Kafka Beyond the Kafkaesque: Reading Laughter in the 'Dystopia' of *The Castle*

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Abstract: Franz Kafka's fiction has been read as presenting instances of especially deprived subjectivities. Kafka's protagonists are seen as being alienated from others around them. They are uncritical servants of tyrannical bureaucratic organizations and offer no resistance to the frightening impact of the forces of power, technological surveillance, and domination that constitute the episteme that they inhabit. Their situation, to put it succinctly, is Kafkaesque- defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as "of, relating to, or suggestive of Franz Kafka or his writings; especially having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality." The present paper argues that Kafka adopts an *ironical* attitude towards his protagonists as they seek to control the accidents and surprises, they encounter in their lives and render them manageable. It reads K.'s meeting with the official Burgel from the Castle in Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) as being an instance of an accidental and humorous situation that critiques the *metaphysical dualities* characterizing human existence - such as freedom and determination- by reflecting ironically on them. This humor is of course humor at the expense of the protagonist, but it is also humoring that points to the (futile) human endeavor of seeking to achieve *absolute freedom* in the world. The paper, thus, attempts to establish an association between Kafka's ironical attitude towards K. in *The Castle* and the critique of the nightmarish, terrifying, and ultimately *dystopian* aspects of Cartesian modernity that such an attitude leads to.

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> …Wouldn't you say that in such circumstances the complaints of the secretaries are highly justifiable?' K. had already spent some time half asleep, and now his slumbers were disturbed again. Why all this, he asked himself, why all this? From beneath his lower eyelids, he observed Burgel not as an official who was discussing difficult questions with him, but simply as something that kept him from sleeping, and he couldn't see any other point to him.
> …K. was asleep. It was not real sleep; he could hear what Burgel was saying perhaps better than during his early period of wakeful exhaustion, word after word came to his ear, but his troublesome consciousness was gone; he felt free, Burgel no longer had a hold on him… He felt as if he had won a great victory, as if a company had gathered to celebrate it, and he or someone else was raising a glass of champagne in honor of that victory. And so that everyone would know what it was about, the struggle and the victory were repeated all over again, or perhaps not repeated, perhaps they were now only taking place but had been celebrated earlier, and because, luckily, the outcome was certain there was constant celebration. K. was fighting a naked secretary who greatly resembled the statue

> of a Greek god, and who was getting the worst of it. It was very comical, and K. smiled slightly in his sleep to see the secretary's proud bearing upset again and again by K.'s advance…Was it combat at all? There was no serious obstacle, only a squeal from the secretary now and then. That Greek god squealed like a girl being tickled. And finally, he was gone; K. was alone in a large space…Only the champagne glass lay on the ground, broken, and K. trod it to pieces. But the broken glass stung, and he woke again with a start… (Kafka, *The Castle*, 229-231)

Passages such as the above abound in Kafka's fiction. They detail the experience of the protagonist that seems to be located at a juncture lying between dichotomies such as half asleep and full sleep, real and 'unreal' sleep, troublesome consciousness and freedom, comedy and combat, struggle and victory, and sleep and wakefulness.

How does one account for the representation of such an experience in fiction? What allows for such a situation to be realized in writing? I would argue that it is precisely the manner in which Kafka's text undercuts and subverts the traditional binary between 'plausibility' and 'accident' in a (novel's) narrative that makes it possible for such situations to appear in them. This subversion works simultaneously at two levels. One, it underlines the limitations of the manner in which plausibility and accident have shaped narratives (of novels) and two, that it deliberately colludes and corrupts these two categories by presenting situations that can perhaps be best described as accidentally plausible and plausibly accidental.

In the given scenario from *The Castle*, for instance, Kafka undercuts the value of plausibility in the narrative by rendering the plausible vulnerable to interception by the accidental. If K. were to not fall asleep, he would have to endure Burgel's long-drawn discourse on the problems of being the secretary of an official in the Castle. Moreover, he would still have not come to know the reason as to why he was summoned by Erlanger, apart from being asked to 'return' Freida to Klamm. In other words, it seems that the choices that K. apparently enjoys are no real choices as such because they cannot be graded in terms of their value or importance. They are virtually indistinguishable from each other. In other words, every option that K. exercises including say, of leaving the quarters of the Castle-officers immediately or speaking to Burgel about his own appointment, will be as *accidental* and *implausible* a choice as any other.

