MASTER OF THE ROLLS AND READER OF SOULS: READING KAFKA AND JUDGING OURSELVES

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Focused on the future of learning
The intervening episodes show Josef K trying to outwit and outmaneuver the enigmatic “court” that has apparently arrested him.

He does this by trying to manipulate and motivate others to suit his own ends, and never enters into meaningful relations with anyone including his own family.

This paper reads the tale as a dreamlike “psychodrama” in which the protagonist K is a tragic “hero” doomed by his own character, principally the failing of hubris consisting in his confidence in his own rationality and powers of logic and analysis.

This reading is informed by biographical details of Kafka, who was a supremely introspective and self-reflective writer.
Kafka was a successful corporate counsel who combined skill in working with ideas and with words and who rose to the rank of Chief Legal Counsel for a large Workers Compensation organization.

He was consumed by the need to write in a way that would stir others with powerful words that would act as “an axe for the frozen sea inside us”.

Kafka was a Jew with a philosophical and spiritual\mystical approach to religion which highlighted the Fall of Man and the necessity of humanity reconciling with itself for redemption and approach to God.

Kafka was a humanist, widely read in 7 languages, a technophile who enjoyed films and the theatre, but who supremely valued writing as a human achievement.
Some[1]one [Kafka] must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong [or necessary], he was arrested. ...

“Telling tales” was Kafka’s way of entering into relations with others (readers), at which he was a (self-admitted) failure interpersonally.

What is necessary in life, transcending knowledge and morality, is to enter into genuine, meaningful relations with others.

Kafka had few successful interpersonal relations – engaged three times, twice to the same woman; and estranged from his father and mother.
Writing was Kafka’s way of entering into meaningful relations with his readers.
In Kafka’s view humanity can only redeem itself by transcending its natural hostility to others through meaningful relations which might lead to human solidarity.
Such relations with others supersede concerns for knowledge and mundane morality in favor of an attempt to enter into divine justice.
Josef K is incapable of suicide because of his overpowering ego, but is motivated to murder his soul in order to live on untroubled by any concerns for others.

In this sense The Trial is a prequel to A Christmas Carol by Dickens, an author Kafka highly admired. Josef K becomes a “Scrooge”.

While condemning Josef K to a less than human life, Kafka redeems his own life by passing the tale on to others.
The present reading supports Auden’s view that Kafka best captures the spirit of the modern age in which we find ourselves between possessing godlike power flowing from science and technology, while at the same time persisting in brutality and perpetrating atrocities which can only be described as inhuman.

Our souls can only be redeemed through solidarity with others, beginning with the smallest family groups and eventually extending to the world.

Judges must judge themselves on the degree to which they try to enter into meaningful relations with all before them.
Kafka points to a type of “grassroots” campaign for justice which starts with interpersonal relations.

Justice in this conception requires more than formal legal categories and must comprehend and work with the particularities of individuals and groups.

This paper is an attempt to do justice to Kafka through reading his powerful words as “an axe for the frozen sea inside us”.

Conclusions:

- “Citizen” is not a human identity today any more than “consumer”
- Justice can come from the “bottom up” – from relations to respect and thence to rights

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Thanks!

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