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Roberto Calasso

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Roberto Calasso is the author of an ongoing series of books which began with *The Ruin of Kasch* and includes the international bestseller *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, *Ka*, *Tiepolo Pink*, *La Folie Baudelaire*, *Ardor*, *The Celestial Hunter* and *The Unnamable Present*. He lives in Milan.

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Translated from the Italian by
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for Katharina

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I. The Saturnine Sovereign

At the beginning there's a wooden bridge covered with snow. Thick snow. K. lifts his eyes "toward what seemed to be emptiness," *in die scheinbare Leere.* Literally: "toward the seeming emptiness." He knows there's something out in that emptiness: the Castle. He's never seen it before. He might never set foot in it.

Kafka sensed that by then only the minimum number of elements of the surrounding world ought to be named. He plunged the sharpest Ockham's razor into the substance of the novel. To name the bare minimum, and in its pure literality. And why so? Because the world was turning back into a primeval forest, too fraught with strange noises and apparitions. Everything had too much power. Thus it became necessary to limit oneself to what lay closest at hand, to circumscribe the zone of the nameable. Then all that power, otherwise diffuse, would be channeled there, and whatever was named—an inn, a file, an office, a room—would fill with unprecedented energy.

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Kafka speaks of a world that precedes every division, every naming. It's not a sacred or divine world, nor a world abandoned by the sacred or the divine. It's a world that has yet to recognize such categories, to distinguish them from everything else. Or that no longer knows how to recognize them or distinguish them from everything else. All is a single unity, and it is simply power. Both the greatest good and the greatest evil are saturated with it. Kafka's subject is that mass of power, not yet differentiated, broken down into its elements. It is the shapeless body of Vritra, which contains the waters, before Indra runs it through with a thunderbolt.

The invisible has a mocking tendency to present itself as the visible, as if it might be distinguished from everything else, but only under certain circumstances, such as the clearing away of mist. Thus one is persuaded to treat it as the visible—and is immediately punished. But the illusion remains.

The Trial and *The Castle* are stories about attempts *to deal with a case:* to extricate oneself from prosecution, to have one's nomination confirmed. The point around which everything revolves is always *election*, the mystery of election, its impenetrable obscurity. In *The Castle*, K. desires election—and this thoroughly complicates every act. In *The Trial*, Josef K. wants to escape election—and this thoroughly complicates every act. To be chosen, to be condemned: two possible outcomes of the same process. Kafka's relationship to Judaism, every recess of which has

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been doggedly (often fruitlessly) examined, emerges most clearly on this point, which marks the essential difference between Judaism and what surrounded it. Much more so than monotheism or law or higher morality. For each of these, one can look to Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Greece for precedents and counterbalances. But the emphasis on election—that's unique, and founded on a theology of the unique.

The court has the power to punish, the Castle, to elect. These two powers are perilously close, at times identical. More than anyone else, Kafka, thanks to atavism and inclination, had antennae to recognize them. No one else was so aware of their proximity, their overlap. But this wasn't only a matter of Jewish heritage. It had to do with everyone, and all times.

The Trial and *The Castle* share a premise: that election and condemnation are *almost* indistinguishable. That *almost* is why we have two novels rather than one. The elect and the condemned are the chosen, those who are singled out among the many, among everyone. Their isolation lies at the root of the anguish that engulfs them, whatever their fate.

The main difference is this: condemnation is always certain, election always uncertain. Unknown persons show up in Josef K.'s bedroom, devour his breakfast, and inform him that he's being prosecuted on criminal charges. The prosecution is itself already the sentence. And nothing could be as undeniable as that intrusion in

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front of witnesses. For K., on the other hand, doubt remains: had he really been named land surveyor? Was K. called, or did he only wish to be called? Is he the legitimate holder of an office, however modest—or a braggart who claims a title that isn't his? On this point K., who is nimble and tenacious in his analyses, proves evasive. His history, prior to the "long, difficult voyage" that brought him to the Castle, remains murky. Had he received a summons—or did he set out on his voyage in order to obtain one? There's no way to know for certain. But there are many ways to aggravate and exacerbate the uncertainty.