How does the reader of Kafka's fiction react to the kind of scenarios described thus far? These situations actually simultaneously invite and reject the reader's attempts to identify with the protagonist. This becomes possible as they entail a dual movement where the reader is invited to imagine as to how the said situation would play out if he/she would have faced it and, simultaneously, the narrative continuously alerts him/her of the fact that the particular scenario might be specific to the protagonist in question and it would not be possible for it to be shared (not just with the reader but also with the other characters in the novel).

In other words, the scenarios such as those detailed above confound the readers of Kafka's fiction because they are situations that serve as the sites of the *contingent*. Through their carefully organized structure, they render metaphysical dualities say, of freedom and

determination, contingent and do not let the reader identify with the protagonist who experiences them. This begs the question as to what, then, Kafka's writings involve if they can thus be regarded as sites where contingency is iterated without entailing the sacrifice of any of its potency on account of its 'situation.'

The contingent, I would like to argue, thoroughly encompasses the protagonist and reader's perspective and does not allow him or her the critical distance necessary to make any judgements on its nature. This precisely is what the Kafkaesque entails, a 'dystopian' sense of bleakness about the nature of human existence caught in a situation which makes it impossible for the character and quality of the situation to be estimated or comprehended.

Yet, the world of Kafka's novels and short stories is also marked by comedy and laughter. Kafka is himself supposed to have laughed aloud while reading out some of the otherwise bleak and disconcerting incidents from the manuscripts of his novels such as the arrest of Josef K. for no apparent reason at the beginning of *The Trial* (1925). Recent criticism has attempted to account for the laughter evoked by Kafka's writings by explicating its relation with the question of freedom and determination. Dimitris Vardoulakis in *Freedom from the Free Will: On Kafka's Laughter*, for instance, has argued that Kafka laughs at the commonplace assumption (in Western thinking) that there is absolute freedom that might be available to human subjects (Vardoulakis, vi-vii). He further suggests that it would be a mistake for Kafka's readers and critics to construe such laughter as being merely critical of the nature of human existence that pines for absolute freedom when the latter is so absolutely unavailable (and, therefore, non-existent). Rather, they must understand that Kafka's laughter is also constructive as it mediates the binary between freedom and the lack of it in an alternate manner.

Political thinking in Kafka's writings, argues Vardoulakis, is thus linked to situations of laughter as Kafka laughs not just at the individual's conception of his or her free-will but also at its underlying presupposition, i.e. the assumed rigid and irreparable separation between the domain of freedom of the will and the (post-Lapsarian) domain of submission, imprisonment, and confinement within governmentality and bureaucratic institutions in the phenomenal world. In other words, Vardoulakis suggests that mediated or ethical freedom in Kafka is freedom from the various forms of entrapping cages found in his fiction through the recognition that freedom is not freedom of the individual-will but rather a freedom from necessary entailments of understanding freedom in terms of individual-will and agency.

Freedom and hope in Kafka's writings are therefore, according to Vardoulakis, available in the 'here' and the 'now' as the latter do not assume the priority of their availability in the past i.e. in the pre-Lapsarian scenario. This critique of the pre-Lapsarian scenario also makes Kafka in his novels move beyond a nostalgic and retrospective understanding of freedom as he is able to lend ontological priority to mediated freedom over the freedom of the will. In other words, for Kafka, the Fall is determined by freedom and not vice-versa (Vardoulakis 2-25).

Here, I would like to submit my reservations against the second part of Vardoulakis's argument. He correctly highlights Kafka's critique of the conception of a transcendental and

absolute freedom but errs, I contend, in reading Kafka's mediation of the freedom and determination or un-freedom binary as being necessarily productive and as preceding the schism between the pre and post-Lapsarian worlds. For Kafka's laughter to entail a programme of (systematic) construction and to precede the Fall, it would have to have a temporal and spatial perspective that allows it to scrutinise freedom and determination from the outside of both of them. Such a perspective is not available in Kafka's fictional universe which is, as underlined earlier, thoroughly marked by the contingent.

