Features October 2018

How to read Kafka: part I

by John M. Ellis

The first in a two-part series on the writer who transformed our view of modern rationalism.

Kafka’s stories are famously bizarre and mysterious, and for that reason his readers expect to get help from people who make their living by reading and commenting on literature—that is, literary critics.1 But those critics have too often offered only ideas so vague and general that they might just as well have been talking about any one of a hundred other authors. A favorite notion is that Kafka says something very important about our modern age. John Updike thought Kafka the supreme fabulist of modern man’s cosmic predicament, which sounds profound, except that Updike never explains what that predicament is or what makes it cosmic, nor does he tell us exactly what it is that Kafka has to say about it. Irving Howe also thought Kafka the very stuff of modern consciousness, and went on to explain that we see “claustral sensations of modern experience, bewilderment, loss, guilt, dispossession.” But that list of emotions is found throughout human history—not only in “modern” times. Twentieth-century intellectuals often thought that they had a lock on feelings of angst—but of course they didn’t.

Another favorite idea derives from Kafka’s friend Max Brod: in Kafka, “dreams and visions of immeasurable depth flow beneath the serene surface.” But here too the reader may well feel cheated. Why doesn’t Brod tell us what those dreams and visions are about? These grandiose general statements (and many others like them) seem to be merely a way of avoiding a discussion about what Kafka has to say to us, because, with texts as bizarre as his, it’s quite difficult to do that.

How, then, to begin talking about what Kafka has to say? How is Kafka to be read? Let’s start with one overwhelming impression that we get from him: Kafka always seems excessively reasonable. However odd his subject matter may be, everything is carefully explained, with great attention to detail. A typical example is found in the first chapter of Das Schloss (The Castle), when the novel’s central character K. is trying to find his way to the castle. He is walking along the main street of the village below it, but “even if it [the street] was not getting any further away from the castle, yet it was not getting any nearer to it.” This is certainly a precise description, but leaves K. (and the reader) going nowhere. Kafka frequently gives us careful reasoning and explanation that leave us exactly where we started.
Why does he do this? The first place we should look for an answer is the story that Kafka devoted to this very problem: the uses, limits, and indeed disasters of reason. It is “Der Bau” (“The Burrow”).

“The Burrow” is about an animal (it is never clear what kind) who digs a burrow to protect himself. This might seem to be just a matter of the physical hard work of digging, but for Kafka’s animal it is an intellectual task. It involves “laborious calculations,” and it’s the pleasure that the astute mind takes in its own workings that keeps the animal going. It is to be the perfect burrow, the best possible protection.

Now this may remind us of another story of animals building the perfect protection: the three little pigs. One builds with straw, the second with sticks, but neither is a match for the wolf. The third, however, is clever enough to see that the labor of building with bricks will keep the wolf away. All of which sounds very logical and reasonable. The moral of the story is that reason and prudence will keep you safe. But it’s not so easy in Kafka’s world, where reason and prudence are precisely what make life very difficult indeed.

Kafka’s animal begins his story by telling us that he has finished his burrow and that it seems to him a great success. So far, so good. But he can’t stop rethinking its design and second-guessing himself about what he ought to have done differently. The physical work is over, but the mental work is never-ending.

He has made the entrance to the burrow a weak layer of moss, which makes it easy for him to escape if it were ever invaded. But this also makes it easy for an enemy to break in. Perhaps, he thinks, he should have covered the entrance with a hard layer of earth, to make it harder for the enemy to get in. But that would make it more difficult for him to get out to escape a predator who had burrowed his way in. Which is better, an entrance that is difficult for the enemy to get into and hard for him to escape from, or vice versa? There is no answer to this question. At one point he considers two entrances—but that would double the danger.

He has placed a labyrinth just below the entrance to confuse an intruder, but on second thought realizes that it is useless: mazes inevitably have thin walls that an intruder could easily smash through.

