Paris Bride

John Schad

Published by Punctum Books

Schad, John.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84187

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2918640
CHAPTER TWO

Trials

I/IV

Accused

No, dearly beloved, Marie did not walk under a motorcar. That was quite another woman, one who need not trouble us. Marie, you see, did make it through the traffic, and across the Channel, back here, to Paris. In fact, she first returned almost a year before. And, once here, she drew close again to her dearest friend, Madeleine.

She, Madeleine, is wife to one who was, as it happens, the Pastor of what is called the Tab, or Tabernacle. This is that most surprising Parisian thing, a temple or church of the Drowned. To clarify, it is a church of the happily Drowned, the fully-immersed people of God. Baptists, would you believe it. Yes, here, in Paris.

Marie herself once passed through the Tabernacle waters. This was when young and born again, some years before her English exile. Upon return, though, to the Drowned, she had news for the Drowned. Or at least for Madeleine.

Marie’s husband, smitten by a young woman seventeen years younger than himself, has turned her
out. … Marie … has agreed to facilitate a divorce by declaring that she has never had conjugal relations with him. The divorce is on the pretext that Marie has infantile organs.

(Madeleine Blocher-Saillens, May 1924)

Hard words, are they not? But are they true? Well, it is certainly the case that Johannes is smitten by another woman. And, yes, she is indeed younger by seventeen years. Born, 1897. As it happens, she too is called Marie, Marie Haile; though Johannes chooses always to call her “Marnie,” gently insinuating an alien “n.” I can also testify that this second Marie marries Johannes. This is in August 1925, in Sussex. Together they have three children, one of whom will become my father. Yes, my father.

What, then, am I now to think? What to make of all of this? Here. Now. This evening. In this lecture. Above all, whom am I to believe? Johannes, or Marie? The word of a doctor, or the diary of a friend? High Court, or Low Church? London, or Paris? If Paris, Johannes becomes, in a heartbeat, suspected of both perjury and bigamy. The view from the Tabernacle is, then, that Johannes stands accused. My father’s father, accused.

Being kin, blood-related, I should perhaps seek to defend Johannes; however, my only real thought, poor scholar that I am, is this: that Johannes, as a man accused, may be likened to Herr Joseph K. I think, of course, of the hero, if that is the word, of Herr Kafka’s fine and famous novel, *The Trial* (1925). Herr K., as you know, is a man who stands accused. Indeed Herr K. is, as it happens, a clerk, just like the young Johannes.

It is true, I accept, that Herr K. ends his life in a quarry and in the company of theatrical executioners. Frock coats, top hats, etc. Johannes, on the other hand, comes to an end in a suburban bed, no killers in sight, with or without top hats. Johannes, however, is not wholly unfamiliar with execution. You see, he is, or claims to be, the son of the son of the son of the son of the son of one Uli Schad. Poor Uli, a Basel weaver, was done
away with in 1653 for his part in leading, or attempting to lead, a disaster. A peasant rebellion, that is. The six other leaders were beheaded, like kings. Uli alone was sent, for still greater shame, to the gallows. And, with no Priest. No holy comfort, none.

Fig. 6. Etching of Uli Schad. Historisches Museum Basel. Photo: Peter Portner.
II/IV

Arrested

Kindly allow me, dearly beloved, to start again. To recommence my lecture. And to do so by returning to The Trial, Herr Kafka’s, and to the sentence with which it all begins. “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K.” Astonishing. You see, Marie, or possibly Madeleine, may have been telling lies about Johannes. Here, in Paris. But, then again, perhaps not.

I will, therefore, now look into his case, and do so with the tools of my own clerkly trade. Books. Modern books. Such as The Trial. It is, please note, a book that many scholars, even real ones, believe to be born of the guilt that Herr Kafka once felt upon terminating an engagement to be married.

I … didn’t visit her parents. Merely sent a messenger with a letter of farewell. Letter dishonest and coquettish. [It said], “Don’t think badly of me.” Speech from the gallows.
(Kafka, July 27, 1914)

Fig. 7. Drawing of the execution of Uli Schad (ca. 1653).
Zentral & Hochschulbibliothek Luzern.
These last exquisite words I stole from Herr Kafka’s diary. They mirror so daintily, I think, the whole of *The Trial*: a man is accused, a man is condemned. Beautiful. *The Trial* in domestic miniature.

By the way, dearly beloved, have you noticed how very domestic, even (dare I say it) how very intimate, is the world of Herr K.? The courts, I mean. Wherever he turns, or looks, within the House of Law, he finds himself touch-close to a young woman. And every time it is a different young woman. Never the same. One, I find, in every room. And then there are all those beds. All warm, I think, with bodies. Like the bed in which Herr K. is arrested. Or in which the Advocate works. Or over which, upon re-entering the Court, Herr K. must clamber. Climb. Bed, bed, bed. Beds everywhere. Ah, how telling. How suggestive of the flesh and all its desires.

“No,” you may say, a little disgusted. Beds, you may say, exist not merely to stage our sexual encounters. Far from it, you may say. A bed, you may say, also provides for falling to sleep. Or being ill. Or even giving birth. And all this I do accept. However, in the House of Law, the bed, I say, is finally and essentially, the conjugal bed. The scene of marital union. Conjugal union, you see, is the Law’s great and secret preoccupation. Obsession, even.

