



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

FRANZ KAFKA

THE CASTLE

THE CASTLE

FRANZ KAFKA (1883–1924) was a Czech-born German-speaking insurance clerk who despised his job, preferring to spend his time writing. Nevertheless, Kafka published little during his lifetime, and ordered his closest friend, Max Brod, to burn the mass of unpublished manuscripts – now familiar to us as some of the most influential novels and short stories of the twentieth century – after his death. Kafka's novels and short stories, all available in Penguin Classics, include *The Trial*, *Metamorphosis* and *Other Stories* and *Amerika*.

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FRANZ KAFKA

The Castle

Translated by J. A. UNDERWOOD

With an Introduction and Notes by JOHN ZILCOSKY

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Translator's Note

Kafka never finished this book. In fact, it breaks off in the middle of a sentence. He did not finish any of his three novels; they and many of his stories remained unpublished during his lifetime. Dying of tuberculosis in 1924, he asked his writer friend Max Brod to burn his papers. Brod did not do so (nor, surely, can Kafka seriously have expected him to) but instead edited much of Kafka's work after his death and published it bit by bit.

In this, Max Brod's contribution was immense; without Brod, Franz Kafka might be a minor name, known only to a few specialists. In other respects, however, scholars wishing to uncover Kafka's original intentions have had to undo a lot of what Brod did, patiently stripping away the textual adjustments and layers of interpretation that, with the best of intentions, he and those who followed him had imposed on the dead man's prose (and that, for example, inevitably affected the way in which Kafka's first English translators, Willa and Edwin Muir, approached their task).

A good marker for the turning-point is perhaps Erich Heller's provocative comment (in *The Disinherited Mind*, 1952): 'Kafka is the least problematic of our modern writers.' In a sense, there is no 'problem' of 'what Kafka meant': he meant what he wrote. The original on which this translation is based is, as nearly as we can tell, *The Castle* as Kafka left it; I hope the translation will give English readers a glimpse of the original's freshness.

J.A.U.

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Introduction

When Penguin asked me to write an introduction to *The Castle*, I almost said no. Even though it is my favourite book, I have never understood it. I like it even more than *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis* because it adds deep social relations to the typically ‘Kafkaesque’, including the only convincing love story in Kafka’s oeuvre – complete with heartbreaking misunderstandings, quotidian bickering and sex scenes. But such a story only adds to the usual problems of understanding Kafka. What kind of novel is this? Is it closer to the realist novels that he had dreamt of writing in his youth? If so, how does this jibe with the mystifying elements carried over from its predecessor, *The Trial*: claustrophobic anxiety, surreal distortion and bureaucratic absurdity? The writer Roberto Calasso argued that *The Trial* and *The Castle* both run parallel to reality but not to each other; rather, the latter continues from the former.¹ If that is true, then *The Castle* bends *The Trial*’s bafflements towards that parallel realm of love and attachment.

Like most of Kafka’s texts, *The Castle* presents itself as a puzzle, even a vault. The German word *Schloß* means both ‘castle’ and ‘lock’; Kafka shows us a lock and even hints at its code. Some hints are helpful. Others are red herrings. We never know which is which. This is Kafka’s genius and his obsession. He even creates such interpretative quandaries within his texts, putting characters in the same position as readers. Reflecting on whether to write this introduction, I realized that I liked *The Castle* precisely because I did not understand it and because Kafka – who abandoned the

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¹ Roberto Calasso, K., tr. Geoffrey Brock (Vintage, 2006), 9.

manuscript – might not have cared whether anyone did, even himself.

Readers around the world have tried for almost one hundred years to break this novel's lock and access its secrets. Like all great literature, it is infinitely malleable yet stubbornly itself. Kafka's best friend and editor, Max Brod, viewed *The Castle* and Kafka's other novels as classics – comparing them to Tolstoy's, the greatest novels of the nineteenth century. The poet W. H. Auden agreed, claiming that Kafka meant for the twentieth century what Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe meant for theirs. Part of this significance is Kafka's apparent universality. His works did not seem particularly German, Austrian or Czech because they contained little historical detail.

Yet as much as Kafka's texts seem universal, they are also products of their time and place. If they are myths, they are myths of modernity. Kafka was born in 1883, the year the most famous artist of the nineteenth century – Richard Wagner – died. Out with the old; in with the new. The differences between these two are stark enough to feel symbolic. Wagner was a star, like many other artists of his century: Goethe, Tolstoy, Dickens, Zola, Hugo, Delacroix, Tchaikovsky. Wagner was also a master of 'complete' works in both senses: he finished epics (the fifteen-hour *Ring of the Nibelung*) and created *Gesamtkunstwerke*, 'complete works of art' that combined music, poetry, theatre, dance, architecture and painting. Finally, Wagner was a political figure. He agitated revolutionarily against Germany's kings and princes in favour of a national republic and became an antisemite.

Kafka could not have been more different, and modern. Firstly, he was a failure, at least by his own estimate, publishing only short stories and gaining little recognition beyond elite circles. This failure became the topic of his stories, as it was in the lives and art of a different, non-Wagnerian lineage also emerging from the nineteenth century: Dostoevsky, Van Gogh, Oscar Wilde, Knut Hamsun and Stephen Crane. That was Kafka's heritage. After his death, he became emblematic for the starving artist in the work and lives of Ernest Hemingway, Dylan Thomas, Delmore Schwartz, Paul Auster and the folksinger in the Coen brothers' film *Inside Llewyn Davis*.

Secondly, Kafka did not produce complete epics but mostly unfinished fragments and miniatures, including one consisting of only a single incomplete sentence. And Kafka abstemiously restricted himself to writing. He resisted attempts to augment his work with visual art and insisted that the cover of *The Metamorphosis* not depict Gregor Samsa. Kafka's ascetic devotion to the word characterized literary modernism and its successors: Proust, Musil, Joyce, Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Borges and Beckett. Kafka's frugal relation to art also corresponded to his literary style. Unadorned and un-Wagnerian, it prefigured the sparseness of later cultural trends: abstract expressionism in art, the International Style in architecture and a musical austerity that culminated in John Cage's experimental composition 4'33". Finally, Kafka remained on the topographical and cultural periphery. He was a double minority on the fringe of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: a Jew and German-speaker in a Czech city, Prague. As a Jew, he feared German *and* Czech patriotism, so had no interest in the revolutionary nation-building of the nineteenth-century artists. The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari championed him as the vanguard of a new, diasporic 'minor literature'.²

Even compared to his contemporaries, Kafka was unusually modern. For fifteen years, he held a day job as a high-ranking insurance lawyer, mostly at the state-run Worker's Accident Insurance Institute. A lynchpin of the new welfare state, this institute produced something fundamental to modernity: a massive, mysterious, anonymous bureaucracy. Kafka travelled around Bohemia inspecting factory safety practices and was appalled by the workers' terrible injuries. He recommended improvements to machinery and forced employers to pay their premiums. This enmeshed him in the bureaucratic system, especially when he was in the office, dictating briefs that went whizzing through pneumatic pipes between floors. Responses came whispering back to him through the pipes: a raging *Briefverkehr*, Kafka called it, a traffic of letters. Like many of his characters, Kafka was a cog in this system that was too complex for one

2 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

person to decipher. He is the only European modernist to describe it so trenchantly because he was the only one to spend his career inside it.