He has left a decoy entrance at some distance from his burrow. That entrance is wide open but leads nowhere. It diverts attention from the burrow itself, he thinks. But he also realizes that this could signal to the enemy that there must be something worth looking for in the vicinity. Are the chances of an attack lessened by the diversion of the decoy or increased by the tip-off that there is something interesting going on? Who knows?
He has built the burrow on a grand scale, with many passageways and subdivisions. It’s an impressive fortress. But after a while he realizes that its size will make it easier for a burrowing animal to stumble upon it. His attitude to his grand burrow is eventually reversed: he sees that it’s precisely this large vulnerable structure that makes him defenseless. He goes outside and constructs an experimental burrow no bigger than he is. This one is much harder to find—but on the other hand there will be no escape if it is found.

Even the setting of the burrow becomes another unanswerable question: he has built it in a lonely spot without much traffic so that his coming and going will not be seen, but it suddenly occurs to him that the bustle of dense traffic might provide better cover.

The third little pig found an answer to his quest for security: to stay alive you need to be smart and prudent, and work hard. But for Kafka’s animal, each feature that he considers can just as well be considered a drawback as an advantage.

Although the animal is devoted to reason and is explicit about the burrow’s being perfectly designed with the powers of reasoning, he inadvertently allows something to enter into his endless scheming that goes beyond calculation: the pride he takes in it. Because he is proud of his burrow, he feels protective of it. But pride is not rational. In fact, it makes the animal downright irrational. Eventually he starts to worry about his burrow’s safety, as if it needs protecting, not him. He goes outside and conceals himself so that he can watch over it. It gives him unspeakable pleasure to look at this thing he loves so much, and he feels as if he is watching over himself. But he has now inverted his relationship with the burrow: it was supposed to protect him, but now he is protecting it while leaving himself completely unprotected.

He sees nothing and so decides to go back in, but now he has given himself another intellectual headache, another unanswerable question. How can he get back in? When he lifts the cover, enters the burrow, and then lowers the cover, how will he know whether an enemy arrived at that very moment and saw him lowering the cover? Of course, he can lift the cover to look out and see if anyone is there, but as he lowers the cover again the same question arises.

It seems that prudence is also hard to combine with rationality: how much prudence is enough? Prudence ought to be a means to an end: a contented life. If it becomes a full-time occupation, as it does with the animal, it defeats its purpose. But the problem is that there turns out to be no rational answer to the question: how much time should we devote to prudential planning? If some prudence is desirable, shouldn’t more of it be more desirable still? The animal’s obsession with prudence goes so far that it leads him to take terrible risks, as he does when he goes outside his burrow to watch over it. The animal himself puts his finger on the contradiction: “It’s precisely prudence that requires that one risk one’s life.”

The animal started in an optimistic mood thinking that his burrow is a success, but as the unanswerable questions pile up he realizes that it’s a failure. Forgetting all about his hard physical and mental effort, he accuses himself of being lazy, of never having thought it all through: he has
been negligent and has spent his adult years in childish games. Yet he still can’t let go of the dream of the perfect burrow because he is convinced that correct reasoning must make it so. He imagines that he might have built one according to a plan he had long ago in his youth, and as he does so he forgets about the logical problems that have always plagued him. He dreams of important technical breakthroughs, and he is continually mesmerized by the idea of the theoretical brilliance of his plans. All he needs to do, he thinks, is to start afresh! In the last pages of the story he alternates between despair and optimism, but as the ending makes clear: “everything remained unchanged.” He hasn’t solved those problems, and he never will. Very early in the story, the animal says to himself: “To be sure, many a ruse is so subtle that it destroys itself.” That simple statement sums up all that has been happening to him. Reason—thoroughly detailed reason, thanks to the author—has been the source of his troubles, not their solution. Eventually the animal begins to hear a hissing noise, but when he tries to find its source it never changes volume as he moves about, which means that it must be inside his own head. He is on the way to delirium.

The Enlightenment can tell us all to rely on reason, but Kafka’s “The Burrow” shows that we’ll still find a way to use reason itself irrationally.