The village superintendent tells K.: "You've been taken on as a land surveyor, as you say, but unfortunately we have no need for a surveyor." The cruelty is not in the final phrase but in the piercing "as you say." Nor do Castle authorities ever admit anything else, leaving open until the end the possibility that K.'s belief is delusory or simply feigned.

One fact only is certain, according to the superintendent, who likes to make clear that he is "not enough of an official"—and therefore not of sufficient stature to handle such questions—since he is "a peasant and nothing more." And the fact is this: one day long ago a decree was issued ordering the appointment of a land surveyor. But that remote decree, which the superintendent would no doubt have forgotten had his illness not offered him the chance to "think back on the silliest matters," couldn't have had anything at all to do with K. Like all decrees, it hovered above everyone and everything, without specifying when and to whom it would be applied. And it has

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languished ever since among the papers crammed in the cabinet in the superintendent's bedroom. Though buried in that intimate, unsuitable place, it has maintained its irradiant energy.

But uncertainty's torment never ends. On one hand the superintendent continues to converse with K., implying that K. has good reasons for questioning him. On the other, he never goes so far as to recognize the legitimacy of K.'s claim—and we've known at least since Hegel that the human animal requires *only* recognition. The superintendent continues: "Even your summoning was carefully considered; it was just a few incidental details that caused confusion." K.'s summoning, then, was in fact the object of reflection on the part of the authorities—but what of their conclusion? Was K. ever called? It's a question the superintendent is careful not to answer.

A further stage of torment emerges when the superintendent—while reconstructing the complex history of the decree to appoint a land surveyor and of the village's misdirected reply, issued by the superintendent himself, to that decree (a misdirected reply evidenced, according to the reconstruction, by an "empty envelope," now misplaced)—lets it be understood that sometimes, especially "when a matter has been considered at great length," it may resolve itself "with lightning speed," "as if the official apparatus could no longer tolerate the tension," the prolonged irritation of the unresolved question, and so proceeded to eliminate it by reaching a decision "without the help of the officials." Such a possibility, therefore, does exist, as the superintendent himself admits. But

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could this be what has happened in K.'s case? Here again the superintendent retreats, offering no guarantees: "I don't know whether such a decision was reached in your case—some elements speak for it, others against."

K. appeals to two other pieces of evidence to support his appointment: the letter from the official Klamm, addressed to him, and the phone call from the Castle the night he first arrived at the Bridge Inn, and these also—indeed these above all—are cast into doubt. The letter from Klamm is (as the salutation alone makes plain) a personal letter, and thus worthless as an official declaration, even if it might be invaluable for other reasons. And the telephone communication can't be anything other than misleading, since "there is no definite telephone connection to the Castle." The murmur, the song that issues audibly from the phone as soon as any receiver is lifted in the village, is the Castle's only acoustic manifestation. It is indistinct and, moreover, nonlinguistic, a music composed of words gone back to their source in pure sonic matter, prior to and stripped of all meaning. The Castle communicates with the outside world through a continuous, indecipherable sound. "All the rest is misleading," says the superintendent. Starting, then, with the clear and limpid word. At this point, like a great academic who ends a seminar by sending the students off to other places and classes to continue their debates, the superintendent tells K.: "You should know by now that the question of your being called here is too difficult for us to answer for you in the course of one little conversation." But all of life is no more than a "little conversation." And so the

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principle of the irrepressible uncertainty of election is once again affirmed.

