

Franz Kafka vs. Sherlock Holmes

Der Heizer in Der Verschollene

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*To Alessandro Piperno
And to his Leo Pontecorvo,
A Kafkaian hero*

An almost indestructible and frequently repeated myth is that of the nearly total “inaccessibility” of Kafka’s fiction. Coming back into vogue in the 1980s in the wake of the success of deconstructionist and post-structuralist approaches, it has recently reappeared, for example, in Oliver Jahraus’s intelligent and well-crafted book, *Kafka: Leben, Schreiben, Machtapparate*. Jahraus’s thesis is suggestive: Kafka’s writing is a labyrinth that tempts the interpreter, pulls her inside and forces a confrontation, but does not actually bring her any place at all, fending off any attack.¹ An idea not dissimilar to that decisively advanced by Giuliano Baioni in *Kafka: letteratura ed ebraismo*, where he observes how Kafka’s images are neither “liberally usable forms” nor “cathartic forms or in any case gratifying in the light of a relationship that connects, even if purely mediately, the horror of the signifier at the liberation of any signified”. Baioni writes:

They do not find within the text a sense that transcends them, they do not positively return, as they make one believe, to a truth beyond their physical beauty. Simply presented as metaphorical material, beautiful but precisely for this reason impermeable to any interpretation, their degree of truth lies uniquely in the function they have of being the cause of a question the reader is induced to create for herself, often unconsciously, an interpretive key to the reading and,

¹ Oliver Jahraus, *Kafka: Leben – Schreiben – Machtapparate* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006), pp. 11-14. As regards the recent and less recent history of “anti-hermeneutic” interpretations of Kafka’s work, see Detlef Kremer, *Kafka und die Hermeneutikkritik*, in *Kafka-Handbuch*, edited by Bettina von Jargow and Oliver Jahraus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 336-352.



as a consequence, to compromise herself, and in a manner for the most part irrecoverable, with this univocal and reassuring interpretation.²

Against such theses it is not worth putting up an argument that too has its own historical evidence. On the contrary, it means that almost every approach to the work of Kafka has revealed itself to be, in one way or another, fruitful, and has generated an immense critical tradition that with great effort has made it out of the shallows of impressionistic or simplistic interpretations. Kafka's writing, notes the same Baioni, indeed makes every attempt at textual interpretation almost impossible, the paradoxical result of which being the exaltation of "the interpretations more than the writing itself";³ thus, it is not the signified of the work to emerge in the continuum represented by the history of its exegesis, but rather the signified of the exegesis itself: a carefully calculated result of Kafka's writing which thereby places not the nature of its meaning at its center, but rather the nature of the relation that every reader creates with that meaning. However, this question risks reducing the relationship between text and interpretation to a vicious circle that, in fact, re-proposes the problem of the inaccessibility of Kafka's writing on another plane. Is there therefore no other solution for criticism than to accept the given un-interpretability of Kafka?

The scant fortune which for some decades now research has enjoyed that does not diverge from this fact and that does not attempt to offer a cure through the always more vast and detailed consideration of the historical, biographical, social, and religious context within the work of Kafka would seem to indicate the existence of a dominant attitude of resignation before the fact of its impenetra-

² Giuliano Baioni, *Kafka: letteratura ed ebraismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), pp. 94-95. See also Claudia Sonino's strongly consistent pages, *Giuliano Baioni. Letteratura ed ebraismo*, in "Scrivo in Tedesco perché sono ebreo". *Canoni, bilanci, prospettive di studio sulla letteratura ebraica-tedesca*, edited by Roberta Ascarelli and Claudia Sonino (Arezzo: Bibliotheca Aretina, 2007), pp. 125-143.

³ Giuliano Baioni, *op. cit.*, p. 92.



ble, if productive, inscrutability. From this point of view, the thematization of the context becomes the skeleton key with which it seems possible to suggest at least the initial conditions for opening up passages in the solid shell that protects the writing's vital heart. Biography, Prague, Judaism, juvenile cultural suggestions: these are the most valued areas research has drawn upon in order to identify possible keys to unlocking the work of Kafka. These four areas indeed seem to have monopolized the attention of the majority of interpreters. Without any doubt research has profited greatly from this state of things: it has earned concreteness, it has returned Kafka to his time and place, it has erased the myth of the "great exception" and it has opened new roads to the investigation of the work. However, it has done so not without conserving some old, and little shareable, conditioned reflexes: it is enough to think of the excess of psychologisms that still are to be found within Kafka criticism. The interchange of life and literature – a hermeneutical topos that always finds new formulations – drives serious and even severe scholars in the philological conduct of their investigations to develop parallelisms between the work and the life that would appear acceptable only with difficulty in the case of almost any other author. What else if not a long tradition of studies sensitive to these superimpositions could have brought, for example, Peter André Alt, in his excellent biography of Kafka, to equate the "dramaturgy of the relationship" with Felice Bauer to the "literary output of Kafka"? Alt on this point writes:

Its internal law, dictated by unstable impulses of expansion and retraction, imitates the contorted logic of the writing process. Happy phases are followed by stalls, resistances and interruptions which again are taken over by connections leading to equilibrium and new beginnings. The oscillation between ecstasy and the return to sobriety, suggestion and delusion, is, in each of the cases, the dominant principle.⁴

⁴ Peter André Alt, *Franz Kafka: Der ewige Sohn* (Munich: Beck, 2005), p. 375.