Kafka extraordinarily devoted himself to another, less tangible, aspect of modernity – the investigation of dreams – thereby inviting us into a realm that is notoriously difficult to understand. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) ran through seven editions during Kafka's lifetime and was so well known that Kafka jotted in his diary after finishing a story: 'Thoughts of Freud naturally.'³ Kafka devoted himself to comprehending the transition from dreaming to waking, which he called, in a deleted passage from *The Trial*, 'the riskiest moment of the day': 'It is really remarkable that when you wake up in the morning you nearly always find everything in exactly the same place as the evening before.' Kafka marveled at the 'enormous presence of mind' it took to make this leap back into reality.⁴

Before discussing the content of the text that Kafka called 'the castle story',⁵ let us consider its form. Is the book you are holding in your hands or the e-book on your screen really a novel? Does it accurately represent the pile of notebooks and loose sheets that Kafka left when he died in 1924? Kafka had instructed Brod to burn his unfinished texts unread, but Brod disobeyed. He found six notebooks and some loose sheets containing this story about a man named 'K.' who arrives in a village and wants to enter a nearby castle. These pages constituted a first draft; there was no sign that Kafka intended to revise it or prepare a clean copy for publication. Brod wanted to produce out of these notebooks and sheets a finished-seeming novel. He 'corrected' what seemed to be errors – not just in spelling but also in tense, mood and punctuation. He translated Kafka's local Pragueisms and Austrianisms into high German. And he ended the story after the woman who becomes K.'s fiancée,

3 Kafka, *Diaries*, tr. Ross Benjamin (Schocken, 2022), 242 (23 Sept 1912).

4 Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. Willa and Edwin Muir (Schocken, 1968), 257–8.

5 Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, tr. Richard and Clara Winston (Schocken, 1977), 357 (to Brod, 11 Sept 1922).

Frieda, leaves him. This seemed to Brod like a natural conclusion, even if it meant discarding one-fifth of the story. Brod thus created ‘as clean a text as possible’, which he published as *Das Schloß* in 1926.⁶

Nine years later, Brod published a new edition that included the sections he had deleted. But his ‘corrections’ remained. Only in 1982 did Malcolm Pasley produce an edition that removed these, returning us to most of Kafka’s original wording. This return, which only appeared in English translation in 1997, changed our understanding of key points. Most notably, Kafka often used commas or no punctuation where periods would have been customary. Brod added periods. But Kafka’s avoidance of periods was not accidental. As we now see, Kafka eschewed not only periods but also paragraph breaks – including for new speakers in dialogue. There are also no clear chapter divisions. Kafka only implied these by adding, after the fact, a pen stroke between some of his massive paragraphs (having found a sheet where Kafka scribbled chapter titles, Brod, and Pasley, inserted these together with page breaks). Kafka’s original thus has a breathless momentum, more than his other texts. Although little happens in the plot, K. feels like a cart careening downwards. He cannot pause to consider a past or a future.

To give just one example of Brod’s corrections: at the beginning of the second paragraph, right after K. enters the village, Kafka’s manuscript reads, ‘Then he went to look for somewhere to spend the night; they were still awake at the inn, the landlord did not have a room to rent but was willing, the late guest having very much surprised and confused him, to let K. sleep on a straw bed in the lounge, K. accepted’ (3).⁷ After ‘in the lounge’, Brod had replaced the comma with a period (reproduced in this Penguin translation) – creating a full stop between the landlord’s offer and K.’s assent. This produced a moment for K. to consider whether

6 The quote is from Brod’s assistant for the second, 1935 edition: Heinz Politzer (‘Zur Kafka-Philologie’, *Die Sammlung* 2 [1935]: 387).

7 For the original punctuation in English, see Mark Hartman’s translation of *The Castle* (Schocken, 1998), 1.

sleeping on a straw mattress in a dirty pub was a good idea. In Kafka's version, there is no break. Kafka's reckless rhythm does not give his protagonist space for rumination. K. is swept along – as are we readers, who cannot find a point to stop and think.

Kafka's obliteration of punctuation and paragraph breaks speaks to his state of mind. In the fall of 1921, he suffered high fevers and insomnia and first learned that the tuberculosis in his right lobe was spreading. His doctor officially recommended to Kafka's institute that he take early retirement; Kafka was only thirty-eight, but a cure was 'unlikely'.⁸ What is more, Kafka endured a psychological breakdown and 'periods of insanity' – as he recalled in a later letter to Robert Klopstock.⁹ He had not written for over a year. Remembering the joy and salvation that it had once offered him, he decided that only writing could save him.

On 27 January 1922, he traveled to a snowy health resort in the mountains near the Polish border. He immediately began to write, on loose sheets ripped from old notebooks and stuffed into his suitcase. Because this felt urgent, he took no time to find an ink well and just wrote in pencil – describing now a lone traveler entering a snow-covered village. Already on this first night, Kafka felt the wind beneath his wings: the 'strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps saving consolation of writing' that rises up 'joyful[ly]'.¹⁰ Never had Kafka viewed writing so clearly as therapy. He was no longer the young, healthy man beginning the novels *The Trial* and *Amerika* (also known as *The Man Who Disappeared*), while imagining a career as a writer. Now he found himself in extremis. He wanted palliation but also dangerous pleasures. He had nothing to lose. Locking himself in his room, he wrote as if the devil were guiding his hand. Kafka called this 'serving the devil': a journey to a private netherworld of 'dubious embraces' that satisfy his carnal 'craving for enjoyment' (*Genußsucht*).¹¹

8 Dr J. Kodym's 22 Oct 1921 report, cited in Kafka, 'Hochlöblicher Verwaltungsausschuß': *Amtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Hermsdorf (Luchterhand, 1991), 438.

9 Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, 323 (March 1922); date revised according to Kafka, *Das Schloß: Apparatband*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Fischer, 1982), 64.

