The Meaning of Meaning in Kafka's *The Castle*

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> The first enemy of the aesthetic was meaning.
> —Roberto Calasso

1. The Question of Transcendence

The Castle is Franz Kafka's most humanistic work, virtually the only one in which the protagonist forms continuous, close relationships with other characters, including love. As in many of his other works, the protagonist is on a quest for a goal that proves unattainable. But in *The Castle*, K. becomes seriously and deeply involved with the lives of the people in the village. *The Castle* puts the question of meaning within a social context, where it rightfully belongs.

The novel revolves around two main poles: the protagonist, who is the narrative center for the reader, and the Castle, which seems to be the source of meaning for the characters in the novel, especially K. The ambiguity surrounding the Castle (as well as the obscurity of K.'s motivations) raises the question of what transcendence actually means, the meaning of meaning. While all serious art addresses this question implicitly, Kafka makes it central and explicit. Despite (or because of) the ambiguity of his works, Kafka is like an archer who shoots straight for his mark, the unspoken axis upon which culture turns.

By equating transcendence with meaning, of course, I already assume a rudimentary definition of meaning; but I share this assumption with the novel. Meaning is transcendent because its source is above and beyond; while it is true that K. seeks the domestic goals of job, home, and family, the achievement of his goals depends upon the Castle, which is literally above and beyond the village, remaining more or less inaccessible to the villagers. The concept of transcendence implies that there is something to be transcended or gone beyond. In *The Castle*, K.'s quest requires overcoming various obstacles, the chief of which is the distance between village and Castle. K. essentially seeks sanction from the Castle,

independently of his other goals; meaning requires validation from a locus external to the self and the immediate community.

Transcendence has a traditional association with the sacred. We make no great leap by seeing the Castle as occupying the place of the sacred in a traditional society (i.e., one which respects sacred distinctions and authority), which the village seems to be. The quasi-supernatural elements in the story, Jeremiah's magical transformation and so on, are by definition sacred. And the virtually religious awe with which the villagers regard the Castle also supports this association. From an anthropological perspective, the sacred is the original form of the meaningful, and the ambiguity of the Castle can be viewed as a modern version of the well-known ambivalence of the sacred.(1) This preliminary understanding of the Castle avoids the debate about whether the Castle represents God or is inhabited by "Gnostic demons" (Heller 76), supernatural good or supernatural evil. From our perspective, these are two sides of the same coin.

The Castle is a novel, but its setting, form, and content call to mind medieval romance and quest-narratives. The village sits on Castle land, and the Castle governs the village as in feudal times (although the extent of its power in the village is an open question). The setting is otherwise ambiguous; while there are references to Count Westwest and a Castellan, the main representatives of the Castle are characterized as "officials," as with a modern government bureaucracy. The medieval elements of the novel evoke a world in which hierarchy and authority are taken for granted, as indeed the authority of the Castle is assumed by all the villagers with the possible exception of Amalia. Although he sometimes questions the justice of its actions, K. also takes the authority of the Castle for granted. Moreover, he is deeply attached to the village and obsessed with the Castle, suggesting that the novel is nostalgic for a world in which divine hierarchy structures human relations.

René Girard has not written on Kafka in any detail, but he suggests clearly that Kafka's fiction represents what he characterizes as the modern, post-Christian world of internal mediation and frustrated transcendence (DDN 266, 286-7, 308-9). Bruce Bassoff's essay "The Model as Obstacle: Kafka's *The Trial*" fruitfully explores internal mediation in that novel, substantiating Girard's hints about Kafka. As we will see, *The Castle* does present a world distinguished by internal mediation but not, in the final analysis, frustrated transcendence. The interpretive problem here is that the characters in the novel and the critics are looking for transcendence in the wrong places. I will show that *The Castle* models an alternative form of transcendence from a perhaps surprising source that previous critics have not considered or recognized as such. In this way, Kafka's novel goes beyond Girard's dichotomy of *mensonge romantique and vérité romanesque* (DDN 16-17), providing a valuable insight into the very origin of language.

2. The Castle

What is the Castle? This is the main question of the novel, both for readers and characters, although the characters never pose the question quite so directly, focusing instead on more immediate goals that invariably involve the Castle. In the famous opening of the novel, the Castle is ominously present even in its absence:

> It was late in the evening when K. arrived. The village was deep in snow. The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village, K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him. (3)

The gothic description of the Castle hill as "hidden, veiled in mist and darkness" suggests an element of secrecy and perhaps deceit in the Castle's presentation. Does the Castle inhabit an "illusory emptiness" or is it merely an empty illusion? Despite the darkness, K. is clearly aware of the Castle. Indeed, why else would he stand "for a long time gazing" into the darkness above him? The Castle is the fundamental goal of K.'s quest from its beginning.

The next morning he sets out from the Bridge Inn and sees "the Castle above him, clearly defined in the glittering air" (11). This clarity, however, is deceptive. At first, "this distant prospect of the Castle satisfied K.'s expectations," despite its appearance as "a rambling pile consisting of innumerable small buildings closely packed together" (11). But in the following paragraph, upon closer approach, K. is "disappointed in the Castle; it was after all only a wretched-looking town, a huddle of village houses, whose sole merit, if any, lay in being built of stone; but the plaster had long since flaked off and the stone seemed to be crumbling away" (11-12). The Castle's appearance is decidedly at odds with its power and authority in the village. But in regard to the Castle, appearances are always deceptive and subject to revision.