To locate the thing that destroys the animal in the power of reason itself sounds very remote from the spirit of the Enlightenment, that movement which was already a century old when Kafka was born in 1883. For the Enlightenment thinkers, the consistent application of reason would solve all the problems created by human foolishness. But that’s not the way things work out in “The Burrow.” There, reason keeps coming up against problems to which there are no answers, and it’s precisely because the animal can’t stop trying to reason out the perfect solution to the burrow’s design that he is driven mad. In Kafka’s story reason doesn’t overcome our mental weaknesses because it’s driven by and intertwined with them. When the animal delights in the splendor of his burrow, he has unwittingly brought into play an irrational factor in his commitment to it. The burrow is not just shelter—he loves it so much that at one point he tells us that he would gladly die in it and have his blood drain into its soil. The logic of the burrow has again been turned upside down: instead of its existing for him, he will sacrifice himself for it.

The Enlightenment can tell us all to rely on reason, but Kafka’s “The Burrow” shows that we’ll still find a way to use reason itself irrationally. Kafka was an Enlightenment skeptic. He saw something that the Enlightenment philosophers didn’t: that even after they have persuaded everyone to be guided by reason, human nature will not have changed. Those people who are now supposedly on a better path will still be essentially as they were before. The irrational side of their nature will not have gone away: it will just find another way of expressing itself. It will co-opt reason and employ it in the service of the same drives, ambitions, and even foolishness that were there all along.

The Enlightenment philosophers had such enormous faith in reason that they thought it must lead us to better moral values too. Needless to say, Kafka was skeptical of this as well. His most well-known work, “Die Verwandlung” (“The Metamorphosis”), is all about that.
In the story, Gregor Samsa turns into a monstrous insect-like creature overnight. The problem that interpreters of “The Metamorphosis” generally tackle first is: what exactly is the animal that Gregor Samsa has turned into, and why? But those questions are best left until after we have answered two other questions: First, what is the state of his family’s household before Gregor’s transformation? And second, what is the state of that household after he becomes an insect and they are left without him?

The answer to the first is complex. Gregor appears to be the very model of a responsible, dedicated son. Five years earlier his father’s business had failed. Gregor sprang into action: he wanted to rescue his family from their hopeless situation, and so he began to work feverishly, soon becoming their sole support. It would seem that without any hesitation, Gregor has done the right thing: he has behaved nobly.

But this splendid edifice is just as unsound as the animal’s magnificent burrow. Although Gregor has eagerly embraced this role of the family’s lone protector, he sees himself as a martyr. He hates his job. It is exhausting, his firm mistreats him, and he has no choice but to stay in a degrading position to support his parents and sister. To make matters worse, he feels that a certain warmth is lacking in his family’s reaction to his supporting them all.

Why would that be? We have only to look at the state they are in to understand why. His father has not worked for five years, and in fact is no longer capable of working, having grown fat and clumsy. He either sits around in his dressing gown doing nothing or lies wearily in bed. He is barely able to stand up, and if he goes out he can only shuffle along very slowly. His mother is in bad shape too: she spends much of her time lying on the sofa, breathless because of her asthma. His sister, Grete, is similarly impoverished: she sleeps for long periods, seems only interested in nice clothes and playing the violin, and even her parents think she’s a useless girl.

All three members of the family are idle and their lives seem completely empty. But there is one incongruous detail of the family’s life that seems puzzling: the flat that Gregor has provided them with is not just adequate—it is sumptuous and bigger than they really need. How could that be consistent with Gregor’s hating the fact that he has to work so hard to support them? He could give them an apartment better suited to their needs and as a result work less.