10 Kafka, *Diaries*, 475–6 (27 January 1922).

11 Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, 333–4 (to Brod, 5 July 1922, trans. rev.).

Considering this feral desire, we see why Kafka does not provide a full-stop for K. to consider the landlord's offer. K. does not need to think things over, just as Kafka does not. Both must enter the space of writing as soon as possible. Kafka writes like the wind. His manuscript shows remarkably few cross-outs and a smooth regularity suggesting speed. This quick writing produces a protagonist who, like his author, pursues reckless cravings. While tracking an elusive castle official named Klammm, K. ruminates: 'It was not nearness to Klammm he thought worth striving for but rather that he, K., he alone and no one else, should with his and no one else's desires get close to Klammm, and get close to him not in order to come to rest in his presence but in order to go on, past him, into the castle' (105). Just twenty-five pages later, when Frieda suggests that she and K. emigrate to Spain or the South of France – shockingly real places in a world devoid of them – K. restates his undefined longing: 'I came here in order to stay here. I shall stay here . . . Because what could possibly have lured me into this desolate country but the desire to stay here' (130). This barren place from which no one can emigrate hints at the underworld, leading some readers to see K. as *The Trial's* Josef K. in the afterlife. But this wasteland is also simply an empty space, the topographical equivalent of the blank sheets that Kafka had stuffed into his suitcase. It is the white page of desire.

On this page, Kafka gives us a character who is only an initial – K. – nothing and everything. Kafka draws attention to it by placing a period after it, the same period he eschewed everywhere else. These periods confuse us by creating apparent ends of sentences where there are none. In his manuscript, Kafka gives us this letter as art. An impish curlicue marks the point where the arm and the leg of the 'K' meet at its straight back. This visual energy together with the absence of a name signifies endless potential. K. is the opposite of his fellow 1922 protagonist, *Ulysses's* Leopold Bloom, about whom we know everything, even that his penis floats in the tub like a flower. As Calasso has pointed out, K. remains a mystery. He does not even have the 'dark eyes' that Kafka had ascribed to Josef K.¹²

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¹² Calasso, K., 11.

K.'s emptiness and capacity are clear already in the opening scene. A man tells K. that this village is the property of the castle. K. is dumbfounded: 'You mean there's a castle here?' 'There certainly is,' the man retorts. 'Count Westwest's castle.' The man then accuses K. of being a 'Landstreicher', a tramp, and K. claims, out of the blue, that he is a 'Landvermesser' – land surveyor – summoned by 'the count' (4). He hears *Landstreicher* then becomes a *Landvermesser*. He hears 'castle' and 'count', then adds these to his tale. Unlike traditional heroes, K. does not arrive with psychological depth and a long personal history. He is a two-dimensional language sponge, the perfect character for a writer who desperately needs to write. Kafka must put one word after the other to save himself, so he creates a character who only gains depth through words.

The characters around K. are similar. Although many turn out to have meaningful pasts – Frieda, Amalia, Gardena – many do not. But even the most insignificant of them receive names. I counted thirty-eight names, even though there are only four or five important, recurring characters. Some appear early, then never again, leaving only their appellation: Oswald, Mizzi, Vallebene. Others appear late, out of nowhere, then return to oblivion: Galater, Seemann, Bertuch, Pinzgauer, Bratmeier, Henriette, Emilie. We learn also that there are two Hanses and two Friedas, which becomes a topic within the story. Frieda is annoyed by this doubling, not least because she realizes that a name can float free, separate from the human that it is supposed to denote. When she used to be Klamm's mistress, he would call 'the name Frieda'. But no one knew 'what he had in mind': 'The fact that Frieda naturally came running was her affair, and her being allowed without protest to go in to him was due to Klamm's kindness, but we cannot claim that he was calling her, not as such' (47). Names take on similar lives of their own again later, when we hear of two castle officials, named Sordini and Sortini, who both specialize in fire prevention: 'people probably confuse [Sortini] with Sordini, the actual expert, who exploits the similarity of name to unload particularly his public-appearance duties on Sortini' (186). Kafka's comedy runs parallel to his tragedy. We laugh yet feel for these characters who suffer from seeming to be *only* names.

And we search vainly for meanings behind these name soups. Is ‘Gerstäcker’, the name of the coachman, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the homonymous popular nineteenth-century German travel writer? Is Klammer’s secretary ‘Momus’ really the Greek personification of satire and mockery? Unfortunately for sleuthing readers, these names are not codes but free associations as in dreams, where a shift in one letter, from a ‘d’ to a ‘t’, seems meaningful but later strikes the woken person as absurd. Kafka follows these unconscious trails in his writing, in the process of unveiling his ‘dreamlike inner life’.¹³ ‘Gerstäcker’ and ‘Momus’ float in Kafka’s head, then leap out of it onto the page. They may indeed have meanings, as do many linguistic displacements in dreams. But we are like K. searching for paths to the castle: We do not know which interpretative trails to follow and which to bypass.

These mysterious names bring us back to the initial K. In an early scene, K. telephones the castle and identifies himself as K.’s assistant. When the voice on the other end asks this ‘assistant’ his name, K. says ‘Josef’ – the name of K.’s predecessor from *The Trial*, who had been on Kafka’s mind. The night Kafka checked into the inn and began writing his castle story, he noted: ‘Although I wrote my name clearly for the hotel, although they too have now written my name correctly twice, downstairs on the board it says Josef K. Shall I enlighten them or shall I let them enlighten me?’¹⁴ When K. calls himself Josef, the voice on the other end says that this is impossible because K.’s assistants have different names. ““Those are the new assistants,” said K. “No, those are the old ones.” “They’re the new ones, I’m the old one, I rejoined the land surveyor today.” “No,” the voice now shouted. “Who am I then?” K. asked’ (21). Kafka has been playing with this terrifying, liberating question from the moment he arrived in the village. Given that Kafka originally started this tale in the first person, this question’s earliest form in his manuscript read: ““Who am I then?” I asked.’ Kafka is an ‘I’ and an ‘other’, as in Rimbaud’s ‘Je est un autre.’ Kafka transforms into this

¹³ Kafka, *Diaries*, 286 (6 August 1911).

¹⁴ Kafka, *Diaries*, 476 (27 January 1922).

other by inventing a new third-person, K., who can develop forward toward 'Kafka' but also backward toward 'Josef' or in some unimagined direction. An initial is just the beginning of something, the shape of desire.