Ah, you smile. Perhaps you don’t quite believe me? Well then, watch, with me, the woman in the Interrogation Chamber. Herr K’s. Come close, close up, and watch how the woman sleeps so beautifully alongside her darling husband, and then, all of a sudden, she gently stirs, wakes, and looks up only to see, looking down upon her, none other than the Examining Magistrate. With, no doubt, a kind of grin upon his face.

Again, take a closer look at Herr K. himself. Peer discretely over his shoulder, as he leafs through the books upon the shelves of the Interrogation Chamber. Now, what very particular book does he find secreted there? Any idea? Suggestion? No? Well, let me then enlighten you. It is, I am afraid, a work of pornography.
Conjugal pornography. Shameless, nevertheless. Its title, *How Grete was Plagued by her Husband*.

It is not, I know, the case that each and every husband is capable of plaguing his wife. Or at least not the husband (if husband he is) whom Herr K. comes across within another of the Court’s many ancient volumes. It is, I fear, another book of doubtful character. This time with pictures.

A man and a woman were sitting naked on a sofa; the obscene intention of the artist was evident enough, yet his skill was so limited that nothing emerged from the picture save the all-too-solid figures of a man and a woman sitting rigidly upright and, because of the bad perspective, apparently finding the utmost difficulty even in turning towards each other.

*(The Trial)*

The artist, I feel, very much hopes that these two lovers of his, naked as they are, should come together. He yearns for it, indeed. As do I. Sadly, though, this Adam and Eve, as it were, are so badly drawn, the perspective so very poor, that it would appear they will never be as one. Under the laws of classical perspective, they are doomed to remain apart. Forever.

How sad. How very sad.

But wait. These times of ours are, I gather, modern times. On the whole. And the world, I hear, is now full of art with no regard whatsoever for the iron laws of perspective. Think of such as the lawless Signor Picasso, or Monsieur Matisse. Think of them. No, don’t just think of them — call them, telephone them if need be, and quick. Summon them here, now, this evening, to this very lecture hall, and ask them to view, all aslant and askew, our naked couple. And the outcome? The upshot? Why, it is that our Adam and Eve might yet be seen, thank God, to be about to come together. Paradise thus made possible, their relationship saved, redeemed. Hallelujah.
Hallelujah, indeed. Especially if, by the miracle of analogy, we might also come to witness the redemption of the marriage of Marie and Johannes. For they are also, you see, an all-too-solid Adam and Eve sitting naked together, rigidly upright, finding forever the utmost difficulty even in turning toward each other. Or so it is said back in London. And yet, what if Marie and Johannes are also only being kept apart by bad perspective? By distances that can yet be overcome? Overcome by something so ready-to-hand as a cool disregard for classical perspective? If so, if the case, then they too would yet find no difficulty in finally turning toward each other. They too might yet melt, at last, together. In union. Passionate union. Think of it.

*'

You have, perhaps, by now ceased to think of it. Had your fill, dearly beloved. If so, you may have spotted a flaw, or lacuna, in my argument, in your dear professor’s thesis. Yes, you might say, it is true that the laws of perspective hardly obtain in the case of coitus; true that in the confusion of union, its rough and tumble, all such laws are suspended or broken. Nevertheless, you might add, Johannes and Marie’s fate is sealed, fixed — there is no possibility whatsoever that they might yet come together. Not now. The past is forever the past, and simply cannot be changed. And to suggest anything other is absurd.

Fair point, fair point indeed. Were it not that Herr Kafka sees things otherwise. “I pray for the past,” he says. Pray that it might yet change.

And why not? If God is God, then could He not choose to change the past? Rot, you may say. Change the past? The very idea. But it is, in fact, a not unfamiliar notion. Even among scholars of Theology, once Queen of the Sciences. So, let us pray. Yes, you and I, let us pray for Marie and Johannes. Just as the Drowned doubtless did. Indeed, let us pray so fervently that the past is eventually changed, and Marie and Johannes do yet somehow become one flesh. One. Amen.
I see you smile again. But I am most serious and will certainly pray, and upon my knees. And will do so in full awareness that if my supplication is answered, if Johannes and Marie do in fact come together, and if therefore Johannes never marries his second Marie, then I would not be here. I would, I realise, have prayed myself out of existence. As you can see, however, this is not, as yet, the case. Perhaps I am too solid.

Not so the pages of The Trial. They are, in fact, so thin, so translucent, so diaphanous that I can, as I say, glimpse through them the accusable figure of Johannes. Yes, Johannes. And I glimpse him most clearly when sweet Miss Leni puts to Herr K. two questions that I myself should like to ask poor Johannes.

**Question one:** Do you have a sweetheart?

**Question two:** Has she any physical defect?

* *

Well, as you know, Johannes does have a sweetheart, even before the annulment. Or, so the Drowned say. She, this sweetheart, is to become Marie the Second, as if a queen. But does she, this second Queen Marie, have a physical defect? Well, does she? What do you think? No idea? Well, sadly, I must report that she does have a defect. You see, when Johannes first meets Queen Marie II, she is a consumptive. Or at least, she is a convalescent consumptive. At Bognor Regis, England, far in the royal south, far in the summer. A frail thing.

And what of Marie the First? Is it really the case that she has a defect? That, of course, is the overwhelming question, the question to which the appointed examiner, good Dr. Stevens, must speak. But, what does Miss Leni think? What is her view, or take, on Marie’s possible physical imperfection? Or blemish? Her unfitness for marriage?

