

The Emperor's Message: Truth and Fiction in Kafka

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A passage from the story "On the Building of the Chinese Wall" ("Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer") has achieved the stature of a separate piece of work in the Kafka canon with a title of its own—"An Imperial Message" ("Eine Kaiserliche Botschaft").¹ To a significant degree this brief anecdote or parable resembles "Before the Law" ("Vor dem Gesetz"), the most prominent of the threesome² of such passages, excised and given independent existence by Kafka. In both instances an unpretentious individual seeks contact with an ultimate power or authority and is thwarted, in the case of "Before the Law," because of the intervention of an "official" doorkeeper and, in the case of "An Imperial Message," despite the enthusiastic cooperation of a messenger. Since the former narrative has been extensively discussed, most trenchantly in the recent past by Jacques Derrida,³ it would seem appropriate to afford "An Imperial Message" renewed attention. It is obviously, despite its brevity, a key passage both for Kafka, who, after all, singled it out and, in that light, for his interpreters in attaining insight into the cosmology of his fictional world.

"An Imperial Message" presents a picture of a dualistic universe, predicated on the principle that two kinds of reality exist in it. Almost inconceivably remote from the province of daily life (the perceptible world), there lies, according to this cosmology, the palace of the emperor,⁴ the seat of an authority exercised, nevertheless, with palpable effect. These two realities coexist but never make actual contact with one another. The facets of these very diverse sphere of comprehension are manifold. As the narrator reports, the emperor presides over a vast court and entourage ("all intervening walls are laid low and on the free-standing staircases rising high and wide there stand in a circle the high and mighty of the country"⁵), but he is dying. The world of everyday reality is equally extensive; the storyteller pictures to himself the masses that inhabit the "endless homesteads" of the area that also has a crowded capital city in its midst. (This "Chinese" landscape unmistakably resembles that of America in *One Who Vanished* or *Amerika*.) The two

¹ "An Imperial Message" first appeared in the journal *Selbstwehr*, edition of August 24, 1919. It was already a part of the collection *A Country Doctor*, published subsequently in 1919. "On the Building of the Chinese Wall" was published in 1931.

² The other "story" which has been separated from the main text is "Ein Traum" ("A Dream"), excised from *The Trial*. Another independently published section of prose, the opening chapter of *Amerika*, namely "The Stoker" ("Der Heizer"), does not clearly represent a fourth instance of the phenomenon because of its length and the sense of its being fully developed.

³ See Jacques Derrida, "Devant la Loi," in *Philosophy and Literature*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 173-88.

⁴ The emperor and his palace appear also in the story or legend "An Old Document" ("Ein altes Blatt"). The emperor's realm here is geographically nearer to the observer but practically just as remote.

⁵ Franz Kafka, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1976) 59. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text. My translations from the German here and throughout.

antipodal symbols, the imperial palace and the world of the commonplace, have produced from the interpreters of Kafka a list of contrasting counterparts; thus, on the one hand, the emperor and his court are taken to represent a nationalistic configuration, while, on the other, the narrator or the "du" with whom he identifies is taken to symbolize the isolated individual. In another version, the patriarchal system (the dying emperor) cannot communicate with its subject who has distanced himself and yet waits in vain for the imperial message, a variation of the father's blessing on his son. The conflict between order and anarchy, an established hierarchy and the rebelling individual, also has a place in the catalogue of opposing forces which interpreters see as contending with one another in "An Imperial Message." Similarly, the outsider has been contrasted with his bourgeois counterpart or, more specifically, the artist with the staid citizen.⁶