If 'K.' is desire, then the castle is his object. From the outset, he is not sure whether this object even exists: 'Nothing could be seen of Castle Hill' (3). When he looks up, he sees only emptiness. He walks toward this the next day and sees something – but hardly a castle, just low-slung buildings jumbled together: 'had you not known it was a castle, you might have taken it for a small town.' Getting closer, he sees a 'wretched-looking small town, a collection of rustic hovels' (9). K. consults with a passing schoolmaster, explaining to him that he is new to the area and belongs neither to the castle nor the village. The schoolmaster tells him that 'there's no difference' between the two (11). Even though the castle might be nothing other than the village, where K. already is, he persists in his search, walking along the main road, which has a dreamscape geometry. It moves forward while getting neither closer to nor farther from the castle. The next day K. walks through the snow with the castle messenger, Barnabas, hoping to get to the castle but ending only in Barnabas's home. This too is a house of mirrors. Barnabas's two sisters resemble each other, and the two sisters together resemble Barnabas. One of these sisters now takes K. to a second inn that is 'very similar in appearance to the inn where K. was staying' (32). Everything resembles everything else, and the village seems the same as the castle, making it nonsensical to try to reach the latter.

K. drops his attempts to reach the castle and tries instead to get near to those connected to it. K. searches for Klamm, who illegibly signed the only missive K. has received from the castle. For the villagers, the sight of Klamm is unbearable. K. is not afraid and manages to glimpse Klamm, but he learns that this might mean nothing, for Klamm is a shapeshifter. The villagers cannot describe him because his appearance changes with the beholder's 'mood, degree of excitement' and 'countless gradations of hope or despair' (168). At every sighting, the beholder asks, 'Is it Klamm? Isn't it rather someone who simply looks like Klamm?' Like the castle,

Klamm might just be a mirror image of something. Some swear that Klamm's secretary, Momus, is Klamm, or vice-versa, just as K. had claimed to be both himself and his assistant. Klamm is 'often aspired to and so seldom attained' and 'takes on different forms in people's imagination' – a shibboleth of power and desire (172). We cannot take Klamm's oft-cited relation to the Czech *klam* (illusion) too literally, for although Klamm is indeed protean, so is K. Asserting that Klamm is an illusion implies that the rest of this world is not. But in this network of dream-logic, everything resembles everything else, and illusion resembles reality. As one official later tells K., 'it may be that the appearance [*Schein*, illusion] does in fact match the reality' (245). Klamm is only the most exaggerated form of this confusion, making K.'s lunges toward him particularly vain.

Because Klamm is elusive, K. now approaches someone who is near to Klamm: his mistress, Frieda. K. cannot get close to Klamm, but he can get close to what Klamm desires. If Klamm desires Frieda, then K. will desire her too, and in this way get near to him. K. eventually steals Frieda away. When K. hears that Klamm is no longer even interested in Frieda, K. insists that this cannot be true, that she cannot have 'lost all importance for Klamm' (49). K. later notices that Frieda has lost her beauty and suspects that her distance from Klamm is to blame: 'It was Klamm's nearness that had made her so madly alluring, in that allurements she had snatched K. to her and now she was wilting in his arms' (129). When Frieda leaves him near the end for Jeremiah, K. tells her that Jeremiah is doing to her what K. had done: 'As Klamm's mistress you're of course a respectable figure in his eyes, and installing himself in your room and feeling like a little Klamm for once no doubt does him a lot of good, but that's as far as it goes, you yourself mean nothing to him now' (237). K. knows what it feels like to want to be a little Klamm who longs to get close to big Klamm. And K. is right about both himself and Jeremiah. As a chambermaid later recognizes – long before the philosopher René Girard – the world functions according to this mimetic desire. When the unattractive Frieda originally became Klamm's lover, she became immediately 'admitted by everyone', a 'great beauty . . . almost too beautiful, actually' (278).

Some readers have criticized K. for not truly loving Frieda. But they make the mistake of imagining that K. is the kind of 'real' person we might meet – and judge – in a traditional novel. But K. is not real in this sense, even if this does not make him 'unreal'. He is an experiment in potential life. This does not mean that he exists only in a dream, where there are no morals. That would be too easy. Kafka instead gives us a form of realism that we have all experienced, if only darkly: the reality of a dream that, upon waking, clings to us. We spend seconds thinking that the dream has really happened, and in one sense, we are right: it has happened in our unconscious. This is the reality that Kafka has been experiencing for most of his life, the 'tremendous world . . . in my head' that he cannot contain.¹⁵ He has been sensing this even more powerfully in the months leading up to his castle story; due to his illness and his psychological episodes, he has been inhabiting this outer edge of reason. He thus offers us an even wider palette of the 'real' than before, including vivid impressions of this unconscious desire beyond good and evil.

This desire has caught K., who, like all of us, wants things he cannot have, things that might not even exist, abstract things like intimacy and love. Because he cannot grasp these, he clutches at their concrete, sensual representations. When telephoning with the castle, he hears a humming that sounds like 'countless children's voices . . . the song of distant, utterly distant voices – as if out of this buzzing there emerged in a quite impossible fashion a single high-pitched yet powerful voice that struck the ear as if demanding to penetrate deeper than into mere hearing' (20–1). K. senses something similar when he first meets Frieda and, in typical dream logic, abruptly tells her that he wants her and makes love to her. She releases a noise reminiscent of this telephone – 'she sighed more than sang some little ditty' – and leans backward in a swoon. K. enters a lyrical 'state of oblivion', where 'hours passed, hours of breathing as one, hearts beating as one, hours in which K. constantly had the feeling that he had lost his way or wandered farther

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¹⁵ Kafka, *Diaries*, 294 (21 June 1913).

into a strange land than anyone before him, a strange land where even the air held no trace of the air at home' (40–1). Later, while waiting for Klamm in his upholstered sleigh, K. approaches another truth through his senses. He sinks into soft, warm 'blankets, cushions, and furs' and smells something sweet and caressing that reminds him of how you feel 'when you hear praise and fine words from someone of whom you are very fond' and 'are not at all sure what it is about and do not wish to know and are simply happy in the knowledge that it is the loved one who is speaking' (97–8).

These experiences all eventually fail to provide deep nourishment. The inspired sound from the telephone transforms into a 'harsh, arrogant' male voice with a speech defect (21). K.'s lovemaking with Frieda ends 'in pools of beer, the smell of which was now overpowering' (41). When they make love again the following night, they do not even get any of the initial satisfaction – only selfish, violent despair: 'She was in search of something and he was in search of something, enraged, pulling faces, burrowing into each other's breasts . . . , the way dogs scratch desperately in the earth they scratched at each other'; in 'helpless disappointment,' they finally 'swept their tongues over each other's faces' until 'weariness quietened them' (44). And after feeling transcendent happiness in Klamm's womb-like sleigh, K. notices that someone has turned on bright lights. He feels a kind of freedom but without any meaning: 'he was now freer than ever before, no question about it, and might wait in this otherwise forbidden place for as long as he liked.' But still – and 'this conviction was at least equally strong' – 'there was nothing more futile, nothing more desperate than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability' (100–101).