I see Miss Leni “raise her hand,” right hand, pause for a second, and then stretch out two middle fingers, between which she displays “a connecting web of skin.”

How curious that web of skin. Is it indeed her answer? Coded? Just for me? If so, Miss Leni, I think, concurs with Dr. Ste-
vens. But Madeleine, in Paris, shakes her well-drowned head. “No,” says her head. The good doctor is not to be trusted.

And neither, perhaps, is Miss Leni. She is, you see, no disinterested party. Offers no neutral, Alpine view. Her interrogation of Joseph K. is, in fact, pure seduction. Pure. Lower your head, dearly beloved, bend your ear, and hear how her questioning ends with her whispering, so sweetly, “You belong to me now.” Me.

Beware, then, Miss Leni. Her voice so soft. As is her body, albeit out of joint. Just look at her. See how her advances are ever-so-slightly at odds with lovemaking’s classical laws. The laws we know so well, you and I. “She clasped his head, bent over him, and bit … him on the neck.” “She … scrambled up until she was kneeling open-mouthed upon his knees.” “A final aimless kiss landed on his shoulder.” Miss Leni, I fear, is in truth the pornographer’s badly-drawn woman. Or rather, she is that woman just beginning to come to life. Making her first-ever amatory moves in the world. First-ever.

Clumsy?

Why yes, she would indeed be clumsy. As clumsy as a clerk on a bicycle, you might say. Or so Herr K. might say, seeing he is himself a bit of a cyclist. Oh, did you not know? Herr K. is in possession of a “bicycle licence.” And thus also, I presume, a bicycle. All of which should warm Johannes’s heart, presuming its tyres (the bicycle that is) are made of rubber.

Ah, rubber. Dear rubber. It everywhere encompasses us. And yet, the full extent of its ministry is still something of a secret. So secret, in fact, it is known only to a strange cove called “J.W.L.” Full name withheld. A furtive fellow, as well he might be, possessed of this the very secret of our modern world. The secret that is the ubiquity of rubber. King Rubber, as it were. It is a secret that came to J.W.L. in a vision, a vision of a city. 1913 the year. It was a gleaming city that he envisioned at first, but one that, in a twinkling of an eye, was somehow denuded of all rubber. Of a sudden, he says, every office in the city was a ruin, every desk a wreck, as erasers resolved into dust, papers fell apart in confusion, and telephones, now without receivers, hung, limp,
from tangles of naked wires. It was as if the end had come, the end of our world. Yours and mine. Rubber, you see, is our only defence. Against catastrophe.

You look uncertain. Unconvinced. Well, consider once more Herr K. He, who, in the moment of his arrest, the moment of his need to identify himself, to establish who on earth he is, reaches for (of all things) a bicycle license. Yes, bicycle license. In short, poor Joseph K. depends upon a document that in turn depends upon a bicycle that in turn depends upon the rubber of its tyres. Rubber, yes, rubber. Dear rubber.

And it is again rubber, again a case of rubber, when Herr K. comes to the Great Realisation that his arrest could not possibly have taken place at work, at the office. At home, yes; at the office, no, never. And why not? Well, because in the office he has upon his desk not only “the general telephone” but also “the office telephone,” and each, he says, daily “stand[s] before me.” Herr K., you see, knows he is protected by the telephones. They are, as it were, his guardian angels, angels that are made of rubber, yes rubber, albeit in part. Think, dearly beloved, of the receiver, or the casing for the wires, etc. etc. If only Herr K. had remained at his desk, enjoying forever the faithful protection of its rubber-edged seraphim. His error, his fatal error, was to leave the office. To go home. It was at home that he fell foul of the Law. It was there he was arrested.

Ah, how strangely vulnerable we are, all of us, in our homes. Vulnerable to the Law, that is. It is a lesson I myself have learnt from not only the long-closed case of Herr K. but also the as-yet-open case of Johannes. You see, one moment Johannes is merely a man in a marriage; the next he is a petitioner in court; yet another (here in Paris) he stands accused of having a sweetheart.

Herr K.’s Uncle: What case is this?
Indeed, a case of perjury. Not to mention bigamy; for, you see, if Johannes's marriage to Marie was only annulled on false evidence, then Johannes is still (or already) married when he marries again. Marries a second wife. Which is, I gather, against the Law. Bigamy.

But you, dearly beloved, may wonder by what authority is this case brought? Who am I to be interrogating my father's father? In whose name do I speak? Well, I would have thought that was obvious. Behold my gown, my lectern, this august auditorium. Yes, my authority is granted to me by scholarship itself. There is, you see, no more inquisitorial institution than this mystical body we fondly call the Academy.

In fact, on occasion, at night, I do discern something of the Academy's dark shadow in the case of poor Herr K.

"The real question," he cries, "is, who accuses me? What authority is conducting these proceedings?"

The real answer, I cry, is, the bloody Academy!

Herr K. nods at this. "This arrest," he whispers, "gives me the feeling of something very learned."

Quite, I say. And it is a feeling, Herr K., that must surely grow greater with every book that lines the courtroom walls. The walls that now surround you.

However, dearly beloved, we should not be surprised at this. Not surprised to find the Academy lurking about this particular House of Law. Herr K.'s, that is. After all, the man who first notifies Herr K. of his arrest is a man who is "reading a book." Yes, a book. Of some kind or other. Indeed, dearly beloved, if you open the door, the door to the office lumber room, the one wherein the whipping is going on, you will find not only "empty ... ink-bottles," a "candle" and "a bookcase" but also a pile of "useless papers." Useless, please note. Behold, I say, the scholar's cell. Whipping notwithstanding.