After viewing the Castle, K. thinks of his hometown, and

> in his mind he compared the church tower at home with the tower above him. The church tower, firm in line, soaring unfalteringly to its tapering point, topped with red tiles and broad in the roof, an earthly building—what else can men build?—but with a loftier goal than the humble dwelling houses, and a clearer meaning than the muddle of everyday life. (12)

At home, in former times, the sacred occupied a well-defined place in relation to the human

community: the church tower is rooted in the “earthly” yet soars “unfalteringly” heavenward, with “a clearer meaning than the muddle of everyday life.” This description suggests a cosmic order well justified by the spiritual nobility symbolized by the church tower. The novel contrasts this idealized symbol from the past with the Castle’s tower in the novel’s present:

> The tower above him here—the only one visible—the tower of a house, as was now evident, perhaps of the main building, was uniformly round, part of it graciously mantled with ivy, pierced by small windows that glittered in the sun—with a somewhat maniacal glitter—and topped by what looked like an attic, with battlements that were irregular, broken, fumbling, as if designed by the trembling or careless hand of a child, clearly outlined against the blue. It was as if a melancholy-mad tenant who ought to have been kept locked in the topmost chamber of his house had burst through the roof and lifted himself up to the gaze of the world. (12)

In this remarkable passage, the tower starts off sounding relatively innocuous, even promising, with the “ivy” which “graciously mantled” the “uniformly round” tower; but by the end of the passage we face a tower designed by a careless child, unable to conceal any longer the madman within. The sacred is no longer contained within established boundaries; it has escaped with horrifying consequences. The comparison with a lost past suggests a fallen world, but in a modern, alienated incarnation—a world in which the dangerous power of the sacred has been liberated from the constructive channels of the medieval cosmos.

There is a definite hierarchy between village and Castle, but the exact nature of the Castle’s authority remains obscure. Significantly, the boundary between the village and the Castle is hard to define. Schwarzer, the son of an under-castellan, reminds K. upon his arrival, “whoever lives here or passes the night here does so, in manner of speaking, in the Castle itself” (4). And the schoolteacher remarks, “There is no difference between the peasantry and the Castle” (14). Yet when K. sets out to reach the Castle on his first day in the village, it recedes, like the horizon to the traveler, ever farther into the distance. Communication with the Castle is difficult if not impossible. The Castle is seemingly everywhere and nowhere, more threatening precisely through its silence.

The only villagers who reportedly have visited the Castle are K.’s assistants and the messenger Barnabas, who sees only the outermost rooms. The main points of contact between the villagers and the Castle are the officials and their servants, who travel back and forth between the village and the Castle, staying at the Herrenhof Inn when in the village. The servants, freed from Castle regulations, are “ruled by their insatiable impulses” (285) in the village, drinking, dancing, sleeping with prostitutes, and harassing the Herrenhof’s barmaid Frieda, who characterizes Klamm’s servants as “the most contemptible

and objectionable creatures" she knows (51). The officials spend their time at the inn reading files, interviewing villagers, and occasionally taking a break from their intellectual work with hobbies, like carpentry, involving physical activity. When K. looks through the peephole at Klamm, he appears awake, but Frieda reports that he was actually asleep: "the gentlemen do sleep a great deal. It's hard to understand" (51). Up in the Castle, Barnabas reports that the officials spend the day crowded behind a long desk, reading large books and dictating to clerks occasionally in a barely audible whisper (233). What concrete purpose the officials' activities serve is obscure. It's hard to imagine that governing a village requires such an apparently vast bureaucratic apparatus. The narrator, echoing K., thinks, "all [the authorities] did was to guard the distant and invisible interests of distant and invisible masters" (74), suggesting that the Castle is ruled by self-interest rather than public advantage.

The main concrete action of the Castle officials appears to be sleeping with the young women of the village, who are eternally grateful for any contact with them. Ironically, sleeping with an official makes a young woman "respectable" (48, 307). Gardena, the landlady, finds great comfort in remembering her brief time as Klamm's mistress. But the officials are not outwardly attractive: grotesque in appearance (in the case of Sortini), middle-aged or elderly, tyrannical, abrupt, rude, and occasionally brutal. They are reportedly so "sensitive" as to find the sight of a stranger unbearable, "at least unless they were prepared for it" (44).

Is it possible to distinguish the officials from the Castle itself? We might assume a difference between the officials in their public role and their "private" actions, such as ordering the young women to their beds. But in fact, the villagers never make any such distinction. In a deleted section of the novel, when K. attempts to do so, Gardena reproves him: "one cannot say of a real official that he is sometimes more and sometimes less of an official, for he is always an official, to full capacity" (438). The actions of the officials are of supreme importance, and there is no difference, for the villagers, between their public and private lives. For all practical purposes, the officials *are* the Castle.

Given the behavior of the officials (from offensive to incompetent), the question is why they enjoy such uniform, unquestioned respect among the villagers. Why is Amalia's rejection of an official so abhorrent in their eyes? In a traditional society, the villagers or peasants often idealize the far-off Lord or King while resenting intensely the immediate overlords. But even the lowliest officials are both feared and respected in Kafka's village. K. finds Sortini's behavior abhorrent, but he is an outsider, and even he never questions the power of the authorities; the Castle always remains as the firm goal of his quest.