The worlds of *The Trial* and *The Castle* run parallel to all other worlds but not to each other. Each is, rather, the extension of the other. Josef K. becomes K. Between them, a sentence and an execution. But the story is the same—and it keeps going. Now it's not someone else who comes looking for Josef K., but K. who goes looking for something. The terms are reversed. The climate changes but remains familiar. Women, officials, clothes. Long conversations, often terribly intimate, with strangers. A nagging feeling of estrangement. "I don't yet know a great deal about your legal system," says Josef K.—despite the fact that at that moment he's in a suburb of his own city, whose legal system he, as chief officer of a bank, is used to dealing with every day. It's as if two incompatible laws hold sway simultaneously. This is strange, but for Josef K. it will quickly cease to seem so, and not just for him, but for the reader too—which is stranger still. Nothing is further from *The Trial* than the sense of the fantastic, the visionary, the "extraordinary" that we might associate with Poe. Indeed for the reader the ever present suspicion is that it's a kind of verism. The reading catches the reader by surprise, just as the guard Franz, wearing his "travel clothes," catches Josef K. by surprise in the "riskiest moment of all": that of waking. The moment when one can be easily "dragged off," if one isn't prepared. And no one, on waking, is prepared. To be so, one would need to find oneself already in an office. As K. says to Mrs. Grubach,

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"For example, in the bank I'm prepared; something like this could never happen to me there."

The Trial and *The Castle* take place within the same psychic life. After the execution of his sentence, Josef K. reappears under the name K. and distances himself from the large city. *The Castle* is Josef K.'s *bardo.*

The world of the *bardo*—that "intermediate state" that the Tibetan Book of the Dead teaches how to traverse—doesn't look drastically different from the world of the living. But it doesn't easily permit return. Frieda's fantasy of running away with K.—maybe "to the south of France or to Spain"—seems as far-fetched and unattainable as a longing to live in the Egypt of the pharaohs. Entering the *bardo*, like entering a dream, requires only a slight twist of what is, but it's irreversible and skews all relations. The procedures of the court in Josef K.'s city bear an obvious kinship to those of the Castle administration, but nothing assures us that their objectives coincide. The only sure things are certain differences of style: at the Castle there is no need to expel or to kill, practices that *The Trial*'s court, perhaps more primitive, still engages in. At the Castle, it's enough that life goes on. The simple passing of time is the judgment.

What distinguishes both *The Trial* and *The Castle* is that, from the first line to the last, they unfold on the threshold of a hidden world that one suspects is implicit in this world. Never had that threshold been such a thin line or so ubiquitous. Never had those two worlds been

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brought so terrifyingly close as to seem to touch. We can't say for sure whether that hidden world is good or evil, heavenly or hellish. The only evidence is something that overwhelms and envelops us. Like K., we alternate between flashes of lucidity and bouts of torpor, sometimes mistaking one for the other, with no one having the authority to correct us.

Compared with all other fictional characters, K. is potentiality itself. That's why his physical appearance can never be described, directly or indirectly. We don't even know whether he has "dark eyes" like his precursor, Josef K. And it isn't because K. undergoes, as Klamm does, continuous metamorphoses, but rather because K. is the shape of what happens.

December 1910—a barren, sullen time. Kafka uses his diary now mainly to record observations on his own inability to write. "With what can I justify the fact that so far today I've written nothing? With nothing," we read in a fragment. And immediately after: "I hear in my head a continuous incantation: 'O were you to come, invisible tribunal!'"

With these words, as if he'd resorted to a powerful left-handed spell, Kafka crosses the threshold into the enclosed space of *The Trial* and *The Castle*—and indeed of all the rest of his work. This is the site of his writing, where one awaits one's sentence, endures the delays of a never-ending case. It's an agonizing place, but the only one where Kafka knows he belongs. Newly arrived in the

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village beneath the Castle, having already been rebuffed and harassed, K. knows only that he has "come here to stay," as if any other kind of life were already closed to him. And he repeats: "I will stay here." Then, as if "talking to himself," he adds: "What could have drawn me to this wasteland, if not the desire to stay here." The "wasteland" is the Promised Land. And the Promised Land is the only land about which one can say, as K. does: "I cannot emigrate."