The thesis is, without a doubt, compelling. Its veracity however is undemonstrable and, in the end, feeds that vision of the short-circuit between the life and the work as the motive behind Kafka's writing; a vision which is good for psychological readings, but too often risks constructing a simplifying shortcut in which art is reduced to impulse.⁵

In any case, while the contextual questions keep critical attention alive, other threads of research tend to produce results that are basically arid, no longer practicable, or simply ignorable. Scholars seem by now to have abandoned generic allegorical or existential readings of Kafka's work which for quite a long time marked the history of its interpretations.⁶ However, it seems that they have not developed a particular sensibility for the internal parallelisms, for those precise inter-textual references, for the well-designed motivational and thematic geometries that, instead, to a large degree determine the meaning of Kafka's fiction. Naturally, there are exceptions; but they are precisely that, exceptions. Otherwise at certain times investigations prevail according to the spirit of a "great interpretive tradition" that passes from Adorno to Alt, through Wagenbach, Emrich, Baioni, Politzer, Robertson, and Binder;⁷ at others according to the multiple

⁵ Even Oliver Jahraus, who in his monograph distances himself from the long-lived myth of a Kafka "constantly overwhelmed by family authority, bureaucracy, and society, above all, by his father, and more than that tried by the adversities of life to begin, by amorous relationships and by professional failure" (Jahraus, 24), nonetheless advances psychological hypotheses, even if refined and distant from the usual time-worn clichés. For example, when Jahraus confronts the question of Kafka's two wills and the destiny of his work within them: "He wanted, in the end, even fully conscious of the impossibility of realizing just such a wish, his writing (autographic) to remain immutable as only in this way could the process of writing have saved and preserved him. Only writing did Kafka feel sovereign to that which he had written. But because death sets an end to writing, the sovereignty to that which he had written could only be preserved through a negative, destructive gesture; that is, through the destruction of what had already been written" (*ibid.*, p. 58).

⁶ See the considerations developed by Peter U. Beicken in his dated, but still very useful, study, *Kafka: eine kritische Einführung in die Forschung* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1974), p. 60 and following.

⁷ A tradition that should be considered, together and with some elaboration, in the same way as the colossal critical-philological commentary in Walter Benjamin's brilliant 1934 essay. In addition to the aforementioned monograph of Peter André Alt, see



perspectives of different “culturalogical” approaches adopted with greater or lesser success, but growing at an unrelenting rate since the 1990s.⁸

Even if in one way this extreme mobility of Kafkian exegesis testifies to its vitality and to the ever new demands that historical-philological discoveries put on its interpreters, in another it exposes a restlessness determined by a constant dissatisfaction with the results achieved, an embarrassment or a weakness that induces one to change and to revise one’s point of view in order to try and collect whatever otherwise would seem to remain inexorably hidden. The price of a similar attitude is measured by the risk of generating a great number of parallel critical discourses only vaguely connected by the common denominator of Kafka’s work and prematurely letting go of promising interpretive approaches worthy of elaboration. Nor are blind spots lacking. The meager amount of critical interest in the inter-textual relationships within Kafka’s work has already been mentioned. One could however also add that, for quite some time, perhaps precisely because of the ever greater influence exercised by studies of a culturalogical bent, the axis of research has definitively moved toward the investigation of “what” Kafka relates rather than toward an elaboration of “how” that something is related.

the following: Theodor W. Adorno, *Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka*, in *Prismen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955), pp. 248-281; Klaus Wagenbach, *Kafka. Eine Biographie seiner Jugend. 1883-1912* (Bern: Francke, 1958) [expanded edition Berlin: Wagenbach, 2006]; Wilhelm Emrich, *Franz Kafka* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1958); Giuliano Baioni, *Kafka: Romanzo e parabola* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962); Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka. Der Künstler* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965); Harmut Binder, *Kafka: Der Schaffensprozess* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983); Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka. Judaism, Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). This brief list of famous titles naturally serves only to trace the lines of the tradition to which this text refers and from whose example innumerable essays and studies have been derived.

⁸ Among the most significant results of this tendency, impossible to present extensively due to the risk of having to list an immense number of titles, see the extensive chronologies found in the studies of Wolf Kittler and Gerard Neumann (see the chapters contained in their volume, *Franz Kafka: Schriftverkehr* [Freiburg: Rombach, 1990]); and that of Joseph Vogl, *Ort der Gewalt, Kafkas literarische Ethik* (Zurich - Berlin: Diaphanes, 2010).



Yet it is clear, and maybe always has been, that the forms of Kafka's fiction decisively determine its sense. Benjamin himself observed how the novel of Kafka was nothing more than a parable,⁹ opening the road to one of the major threads of interpretation of the last half a century. At the same time, convincing contributions in the history of *Kafka-Forschung* have often come from those authors who – like Gerhard Neumann or Jürgen Kobs or more recently Barbara Neymeyr¹⁰ – at the base of their interpretations have incisively placed the question of formal paradigms.

In any case, here it pays to move on to facing the difficult question surrounding the meaning of a central text in Kafka's oeuvre like *Der Heizer* (first and foremost in its function as the first chapter of the novel *Der Verschollene* and only thereafter as an autonomous short-story), and to focus upon a constructive aspect of the narration often touched upon, in other cases, by research but rarely made the object of a specific and close examination: the liberal exploitation and use of stylistic features derived from various forms and genres within a context apparently foreign to them.

A well noted example of this Kafkian process is found in the novel *Das Schloß*, whose beginning (beyond various events and environmental details) in a rather obvious, and almost ostentatious, way calls to mind characteristic *topoi* of the 18-19th century gothic novel,¹¹ from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* to Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, from E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Elixiere des Teufels* to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.¹² Equally noted and examined is the reuti-

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Franz Kafka. Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Herrmann Schweppenhäuser, vol. II.2: *Aufsätze-Essays-Vorträge* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 420.

¹⁰ From Gerhard Neumann see, above all, the essay which immediately became a classic, *Umkehrung und Ablenkung: Franz Kafkas "Gleitendes Paradox"*, in "Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift" XLII (1968), n. 4, pp. 702-744; Jürgen Kobs, *Kafka. Untersuchungen zu Bewusstsein und Sprache seiner Gestalten*, edited by Ursula Brech (Bad Homburg: Athenäum, 1970); Barbara Neymeyr, *Konstruktion des Phantastischen: Die Krise der Identität in Kafkas „Beschreibung eines Kampfes“* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004).

¹¹ See Michael Müller, *Das Schloß*, in *Kafka. Romane und Erzählungen. Interpretationen*, edited by Michael Müller (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), p. 254.