You look a little doubtful. Well, to persuade you, allow me to offer you a citation. One of my very best bits of useless paper, as it were. It is a quotation from Herr K., as quotable as he is killable.
“There can be no doubt,” he says, “that behind all the actions of this court of justice … there is a great organisation at work [which] … has at its disposal … an indispensable … retinue of servants, clerks, … and other assistants.”

It would be hard, I suggest, to find a more telling description of the modern university. Not least our own.

Herr K. does, I confess, go on to claim that this great organisation “employs corrupt warders, stupid Inspectors, … police, and … perhaps even hangmen.” Here, you might say, the resemblance to a university begins to falter somewhat. You might accept, with a shrug, that the world of scholarship succumbs to occasional stupidity and perhaps, just perhaps, some policing of a sort, a higher and necessary sort; however, I suspect you would draw the line at hangmen. Arguing, perhaps, that no university actually marches people out and hangs them, that there are no gallows in the quad, no gibbet in the examination hall, no lectures given from the scaffold. Or at least not here. Well, we shall see.

But what can already be seen is this: that insofar as Herr K.’s courtrooms do shadow-forth a university then it is, alas, that saddest species of university, a student-less one.

“There was a time,” says the Advocate, “when several young students … worked for me, but today I work alone.”

Rest assured, dearly beloved, I am not about to suggest that the Advocate’s students have been marched out and hanged. However, do not forget the War. Do not forget how many of the students of Europe’s finest universities were marched out and left in the trenches. Indeed, given our modern tubercular plague, those students not marched to the trenches are, instead, being put on trains to sanatoria where equally high death-rates are achieved.

Once there, however, once settled in their airy dormitories, some are busy, even now, creating universities of a wholly new kind. A sickening kind. The most famous is at Davos, the ski resort high in the Alps. It is a dazzling place. A dazzling place which, each and every year, thanks to a certain Herr Doktor Muller, hosts a dazzling philosophical knees-up. A symposium,
if you must. Its purpose: to occupy the dying minds of the resort’s more book-bound inmates. Poor souls. Or perhaps I now think of Herr Thomas Mann’s intoxicating novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924), set, as it is, in an imaginary Davos sanatorium. Berghof, it is called, this sanatorium, and it is itself already a shadow-university, what with its meandering lectures and doomed romances. It is no miracle that Doktor Muller’s annual symposium is known, to the knowing, as “the University on the Magic Mountain.”

By the way, should you be wondering, Herr Kafka himself, although tubercular, does not go to Davos. True, it had once been on the cards. That was in 1920. August. And he was then already so ill as to be what we term, after Berghof, “a horizontaller.” “You try to send me to Davos,” he wrote. Indeed, in 1924, March, he declared, “I *am* … going to Davos.” Now, though, Herr Kafka is too ill, too horizontal, even to travel, even to seek the cure. Far too ill.
It is, I accept, unfortunate that Herr Kafka never makes it to Davos, to the snow-capped roof of Europe. It is, however, a fate he always anticipated. “I [have] watched you,” he says, “as I would watch mountain climbers from my deck chair.” Herr Kafka, you see, is doomed to stay below. One could not, after all, be further from the summit of a mountain than when confined to a deck chair.

But, why on earth pass one’s time watching mountaineers? “To see,” he says, “whether I could recognise them up there in the snow.” Well, good luck to him. From a distance, it is nigh impossible to recognise any mountaineer. Though that, perhaps, is Herr Kafka’s point. That he cannot really see anyone in the snow. On the mountain.

“But wait,” you cry.
Pardon?
“By seeing no-one in the snow does Herr Kafka not thereby see, or foresee, a very particular someone in the snow?”
Who?
“Herr Heidegger. Martin Heidegger. Philosopher. And occasional skier.”
Continue.
“In 1929, Herr Professor Heidegger is in Davos, at one of the symposia.”
Indeed. Albeit as thinker rather than skier.
“A fine distinction.”
True. Especially since he is there to think about Nothing, or to be precise —
“The Nothing.”
Excellent. Congratulations. It would indeed be perfectly legitimate to suggest that the No-One, or Nothing, which Herr Kafka sees in the snow is Herr Heidegger. Dear Herr Heidegger, up there with his goggles, baggy pants, and ageing skis. Ah, you smile. I am gratified.
By the way, I do believe that Herr Kafka somehow always had Herr Heidegger in his sights. Herr Heidegger the Nothing-man, that is. You see, way back in 1913, Herr Kafka declares that “our task,” the task of modernity, is “to accomplish the negative.”

With regard to this noble task, I am myself, as you know, doing my utmost. And will continue to do so by here observing that Herr Heidegger, our philosophical magician, accomplishes a “negative” that is, mirabile dictu, even more negative than “the negative.” But how? By what rough magic? Well, Herr Heidegger himself says this, that “The ‘Nothing’ is more original than the Not and Negation.” For Herr Heidegger, you see, it is not Negation which produces Nothing but the other way about. In the beginning, as it were, is “Nothing.” That, you see, is the law that Herr Heidegger hands down from the Magic Mountain. Or rather, almost. For our magician wants no-one to run away, hot-foot, with what he calls the “nonsensical idea of a Nothing that ‘is.’” And so I won’t — run away, that is. Not at my age. Or at least not with such a foolish idea. Clearly, Nothing cannot be. Not as such.

