

Fein on Mystery

Robert Wexelblatt

One of the things I did on my summer vacation was wonder what the publisher would come up with by way of a cover for *Aristocratic Democracy*. According to my publisher there has to be some sort of illustration and, by contract, I had no say in the matter. Long ago, when I had not published so much as an epigram, I told myself that, should I ever get so far, my books would all have a standard format and nothing on their covers but words, in the style of my beloved inexpensive but hardbound Everyman and Modern Library editions. That was then, as they say; that was adolescent dreaming.

I tried to think of a suitable picture for the new book, something that would suggest its insides in a clever, commercially irresistible way. I accomplished this thinking in various locations—in the shower, the car, in the kitchen while making a stir-fry, in bed in lieu of falling asleep. Wherever I was, I drew a blank. Perhaps if what was being published were a work of fiction it would have been easier to dream up a cover; but then I suppose it would also matter more because a cover illustration is bound to guide a reader's imagination, and perhaps wrongly so. I suppose the books judged

by their covers are generally novels. In the end, I feel relieved that the contract I signed guarantees that the responsibility isn't to be mine, not for the cover, the font, width of margins, or rag content of paper. Considered purely as a physical object, *Aristocratic Democracy* will have nothing to do with me.

Memory is layered, like the Grand Canyon, like a wedding cake or a parfait. Whatever's at the bottom grows invisible, crushed under pressure; so we presume such things are "forgotten," only to find out they aren't when they suddenly erupt to the surface, usually imperfectly but sometimes with astounding accuracy. It was while I was fruitlessly contemplating the book cover question that I had such an experience: I recalled a letter of Kafka's I must have read at least two decades ago. Of course, it was about a cover illustration.

Those who can console us always assume great authority and so Kafka does for me and has ever since a high school English teacher made me promise to read him. I never knew why Mr. Hill insisted on this extracurricular assignment—possibly it was for no better reason than because I'm Jewish.

On October 25, 1915, Franz Kafka addressed the following letter to Kurt Wolff Verlag:

Dear Sir,

You recently mentioned that Ottomar Starke is going to do a drawing for the title page of *Metamorphosis*. . . . It struck me that Starke, as an illustrator, might want to draw the insect itself. Not that, please not that! I do not want to restrict him, but only to make this plea out of my deeper knowledge of the story. The insect itself cannot be depicted. It cannot even be shown from a distance. . . . I would be very grateful if you would pass along my request and make it more emphatic. If I were to offer suggestions for an illustration, I would choose such scenes as the following: the parents and the head clerk in front of the locked door, or even better, the parents and the sister in the lighted room, with the door open upon the adjoining room that lies in darkness.

Ottomar Starke was only three years younger than Kafka, but he lived until 1962, the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was a maker of woodcuts and a set designer but is best remembered as

the creator of covers for Wolff's *Jüngste Tag* series—above all, of course, *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka's first book, *Meditation*, has no cover picture, nor does *The Stoker*, the first published in the *Jüngste Tag* series. They are just like my dear Modern Library and Everyman editions. I expect Kafka was pleased by this; I would have been. But the next book, *The Metamorphosis*, was to have a cover illustration whether he liked it or not. Judging by the tone of alarm in his letter, I suspect Kafka didn't care for the idea one bit, but, like me, was obliged by his contract to consent. The suggestions he offers were *faute de mieux*, which is to say not as bad as what he feared, though not better than nothing. Starke was probably shown the letter because what he devised, though not exactly what Kafka proposed, does reflect the author's suggestions. His cover depicts a male figure in a bathrobe who is taking a step away from a door. The door is ajar so that we see only a sliver of the interior, and it is jet black. He holds his head in his hands, covering his eyes. Who is this man? He seems too young and slim to be Herr Samsa and the Chief Clerk would not behave so, nor would he be wearing a dressing gown. It's not a great illustration. Kafka's ideas were better but there is, at least, no depiction of the bug.

The *Jüngste Tag* (Newest Day) series was a remarkable enterprise born in a world of empires about to tear themselves to bits, on a continent that had been stable for so long that only the most sensitive seismographs sensed how precarious its balance was. Several of these seismographs were writers published in the series whose books were to be short as well as cheap: “. . . epitomes of their creators' ideas.” The project was begun in 1913 and announced in a prospectus written by Franz Werfel, no less.

The Newest Day will be more than just another group of books, but less than a [formal] library. It is to be a series of creative works by our latest authors, produced out of the common experience of our time. . . we shall publish at intervals and at a low price (80 pfennigs for the paper-cover edition, 1 1/2 marks for bound copies). . .

Surprisingly, the War didn't kill the series. It lasted all the way to 1921 and put out eighty-six small books, of which Kafka's, of

course, are the best remembered, the only ones to have become world-famous. Wolff had two talented assistants, Franz Werfel, who knew Kafka, and Kafka's best friend in the world, Max Brod. *The Newest Day* was not only a great moment in modernism but also in networking.