If, for Vardoulakis, the contingent must entail something, then it merely entails the *acknowledgement*, as suggested by Philip Weinstein in his magisterial study of Modernist writing titled *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, that a perspective outside freedom and un-freedom is unavailable to the protagonists of modernist texts such as Kafka's and they must, therefore, acknowledge and gracefully accept contingency as being the constitutive *event* of their existence and experience (Weinstein 253). In other words, it seems to me that Kafka laughs not as much on the misplaced human belief in absolute freedom as he does on the *ironical* condition of human existence that must acknowledge the incapability of fulfilling its own limitations and yet simultaneously strive to do exactly the same.

In light of the above description of the manner in which the contingent entails the question of freedom and the lack of it in Kafka's novels and its relationship with the laughter evoked therein, I would like to contend that Kafka's fiction functions in an *ironical* manner. The reader of Kafka's novels is presented with the irony of the contingent situations in which the protagonists find themselves but he or she cannot be provided with an alternative that would shed any light on the contingency of their condition. My contention is based on the manner in which the philosopher Richard Rorty in his well-known account *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* has read the later writings of Jacques Derrida vis-à-vis the questions of irony and contingency (Rorty 122-140).

In the essay titled "From Ironist Theory to Private Allusions: Derrida," Rorty argues that Derrida in his early writings was strained by the question as to what might be the most appropriate method to critique the history of Western metaphysics in that it is a continuous search for ontological presence. Rorty suggests that Derrida felt thus constrained because he was yielding to the demand of presenting a *philosophical argument* of his critique of Heideggerian metaphysics even as he realized that doing so would in itself entail a metaphysical maneuver or gesture. Such a gesture would be the result of the sacrifice that Derrida would have to make of the aspect of *contingency* that is so central to his critique.

Consequently, according to Rorty, Derrida was able to get around such a constraint as he refused to acknowledge any method and/or clearly ascertainable principle or proposition to Deconstruction. Crucially, in his later writings such as *Glas* (1974) and *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980), Rorty further argues, he adopted a deliberately *ironic*, *playful*, and *literary* style of writing (the latter book, for instance, in its very form, satirises epistolary prose and literary conventions such as the envoi) that simply gave up on allowing a philosophical conclusion or insight to be drawn from them. In other words, Derrida

successfully resisted the pressures of metaphysical thinking by not only ironizing the style of his own work but also the conventional expectations of his readers and colleagues from such writing. Such resistance, Rorty suggests, makes Derrida an ironist in the tradition of thinkers and writers such as Georg Hegel, Marcel Proust, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger.

The struggle to come up with a rigorous vocabulary from among that which others have used is what is common among Derrida and the thinkers and writers named in the previous paragraph. Rorty argues that an ironist philosopher like Derrida sees the vocabulary and language that he or she uses as neither neutral or as a mere feature of some universal metalanguage nor as a device to get closer to some mythical real. Rather, the ironist philosopher plays off old vocabulary picked up from existing writing with some new vocabulary picked up from somewhere else to further explicate the irony of his or her own location within a metaphysical discourse. The ironist's vocabulary, in this sense, always reflects the strain that it is subjected to by the contingent and remains fragile and liable to change. Rorty writes:

> I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfils three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (Rorty 73)

This is precisely the aspect of Rorty's argument about Derrida's ironical resolution of the question of the appropriate method to express the contingency in his own thinking that is relevant for our ongoing discussion of the 'siting' of contingency in Kafka's fiction. Derridean strategy about irony is valuable in our attempt to understand Kafka for it entails within itself an alternative manner of 'doing' philosophy that does not see philosophy as a discipline constrained by requirements of a strict distinction from literature and literary conventions. Moreover, Derridean philosophical practice asks of its readers and critics to imagine futures in which irony, playfulness, and a deliberate confusion of genres (both *Glas* and *The Postcard* are books that deliberately defy constraints that would otherwise limit them as belonging to a particular genre of writing) would be re-cognised as 'legitimate' ways of doing philosophy.

Given Kafka's attempts to re-present contingent situations in his fiction and his relentless, simultaneous ironical attempts to not yield to the metaphysical pressure that would entail him sacrificing the force of this contingency in favour of a constructive programme to address the lack of absolute freedom in the world, it would not be out of place here to suggest that Kafka needs to be recognised as an *ironist* as his novels push their readers towards attempting to discover and, consequently, move past newer vocabulary to address the irony of the metaphysical condition in which humanity finds itself.