Is there any rational warrant for the villager's respect? Frieda makes perhaps the best case, when she attributes her encounter with K. to Klamm's mysterious providence: "it was entirely his work that we found each other under the bar; we should bless that hour and not

curse it" (67). As a villager, however, not to mention his former mistress, she is partial to Klamm. We must also consider that the letters from Klamm to K. demonstrate an almost complete ignorance of his affairs. Like Frieda, the Mayor believes that "the [Castle's] supreme control is absolutely efficient" (77). "Nothing is done here without taking thought," the Mayor asserts; although there is no work for a land surveyor, "Even your being summoned was carefully considered" (80). Any error is only apparent, for "who can say finally that it's an error?" (84). Similarly, Olga believes that the ostracism of her family is "all engineered from the Castle" (260). While K. argues that their punishment is rather due to the "senseless fear of the people [and their] malicious pleasure in hurting a neighbor," Olga insists that everything was "due to the influence of the Castle" (265). In the story she tells, however, the villager's superstitious fear of the Castle determines the fate of the family, not the Castle directly. We never actually see the Castle exercising its supposedly awesome power. Given that "official decisions are as shy as young girls" (227), it is hard to make a case that the Castle actually benefits the villagers or controls events in the village. At best, the Castle apparently regards the village as unworthy of its serious attention, at worst the Castle is ignorant and uncaring. It seems possible that K. could find a home and job in the village without the Castle's permission, just as he succeeds in finding a mistress without its sanction. Certainly there are no barriers to his staying with Barnabas's family or in Gerstacker's "hovel" (416).

The Castle remains as only an apparent source of meaning for K. and the villagers. Its actions, such as appointing "assistants" for K., seem random at best. Various hints, such as K.'s comparison of the Castle (in the present) with his hometown (in the past), justify viewing the novel as reflecting the situation of Modernity, in which the sacred lacks any clear role in a market economy. What remains unexplained is the fascination that the Castle continues to exert upon the villagers and especially K. This fascination suggests that Kafka regards the sacred as somehow continuing to play an important role in Modernity. K. has a more modern attitude towards the Castle than the villagers, in that he questions its wisdom and seeks to overcome the barriers separating the Castle. But he is united with the villagers in his obsession with the Castle and its officials.

3. The Villagers

On one level, the problem of the novel is epistemological. Each character has an incomplete and biased view of the Castle, giving rise to endless debates about how to approach the Castle and what its actions mean. The use of limited perspective is a traditional device for creating plot tension. While critics tend to focus on metaphysical issues, the novel is actually very well constructed, considering its unfinished state. The main plot device is simply that *things are not as they appear.* More specifically, *people* are not as they appear. For example, Barnabas appears initially as a confident and experienced messenger, but in Olga's extended narration late in the novel, we learn that his message to K. was in fact his first, and that he and his family have enormous hopes pinned on his role as messenger. The

meaning of events is obviously relative to one's perspective, in which each person sees herself as central. Repeatedly, we learn that another character (in principle every character) is the center of her own narrative, with her own desires, goals, and dreams; a narrative in which K. plays a more or less peripheral role. It's as if Guildenstern were to take Ophelia for his lover and suddenly dominate the play with the presentation of his original and compelling perspective. I call this type of revelation *the unexpected centrality of the other*. Characters that develop *unexpected centrality* through inset narration include Olga, the Bridge Inn landlady, Jeremiah, Barnabas, and Pepi. The desire of the other is revealed in such a way as to decenter and destabilize the reader's reasoned view of the novel's world.

The Castle fits Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of a "polyphonic novel," which includes "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses."(2) What distinguishes the polyphonic novel is that there is no overarching, normative narrative perspective by which the reader can place the events of the novel within a stable discursive framework. While the novel is centered on K., his perspective is not normative by any means, not only because he has limited knowledge, but also because he becomes a suspect figure for the reader at various points. The critics who argue that his claim to be a land surveyor called by the Castle is doubtful have a valid point.(3) K. is always calculating in his self-presentation, managing his appearance in accordance with his immediate goals, which are, moreover, constantly shifting.

The conflict of perspectives poses a problem for a theory of meaning because what is "good" for me is not necessarily "good" for you, especially if what I understand as my "good" involves possessing something that you already possess.(4) The conflict of perspectives in the novel is essentially a conflict of desires. For example, both K. and Jeremiah desire Frieda, but both of them cannot equally have her. Plato, in his theory of forms, argues that this conflict is only apparent. Since individuals depend upon the community, he reasons, then the interest of the individual is actually identical to the interest of the community.(5) The interdependent relationship between individuals and community supports the idea that meaning is social, but it does not follow that my individual interests are identical with the community's. First of all, what is in the best interest of the community is always a matter of debate; and second, the community may decide that sacrificing individuals is in its best interest, as when the village sacrifices Amalia and her family.

If we turn our fascinated gaze away from the Castle and examine closely the conflicting perspectives in the novel, we will easily discover the mysterious source of the Castle's attraction. Jeremiah is the key figure in this regard. When we first see Arthur and Jeremiah, they are merely passers-by whom K. finds appealing for their evident good humor and youthful energy: "they were obviously good and jolly companions" (19). In the following chapter, they are unexpectedly reintroduced as K.'s assistants. They never actually claim to be his "old assistants," but K. suggests that they are and they go along with his suggestion.

In any case, they serve as a token of the Castle's recognition, however ironic. K. claims that he can't tell them apart, suggesting their lack of individuality in his eyes. They obey with childish eagerness most of K.'s commands but without, however, managing to accomplish anything. After their introduction as his assistants, the narrator generally neglects to record their words, and they are distinguished by their clownish behavior: climbing in windows, comparing beards, showing up unexpectedly in inappropriate places, and following him around like a pair of puppies. K. at first does not take them seriously but eventually he finds them a pernicious nuisance and tries to send them away. Even after Jeremiah takes Frieda away from him, K. is amazed only that her love was so fragile as to be stolen by "this puppet, which sometimes gave one the impression of not being properly alive" (305).