¹² See Peter André Alt, *op. cit.*, p. 591.



lization of images gathered from an exotic-erotic novel like Octave Mirbeau's *Le jardin des supplices* in the short-story *In der Strafkolonie*.¹³ But these are only two examples of many. The stories about animals or the Chinese stories utilize, as is well-known, narrative styles borrowed from fables, fairytales, news pieces, and Hassidic anecdotes.

These are matrices that Kafka employs to diverse ends, often to alienating effect, but never in contrast to the conceptual *ductus* of the narrative event, even if the sense of genre-contamination may be somewhat difficult to decipher. The most obvious function of this process is that of creating in the reader a specific horizon of anticipation that the narration will then try to frustrate or develop in an unusual way. Referring specifically to *Der Heizer*, for example, with rare acuity Milan Kundera observed that the beginning of the story had all the characteristics of a joke, but was related like one that cannot or should not be told.¹⁴ As for the rest, precisely in the capacity of constructing the narration from the gap between the implicit model and its eccentric development in the story lies the secret of the ability – Kafkian if anything – of attracting the reader's attention through the illusion of immediacy, then raising unexpected and nearly insurmountable difficulties. The peculiarity, however, that makes *Der Heizer* almost unique within Kafka's oeuvre lies in the specific combination of narrative models, apparently irreducible to a unitary figure, from whose meeting springs a formidable characterization of the protagonist, Karl Rossmann, and his adventure. The encounter with these models happens almost immediately, but their incongruence with the context in which events take place renders them barely discernible.

This can be clarified by a brief analysis of the famous *incipit*: arriving at the port of New York, a growing crowd of porters, a seeming allusion to the frenetic dynamic of metropolises, weighs down upon all the passengers, forcing Karl to the external side of the ship's

¹³ Wayne Burns, *In the Penal Colony: Variations of a Theme by Octave Mirbeau*, in "Accent", XVII, 2 (1957), pp. 45-51; Harmut Binder, *Kafka-Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1975), pp. 174-181; Bernd Nagel, *Kafka und die Weltliteratur. Zusammenhänge und Wechselwirkungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1983), p. 46; Giuliano Baioni, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-88.

¹⁴ Milan Kundera, *Einstein e Karl Rossmann*, in *Il sipario* (Milan: Adelphi, 2005), p. 87.



deck. The scene seems to fit perfectly with all the readings that consider it the premonition of a novel that will be piercingly critical of the dynamics of power and tyranny dominant in modern society.¹⁵ And yet, immediately following this prelude of the encounter with the chaos of the great American city, Karl Rossmann embarks upon an adventure, so to speak, outside of time. An adventure that is paradoxically far from the world in which he has just arrived and instead completely tied to the reality of transit, neither Europe nor America, that is the interior of the ship. The situation to which Kafka relegates him seems copied from a canonical fable: Karl, removed from his family and forced to abandon his home and native country, loses himself in the corridors of the transatlantic ship as an unexpected event keeps him from returning to his cabin by the familiar way. After following a labyrinthine route, he is brought to a small door and comes upon an inhabitant of the recesses of the ship: the stoker, whose aspect is that of a giant, “ein riesiger Mann”.¹⁶

The similarity of this *incipit* to that of famous fables, from Ludwig Bechstein’s *Der Kleine Däumling* or *Der golden Rebbock* to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s *Hänsel und Gretel* or *Das Waldhaus*, does not seem to be by chance. It invites one to consider Karl’s infantile perception of reality. Even where – later in the text – the scene of his seduction by the family cook is evoked, she surfaces in Karl’s memories as a “Hexe” who closes him in “unter Grimassen seufzend in ihr Zimmerchen” (KKAV, 42), a direct quote from *Hänsel und Gretel*. Moreover, if one then considers *Der Heizer* in the light of that to which it is attached, also on a formal level, that is, to *Der Verschollene*, one notices almost automatically that the fable references in the novel constitute a sort of central thread that resurfaces multiple times; in the third chapter, for example, where the stroke of midnight announces the instant that retransforms Karl Rossmann from the pampered

¹⁵ See, among others, Wilhelm Emrich, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Franz Kafka, *Der Verschollene*, edited by Jost Schillemeit, in *Schriften – Tagebücher – Briefe*. Kritische Ausgabe, edited by Jürgen Born, Gerhard Neumann, Malcolm Pasley and Jost Schillemeit, 11 volumes (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982), p. 8. Textual citations, from the novel version, are inserted directly into the text and marked between parenthesis with the abbreviation KKAV, followed by the page number.



nephew of a senator into a homeless boy abandoned to his own devices (KKAV, 120); or in the fifth chapter where the story of Therese develops into a supplement easily ascribable to an Andersonian more than Dickensian model (KKAV, 196-202); or in the same figure of the head chef of the Hotel Occidental, protective wetnurse, who has innumerable precedents in the world of fables.

Beyond these more or less recognizable allusions, the element that connects *Der Heizer* to the aforementioned fables is more substantial and has something to do with the nature that the novel, from its very first lines, attributes to Karl Rossmann: the nature of the rational planner in a context that, precisely because of the simplifying and organizing force of rationality, appears irreducible. Just like his predecessors in fable, Karl is identified completely with the logic that informs his acts: he has conceived a project destined, because of its precision, to work; however, it is disrupted by a random, unexpected and unconsidered event – the closed door – which in the end leads him into an unknown domain. A domain in which he is forced to ascertain – at least for a little while – how his instruments of orientation have become ineffectual and how the reality which surrounds him in and of itself is strangely incommensurable.

The importance of this sort of fable-like preamble must not be undervalued. It establishes a crucial characteristic of the entire novel, which amply deploys, all along its developmental arc, the motive of contrast between Karl's reasonable expectations and the setbacks that the particular circumstances in which he finds himself inflict. The familiar form and the usual order of things no longer exist. Rather, there exists a new reality in which everything is singularly deformed. It is no accident that Kafka's representation of America in *Der Verschollene* is teeming with inaccuracies, great and small, which stud the novel from the beginning. The most infamous example is the novel's opening image of the Statue of Liberty holding an impossible sword instead of a torch (KKAV, 7). But over the course of the novel, the following also make an appearance: a transatlantic ocean crossing that lasts only "fünf lange Tage" (KKAV, 19); a bridge that connects New York to Boston (KKAV, 144); an allusion to a San Francisco of the east (KKAV, 124); a place called Oklahama



(KKAV, 387 and following); as well as the two imaginary cities of Ramses and Butterford. All of these “exceptions” to reality (for a long time missing thanks to Max Brod’s intervention) show that Karl Rossmann has entered into a world only seemingly recognizable as “America”: in reality, he is lost in a literary space in which arbitrary laws have a value with unpredictable consequences.

