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CRISIS AND MEANING: F. KAFKA AND THE LAW

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The parable “Before the Law” is a pivotal text in the work of Franz Kafka. It tells of a man who looks for the law as the quintessence of his life. But his quest for meaning comes to a crisis because of a fundamental deception. Instead of interpreting the law as a personal mystery, he somehow objectifies it. His abstract view on life begets the obstacle-character that embodies all those who could bar him from finding the law. In this narrative, the failure of finding the law results in a murder in which human life is reduced to bestial death. In this sense, Kafka’s narrative is a tale of anti-creation.

In a close reading we analyze the text with attention for the ternary structure, i.e. the intertwined complex of the I-Thou relation and the I-It relation (Martin Buber). The literary text is interpreted for its philosophical relevance. Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas but also Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida have an important role in this way of reading.

Keywords: “Before the Law”, dialogical thinking, fragmentation, Franz Kafka, obstacle, quintessence of life, searching, ternary thinking, *The Trial*.

Introduction

In the British Museum, two colossal statues are displayed as massive doorkeepers in front of the entrance gate to the reconstructed palace room of the Assyrian kings Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III from Nimrod. In the center of the rectangular throne room is the impressive bas-relief of the tree of life. Here, the cultural tourist can satisfy his curiosity for days on, sauntering about through space and time and

imputing meaning to what he sees. But when the mute statues and the silent images are brought to life with insufflations from the original texts that have shaped our culture, heretofore still unsuspected new meanings can arise. In a remarkable way, two texts are intertwined: the tree is the central element in the creation narrative – the topic of entering the gate and the doorkeeper structures a story of Kafka (1883–1924).

In his famous parable “Before the Law” (in German: *Vor dem Gesetz*, originally published

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in 1916), the Prague novelist Kafka writes about the secret of life, and about an inordinately oversized doorkeeper (2009: 154–155). The protagonist/the “man from the country” (*Mann vom Lande* – Kafka’s literal translation from the Hebrew expression *Adam ha-Aretz*) reaches a crisis in his quest for meaning: the secret or the quintessence of life evades him, it is never revealed to him; and his humanity shrinks more and more, the larger his fascination becomes with the presumed obstacles that prevent him from accessing the mystery of life. Rather, the Biblical Genesis creation narrative is about a tree (of knowledge), the fruit of which is supposed to reveal the secret of Good and Evil. And yet, here, too, human existence experiences a crisis, one introduced by the law of the Spirit of life: Adam and Eve are seduced to transgress the law. They thereby disqualify themselves from their God-given humanity. And it is not in denial but precisely in this confrontational revelation that a wholly new, intersubjective, meaning arises.

Kafka’s text appears as the opposite of the Biblical narrative of creation. In this first part, therefore, we present a close reading of the Kafka-story. The triangular narrative structure of the text reveals a ternary pattern of relationship in reality: the I-Thou relation being intertwined with the I-It relation (Buber 1984; Dufour 1990; Anckaert 2002b). But the objectivity becomes a hindrance that makes the revelation of the ultimate meaning of life difficult. In the second part, we will start from the presumption that Kafka inverted the dynamics of the creation story. This inversion is a speculative gesture that allows Kafka to deconstruct and to repeat in a renewed way the meaning of old texts. This play of difference and repetition (Deleuze 2014) is frequently present in Kafka: The extracts “Home-Coming” (in German: *Heimkehr*, originally published in 1920) (1971: 445; De Visscher 2002: 13–32), “A Fratricide” (in German: *Ein Brudermord*, originally published in 1917) (1971: 402–404), “The City Coat of Arms” (in German: *Das Stadtwappen*,

originally published in 1931) (1971: 433–434; Mosès 2006), “The Truth about Sancho Panza” (in German: *Die Wahrheit über Sancho Pansa*, originally published in 1931) (1971: 430), “The Great Wall of China” (in German: *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*, originally published in 1931) (1971: 235–248), and “The Silence of the Sirens” (in German: *Das Schweigen der Sirenen*, originally published in 1931) (1971: 430–432) are but a few instances of inversions of classical texts.