But from early in the novel, there are hints that Arthur and Jeremiah have more significance than their appearance warrants. When K. is unable to tell them apart upon their first real meeting at the inn, he complains that they are "as like as two snakes" (24)—a rather unexpected and sinister comparison. At this point in the narrative, they appear to the reader as anything but sinister, but K. apparently finds their similarity to be unsettling—an expression of "the disturbing power of the double" (Calasso 85), which as René Girard has argued, reflects a fear of mimesis for its power to dissolve the "sacred" distinctions that structure human society.(6) Frieda views the assistants very differently from K., laughing and joking with them, and defending them as "true friends" (59). At the school, K. and Frieda discuss the assistants at some length. Frieda now claims that the assistants are actually scheming to take her away from K. She surprisingly associates the assistants with Klamm and remarks, "Their eyes—those ingenuous and yet flashing eyes—remind me somehow of Klamm's; yes, that's it, it's Klamm's glance that sometimes runs through me from their eyes" (183). She warns K. that, as Klamm's messengers, "if you keep on hardening your heart to them, it will keep you, perhaps, from ever getting admittance to Klamm" (184). Klamm, as we've seen, represents the power of the sacred, but he is also, not coincidentally, K.'s rival for Frieda. In an extended passage, Frieda describes her profoundly ambivalent feelings for the assistants. On the one hand, she is repelled by them: "What ugly young black demons they are, and how disgusting the contrast is between their faces" (182), alluding perhaps to their uncanny similarity. But at the same time, she feels herself strangely attracted to them, and reports that she cannot stop gazing at them. Despite all this, K. still does not really take the assistants seriously as rivals, even after discovering Arthur literally sleeping between Frieda and him. The assistants' surprising similarity to Klamm could be explained simply by their shared connection to the Castle. But more profoundly, they are connected by their shared status as rivals for Frieda's affection.

Late in the novel, after K. leaves Olga's house armed with a hazel switch, he meets Jeremiah in the street, ready to beat him for following him. But Jeremiah is transformed, literally unrecognizable to K.: "He seemed older, wearier, more wrinkled, but fuller in the face; his walk too was quite different from the brisk walk of the assistants, which gave an impression as if their joints were charged with electricity; it was slow, a little halting, elegantly

valetudinarian" (301). "It's because I'm by myself," Jeremiah explains. "When I'm by myself, then all my youthful spirits are gone" (301-2). Jeremiah and Arthur apparently imitate each other when together. But this, by itself, does not explain Jeremiah's miraculous aging. The real source of Jeremiah's transformation is the decisive disclosure in this scene that he is a serious rival for Frieda's love. Jeremiah's centrality is unexpectedly revealed at this point, and he tells his own version of events. Whereas K. perceived the assistants as persecuting him, in Jeremiah's account it is K. who unaccountably and cruelly persecutes Arthur and Jeremiah, literally almost killing them. Jeremiah presents himself as a victim, thus older and vulnerable. Being feeble actually makes him a more formidable rival, since he can now claim Frieda's maternal attention as K.'s victim as well as her childhood friend. Jeremiah and K. start to become doubles in this scene; like K., Jeremiah is now articulate, skeptical, and scheming. The "other" becomes uncanny not through his incommensurable alterity but rather by the discovery of his unwelcome similarity. The mimetic rival is ambivalently both the model and the obstacle.(7) As the model for one's desires, the rival appears larger than life, possessing "divine" qualities lacking in the self. As the obstacle, the rival is demonized, blocking the self from achieving fulfillment. Jeremiah is now a menacing figure, threatening to K. In Girard's theory, the desired object or person is really just an occasion for the competition between the rivals. The rivals find each other endlessly fascinating by their ability to generate desire.

As for Jeremiah, so for Klamm. Many critics have noted that K.'s desire for Frieda is mediated by Klamm. K. admits to himself, "It was the nearness of Klamm that had made her so irrationally seductive" (179). But critics have not understood the connection between Klamm's role as rival and his status as the novel's main representative of the Castle. Klamm is not a rival because he is sacred, he is sacred because he is a rival. The power of mimesis transforms him from ordinary person into sacred being, just as it makes Frieda so seductive. The Bridge Inn landlady says, "You're not even capable of seeing Klamm as he really is; that's not merely an exaggeration, for I myself am not capable of it either" (64). The landlady is correct, but not because Klamm is so awesome. Desire, as rivalry, so transforms his appearance that any objective perception is impossible. When Klamm was first pointed out to Barnabas at the Castle, "he didn't recognize him [despite being familiar with his appearance in the village], and for a long time afterward couldn't accustom himself to the idea that it was Klamm" (232). Klamm's very identity is subject to question. Barnabas doubts "that the official who is referred to as Klamm is really Klamm" (229). Some villagers believe that Momus is actually Klamm. Klamm's physical appearance is a matter of considerable debate among villagers, since it must be reconstructed from various incomplete reports. As we might expect, this fragmentary construction fluctuates in details, "yet perhaps not so much as Klamm's real appearance" (230)! Olga says:

> he's reported as having one appearance when he comes into the village and another on leaving it, after having his beer he looks different from what he does

> before it, when he's awake he's different from when he's asleep, when he's alone he's different from when he's talking to people, and—what is comprehensible after all that—he's almost another person up in the Castle. (230-1)

Unless Klamm really is a "Gnostic demon" then we must conclude that what changes is not Klamm himself, but rather people's perception of Klamm in accordance with their hopes and fears which are projected onto him as the mediator of their desires.

There is a strong note of eroticism in *The Castle* which is not tangential to its meaning. Frieda, Pepi, and Olga are all sexual figures that tempt K. While Olga and K. are conferring together, Amalia interrupts to give a brief parable, a story of a young man who was so obsessed with the Castle that "people feared for his reason . . . . It turned out at length, however, that it wasn't really the Castle he was thinking of, but the daughter of a charwoman in the offices up there, so he got the girl and was all right again" (266). Amalia understands that K.'s fascination with the Castle is based on the power of desire and imitative rivalry, of which sexual rivalry is the most powerful form. K. responds to Amalia, "I think I should like that man" in the parable (266). Amalia answers pointedly that she doubts that K. would like the man, "it's probably his wife you would like" (266).