And what is more, dearly beloved, Nothing cannot, apparently, be thought. Seek not, says Herr Heidegger, an idea of Nothing but an “experience of Nothing.” A hard saying, is it not? Indeed, if true, Nothing would cease to be the business of the scholar. The man of ideas. Not, then, my business, and not even Herr Heidegger’s. Or, at least, not the one on the mountain.

Though there is another one. Yes, another Herr Heidegger. His twin, if you will. This other Herr Heidegger, first name unknown, was the German master at some English preparatory school. Somewhere in the North, I think. Sadly, though, he was brutally killed. In 1904, or thereabouts. He was, in fact, riding a bike just before he was killed. A very nasty affair. You may perhaps recall it, for the crime, in the end, was solved by none other than the famous Mr. Holmes, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. The detective. By the way, in solving the crime, Mr. Holmes made much of Herr Heidegger’s bicycle tyre, its precise type and design. Its
tread, indeed. However, my particular point, or thought, is that this other Herr Heidegger might be said to have had, in fact, an “experience of Nothing.” Of Nothing on wheels, as it were.

No. Sorry. Correction. Not even this Herr Heidegger will really do, seeing that the nothing of his death was merely a negation of his life, his vivid, cycling life. That is all.

And much the same may be said of even Herr K. Another dead cyclist. Also killed. Or executed, perhaps. In his case “like a dog”; and even dogs live before they die.

As do all of us, I gather. Mind you, there is or was (or perhaps was not) that still-born child who, in January 1916, “was found,” at a post-mortem inquest, “never to have lived at all.” I saw this in the Palmers Green Reporter. Marie’s local newspaper, in London. As you may know.

But I stray, decline, fall off. So must return, to my point, my Alpine point, or question. Which, now, is this, that: If, in 1929, up there in his snowclad tower, Herr Heidegger is really scanning the horizon for not just negation but rather Nothing itself, and indeed the Nothing which must be experienced, or felt, then does he not somehow glimpse poor Marie?

After all, it is Marie, apparently, who knows, really knows, not the mere negation of a thing—that-once-was but rather Nothing itself, full-blown and pure. It is, indeed, a Nothing that has been the case, they say, for nineteen years. There having been, they say, no marriage. None at all. She and Johannes have been, they say, merely two people who happened to be, for the most part, within the same lonely house, the same lonely bedroom, even the same lonely bed, at least on occasion. That is all, they say. At worst, it is, I fear, faintly indecent, an almost living-in-sin. At best, it is, I suppose, all rather modern, even avant-garde.

Either way, they say, it has not been a marriage. Or at least not as defined by the Law, flesh-minded as it is. Flesh-minded since, for the Law, it seems, it is either coitus or nothing, penetration or nothing. This is also the founding principle of pornography. So I am told. I now know why a courtroom library might include some books of filth.
Mind you, Herr Kafka always knew. Being a knowing fellow. And what he knows all too well is just how peculiar is this entanglement of Law and Flesh that we (you and I) call marriage. Such a strange entanglement. Deadly entanglement. “Through marriage,” says Herr Kafka, “I shall perish.” In short, marriage, for Herr Kafka, is a kind of Nothing.

Correction. Nothing is, in fact, what he is as an unmarried man. He believes, you see, that “marriage [would be] the dissolution of the nothingness” that he is already, as Bachelor Kafka, Herr Kafka the single-man. Marriage, then, would serve to Nothing the Nothing that Herr Kafka already is. It would render him doubly Nothing.

To view all this another way: were Herr Kafka ever fool enough to marry, he would finally become something or someone (a married man, that is) which would in turn make possible, if not inevitable, his immediate annihilation.

You follow me? If not, try this: “The smile on your mouth was the dearest thing alive enough to have strength to die.” Thomas Hardy.

By the way, being alive enough to die is not an error that Herr Kafka cares to make. Or at least not alongside Felice Bauer, the woman with whom, as his bride, he would be doing (or sharing) the dying. Herr Kafka, you see, considers marriage to be an elaborate suicide pact. A case of till-death-do-us-not-part. “As a child,” he tells Felice, “I used to … look … at a bad colour-print depicting the suicide of two lovers. [It was] a winter’s night, [and] … the couple stood at the end of a … landing-stage, about to take the decisive step.” Once again, two badly-drawn and frozen lovers. Poor Felice. Dear Felice.

Dear Felice, indeed. If not, Dearest Felice, as in “Dearest [Felice], of the four men I consider … my true blood-relations, Grillparzer, Dostoyevsky, Kleist and Flaubert, [only] Dostoyevsky … got married; and … Kleist, when compelled to shoot himself on the Wannsee, was the only one to find the right way out.”

What Herr Kafka, by the way, fails to mention is that Herr Kleist blasts himself to Kingdom-come on the clear understanding that his bride, Henriette Vogel, will do likewise, that she too
will suicide on the Wannsee. As indeed she does, obliging to
the last.

Dear Felice, though, will have known all this, known that the
Wannsee is where lovers agree to vanish. Hand in hand, as it
were. It is, then, no wonder that when Herr Kafka has a dream
about, of all places, the Wannsee she, Felice, is hardly amused.
“We were … in the Wannsee,” he writes, “which you didn’t like.”

