

Kafka's Death Fantasy in Amerika

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It is incumbent on the careful reader of a Kafka story to begin with the title. As is generally known, the name *Amerika* was bestowed on Kafka's first attempt in the novel form by Max Brod, who prepared the book for publication in 1927, a few years after Kafka's death. *Amerika* is a not-inappropriate title for a work which deals with the misadventures of a naive young man from Europe who tries desperately to find a place for himself in America's workaday world. However, Kafka had already chosen his own designation for the book's concept: *Der Verschollene*, *One Who Vanished*. The word has the connotation of someone who has disappeared without a trace and is presumed dead.¹ Indeed, although it is not etymologically related, the base "Scholle," clump of earth, interposes itself. Because of the title it becomes apparent that Kafka had envisioned the course his protagonist's life was to take, and the fact that he never finished his manuscript, although he provided a final (and likewise unfinished) chapter, is no impediment to an analysis of the book in the light of its fantastic ending.

Amerika is, of course, in its entirety an exercise in creative imagination, since Kafka knew the United States only through the accounts of others, particularly that of Arthur Holitscher, entitled *Amerika, heute und morgen*. Underlying Holitscher's reportage of conditions for working people in the States and Canada, exemplified by the assertion that life in Chicago is hell, is the hope for a socialistic utopia in the West in the future. Another interpreter of the novel, A. Wirkner, has recently maintained in similar fashion that Kafka was promoting in the book the liberal social views of Woodrow Wilson which he had stumbled upon. The speculation that Kafka was basically engaged in criticizing a capitalistic society and providing a remedy seems rather farfetched when the tenor of Kafka's own remarks on *Der Verschollene* is taken into account.

The book was Kafka's *Sorgenkind* (problem child). Dissatisfied with an early version, written before 1912, he destroyed it. He was equally unhappy with much of the second draft, which he worked on principally in October and November, 1912, but he excised the first chapter, called "Der Heizer" (The Stoker), the publication of which he not only approved but also at a later time exempted from the destruction to which he consigned, through Max Brod, most of his work upon his death. Kafka linked the stoker's story to two other early stories which he also came to consider accomplishments worth saving. At the time when "Der Heizer" was about to appear, he proposed to the publisher that it be combined with "Das Urteil" and "Die Verwandlung" to constitute one volume entitled, at his suggestion, *Söhne*.² The theme which the three narratives have in common is, far from that of social criticism, the rise and fall of a young man with a hidden ambition to write in the bourgeois world, a process of alienation accompanied by guilt feelings and unsuccessful attempts at atonement. Typically, the stoker pursues his vocation with diligence, but is frustrated in his endeavors to belong in the ship's rigidly constructed

¹ See, for example, the entry "verschollen" in *The New Cassell's German Dictionary* (New York: Funk & Wagnall, 1958).

² Letter to Kurt Wolff, Prague, April 4, 1913; see Franz Kafka, *Franz Kafka: Dichter Über ihre Dichtungen*, ed. Erich Heller & Joachim Beug (München: Heimeran/S. Fischer, 1969), p. 41 f.

society by the unfounded attack on his integrity by his chief. The book's protagonist, Karl Roßmann, finding that the stoker's lot duplicates his own, at first tries to forestall a verdict of guilty in the stoker's case, but then abandons his cause when the possibility of circumventing the same fate in his own life presents itself.

While the inevitability of the stoker's failure is made plain, his ultimate fate is not revealed. In Karl's case, his fall from grace, the process of his exclusion from the bourgeois world, is minutely described. Like the sons in "The Judgment" and "Metamorphosis," he tumbles headlong downward to the point of extinction (*Verschollenheit*). A brief stay at the top of the ladder in the capitalistic world, where the good fortune of being favored by a father figure has placed him, involves him in a minor misdemeanor which leads to his expulsion from his benefactor's capitalistic Eden. The as yet resourceful Roßmann finds employment at a lower level in America's industrial society; he becomes an elevator operator in a suburban hotel. His devotion to his work, however, is undermined by his association with a Bohemian friend, patently his, that is, Kafka's writer self. A slight infraction of the rules brings ruin. Karl's sojourn in the morally dubious world of art as a servant in the house of an opera singer marks his having reached almost the lowest rung of society's ladder; he has become an outsider. Perhaps Kafka sees in Karl at this stage the writer whose function it is to subject himself to humiliations extant in the subconscious which the workaday world refuses to acknowledge. In another adventure, written in so fragmentary a form that Brod omitted it from *Amerika*, Karl reaches the nadir of his career; holding on to the last vestige of white collar employment, he becomes a messenger for a brothel. Exiled from home, family, and the society of responsible men and women, all through no fault of his own, the guiltless Karl Roßmann—as Kafka has called him³—departs from the scene and possibly from this life.