K. is an intensely mimetic character. This is the key to his motivation. On his first night in the village, when he receives word that "the Castle has recognized him as the Land-Surveyor," his reaction is rather strange: "That was unpropitious for him, on the one hand, for it meant that the Castle was well informed about him, had estimated all the probable chances, and was taking up the challenge with a smile" (7). The Castle's response, as K. interprets it, simply mirrors his own way of thinking. K. views the Castle as essentially a rival whom he challenges, just as with the churchyard wall from his childhood (38). When Momus wants to interview him, K. refuses with a mirror image of Momus's imperious demand. It's because K.'s motivations are mimetically driven that they shift so rapidly and appear so obscure, even to K. himself. For example, at Barnabas's home on the night of K.'s first day in the village, when Olga announces she is going to the inn, K. suddenly wants to go also; but when Barnabas assents, "This assent was almost enough to make K. withdraw his request; nothing could be of much value if Barnabas assented to it" (42). Then, at the inn, his attitude towards Frieda is also very ambivalent. At first he is impressed that she is Klamm's mistress, but then he tries to bring her down a notch by asking whether she's ever been at the Castle. Next he attempts to flatter her and suggests a private conference. He seems to be aiming at Klamm rather than Frieda at this point; there is no hint that he desires her sexually. She is the one who suggests he wants to steal her away from Klamm, and he responds, "*as if* wearied by so much mistrust, 'that's exactly my real secret intention. You ought to leave Klamm and become my sweetheart. And now I can go. Olga!'" (50, emphasis added). His immediate resolution to leave after declaring his "real secret intention" suggests that he was being ironic in his reply to her. Frieda, blind to sarcasm in

her self-absorption, then asks, “When can I talk to you?” to which he responds, “Can I spend the night here?” (50), going back to his original plan of spending the night in the inn. Yet the next thing that happens is that he’s making love to Frieda on the floor and, the following day, planning their marriage. There’s no need to assume, as does the landlady, that his motivations are purely cynical. Desire, because it is mediated, is confused about its object. K. doesn’t really know what he wants, beyond his fixation on the rival.

The phenomenon of mimetic rivalry also helps us to understand the important difference between K. and the villagers. The villagers see the officials as what Girard calls “external mediators” (DDN 9); the officials occupy a sphere so far above them that they can’t imagine themselves directly competing with the officials for desirable objects. When the Bridge Inn landlady tells the story of her marriage, K. immediately fastens on the possibility of rivalry between Klamm and her husband (104). But the landlady finds K.’s suspicions ridiculous; Klamm is so far superior to her husband as to make the idea of competition absurd. For example, when she sends everyone out of the room so she can talk to K., her husband says meekly, “I’ll go too, Gardena” (99). Gardena responds, “Of course, . . . Why should you remain any more than the others?” Why would her husband even imagine that he has any special status in her eyes? The only people of any importance are the officials and those, like K., who might presume to challenge their authority. K., in contrast, regards the officials as “internal mediators” (Girard, DDN 9); he competes with them for status and desirable objects, like Frieda. He not merely wants “to attain to Klamm,” but actually “to go beyond him, farther yet, into the Castle” (145); this is why he is so incomprehensible to the villagers. He tries to treat the officials as, in principle, human beings, although their status as rivals still evokes superstitious dread, as when, at the Herrenhof, K. is unable to “utter a word, overwhelmed as he was by the discovery that it was his patron [Klamm] in the house” (45).

This reading of the novel also explains why Amalia and her family pose such a threat to the village. First, according to Olga, the officials are irresistibly attractive: “women can’t help loving the officials once they give them any encouragement” (256). So the question is, how is Amalia’s rejection of Sortini’s proposition possible? Olga says, “Anyone who didn’t know Amalia and read this letter must have considered a girl who could be written to like that as dishonored, even if she had never had a finger laid on her” (250). Furthermore, “One couldn’t but be furious on first reading a letter like that, even the most cold-blooded person might have been” (250). But everyone in the village regards Amalia’s reaction as anomalous, so our question remains. Olga says that she herself would have gone to Sortini simply out of fear. And she speculates that Amalia must really love Sortini despite the insult. Olga grants that Amalia is exceptional in refusing Sortini, “but if in addition she weren’t in love with Sortini, she would be too exceptional for plain human understanding” (256). Olga’s speculation is unlikely but may contain a grain of truth: not that Amalia really “loves” Sortini, but rather that her furious response is a mimetic reaction to his proposition.

Regarding the morning when Amalia tore up Sortini's message, Olga says, rather mysteriously, "That was the morning that decided our fate. I say 'decided,' but every minute of the previous afternoon was just as decisive" (249). In order to understand Amalia's rejection, then, we need to look at the previous afternoon, the celebration given by the Fire Brigade of their new fire engine. On this day, she is the center of attention for everyone in her family. She wears a fancy new dress from her mother of which Olga was at first intensely jealous. On the day of celebration, Olga overcomes her jealousy, acknowledges Amalia's superior beauty, and even gives her a special garnet necklace, remarking, "I bowed before her triumph and I felt that everyone must bow before her" (245). Amalia's father echoes Olga's judgment, predicting that she will find a husband that day. At the fair, she continues as a superior figure such that "nobody dared say a word to her" (247). Olga clarifies that her centrality was not a result of her physical beauty or her clothing: "perhaps what amazed us so much was the difference in her appearance, for she wasn't really beautiful, but her somber glance, and it has kept the same quality since that day, was high over our heads and involuntarily one had almost literally to bow before her" (245). Two points should be emphasized in Olga's description: first, that Amalia is changed on this day, she has somehow been transformed. Second, her transformation is primarily internal, a new inner quality that finds expression in her "somber glance," suggesting that she has a new way of looking at the world, a new way of *understanding* the people and events that surround her. Amalia's gaze is her most distinctive feature. At his second visit to their house, K. thinks, "Her gaze was cold, clear, and steady as usual" (219). He comments on her "look" several times, which he interprets as "not hateful but proud and upright in its reserve" (219). The peculiarity of her gaze involves, at least in part, a sense of her superiority.