So much for the first question. Now to the second: what happens to the family when Gregor turns into an insect, becoming unable to support them any longer, and then finally dies and is gone from their lives? The answer is that there is a second metamorphosis in the story, one that the family undergoes. A few months after his transformation, Gregor looks around the edge of the door and sees the family. His father is now smartly dressed in the blue uniform with gold buttons of the job he has found. His eyes have renewed life in them, and his hair is no longer disheveled but instead carefully brushed. It turns out that he could support himself and the family after all. The rest of the family has undergone a similar change. Gregor’s mother has taken a job sewing for a fashionable firm, and Grete is now employed as a salesgirl while also studying shorthand and French in the evenings so that she can move on to better jobs. (Her ambition is something we’ll
return to.) All three now look lively and productive. What all of them really want, however, is to move out of the oversize flat Gregor put them into. But they can’t while Gregor is still alive. At last they face up to what he really is for them: a nuisance, one they would like to be rid of. Gregor soon dies, but there is no sorrow in their reaction. On the contrary, they leave the apartment together, “which they had not done for months,” and go for a ride on a tram into the open country. It’s a celebration notable not for its excitement, but for its everyday banality. They have their ordinary lives back—the lives Gregor had taken from them.

We can now return to the question that has always been the first asked of this story: what kind of animal does Gregor turn into? It’s the context of the family’s changes that gives us the answer. Once just a younger member of the family, he had become a vile creature who preyed on their vulnerability to control them and squeeze the life out of them. Kafka’s word for the creature is “Ungeziefer,” best translated as “vermin.” But that is not a physical description or the name of a species; it is used for a creature that is both loathsome and harmful. Gregor’s bodily transformation is only the physical expression of what he had already become to them. He had made his family completely dependent on him and reduced them to a miserable state, but once he is no longer able to dominate them they recover and become normal human beings again.

Is this then a happy ending? Perhaps not. The story ends in an interesting way: “And it seemed to [Gregor’s family] like a confirmation of their new dreams and good prospects that when they reached the end of their journey their daughter was the first to get up, and she stretched her young body.” Given what has already happened with Gregor, Grete’s stretching her young body has a sinister ring to it: is she sensing her growing power too? Like Gregor before her, she has already been studying to equip herself to earn more money. Will she also use it to control them and make them totally dependent on her? She had already shown a tendency in that direction when she took control of Gregor and his room, insisting to the rest of the family that this was her domain alone. The problem is not localized in Gregor: it is part of the human condition.

The reversal of values in “The Metamorphosis” is somewhat reminiscent of the one that occurs in “The Burrow.” In that story, the animal’s dedication to reason becomes completely irrational and ends in his destruction, while in “The Metamorphosis” Gregor appears to devote himself to helping and supporting his family, but is actually exercising tyrannical control over them. But both are equally reversals of Enlightenment doctrine. The kinder, gentler world that the Enlightenment envisages when reason becomes dominant does not materialize, because Gregor uses those gentler values of goodness and kindness to satisfy much older impulses of domination and oppression. Kindness is his mode, but he is killing his family with it.

Here too, Kafka seems to have understood something that the Enlightenment thinkers didn’t: even if the exercise of reason led to an overt change in morality, human nature would not suddenly change too: it will just find new ways of expressing itself. In “The Metamorphosis,” kindness is a means of tyrannizing. Our emotional makeup is much too deep-seated to be changed so quickly. Kafka’s people and creatures subvert Enlightenment values even as they live by them.
The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy tells us that the Enlightenment thinkers had a confidence in humanity’s intellectual powers “generally paired with suspicion or hostility toward other forms or carriers of authority (such as tradition, superstition, prejudice, myth, and miracles).” Superstition and myth do indeed sound unworthy of modern people, who shouldn’t any longer believe in mythical creatures that nobody has ever seen or heard. Unenlightened people may allow imagined things like these to play a role in their lives, attributing to them qualities they don’t really have, but rational people believe only in what they actually see and hear. Or do they? That’s what Das Schloss (The Castle) grapples with.

In *The Castle*, a land surveyor, named simply K., arrives in a little village that is in the shadow of a castle situated somewhere up on a hill. When he arrives, it’s difficult to see the castle because it’s hidden by mists and darkness. The surveyor has apparently been hired by the Castle (the institution, not the building) to do some work. But when he stops at an inn in the village, the question arises as to whether he has really been hired to work for the Castle, and who exactly hired him. A phone call to the Castle receives the answer that he has not been hired at all, but soon another call produces a different answer. Simply a mistake corrected, perhaps? No, because later on the matter of whether he was ever hired comes up repeatedly. Very soon, all of this uncertainty begins to raise the crucial question: who speaks for the Castle? Someone must have hired him, but was that the Castle hiring him? And that raises the even more fundamental question: what is this thing called the Castle? And where can we find its authoritative voice?

