

Kafka and His Precursors

At one time I considered writing a study of Kafka's precursors. I had thought, at first, that he was as unique as the phoenix of rhetorical praise; after spending a little time with him, I felt I could recognize his voice, or his habits, in the texts of various literatures and various ages. I will note a few of them here, in chronological order.

The first is Zeno's paradox against motion. A moving body at point *A* (Aristotle states) will not be able to reach point *B*, because it must first cover half of the distance between the two, and before that, half of the half, and before that, half of the half of the half, and so on to infinity; the form of this famous problem is precisely that of *The Castle*, and the moving body and the arrow and Achilles are the first Kafkaesque characters in literature. In the second text that bibliographic chance brought my way, the affinity is not in the form but in the tone. It is a fable by Han Yu, a prose writer of the ninth century, and it is found in the admirable *Anthologie raisonnée de la littérature chinoise* (1948) by Margouliès. This is the mysterious and tranquil paragraph I marked:

It is universally admitted that the unicorn is a supernatural being and one of good omen; thus it is declared in the Odes, in the Annals, in the biographies of illustrious men, and in other texts of unquestioned authority. Even the women and children of the common people know that the unicorn is a favorable portent. But this animal does not figure among the domestic animals, it is not easy to find, it does not lend itself to any classification. It is not like the horse or the bull, the wolf or the deer. Under such conditions, we could be in the presence of a unicorn and not know with certainty that it is one. We know that a given animal

with a mane is a horse, and that one with horns is a bull. We do not know what a unicorn is like.¹

The third text comes from a more predictable source: the writings of Kierkegaard. The mental affinity of both writers is known to everyone; what has not yet been emphasized, as far as I know, is that Kierkegaard, like Kafka, abounded in religious parables on contemporary and bourgeois themes. Lowrie, in his *Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press, 1938), mentions two. One is the story of a counterfeiter who, under constant surveillance, examines Bank of England notes; in the same way, God could be suspicious of Kierkegaard and yet entrust him with a mission precisely because He knew he was accustomed to evil. Expeditions to the North Pole are the subject of the other. Danish clergymen had declared from their pulpits that to participate in such expeditions would serve the eternal health of the soul. They had to admit, however, that reaching the Pole was difficult and perhaps impossible, and that not everyone could undertake the adventure. In the end, they announced that any journey—from Denmark to London, say, in a steamship, or a Sunday outing in a hackney coach—could be seen as a veritable expedition to the North Pole. The fourth prefiguration I found in Browning's poem "Fears and Scruples," published in 1876. A man has, or thinks he has, a famous friend. He has never seen this friend, and the fact is that this friend has never been able to help him, but he knows that the friend has very noble qualities, and he shows others the letters his friend has written. Some have doubts about his nobility, and handwriting experts declare the letters to be fake. In the last line, the man asks: "What if this friend happened to be—God?"

My notes also include two short stories. One is from *Histoires désobligeantes* by Léon Bloy, and refers to the case of some people who amass globes, atlases, train schedules, and trunks, and who die without ever having left the town where they were born. The other is entitled "Carcassonne" and is by Lord Dunsany. An invincible army of warriors departs from an infinite castle, subjugates kingdoms and sees monsters and crosses deserts and mountains, but never reaches Carcassonne, although they once catch a glimpse of it. (This story is, as it is easily noticed, the exact opposite of the

¹The failure to recognize the sacred animal and its shameful or casual death at the hands of the people are traditional themes in Chinese literature. See the last chapter of Jung's *Psychologie und Alchemie* (Zurich, 1944), which includes two curious illustrations.

previous one; in the first, they never leave the city; in the second, they never reach it.)

If I am not mistaken, the heterogenous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This last fact is what is most significant. Kafka's idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist. The poem "Fears and Scruples" by Robert Browning prophesies the work of Kafka, but our reading of Kafka noticeably refines and diverts our reading of the poem. Browning did not read it as we read it now. The word "precursor" is indispensable to the vocabulary of criticism, but one must try to purify it from any connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.² In this correlation, the identity or plurality of men doesn't matter. The first Kafka of "*Betrachtung*" is less a precursor of the Kafka of the gloomy myths and terrifying institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany.

[1951]

[EW]

²See T. S. Eliot, *Points of View* (1941), 25–26.