

KAFKA, PIRANDELLO, AND THE IRONY OF IRONIC INDETERMINACY

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In a certain kind of comedy the hero abandons all objective norms and seeks to exploit other persons for private gain; Jonson's *Volpone*, Molière's *Tartuffe*, Goldoni's *The Liar*, or Kleist's *The Broken Jug* might serve as examples. Despite the regnant negativity of these works, norms are still presupposed as a measure against which the audience can recognize negativity as negative. The hero eventually falls victim to his own illicit behavior, and order is restored. In the works under discussion in this paper, all norms have been abandoned; everything, including all unstated norms of measure, is ironized.

Irony of this kind -- I'd like to call it absolute irony -- is not only all-pervasive, it transcends the work's object-level and functions on a meta-level. The artist creates ironic distance not only toward the characters but also toward the work; he no longer believes that it carries meaning. Absolute irony consists -- to paraphrase Hegel's account of romantic irony, with which it shares certain features -- in the fact that everything that begins as beautiful, noble, and interesting later destroys itself and seeks its opposite; enjoyment is found in the discovery that goals, interests, and character are nothing (Hegel 11:80).¹ This loss of meaning may become unwittingly comic as the writer's only topic remains the difficulties of writing. Absolute irony finds everything null, ultimately even itself, which is empty and devoid of substance. Nothing is to be taken seriously. Hegel writes: "Whoever has reached such a standpoint of divine originality, looks down from on high at all other persons, who are pronounced narrow-minded and dull, inasmuch as justice, ethical substance, and so forth still count for them as enduring, binding, and essential" (13:95, my translation).

The hero, or author, enters into a contradictory position, whereby he recognizes, or refuses to recognize, that the negation of external value derives from an internal source that is itself without value, thus the negation is no longer tenable. The negation of value itself lacks validity and so cancels itself. Though absolute irony generally claims to be self-reflective, it also purports to present negativity as permanent rather than as self-reflexively self-negating. Moreover, the argument that ironic works unveil the illusory nature of truth and reality and are thereby truer and more insightful than competing texts is no less self-canceling. In works of absolute irony, negation and self-reflection transcend the particular intentions of the author and unintentionally reintroduce a transcendence of negativity.

II

Let us return to some of these points through a brief analysis of Kafka's *The Trial*,² and begin with what I call the existential-theological reading of the novel: Josef K. appears guilty and is unable or unwilling to face his guilt.³ Evidence for this reading is plentiful. If the Law is to be believed, Josef K. is guilty, for the Law is attracted to those who are guilty. Though Josef K. asserts his innocence before a Law he does not even know, his rhetoric and behavior point toward guilt. He is forever apologizing for the actions of the court, suggesting indirectly that what is his fault (*Schuld*) may also be his guilt (*Schuld*). Josef K.'s act of continually seeking out the court seems to indicate, moreover, that he is not content with himself, that he is alienated from his full potential. His entire humdrum existence and the occasional suggestion that he has not lived as he should have evoke parallels with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich.

Evidence suggests that K. should either become more introspective and self-reflective (rather than criticizing the court and its officials, or in the analogy the doorkeeper) or walk away from the court and its authorities and turn to a sphere of action and life rather than submission and lifelessness.⁴ K., it

seems, adopts the pose of victim merely to deflect attention from his shortcomings--which range from callousness toward others, including the poor and the victimized, to his lack of any social embeddedness. The suggestion is also made that K., who has an apple for breakfast on the day he is arrested, is guilty insofar as everyone is guilty before this quasi-existential, quasi-theological court.

But the court that accuses Josef K. of being guilty, can give no grounds for its decision and may be ironized; thus, we come to a second interpretation, what I call the social-political reading.⁵ K. himself openly asserts his innocence, and no definite accusations are made. To believe a Law that is incapable of grounding its accusations would be absurd. The Law's validity is nowhere questioned, its executants are dubious, ignorant, and corrupt, and its precepts include oppression, humiliation, cruelty, and violence. We should doubt a Law that cannot be scrutinized, that demands blind faith in its priests. The Law's incomprehensibility and impenetrability, the limits of thought and of resistance, only encourage blind faith and submission to characters such as Huld, who claim to know but cannot defend their positions and do not have to substantiate them, for such substantiation is deemed impossible.

The existential--theological interpretation and the social-political reading, though at odds with one another, seem able to substantiate themselves with evidence from the novel. Indeed, in many cases the same evidence appears to support either reading. The scene where the people in the court gallery must wear cushions on their heads to keep from getting bruised by the ceilings might symbolize, along with the attic rooms, the court's extreme height, thus its transcendent authority; or it may suggest the court's oppressiveness, as with the stooped whipper and the stooped chaplain; or even the stuffiness and heaviness of the attic air. This difficulty or dilemma of interpretation is especially clear in the shame of Josef K.'s death (Sokel 30-31). Is it the shame of Josef K.'s refusal (or inability) to understand what the Law expects of him, shame at his unwillingness to commit sentence on himself? Or is it the shame of a court that orders such injustices, the dishonor and senselessness of murder? To make matters more complex, perhaps it is the disgrace of Josef K.'s failure to resist such injustice.