This naturally implies a drastic relativization of realistic readings of Kafka’s American novel and its first chapter. There is no doubt that the travel accounts of Arthur Holitscher,¹⁷ the stories of Kafka’s cousin Emil, the conference of Prague socialist František Soukoup on America and its officials,¹⁸ and the newspaper articles and other texts already mentioned in criticism on the origins of the novel had an influence on this or that scene.¹⁹ Certainly Kafka had done a lot of research in order to realize his novel (and this makes it even more improbable that his “errors” are truly errors). But no interpretation that places similar suggestions at its center can convincingly resolve the question of the many ways in which Kafka’s writing programmatically eludes every mimesis of American reality. Kafka’s America is a fictitious scenario and the essential fact is not that within it there are the same conflicts of force that run through a real America; rather, what is essential is the confusion of the man who all of a sudden finds himself at the mercy of situations without any means of useful understanding or orientation where he is incapable of taking hold of anything at all.

That this incapacity of collecting the forms, the rules and the connections of reality is the principal theme of *Der Heizer* is demonstrated, if nothing else, by Kafka’s ability to generate within the

¹⁷ Arthur Holitscher, *Amerika. Heute und morgen. Reiseerlebnisse* (Berlin: Fischer, 1912). The collected texts had previously appeared between 1911 and 1912 in the magazine, “Neue Rundschau”.

¹⁸ See the related annotations in the diaries, KKAT, 424.

¹⁹ Hartmut Binder, *Kafka. Der Schaffensprozess* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 75-135; Peter André Alt, *op. cit.*, pp. 351-358; Bodo Plachta, *Der Heizer/Der Verschollene*, in *Kafka Handbuch*, *cit.*, pp. 445-447. See also the extraordinarily precise notations of Andreina Lavagetto in *Franz Kafka, La metamorfosi e tutti i racconti pubblicati in vita*, edited by Andreina Lavagetto with a preface by Klaus Wagenbach (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), pp. 274-275.



reader the same sense of bewilderment that overcomes Karl Rossmann. Thus, there is almost no need to underline how one of the principal reasons for the extraordinary capacity of Kafka's writing to involve the reader must be recognized in the effectiveness with which it cancels, forever in different ways and with brilliant variations, every distance between protagonist and reader. At times it achieves this effect through the only outwardly simple device of the direct call (an example being the justly celebrated text *Eine kaiserliche Botschaft* in which the dynamic that unites the narrator, hero and reader constitutes the very theme of the story). More often the appellative structure of the narration is only implicit, the reader inadvertently becomes the protagonist of the story. And this is precisely what happens in *Der Heizer*.

One understands this clearly when one considers how the apparently objective narrative does not offer the reader any means with which to differentiate or distance herself from Karl Rossmann's perspective. As in many stories and novels by Thomas Mann,²⁰ in *Der Heizer* the voice of the narrator borrows the protagonist's thoughts and returns them uncritically; therefore, the reader follows the events of the drama from a unique perspective. Unable to assume a distanced perspective, obliged to orient herself in one direction only, the reader becomes, literally, the protagonist's double: she shares in the bewilderment perforce, as long as it does not become her major preoccupation. At this point, just like Karl Rossmann, she must employ all the resources at her disposal to confront the events the novel puts forward and that she is incapable of understanding. She tries therefore to place them into a coherent, rational order, defining both cause and effect. However, this is precisely what is impossible for her, just as it is for Karl: the novel continuously eludes the reader's attempts thereby losing her in its plot no less than the way Karl gets

²⁰ Elisabeth Galvan has analyzed this narrative technique in *Der Tod in Venedig* and in other stories by Mann in *Der "Kleiderschrank" und seine Folgen*, in "Thomas Mann-Jahrbuch" XXIV (2011), pp. 119-132. As far as the position of the narrator in *Der Zauberberg* is concerned, see my essay *Wer ist der Erzähler des "Zauberberg"? Und was weiß er eigentlich von Hans Castorp?*, in "Jahrbuch für Literatur und Psychoanalyse", XXXI [2012] (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), pp. 167-182.



lost in the ship, in New York, and in America. America itself finishes, in that way, in order to configure itself as a place of bewilderment and, as we have examined, as a metaphor of the story itself in as much as it is the site of another and more macroscopic bewilderment: the reader's.

This vision may seem reductive and even simplistic if only because it sets up Kafka's America as a metaphor, as a neutral and little characterized field as regards its historical and social aspects.²¹ This has, however, the advantage of defining the conceptual frame in which Karl Rossmann's adventure inserts itself as well as easily explaining the "strangeness" of the novel and its *incipit*. If in fact Kafka's end is not principally that of offering an image, even if highly symbolic of American reality, but that of giving form to a narrative destined to produce a continual effect of disorientation, there is sufficient reason for introducing elements to the story that have no reference to known or explainable things. The result is evidently that of thematizing the inadequacy of the processes of deciphering the facts that both the protagonist and reader employ.

On this basis, certainly not uncommon for Kafka's stories, a singular theme is developed which the story presents with extreme caution, even if amply elaborated. Such a theme brings one back to Karl Rossmann's condition of disorientation, but with a paradoxical logic that further contributes to destabilizing the reader's capacity for comprehension. The essential point is that Karl, having entered a fable-like dimension which does not allow the use of the usual instruments to interpret reality, nonetheless must return to their use due to the simple fact that he has no other alternatives at his disposal.

