

Images In Captivity

Kafka: A Biography, by Ronald Hayman, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. xvii + 349 pp. \$19.95.

My talent for portraying my dream-like inner life has relegated everything else to the incidental, and it's becoming dreadfully and increasingly stunted. Nothing else will ever give me any satisfaction.

—Franz Kafka

MR. RONALD HAYMAN'S biography redeems Franz Kafka's work by accounting for the missing moral element. We discover that Kafka's morality—conspicuously absent from his work—lies in the fact that he was able to create at all. Never before or since has such a drab outer existence concealed such a rich inner life. Kafka's writing represents the triumph of the creative spirit under the kind of emotional adversity possible only in our century. Kafka was the first major artist to mature in the eye of the materialist forces which led to the Great War, and the first to draw upon childhood trauma with Freudian exactitude. Modern critics enforce a polemic interpretation of Kafka, yet only accidentally and through hindsight does Kafka presage the rise of fascism. His controlling impulse, as Hayman makes clear, was to assuage the frustration engendered by a hopelessly capricious, unenlightened, and tyrannical father.

Hermann Kafka might almost stand as the subject of Hayman's biography. Self-made, capable of exerting enormous physical and material leverage, but grossly inadequate in most other respects, Kafka, senior, recalls no one so much as the father of Adolf Hitler. Both fathers were prototypical nineteenth-century domestic ogres, both sons the neurotic products of environments in which high ambition was forcibly thwarted. In Kafka's case, his father's stupidity condemned him to a life of regular office labor and stints at managing the Kafka family's fancy-goods business. Kafka wrote for long stretches in the evenings and early mornings, almost in secret, permitting only one small volume of

his works to be published in his lifetime. His father's only reaction to Kafka's attempts at literature was vague suspicion combined with sporadic attempts to prevent Kafka from writing on the grounds that it would injure his health. Toward the end of his life, Kafka wrote a 10,000-word letter to his father. "My writing was all about you," it said. "All I was bewailing in it was what I could not weep about on your shoulder."

Armchair psychologists need not look far to discover the wealth of paternal disturbance only half concealed in the body of Kafka's work. "The Judgment" (1912), Kafka's first mature work, written in one marathon stretch of eight hours when the author was nearing thirty, concludes with the father figure condemning young "Georg Bendemann" to death, and Georg hurtling himself from a bridge in faithful compliance. Kafka's best-known works, *The Trial* (1914) and *The Castle* (1919) begin as their protagonists, "Joseph K." and "K." respectively, are rudely awakened by strangers. These awakenings represent a literary transformation of Kafka's earliest childhood memory. At the age of four, Kafka's father dragged him from his bed and locked him out of the house after he whimsically cried for water once too often.

But the major effect Hermann Kafka had on his son was to foster within him an ineradicable self-hatred. For by the standards which mattered—his father's—Kafka was an unutterable failure. Self-hatred provided abundant material for Kafka's works, but made his natural life one of extended, suicidal misery. As a grown man, Kafka wrote that he belonged in a zoo, that he pursued literature in defiance of God, and that "I, too, would avoid myself if I could." His self-hatred led to the grotesque morbidity by which we have come to characterize Kafka's work. Kafka envisioned hands unscrewed from their wrists, men transformed into apes, mice, and insects, creatures huddled within immense, labyrinthine burrows, and instruments of ghoulish torture. In many of Kafka's works, the protagonists wilfully seek their own destruction. Joseph K. of *The Trial* deliberately exacerbates an already intolerable situation, conjoining in

morbid symbiosis with the institution which will destroy him, though its clumsy machinations are readily avoidable. The officer of *In The Penal Colony* applies the torture device to his own body.