The critic who takes the text's ambiguities seriously--evidence speaks both for and against the guilty verdict--may be led to transcend these two readings and see in the text a self-reflexive moment, a hermeneutic interpretation, according to which Josef K.'s encounter with the court is very much analogous to the reader's experience of the novel. The figural narration and mutual impotence of Josef K. and the reader before seemingly arbitrary signs reinforce this third interpretation. The text is rich in self-reflexive moments: the book in Josef K.'s reenactment of the arrest; the ink bottles and the printed matter in the whipping room; the court books; the important introduction of a painter; Block's studious but slow reading; the church as a work of art into which Josef K. enters; and most important, the parable of the door keeper, in which the message seems to be that the message, if there is one, cannot be communicated.⁶

The court is characterized by what many contemporary critics would call literary language: it is paradoxical, ambiguous, inconsistent; it draws attention to its own inadequacies. Like K., the reader tries to grasp the situation and remains frustrated. The text encourages us to look for explanations of guilt without, however, supplying answers to those questions. We, like K., become utterly confused, and we, like K., have no recourse to objective evidence. We are restricted by figural narration and narrated monologue. Even the others, whom Josef K. and the reader hear, can offer no useful information on the court. Thus the novel would be, in this hermeneutic reading, a novel of absolute irony. There is no truth; if there were truth we couldn't know it, and if there were truth and we knew it, we still couldn't communicate it.

The earliest Kafka criticism tended toward an existential-theological discussion of K.'s guilt (the first reading) or a social-political analysis of the court and its bureaucratic make-up (the second reading). More

recent criticism has tended to focus on the text's hermeneutic and self-reflective dimensions, though, not surprisingly, critics continue to support the existential and political readings with new and imaginative arguments.⁷ None of the readings, however, attempts to integrate the thrust of the other two; the hermeneutic interpretation comes closest insofar as it addresses the ambiguities of the first two, but it leaves behind the content of each and presents a merely formal *Aufhebung*.

A more complex reading that integrates the other three,⁸ we might call the "metahermeneutic" reading. If our experience of the text is analogous to Josef K.'s experience of the court, and the court, which can give no account of itself, manipulates the submissive Block and brutally murders Josef K., the novel could be said to integrate a self-reflexive dimension into the social-political reading. The novel is also about a particular kind of art or form of reading and analogous thought pattern that embraces contradiction and easily passes over into brutality. The moment of violence is often just under the surface in Kafka's texts and relates to the passage from relativistic thought to the arbitrary wielding of power. One returns via the hermeneutic reading to the social-political interpretation, but now as criticism of a particular kind of literature and thought, that of absolute irony. If the questions of K. (and of the reader) cannot be answered, the court and the text have the power to manipulate us, to encourage submission, or to introduce acts of violence. The existential reading reenters here as well, for the "metahermeneutic" reading is a call to the reader to act coherently, consistently, responsibly in the face of such brutality, to question the authority of a text that itself erases the concept of authority. Kafka's novel need not self-destruct: it criticizes a particular type of reading, including a particular kind of interpretation that allows for this consequential brutality against which the absolute ironist has no arguments (because all arguments have been undermined), and so transcends this merely negative reading. The novel contains and criticizes, and is therefore not exhausted by, absolute irony.

III

The structure by which a work that appears to embody absolute irony but, on closer analysis, points toward the ironization of absolute irony, is also evident in Pirandello's *Each in His Own Way*.⁹ Here, however, it may be permissible to focus on an undermining of not only the reader's views but also the author's intentions. In some comedies, we see on the object-level, the level of action, the pursuit of a false goal. In works of absolute irony the pursuit of a false goal takes place on the meta-level. The author purports to write a work about nothing. Comedy is the genre of subjectivity, as Hegel recognized (15:521), and thus the genre of reflection. The comedy of absolute irony views a false goal reflexively. It creates a work, not just a character or set of characters, which embodies negativity and purposefulness. Just as the more traditional comedy turns on itself exhibiting the self-destruction of the hero's false goals, so does the comedy of absolute irony turn on itself. Intentionally perhaps a work of absolute irony, Pirandello's play is in effect, and behind the author's back, a work more of intersubjectivity than of absolute irony.¹⁰ In trying to say there is no meaning or truth, the artist ends up making a great artwork. A larger spirit seems to work through the author, transforming negation into hidden harmony.