Derrida himself would certainly have approved of such a suggestion given that his own writing on Kafka deals with the famous parable about seeking entry into the gates of Law (included in

the chapter “In the Cathedral” in *The Trial*) wherein he suggests that the reader’s attempts to make the parable (in the novel) subscribe to a law of genre are as futile as the attempts by the man from the village to enter into the gates of the Law by engaging with the doorkeeper[i] (Derrida, “Before the Law” and “The Law of Genre”). The parable, according to Derrida, in its very structure and form resists the assignation of a particular meaning and interpretation to it even as it tempts its pursuer to attempt precisely the same. Unlike the allegorical and the symbolic, the parable retains an element of folk or pre-structural narrativity that makes it difficult to ascertain the nature of reality which it is supposed to correspond to and address. Consequently, like the parable about the gates of Law in *The Trial*, the reader’s attempts to ‘solve’ and see through any parable in Kafka’s writing only leads him or her onto a labyrinthine path from which there is no clear and distinct exit. The man from the village and the reader of Kafka’s prose works, in this sense, are left to wonder about the precise nature of parables like the two men in Kafka’s short story fragment titled “On Parables.” Kafka writes:

> Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: “Go over”, he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labour were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.
>
> Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.
>
>> Another said: I bet that is also a parable.
>> The first said: You have won.
>> The second said: But unfortunately, only in parable.
>> The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost. (Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories* 457)

As Judith Butler has suggested in her reading of the parable cited above, Kafka’s narratives move away from a Christian and didactic conception of parables which supposes them to be tools that can educate and train their listeners and readers into leading a ‘good life.’[ii] She rightly argues that the “truncated form” of the parable constitutes and interrogates into an irresolvable duality between daily (and real) life and a domain that remains unknown and incomprehensible. The latter persists in its unattainableness as the parable constitutes a specific temporal and spatial configuration that cannot cover the gap that appears to exist between thinking about what lays in the beyond and acting in a way that could lead to its attainment. (Butler, “Kafka’s Parables and Paradoxes”) Hence, even as the first man says “If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares,” he is immediately interrupted by the second who argues, “I bet that is also a parable.”

With regard to the specific temporal and spatial arrangement made by the parable, Butler insightfully suggests that the latter therefore emerges as the *provisional* and *local* limit text-space that exists at the margins of the cares of daily life and does not or has not yet attained the beyond. In this sense, the linguistic and narratorial configurations of Kafka's parables force their readers and listeners to come face to face with the limits of the spatial and temporal configurations of human knowing and comprehension. Further, Butler underlines that such potent *liminality* can provide invaluable insights into relationships constituting our lives that depend on a strict code of departure and arrival as it reflects a situation where one departs without necessarily arriving and thus breaks the promise that hopeful and optimistic investment in futurity usually entails.

Butler specifically highlights two arrangements with regard to the question of departing but not arriving as related above- one, of the relationship between law(s) and reality and if law(s) ever arrive in our lives and two, of the relationship between hoping for or desiring a future which might be redemptive in different ways and the prevalent circumstances that constitute and determine our lives. Butler, in other words, sees Kafka's parables not as statements that attest to the dystopia of our lives, to the nightmarish and terrifying qualities of human existence, or to our subjection to networks and chains of power and governmentality. Rather, she indicates that Kafka needs to be read and understood as one of the most potent critics of Cartesian modernity, the condition that, in a way, gives rises to dystopia and paranoia in the first place.
Thus, this paper has attempted a reading of Kafka's *The Castle* that suggests that Kafka does not merely elucidate the 'dystopia' of the various chains and cages in which humanity is confined, he also points towards a space where the conventional understanding of the relationship between freedom and determination itself is disturbed and re-imagined.

Notes:

i. Both these essays engage with the question of genre and the literary. The latter essay is an engagement with Maurice Blanchot's short fiction titled *The Madness of the Day*. In this piece, Derrida suggests that the encounter between the narrative I in Blanchot's fiction with the genre (assigned by law) that it is supposed to belong to and get appropriated by actually creates a tension that overruns and displaces the purity of the latter by resisting its linearity and refusing to recognise its closure.

ii. Christian understanding of good life entails a believer in the Trinity who, instead of seeking material and physical comfort, invests in human relationships based on trust, sympathy, love, kindness, and forgiveness.

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