Abruptly he reappears in the chapter with which Kafka intended to bring the novel to a close, written while he was also working on *Der Prozeß* and "In der Strafkolonie." Karl's situation, like the executions of Josef K. and the penal colony's officer, now negates the purport of all preceding events. To put it crassly, the section reads as if Karl had died and gone to heaven. Max Brod has revealed that Kafka was particularly fond of the novel's somewhat incomplete conclusion⁴ and read it aloud to his friends with relish. To these remarks Brod adds: "With puzzling words Kafka indicated, as he smiled, that his young hero would regain in this 'almost limitless' theater his occupation, freedom, support, and indeed even his homeland and his parents as though by means of Paradise's magic."⁵ Brod labeled the chapter "The Nature Theater of Oklahoma," although Kafka has nowhere indicated that the word "nature" would be pertinent. Its relevance would seem to stem from the fact that Brod was aware of the circumstances under which the concept of the conclusion came into being. In July, 1912, Kafka spent a vacation in Stapelburg in the Harz Mountains; there he made the acquaintance of a Silesian surveyor who, as an enthusiastic Protestant, tried to convert Kafka and as a token of their friendship presented him with a Bible. At the time Kafka not only became absorbed in Old and New Testament theology but also attended open air Christian services. In his Kafka biography Hartmut Binder concludes: "References to the

³ In the journal entry of Sept. 29, 1915, Kafka discusses the similar and yet separate fates of Karl Roßmann and *The Trial's* Josef K.: "Roßmann und K., der Schuldlose and der Schuldige, schließlich beide unterschiedlos strafweise umgebracht, der Schuldlose mit leichterer Hand, mehr zur Seite geschoben als niedergeschlagen," *Franz Kafka: Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 46.

⁴ Although the manuscript breaks off before Karl reaches his destination, Wolfgang Jahn contends that this openendedness might well represent Kafka's intent. ("Die Romane: Der Verschollene," in *Kafka Handbuch*, ed. Hartmut Binder [Stuttgart: Kröner, 1979]).

⁵ *Franz Kafka: Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 45. My translation.

Apocalypse and the Gospel of Matthew which occur in the Nature Theater of Oklahoma chapter, certainly are to be traced back predominantly to this stay of Kafka in Stapelburg ... as indeed the entire extensive environs of the Jungborn district may have been a kind of model for the Nature Theater."⁶

Karl's death and afterlife as depicted in the title *One Who Vanished* and in the symbolism of the Theater of Oklahoma are also implied in some of Kafka's references to the work made in letters to Felice Bauer. On one occasion (Prague, January second and third, 1913), Kafka writes of his difficulty in bringing his novel to a close: the characters seem at times to elude him, he complains, and "I would have to run after them, even if it meant going to Hades, where indeed they are most at home."⁷ Only a few days later he puts himself into the framework of his book, allotting to the author the fate of the protagonist: "In the final analysis there can be no better place to die, none more suitable for complete despair, than one's own novel."⁸