Kafka's proposal to depict either the parents and clerk before the locked door or Gregor's family gathered quietly in the light that will set off the darkness of his room, good as it is, strikes me as desperate. Whatever Starke might end up drawing, the really essential thing for Kafka was clearly this: *The insect itself cannot be depicted*. Notice that the word "cannot" may mean either *must not* or *is unable to*. I believe Kafka intended both. The metamorphosis itself must be preserved as a void, a mystery. This is not to deny it meaning; exactly the opposite. As a mystery, what happens to Gregor is free to be a symbol with an unconstrained significance: tuberculosis, religious conversion, amputation, Jewishness, self-hatred, materialism, Oedipal war, masochistic guilt, sexual frustration, disgust with family and commercial life, and so on. The ripples can multiply; they can swell to breakers. Depict the insect, sketch us a cockroach or dung beetle, and audacious metaphor pales to pitiful simile. Dostoyevsky Underground Man feels himself "like an insect" whereas, now that it is the twentieth century, Gregor really is one. *The Metamorphosis* is the "epitome of an art" indeed, one that knows what not to reveal. This is why Camus said Kafka's art "consists in forcing the reader to reread." Just imagine if the Officer in *In the Penal Colony* were tried for insubordination or, even worse, that Joseph K. were hauled before a district court and charged with embezzling from his bank.

Kafka writes of mysteries without ever transgressing into mystification, which is just what his imitators invariably do. Mystery enhances and runs deep; mystification, like any fraud, diminishes both those who perpetrate it and those taken in by it. Mystery leaves you pondering; mystification swearing. Mystery begins by accepting, even insisting that there is something that *cannot be depicted*. Mystification holds back what can, and ought to be, revealed. Mystification is pretentious, hollow; it is found in bad screenplays, bad detective novels, bad ghost and science fiction

stories, and in tales that are “dream-like” without ever persuading you they could be actual dreams. Of mystification (“ . . . and so we never did discover who the real murderer was. . .”) there is nothing good to say. About mystery, though, one can speak endlessly, because what *cannot be depicted* is hardly, for that reason, beyond interpreting. Kafka has a knack for finding in what has never happened to anyone what happens to nearly everybody. His works constitute a kind of Modern Everyman Library. Maybe that’s why Mr. Hill wanted me to read him even though I was only sixteen years old. He must have known I wouldn’t be able to understand anything—did he trust me to know what was good? Well, I did know it was good—tremendously good—but that’s all I knew. Kafka’s work *was* a mystery to me, but a mystery of the best kind.

The etymology of *mystery* is religious. The Greek word *mysterion* refers to secret rites (e.g., the Eleusinian). *Mystes* means an initiated one and *myein* to perform the initiation. To the Romans, *mysterium* meant, in general, “supernatural thing.” The early Christians, sponges who could adapt anything to their ends, used the word to signify something like “divine secret.”

The so-called mystery plays dramatized biblical events, especially from the life of Jesus, to instruct and awe the illiterate medieval laity. In Roman Catholicism, *mystery* came to have two specific meanings: a) a sacrament, especially the Eucharist, and b) one of the fifteen episodes in the lives of Jesus and Mary that serve rosary-sayers as topics for meditation. False mysteries are, of course, mystifications, so perhaps that is what ought to have been written on the forehead of the Whore of Babylon hefting her golden goblet overflowing with abominations.

There is no religious mystery or mystification in the Homeric epics. Both are, so to speak, nullified. The gods’ motives are all too comprehensible. These are nature-gods, anthropomorphized, and so the supernatural is really the natural. That is why Socrates could say that he believed in the gods in a higher sense than his accusers; it is why he mocks the credit Euthyphro childishly gives the old myths. Socrates, the supreme rationalist, despises mystification, but he believes in mystery.

In Greek tragedy the mystery is called Fate, but this is a mystery shared by all, albeit some stories are stranger than others. It isn’t

true that in Greek tragedy Fate overrides responsibility; in fact, it might be better to say that a hero's fate conspires to create his character. Still, I've always felt sympathy for the dying Oedipus in Colonus shaking his fist skywards and whining that it wasn't his fault.

Kierkegaard has something interesting to say about these matters.

In Greek tragedy concealment (and therefore recognition) is an epic survival based on a fate in which the dramatic action disappears from view. . . . This is why the effect produced by a Greek tragedy bears a resemblance to the impression given by a marble statue that lacks the power of the eye. Greek tragedy is blind. Hence it takes a certain abstraction to appreciate it.