Early in the novel, K. understandably thinks that he may grasp what is going on if he goes up to the castle—the building. That might seem plausible enough: if you want to know what the Castle has done, why not confront it? (K. has not yet understood that the Castle could never be the same thing as the castle.) At some distance the castle building seems quite castle-like, but as K. gets nearer he realizes that it is nothing but a wretched heap of little village houses stuck together, all in bad repair at that. There is no castle. What does it mean that there is no grand overarching edifice, but only a lot of little dwellings? And what does that mean for the Castle as an institution?

As we read further in the novel, it becomes clearer that this is a symbolic representation of the idea that K. will be struggling with throughout. Institutions don’t exist as buildings do—as something that can be seen and touched. They are only arrangements among people, and they only exist as long as the people concerned think they exist, which sounds a little too much like a superstition.

Where then is the Castle? Actually, K. has already been told where it is. When he first arrives, he is told that the village belongs to the Castle, so that everyone in it or passing through it is really in the Castle. It is both ever-present and never seen. Just like a mythical creature.

What K. is looking for is something that could never exist in the way he wants it to. Yet though nobody can touch or see it, everyone behaves as if it had a will and a personality. It is greatly feared, and its presence dominates. When K. tells his host at the inn that he’d rather stay free by living outside the castle, the host says ominously: “you don’t know the Castle.” That makes it
sound like a person with a set of attitudes all of its own. The story told by Amalia (the younger sister of Barnabas, a Castle messenger) gives us a strong impression of the Castle as an individual who has a sense of dignity and can therefore take offence and retaliate. She had been sent a letter by a Castle official demanding that she sleep with him. When Amalia doesn’t do as he demands, she is punished, not because she has refused him, but because she has insulted the Castle. What then happens to her is retaliation by the Castle. But who really is retaliating? It’s no use going to the wretched collection of cobbled-together buildings to find out.

Much of the novel is spent in K.’s search for the Castle’s genuine and authoritative voice. But can there be any such thing? How does any institution that is composed of different people ever have one? K. is always on the lookout for someone who can serve as a starting point, a first step up the ladder of the Castle hierarchy to finally reach its real voice. At the beginning of the novel, a young man introduces himself as the son of the castellan, and that sounds very promising. But promising starts always fade away: a castellan might be as strong as a governor or as weak as a mere administrator, though that scarcely matters because K. is soon told that the young man exaggerated; he is only the son of an under-castellan, and the trouble with deputies of any kind is that there can be scores of them, with as many different opinions as there are under-castellans. The Castle’s real voice is suddenly miles away again.

K. then goes to see the village supervisor. What K. wants from him is an authoritative “yes” or “no” to the question of whether he has been hired. He doesn’t get that (though the supervisor does have an opinion—a negative one) but instead receives something that ought to be more useful. When K. protests that the supervisor’s opinion contradicts what the Castle official who hired him said, the supervisor shares some important truths about institutions like the Castle:

I can explain that to you. In such a large administration as the Count’s it can happen that one department decides this, another that, neither of them knows about the other, the overarching control is to be sure extremely precise, but being what it is comes into play too late, and so a little confusion can still arise.

This mention of a Count might appear to offer an actual person who is the voice of the Castle, but that turns out to be illusory: he is neither sought nor found but just fades out of the text of the novel. Later on, Olga, an ally, puts the point more strongly: “In his own area an official can grasp whole trains of thought from just a single word, but you could try to explain things from another department to him for hours, and he’ll nod politely without understanding a word.” If K. took this to heart, he’d have to conclude that his search for the true voice of the Castle is a wild goose chase.