Despite the failure of these sensual experiences, they promise K. hope of finding profound attachments: to the children whose voices he hears, to Frieda, to the friends who say kind things to him. These experiences hint at K.'s social potential. Unlike most of Kafka's protagonists, K. can connect deeply with others. This is one of the reasons the village mayor does not want him and one of the reasons some villagers do. These villagers challenge the mayor in a discussion and seem to be suspicious of him for not wanting a

surveyor. They know that surveyors can redraw borders, and they sense 'secret agreements and injustices' in the mayor's refusing them one (64). They know that the castle is repressive: withholding data, demanding servitude, claiming a *droit du seigneur* over women, and seeming to commit physical violence. The coachman Gerstäcker is bent over as if 'abused', and the peasants have 'positively tortured faces', their skulls seemingly beaten from above: 'smashed flat on top' (17, 22). They live in fear, do as they are told and hope only for acts of mercy. Except for Barnabas's courageous sister, Amalia, K. is the only one who challenges the castle. He is a foreigner, not domesticated, so refuses to play along. He demands his rights of work and shelter and insists that the castle explain its schemes. He says he used to be in the 'army', so might be a veteran of World War I, demanding political change as so many returnees did (17). Or he might be the messiah. As Kafka knew from his study of Hebrew, *mashiah* sounded a lot like the word for surveyor: *mas-hoah*. K. could be the saviour this village needs.

But K.'s revolutionary potential proves difficult to fulfil, because the castle refuses to fight back. Even more clearly than Josef K., K. experiences no assaults from the authorities. *Pace* Theodor Adorno, Kafka does not seem to be predicting 'Hitler', 'the SS' and 'the concentration camps': his world has no charismatic dictator, no camps and no Gestapo or police of any sort.¹⁶ The police are indeed mentioned only once in *The Castle*, and even then, they do not appear. Despite the ominous, haunting feeling and the apparent injuries of the villagers, we never see state violence. Instead of imprisoning K., the castle backs away from him. It dodges and weaves, avoiding contact like a cagey boxer, refusing to give K. the brawl he wants. It simply lets him exhaust himself.

We could take this one step further and ask: Is the castle even repressive at all? Or is it merely an echo chamber of K.'s desires and fears? No sooner does K. claim to have been summoned by the

16 Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber (MIT, 1981), pp. 259–60. Originally published in 1963 as 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka' in *Die neue Rundschau*.

count than he receives a letter confirming this. You want to be summoned by the count? Okay, you are summoned by the count. K.'s fear that the castle is only telling him what he wants to hear makes him obsess over the first three words in the summons letter: 'As you know, you have been admitted to the count's service . . .' (23). *As you know?* What is this supposed to mean? Has K. in fact been summoned? Or is the castle just feeding his own words back to him? He thinks this through: 'K. had announced his presence and since then had been aware, as the letter put it, that he had been accepted.' For K., these 'three words "as you know"' are the castle's way of telling him that it has agreed to nothing at all. It is merely repeating to K. what he said. Moreover, it is telling K. that *he* has begun this 'fight' by having hubristic presumptions. But the castle at least seems to admit that there is a fight. If there is, then whom will K. battle? If the castle is only echoing K.'s words, should he fire at his doppelganger who is also himself – as in the hallucinatory film shot and shown in Kafka's hometown in 1913, *The Student of Prague*? The only injury so far is indeed a self-inflicted one – the kind that Nietzsche and Freud decried as the bane of modernity: K. has a psychologically painful 'uneasy conscience' (25).

Is this battle all in K.'s head? Is he fighting phantoms? Is he merely paranoid, as many readers have claimed? Or is he paranoid with real enemies? Let us remember that the castle's political ills do not differ fundamentally from those of our own neoliberal democracies: inflexible hierarchies, confusing bureaucracies, false news, dissidents shunned, women trapped in gender roles. The castle officials take whatever mistresses they want, and the only one to resist, Amalia, finds herself and her family ostracized. The cowed villagers do nothing about the castle's abuses, just as we remain silent and stupefied while our authorities 'clothe the obvious wrong in the beautiful garments of righteousness.'¹⁷ Our critics and naysayers fear not violence or arrest but the same kind of communal shaming and cancelling that befell Amalia.

Also like our authorities, the castle does not seem to rule by

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¹⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., 'An Address at Cornell College', 15 October 1962.

force. The peasants' heads may be smashed from above, but no one has seen a castle official doing this. Maybe the wounds are self-inflicted? Maybe they have banged their heads against the ceiling? The castle's power is ghost-like. It does not stand and fight but rules through beliefs that are automatically accepted by the villagers: the castle is omniscient and omnipotent; we are ignorant and weak; the castle is permanent and unchanging; we are mortal and temporary. Similar ideologies have existed throughout history, with various terms substituting for 'castle': God, Emperor, Leader, Chairman, President, and, in today's global capitalism, with more suspicion, Free Market. As in Kafka's novel, these ideologies determine political and philosophical creeds as well as practical, day-to-day habits. Customs and linguistic patterns develop. Certain things are said, others are not. One does not use the Lord's name in vain; one does not insult the monarchy; one does not question free-market values; one never says the word 'Klamm'. Only revolutionaries like K. violate these prohibitions. Most of humanity falls into line, sustaining itself in a community of suffering, which Kafka's villagers create by reciting legends: 'castle stories' (194). The villagers work toward what they imagine the castle wants, and we see ideology functioning the way it often does, especially in modernity: the ruling class maintains its dominance without having to fire a shot.