To be put on trial or to have dealings with the Castle is to enter into that hidden, dangerous, elusive life from which every other life issues—and of which every other life is only a poor counterfeit. The operation of a great bank, like the one where Josef K. works, with its bright offices, its spacious lobbies, and its corridors, imitates the sordid attic that houses the court offices—not the other way around. And one needs only to open the door to a junk room, in the bank's own offices, to find the court at work, as represented by a persecutor ("the flogger") and two victims. It is the court that encompasses daily life—not daily life that accommodates the court.

Writing begins when one enters into a relationship with the court or the Castle, a relationship that always will be, literally, a lost cause. Even Josef K.'s Uncle Karl said as much, when he arrived from the country to lend his nephew a hand: "A trial like this is always lost from the start." And proverbs, they say, are always true.

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The articulation and the workings of the "invisible tribunal" can be seen on every page of Kafka, but only in *The Trial* and *The Castle* do they become the very substance of the narrative. The court of the big city, which must judge Josef K., is the invisible tribunal, as is the apparatus of Castle offices in the distant territories of Count Westwest. The "invisible tribunal" extends its reach over everything. The Castle offices, though administrative rather than judicial, use the same kind of language as the big-city court. For both the court and the Castle, the outside world, whatever that might be or represent, is in the legal sense a *party*, and they must constantly determine what relationships to allow with said party, if ever they must allow any. Their methods too are very similar, at times indistinguishable, and always exasperating, elusive, deceptive. Yet Kafka, when he in his despair dared to invoke an entity he named "invisible tribunal," was asking nothing other than to be delivered into the hands of the court and the Castle, despite knowing what lay in store for him there. For only within such torments, he suspected, lay the life he could never have reached in any other way.

The Trial and *The Castle* take place on the same plane of the *mundus imaginalis.* They stick out there, isolated. And there exists no easy or direct way to make contact between that plane and others. Connections between the two books, however, are innumerable. Kafka wrote *The Trial*, incomplete but with an ending, in a few months in

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1914. He wrote *The Castle*, incomplete and without an ending, in a few months in 1922. There are no indications that, in the time between, he ever went back to work on *The Trial*, and in 1920 he gave the manuscript to Max Brod. When he began to write *The Castle*, without recording any comments on the undertaking, it was as if he had been hurled back into that land that he alone inhabited. There, he was to behave like an expert surveyor. He had only to move a short distance—and yet that journey would be "endless"—from the city of Josef K., with its offices and staircases and attics, to the village where K. comes to offer his services to the Castle.

The court that must judge Josef K. and the Castle administration by whom K. wants to be appointed are contiguous organizations that resonate, each in the other. Both are populated by scrupulous, peevish officials. "A nervous people," the Castle dwellers. "Irascible," those of the court. They share an easily wounded sensibility, quick to detect the slightest changes—and to suffer from them. Like space, *sensorium Dei*, they form a delicate spiderweb the extent of which they themselves are not in a position to judge. But in each of them, even the lowliest, one senses the breathing of a "great organism." In the court as in the Castle, the farther you go up the hierarchy toward the top, the easier it is to get lost. Common life always unfolds below, among secretaries and substitutes, if not among servants and waiters. But the divide between those who belong to the organism and the obscure *parties* who try to make contact with it is always unbridgeable. There's a

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formless and perhaps meaningless life that is everyone's life. And then there's another life through which forms pass like a blade—like a flashing multiplicity of blades. Whoever has dealings with the court or the Castle gets a taste of it. This other life is overloaded with meanings that tend to cancel one another out. Such is the throng of meanings attributed, or attributable, to the *proceedings*—a word used to designate the physiology of the "great organism"—that these proceedings ultimately appear impenetrable. The imbalance between the two worlds is permanent and untreatable. Even those like Huld the lawyer, who have long been used to the company of magistrates, reach a point where "nothing seems certain anymore." And then they may also ask themselves the more painful question: perhaps some trials that "in their natural course were proceeding well, later ended up on the wrong track, thanks precisely to our assistance," that is, to the work of the lawyers. The implication is that any intervention, even when carried out with the best of intentions and a thorough knowledge of the case (it's necessary to specify this), would be injurious, worse than useless. Only a total passivity, therefore, like that of a plant shaken by wind, would have even the faintest chance of leading to a successful outcome.