The supervisor goes on to say that having all kinds of departments that pronounce conflicting things is not all bad. On the contrary, out of this apparent chaos occasionally can come excellent, definitive solutions to problems. Of course, he says, you probably won’t find out about them in time for them to be useful. But even if you did find what looks like a definitive solution, how will you know that there won’t be another one coming that will negate it? You won’t.
And yet even with all these indications that the Castle’s authoritative voice can never be found, everyone remains obsessed with its attitudes and influence, and therefore desperate to cultivate access to it and the people who seem to be important in it. Alas, the Castle always protects its inner workings from sight. Olga tells K.: “We have a figure of speech here, perhaps you know it: official decisions are as shy as young girls.”

During the course of the novel, a small number of people pop up who seem to promise access to the mind or voice of the Castle, and K. eagerly pursues them. He is especially on the lookout for Castle big-wigs. The most serious candidate for Castle big-wig status to turn up is Herr Klamm.

In the second chapter, K. is approached by Olga’s brother, the messenger Barnabas, who has a letter for K. from Klamm. It seems that Klamm is the head of department X, a title which for the moment seems mysteriously impressive—until it is later undermined by the supervisor’s remark that some departments do this and some do that. Klamm’s letter confirms that K. has been hired, and he sends K. to the supervisor to get the details of what his work is to be. But when he gets to the supervisor, K. is (of course!) told again that he has never been hired.

Klamm becomes almost the Holy Grail for K., and he spends a great deal of time trying to find and talk to him because (in spite of the supervisor’s warning) he is convinced that Klamm can set him on the way to the true voice of the Castle. But the closest he gets to Klamm is when Olga takes him to an inn where a barmaid, Frieda, tells him that she is Klamm’s mistress. She lets him look at Klamm through a tiny hole in the wall of the room he is staying in. K. waits outside the inn, hoping to see him as he comes out, but Klamm always evades him.

As K. tries to make his way up the Castle’s chain of authority, he actually goes in the opposite direction—down to ever more peripheral Castle employees. He is hopeful when he meets Herr Momus, who introduces himself as Klamm’s village secretary. But by now he should know what will happen next: it turns out that Momus is only one of Klamm’s many secretaries, which as usual dilutes the importance of any one of them.

K.’s descent down the chain of authority to the very bottom begins when Olga tells him of Barnabas’s doubts about Klamm: he now wonders whether the individual who is said to be Klamm really is Klamm. It was Barnabas’s message to K. from Klamm that first gave him hope of a clear and credible Castle verdict, and so this new doubt is particularly disturbing. But Olga also has doubts about Barnabas: he goes into the offices, she says, but are those offices the real Castle? K.’s own doubts about where Barnabas stands in relation to the Castle produce a frenzied series of thoughts which spiral downward, as one opportunity is always followed by its negation, and K. settles for less and less:

[Barnabas] is allowed in the offices, or perhaps if you will it’s just an anteroom; alright then it’s only an anteroom, but there are doors there that lead further on. . . . To whom Barnabas speaks there I don’t know, perhaps that clerk is the lowest servant, but even if he is the lowest, he can still lead to the next
higher one, and even if he can’t lead to him he can at least name him, and even if he can’t name him, he could still point to someone who will be able to name him. This alleged Klamm may have not the tiniest thing in common with the real one . . . he may be the lowest of the officials, he may not even be an official, but he has some task to do at that desk, he is reading something or other in his big book, he whispers something to the clerk . . . and even if that is all not true and he and his actions mean nothing at all, somebody must have put him there and had some purpose or other in doing that.

K.’s quest has now been turned upside down. Unable to get to the top of the Castle hierarchy to find its true voice, he races to the bottom, where even the lowliest part of the Castle must in some way be related to its larger purpose, and so must shed at least some minimal light on that purpose.

This is all reminiscent of the animal’s frenzied attempts to make sense of his lair in “The Burrow.” Like the animal, K. is exhausting himself by his ceaseless analyzing of a question to which there is no rational solution. The more both K. and the animal fail to find rational solutions, the more they redouble their efforts to discover one.