With this perspective it is as important as ever to observe that the narration, other than supporting itself with a recognizable fable-like framework, is full of images of an obviously allegorical nature. It is enough to return to a consideration of the initial scene – the arrival of the ship in the port of New York – to understand that allegory

²¹ As opposed to what criticism holds to be true, beginning with Wilhelm Emrich's familiar interpretation, p. 244 and following ("Der Kapitalismus als 'Zustand der Welt und der Seele'").



plays an essential role. The appearance of the Statue of Liberty, called by name and, accordingly, expressly recognized in its allegorical nature, naturally proves rather problematic in the region of the cancellation and transformation of the attributes that, precisely, qualify it as an emblematic image of liberty. The statue is not only equipped with a sword instead of a torch; but, as its left arm is invisible, it is impossible to know what it holds. Nevertheless, the fact of having to be understood as an allegory is never under discussion; indeed, because she holds a sword, it seems reasonable to sense in that an image ascribable to traditional allegorical representations of justice. Justice without a scale, naturally, and therefore without equilibrium or equanimity, but recognizable nonetheless by means of one of its fundamental attributes.²²

If this is the way things are, one must reckon that Kafka deliberately imposed one allegory on another, maybe with the intention of alluding to the double nature of a liberty imposed by the sword or to negating the existence of liberty itself within the American universe represented by the story. In any case, the image with which this story opens possesses an undisputed allegorical worth. Which, moreover, does not exhaust its function after disappearing from Karl Rossmann's view but, on the contrary, manages to engender significant consequences in the events to follow.

The first significant event, in this light, is that Karl, after having listened to the story of the stoker, progressively seems to return from out of his bewildered state. He again begins to form reasonable hypotheses together with the facts he learns from the voice of his interlocutor and, proceeding in the same way, seems to acquire authoritativeness and once more become master of the situation. He also assumes the role of prompter, patron, even mentor of the stoker, in an unexpected exchange of roles: a reversal essentially determined by the capacity of formulating considerations and deductions of which the other seems incapable. The result of this recovery of faith in his own instruments of orientation is that Karl is able to induce his new, reluctant friend to go to the ship's captain to demand

²² Oliver Jahraus, *op. cit.*, p. 257.



his rights: “Waren Sie schon beim Kapitän? Haben Sie schon bei ihm Ihr Recht gesucht?” (KKAV, 14).

In this changed context the plea for rights tacitly suggests a correspondence with the opening image. It has to do with putting justice to the test, with testing the effective correspondence to the expectations of reason. But the logic of the initial allegory appears, in the story, more solid than that put forth by Karl Rossmann. If he trusts in the protocols of etiquette dictated by the reality from which he comes, that of the by now far away homeland of Europe, the allegory's force of penetration seems to dominate the “American” world. When the rule of law makes its appearance – on the occasion of the debate in which the accusations and the claims of the stoker are passed on to the examination of the ship's authorities – it is not the reality of the law and its norms that receives emphasis but, instead, once again the allegorical detail of the sword that the captain wears on his side and with which he plays (KKAV, 20); or that of the bamboo cane that appears, not unlike a sword, on the side of the man who will reveal himself to be Karl's uncle (KKAV, 21).

The pervasive force of the allegory is essential to the representation of the nature that justice possesses in the new world Karl Rossmann has reached. In it, the noted criteria of justice are suspended; in their place others have been substituted, which however – and this is the most significant point – derive directly from the form that the sphere of rights assumes in its allegorical transfiguration. The allegory has become essential: it no longer returns, outside of itself, to the reality of justice, but substitutes it. The sword is both allegory and reality of the same justice and for this reason precisely appears both between the hands of the statue that dominates the port of New York and on the side of he who represents the authority of the law on the ship.

One must therefore consider that in the narrative space opened up by the first pages of *Der Heizer*, and precisely because of the imposition of a fable-like and allegorical dimension within the story, the ordinary good sense of Karl Rossmann loses all validity. His analysis of the facts is for the most part completely ineffectual there where the logic of free narrative invention or rather the law of an aesthetically defined reality determines the course of events.



Furthermore, Karl bases his deductions, thoughts, and expectations on the flimsiest of grounds. He completely ignores the norms, rules, and uses that orient the life of the ship and, in general, navigation. Therefore, he blindly proceeds in his demands of obtaining the stoker the recognition he feels he is due. Yet, as criticism has often revealed, without any hesitation he shares the nationalistic prejudices of the same stoker, he adopts them as proof of the legitimacy of everything the stoker has told him, immediately violating the objectivity and impartiality of any rational investigation of the truth.

In this way the literary features of the character Karl Rossmann are explained further. Introduced into the domain of an unknown reality in which he is nothing more than that naïve hero both his age and disorientation make of him,²³ he nonetheless desires to somehow stand above the reality and the events that surround him on the strength of his deductive capacities. The fact that from the beginning these clearly appear uncertain, limited, and founded on a reason of dubious critical capacity does not seem to be an obstacle. However, it is precisely this element that proves truly significant in his complex characterization. Karl's nature is in fact that, paradoxically, of a lost child that will rise up, nevertheless, to become a hero of rationality.

The insistence with which Kafka develops this paradox is clear and runs throughout all of *Der Heizer* from the moment Karl Rossmann begins to give advice. The seeming obviousness of his advice is at odds with its patent ineffectualness and subtle hints of danger. Karl inevitably continues to make mistakes: from the beginning to the end he constructs images of reality unfailingly contradicted by the facts, he offers uniquely faulty indications, and he forces the stoker, while trying to help him, to undertake a series of actions that in the end come back to both haunt and hurt him. On the other hand, Karl does not show the slightest doubt as to the value of his own judgments and when confronted with his first mistakes, does not experience any uncertainty. When the stoker reacts with annoyance to the suggestion of going to the captain with his countercharges (“Sie hören nicht zu, was ich sage und geben mir Ratschläge”), Karl re-

²³ See also Peter André Alt, *op. cit.*, p. 356.



mains convinced of the goodness of his advice. (“Einen bessern Rat kann ich ihm nicht geben”) (KKAV, 14); and during the brief questioning of the stoker, while the hopes of seeing his reasons acknowledged rapidly disappear one after the other, Karl never loses faith in his capacity to dominate the situation. On the contrary, he feels “so kräftig und bei Verstand, wie er es vielleicht zu Hause niemals gewesen war” (KKAV, 33).