The autobiographical import of these exegeses of the brief text lies close at hand. In this instance, Kafka has widened the scope of his investigation of familial strife, principally his relationship with his father, and placed the domestic scene in the midst of a metaphysical one. The authoritarian figure has been elevated to the rank of someone who exercises unlimited—but not necessarily political—power. The emperor presides over a domain which at the time of the building of the wall had, from a European point of view, the aura of a mythical place. (For the Western world China is an exotic place even today.) He is, according to the narrative, the source of legendary wisdom, some vastly important knowledge, which he finds must be conveyed immediately to those who live in the remotest regions of his realm and have always been bereft of his presence. The nature of the emperor's message is left unexplored in the "story," except for the suggestion at the end that it may be grasped intuitively by the most humble or abject of these deprived subjects: "You [*du*], however, sit by your window and dream [*erträumst*] it into being for yourself when the evening comes," the narrator reveals (60). Significant in this concluding sentence is the pronoun shift: the third-person narrative yields to the intrusion of either the author himself or his surrogate, the narrator. Equally striking is the use of the verb *erträmen*, the perfective form of the verb "to dream" (*trämen*), which has no exact equivalent in English. Other instances of the proposition that a protagonist may acquire enlightenment or find a way out of his plight accidentally, so to speak by divine or royal dispensation, are not lacking in the Kafka canon. K's stumbling into the presence of Bürgel in *The Castle* (*Das Schloß*) and being afforded a quasi-solution to his dilemma is the outstanding example of such a denouement. In an early story "Wedding Preparations in the Country" ("Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande"), the main (and only) character Raban, while in bed, half-asleep, concocts a plan which will allow him to remain behind in the country, in the shell of an insect, while his physical self undertakes the trip to the wedding which has been forced upon him.

⁶ Gerhard Neuman in *Kafka-Handbuch*, ed. Hartmut Binder (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1979) analyzes these dualities; see especially 321 f. and 324 f. See also C. Goodin, "'The Great Wall of China': The Elaboration of an Intellectual Dilemma" in *On Kafka*, ed. F. Kuna (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1976), 128-45. See also Gregory B. Triffitt, *Kafka's 'Landarzt' Collection* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985) 164. (Triffitt calls "An Imperial Message" "aesthetically speaking, one of the best [of the stories]" (ibid.).

Kafka gives no clue as to what the emperor's message might be, but since he proposes that it can be intuited, he invites the reader, to whom the "you" at the end of the narrative might equally well apply, to reach his or her own conclusions. If "An Imperial Message" itself contains no suggestions as to its content, Kafka has, of course, especially through his journals and letters, provided a considerable amount of comment on his work. The tenor of much of this self-analysis is a focusing in on the writer's, specifically his own, precarious situation. He claims that he has a calling but finds it impossible either to establish the authenticity of the claim or to convince himself that he has the capacity to carry out his mission. Kafka expressed dissatisfaction with his own work frequently and with vehemence; in this vein there is his insistence that his literary executor Max Brod destroy his manuscripts. On rare occasions, however, he sanctioned individual narratives. One of the most noteworthy of these few positive appraisals occurs in his journal for the year 1917 (at the time when "An Imperial Message" was written), following the entry for September 23; in it he not only writes favorably about "A Country Doctor" but also states the goal he hopes to achieve with his writing. "Temporary satisfaction," he posits, "I can still have from works such as 'Country Doctor,' provided that I can still accomplish something of this sort (very unlikely). Great good fortune, however, [I can achieve] only in case I can raise the world into [the realm of] the pure, the true, the unalterable."