The book's last chapter begins abruptly, without transitional references. Karl Roßmann reads an advertisement posted on a street corner; it reveals the solution to his problems and is, so to speak, the answer to his prayers, because it affords employment for everyone, even to the completely unqualified, and thereby inclusion in the community of humankind. The agency which is hiring all comers is the Theater of Oklahoma. The symbol of the theater is, in typically Kafkaesque fashion, paradoxical. On the one hand, it represents a reconciliation between the world of art, previously exemplified in *One Who Vanished* by the tramps Robinson and Delamarche and the indolent Brunelda, and the bourgeois world, personified principally by Uncle Jakob. On the other hand, this happy circumstance (the Indian word "Oklahoma" means "the happy or beautiful land") exists only in the theater, the realm of fancy and illusion. Irony appears also in the words with which the invitation to join the theater is issued. The place where the about-to-be employed are to gather is a race track in the town of Clayton. Thus the element of competition enters into a situation, the key to which is that all who apply will be accepted. In addition, the site of the track is Clayton, that is, town of clay, signifying the grave. Further ambiguity is provided by the fact that the decision to join or not to join the Oklahoma company within a certain time limit is irrevocable. Indeed, the poster concludes its message with the warning: "Damned be the one who does not believe us!"⁹

Not only the wording of the Theater's announcement but also the very nature of the enterprise associates it with another and quite different institution—the church. As Lienhard Bergel has pointed out, no other social agency affords "a place, employment, and security to everybody . . ." ¹⁰ Of course, the church offers

⁶ Hartmut Binder, "Leben und Persönlichkeit Franz Kafkas," in *Kafka Handbuch*, I, 415: "Die Anspielungen auf die Apokalypse und auf das Matthäus-Evangelium, die sich im Kapitel *Das Naturtheater von Oklahoma* finden, gehen sicher vorwiegend auf diesen Aufenthalt Kafkas in Stapelburg zurück..., wie überhaupt die ganze ausgedehnte Anlage des Jungborn eine Art Vorlage für das Naturtheater gewesen sein mag." My translation.

⁷ *Franz Kafka: Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 38: "Ich müßte ihnen nachlaufen und wenn es bis in die Unterwelt wäre, wo sie ja eigentlich zuhause sind." My translation. Following this quotation come the words often cited to indicate the close relationship between Kafka and his protagonists: "Der Roman bin ich, meine Geschichten bin ich . . ."

⁸ *Franz Kafka: Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 38: "Schließlich kann es keinen schöneren, der vollkommenen Verzweiflung würdigern Ort für das Sterben geben als einen eigenen Roman." My translation.

⁹ Franz Kafka, *Amerika* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1976), p. 223: "Verflucht sei, wer uns nicht glaubt!" My translation.

¹⁰ Lienhard Bergel, "Amerika: Its Meaning," in *Franz Kafka Today*, ed. Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1962), p. 122.

a refuge not only in this life but also in the next. On reading the theater's advertisement, Karl Roßmann immediately takes note of the fact that it makes no mention of wages for those it would employ; Oklahoma, it appears, is an extraordinary place. Even Clayton, where the recruiting offices are located, cannot be reached without undertaking a somewhat long journey. Karl has to make use of the underground train, and like someone crossing the River Styx, he pays a fee. Exiting from the train, he hears the blare of trumpets. They are in the hands of hundreds of angels, women in white robes with golden wings on their backs. One of them he recognizes to be an old friend, Fanny. Since the name begins with a "F" and is non-German, the conclusion that it is meant to suggest "Felice" can readily be arrived at and, indeed, the ambiguities of Kafka's relationship with his eternal fiancée Felice seem here to have been resolved. Because the angels are stationed on tall pedestals, which are covered by their appropriately long robes, Karl must climb a ladder concealed beneath Fanny's clothing in order to converse with her. The symbolism Kafka employs in this instance implies that in this quasi-heavenly realm, sexual inhibitions have been overcome. From Fanny Karl learns that the angels are regularly replaced at their posts by male devils. The race track recruiting office thereby has the aspect of an anteroom in limbo, where the newly arrived await assignment or consignment to heaven or hell.

It is therefore a pseudo-purgatory in which Karl finds himself. Characteristic of the Clayton Race Track is the fact that vestiges of the worldly life remain in this haven for all. The bureaucracy which formerly plagued Karl Roßmann and condemned him to the life of the outsider functions still, but its judgments are nullified by the conditions under which he has come to the Theater's offices. Although he has mastered no particular skill, he is recognized as an artist whose place in a theater cannot be disputed. Authority figures whose skepticism in regard to Karl's employment is very evident are overruled by their secretaries. One of the men in charge of arrangements at the race track surprises Karl in his resemblance to a professor whom he presumes to be still teaching in his hometown; Karl finds it hard to believe that he is encountering this man in another world. At the same time Karl also cannot bring himself to discard all memories of the indignities he suffered while his former self. When he is asked his name, he responds with the nickname he had had as (apparently) a messenger for a brothel—Negro. Aware that the candidate is identifying himself as the complete outsider—in New Testament terminology as the least of men—the authorities nevertheless have no choice other than to accept him, although they send him on to increasingly inconspicuous way stations. At long last he is given his admission papers.