This seeming state of grace of intelligence is underlined, in the story, by the long sequence of questions that Karl asks himself before the hesitation of the stoker; by those ever silent ones with which he happily demolishes the credibility of Schubal, the antagonist of his “protected one”; and the brief discourse with which he seems to want to persuade his interlocutors of his good faith. Karl Rossmann reasons:

Warum war das erste sachliche Wort das ihm einfiel “Unredlichkeiten”? Hätte vielleicht die Beschuldigung hier einsetzen müssen, statt bei seinen nationalen Voreingenommenheiten? Ein Mädchen aus der Küche hatte den Heizer auf dem Weg ins Bureau gesehen und Schubal hatte sofort begriffen? War es nicht das Schuldbewusstsein, das ihm den Verstand schärfte? Und Zeuge hatte er auch mitgebracht und nannte sie doch außerdem unvoreingenommen und unbeeinflusst? Gaunerei, nichts als Gaunerei und die Herren duldeten das und anerkannten es noch als ein richtiges Benehmen? Warum hatte er zweifellos sehr viel Zeit zwischen der Meldung des Küchenmädchens und seiner Ankunft hier verstreichen lassen, doch zu keinem andern Zwecke als damit der Heizer die Herren so ermüde, dass sie allmählich ihre klare Urteilskraft verloren hätten, welche Schubal vor allem zu fürchten hatte? Hatte er der sicher schon lange hinter der Tür gestanden war nicht erst in dem Augenblick geklopft, als er infolge der nebensächlichen Frage jenes Herren hoffen durfte der Heizer sei erledigt? (KKAV, 34-35).

The point is that these questions expose an intellectual plotting, an incessant following of considerations and deductions that clarify the role into which Karl Rossmann feels placed. In the proceedings or, if you will, in the small trial that he in no small way has helped to



further, it seems to be his turn to play the part of keen observer, of perceptive analyst in search of the truth. As he seems to have understood in the above passage, Karl has decided to assume the function of both lawyer and investigator. He has become, or believes to have become, the protagonist of a sort of detective novel with a victim, the stoker; a culprit, Schubal; and he himself in the part of improbable detective as well as court called upon to judge.

The reference to the detective novel may seem superfluous. But in this case, as in that of the elements of fables mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the ways in which Kafka, in *Der Heizer* and again in *Der Verschollene*, brings to the reader's mind certain canonical elements of this specific genre are not small in number. The allusive and detective-story-like title, for example, that Kafka attributes in the novel to the sixth chapter, "Der Fall Robinson", is indicative as is the sequence of events with which the seventh chapter opens. In that chapter Karl Rossmann is "transformed" by Kafka into a suspected criminal and subjected to an insidious interrogation by a police officer, forced to escape (which gives life to an adventurous chase), and finally saved in extremis by the providential intervention of Delamarche, who grabs him unexpectedly by the arm just in time to push him into the safety of a darkened doorway (KKAV, 277-287). Furthermore, the fact that Kafka was familiar with detective fiction is proven by his diaries where one finds the following particular observation dated January 5, 1912:

Weltsch eingeladen, zum Benefice der Frau Klug zu kommen. Löwy mit seinen starken Kopfschmerzen, die wahrscheinlich ein schweres Kopfleiden anzeigen, lehnte sich unten auf der Gasse, wo er auf mich wartete, die Rechte verzweifelt an der Stirn, an eine Hausmauer. Ich zeigte ihn Weltsch, der sich vom Kanapee aus zum Fenster hinüberneigte. Ich glaubte zum erstenmal in meinem Leben in dieser leichten Weise aus dem Fenster einen mich nahe betreffenden Vorgang unten auf der Gasse beobachtet zu haben. An und für sich ist mir solches Beobachten aus Sherlock Holmes bekannt.²⁴

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, edited by Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller and Malcolm Pasley, in *Schriften*, cit., pp. 348-349.



The situation described in this annotation is sufficiently typical of the novels of Conan Doyle to not be of any real help in providing a precise reference. However, it is intriguing to hypothesize that Kafka could have had in mind a story with a title almost fatally worthy of attention, *A Scandal in Bohemia*; a story in which Doctor Watson, at one point, duly assists Holmes in a *mise-en-scène* with a diversionary tactic from outside of a window.²⁵ In the end, however, it is not the tracking down of sources to persuade one to seriously take into consideration the reutilization on Kafka's part of stylistic features from detective novels. The really important question is why Kafka allowed himself, in *Der Heizer* and more generally in *Der Verschollene*, to drop Karl Rossmann, firstly, into the role of captious investigator and then into that of suspected fugitive.

The answer to that question, for which it is helpful to turn once again to Kundera's invitation to recall the eccentric treatment to which Kafka subjected the disparate materials of his stories and novels, may be found in two details from the story, almost two asides, where, as we will shortly see, precisely that detective literature of which Karl Rossmann seems to have become a protagonist is mentioned. Before considering them more closely, however, it is necessary to briefly reconstruct, once again, the thread of the events narrated in *Der Heizer*, because it is only within the context delineated by them that the worth of the quoted details clearly emerge.