We read and compare the texts in an attempt to ascertain whether human existence itself is not an unceasing quest for meaning, one marked by endless crises that challenge human life on earth to acknowledge “the other” and hence to open up to alterity. In our attempt to discern nuances, we seek guidance in the biblical and philosophical thought of Rosenzweig and Levinas (Anckaert 2006; Burggraeve 2009).

Fragmentation in Kafka

A general topic in Kafka is living in a fragmented world. The opening words of *The Castle* (in German: *Das Schloss*, original edition in 1926) can be read as the programmatic challenge of his oeuvre:

“It was late in the evening when K. arrived. The village was deep in snow. The castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him” (Kafka 1998: 1).

The first words evoke the element where-in the quest for meaning begins. Like the Levinasian *there is*, night or confusion is the indication of the world that loses reality and meaning (Levinas 1995). In the beginning, there is darkness. Starting from darkness, the quest for humanity originates: creation out of

the *Tohu wa-bohu*; the *Shabbat* that starts at night and grows into the light of the day; Elie Wiesel's trilogy *Night, Dawn and Day* (2008). The Nobel Prize winner tells of his life in the Shoah, his liberation and the regained daily life. In Jewish mysticism (Scholem 1961), the creation is understood as the *Sjebirat ha-kelim* or the breaking the vessels (Luria) and redemption is understood as *Tikkun olam* or mending the world (Fackenheim 1994). *The Castle* is inserted in this tradition and tells the quest for meaning. But meaning cannot be found, there is only a wooden bridge (Benjamin 2007).

From the dark elemental sphere, three narrative protagonist arise like Levinasian hypostases (Levinas 1987). The human lead actor is a person without proper name, without identity. Rosenzweig claims that the name is the marking point of man's identity in distinction to totalizing reality:

“Man, in the simple oneness of his own being, in his being which was established on his last name and his first name, strode out of the world that new itself as a thinkable world, strode out of the All of philosophy” (2005: 16).

In Kafka, man loses his identity and personality and becomes a man without qualities (Musil 2017). And this empty identity searches a way for himself in a village that is invisible. Later on it becomes clear that the profession of K. is to be a land surveyor. The man who does not know himself gets lost in a world that fades away. The castle – symbol of the ultimate meaning – remains hidden and closed (the German title of the book – *Das Schloss* – expresses exactly the ambiguous inaccessibility of the building).

Rosenzweig wrote in his diaries (1979: 1152) that he never read a book that reminded in a so convincing way to the Bible. For Rosenzweig, K. is the metaphor of man, the village of the modern world and the castle of the ultimate meaning/God. The ternary relation between man, the world and God structures Rosenzweig's

The Star of Redemption (in German: *Stern der Erlösung*, originally published in 1921). But whereas Rosenzweig understands the pieces of modern experience as cornerstones for renewed relations between God-Man-World, Kafka expresses the broken and split reality. Fragmentation intrudes on with a compelling necessity. The human person K. stands still on a wooden bridge that forms an initial illusion that could lead him to the world of the village. The castle itself is veiled in mist and darkness. And the surveyor, who wants to fix solid coordinates, is being paralyzed by the closedness of the castle. Kafka narrates of the failed access to the secret of life. Therefore he can be called *unheimlich*.

“Before the Law”: a narrative in the narrative

Kafka wrote his parable, “Before the Law”, in December 1914. After a first publication in 1916, it was included in the collection of stories *A Country Doctor* (in German: *Ein Landarzt*, originally published in 1919) (Kafka 1971: 3–4). Thereafter, it was inserted as a cardinal hinge in *The Trial* (in German: *Der Prozess*) (Kafka 2009), which had been penned in the same time period but published posthumously in 1925. The parable functions as a pivotal text in the penultimate chapter – that is the last word before the last word – wherein the encounter with the chaplain is described. The parable evokes the impossibility of entering the law. It is the story about the inaccessible and concealed life secret.

