

Kafka's "Assistants" from the Castle

KURT J. FICKERT, *Wittenberg University*

The culmination of a series of pairs of figures (e.g., the arresting officers in *The Trial*, Blumfeld's assistants, the condemned man and his guard in "In the Penal Colony"), Jeremias and Artur in *The Castle* have challenged all interpreters of Kafka with their cryptic presence. Explanations by the critics run the gamut from those who merely accept the novel's assertion that the pair have been sent by the castle to help K. by diverting him to Charles Neider who in *The Frozen Sea* identifies the two as (of course) K.'s testicles. Quite appropriately, each interpreter aligns his concept of these assistants, provided the self-proclaimed surveyor K., with his concept of the book's purport. Since Ronald Gray emphasizes the serious tone of the novel in depicting the search for grace, he regards the assistants' childish behavior as parodistic.¹ Their frivolity affords A. P. Foulkes another argument to substantiate his theory that Kafka tends to be a nihilist: "The castle had indicated to K. how life might be endured by providing him with two conformists . . ."²

Nevertheless, a certain amount of agreement in interpreting the symbolism of the assistants prevails, particularly in the analyses of the most prominent and knowledgeable of the Kafka experts. Thus Wilhelm Emrich stresses those characteristics of Jeremias and Artur which are aspects of the human psyche: ". . . [The assistants] represent vital, unreflective natural forces, which are always present in each individual . . ."³ For Herbert Tauber, an early interpreter of Kafka who yet remains one of the most perspicacious, the assistants likewise are evidence of K.'s humanity, the counterpart of his predilection for rumination. (Along these lines, Martin Greenberg's category for the assistants in *The Terror of Art* is that of "primitive-childish impulses and instincts."⁴) While concurring in the view that K.'s helpers are a projection of his inner self, another group of critics assigns them a less ambiguous and an even more dynamic role: they function like a conscience—for Norbert Fürst, in parodying the conscience.⁵ Sometimes they become doubly conscience: "If [the assistants] are Klamm's eyes, they are also K.'s mirrors."⁶ Again without providing a specific designation for the pair of watchers, Klaus-Peter Philippi suggests the serious nature of their endeavors and, at the same time, K.'s misconception of their activity: "Their [the assistants'] reticence and consideration appear to K. to be the exact opposite, to be imposition and surveillance."⁷

What all these eminently reasonable explanations of the presence of Artur and Jeremias in *The Castle* do not take into account is their literary value, since Kafka uses them neither as symbols in a system of philosophy nor as elements in a psychological study (a kind of endeavor which he particularly abhorred), but as characters in a fiction, a novel. They are, first of all, a literary device in that they are doubles. K. does not believe that he can tell one from the other. That this motif, doubling and its nuances, has a particular fascination for K. and consequently for Kafka becomes clear in an episode in which K. contemplates Barnabas, the figure who embodies his fondest hopes. (Significantly, Walter Sokel has called Barnabas both K.'s pure self and his writer-self.⁸) As he looks at his partner in the plan to penetrate the defenses of the castle, K. finds himself confronting two people: ". . . as if he [Barnabas] were not one man, but two, and only K. and not reality were

capable of keeping them apart, he now believed that he had been moved to take him [i.e., Barnabas] along not because of his trickery [*List*], but because of his worried, tentatively hopeful face. . . . He based his hopes on this fact."⁹ This experience of the division, or, actually, fragmentation of the self which Kafka describes as an essential part of his comprehension of Barnabas (in literary terms, his concept of Barnabas) is rooted in his own life. In his work and its autobiographical paralipomena there is a plenitude of reference to the two people whom he felt himself to be, namely (in the simplest of designations) the bureaucrat and the *Dichter* (poet). A climactic instance of the compulsion to regard himself as one and an other Kafka occurs in a letter to Milena, whose affair with Kafka is responsible for bringing *The Castle* into existence. He importunes her thus: "You forget, Milena, that we are standing beside one another, observing this phenomenon on the ground which I am; but I, the one who is looking on, am actually insubstantial."¹⁰