As the dream continues, our two sorry lovers “pass … into
… a cemetery.” In Herr Kafka’s dreamy head, the Wannsee
means, for lovers, quite simply, death. Once upon a time, it
was Kleist and Henriette with their smoking guns. Now, it is
himself and sweet Felice dream-waltzing through graves. “We
passed through a wrought-iron gate as into … a cemetery, and
had many experiences, for the telling of which it is now too late.”

★

I should, perhaps, here offer two pale observations. Each drawn
from useless papers, scribbles, notes-to-self, found somewhere
toward the broken back of a broken drawer. In that broken desk
of mine. They, my notes, are as follows:
1. Both Herr Kafka and Felice are, undoubtedly, Jews.
2. Wannsee signals the end for many a Jew. Some lovers, some
   not.

In this latter connection, I think of a certain meeting or gather-
ering held at a snow-bound Wannsee mansion in 1942. January.
It is a meeting of minds and views. Perspectives, as it were.
Not to mention, the very best wine and food. A symposium, if
you will. And the disputants are there to ponder a question, a
very particular question, the Jewish Question. They are there, in
fact, to find an Answer to the Question. This they do, over their
food, the bread, the wine, etc. And, in the end, the Answer to the
Question, they say, is what they call The End. The End of Them
All. You may have heard of It. Heard of the ditches, the busy lit-
tle gas-vans, the showers that are not showers, and all the other
masked houses of execution, the houses that house six million
cemetery experiences for the telling of which it is now too late.
Yes, too late. Too late for telling. But not too late (not, at least, by my watch) for arguing. Arguing that Herr Kafka somehow sees, or foresees, something of all this, all this dying, in the shape, or form of marriage. Odd, very odd, I know — so near as this is to saying that Herr Kafka feels unable to marry Felice because thirty years later millions of fellow Jews will be married to everlasting night, each marriage a shot-gun marriage, as it were. Yes, odd. Except for this: that both the institution of marriage and the organized murder of millions entail the careful administration of flesh. To put this a better way: both, in their respective ways, oversee the throwing together of naked bodies. I am sorry to say this, dearly beloved. So sorry. You know how, on occasion, I grow dark. But remember, please, that dear Herr Kafka sees within marriage not only “dissolution” but also “that I shall perish.” Perish. Remember too that Milena Jesenská, another sweetheart of Herr Kafka’s, a later sweetheart, will die in a camp. Ravensbrück. The concentration camp.

So, to take this further, allow me to ask you a question. A difficult one, as if this were one of our little examinations. Concentrate please. The question concerns Felicia and Milena, lover one and lover two, respectively. The question is as follows:

How far and in what ways is it possible to argue that the disquiet felt by Felice from within Herr Kafka’s Wannsee dream (“you didn’t like it”) anticipates what Milena will later endure within one of the very camps that serve to realise Herr Hitler’s Wannsee dream?

You look confused. Allow me to simplify the question:

Is it possible that Herr Kafka’s first beloved might glimpse the death of his second beloved? In short, might we say that the two Wannsee dreams are woven together? Herr Kafka’s dream and Herr Hitler’s. The lover’s dream and the executioner’s. Might we say that? Might we? Might we? Answer me. Answer.

Well, I think, myself, that, yes, we might say that. Might well say that. And, indeed, I will say that. If only because Herr Kafka believes, above all, that those who love and those who are dead

67
prove the closest of neighbors. “Kisses,” he says, “don’t reach their destination, rather they are drunk on their way by the ghosts.”

Again, I am sorry. I have, just now, misled you. Quoted a little out of context. An old scholar’s trick, crime. Sin, even. I shall, therefore, seek redemption. Confess, right now, in the relative dark. Confess that, in truth, Herr Kafka has in mind not just any kisses, not just any old kisses, but “written kisses.” Yes, written.

Mind you, some would say that, in a sense, all kisses are written. That all kisses are cold kisses. Kisses that fail. That fail to unite, to join. That, however passionately we embrace, however intensely we kiss, we somehow remain apart. Unfed, as it were. Doomed. “The ghosts won’t starve, but we will perish,” says Herr K..

The work of perishing, of dying, is not, you see, something undertaken only Out There, or Elsewhere. In, say, the ditch or the van or the shower. In fact, forget ditch, van, and shower. The dying is here, right here. As close as our breath, as our lips. Yours and mine, were we to kiss. All lovers, you see, however close, do somehow freeze. Somehow die in the snow. Believe me.
By the way, talking of snow, do not forget how very difficult it is to be recognised in the snow. Both literal and metaphorical snow. I am thinking now, in particular, of Herr Kafka’s unfortunate sisters, all three: Gabriela, Valeria, and Ottla. All three, you see, disappear into the Wannsee snow, without record or trace, no-one knowing exactly where or when. No-one.

The case of K.’s beloved, his second beloved, Milena, is very different. For scholars, even bad ones, can establish, and with exquisite clerical precision, the where, when, and why of her passing. Place: Ravensbrück. Date: May 17, 1944. Cause: kidney infection.

There. Perfect. Milena, you see, is not a Jew but a Catholic. She is deported not for her blood or breeding or (if you must) who she is, but simply and purely (yes purely) for what she does, does for the Czech Resistance. And that is why we have place, date, and cause. Why she stands out in the Wannsee snow. Why she leaves there, out there, a perfect Christian print. Perfect.