In a concentric structure, we firstly present the general structure of *The Trial*. Thereafter we pay attention to the stylistic inclusion that introduces and concludes the parable. The narrative is introduced by the dialogue between the priest and Josef K. about the search for the law that determines life; it is concluded by a Talmud like discussion on the consequences of missing the law. Finally, we present our close reading of the parable.

The endless search for the law

As known, *The Trial* describes the quest of the main character Josef K. for the cause of his arrest. On the first pages of the book is told how he is placed under arrest by two gentlemen. The gentlemen are present in the morning in his apartment and arrest him without explanation (Kafka 2009). This fictive story of a complete irrational arrest became reality in *The Gulag Archipelago* (in Russian: *Arkhipelag GULAG*, originally published in 1973) (Solzhenitsyn 1974). Joseph K. is not locked but gets a judgment whereby he is not allowed to leave the city. Apart from this limitation he can just continue his life. During the following chapters he continuously goes looking for the law that he would have violated. Especially the elusiveness of the judgement, the inaccessibility of the Court and the ever-deferred process come to expression. K. is constantly faced with doors and thresholds that should offer a perspective on the law that bewitches his life. The law that was the basis of his arrest gradually grows to the law that governs the entire life. The law becomes the life law of Joseph K.

The impassable limit or threshold of the law governs his life. The blind writer Jorge Luis Borges sees in the text by Kafka a repetition of the famous Zenó's paradox: a distance cannot be bridged unless first half the distance is bridged; this first half cannot be bridged unless (Borges 1999). The paralyzing movement of procrastination (see Derrida 1982) goes to infinity. Each door opens a new space that leads to another door. There appears to be no anchor point. Man is lost in a fragmented world. This hopeless quest comes to a climax in the fragment "Before the Law". It describes how the search for the law ends in a total fiasco.

The missing of the law

In the same way an arrow can miss its goal, Josef K. misses the law. After the parable, the last page

of the book tells how on the eve of his thirty-first year, the age at which Jesus was executed, K. is led away by the same two gentlemen who arrested him on the first page of the book:

"But the hands of one of the gentleman were laid on K.'s throat, while the other pushed the knife deep into his heart and twisted it there, twice. As his eyesight failed, K. saw the two gentlemen cheek by cheek, close in front of his face, watching the result. 'Like a dog!' he said, it was as if the shame of it should outlive him" (Kafka 2009: 165).

The ultimate failure to achieve the law is followed by death, even animal death. K. falls from the human life back in the animal death. The failure has a double consequence. Life flows into the death; the humanity expires to bestiality. Also Sigmund Freud understands *Thanatos* or the death drift as a regressive destruction drift. This drift comes to rest when a lower life form replaces a higher life form (Freud 2010). It seems to be a repetition of the adventures of Gregor Samsa (Kafka 1971: 89–139).

The immediate context of the fragment

The text itself is inserted in the immediate context of a failed encounter. The bank clerk K. would meet at the request of his director an Italian business friend and take him on a tour in the city. They were agreed to meet each other in the church. Due to a coincidence the tour does not take place. K. is in the church but the Italian does not come. Instead, K. meets a prison chaplain. The priest represents both the law as the religion. A dialogue begins. In this talk we find three important keys to read the parable:

"K. waited for him at the foot of the steps. While he was still on one of the higher steps as he came down them the priest reached out his hand for K. to shake. 'Can you spare me a little

of your time?’ asked K. ‘As much time as you need’, said the priest, and passed him the little lamp for him to carry. Even at close distance the priest did not lose a certain solemnity that seemed to be part of his character. ‘You are very friendly towards me’, said K., as they walked up and down beside each other in the darkness of one of the side naves. ‘That makes you an exception among all those who belong to the court. I can trust you more than any of the others I’ve seen. I can speak openly with you.’ ‘Don’t fool yourself’, said the priest. ‘How would I be fooling myself?’ asked K. ‘You fool yourself in the court’, said the priest, ‘it talks about this self-deceit in the opening paragraphs to the law’” (Kafka 2009: 153–154).