It seems to me something of the same thing could be said of Kafka's work. The real mystery isn't the appearance of the insect and picturing the latter can only undermine the former. Kafka does his best to tell the story as if it were literally true yet he doesn't want the reader to see it that way. Gregor himself is on the verge of turning into an abstraction. The metamorphosis is the *donnée* of his story, as Oedipus' parentage is of his. Both fates are established before the stories begin, just as the mystery of the Big Bang—or, better still, what preceded it—ended long before the invention of bagels and bicycles, yet is their *sine qua non*.

Kafka is anxious for his reader, and this is why he was jumpy about *The Metamorphosis* being published with an illustration on its cover. Every writer considers his or her readers, even as abstractions, even authors who claim to write for no one but themselves, and especially the bad authors who think like con men and consider their readers as targets for mystification. Kafka worried about how *depicting the insect* would prejudice the reader's mind. Thus the insect *cannot be depicted*.

In modern drama what passes for mystery is psychological. As Kierkegaard sees it, all drama is built on a structure of concealment and revelation, pretty aesthetic illusion displaced by gratifying ethical disclosure, "warts and all." In the Greek tragedies, neither concealment nor revelation is in the hands of the hero; in modern

drama, both are. It's up to Nora to sit Torvald down and have it out with him. Hamlet feigns madness but reveals his sanity in the end. Desi spots Lucy in the chorus line and calls her out. They are all revealed, uncovered; they have to show themselves. After all, *theater* means "place for showing." So, for that matter, are non-Kafkan courts of law. In such cases there is no mystery, except for the deep ones that outlive the dénouement: "The rest" that "is silence."

As a psychological state guilt too can be a mystery; it is the one on which Kafka is the supreme expert, in fact. It easily exists independent of responsibility. Guilt can shrug off even an exculpatory verdict. Kafka gives us our modern epic of polysemous guilt in *The Trial*. Like *The Metamorphosis*, it too begins immediately following a mystery, the accusation against Joseph K. One man goes to bed human and wakes up a bug; another goes to sleep innocent and wakes up guilty. Life really is like that.

The nature of Kafka's religious beliefs—Thomas Mann called him "a religious humorist"—is itself mysterious; however, all his best stories have a spiritual aura about them. His mysteries are more archaic and run deeper than the positivistic mysteries conceived by Poe and Conan Doyle or the psychological extravaganzas of Gothic novels from *The Castle of Otranto* to *Dracula*.

The divine mystery and the murder mystery are linked by nothing more than semantics. Murder mysteries are locks with keys, both manufactured at the same time. They had better have a key or what we are left with is a thirteen-line sonnet. You might suppose that the best of such stories would be those with the cleverest plots; but, in fact, the unlocking is secondary to the locksmith. What we want is to sit alongside our favorite detective, to drink with, to have a smoke beside him. He reassures us. He sets the world to rights, fingering the innocent as well as the guilty, making sense of it all. What he dispels isn't mystery, though, but mystification. That is an ethical act, not a spiritual one. The facts of the case must not only be worthy of the detective but fitted to his or her style. Miss Marple would be, not out of her depth perhaps, but certainly out of place on the mean streets of Los Angeles. Sherlock Holmes needs his London and its fog. As dissolvers of mystifications, detectives are hard-headed, with thick skulls around Cartesian brains. The problems they solve have no spiritual dimension; however, the

best detectives always do. This is because they see and suffer from a human condition they know more about than those around them. Only the most diabolical villains can approach them in this regard, like Moriarty, that mathematical immoralist.

Drop Hercule Poirot into the world of *The Metamorphosis* and both would be shattered. The murder mystification is devised to be explained. Kafka's mysteries are not, in accord with Klaren Verheim's proverb: "Whatever can be explained can be explained away." An unsolved murder in a detective novel is simply a cheat. There's no use claiming that the daring author has transcended convention by violating our expectations when what he's really done is fail to fulfill convention's just demands, the just demand for justice. Such an author attempts to get credit for a course he hasn't taken—and extra credit, at that. It is much the same with religious mystification, the charlatanism of the spirit, meretricious shows of ritual, incantations, smells and bells. The state of California churns out spanking new religions at almost the same pace as flashy movies, the kind that, even in its Golden Age, a bitter Scott Fitzgerald dismissed as "wet goods for children." Bad movies and bad religions depict their insects because it's all gotten up, "special effect." There's really no bug there at all.

Historical mysteries result from our inability to establish objectively the causes of events. History means "inquiry," but into what? Into past events, one says, though this is no real answer. After all, history is not chronicle, not this event then that one, any more than a series of unconnected events constitute the plot of a story. History is a tale of causes-and-effects and so must be shaped by the minds of historians and these seldom limit themselves to what can be objectively established. Where's the fun in that, after all? In one direction historiography dissolves into psychological speculation, what is called psycho-history; in another it devolves into mere docudrama.