Like Marie, in fact. For her too we have place, date, cause, where, when, why. All carefully filed. Tucked away. Somewhere or other in that windowless cell of mine. I also have, here and there, the annullment papers. On the floor, I think. Beyond that, however, all I have are a few pages from Madeleine’s diary, a tearful Tabernacle obituary and, from Marie herself, in her own poor hand, just one stray letter, from 1909, along with a single postcard. That is all. That is it. Nothing more. Nothing.

The postcard, by the way, is sent from a village in Brittany, up North. Frozen North in fact, the card being stamped (boot on face, as it were) January 5th 1942. Just 15 days before the snow began to fall forever at Wannsee.

So, then, what we have, apropos Marie, is next to nothing, and then, of a sudden, out of all this next-to-nothing, a postcard from January 1942. A postcard from Wannsee, if you will.
There are, I suppose, precious few postcards from Wannsee. Most of those who might have sent them now lie, face-down, in the Wannsee snow. Being Jews. That Marie manages to get a message out is a Tabernacle trick, a sleight of Christian hand. Those with whom she is staying, her Northern hosts, are, you see, also the happily-Drowned. What is more, Madeleine, to whom she writes, is now, by roundabout miracle, Pastor of the Drowned. Their Shepherdess, as it were. This postcard is, then, a second Christian print in the ice. A frozen cross, as it were.

But there is, believe me, still more, to this, to this icy sign. It being also, or nearly, an Hebraic scar, a Jewish wound. An ice-cold Star of David, if you will. You see, here in France, by 1942, the rumour, the murmur, among the Protestant few is that they will soon be pursued just as the Jews are already pursued. “After the Jews, without a doubt, it is our turn,” says Madeleine.

And this is in November of 1942, that is to say several months after the Great Round Up, the Rafle du Vel’ d’Hiv. Here in Paris. You recall? The city-wide Midnight Rehousing Scheme. July
16th. Dead of summer night. Thousands of sleepless Jews all swept away on silent buses. All off, they say, to the Vélodrome d’Hiver. To where, in less exceptional times, hibernating bicycles go around and around in circles. But not now.

No, not now, for things here are different now; there is, alas, no time now for going around and around. There are more pressing tasks. Like proving you are Christian. Always difficult, I find. But one way is to wave, like a handkerchief, your Certificate of Baptism. If you have one, dearly beloved. I refer, of course, to a Certificate of Infant Baptism, Catholic Baptism. Proper baptism. Which, naturally, only a few of the Protestant few possess. They are, you see, in peril, more than they have been for centuries. Or so they murmur, behind their pulpits, exchanging sorry stories of their fathers’ fathers’ fathers, persecuted ancients called Huguenots.

“The Germans,” says Madeleine, “have allowed only children under seven to stay with their mothers.” She thinks of the Jews. But adds, “exactly as they did to the Huguenots.”

This last may or may not be true. I do not know, to be honest; but the darkest Huguenot day, so dark as to be more of a night, is, doubtless, St Bartholomew’s Day, 1572. August 23rd. A famous massacre, it was. At a famous Paris wedding. One that went wrong. Not the first. Nor the last. This wedding, though, went so very wrong that it ended with thousands of stiffening Huguenots. It all began, they say, with good King Charles IX taking pot-shots at his fleeing Protestant guests from an upper-floor window of the Louvre. The window was open.

In Paris of old, you see, one use of an open window was to kill Protestants. In modern Paris, open windows are, I fear, being occasionally used for the killing of Jews. Although they jump from the windows, they are in fact pushed.

But what, you may wonder, is my point? At this late stage in my discourse. Well, it is that here in France, Catholic France, it is so easy to mistake the children of Abraham for the children of Luther. In fact, the mistake is most often made by Luther’s tribe itself. They are, I find, the most confusable of children. In particular, the drowned ones, the Baptists, such as they are. As but
a few of the few, remnant of a remnant, they, the Drowned, fall time-and-again for that most faded Christian dream. The dream that the Church is, in the End, at the Last, to be God’s new Israel, the latter-day children of Abraham.

Yes, a dog-eared dream, is it not? But it is most passionately dreamed by whoever they are that dream at the Tab, as they call it. Tabernacle, that is. And what name could be more Jewish? Indeed, what thing, or object, could be more Jewish than the first-ever Tabernacle? You know, Jahweh’s tent-for-the-Wilderness. His wigwam, big-top, marquee. Where He sees you, face-to-face, if you are Moses and all-at-sea in the sands, the desert, the Wilderness. And (again) my point? What is it? Well, that Marie, as one of the Tab, is that queerest of fish, a dream-Jew, a Jew by force-of-desert-mind, desert-dream.

But, perhaps, you do not quite believe me? Well, then, examine that postcard from the North. Marie’s. It is, I suggest, a card not only from the Wannsee but the Wilderness.

Dear Madeleine,

After a good period, Sara has had a sudden turn for the worse. This morning her temperature was 38 degrees, and this afternoon 39. There is nothing we can do to control the infection. Naturally, she is very weak and scarcely able to eat. Mme Matthews, however, always so kind, has prepared some woodcock and quail. These Sara has managed to eat. Please pray that she be delivered.

Yours,
Marie

“Yours, Marie, The Wilderness,” as it were. The Wilderness of the Jews. Her sister, you see, Sara, you see, is an invalid, you see, nigh-unto-death, you see, and yet both, you see, are daily sustained by providential kindness. And this kindness, you see, includes gifts of poultry, which, in turn, includes, you see, of all possible fowl, all possible species, the quail. Yes, quail. Of all the birds in all the sky, you see, quail was, you see, the very bird, you
see, sent from Heaven, to feed the Jews. In the Wilderness. Yes, the Wilderness.