Three elements from the dialogue deserve special attention. First of all K. asks: “can you spare me a little of your time?”. The time is referred to as a core theme in the story. In the parable there is a tension between the topicality of the dialogue and the monotonous time that is stretched to an endless enlargement of the now moment. Within this infinite now every movement seems to be impossible (cfr. Zeno). Besides, after the affirmative answer from the chaplain, K. receives a little lamp. The priest donates time, as much as needed, and provides a lamp that K. should carry himself. In the opening sentence of *The Castle* it was also dark. Now K. is in the dark side nave of the church, but he light. Finally, the central theme of the story is indicated: the self-deceit (*Täuschung*). The deceit is fundamental and concerns the law. What is the place of judgment in relation to human freedom? What place one can give to the law? And about this deceit, something is written in “the opening paragraphs to the law”. After this sentence follows a colon after which the parable is quoted and included in the context. The parable is a story about the story, an interpretation key of the hopeless quest. As to King David after his escapades with Bathsheba, a mirror is held up to Joseph K.

Reading the law

Kafka opens his parable with a scene featuring three agents: the law, the doorkeeper, and the man from the country (see Fig. 1).¹

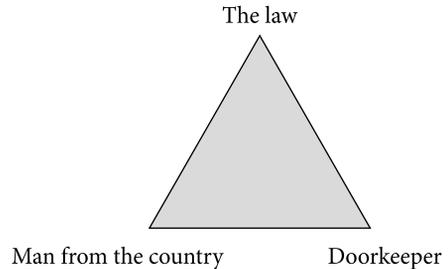


Fig. 1. The structure of “Before the Law” (source: created by the authors)

“In front of the law there is a doorkeeper. A man from the country comes up to the door..”

The law appears as an edifice with a gate. Constantly present in *The Trial*, the motif of entering the door reaches its climax. Of course the law does not refer to a juridical code in the first place. Two semantic fields can be linked around the term. Even if we know that Kafka was a secular Jew, we can interpret the law as the Torah, the legal text, which structures Jewish life. Such an interpretation is reinforced by the consideration that, in the preceding dialogue with the priest, the text refers to “the opening paragraphs to the law” (*in den einleitenden Schriften zum Gesetz*); and, moreover, the text that follows the parable mentions “consideration for the Scripture” (*Achtung vor der Schrift*). This fact can be linked to the Talmud-like comments, which the prison chaplain makes when he interprets the parable. The Hebrew word *Torah* is translated by Rosenzweig

¹ IMPORTANT NOTE FOR READERS: all the following indented quotes without references are taken from the parable (Kafka 2009: 154–155).

(Buber, Rosenzweig 1926) as *Weisung*, the law of life for the disoriented person. Rosenzweig, too, links the discovery of the secret of life with a gate. The final sentence in his *The Star of Redemption* is: “But whither do the wings of the gate open? You do not know? INTO LIFE” (Rosenzweig 2005: 447).

Connotations in the text suggest a second semantic field, however. The law is the crux where the lines of Kafka’s iron logic meet. Kafka’s texts are typified by repeated failed access to the quintessence of life. Thus a paralyzing deceleration, a movement of slowing down occurs (Borges 1999). The mystery of life is a receding field of burst metaphors, through which foundational meaning escapes. Amidst these, three metaphors are important. The father figure refers to the elusive origin of life (Kafka 1954); woman as animal of lust is an object of humiliation (Frieda in *The Castle*) or a means to power (Leni in *The Trial*); and man’s death refers to authentic life (the first words in “Before the Law”, from the parable resonate in the later-appearing words “Before he dies” (*Vor seinem Tode* – before his death)). The metaphors evoke the temporal structuring of the intangible law of desire: the past origin; the unattainable other in the future; and, stuck in the middle, the current truth of life in the face of death (Anckaert 2002a).