How to resist? The system is cold and threatens violence, but no one has seen it commit this. It collects data without your consent but does not use it against you, at least not yet. It refuses to confirm your status but lets you run free. Nothing it does is clearly evil. The village women go willingly. The system's cruelest act is to ignore you: when you come calling, it leaves you desolate. We find the beginnings of a resistance strategy in an unusual place when, fifty pages into the manuscript, the ill, half-insane Kafka chooses to shift from the first to the third person. This is a few pages before Kafka writes his first ever explicit, consensual sex scene, with Frieda (there is a rape in *Amerika*)—leading Kafka's best biographer, Reiner Stach, to conclude that Kafka shifts perspective out of squeamishness. His notorious erotic anxieties had indeed reached a high point. His thrilling, mostly

epistolary affair with the brilliant young Milena Jesenská had recently failed. And on 18 January 1922, nine days before beginning his castle story, Kafka wrote, 'sex presses me, torments me day and night, I would have to overcome fear and shame and probably even sorrow to satisfy it.'¹⁸ The following night he made his last, and probably worst, visit to a brothel. And now he is describing Frieda leaning back before his 'I', 'swooning with love', throwing open her arms and whispering, 'Darling, oh my darling'. Her 'little body' burns in his hands (40). They embrace, roll on the floor, and thud into a door. Stach says that Kafka did not have the stomach for this as an 'I', forcing him take refuge in the 'he', whom he hurriedly dubbed K.¹⁹

But Kafka did not actually change to the third person during this sex scene; he did so two-and-half manuscript pages earlier. Because he wrote quickly and without outlines, he likely did not even yet know the details of the episode to come. The shift occurs during the 'I's initial conversation with Frieda. He has just noticed a 'striking look in her eye' and finds himself drawn to her (35). Still speaking in the first person, for the last time in the entire text, he tells her how much he admires her persistence: 'I said, "It's most unusual and requires exceptional strength to work one's way up from milkmaid to barmaid"'. He tells her that he knows she is aiming still higher, because her arresting eyes 'say less about the past struggle, more about the one to come.' He then blurts out everything he is feeling, after knowing her for only half an hour. He imagines their future together, as a couple fighting against the world: 'The resistance put up by the world is great, it grows greater, the greater the goals, and there is nothing shameful about securing the assistance even of a small, ineffective but correspondingly combative man.' Frieda realizes the seriousness of his proposal: 'are you trying to take me away from Klamm, by any chance? Oh good heavens!' K. too understands the weight of his promise, as does Kafka. Right here, in the middle of a sentence and well before the

¹⁸ Kafka, *Diaries*, 468.

¹⁹ Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, tr. Shelley Frisch (Princeton, 2013), 427.

description of sex, he switches to the third person, scratching down his first 'K.': "'You've guessed it," said K' (37–8).²⁰

The 'it' that causes Kafka to scribble 'K.' into his notebook is not merely sex but a profound connection to a woman created through a remarkable 'look' in her eyes. The look promises action: an amorous couple tackling the world. It is this thrill, not the shame of sex, that grips Kafka. While writing, he was surely struck by the similarity between the two F's: 'Frieda' and 'Felice' – Felice Bauer, to whom he had been twice engaged over five years and whom he had already coded as 'Frieda' in an earlier story. He would have been reminded of the only satisfying sexual experience of his life, with Felice while staying in adjoining hotel rooms in 1916. This coitus was more satisfying than the few affairs he had had in his youth. He wrote to Brod, 'Now I saw the look of trustfulness in a woman's eyes and could not fail to respond.'²¹ A couple of days earlier, he had recalled this experience in his diary: 'beautiful the gaze of her soothed eyes, the opening of womanly depths.'²² Throughout his life, Kafka found such gazes transfixing, but now, for the first time, he experiences one simultaneously with sexual pleasure.

Like Frieda, Felice was not obviously attractive (Kafka noted her 'bony' face), but her gaze, like Frieda's, revealed the possibility of a union with untold dynamism.²³ Together with Frieda, K. will take the castle by storm. As Kafka told Felice six years earlier after their hotel encounter, they would set up a radical household. Kafka would leave Prague and the grip of his family for Berlin, where he and Felice would sleep in separate rooms with an adjoining door as in that magical hotel. They would remain financially independent yet emotionally close – the opposite of the more conventional Brod, who lived co-dependently with his wife but got sexual satisfaction elsewhere. Like Frieda, Felice was disciplined and skilled, as

20 For the exact spot of the switch from 'I' to 'K.' in the manuscript, see Kafka, *Das Schloß: Apparatband*, 182.

21 Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, 117 (12–14 July 1916).

22 Kafka, *Diaries*, 421 (ca. 10 July 1916).

23 Kafka, *Diaries*, 226 (20 August 1912).

technologically savvy as today's social-media whizzes. She had mastered stenography and the newfangled writing machine known as the typewriter. As a marketing agent for a cutting-edge Berlin media company, she also grasped the latest dictation technologies: gramophones and phonographs. Although Kafka wrote by hand, he was aware of the power of new media through his job, so fell in love with Felice partially because of her competence. Critics have complained that Kafka did not really love her and only used her. But we should remember that a shrewd, competent, well-read woman like Felice might not have been so easily used. Perhaps she too saw in them a dream couple: a brilliant writer and a media expert. Together, they might be able – like K. and Frieda – to resist the world and free each other from the bonds of convention.

Neither relationship works out, but that subtracts nothing from their potential. Kafka sensed a similar opportunity in 1920 with Milena, and he had read about such a couple in the letters of the poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. The psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg, born in Vienna just six years after Kafka wrote *The Castle*, argued that couples like these developed a creative 'private morality'.²⁴ This allowed them to resist convention and the temptation of mass political movements such as Nazism, which Kernberg fled in 1939. Although we normally think of coupling as conventional, Kernberg claims that amorous pairs are the unit most capable of defying established thinking and group fanaticism. Couples are stronger and less needy than individuals, yet small enough to remain eccentric and avoid groupthink; remember Winston and Julia's rebellious affair in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This is why exceptional, well-functioning couples are often viewed as threats and objects of envy in unstructured groups such as political parties.²⁵

K. seems to be imagining this when he looks into Frieda's eyes and tells her that only as a couple do they have a chance against the 'resistance put up by the world'. K. and Frieda's pairing is specific yet universal. Their private morality might have the capacity to be

²⁴ Otto Kernberg, *Love Relations* (Yale, 1995), 176.

²⁵ Kernberg, *Love Relations*, 92.

a model for others, a political act. This is why K. tells Frieda, immediately before asking her to join him in the fight, that her remarkable gaze belongs not to her alone. Given that Kafka often crossed out phrases that seemed too on-the-nose, it is noteworthy that he struck this: 'It is a look that in a sense does not belong to you at all yet belongs to you even more.'²⁶ Frieda's gaze is both individual and shared. At this moment when the particular and the universal mix, Kafka stops using the 'I'. He likely did this because, despite the guise of fiction, the first person always reminded him of himself, the isolated individual who is, as he said, 'as lonely as – as Franz Kafka,'²⁷ The extra-personal force of K. and Frieda's attraction pushed Kafka beyond autobiography toward what he always wanted writing to be: 'the pure, true, immutable'.²⁸ For this, he needed a new point of view: the third person, 'K.'. K. of course still points toward Kafka, but not necessarily. For K. is only a beginning and could go in any direction, a grapheme of endless potential.