On this point it is worthwhile remembering that the most macroscopic characteristic of *Der Heizer*, the one that even becomes sensational when we consider the story outside of its context in the novel, is that of being a narration articulated in two almost connection-less episodes, the second of which roughly ends the first, leaving it without a solution. Now, if one asks oneself why Kafka was driven to so obviously break the rules of almost any traditional narrative, one is again sent back to the nature of its hero and to the position he has assumed before the events. Karl Rossmann, who enters like the lost protagonist of a fable, disoriented by a reality incom-

²⁵ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Celebrated Cases of Sherlock Holmes* (Minneapolis: Amaranth Press, 1984), pp. 1-15.



prehensible to him, early on begins to adopt the interpretative instruments with which he tries to put in order the facts given to him by the stoker. Gradually, but inexorably, he ends up attributing to his rational capacity of analysis the power of penetrating beyond the apparent confusion of events, individuating in them a convincing causal logic. Because of this, he begins to give advice, intervening in the diatribe that pits the stoker against his superior, Schubal, convinced as he is of holding the key to the sure determination of truth. The only problem is that not only do his convictions reveal themselves to be completely erroneous, not only do every one of his suggestions and every one of his interventions produce unexpected and almost catastrophic consequences, but the last thing his entire undertaking reveals is that it is itself founded upon a colossal equivocation: for while he is following his investigation of a truth he is convinced of seeing lucidly and that, maybe, does not exist, he finds himself to be the object of an investigation. Karl's uncle, who has been on his tracks without even knowing him, without many clues, and without the certainty of even being able to see his efforts through, finds Karl at last in the cabin in which he had brought himself in order to plead the cause of the stoker. From the beginning – and this is one of the most extraordinary inventions of Kafkaian narration – Karl has been the authentic end of the investigations related by the story. Only that with a brilliant reversal of perspective, Kafka immediately puts it beneath the reader's eyes; recounts the bizarre events of which Karl has become the protagonist as if they constituted the principal drama of the narration; offers the spectator only the possibility of sharing Karl's gaze, Karl's thoughts and Karl's actions; even entitles a chapter – and then publishes the story separately – with the name of the stoker who is the object of all of Karl's attention; and finally, with a real twist worthy of theatre, reveals his secondary and, all in all, irrelevant character. Karl, who would like to be the protagonist of a novel of which he holds all the keys, the hero of an authentic whodunit, the detective who uncovers the truth in the case of the stoker, all of a sudden finds himself in the position, so to speak, of the wanted man, in the same way in which, much later in the novel, he finds himself, and not the Robin-



sons or the Delamarches that inspire his constant suspicions, followed by the police.

It is at this point that the two explicit connections to detective novels may be considered on the basis of their meaning in the economy of the story of Karl Rossmann. And it is worth departing from the second, which falls in the fifth chapter of the novel. Here, after Karl has been hired by the Hotel Occidental as an elevator boy and has begun to study commercial correspondence in a book from Therese, one reads that he passes entire nights doing exercises while his younger colleagues – all of them adolescents for elevator boys may not be older than twenty (KKAV, 203) – do not read anything other than “als höchstens Detektivgeschichten, die in schmutzigen Fetzen von Bett zu Bett gereicht wurden” (KKAV, 204). If one considers that this quotation appears after the novel at its beginning has already developed the form of a detective novel, and that shortly thereafter, in the seventh chapter, it recovers the stylistic features in a much more evident way, it seems to collect in itself a seed of auto-reflection, a miniscule meta-fictional opening. But the fact is that the detective fiction to which Kafka here refers is that of teen pleasure reading, a literary genre of easy and widespread consumption that Karl Rossmann with his new interests self-importantly considers from on high. Why then should *Der Verschollene* take up these movements again?

The motive seems to reside, again, in the perspective with which the reader is forced to follow the tangled web of the novel, in the end always and only that of Karl Rossmann. Now, it is clear from the observation of his colleagues' reading habits that Karl, no less than Kafka, knows what a detective story is and may rightfully consider it light-reading; and, therefore, is or has clearly been a reader of such literature. His desire to dedicate himself solely to formative reading seems to have brought him to disdain literature he considers useless as regards any possible future career. However, the memory of that which he had certainly encountered in the past has not vanished, and this conditions his perception of reality. In this way, just as some events transform themselves in Karl's vision into fragment of a fable not dissimilar from those that must have populated his recent in-



fancy, others appear to him like episodes from a police drama. The means, systematically used by Kafka in this as in many of his works, of making the perspective of the narrator and the reader coincide with that of the protagonist make it possible, at the level of the story, for the drama of events to develop according to those same dynamic and logical forms that Karl Rossmann believes he recognizes. The stylistic features of the fable and detective novel otherwise would not be anything but the baggage Karl Rossmann brings with himself from his infant and adolescent readings which have given form to the modest cultural instrument with which he interprets the events that involve him.

This explains the drama's incongruities, being neither overseen by a narrator who decides its every move, nor conceived to depart from a sovereign eye that cancels the superfluous and the contradictory in order to delineate an event from not uneven development. The drama is designed instead to depart from the contradictions, the causalities and the contrasts of a mind still bound to fantasy and infantile sensations. Karl guides the reader through his America beyond which there is no other world he is able to distinguish and represent.

It is clear, on the other hand, that this world composed of fable-like characters, adventures and allegories comes from an independent reality, that of America, that cannot entirely disappear behind Karl's fantasies. It is logical, therefore, that beyond these last points criticism has seen the very concrete image of a society dominated by the dynamics of power and relationships of threatening forces. This represents the material to which the perceptions and fantasies of Karl Rossmann apply themselves. The bewildering effect that Kafka's narration provokes in those interpreters who are most unwilling to see the presence of recognizable meanings grows out of the formidable contrast that it stages between the brutal concreteness of this material and the total inadequacy of the instruments that its heroes employ to observe, understand, and analyze it. But what instruments are we talking about? We are talking about basic rational instruments or, if you like, basic forms of rationality. The references to fable and to detective novels in the case of Karl Rossmann in



themselves imply a criticism. Kafka uses them in as much as they set up examples of the fascinating simplification of nature and the functioning of reason. In his simplest literary declinations, rationality assumes a reassuring, protective aspect, and, above all, is available to all. Thanks to these declinations, every time that Karl Rossmann recognizes in himself the practical intelligence of Kleiner Däumling or the analytical capacity of Sherlock Holmes, he may believe that he dominates the reality into which he has fallen from on high. In truth, the coarseness of his deductions, his line of reasoning, his suggestion and his actions depend on the fact of his having absorbed, with his models, a mythology of reason *prêt à porter* that unrelentingly conducts him toward an uninterrupted series of failures. In the end, Karl Rossmann is unable to realize any of his plans and is unable to divine even one of his intentions. To stick to the facts narrated in *Der Heizer*, he does not find the umbrella he has lost, he does not help – in fact irredeemably compromises – the stoker, he does not understand the nature of the situation in which he finds himself nor does he know how to judge the people he meets. Furthermore, with a twist worthy of the best humorist, Kafka has him find his luggage he thought definitively lost.