Each in His Own Way is more openly self-reflexive than Kafka's novel. The play-within-a-play format allows for interpretations from within the play itself. Among these are direct references to the meaninglessness and absurdity of Pirandello's plays. As in Romantic irony, the author is directly named. The play, which is broken off before the third act, seems to be a play about the impossibility of a play, in the words of one character, the play is "a joke on the audience! What's it all mean? No one knows what it means! No one can make head or tail of it!" (Pirandello, *Opere* [hereafter P.O.] 4:180; Bentley 316), or in the words of another, the play is "Nonsense! Just plain damn nonsense" (P.O. 4:181; Bentley 317).

Despite the apparent negation of art and elevation of absolute irony (the play even opens with a discussion of the relativity of all views), the drama has a highly speculative structure. The play's suggestion of the end of art derives not, as it seems, from art's anarchic self-destruction but from its fulfillment. The play is about the relation of life and art, and the artwork, it turns out, is a prolepsis of life, preparing the words and images for a reconciliation between warring parties.

The play parodies a tragic world-view, in particular the inescapability of tragedy. An apparent tragedy of collision arises when two characters each recognize the validity of the other's position and thus change roles, eventually attacking their earlier stances: "Why, here the two of them were on opposite sides of the same question. They both changed their minds at the same time, each coming around to the view of the other. Naturally, they collided in the process" (P.O. 4:191; Bentley 328). Rather than suggesting inevitable conflict or an "anything goes" mentality, the split indicates the potential for recognizing the validity of another stance, the stance originally negated, as well as a contingent inability to recognize the instability of each position as it is embraced. This structure of reversal, if applied self-reflexively, may imply that the negation of art and meaning is, behind its own back, an affirmation of art and meaning.

The structure is dialectical, and the play is sprinkled on the finite level with precisely such dialectical insights: that refusing to have an opinion is a way of having one (P.O. 4:150; Bentley 279); that talking about why one shouldn't talk is still talk (P.O. 4:151; Bentley 280); that the claim that nothing is true derives from a deeper supposition of truth (P.O. 4:169; Bentley 305). In each case a negative position passes over into the object of its own negation. The audience articulates this point, though it does so critically: "Nobody knows what it's all about! / First, it's this, and then it's something else! / First they said one thing, but now they say the opposite!" (P.O. 4:180; Bentley 316). Pirandello shows that reality, or what we take to be reality, is not fixed, which is not to say that everything is illusion (cf. P.O. 4:183; Bentley 321 and P.O. 4:194; Bentley 332). Rather, reality can be transformed by illusion; in that sense reality is not fixed; in that sense what was taken to be illusion can become reality.

Art, rather than being mere illusion or the illusion of an illusion, is the norm by which life rises to a position of intersubjectivity, as is demonstrated in the fulfillment of Act 2 in the Second Interlude.¹¹ Delia Moreno and Baron Nuti break through their mask of hatred and embrace one another. Illusion is pierced by reality but a reality prepared for by illusion. The play does not end in disruption and chaos; that is mere illusion. It ends, rather, in fulfillment and harmony. Though the heroes earlier reacted with rage at seeing their lives mirrored before them (they object to accusations of ignorance and immorality), they do not leave the theater. This suggests a structure by which the heroes want to see themselves mirrored, yet they want the mirror to lead them to a better, not a weaker, reality. Art's imitation of life is scorned; but life's imitation of art is embraced.

*

The most interesting ironic works are not those that end in nonsense, nothingness, or despair, but those that unwittingly lead to a form of affirmation, derived from the ironization of irony or the negation of negativity. In these works of Kafka and Pirandello we see that a layer of meaning lies hidden. In one case the author has created an extraordinarily complex work whose affirmative moments are not easily discernible; in the other the moment of affirmation is unveiled against the author's intentions by way of the reader's attention to the work's independent dialectical structures. To put it in the paradoxical language of an irony that ironizes itself, Kafka's world may be so Kafkaesque that it is no longer simply Kafkaesque; it is beyond mere despair and chaos. Pirandello's world may be so rich in anti-pirandellism that his texts mean more than their apparently reliable ironic characters think they mean. The true irony

of ironic indeterminacy is its passage beyond irony; otherwise, irony is too earnest and stable, all-pervasive except toward itself.

Notes

¹ My reading of Hegel's critique of romantic irony as extendable to the present is supported by Desmond, *Art* 114-20 and *Beyond Hegel* 292-300 and Houlgate 148-53 and 170-71.

² Some readers may question my discussion of Kafka as comic. Consider, however, the novel's all-pervasive ironic structures; its absurdly comic situations, such as the sequence of lawyers who have themselves repeatedly thrown down the stairs in order to tire out a court official; and the author's own laughter when reading *The Trial* aloud to Max Brod and others. Thus for various reasons I find that the weakest reading of *The Trial* elevates the moment of despair and thereby reduces the work to a self-pitying novel of suffering. In Kafka we can nonetheless see to what extent modern comedy has removed itself from the lightness Hegel so much admired in Aristophanes (15:552 and 15:569).

