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KAFKA IN RUSSIA

Kafka's recent entry into Russia has a history of its own. For several decades the visionary from Prague belonged—theoretically he still belongs—to the Unholy Trinity of Proust, Joyce, and Kafka. This Trinity has been condemned in Russia on every possible occasion, until it became a classical negative cliché, a literary equivalent to the Trotsky-Zinoviev-Bukharin bloc.

The Soviet inquisitors did not, of course, read the books they designated for burning. But their co-religionists in the West, who *did* read Kafka, also wanted to burn them. In 1946 the Paris Communist weekly *Action* published answers to the question "Should Kafka's Books Be Burned?" The argument of *Action* ran: Kafka's gloomy pessimism, a product of the bourgeoisie's moral decay, casts a shadow upon the bright perspectives opened up for humanity by the genius of Stalin. From all over France the barbarians roared their answer: "Burn! Burn!"—until a nasty character wrote to *Action* that its inquiry was useless, as Kafka's books had already been burned by the Nazis; only the Zurich edition remained, and it was doubtful that the Swiss could be persuaded to burn that. *Action* then abandoned its project.

So much for France. In Russia and the "people's democracies," new hands kept adding fuel to the symbolic flames. With time Kafka outpaced his two colleagues of the Unholy Trinity and became the Number One Menace. The quintessence of "bourgeois poison," he seemed to threaten the very foundations of "socialism." Travellers looking for traces of Kafka in his native Prague were called guilty of "provocative acts."

Eduard Goldstuecker, Prague's expert on German literature who had been tried with Slansky, confessed many years later: "Until 1962 it was quite an achievement in our country—requiring considerable effort and endurance—to locate books by or on Kafka." The new Czech rulers would probably have levelled Kafka's tomb in the Jewish Cemetery had they not been afraid of being called superstitious. Besides, only a few visitors from the West bothered to seek out the grave. But

the black ghost of the tubercular man with the burning eyes may have floated at night, like a solitary raven, over the city of the Golem.

The first signal to douse the symbolic book burning was flashed from Poland, where Kafka had been excellently translated before the war by Bruno Schulz. The exact date on which Kafka re-entered Poland is significant, and so is the choice of the text: *The Penal Colony*, translated by Witold Wirpsza and published in the literary magazine *Twórczość* in October 1956.

From Poland the new Lucifer penetrated Hungary, Yugoslavia, and his native Czechoslovakia, spreading his dark light. But his books were merely subjects for discussion among party heretics. The real turning point came in July 1962.

At the Moscow Peace Congress, Sartre made an open plea for Kafka. He diplomatically tried to persuade his hosts that, if the author of *Amerika* were proscribed in the East, he would automatically become a cold-war hero in the West. The seed sowed by this much-courted hand was bound to yield a quick harvest. By the end of the year, the Soviet censor permitted Victor Nekrasov to make a "shameful confession" in his travel notes from Italy—he reported a conversation with the Italian novelist Moravia in which he had admitted his ignorance of Kafka's work.

At about the same time, Goldstuecker rushed to the attack in Prague. He appealed to the "enlightened Marxists" to rescue Kafka from Max Brod, Kafka's close friend and biographer, who, he claimed, had falsely turned him into a religious thinker. "But before this can happen," Goldstuecker wrote, "a very important condition must be fulfilled. We must see to it that even the gloomiest imagination cannot equate our government offices with Kafka's visions of bureaucratic cruelty and chicanery." This sounds like Kafka squared.

In May 1963 Goldstuecker organized a conference near Prague, aimed at adapting Kafka to "socialist society." There the Austrian Communist writer Ernst Fischer asked his hosts the dramatic question, "Will you finally give Kafka his entry permit?" His French colleague Roger Garaudy now chose to forget that his party had once debated whether Kafka's books should be burned and cleverly gave a new direction to the trial of *The Trial*. To avoid the dangerous analogies which so disturbed the "enlightened Marxists," he proposed that alienation, a theme dominating Kafka's work, should be viewed as integral to modern industrial society as a whole rather than as the attribute of any particular social system.

Kafka next surfaced in Leningrad in July 1963, during an inter-

national symposium on the novel. When Constantin Fedin, speaking for the hosts, pronounced once more the official formula of the Unholy Trinity, two guests from Paris, Natalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, did not conceal their irritation. Jiří Hajek and Ladislav Mnachko, two other guests, from Prague, energetically opposed Fedin in the name of the "enlightened Marxists." The "Great Moderator," Ilya Ehrenburg, was quickly mobilized; he said that, although he did not like Kafka, he could not deny his importance.

Now the ground was prepared for Kafka's official entry into Russia. *The Metamorphosis* and *The Penal Colony* were chosen for that solemn ceremony, celebrated in January 1964 in the pages of *Inostrannaya Literatura* (Foreign Literature).