Kafka not only recounted intimate instances of doubling but he also manifested an interest in the nature of the phenomenon. Despite his aversion to psychology (or, perhaps, Freudian psychology), he requested of his friend Felix Weltsch that he locate a book on onanism and homosexuality by "some Dr. Wilhelm Stekel or other . . . who is making mincemeat out of Freud."¹¹ As it happens, one of the psychological responses which Stekel explores is doubling. In a book on the literary use of this neurotic reaction by the personality when embroiled in conflict (it is a ubiquitous literary device), Ralph Tymms has summarized Stekel's conclusions: "According to him, the double represents elements of morbid self-love which prevents the formation of a happily balanced personality."¹² Whether or not Kafka was actually acquainted with Stekel's analysis of doubling, it is hardly likely that Artur and Jeremias represent a less than deliberate exploration, on Kafka's part, of the literary motif of the double. His familiarity with famous instances of the occurrence of the double in literature (in Dostoevski, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Jean Paul, Kafka's preferred authors) also must be presumed.

By investing K. with two assistants, Kafka was, therefore, providing further insight into the nature of his protagonist. Insofar as they are identical, they point to the original unity of K.'s character. But, as is the case with the other pairs of figures in the Kafka canon, the two are gradually but decidedly distinguished, one from the other. It is the fate of Artur and Jeremias in *The Castle* to duplicate the dissolution of K. into two people: one, the lover of Frieda, the school janitor, the disillusioned Don Quixote, who, as Kafka suggested to Max Brod, would on his deathbed be taken into the fold of the village; the other, the champion of the Barnabas family, the disciple of Klamm, the dreamer in the bed of Bürgel who dreams of wrestling with God or the angel, the architect of the castle. Richard Sheppard has pointed to Kafka's use of contrasting terms to separate the one twin from the other: Artur is "tender" and Jeremias is "passionate," and Sheppard concludes that the one embodies "destructive 'irrational' energies" and the other "creative 'transrational' energies."¹³ The plot of the novel, while providing no solution to the protagonist's problems, affords different denouements for the affairs of Artur and Jeremias. Artur returns to the castle in an act which represents K.'s allegiance to the ideal, the pursuit of which begins with his arrival in the village. Jeremias's destiny leads him into the relationship with Frieda and to the domesticity which K. has abandoned in order to continue his siege of the castle, his attempt to sustain the illusion that his life has another purpose than that of marriage and a bureaucratic career.

The name Artur presents a clue as to the kind of activity which service in and to the castle involves. Like the device of doubling it has a literary basis. In Kafka, of course, literary allusions tend to have ironic implications so that this King Arthur figure is the lowliest of "knights" (cf. *Knecht*) and more the fool than the monarch. In this way Kafka ridicules his own achievements as a writer, perhaps necessarily, since the *Dichter's* goals he ascribes to are incommensurate with anyone's abilities. The use of a name from Arthurian legend in *The Castle* may have been foreshadowed in *The Trial*, where Titorelli occurs, which, as Kurt Weinberg has suggested in *Die Travestien des Mythos*, is close to Titurel. (The motif of the wound, central to Arthurian romance, is also an important factor in Kafka's fiction.) By way of contrast (Judaic as against Christian), Kafka named Artur's twin identity Jeremias. Once again, the vast difference between prophet and petit-bourgeois (i.e., a surveyor's assistant) and between the lamentations for a lost people and the lamentations for a young man who wants to be both an author and a dutiful son and father sharpens the ironic edge of Kafka's concepts.