This discovery grips Kafka more than he could have expected. He does not merely jot 'K.' here for the first time. He also stops his flow of writing and goes back and crosses out every 'I', 'me' and 'my' and replaces these with 'K.', 'him' and 'his'. Given that Kafka never seemed to imagine publishing this manuscript, his scrupulousness with these changes is astonishing. After describing the mystery of the shared look, when two people merge in unbound potential, he changes the perspective of the entire novel. The individual – 'I' – that entered the snow-covered village dissolves with Frieda into a powerful unity. A couple of pages later, this 'I' that has become K. feels this union's full force. He and Frieda experience 'hours of breathing as one, hearts beating as one,' and K. – like his author – senses the possibility of a shared ethics.

There is no need for such a revolutionary coupling to be

²⁶ Kafka, *Das Schloß: Apparatband*, 182.

²⁷ Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, tr. Goronwy Rees, 2nd edn. (New Directions, 1971), 70. Scholars have correctly questioned Janouch's reliability, but this remark resembles ones written by Kafka, including, 'What do I have in common with Jews? I have scarcely anything in common with myself' (*Diaries*, 327).

²⁸ Kafka, *Diaries*, 445 (ca. 25 Sept 1917).

heterosexual. Kafka depicts homoerotic attractions in his letters, diaries and fiction – including *The Castle*, where near the end K. re-enters the second inn, searching for the room of a castle official. It is late, and all the doors look the same. He tries one and finds himself in a room where a different, good-looking official named Bürgel lies in a gigantic bed. The bed fills the room, so K. sits on the edge of it, and Bürgel tells him there are special ways to get to the castle's secrets. When petitioners such as K. visit officials at night in their rooms, Bürgel says, the officials are vulnerable, and the petitioners can gain more through a meaningful 'glance,' a penetrating look, than through 'a lifetime of exhausting endeavour' (245). K. considers this as he drifts off to sleep and dreams of wrestling with Bürgel naked, as Bürgel squeals like a girl. K. awakens in a half-dozed while listening to Bürgel continue to describe the petitioner's nighttime opportunities: If a specific petitioner for whom the official has been privately thirsting makes a wish, Bürgel says, this official will grant it. The granting of this wish will 'literally rip the official organization apart'. This erotic yielding will destroy the system. Although K. falls asleep and misses his chance – Kafka's black humour at work – this chance has nonetheless appeared. Like Frieda's gaze in the barroom, the amorous 'glance' between K. and Bürgel has the power to obliterate the world. Bürgel puts a fine point on this at the end of the scene: 'How suicidal happiness can be!' (253).

Shortly after writing this chapter, Kafka stops working on his castle story forever – in August 1922. He never explains why. But even before the Bürgel episode, we sensed that Kafka has too many characters and too many loose plot lines. He has also shifted from a wide-ranging third-person narration to long monologues with little external description. Frieda's mother once compared Klammer to an eagle and K. to a 'slow-worm' ('blindworm', a European lizard with poor vision), and Kafka now seems to have become myopic too (53). He lets his narrator disappear and, as in a wacky experimental play, relates mostly rants, with one person talking for pages to a silent interlocutor, something that would never happen in life. Each speaker crazily spews castle stories into the machinery of Kafka's own castle story, which now comprises disconnected tirades – long

before Bertolt Brecht insisted that each scene in modern narration exist ‘for itself’, not forced into a fantasized whole.²⁹ As these orations continue, we readers see less of the fictional world; nothing remains of a traditional eagle- or bird’s-eye perspective. K. experiences this same narrowing of vision. He no longer looks up at the castle. He barely even goes outside, remaining trapped in interiors that get smaller and darker.

After the Bürgel scene, these tendencies only increase. Kafka seems unable to gather energy for another momentous encounter. Instead, we get one more fevered monologue, now from a chambermaid, after which K. enters a lightless closet with the landlady of the second inn. K. then follows Gerstäcker to his family’s tiny cottage. He meets Gerstäcker’s mother, who is reading a book by dim candlelight in a niche. Kafka ends here, offering us the opposite of what Goethe demanded on his deathbed: ‘more light’. Kafka gives us more darkness, the increasingly myopic perspective of the modernist blindworm who seeks to understand less, at least in the traditional sense – not more. Kafka stops in mid-sentence. Mrs. Gerstäcker opens her mouth to speak. Kafka writes ‘but what she said . . .’ and then lifts his pen never to put it back down (297). He leaves us with the un-Wagnerian incomplete work of art.

I do not mean that Kafka deliberately did not finish. We will never know whether the incompleteness was a purposeful extension of modernist ideals or a manifestation of Kafka’s lost hopes due to his incipient madness and terminal diagnosis. But we do know that Kafka never spoke of publishing his ‘castle story’, as he did with *Amerika* and *The Trial*. He had wanted those to launch a literary career. When they foundered, he clung to them – trying out new points of connection and telling friends of his desire for completion. Not so with this text. In September, Kafka told Brod he had not worked on his castle story for over two weeks and had lost the thread; he would ‘have to drop [it] forever’.³⁰ Brod responded by

29 Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett (Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), 37.

30 Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, 357 (11 Sept 1922).

telling him to stop joking and send progress updates.³¹ But Kafka never wrote another line and never mentioned it again. Brod had wanted this to be a novel, Kafka less so. Brod should not have been surprised; two months earlier Kafka told him that his castle text was always meant ‘to be written, not to be read’.³² Kafka should have said: ‘to be written and read aloud’. His use of commas instead of periods speaks to oral rhythms, reminding us of K.’s insistence that Barnabas relay his message only ‘orally’ and of Kafka reading the text aloud to Brod (115). Brod noted the irony of Kafka’s systemic shortness of breath: his ‘magnificent sentences’ demanded ‘long breaths’.³³ Kafka’s story indeed demanded such length. It was an open-ended, spoken-word project that Kafka needed to save himself in January 1922. When it spun out of control, he abandoned it unceremoniously – turning to the short story ‘The Investigations of a Dog’, which now developed its own momentum.

This may be disappointing news to fans of *The Castle* and of novels in general. But it is a stretch to call Kafka’s ‘castle story’ a novel and is perhaps why I have never ‘understood’ it. Every attempt to bind his notebooks and loose pages into a neat codex, from Brod’s to Pasley’s, is a distortion. If we want to get close to the desperate energy beneath this experiment, we must turn to the 2018 facsimile version, which places us in front of that same disorderly, paper-filled drawer that Brod found in 1924. We can see here Kafka’s remarkably clean, quick handwriting and feel the spooky, crazed power behind it. Kafka is not attempting to communicate with an audience and get them to comprehend, as did Wagner and most nineteenth-century artists. He is writing something not meant to be read, an experiment in *not* trying to be understood.