Before the long journey to Oklahoma is to begin, the new employees are feted. Seated at a series of tables on platforms raised to various heights, social station being acknowledged even at the gates of heaven, the theater's new members enjoy a sumptuous meal and drink wine. Wolfgang Jahn has identified this rite as the last in a series which provides Karl's induction into the Oklahoma Theater with New Testament features; "the summoning and warning (the posters), the court (the referee's stand [at the track]), feeding the poor ([Jesus's] feeding of the masses)," he contends, "links [these events] uncontroversially to New Testament visions of resurrection, last judgment, and salvation."¹¹ The feast is presided over by a leader (*Führer*), to whom a toast is raised as the "Father of the Job-Seekers" (*Vater der Stellensuchenden*); at his side is apparently his assistant. However, as Karl notes, these versions of God the Father and God the Son remain largely indifferent to the proceedings.

¹¹ Wolfgang Jahn, "Die Romane: Der Verschollene," in *Kafka Handbuch*, II, 413: "Aufruf und Warnung (Plakate), Gericht (Schiedsrichtertribüne), Mahl der Armen (Massenspeisung) lenkt unvermeidlich auf die neutestamentlichen Visionen von Auferstehung, Jüngstem Gericht und Erlösung." My translation.

As a token of the forgiveness which is his reward upon entering this Christian heaven, Karl is reunited during the communal meal with the youngster, another elevator operator at the Hotel Occidental, whom he had befriended and then been forced to abandon—as he had the stoker. The boy's name is Giacomo, "Little Jacob"; therefore he also represents a scaled down and benign version of the uncle and father figure whom Karl has never been able to please. Later, traveling on the train to Oklahoma, Karl defends Giacomo against some mischievous companions in another act of reconciliation. At the end of the communal meal there occurs the parody of a race to the train leaving for Oklahoma or Paradise. A recurring symbol in the Theater episode makes a last appearance in connection with the mad dash to climb aboard the heavenly train. Karl assists the Kalla family, father, mother, and their child in a baby carriage, in reaching the railroad cars. Since "Kalla" bears an obvious resemblance to "Kafka," the little family signifies Karl's reunion with his parents which Kafka had indicated to Brod would be one of the happy events in the novel's final chapter.

Critics have, of course, emphasized the utopian character of the Theater of Oklahoma, and some (Mark Spilka, for instance) have seen it as a futuristic vision of the ideal society, which personal and social redemption have achieved. The many comic elements in the scene lead other interpreters of Kafka to the logical conclusion that what is involved is the satire of a utopia. This capitalistic world in the heart of America is a ridiculously improbable one which has its proper place only at the end of a Chaplin film. Because the chapter was written at the time when Kafka was also working on "In the Penal Colony," I find it likely that the orientation to questions of guilt and redemption, religious matters, in the one story persists also in the other. Aspects of Christian (New Testament) theology presented in bizarre fashion are evident in "In the Penal Colony," and an equally wry version of the heaven many Christians visualize would not be beyond Kafka's intent or capacity. According to Gustav Janouch, Kafka once confided to him that Karl Roßmann was not Jewish.¹² The protagonist in "In the Penal Colony," the traveler, who is a humanist, turns his back on religious faiths which hold humankind to be guilty and in need of redemption. The hilarious picture of Karl Roßmann in heaven, or on his way to heaven, may be Kafka's representation of his doubt about the validity of the claim of any institution that it has the power to redeem. That the doubt remained a doubt is testified to by the fact that, just as he was dissatisfied with the end of "In the Penal Colony," he could never bring his description of the Theater of Oklahoma to a close. It remains a fascinatingly open-ended fantasy.

¹²Franz Kafka: *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen*, p. 49.