The doorkeeper stands before the law. We are given only sparse details about this doorkeeper. He wears a fur coat with fleas in the collar; he has a big sharp nose and a long thin black Tartar beard. It is not too sympathetic a typology of a Jewish man. The doorkeeper is seen through another person’s stereotyping eyes. In any case the doorkeeper will function as an obstacle.

The man from the country is an alias for Joseph K. In journalists’ reports from the law court, full identity of the accused used to be omitted by limiting mention to initials only. The initial K. here additionally points to a Kafkaesque inner emptiness, however: personal identity now reduced to a single

letter (Anckaert 2009); in his search for the law, above and beyond himself, man loses the existence inside his self. In an important text, Rosenzweig writes that, in periods of inhumanity, man remains himself by his given name and surname: “I, the quite ordinary private subject, I first and last name, I dust and ashes, I am still there” (1999a: 48). Here, he resumes the human answer to the biblical address by God: *hinne ni* (*here I am!*). In *The Castle*, the protagonist is represented as a disoriented land surveyor, which reminds one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s mad-man (1974: 181–182). The surveyor is looking for a structure in society but encounters the inaccessibility of the castle. To the inner emptiness an outer disorientation is the response.

“...and he asks for entry.”

It is crucial that the man, who wants to relate to the law, spontaneously addresses the doorkeeper. The relation to the law is mediated through the other. With regard to “the other”, a fundamental deception can take place. A personal relation with one’s other, which embodies the secret of life, is simulated to an anonymous relation with an obstacle. The initiative comes from the man from the country, who stereotypes the other. From his own point of view, he expects the doorkeeper to be an obstacle who might forbid him access (Girard 1953). It is important to emphasize that this is happening in the eyes of the man from the country. Kafka has elaborated this, stylistically, in a brilliant and subtle way by using indirect speech. It is remarkable that the doorkeeper is quoted only twice – and each time, in indirect speech. This exception merits attention.

“But the doorkeeper says he cannot let him in to the law right now.”

Via indirect speech, an intersubjective dialogue between the two persons is avoided. From the man’s point of view, the doorkeeper cannot

possibly answer for himself in the I-form, in the first person. In indirect speech, the doorkeeper appears as the grammatical third person. In this way access to the law is obstructed. “The other” arises as an obstacle. To break through the deadlock, two tracks can be devised: the theme of time; and the theme of encounter. First, there is the temporal aspect. If the man cannot go in now, he may be allowed in, later. Access to the secret of life, in that case, would be only a matter of time, of postponement and delay. The moment in the present here and now is deferred to the future (*différance*).

“The man thinks about this, and then he asks if he will be able to go in later on.”

Secondly, there is the possibility of the personal encounter. From the point of view of the man, the doorkeeper appears in the detached objectivity of a third person. Rosenzweig writes on a crucial page of his work that redemption takes place when “the I learns to say you to the he” (2005: 292). It is as if the “clammed” subjectivity of man is “opened up” when man sees the other as person or as purpose for its own sake, and not as an object or a means to a purpose. This intersubjective reality can only take place in the present moment of direct speech. When it is projected into the future, its immediate meaning (and hence, the immediacy of its sense) is lost.

The man from the country chooses postponement into his future. It is in this sense that the image of doorkeeper-qua-obstacle is emphasized. Attention to secret of life is postponed *sine die* – indefinitely. The doorkeeper openly confirms this option:

“That’s possible”, says the doorkeeper, “but not now”.

In this objectified pattern of relationship, the primacy of “the eye” enters the scene:

“The gateway to the law is open as it always is, and the doorkeeper has stepped to one side, so the man bends over to try and see in”.

In the Western tradition, the metaphor of “seeing” refers to the metaphysics of presence. Seeing is essentially all about in-sight, image, and representation (Deleuze 2014). Total reality is brought together in an infinitely large present moment (Levinas 1979). *Theōriā*, according to Aristotle, is the highest degree of knowledge (Radice, Davies 1997). Western culture aims at insight or transparency. Levinas refers to this as the synoptic look (1979: 191). It is the look which, all at once, synthesizes everything in a totalizing synopsis. A synoptic look eliminates alterity and reduces one’s “other” to objectivity.