We can say, then, that Amalia understands her own centrality, her inner sacrality—an insight that apparently originates in the attention given by everyone who surrounds her. In place of the public, external distinction of the Castle, she discovers an internal distinction that frees her from the necessity of fearing the Castle any longer. In this, Amalia is the most modern figure in the novel. Whereas traditional societies are structured by more or less rigid hierarchy, modern egalitarian societies are structured by individual difference. In theory, each person is special and unique, and therefore in no need of mimetic competition in order to distinguish herself. In practice, of course, moderns are more mimetic than ever; a market economy is driven by competition. But the market also offers the individual the means to distinguish herself as unique, through the sale of *signs* of distinction, as well as through a variety of specialized local markets in which she can successfully compete, often aesthetically. But the precondition for success in the market is precisely the sense of internalized superiority or self-confidence that Amalia possesses, by which one has the ability to disregard current trends and make oneself into a model for others.(8) In rejecting the Castle, she confirms her significance, attracting even more attention than she did on the day of the fair.

René Girard argues that Romantic individualism is based on the illusion of autonomy, what he calls the *mensonge romantique* (DDN 15-16, passim). But there is actually a grain of truth in Romantic individualism. Eric Gans, in his decisive revision of Girard, sees sacrality as a function of the "scene of representation," structured by a sacred (or simply significant) center and a human periphery (OT 1-44). In traditional societies, one finds the sacred on the public or ritual scene, to which all individuals, even the highest, are subject (the lesson of tragedy). Modernity, in contrast, grants authority to the *internal* scene of representation, the soul in religious terms, the inner self (more prosaically, the memory or imagination). This authorization is necessary for a society built on the principle of individual difference. Protestantism pioneers the egalitarian centrality of the internal scene, but it finds its definitive modern expression in Romantic individualism.

However, the same historical forces that led to Romanticism (i.e., the evolution of a market economy) also impelled the discovery of the imitative basis of desire, primarily in the novels of figures such as Flaubert and Dostoevsky—a discovery that radically undermines the premise of individualism.(9) How can the self be truly unique when it remains in competitive dependence upon its rivals? This is possible only to the extent that the individual is able to recognize the mediated nature of desire, including her own. Amalia's rejection of Sortini's proposal is based on her insight into the illusory nature of the Castle's authority. Remember Olga's comment: "She stood face to face with the truth and went on living and endured her life then as now" (272). Confronting the truth of desire is heroic because this truth is corrosive to her identity and social existence. An individualism that recognizes the impossibility of autonomy gives birth to an attitude akin to Romantic irony, an ironic, self-conscious sense of identity.

Amalia's sense of superiority, like Socrates', is clearly marked by irony. Olga remarks that Amalia is hard to decipher because "often one can't tell whether she's speaking ironically or in earnest" (266); Amalia is probably doing both at the same time. True superiority would have to be based on the recognition that no one is truly unique and autonomous. Even the rejection of desire can be understood as a mimetic reversal, as Olga interprets Amalia's refusal of Sortini, a gesture which, in its furious passion, indeed reveals Amalia as intensely mimetic. If Amalia understands that she is actually just like everyone else, while at the same time everyone insists that she is special and different, as on the day of the fair, then she may well have developed an acute insight into the mechanics of desire. This insight is the basis of her aloof gaze, which "was never leveled exactly on the object she was looking at, but in some disturbing way always a little past it" (219). In other words, Amalia is never exactly looking at what she is looking at. Her perspective is essentially ironic. K. attributes her ironic gaze to "a persistent and dominating desire for isolation" (219). Precisely because she is so intensely mimetic, Amalia understands too well the mechanism of rivalry; she finds relief only in solitude, a resting in the sacrality of the internal scene.

Roberto Calasso, an astute reader of Kafka, writes, "Perhaps it is precisely [Amalia's]

aloofness that strikes Sortini" (91) and motivates his galvanic leap right over the shaft of the fire engine, even "though his legs were stiff from working at desks" (Kafka 256). What attracts Sortini mimetically is her unavailability, her seeming immunity to desire, her internalized sacrality, which is in fact a rival to the Castle's. Amalia is scandalous to Sortini even before she tears up his proposal because she doesn't seem to need anyone. Amalia has seen into the mimetic basis of the officials' attraction, and she simply refuses to play the game, a game that is the basis of village life.

The village demonizes Amalia because her scandalous freedom exposes the Castle "religion" as mere idolatry. If Amalia is right, then the rest of the village must be wrong. Calasso comments insightfully, "Amelia's gesture is therefore something that profoundly unhinges the order of things, something that denies the very foundation of village life: the irresistible attraction to anything that emanates from the Castle—and above all its officials" (93).(10) Frieda and the landlady's exaggerated hatred of Amalia and her family is incomprehensible unless we recognize that she represents a threat to their identity at its very core.