It would be a mistake to see The Castle as a satire on bureaucracy. That kind of satire has been written many times already, but its concerns are not Kafka’s. There the focus is always on a familiar set of anti-bureaucracy themes: its inefficiency, its mediocrity, its self-serving, its shortsightedness, its dullness and deadness, and the irresponsibility of a nine-to-five mentality. The Castle is about something entirely different: the clash between our acceptance of institutions as a normal part of life, and the reality that they are very odd things that require us to act as if they were something which they are not. We believe in them though we can’t really see them, hear them, or touch them. We attribute to them motives, personality, wishes, even a moral character. We confuse their apparent physical locations with what they are: castle and Castle. But even the simplest question gets us into trouble: who speaks for the Castle? Institutions are collections of people, but not one of them is essential to their existence. We are forced to treat them as if they related to us as one person to another, but that is a fiction that causes K. and us endless trouble.

Kafka’s Castle may seem like a caricature of an institution, but anyone who writes an angry letter to a large organization sooner or later realizes that he is not really writing to anyone. In the modern world, replies that are computer-generated only make the point more obvious, but don’t really change it. Amalia’s family tries to beg the Castle’s forgiveness for her insult to it, but if she is forgiven it won’t be the Castle that does it—only an individual somewhere.

An institution is rather like a mythical creature that we agree to believe in. The Enlightenment thinkers disapproved of belief in myths, but the kind of unseen and unheard mythical creatures it had in mind never had any real influence on our lives, while Kafka’s Castle is a powerful force.
A uf der Galerie” (“In the Gallery”) is a very short story—just a page long. But perhaps none of Kafka’s writings sets out so clearly his characteristic attitude to the difference between the kinder world envisaged by the Enlightenment and the pre-Enlightenment emotional make-up that is still ours. It consists only of two alternative descriptions of something that happens in a circus: a lady rides a horse in the ring, attended by a ringmaster, with a large, attentive audience looking on. In the first version, the lady is frail and ill, the ringmaster relentless and brutal as he uses his whip to keep her riding round and round forever, and the audience is insatiable as well as unconcerned about the horror of what it is seeing. In the second, the lady is lovely and radiant, the ringmaster tender and protective, the audience enraptured by her.

Yet the first description is a conditional: if things were as they are in this version, we are told, then a young man in the gallery would rush down into the ring and cry: Stop! But, we are then told, things are not in fact as depicted in the first description. Instead, the reality is the second version, and, “because that is the case, then the man from the gallery lays his head on the railing, and, as if sinking into a sad dream during the closing procession, he weeps without knowing it.”

Surprisingly, it is the second scene that causes grief, not the first. The second scene depicts the perfect world of the Enlightenment, where everyone is kind and considerate. It has no room for heroes, because it doesn’t need them. In fact it seems to have no room for the struggles of ordinary life as we know it. It is a world full of light and beauty, and Kafka underlines that point by describing it far more elaborately than he does the first version: the ringmaster lifts the lady with great care onto the white horse; he runs beside the horse and follows her every move; he can barely bring himself to crack the whip; he can scarcely believe how exquisite her artistry is; he quiets the orchestra as she prepares her somersault.

But the problem is that this world has no room for drama, or for courageous reassertions of right and wrong. Nobody is called on to do anything except watch the beauty of the show. But for how long could real human beings do that? Here is Kafka’s orientation in a nutshell. Human beings are made for the first scene, not the second. It is human imperfection that makes the life we know possible—and valuable. The gallery visitor tries in his imagination to find a meaningful role for himself in relation to what is going on, but feels shut out by the flawless, beautiful scene in the ring. We aren’t really equipped for a life composed of scenes like this one.

T he Kafka works we’ve examined in the first part of this study can be roughly divided into two broad types. In the first kind (“The Burrow” and The Castle), there are areas of life in which reason is at best a double-edged sword. In the second kind (“The Metamorphosis” and “In the Gallery”), the kinder and gentler world that the Enlightenment thinkers envisaged gets turned upside down as an older value system reasserts itself. Kafka’s well-known story “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”) is the most interesting example of the second type, and we’ll turn to it next month.
1. This essay is the first of a two-part series.