The Jewish tradition on the other hand is a culture of listening to hear. The act of listening to hear has a fundamentally different structure from looking to see. The word is given by “the other”. The look is taken by oneself so as to get a grip on things. In listening to hear, one is essentially dependent on the other. One “lends the ear” to the word that is said by the other (Rosenzweig 1999b: 87). The experience of time is itself different, as well. To see is tantamount to freezing the present in a snapshot. In the image, the present is congealed, thus allowing infinite duplication of principal iteration. In this respect, postponement as repetition (in a “more of the same” mode) is always possible. Listening, on the other hand, is typified by ethereal evanescence. The present aspect of time is decisive. The material aspect of the phonation is too thin to be objectified in an image (Derrida 2011). The voice can only be heard as an intersubjective reality. The voice cannot bear any objectifying image.

The man from the country is tempted into seeing, after the first objectification of the doorkeeper. He wants to look through the gate into the inner secret of the law. Precisely at that moment, when he gives in to the temptation of the eye, he is dwarfed for the first time. The man has to stoop (!) in order to be able to look through the gate; expanding objectification at the cost of

shrinking humanity. Translated in the reverse sense, the man's becoming smaller signifies that the law, which appears as prohibition, is becoming larger, and that the doorkeeper is turning into an unassailable hindrance. As the prohibition becomes stronger and stronger, it yields a mirror effect as outcome. Instead of one doorkeeper, all of a sudden, three are summoned. The paroxysm of the self-multiplying "in-sight" has its limit, however: the looking soon enough becomes unbearable and, indeed, violent:

"When the doorkeeper notices this he laughs and says, 'If you're tempted give it a try, try and go in even though I say you can't. Careful though: I'm powerful. And I'm only the lowliest of all the doormen. But there's a doorkeeper for each of the rooms and each of them is more powerful than the last. It's more than I can stand just to look at the third one'."

But the man is fixated by the primacy of the gaze, so that an objective and abstract interpretation of the law results:

"The man from the country had not expected difficulties like this, the law was supposed to be accessible for anyone at any time, he thinks..."

The law is always accessible to each and every one; it is a theoretical insight that anyone can acquire at all times. Under the primacy of theoretical reason, everyone is put at the same level and the secret of everyone's life is the same (in a synoptic look). The experience of time in "the merciful now" (*Kairos*) is hence even elongated into an infinite, paralyzing, present. All this takes place in the ambit of thought. It is from this theoretical (mental) attitude that the physiognomy of the doorkeeper is described. As we have already pointed out before, the doorkeeper appears as the unkind caricature of a Jewish man:

"...but now he looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, sees his big hooked nose, his long thin tartar-beard, and he decides it is better to wait until he has permission to enter"

As a particular type of religious Jew, sketched as *pars pro toto* (as an unrepresentative element) of the Jewish way of life, the doorkeeper is featured as a major obstacle to one's access to the law. From a law-based perspective, one would expect to find in religion a sense indicator, a beam of orientation, pointing to, indeed easing, an access to the secret of life (*Weisung*). But from a theoretical angle of view, the doorkeeper appears as objective obstacle. Farther into the text, we read about the doorkeeper's mercy. The man from the country is growing smaller and smaller, and is finally sitting on a stool:

"The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down to one side of the gate. He sits there for days and years. He tries to be allowed in time and again and tires the doorkeeper with his requests. The doorkeeper often questions him, asking about where he is from and many other things, but these are disinterested questions such as great men ask, and he always ends up by telling him he still cannot let him in."

In the inclusion, which is made up by the second quote, in indirect speech, the paralyzing effect of the situation is confirmed. The "theorizing look" fixes the situation and is fixated by it: the man keeps shrinking, the obstacle keeps growing ("great men"), the doorkeeper still appears in third person and all access to the law remains sealed. Postponement in time is confirmed, again, in the form of "not yet":

"The man had come well equipped for his journey, and uses everything, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. He accepts everything, but as he does so he says, 'I'll only accept this so that you don't think there's anything you've

failed to do. Over many years, the man watches the doorkeeper almost without a break”.