Between the administration of the court and that of the Castle there is also a difference of style, of manner. Corruption, for example, figures in both. But in the court it can take on crude, unseemly aspects. The lawyers throng around the "corruptible employees," always with the aim

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of discovering "gaps" in the nearly airtight "rigorous isolation" of the court. On occasion—"in times past," of course—there were actually cases of stolen records.

With the Castle employees, on the other hand, it seems that corruption is tolerated for reasons of elegance, in order to "avoid pointless conversations." As if the employees know that, by allowing themselves to be corrupted, they are silencing the parties who continue to importune them, offering them the illusion of having taken a useful step, even if "nothing can be achieved that way." For the Castle administration, corruption is not unlike the traffic in indulgences. But it seems to be practiced not out of self-interest but rather to impart a certain linearity and neatness to the proceedings, avoiding what must inspire profound distaste: "pointless conversations."

From the start K.'s behavior seems "suspicious," and not without reason. Awakened at an inn where he's sleeping on a straw mattress, he says: "What village have I strayed into? Is there really a Castle here?" Yet moments later he admits that he knows perfectly well where he is and did not present himself at the Castle only because the hour was late. This behavior reminds us how Kafka's readers feel: displaced, disturbed, dismayed. And yet they know exactly where they are—and why.

Mizzi, the superintendent's inconspicuous wife and assistant, has sat down on the edge of her husband's bed (and how many other revelations will come, both to K. and to Josef K., from that position) in order to read him

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Klamm's letter to K. "As soon as she had taken a look at the letter she clasped her hands softly—'from Klamm,' she said." That brief aside, like a sigh, suffices to evoke the reverential fear inspired by Klamm's name and the tremendous significance attached to it—but without having to specify any of it, almost as if even naming it might diminish it. Meanwhile, everything is concentrated in those two words, "from Klamm"—a whisper that floods the sentence, and in that gesture, barely signaled, of her clasped hands. At the end of the meeting, the superintendent recalls Mizzi's presence only when his leg starts hurting again, but she has been sitting there all the time: "playing, as if lost in a dream, with Klamm's letter, which she had made into a little boat." K., "frightened," grabs it from her hand. He fears his precious page will be damaged. But, more obscurely, he fears the childish, mocking vision of that little paper boat. Without admitting it to himself, he knows that this is one of many enigmas he will encounter on his way, enigmas that are always entrusted to feminine beings, that are very often not even noticed, that are never resolved.

K. desires only to be a "little land surveyor who worked quietly at his little drawing board." He doesn't ask for special aid or salvation. But his desire, precisely because of its modesty, has shattering potential. Above all because—as K. dares to tell the superintendent—he doesn't want "gracious handouts from the Castle, but his rights." His tone is that of the free man who intends to evade not only the oppression of the powers that be but their equally

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untrustworthy benevolence. And who makes, at the first opportunity, a pronouncement that is particularly insulting to the authorities. As soon as one enters the realm of one's desires, and especially when these desires begin mixing with rights, the powerful apparatus of the Castle, with its procedural minutiae and its ramifying regulations, becomes ultrasensitive, ferociously rejecting every claim made by the individual—or rather, as one would say in the officials' lexicon, by the *party*. Desire is the unknown—and one cannot lay claim to the unknown. It is the unknown that reigns, not he who, through the unknown, desires. This isn't how Castle officials would put it—they are more delicate and are obliged to follow the usual formulas. But sometimes they let the word get out.