Not only their names but also their function as assistants serve to establish the theme of *The Castle* and Artur's and Jeremias's relationship to it. That K. has assumed the role of surveyor is the fiction which identifies K. as the writer of fiction (Ronald Gray's dictum " 'Surveyor' is not a bad metaphor for novelist . . ." ¹⁴ is actually a summation of critical opinion). K.'s search for the castle represents his search for an identity as a writer. His creative ability manifests itself in the guise of the assistants. One need only compare Kafka's description in a letter to Max Brod (from Prague on November 13, 1912) of the process of his writing: "Two figures, which were supposed to have appeared [in *Amerika*], I suppressed. For the entire time, while I was writing, they came running up behind me, and since in the novel itself they were supposed to have raised their arms and clenched their fists, they did exactly that to me. They were indeed livelier than that which I was writing." In addition, just as Kafka once defined the mysterious friend of Georg Bendemann as the relationship which exists between the protagonist and his father, so Artur and Jeremias can be interpreted as the conditions under which Kafka writes. Together, they are clumsy helpers, inadequate for the task at hand, ridiculous to the point of seeming to be a rebuke for K.'s presumption that the castle is his realm. In their becoming distinguished, one from the other, they duplicate the dichotomy which emerges from the unraveling of the "plot" of the novel—it consists of the elucidation of the contrasts between the village and the castle and between pairs of characters. For instance, when K. wins Frieda, who aspires to be not a muse but a housewife, he is diverted from his pursuit of Klamm, his ideal. In the ambiguity of his feelings toward Olga and Amalia and the ambiguity of theirs toward him there is the warring of the desire to be a compassionate human being with the desire to be the aesthete (the "saint").

When Jeremias and Artur finally go their separate ways, forever estranged, their destiny reflects the insolubility of K.'s dilemma, his inability to effect a compromise between the need to write and the need to lead a so-called normal life. The novel's last episode retains the element of tension which characterizes the relationship between K. and his assistants. Here the contrasting figures are Pepi and the landlady: Pepi (a nickname for Josef) offers K. the security of dark, hidden places—he may stay a secret writer, writing only for his own satisfaction. But the landlady lives in the light of the imagination, in a world of inspiration, where there is a constant change of costume. K. does not choose between the barmaid and the muse, not only because the narrative breaks off at this point but also because he cannot.

Kafka's writing consists of the exploration of the paradox that it is possible to produce literature about the impossibility of producing it. In more apt phrases Sokel has summarized the content of Kafka's fiction: "Kafka's work is strictly the presentation of the myth of his inner existence, interrupted time and again, resumed time and again, in a variety of guises and in the form of a development."¹⁵ The central figure in this myth is the *Dichter*, the writer who Kafka desired to be, in spite of having to pay the great price of accepting the burden of guilt, accrued from the concomitant neglect of normal relationships. Because the assistants from the castle both literally¹⁶ depict the situation of his writing and symbolically portray its schizophrenic consequences, they constitute the most trenchant use of the double in the Kafka canon.

NOTES

¹*Kafka's Castle* (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), p. 54: "The assistants enact one long parody of K.'s persistence."

²*The Reluctant Pessimist* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1967), p. 169.

³*Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1960), p. 166. My translation here and elsewhere.

⁴New York: Basic Books, 1965, p. 183.

⁵*Die offenen Geheimtüren Franz Kafkas* (Heidelberg: Wolfgang Rothe, 1956), p. 24.

⁶Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1962), p. 242.

⁷*Reflexion und Wirklichkeit: Untersuchungen zu Kafkas Roman "Das Schloß"* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1966), p. 16.

⁸*Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie* (München/Wien: Langen/Müller, 1964), p. 480 *et passim*.

⁹Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß* (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 430: from material deleted by the author.

¹⁰Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena* (New York: Schocken, 1952), p. 238.

¹¹*Briefe 1902-1924* (New York: Schocken, 1958), p. 169. The letter is dated September 22, 1917.

¹²*Doubles in Literary Psychology* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1949), p. 41.

¹³*On Kafka's Castle* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), p. 49.

¹⁴Gray, p. 148.

¹⁵Sokel, p. 24.

¹⁶Sokel emphasizes the literalness of Kafka's writing.