At this moment in the story, attention to the entrance gate of the law has totally disappeared. The look is directed toward the doorkeeper with uninterrupted insistence; the intense longing for the law of life, at the outset, seems forgotten by now. There is at this stage a paralyzing fascination with the prohibition itself. This sentiment is strengthened by attempts to bribe, to no avail:

“He forgets about the other doorkeepers, and begins to think this one is the only thing stopping him from gaining access to the law. Over the first few years he curses his unhappy condition out loud, but later, as he becomes old, he just grumbles to himself”.

The prevalence of the prohibition is emphasized again by the fact that the doorkeeper seems to be the only hindrance. The other door-men have faded out of the man’s field of vision. The obsession now becomes so strong that the man even seeks to bribe the fleas. During this infantilizing activity, he turns yet smaller again, becoming child-like:

“He becomes childish, and as he has come to know even the fleas in the fur collar over the years that he has been studying him he even asks them to help him and change the doorkeeper’s mind”.

After this, there is an important turn in the story. The theme of self-deceit (*Täuschung*) from the introductory dialogue is taken up once again:

“Finally his eyes grow dim, and he no longer knows whether it’s really getting darker or just his eyes that are deceiving him. But he seems now to see an inextinguishable light begin to shine from the darkness behind the door”.

The light, which from the eyes of the man casts an objectifying perspective upon the real world so that it becomes visible, darkens. At this very moment a gleam flows from the law to the man. This paradoxical play of light leads to the question of the *Täuschung*: have his eyes deceived the man? In other words, has he developed a “wrong” perspective on reality, such that blindness ensues to anything that differs from oneself?

The reversal from light to darkness constitutes the fulcrum of the text. Against the darkness of the eyes, there appears an inextinguishable light. Kafka here is toying with the central theme from *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy: When Oedipus penetrates the dark secret of his life by stumbling on the double insight of patricide and incest he must cut out his own eyes. Daring to peep into the secret leads to self-inflicted blindness (Sophocles 2010).

The original question had been whether the man from the country would ever be able to penetrate the law at all. For the man from the country, the failure of his insight means the end of his life, a span of time that up to that moment consists in nothing but waiting. The darkness that falls on the eyes indicates the end of this latitude. The man from the country literally does not “see the light” anymore. Obsession with the third person becomes so fascinating as to obliterate the once direct interest in the law. And yet this is only the second track to the law. The first perspective’s own hopeless impossibility leads to a climax in the story, however:

“He doesn’t have long to live now. Just before he dies, he brings together all his experience from all this time into one question which he has still never put to the doorkeeper. He beckons to him, as he’s no longer able to raise his stiff body. The doorkeeper has to bend over deeply as the difference in their sizes has changed very much to the disadvantage of the man. ‘What is it you want to know now?’ asks the doorkeeper, ‘You’re insatiable’”.

Once the overstretching of borrowed time is brushed aside by the likelihood of imminent death (“He does not have long to live now”), the ultimate question becomes possible. It is very carefully and patiently introduced in triplicate. The opening of the sentence “before he dies” stylistically echoes the opening words in the parable “Before the Law”. “Standing before the law” is here concretized as “standing before one’s own death”. It is remarkable that the article from the opening sentence is replaced by a personal pronoun: *he* dies. Death cannot possibly be understood as an objective fact anymore. Death is always a particular aspect of one’s existence. The assumption of one’s own death as negation or limit is, in meaning, tantamount to the acknowledgment of the finiteness of one’s own life. The inevitable presence of death shows the impossibility, hence also the meaninglessness, of the “in-finite” postponement. The yes to the finiteness of life is the initial condition for every relationship with an alterity. Secondly, time postponed into the future is stuffed into a question formulated in the present; and when the man formulates this question, he adopts a direct form of speech for the very first time. In the face of death, he takes, as it were, responsibility for his own existence and speaks in his own name. Thirdly, the game of large and small is repeated for the last time; and only then is the question asked:

“Everyone wants access to the law’, says the man, ‘how come, over all these years, no-one but me has asked to be let in?’”.