K. quickly adopts the tone of one victimized by an abuse of power. If, however, he were really incontrovertibly within his rights, he ought at least to have in hand an official letter of appointment to the post of land surveyor. But it seems that he never received such a letter. A haze of mystification hovers around K., as around everything done or said by Castle officials. So if the village peasants have a grim, distrustful air, it's because they're always having to deal with suspicious behavior, about which many contrasting hypotheses are admissible, whether it involves officials come down from the Castle or a stranger such as K. who shows up at the village inn. And to the villagers it appears suspicious in the extreme that K. shows himself ignorant of the ways of the Castle. Yet K. also seems one of *them*, if by that word we mean anyone who

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doesn't belong to the village. Or rather, K. seems a parody of *them*, a cardboard cutout stripped of every whiff of power.

K. almost never speaks of his past; only with the superintendent does he indulge himself a little. He insists on the "long, difficult journey" that he had to undertake—having already, moments earlier, referred to his "endless journey." The power of the Castle, which had summoned him, must therefore have extended to very distant places—and through time too, perhaps, if the traveler who approached the Castle was like an ancient wanderer, a lone figure in the snow. It is probably in order to render his situation more pathetic—we can't say for sure, not knowing anything else about the matter—and certainly in order to make the superintendent understand how urgent it is that he obtain the land-surveyor appointment, that K. alludes to the "sacrifices [he] made in leaving home" and to the "reasonable hopes [he] had of being taken on down here." Up to this point, his words are no different from those of any worker who has left home in search of fortune. But now something else crops up: K. speaks of his "total lack of means and the impossibility of now finding suitable work back home." But why? In the village K. always tried to give the impression of being a capable, knowledgeable person who would have no trouble finding work elsewhere. One infers from this discrepancy that only for some reason that's left unsaid, but that must weigh heavily, K. *is no longer able* to go back. On the other hand, as the superintendent observes, the Castle is

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not in the habit of chasing people away: "No one is keeping you here, but that doesn't mean you're being chased away either." K. doesn't press the matter—perhaps he realizes he has said too much. Indeed he immediately wishes to muddy the waters, making reference, in order to explain the precariousness of his situation, to something close at hand: Frieda, his "fiancée who is from here." He doesn't mention that Frieda has been his fiancée for only a few hours. In any case, the argument is a pretext, as the superintendent observes with quiet irony: "Frieda would follow you anywhere." K. is exposed—and it's perhaps to avoid embarrassing him that the superintendent changes the subject. By hinting at his former life, K. has come close to revealing something that could harm him: his total dependence on the Castle. For him, no return is possible. The fifth of the Zürau aphorisms says: "Beyond a certain point there's no return. That's the point that must be reached." K.'s story begins one step beyond that point.

In Kafka's handwriting, the letter *K* plunged downward with a showy swoop the writer detested: "I find Ks ugly, almost repugnant, and yet I keep on writing them; they must be very characteristic of myself." Choosing the name K., Kafka obligated himself to trace hundreds of times in front of his own eyes a mark that vexed him and in which he recognized some part of himself. If he had narrated *The Castle* in the first person, as he started out doing, the story would have been less profoundly immersed in his physiology, in zones liberated from the empire of the will.

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Did Kafka ever allude to his process of rigorous reduction to the prime elements, as if he sought to fix them in a periodic table? Perhaps in a notebook entry written in 1922, during a moment of stasis in the elaboration of *The Castle*—and of strong doubt about everything. "Writing denies itself to me" is the fragment's first sentence. Then he mentions a "project of autobiographical investigations." It's not clear what he's referring to—perhaps "Investigations of a Dog," which appears soon afterward in his notebook? Then he is more specific: "investigation and discovery of the smallest possible components." To what end? "Out of these [components], I then want to construct myself." Here he is no longer speaking of writing but of *self-construction.* And right after that we find the phosphorescent trail of a short story:

> Like a man who has an unsafe house and wants to build himself a safe one beside it, using the materials of the old one if possible. But it's a terrible business if, during construction, his strength wanes and now instead of an unsafe but whole house he has one that's half torn down and one that's half built, which is nothing. What follows is madness, a kind of Cossack dance between the two houses, during which the Cossack scrapes and hollows out the ground with the heels of his boots until his own grave takes shape beneath him.