With the assumption that "An Imperial Message" concerns itself with the writer's limitations, the symbolism becomes more securely fixed. The contrast between worldliness, the sphere in which the narrator and/or "you" move, and other-worldliness, the domain of the emperor, defines the dichotomous nature of the writer, given a vision of something beyond the commonplace, yet lacking a means (beyond ordinary language) to express "the pure, the true, the unalterable." Shimon Sandbank in his study *After Kafka* speaks, in reference to the Bürgel episode in *The Castle*, of "the inadequacy of the mind when confronted with that which transcends it."⁷ In this sense, the emperor's message contains the truth to which the writer—Kafka—aspires but cannot acquire in the circumscribed realm which is his world. Sandbank emphasizes the audacity of Kafka's ambition as a writer: "Were it not for the fact that the doctrine Kafka was after was the total meaning of experience, the total truth of ontology rather than the partial truths of psychology or ethics or politics, he could have had a doctrine, not only its 'relics'" (4). From Kafka's depiction of two worlds which like parallel lines never meet Sandbank concludes that the message is that there is no message; however, it seems to me that the narrative's last words, "You dream it into being," point to a possible solution to the writer's dilemma, a way out, an "Ausweg," an expression which is a significant part of Kafka's terminology. This kind of compromise has been foreshadowed in the "Oklahoma" chapter of *Amerika*. It is also present, if just barely, in "Before the Law"; although the protagonist in that narrative dies in frustration, having failed to achieve entrance into the law—the realm of pure light—the last words of the doorkeeper apprise him that he could have entered at any time through "his"

⁷ Shimon Sandbank, *After Kafka* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 9.

door. Note also the "very unlikely" phrase in Kafka's journal entry which in its totality is not altogether negative.

In direct contradiction to the world of truth, of the absolute, the actual sphere in which the writer must function is constructed of deceptions. In "An Imperial Message" the messenger can as little break through these impediments as he can the overpopulated spaces. Kafka's text, at this point, is heaped up with subjunctive verb forms, expressing a contrary-to-fact mode: "If he were to succeed here, nothing would be gained; there would be courtyards to penetrate through, etc." (59). In a journal entry for the year 1916 on the eleventh of May, Kafka describes a personal encounter with the way of the world, the prevalence of deception in human affairs. He had appealed to his supervisor for a leave of absence from his work, but he had not been bold enough to declare that he really wanted to resign his post or that his refusal to admit his illness, even to himself, lay at the root of his use of half-truths. The journal contains a lengthy analysis of this situation, saturated with subjunctive verb forms, much in the style of Kafka's fiction. Kafka ends his discussion with himself with this statement: "All of this is a continuation of the lie, but will approach the truth, if I remain consistent."

The comment would seem to apply as much to his fiction as it does to his biography. Ritchie Robertson in his critique *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature* cogently arrives at this conclusion: "His aim is to confront the world of falsehood . . . by opposing to it a fictional world which, just because it is fictional, rises above the deceits of the physical world and approaches the truth."⁸ The impossibility of actually reaching the goal he has set for the writer, the promulgation of truth, symbolized in "An Imperial Message" by the failure of the message to arrive at its destination, is combined, nevertheless, with the writer's competence to perceive it intuitively. Kafka's "optimism" in this instance may have resulted from a change in the circumstances of his life which followed the time of his inability to complete *The Trial* (*Der Prozeß*), together with his lacking the energy to produce new work. The decline in his literary endeavors, foreshadowed in the conclusion of "Before the Law" ("Vor dem Gesetz"), ended when he was afforded the opportunity to have not only an apartment of his own, away from his parents', but also a separate place, a small house, in which he could be alone to write. There the stories for the *A Country Doctor* (*Ein Landarzt*) collection into being, putting an end to his writer's block. At the same time Kafka developed a concept of his role as a writer of fiction which extended its dimensions far beyond those of the family circle. In his new book, the title of which was at first intended to be *Responsibility* (*Verantwortung*), he undertook to make the message, that is, the significance of his fiction, more pertinent to a general readership. Robertson has analyzed the transition to a new phase in Kafka's literary career in this way: "Since 'das Unzerstörbare' is common to all humanity, withdrawal into solarity and rigorous self-mortification in order to uncover the indestructible within one's own being is the way to the only true integration with humanity" (212). In "An Imperial Message," then, Kafka equates fiction, literature, with a search for truth and portrays the writer as both a messenger, frustrated in his attempt to

⁸ Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 218.

convey the truth, and a writer—the flawed quasi-recipient of the message—who can only put into inadequate words what he senses. One of Kafka's aphorisms reproduces this latter point of view: "It is written, someone must watch and wait. Someone must be there."