What if Kafka had not stopped with Gerstäcker’s mother? Where would his castle story have gone? Many scholars cling to

31 Brod/Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft: Briefwechsel* (Fischer, 1989), 421 (14 Sept 1922).

32 Kafka, *Briefe: 1902–1924* (Fischer, 1958), 396 (20 July 1922, ‘zum Geschriebenen, nicht zum Gelesenwerden’).

33 Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, tr. G. Humphrys, Robert and Richard Winston (Da Capo, 1995), 186n1.

what Brod claims Kafka told him in 1922: that K. would continue his fight against the castle and eventually die of exhaustion. On his death bed, a letter from the castle would arrive, granting him a limited residence permit. Even if Kafka did say this, we must remember that Kafka was famous for his dry humour. Can we be sure that he was not joking, playing with his earnest friend's desire for understanding? And even if Kafka did say and mean something like this, can we be sure that Brod remembered it correctly four years later, when adding it to the afterword of the first edition? And even if Kafka said and meant this and Brod remembered it clearly, can we cleave to it as a truth? Kafka's story had no plan or outline and emerged as a protean process, taking shape along the way; Kafka insisted that he wrote 'as if in a dark tunnel, without knowing how the characters are going to develop'.³⁴ He could sincerely have described this ending to Brod on one day and discovered a new avenue the next.

Kafka might have surprised us, and Brod and himself. The amorous connection with Frieda shook Kafka out of the first person, and a similar bond with Bürgel nearly tore the whole system apart – making us wonder whether such an encounter might have burst out again. If yes, the likely candidate would be Amalia, the most intriguing character of the second half, who once offered special 'regards' to K. (115). The villagers know her because she rejected a lewd advance by an official. Since then, the castle has ignored her family, and the village has shunned them. Amalia has remained at home, caring for her parents. Some scholars argue that she was the author of her own fate: she should have embraced the 'feast of procreation' with her predator or reacted afterward in a more creative, less 'negative' way.³⁵ But what should she have done, in this patriarchal wasteland? Started her own business? Emigrated? Where, in this world with only one village? Amalia's act of saying no is

34 Brod, 'Uyttersprott korrigiert Kafka', *Forum*, 43/44 (1957): 265.

35 Richard Sheppard, *On Kafka's Castle* (Croom Helm, 1973), 157; Ritchie Robertson, 'Kafka, Goffman, and the "Total Institution" in the 21st Century', ed. Stanley Corngold and Ruth Gross (Camden House, 2011), 147.

revolutionary on its own. Her sister realizes this, as does K. And Kafka seems to as well, for he gives Amalia that same magical gaze he lent Frieda. Amalia's look is 'serious, level, imperturbable,' the first thing K. notices about her (32). Later, he observes her 'cold, clear gaze,' which is 'proud and sincere in its self-containment.' Immediately afterward, she tells K. that love need not be spoken, then smiles, 'and that smile, although sad, lit up the darkly furrowed face, made the silence voluble, made the remoteness familiar, was the divulgence of a secret, the surrender of a hitherto protected possession, which though it might be taken back could never be so entirely' (159).

Amalia is also wise. She knows that the villagers' hatred of her is not really hatred but a slavish repetition of public opinion. She knows that people like K. often trap themselves in the castle's logic. When she hears K. and her sister gossiping, she asks them why they waste time with 'castle stories'. Amalia then tells them of a young man, who, like them, had been 'preoccupied with thoughts about the castle day and night, he neglected everything else, people feared for his sanity because his whole mind was up there in the castle'. Ultimately, it 'turned out he'd not actually meant the castle at all, merely the daughter of a woman who does washing-up in the offices, he got her, by the way, and everything was all right again' (194–5). Despite the rich satire, this parable also contains a lesson for K.: his compulsion to understand the castle is a way of avoiding his own desire. When read in conjunction with K.'s breakthrough moments with Frieda and Bürgel, Amalia's fable suggests that K. unconsciously fears another such encounter. And rightly so. For as K. has learned, such encounters can produce anarchic, private communions that might tear apart the entire system. This would annihilate everything, possibly even the revolutionary couple. As Bürgel exclaims while lying in bed with K., such radical happiness is suicidal. Amalia suggests that K. risk this. His preoccupation with the castle is a neurosis, a way of avoiding the transcendent promise of his desire. Give up your obsession with the castle, which only seems to be 'real' and discover the unbearable, joyous truths of the Real.

Such a scene never occurs – with Amalia or anyone else – but her later ferocious defense of K. like a ‘wildcat’ suggests movement toward it (222). And less than a year after Kafka abandoned this text, on vacation in July 1923, he himself did something similarly wild. Having just turned forty, Kafka fell in love with the twenty-five-year-old Dora Diamant, a volunteer with children from the Jewish People’s Home. As Kafka reports: ‘I am not happy when I’m among them, but on the threshold of happiness.’³⁶ Just two months later, Kafka crosses that threshold, moving with Dora to Berlin, an even crazier idea than when he had planned to do so with Felice. Berlin was now in the throes of a deadly inflation, winter was coming, and Kafka’s tuberculosis was worsening. But he no longer cared about death or what people thought. He had finally escaped from his family and Prague, that ‘little mother’ with ‘claws’.³⁷ Dora later said that ‘tearing himself away from Prague, was, even though very late, the great achievement in life without which one has no right to die.’³⁸ These last months in Berlin were Kafka’s suicidal happiness.

Less than a decade after Kafka’s death, the Gestapo raided the apartment of Dora – now a communist – and confiscated all of her and his papers. These were never found, but Kafka nonetheless emerged from the locked cabinets. The Nazis felt the need to prohibit him as did some Eastern Bloc regimes. Our Western democracies allow him but potentially at their own peril. For though he is the writer of stasis, he is also the prophet of revolution. The world is one match-stroke away from conflagration, for better or for worse. This upheaval might be staring us, and K., right in the eye. You only need to be a myopic, a blindworm with no understanding, to see it. In an unwritten ending, K. just well might have. And we might too. Who knows?

36 Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, 373 (to Hugo Bergmann, July 1923).

37 Kafka, *Briefe*, 14 (to Oskar Pollak, 20 Dec 1902, ‘dieses Mütterchen hat Krallen’).

38 Interview with Dora Diamant in ‘The Last Memories of Franz Kafka’, *Horizon* 17 (1948): 43.