On the contrary, and here is the most significant reference to detective literature contained in all the novel, Karl's uncle finds him thanks to a description contained in the letter mailed by the cook who had seduced him; a description that Karl defines, in a way comprehensible only in the context that has here been attempted to be explained, "nicht gerade detektivisch" (KKAV, 46). The *boutade* is obvious. The only thing that comes off in the whole affair with which Karl Rossmann's American adventures begins is precisely that which corresponds least to the characteristics of the punctilious police investigation. The brief description of Karl offered by the cook's letter, most likely based on a rather perfunctory observation and by that time hazy memories, permits his identification better than almost any search led by a detective's basic deductive logic. And this, more than the sudden narrative "turn", is what catches the reader off-guard.

The strategy that Kafka follows throughout *Der Heizer* is that of feeding the expectations of the reader through recourse to recog-



nizable clichés. The moment in which the web of events engenders the detective story, therefore, it leads one to consider the probable success of the investigator. Offering, in fact, the protagonist of the story the same awareness as the reader (but only if she has some knowledge of the detective novel), Kafka pokes another hole in the barrier that separates the hero's point of view from that of the self-same reader and prompts a perfect identification between both of them, founding it on an equal and instinctive faith in the gentle repetition of a known narrative pattern. The detective will be successful. And he will be successful because he will demonstrate that he knows how to use his spirit of observation, his deductive capacities, his ability to distinguish inapparent causal connections better than anyone else. Therefore, Karl Rossmann's failure suggests or implies, to use a formula only paradoxical up to a certain point, the failure of Sherlock Holmes. Firstly, it implies that it is the failure of elementary logic with which the hero of the detective novel arranges the results of his investigation. Secondly, it exposes the uselessness of that hero's observations that are founded upon a "circumstantial paradigm"²⁶ any perfunctory description could replace. And finally, it radically questions his faith in reason as a superior instrument with which to investigate the truth.

This is how, maybe for the first time, in *Der Heizer* one of the major organizational centers of Kafka's fiction emerges: the vision of reason as an illusory vehicle of knowledge. Here, as elsewhere (one need only think of the events surrounding Joseph K. in *Der Prozeß*) its functioning appears completely inadequate to forming a true awareness of reality with which the individual is called to measure his or herself. Instead, to Kafka, reason appears to be an extraordinary defensive instrument, through which it is possible to dull knowledge and construct a world to measure, ordered and kept together by causal connections and outwardly rigorous logic; a world in which it is possible to orient oneself on the basis of a few basic criteria that design a panorama of necessary and predictable events. There is a

²⁶ To take up a noted argument developed by Carlo Ginzburg, *Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario*, in *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), pp. 158-209.



tight familial bond between the Karl Rossmann convinced of justice's eventual triumph in the case of the stoker and the Joseph K. convinced, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, of his own innocence. Both are literally incapable of comprehending the actual state of affairs only because they seek, in them, that causal order, that logic that reason demands and reality denies. Furthermore, there is an obvious irony in *Der Heizer*: precisely when the enigma of the stoker should resolve itself, when the hidden truth about Schubal's abuses of power should come to light, when the acute suppositions of the detective Rossmann should be confirmed and the "detective" drama of the story reach its resolution, the fable-like plot of events instead begins to dissolve. The scene where Karl is recognized by his uncle puts an end to the stoker's story and finds its perfect equivalent in the hero-identification scenes in fables. As in the best examples of the genre, the outcast and lost Karl Rossmann all of a sudden discovers himself to be the privileged descendent of that sort of modern king that is the senator from New York.

In the end, naïve faith in the analytic power of reason fails when confronted with the evidence of a world that escapes any and every attempt at fitting it to reassuring logical patterns. In the twisted reality of a nonexistent America, one that no map could ever help to reconstruct, every event, every small or large detail, responds uniquely to a narrative need and makes sense only in the aesthetic dimension of the novel.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this obvious arbitrariness of recounted reality, this irreducibility of the narration to a known ordering principle, that almost paradoxically makes that content in Kafka's writing which could possibly still be legitimately defined as existential emerge. The breaking open, insistently and variously pursued by Kafka, of that barrier that separates the universes of the narrator, the hero, and the reader here reveals its most intimate need because it cancels out the wall that only apparently divides the novel's reality from any other. Karl Rossmann's world does not possess a precept different from that of any other world we know. Its uniqueness is illusory. That within it arbitrariness, randomness, and error reign; that events continuously begin and remain forever inconclusive; that time,



that space, that the causal connections between events appear dissolved or inconsistent is rather obvious. There where the laws of aesthetics dominate, the reassuring logical order that reason gives to events is no longer capable of establishing itself. But if it is no longer possible to distinguish between the bewilderment of Karl Rossmann and that of the reader who follows his adventures; if the vain efforts of the same Karl Rossmann to rationally define the nature of reality that surrounds him correspond to those, equally vain, who are fascinated by their destiny; if, in short, the limits between the reality of the hero and that of the reader blur, then it is clear that the universe of the novel coincides with that of the reader herself and that the reality of this latter is subjected to the same referees, errors, and incidents that represent the reality of the lost.

Within this frame, reason manifests its defensive, instrumental nature and, at the same time, its limit. Reality has an aesthetic nature, it does not follow order-giving laws or principles, so reason constructs a calming and comforting version thereof. Only art is capable of investigating the forms of reality and of giving an authentic image back to it, even if a necessarily confused, contradictory, and at times even chaotic one. Literature, there where it abandons the infantile myths of its fables or the illusions of those naïve modern sagas that are detective novels, is no exception. And Kafka, telling the story of Karl Rossmann and cleverly representing it as the story of every one of its readers, has put together something similar to an approximate travelogue-like account of an aimless adventure. An imaginary biography that in itself contains the trace of every biography possible.