A Cossack dance between Kafka and the literature that had preceded him.

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Certainly it's not the case, as some continue to maintain, that the religious or the sacred or the divine has been shattered, dissolved, obviated, by some outside agent, by the light of the Enlightenment. That would have resulted in a world made of secular funerals, in all their awful bleakness. What happened instead is that such things as the religious or the sacred or the divine, by an obscure process of osmosis, were absorbed and hidden in something alien, which no longer has need of such names because it is self-sufficient and is content to be described as *society*. All the rest is, at best, its object of study, its guinea pig—even all of nature.

With Kafka a phenomenon bursts onto the scene: the *commixture*. There is no sordid corner that can't be treated as a vast abstraction, and no vast abstraction that can't be treated as a sordid corner. This phenomenon isn't a reflection of the writer's personal inclinations. It's a matter of fact. Svidrigailov, in *Crime and Punishment*, observes that for him eternity looks like a village bathhouse full of spiderwebs. It's a peculiarity of the period, a sign of the times.

When the secretary Bürgel speaks of the officials' "inconsiderate" behavior toward both the parties and themselves alike, he explains that their lack of consideration is also the supreme "consideration," because it consists of "the iron-clad execution and completion of their duty." But his words inevitably have a sinister resonance, even if

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Bürgel is perhaps the most benevolent of the Castle officials and pronounces them after having stretched and yawned—behavior "which was in troubling contrast to the gravity of his words."

Commixture manifests itself above all in this: the social order is superimposed on the cosmic order, to the point of covering it and swallowing it. But the majesty and the articulations of the old order are retained even as the memory of it is erased. In the village no one of course speaks of the cosmos. Even nature might almost not exist at all. The only one who mentions it is Pepi, the servant girl. And the image is one of winter: "a long, terribly long monotonous winter." Color too has been revoked. But no one seems to need or remember it. Differences express themselves in gradations from *chiaro* to *scuro*. The lavish wardrobe of the landlady of the Gentlemen's Inn admits only shades of dark: "gray, brown, or black clothes," as ordered and compact as a phalanx. The mythic landscape has lost its pigmentation.

The cosmic order, as it presents itself in myths, could vanish with the myths themselves. Scientific knowledge could supplant it with an image that is ever more complex, ever changing, in which dimensions multiply to the point of pointlessness. But that's not how it happens. Camouflaged within the social order, the cosmic order continues to exist and operate. After all, it has dealt not only with stars and spheres but also with powers and archons. And those powers haven't gone away. Indeed now, in the absence of names to call them forth, they can oper-

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ate more freely and wildly, even in plain view. K. puts this to the test every day during his harrowing residence in the village.

The gentlemen (*Herren*) of the Castle are the archons. It isn't that "archons" is an interpretation that accrues to or superimposes itself on *Herren* ("gentlemen," "lords," "rulers") but rather that *archon*, if only we give the word enough room to resonate, *means* "ruler." And this constantly happens in Kafka: behind the formulas of common speech a space suddenly opens where words reverberate and sprout meanings, acquiring an intensity that at times is paralyzing. The common speech par excellence is the language of the servants, hence of the servant girl Pepi. Accordingly, when it's her turn to speak to K., her words sound overloaded with meaning and seem to ask what we are always, secretly, wondering about him: "What does he want? What strange sort of man is he?" And indeed out of Pepi's mouth come what may be the most drastic words we'll hear: she goads K. to find "the strength to set fire to the entire Gentlemen's Inn and burn it to the ground, so that not a trace is left, to burn it like a piece of paper in a stove." To burn it like that sheet of paper torn from a notepad and left on the records cart, which K. (only hours earlier, during the scene of the "distribution of records") thought might be *his* record, that sheet on which would have been written his fate, because the *record* that concerns an individual can be nothing less than his fate.

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