4. Beyond Girard

The hermeneutic problem posed by the Castle is in the last analysis an ethical problem. The Castle incarnates, above all, *difference*: a system of social differences that are justified as "divine." In ancient/medieval times, the hierarchical difference between a castle and its village served to prevent conflict between the classes. The authority of a castle, the ruling class, enabled it to enforce the discipline of law upon the village. Furthermore, the more famous leaders of the aristocracy served as external mediators, cult figures with whom the villagers could enter into an imaginative devotional relationship. All these relationships are presented in parodic form in Kafka's novel. The officials' ignorance, incompetence, and gross sensuality satirize the so-called nobility of a ruling class, whether political or priestly. Nevertheless, the village appears to function more or less in a traditional manner, at least until K. arrives, who introduces a wild card into the game. He questions the Castle's "divinity" and enters into rivalry with the officials. By doing so, he threatens to erode the differences that hold village life together, as the Bridge Inn landlady well recognizes.

The novel also incorporates mimetic rivalry formally, through the unexpected introduction of competing perspectives, the inset narratives of the Bridge Inn landlady, Olga, Jeremiah, Pepi, and others. Kafka's novel, therefore, through its form, creates a sense of crisis that is a key to its uncanny power. A comparison with tragedy is instructive: the formal structure of ancient tragedy noted by Aristotle functions to justify the "fated" end of the protagonist. While tragedy allows us to identify with the perspective of the victim, the catharsis of the ending requires that we finally accept the necessity of his death, which restabilizes and reaffirms social hierarchy. *The Castle* departs from this schematic model in several important ways. First of all, the novel questions the authority of the Castle, the divine hierarchy. Second, there is no normative perspective by which one could identify K. as the

cause of the crisis and punish or expel him. Third, the novel never reaches any definitive narrative climax or resolution. In these ways, *The Castle* undermines the value of hierarchy formally as well as in terms of content.

By questioning the authority of the Castle, the novel also questions the validity of K.'s quest, which is in effect a model of meaning as transcendence. Readers might conclude that K. would do well to abandon his quest and perhaps start a new life in America with Olga, as do Dmitri and Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But the novel never follows through on this implication. Therefore, *The Castle* doesn't fit Girard's dichotomy of *mensonge romantique* and *vérité romanesque* (DDN 16-17). The novel, as we've seen, goes a long way toward demystifying the Castle, but it never makes a decisive conversion away from the illusions of desire. K. (and the novel) remains stubbornly attached to the Castle despite its "illusory emptiness." It is possible that Kafka did not understand the "novelistic truth" that his work suggests. With an author as psychologically astute as Kafka, however, it is never safe to assume that we understand his work better than he did himself. We have to consider the possibility that the Castle has a value, an ethical value, that we do not as yet recognize.

First of all, what prevents K. from rejecting the Castle? We've observed the power of mimesis, which makes Jeremiah appear twenty years older in the space of a few hours, and transforms Klamm from a sleepy bureaucrat into the semi-divine figure of a village cult. What's necessary to counteract this process is an understanding of the social dynamics of mimesis, an understanding that is facilitated by our critical vocabulary but does not require it. In Girard's theory of the novel, the power of desire is so blinding that such an understanding requires that the protagonist, and by extension the novelist, undergo a conversion in which he first experiences deeply the deceptions of desire; then, by a series of painful disappointments, he is finally forced to give up his most cherished illusions (Girard, DDN 290-314). The rejection of idolatrous rivalry, for Girard, makes possible true transcendence: a choice of self-sacrificing love. While Girard believes that conversion is necessary, nevertheless, the understanding that emerges from conversion is rational in nature, not mystical. As I have argued, Amalia alone understands the illusory nature of the Castle's mystique. But the novel never gives voice to her understanding explicitly, and K. and Amalia's family remain under the Castle's spell, like the rest of the villagers. If understanding is necessary to disperse the fog surrounding the Castle, then we may conclude that K.'s lack of understanding prevents him from abandoning his quest.

K. does seek to understand the Castle. In contrast, most of the villagers accept the Castle as it is, without worrying too much about understanding. The Mayor, for example, recognizes the ambiguity of the Castle, but he trusts the authority of the Castle to take care of itself and the village. K., on the other hand, does not trust the Castle. He says to the Mayor, "a terrible abuse of my case, and probably of the law, is being carried on" (90). Because K. generally opposes the villagers' understanding of the Castle, he enters into extended discussions of the Castle with several villagers. And in fact, a large part of the novel consists

in exactly such discussions. The Bridge Inn landlady finds K.'s desire to understand the Castle presumptuous. She recognizes his attempts at interpretation as a challenge to the Castle. K.'s hermeneutic practice is another expression of his rivalry with the Castle, as for example in K.'s interpretation of the Castle's initial recognition of him in the phone call to Schwarzer (7-8). For K., understanding means mastery. The hermeneutic question of interpreting the Castle is inseparable, in the novel, from the ethical goal of "spiritual" meaning; both are essentially conditioned by desire.

K.'s quest depends upon a "divine" hierarchy that is in fact a sacrificial order: the interests of those at the bottom of the hierarchy (like Amalia) are arbitrarily sacrificed to those at the top (like Sortini and Klamm). By the same token, any particular interpretation of the Castle would exclude other possible interpretations. The meaning of the Castle can never be completely disentangled from the desires of those who represent it, just as the meaning of K.'s quest depends upon supplanting Klamm. Desire is only "satisfied" when it excludes the rival.

The key point, however, is that K. never achieves any final understanding of the Castle, any more than he achieves an interview with Klamm. The Castle remains irreducibly ambiguous and unreachable. "Meaning" is always deferred. This is not a nihilistic denial of meaning, however. The deferral of K.'s quest is a process with ethical value, because it defers the sacrificial exclusions that the achievement of his goals would involve.

