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# A Lecture by Jean-Paul Sartre\*

FRANÇOISE DERINS

Translated by Denis Hollier and Rosalind Krauss

It is under the auspices of the French League for a Free Palestine that Jean-Paul Sartre spoke on “Kafka, a Jewish Writer” on May 31 [1947], at the Iéna Hall. Instead of what in this case would be the preposterous attempt to perform a critical evaluation, I will simply mention the impression of awesome power produced by the lecturer. It is difficult to imagine that anything further could be added to the literature on Kafka after such a magisterial hour. Probably the only thing left is to reread his work now that Sartre has rethought it and has revealed its system to us, simultaneously deftly extracting what Kafka himself didn't, of course, elaborate and shrewdly evoking what makes his talent escape all classification. Everything—the diversity of the rhetoric, the exhaustive analysis, and even the bodily presence of the thought process—contributed in transforming this lecture into a self-sufficient and necessary whole or, even better, a perfect work of art. My clearest duty at present is to summarize faithfully the great moments of this performance.

Jean-Paul Sartre undertook to show the significance of the accusation of negativism frequently made against Kafka, who avowed himself the negative representative of his time. But his work bears multiple interpretations; entering it is difficult because of his contradictory forays, oscillating as they do between the various aspects of the moral and religious world; and finally, his message is incomplete having been prematurely interrupted by death. In Kafka the birth of reflection seems to coincide with the pain occasioned by the weight of his father's influence. Constantly opposed to the reasonable world of adults, he becomes aware of his particularity, the experience of which is even more inflamed by the reading of Kierkegaard. But whatever his pride, he will have to find an egress, as does the monkey who is imprisoned by the walls of his cage. The only available

\* Following the publication of *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Sartre was invited to lecture by two French Jewish organizations. The first of these events, sponsored by the Ligue française pour une Palastine Libre (French League for a Free Palestine), was held on May 31, 1947. Sartre spoke about Kafka. The only remaining trace of this lecture is this review, published in *La Nef*, by Françoise Derins, the monthly's columnist in charge of reporting on Parisian literary lectures. Ed.

one is that of mimicking general laws in order to remain unnoticed. Kafka translates the absurdity of regulations by means of the boredom pervasive within the bureaucratic world of pitiful pen-pushers.

Here is where the doubt arises: might I not be the most general being at the very moment I believe myself the most particular? Such hesitations are those of a perpetual adolescent from whom his family steals his responsibilities. The core of this is the deliberative process: suicide or not? Marriage or celibacy? Christianity or Judaism? Sartre doesn't see this as the case of a sick man or a psychasthenic but rather that of a man who persists in living in the world of an adolescent. The great struggles are not the ones he takes on; he wastes his strength on banal problems despite the fact that, even at this level, one can win or lose everything; indecisiveness condemns one to stay at the level of psychology. Here is the key to the pitiful climate of novels that, like *The Trial* or *The Castle*, are filled with ciphers for characters.

However, one cannot conceive of a psychological plane that would not be moral and religious at the same time. Immersed in an equally Judaic and Christian atmosphere, Kafka doesn't manage to believe in a personal God. He hesitates between two paths, one of which leads him to seek personal salvation through law, ritual, community, and the building of a family, while the other conduces toward seeking God in what is individual in each of us, outside community and almost transgressively. This gives rise to the motif of Abraham that haunts Kafka. One can sacrifice one's son if one has received a message from the angel. Which means: one is allowed not to marry if God assigns you another vocation. The only way to justify the refusal to join the community is by encountering God in one's path. Psychological hesitation here becomes metaphysical. Are there signs by which to recognize one's way? Every revelation is internal. However, if transcendence and immanence coincide there won't be any signs, or rather, signs will be ambiguous and indecipherable. The carrier of a message is very often unaware of its content. The individual is never totally mistaken but when he is so, he doesn't know it, which makes things even worse. Everything in Kafka's work has more than one meaning. This is the world of absolute relativity.

This uncertainty, however, is overcome by a search for the indestructible. The goal is to attain authenticity, to coincide with oneself. What is the way that leads to it? Alas, there is no way. The castle on top of the hill is visible from everywhere but no road leads to it. Why? Being is indivisible; if it exists, it cannot know itself at the same time. From this psychological condemnation of reflexivity the identification of truth and being follows.

Saint John of the Cross, even in his "dark night," found a way to God. But, says Sartre, Kafka is an impossible mystic for want of a way.

Finally, it was out of the question that Sartre, the great novelist, leave Kafka's art unaddressed. If the meaning of this work is that of telling oneself the story of one's life in order to go beyond it, the activity of writing is a total commitment. Therefore, Kafka doesn't write as a consequence of reflexive analyses; to the

contrary, he writes extremely fast, in a state of semi-somnolence, so as not to separate the components that are united in his consciousness. Words have to be allusive if they are to describe a world that can only be referred to among initiates and to reawaken a knowledge buried within us. In Kafka's work, so complete but so difficult to analyze, so strange and yet so familiar, Sartre sees an attempt to realize the world of the particular, or even better, to transcribe symbolically man's condition.