I can myself, even now, hear the howling Sinai wind. Not to mention the cry of Israel. Her cry for deliverance. And can you? Here, this evening, in our darkening auditorium.

No?

Well then, listen. Listen, I say. Listen, as, with Sara on the very verge of desert-death, Marie begs Madeleine to “Pray that she [Sara] be delivered.” Yes, delivered.

---

Fig. 9. Portrait of Sara Wheeler, Paris (1897). Blocher Saillens Archive.
No, wait, please. Don’t go. Not yet. I have had a thought, of a sort. A question. It is this: does Marie ask Madeleine to pray for Sara’s deliverance from death or from life? Quick. What think you? Come on. Death. Life. Which is it? Always a hard one, I know. Well, the fact is, Sara does not die. Not yet, at least. So, is she delivered or not? Has a miracle happened or not?

No, I don’t know either.

Indeed, come to think of it, I don’t even know if Marie’s prayer is heard, received. After all, if written kisses may not reach their destination, then what chance written prayers? In particular, prayers written on a post-card, and thus so easily drunk along the way to Heaven by not only ghosts but postmen. Curious postmen. Perhaps, though, Marie’s postman heeds her call to pray. Perhaps he falls to his postman-knees in the street. And perhaps his postman-prayers are answered. Indeed, perhaps Jehovah listens best to men in the street. Or at least, better than he listens to men at lecterns. Perhaps. It is difficult to say. As we say. You and I.

Things, though, are not always difficult-to-say. Certainly not in the case of poor Milena, or indeed the unfortunate Kafka sisters. Alas, no ambiguity there. No twisting hermeneutic agony. No riddling postcard over which to do a-song-and-bloody-dance. These women, these Wannsee women as it were, are most certainly not delivered. They are lost, without question, without shadow of doubt. No ambiguity, none. None. Indeed, with respect to these particular women, I am, I fear, left with nothing to puzzle over, nothing to examine, nothing to interrogate. I am in short, redundant. Pointless, even, you might say.

“The enquiry into Nothing puts us, the enquirers, ourselves into question.” So says Herr Heidegger. And, I fear, the bastard might be right. Right with respect to the almighty Wannsee
Nothing that does for Milena, et al. Not to mention the nothing that is annulment, the nothing that does for Marie.

Am I, then, in the end, at the last, to be put so far into question that I too become as nothing? Am I? And, if so, will anyone ever attend to me again? Will you? You, my beloved students. My fellow enquirers. Or will you too disappear, like the others, the other students, those long-ago departed to the trenches? Or sanatoria. Leaving me alone, with no-one to speak to, face-to-face.

You may smile, but it happens, and to the very best of scholars. Even, for instance, to the eminent Linguist himself, Professor de Saussure. When giving his towering lectures on Sanskrit, at Geneva, he would, most years, behold an ever-diminishing audience. As one fine and loyal student recalls, although the first lecture was full, “at the second, there were only twenty of us; at the third, three; [and] at the fourth, I found myself alone with a Bulgarian woman.” Alone, think of that. All alone. Albeit with a woman. And who is young, no doubt.

It is easy, you see, to find that one’s course is a vanishing course, that one labours within a university, which is, if you will, a university of the disappearing kind. So easy. Please, then, dear students, do not abandon me. When, one night, I reach the very end of the very last of my lectures, do not rise and go with a cheer, or hoorah.

Do not, that is, be like the Genevan student, Herr Albert Riedlanger. On July 3rd 1907, “when the final bell rings” at the very end of the last of the lectures given that year by Professor de Saussure, the treacherous Herr Riedlanger closes his notes with: “Finis, D. G.” Being translated, “It is finished, by the Grace of God [Deo Gratia].”

Now. Listen carefully. Read my falling lips. One final coda. And it is this: that I will not have the eventual cessation of my intellectual labours attributed to the Grace of God. I will not, that is, have Jehovah invoked when I finally end my great enquiry, and
the theatre empties, and I am, once more, null and void, and hanging out of an open window.

Do not be thanking God then. No, do not ever be thanking God. Not hereabouts. Within the university. For what on earth has the Almighty to do with the labours of the modern scholar? I accept that I may, this evening, have invoked his name once or twice, but for this I apologize. I was foolish. Weak. Please be assured that I have not, in any substantive manner, allowed God to dull my thinking. Scholarly thought, if professional, must be finally independent of religion. And certainly cleansed of all pietistic phrases or terms. Such as, for instance, *Le Seigneur*, as Marie or Sara would say. Enthusiasts both.

Beautiful they may be (I am not blind) but their holy rumours are intolerable. To be prevented. In the end, at the end, and in the Final Analysis, those who speak of God will simply be silenced. Or at least that is my intent, my avowed intent.

And it is, dear students, with this avowal, this promise, that I come to the end of my lecture. Right upon the bell. Please, then, allow me, ladies, to be the first to exit the theatre. Ladies, I must make haste. Make way.

* 

It is reported ... that when men are in danger ... they have no consideration even for beautiful strange women ... [not even] if these women happen to be in the way of their flight from the burning theatre.
(Kafka, 1910)
Fig. 10. Marie or Sara Wheeler, c. 1905.
We ... have decided ... to reply ... to the riff-raff who make a profession of thinking.
— The Surrealists (1930)