³ Two paradigmatically clear and relatively early articulations of this reading are Emrich and Ziolkowski.

⁴ The ambiguity within the existential-theological reading need not go unnoticed.

⁵ The most popular expression of this reading arises in Adorno's brief comments on Kafka.

⁶ The most important moments of the hermeneutic interpretation, beyond the ambiguity of the conflicting readings, are the analogy between Josef K. and the reader, which has been articulated by Kontje, and the novel's self-reflective dimensions, which have been pursued by Dowden. Attentiveness to the self-reflective aspects of Kafka's texts generally is a dominant tendency of current Kafka criticism. See, for example, the works of Corngold and Koelb.

⁷ See, for example, Lasine, who recently argues for K.'s guilt and with this his reduction of truth.

⁸ The only way to harmonize the existential and political readings of the novel might be to see K.'s guilt in his lack of resistance to the court, that he is not apriori guilty but guilty in his non-resistance. The only way to integrate these two moments with the self-reflective or hermeneutic aspects of the novel is to read the work as an indictment of the very indeterminacy elevated by so many Kafka critics.

One previous critic to attempt a synthesis of the existential and hermeneutic readings is Corngold. Our differences would seem to outweigh the similarities: where Corngold sees K. as a (potential) writer, which Corngold supports primarily with contextual evidence, I see in him a reader, a position supported more by textual evidence; where Corngold sees no redemption in writing, a position partly supported on the level of authorial intention, I see hidden redemption and support the value of this redemption by aesthetic and logical arguments; and where Corngold sees K.'s guilt (and the need for his annihilation) in his illusory belief that writing can be faithful to experience or ethical, I see K.'s guilt in his passivity vis-à-vis an unethical institution or structure. Corngold weighs in on the side of the priest, but the priest's message may be shown to be self-undermining and K.'s position not without its moment of legitimacy. Finally, it seems possible to read "The Penal Colony," which Corngold brings to bear on *The Trial*, as a story that is as much about a crisis in ethical norms, the dual untenability of arbitrary absolutes and relativistic indecision, as it is about writing and guilt.

⁹ Viewing Kafka and Pirandello in the light of absolute irony suggests certain affinities between them. As far as I know, only one critic has commented on their similarities; Bentley does so briefly and in passing (148-49 and 151).

¹⁰ This dialectical strategy could be applied to other works by Pirandello, for example, his splendidly complex *Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*. The play to an extent parodies busybodies and superficial certainty-seekers, but it also mocks Laudisi's laziness (if there is no truth, why search for any), his callousness, and, taken self-reflexively, the titular view that there is no truth: if any position is right, then so, too, the stance that rejects the position that any position is right. The text means more than its apparently reliable spokesman Laudisi thinks it means. The noncommittal ironist is more concerned with demonstrating that truth does not exist than with averting the pain of the Ponza-Frola family (Oliver 35-46). Absolute irony, as illustrated by the play's title and its advocate Laudisi, is not only intellectually self-destructive, it is ethically damaging. Laudisi, unable to persuade other characters and ineffectual at preventing further insensitive inquiries, only *seems* to come into his own; by a series of dialectical inversions the position he advocates is actually undermined. This dialectic is missed in the more straightforward readings of the play from Vittorini 120-28 to Biundo 123-40.

¹¹ The structures of intersubjectivity are prepared for earlier, as, for example, when Diego states: "We all yearn to marry, and for our whole life long, some one particular soul" (P.O. 4:163; Eng 297).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
SIBYLLE BENNINGHOFF-LÜHL: Das Theater im Namen: Franz Kafkas "Teater von Oklahama"	2
RICHARD HEINEMANN: The Bureaucrat as Nomad: The Search for Community in Kafka's <i>Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer</i>	21
LYNDA HOFFMAN-JEEP: Deconstructing the Lover's Distance: Ria Endres' <i>Milena antwortet: Ein Brief</i>	30
MARJORIE E. RHINE: Post-Modernity in Kafka's <i>Briefe an Felice</i>	35
MARK W. ROCHE: Kafka, Pirandello, and the Irony of Ironic Indeterminacy	42
JOYCE S. WALKER: Armoring or Fetish? Corporeal and Sartorial Armoring in Franz Kafka's <i>Die Verwandlung</i>	48
LOUIS WEISS: "Kafka's Flowers"	58
Announcements of the Kafka Society of America Second Edition of Kafka Bibliography Election Results for New Vice President Term 1995-1996 Kafka Society Program for MLA Convention Program 1995	59
Renewal Form	61
Back Issue Order Form	62

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