of the unfamiliar, the finite with the semblance of infini-

**17.** Starvation frees the bourgeois body from its dependency on a nourishment doled out by others as part of a training in social unfreedom, whose hearth is the family table. Starving while it lives, the body is its own nourisher. The complementary illustration of such a freedom might be the vanishing of Kafka the artist—desireless, extinguished—into the perfection of a literary sign “free” of social purposes, aiming neither to explain the world nor otherwise to serve it. I have drawn such reflections from the lustrous and innovative work of Gerhard Neumann: e.g., “‘Nachrichten vom ‘Pontus’’: Das Problem der Kunst im Werk Franz Kafkas,” in *Franz Kafka Symposium—1983: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur zu Mainz*, ed. Wilhelm Emrich and Bernd Goldmann (Mainz: V. Hase & Koehler, 1985).

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ty, thereby I romanticize it.”19 In this sense literature is a raid on the absolute—what Kafka called an “assault on the last earthly frontier” (DII 202). Literature’s estrangement from familiar life might therefore be an exact measure of its proximity to another but genuine life—a finer modulation of the lamentsations of his body.

This idea, however, which assumes the goal of Bildung, is also the belief about which Kafka was most unsure. He did not know whether the other life to which writing “alluded” was the Promised Land or a precipice. This doubt identifies the main topic of his work: namely, the only questionable passage of literature to an authentic life, to an authenticity Kafka often translates, like Nietzsche, into a biologicistic category—the life of an improved body. Gerhard Neumann’s essay on the field of Kafka’s “sliding paradox” discloses fundamentally different directions in the matter of the relation of this field to life: on the one hand it means to be the passage to an authentic life, on the other hand it carves out its own domain—a wilderness or borderland (Grenzland; T 548) of sheer strangeness.20 Charles Bernheimer’s Flaubert and Kafka makes an eminent contribution to this discussion by distinguishing between two kinds of writing or views of writing in Kafka: one, producing metaphors, generates an unstable field disrupting the vital, anaclitic bond; another aims to restore this lost connection.21 Kafka’s gnome can serve as a summary: “The point of view of art and that of life are different even in the artist himself” (DF 86).

Kafka, however, will make another, equally potent substitution for the extraordinary life that writing is about: writing is about death; it is the prayer of a dead man for “a real death”; it is eternal dying. But this death is conceived by writing, and hence, finally, writing is about the relation of writing . . . to itself. Tzvetan Todorov observes (following Blanchot): “When we write, we do merely that—the importance of the gesture is such that it leaves room for no other experi-

ence. At the same time, if I write, I write about something, even if this something is writing. For writing to be possible, it must be born out of the death of what it speaks about; but this death makes writing itself impossible, for there is no longer anything to write. Literature can become possible only insofar as it makes itself impossible.”

The purpose of my chapters is to explore the various forms of life and of a lifelike death which Kafka’s literary language enacts. Like the substrates of knowledge and morality in the transcendental ground of Kant’s aesthetic judgment, they are in their root “intimately and obscurely” connected.