The brutal, arbitrary bureaucracies of such works as *The Trial* and *The Castle* evolved not only from the influence of Kafka's father, but from Kafka's own experiences working as a claims adjuster and law clerk. Oddly enough, it was the former occupation which provided Kafka an opportunity to develop extreme precision and objectivity when describing intolerably gruesome events. Hayman quotes one of Kafka's reports to the insurance company concerning the possibility of work-related injuries:

An extremely cautious worker could probably take care not to allow any joint of his fingers to project over the timber . . . but caution is irrelevant to the main danger. Even the most careful workman must be drawn into the cutter space when it slips or when the timber is thrown back, as happens quite often. . . . Such accidents would seldom occur without the amputation of several finger joints or even whole fingers.

Hayman suggests that the detached nature of the reports, enforced by the company, may have given Kafka "an alibi for something that came naturally. Just as the boring job in the law courts prepared the ground for *The Trial* and *The Castle*, the cultivation of neutrality would serve him in good stead. In the life of a great artist nothing is wholly wasted, but like many great artists, Kafka never had the satisfaction of knowing himself to be one."

Kafka's self-doubt was his central artistic feature. He remains notorious as the only great writer to have instructed his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, to burn all his works. Yet his nihilistic will contains a paradox, for Brod had often asserted that he would refuse to destroy Kafka's works and that Kafka should entrust the duty of destroying them to another. Kafka did destroy countless fragments, and some completed works, on his own. The vast bulk of his work did not see publication until after

his death. Kafka seems to have suffered obscurity willingly, preferring it to a recognition which would have contradicted his abysmal self-image. Yet he experienced occasional flashes of confidence, even grandeur. He could not help realizing something of his talent: "If I indiscriminately write down a sentence, for instance 'He looked out of the window,' it is perfect."

Although much has been made of the quarter-million words, most of them eloquently self-lacerating and indecisive, which Kafka addressed to Felice Bauer over the course of their long, ill-fated and twice-broken engagement, Kafka's instincts were essentially those of a bachelor. He feared Woman as an interloper in his necessary creative solitude. Kafka and Felice exchanged letters daily but rarely telephoned or visited, though both lived in Prague. In his deplorably backward proposal to Felice, Kafka determined that they could be together for only one hour per day. To his horror and dismay, she accepted. Luckily—from Kafka's point of view—tuberculosis intervened to prevent the marriage. Kafka subsequently transmogrified Felice into the "Frieda" of both *The Trial* and *The Castle*, assigning her the role of deceitful temptress.

Tuberculosis struck Kafka in 1917 and finally killed him in 1924 at the age of forty-one. At first, the sputum was "strange and interesting." Then it was "no longer interesting, just boring." Kafka personified his disease as the result of negotiations between his brain and his lungs. He saw it as fitting punishment, fulfillment of his own death wish. By the standards of Kafka's "philosophy of negation," death, as in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych*, equalled enlightenment. Ironically, Kafka was at work on *In The Penal Colony* when the first symptoms appeared. As Hayman writes, "*In The Penal Colony* points forward with an uncanny accuracy to the concentration camps, but the underlying preoccupation seems to be personal and existential, while the image of the penal colony appears to derive at least partly from Kafka's racking headaches. The solution is death. If God resorted to tuberculosis as a delaying tactic, this was crude but logical."

Contrary to the flagrant robustness of most twentieth-century literary figures, Kafka was ascetic to the point of monkishness. He avoided meat, tobacco, and alcohol, he lived a life of inflexible routine. His only vices were writing and sleeplessness. His overwhelming desire was for solitude.

. . . So it's impossible to have enough solitude, when writing, or enough silence. . . . I've often thought that the best way of life for me would be to have writing materials and a lamp in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar. . . . But what I'd write! What depths I'd tear it up from.

Although hampered by an excessive reliance on scholarship, and a correspondingly rigid prose style, Hayman's work nonetheless deserves credit for unearthing our century's most difficult literary figure. Hayman's work is the first full-scale attempt to portray Kafka in over forty years. This reticence among biographers should surprise no one, for never was a biographical subject so devoid of glamor and physical presence. In his retreat to the inner sanctum, Kafka exemplifies twentieth-century man most of all. For not until our century does the artist become a fugitive, even from his own body.

Reviewed by LARRY WILLIAMS