Girard might object here that recognizing the Castle as illusory is not "sacrificial" but actually true; and that the villagers' fear of the Castle is a destructive idolatry that poisons life in the village. I agree up to a point; after all, my essay demonstrates the basis of the Castle's authority in mimetic rivalry. What Kafka's novel suggests, however, is that there is no "outside" to desire, no possible conversion that would finally eliminate K.'s propensity to rivalry. We've seen that even Amalia's unqualified refusal, even Olga and K.'s attempts to understand, are themselves mimetic. We must remember that the mediation of desire is never simple and single: the process of imitation is ongoing, with a long history; so that whenever one degree of desire is demystified, one can always find another level of desire underneath. The interminable discussions about the Castle exemplify precisely this point. Moreover, any representation of the Castle introduces another degree of mediation, so the very attempt to interpret creates one more level to be discounted.

Ambiguity, like sacred ambivalence, has a diachronic as well as synchronic dimension. In *The Castle*, ambiguity generally takes the form of an ongoing discussion in which hypotheses are formulated, tested, compared to alternative hypotheses, refuted, and reformulated. This process has no logical stopping point because the characters in the novel are participants in what they are interpreting, not objective observers. The Castle is not above and beyond the village but in fact incarnates a necessary process of mediation (i.e., representation) that involves the village at every level.

The discussions about the Castle, including this one, constitute an alternative model of meaning that can be contrasted with the model implied by K.'s quest. He seeks, in effect, to displace Klamm and "to go beyond him, farther yet, into the Castle" (145). If K. didn't on some level affirm the principle of hierarchy that structures the village, then he would simply leave; the Castle would not have any fascination for him. The discussions about the Castle, on the other hand, are egalitarian, based on the reciprocal exchange of words. I have in mind primarily the discussions between Olga and K. rather than the hostile discussions with the landlady. Discussion becomes egalitarian and open-ended when the interlocutors honestly recognize the equal *centrality* of each participant (with all that that implies). In this alternative model, the quest for meaning takes on a value that potentially contradicts its achievement. From an ethical perspective, the purpose of discussion is primarily deferral rather than decision.

This model of meaning as an ongoing, productive process of deferral does not exactly fit Girard's theory of culture. Girard argues that sacrifice or scapegoating is the originary human operation, which actually precedes language, and which, despite its functionality, has a negative ethical value, at least from a perspective that recognizes individual rights (EC 124). The only way out of the sacrificial process is through Christian truth, which has a nondialectical relationship to sacrifice; the alternatives are stark.(11) In Eric Gans's necessary revision of Girard, the originary and essential human operation is the exchange of signs, which functions ethically to defer the violence that threatens the group. All signs are mediated by desire, and thus there is no "outside" of desire. We can only minimize, not eliminate, the distortions of desire through an analysis that traces our representations back to a hypothetical common scene of origin (Gans, OT 1-44). From this perspective, all culture is more or less sacrificial, but progressive forms of culture rationalize and minimize sacrifice: for example, the mutual exchange of words in comparison with divine hierarchy.

Kafka's art is progressive to the extent that it refuses any easy catharsis and insists upon the ethical yet difficult process of interpretation. Art is perhaps the premier modern form of the sacred, offering us an experience of transcendence that often includes moments of revelation and insight. Kafka's narrative invites us to identify with K.'s dogged faith in the Castle as the goal of his quest, and we can experience transcendence through the deferral of that quest—an aesthetic of difficulty which requires that we maintain hope while reflecting upon the nature of transcendence. This reflection provides an insight that is revelatory because it hearkens back to the very origin of culture in the exchange of signs. Kafka's novel allows us to see that conversation about the Castle is just as important as the Castle itself, which enables that conversation precisely through its inaccessibility to both desire and understanding.

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Notes

1. On the ambivalence of the sacred, see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). On the originary connection of significance with sacrality, see Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 1-44. (back)

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 6. Italics in the original are left off. On the polyphonic novel, see especially Chapter one, pp. 5-46. (back)

3. See Erwin R. Steinberg, “K. of The Castle: Ostensible Land-Surveyor,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* The Castle*: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Peter F. Neumeyer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Spectrum, 1969), pp. 25-31; and Walter Sokel, “K. as Imposter: His Quest for Meaning,” in Neumeyer, pp. 32-35. (back)

4. See Eric Gans, “Plato and the Birth of Conceptual Thought,” *Anthropoetics* 2, no. 2 (1997), http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0202/plato.htm. (back)

5. For example, see Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 345b-347d. The shift in the question of the dialogue from “the justice of a single man” to “the justice of a whole city” (368e) is unjustified unless Plato considers the interests of the individual as identical to the interests of the Polis. See also Plato’s *Gorgias* (trans. Joe Sachs, [Newburyport, MA: Focus-R. Pullins, 2009], 474D-475D), where Socrates artfully elides the question of whether what is “bad” for one is “bad” for others, while Polus, Socrates’ interlocutor, doesn’t seem to notice that this was precisely the issue under question. (back)

6. For example, see Girard, *VS*, pp. 56-63. (back)

7. Cf. Bruce Bassoff, “The Model as Obstacle: Kafka’s The Trial,” in *To Honor René Girard* (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libra, 1986), pp. 299-315. (back)

8. See Gans, *OT*, p. 128. (back)

9. Girard's theory of mimetic desire is based explicitly on realist novels: see *DDN*. (back)

10. See also Ronald Speirs and Beatrice Sandberg, *Franz Kafka* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 121. (back)

11. René Girard, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 141-280. See also Cesáreo Bandera, *The Sacred Game: The Role of the Sacred in the Genesis of Modern Literary Fiction* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 71ff. In his recent work *Evolution and Conversion* (pp. 244-247) Girard has softened his view on the stark alternatives of sacrifice or truth, finding the free market to be a compromise formation that ameliorates sacrifice without eliminating it. (back)