Priscilla Johnson, the American Kremlinologist, writes in the introduction to her *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture 1962-1964*:

It is particularly surprising that the Soviet reader was given access to *The Penal Colony*, a parable of dictatorship, with its descriptions of . . . how a relatively mild ruler finds it difficult to get rid of the tools of torture used by his ruthless predecessor. It should be added that the editor of *Inostrannaya Literatura*, Boris Riurikov, is generally considered one of the most incorrigible Stalinist bureaucrats. We may conclude from Knipovich's note to the Russian translation and an article by Zatonsky in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, that, in the final analysis, Kafka was permitted to enter Russia through the efforts of Western "socialist" writers. It finally became too embarrassing for the Soviet Union to fight a writer whom its foreign "comrades" and "good friends" dubbed a "realist" who had a "premonition of fascism."

For the initiated, this last phrase rings a bell. Many years ago, after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, a similar phrase was used about another writer banished by Stalin. *The Possessed* appeared in Moscow, with a commentary stressing Dostoyevsky's "premonition of Hitlerism." Circumstances favored this delicate operation; nor was it the fault of the mirror that it reflected twin "premonitions" instead of one.

The real issue is this: how do Kafka's Soviet readers react to his *Penal Colony*? According to the official recipe? Or will they, like his Polish readers of October 1956, apply the "prophetic ring" to their own experience? Does the mirror once more reflect two premonitions or only one? Such questions can be answered only with suppositions, but suppositions which have a solid foundation.

The realistic interpretation of Kafka is hardly an invention of "enlightened Marxists." Long before they discovered it, the adjective

"Kafkaesque" had been applied to many—and mostly the depressing—phenomena of our time. Max Brod was essentially right when he called Kafka a religious thinker, although he made the typical mistake of the jealous exegete—he presented his interpretation as the only and final one. We must remember that Brod's biography appeared in 1937, when the prophetic realism of some of Kafka's vision was not as obvious as it is today. But when Brod launched a furious attack against Guenther Anders, who viewed Kafka as an unconscious anticipator of totalitarianism, he did so as the owner and defender of an "unchallengeable truth."

To be sure, in *The Trial*, guilt is, *par excellence*, metaphysical; but not long after it was written, we were to witness such trials or suffer them ourselves. *The Trial* is a novel about Grace denied to a man at the Gates of Heaven; but soon after its appearance, some earthly governments developed perfect procedures for making us knock and wait in vain. That is why the adjective "Kafkaesque" was coined to suggest the analogies so dreaded by Goldstuecker.

The German literary critic Willy Haas has made the illuminating remark that Kafka had the brilliant gift of deriving one reality from another. He started out with something concrete and turned it into something that seems to us a hundred times more so. His starting point was reality; but it was reality in *statu nascendi*, invisible to his contemporaries and only dimly visible to Kafka himself. He penetrated this reality so deeply with his "secret eye" that his novels and stories acquired three dimensions. There were the visions governed by their own logic (Kafka's "fantasies"); the confrontations of man with God or Fate (Kafka's "religious parables"); and enlarged projections of future events developed from mere indications (Kafka's "magnifying glasses"). This third dimension gained more and more importance as the embryonic phenomena solidified and took on flesh and blood.

This is why Kafka is infinitely more "realistic" today than he was during and shortly after his life-time. His "premonitions" and "prophecies" are now common currency—and this, incidentally, does some harm to the three-dimensional structure of his work. When Brod read *The Penal Colony* in Prague, at the threshold of World War I, he saw in it a modern transposition of the Book of Job, the story of a man who cannot understand God's cruel and unjust punishment. But a contemporary Polish or Soviet reader can hardly be expected to limit himself to this interpretation.

Therefore Kafka's "premonition of fascism" is no mystification. It even has a precedent in the "premonition of totalitarianism," observed

by Guenther Anders. But *The Penal Colony* is a case apart—its parallels with the present are remarkably specific.

An “explorer” from abroad visits a penal colony. The distinguished guest is invited to witness the execution of a soldier who is to die a particularly horrible death under the teeth of a moveable harrow that forms part of an ingenious torturing machine. This “peculiar apparatus” was invented by the former Commandant.

The condemned man looks at the torture machine with indifference; he is interested only in the details of its design. Soon the teeth of the harrow will write out various commandments which he will read in wounds on his body. The officer sighs for the bygone age:

“During the old Commandant’s lifetime the colony was full of his adherents. . . . A whole day before the ceremony the valley was packed with people; they all came only to look on . . . they all knew: Now Justice is being done.”

And today? Today the explorer is the only spectator. What’s more, the officer suspects that the distinguished guest was invited to witness the execution in order to arouse his indignation, which would then be used as a pretext for liquidating the old system. The new Commandant still tolerates the magnificent invention of his predecessor, but not very willingly. The officer hopes to move the visitor to admiration, not indignation, so as to help save the incomparable machine and the purpose it serves. He gives a detailed explanation of how the “peculiar apparatus” functions and asks his guest to intervene on his behalf with the new Commandant. The explorer refuses. Whereupon the officer orders the soldier to be removed from the platform under the harrow, undresses himself, takes his place and sets the machine in motion.

The machine kills the executioner and falls to pieces. The explorer leaves the place of execution and goes to the center of the colony. There he is shown the grave of the old Commandant.

We know a good deal about the reaction of those who read the Polish translation of *The Penal Colony* in October 1956. And we can easily guess the impression it made on the Soviet followers of the Old Commandant.

Postscript: After this was written, news came from Moscow of the publication of a Russian translation of *The Trial*. Within a few hours, the edition was sold out.