Apart from the shift in perspective – namely speaking in one’s own name – the situation seems to remain blocked. The man repeats the earlier idea that the law ought to be accessible to everyone at all times. Moreover, time is still considered as an infinite span. “All these years” are still mentioned. Yet the spell of the objectifying thinking appears to be broken by the radical shift in perspective. The man from the country sees the relation to law, longing and death, as

two facets of his own relation to his law – as his longing, and his death. This is only possible because he now deems himself an I-person and speaks in his own name. Stylistically, the words “man from the country” are being uttered in direct speech form for the very first time:

“The doorkeeper can see the man’s come to his end, his hearing has faded, and so, so that he can be heard, he shouts to him: ‘Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you. Now I’ll go and close it’”.

At the very moment when it becomes quite clear that the law is not an impersonal object, or an obstacle, but a personal gift, the gate is closed. The man from the country has just missed the decisive moment of the here and now. Apparently, it is too late at this point. After this most bewildering end, different Talmud-like interpretations are offered. Then K. dies; like a dog. The failure has a double consequence: life ends in death; humanity is degraded into bestiality. Freud, too, understands *Thanatos*, the death wish, as a regressive yearning for one’s own destruction. This wish is put to rest, when a lower form of life replaces a higher form of life. It seems like a repetition of the adventures of Gregor Samsa.

Conclusions

Kafka’s story evokes how every attempt at finding the law, which could give sense and direction to life, comes with a crisis and can result in failure. The secret of human existence is all about intimate personal encounters. The “other than myself”, which is also deeply present inside myself, is not the impersonal thing that it is oftentimes made out to be. Man is faced with the invitation to meet his own secret of life in a highly individual manner. In this respect, the other person is an important directional indicator. The one who “takes” this the wrong way, considers one’s fellow other to be an obstacle,

and hence misses the quintessence of the opportunity at hand. The story of Kafka can also be read as the first part of a remarkable diptych: it echoes in a reversed sense the Biblical creation narrative.

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KRIZĖ IR PRASMĖ: F. KAFKA IR ĮSTATYMAS

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Parabolė „Prieš įstatymą“ – tai centrinis Franzo Kafkos darbų tekstas. Jame pasakojama apie žmogų, kuris į įstatymą žvelgia kaip į savo gyvenimo kvintesenciją. Tačiau dėl patirtos pamatinės apgaulės jo prasmės paieškos nuveda krizės link. Įstatymo jis neinterpretuoja kaip asmeninės paslapties, o kažkaip jį įdaiktina. Jo abstraktus požiūris į gyvenimą sukuria kliūtį-veikėją, kuris įkūnija visus tuos, kurie galėtų jį atriboti nuo įstatymų suradimo. Šiame naratyve nesėkmingos įstatymo paieškos įsikūnija žudiko asmenyje, kuriame žmogaus gyvenimas redukuojasi į gyvulišką mirtį. Šia prasme Kafkos naratyvas – tai antikūrybos pavyzdys. Atidžiai skaitydami analizuojame tekstą, susitelkdami į trigubą struktūrą, t. y. į susipinančią Aš–Tu santykio ir Aš–Tai santykio visumą (Martinas Buberis). Literatūrinis tekstas interpretuojamas dėl jo filosofinio aktualumo. Šitaip teigiant, svarbų vaidmenį atlieka Franzas Rosenzweigas ir Emmanuelis Levinas, taip pat Gilles'is Deleuze'as ir Jacques'as Derrida.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: „Prieš įstatymą“, dialoginis mąstymas, fragmentacija, Franzas Kafka, kliūtis, gyvenimo kvintesencija, ieškojimas, trejopas mąstymas, *Procesas*.