Heinrich von Kleist, among Kafka's favorite authors incidentally, gives an example of how an historical mystery may be clarified by psychological speculation. He does this in his essay called "On the Gradual Fabrication of Thoughts While Speaking." Here he writes of the Comte de Mirabeau's famously consequential speech of June 23, 1789. It's notable that, up till then, the Count's speeches before the estates had urged moderation. In effect, Kleist ascribes one of the

principal sparks detonating the French Revolution to Mirabeau's all but unconscious inspiration, provoked by the appearance of Henri Évrard, Marquis de Dreux-Brézé, the King's Master of Ceremonies.

The King having enjoined the estates to adjourn, his Master of Ceremonies later returned to the hall to find the members still present, and asked them if they had not heard the royal command.

"Yes," answered Mirabeau, "we have heard the King's command. . ." I am certain that he made this affable start without the faintest prescience of the bayonet thrust with which he was to conclude.

"Yes, Monsieur," he repeats, "we have heard it. . ." Clearly he has no idea of what he is about.

"But by what right," he continues, whereupon a fresh source of stupendous ideas opens up to him, "do you proclaim commands to us? We are the representatives of the Nation!"

This is exactly what he needs, and leaping to the pinnacle of audacity, he cries, "The Nation *issues* commands. It does not *receive* them. And to make myself absolutely clear to you"—only now does he hit on the words that express the total opposition for which his soul stands armed—

"you may tell your King that we will not leave our places except at the point of the bayonet."

The mystery: why did Mirabeau invoke the bayonet? The answer: simply because it tore out of the momentum of his own words. Well, why not? As an historian of a moment, what Kleist tells us is more penetrating than what the textbooks have to say.

Mysteries are ubiquitous. People are called mysterious when their origins are unknown; because of this their motives, aims, and purposes are apt to be considered, at the least, suspicious. Twain had good reason to call his last novel *The Mysterious Stranger*. Its hero is Satan.

Sex is a mystery to virgins, one that even experience may not dispel.

The mystery of genius? If it were explicable we would have to call it talent.

According to Kafka, the real mysteries of life aren't hidden at all, are not the clever, oddly reassuring crimes of the detective novels. They are the accusations lodged against us, the secure positions we cannot quite manage to clutch, the metamorphoses we undergo. These we must endure but it is hard to understand—to depict—them just because they are always before us.

When I was a boy, the local shoe store had a fluoroscope, a contraption about the size of a washing machine. You'd try on your new Keds, stick your feet into a pair of slots, push a button, and look at the bones inside your feet inside the sneakers. Highly dangerous, but a good afternoon's entertainment, and instructive, too.

* * *

EDITOR'S NOTE

I discovered these notes—untitled and uncorrected—in Fein's file for 1983. As *Aristocratic Democracy*, the last of his three books, came out in October of that year, the notes probably date from the end of August or early September.

In many respects what I am calling "On Mystery" is typical of Fein's posthumous papers: free-floating, preceded by no definite thesis, yet conveying a sense of unity. Also, as in many of Fein's writings, Kafka looms large.

The personal nature of Sidney Fein's affection for Franz Kafka is apparent. He says Kafka had been a consolation to him even before he understood anything about Kafka and his work. "I couldn't grasp anything; I only knew it was good," he wrote elsewhere. Fein shows what a large return a living reader can earn on the sympathy he invests in a dead writer. This reminds me of what Kafka said of Kierkegaard. In his letters to Max Brod Kafka is sometimes harshly critical of the Dane, but he was also fascinated by him and read every one of Kierkegaard's books he could lay his hands on. In his *Diary*, Kafka says of Kierkegaard, "He bears me out like a friend." As Kierkegaard served Kafka—and not merely in the matter of their broken engagements—so Kafka did Fein.

These notes contrast the mysteries to be found in Kafka to what is called the mystery novel or the detective story. The penultimate paragraph sums up this theme with Fein reporting on the way

Kafka saw the matter. Here he is clearly alluding to something Kafka said and I believe I have tracked it down. In Gustav Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka*, a book Fein owned, the author teases young Janouch for reading "the latest installment of a detective serial" and also for being ashamed to be caught at it. When Janouch hastens to dismiss the story as "rubbish," Kafka ribs him: "Do you call rubbish the literature which earns the editor most money?" But then he turns serious:

Detective stories are always concerned with the solution of mysteries which are hidden behind extraordinary occurrences. But in real life it's absolutely the opposite. The mystery isn't hidden in the background. On the contrary! It stares one in the face. It's what is obvious. So we do not see it. Everyday life is the greatest detective story ever written. Every second, without noticing we pass by thousands of corpses and crimes. That's the routine of our lives . . .

Fein felt much the same way, apparently. Kafka's heroes—the two K's, Gregor, the Officer—all are blinded by routine. All are caught in the mystery that stares them in the face but which they fail to see.

A final note: In the end, Fein's publisher decided that the first edition of *Aristocratic Democracy* would have no cover illustration.

8