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Kafka’s Letter

Perhaps the most important writer of all to Blanchot is Kafka. In some ways, it is not an exaggeration to say that Kafka is the meaning of literature for him, both as the object itself, the work, but also the subject, the author. In both cases, reading Kafka is an experience of loss and dissolution. We want the work to be a representation of something; we want it to mean something. We want the image of the castle, in Kafka’s *The Castle*, to stand in for the absolute, as though the function of the image where as straightforward as that of a concept (the word ‘cat’ means cat and nothing more or less). But the image does not work in that way. Rather than being the unity of the work, an answer to the question ‘What does the work mean?’, it is the dispersal of the work, and the experience of the absence of meaning. The image of the castle is the centre of the novel, but just as the castle withdraws from K. as it gets nearer to it (it looks on closer inspection to be nothing more than a ramshackle collection of village buildings), so too does the centre of the work withdraw from the reader. It is not just the reader who experiences this distress, however, but also the author, who you might think is in control of this process. To write is to lose yourself, to wander the desert like Moses and never enter the Promised Land.

Literature not only involves this curious, unsettling and uneasy relation of the author to his or her own work, but also the reader’s. This is an intensely subjective experience, and like any extreme subjective experience, like falling in love for example, it too includes injury and damage to self-possession and certainty, but where this harm paradoxically leads to joy and exhilaration. What I write below, and I sometimes wonder whether this is a description of a real experience or a dream, is of my own first encounter with Kafka and the effect, possibly the defining experience of my life, it had on me. My first reading of Blanchot, which came much later when I was at university, repeated and intensified this experience. For I came across his work by chance, without fore-knowledge or warning, idly combing the shelves of the library, and it had a

shattering experience on me, changing and transforming me yet again as though once and for all.[1]

♦

Never write about the author you love, since you will always be disappointed, both in yourself and what you write. Nothing you could write, not one word, would ever measure up to the effect their writing had upon you, because they are the reason you write now, and as this condition they are outside your work, making it possible, but never being its object, theme, or subject matter. Throughout our lives we read many authors, some we are very impressed by and others not. There are those authors we find ourselves, and others our friends or colleagues recommend to us. Some have a very special place in our hearts, but there is always one more special than the others. How can one speak about this distinctiveness? Perhaps it is a meeting of autobiography and reading. There can be a moment in your existence when reading becomes an explosion in your life. You do not just read this or that book, but you start to read at a voracious rate. You read during the day, the afternoon, at night; anytime you can snatch a moment. You do not just read a few lines, or a few pages, but whole books in one sitting. And all this reading has a curious effect on you. It opens you up from within. You cease to be the person you were. You are no longer the one who lives in that place, in that family or at that time. You become deracinated, rootless, and homeless. But also you take on a strange calm, as though nothing that were happening in reality could ever have the same influence on you again. Everything you see seems to be at a distance, as if you were looking at it from long away, or as if someone else where looking in your place, someone who had no name or face.

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[1] What attracted me to Blanchot was his description of literature as an experience, rather than as an object of study, which of course has its own importance but which I was increasingly alienated from. Soon after reading Blanchot, I stopped studying literature at all.

There was a time in my life, however absurd it might seem (and looking at it from this vantage point it makes me laugh at the nativity), where I saw little difference between myself and Kafka. I could imagine, though I knew this was not the case, that he and I felt, experienced, and saw the same things. There is something hilarious about a boy from Wolverhampton who could identify himself with a Jewish writer from Prague, but I suppose this is the beauty of books that they can bring such separate and disparate lives together. I remember a conversation with Nick Land in the student union bar at the University of Essex, where he told me that the importance of books is that they could be found by anyone, and on being opened, could completely transform and change their lives. He imagined, somewhere in some drainage ditch in the fields surrounding Colchester, some drunk, on his way back home at night, would fall in, and at the bottom, in the mud and filth, would find a battered copy of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* and opening the first page would be like one struck by lightning. This reminded me of a remark of Kafka's, though probably not at the time, but I associate it with the memory of this conversation, that books should be like a blow to the side of our heads, or like an ice-pick breaking the frozen ice at the centre of our hearts.[2]

Some memories we have are as vivid as photographs, because they have such a dramatic effect upon our lives, and how we think about ourselves. Just in this way, I can remember my first encounter with the writings of Kafka. I had finished reading all the books in the children's section of the local library, which I think was in Walsall. It was one of those old Victorian libraries that were common in many towns and cities in the West Midlands. I probably had not read all the books, but there was nothing left to read that was worth reading. I asked one of the

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[2] In a letter to Oskar Pollak (1904), Kafka writes, 'I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we would write ourselves if we had to. But we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside of us.' Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 16.

librarians whether I could get a library ticket for the adult section of the library, since they were in separate parts of the library, and even though I was still relatively young (I imagine myself being 12 or 13, but I was probably a bit older), they allowed me to have one. When I entered this part of the library, I felt excited and apprehensive. Excited, because it meant there was a whole world of new books I could read; apprehensive, because I did not know what to read. Though I came from a relatively well educated family (there was no television in our house), I do not remember ever being told what to read, and my family was certainly not as cultured, as I realised latter on in life, when I taught at Cambridge, as it was possible to be (though it is possible to be cultured and stupid). For this reason, I did not really know there was a list of classics you ought to have read, even if you did not want to read them, and they did not interest you. I got to know about them later, but at that moment, with my first steps into the adult library, I was on virgin territory, so to speak, for any book that was about to meet me. Perhaps this purity, if one can speak about it in this way, was very important to the encounter about to take place, but perhaps, also, it has more to do with my holding onto this memory. It reminds me of a time I could approach literature with a innocence that there was still something to discover without being contaminated by received opinions and criticisms, and perhaps worst of all, that I was clever and sophisticated for reading these books. I was like Adam in the Garden of Eden before he ate the apple. I suppose what I really mean is I was, at that time, complete outside the orbit of culture, which meant I could be exposed to the full force of Kafka's work, without confusing this with the culture, and this is not possible for me now.

Kafka's books suffered the same fate as all Jewish writing under the Nazis and was banned and burnt. This meant its publication was moved to New York under the responsibility of Schocken Books.[3] All this, however horrible and terrible, might seem incidental to my own little

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[3] For an excellent oral account of the history of Schocken Books, see, Altie Karper, A conversation about Schocken Books: Part I, interview by Katherine McNamara, 2001, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, http://www.archipelago.org/vol5-2/karper.htm.

story, but like so many great historical events have the potential to intervene in the smallest unexpected and comic way in our lives. For the English translations of the Schocken editions of Kafka had bright orange dust jackets, and it was this colour that pulled me toward this book on that shelf and no other. There was no other reason than this. The impulse for my choice was perfectly childish, just as though I was choosing a toy, or attracted by some sweets in a shop: the bright and baffling colour. Yet, once I opened this book, it was as if I crossed over a threshold, as though there were another light streaming from its pages, than the bright orange light of desire, a splendour I have been fascinated by ever since.

The title of the book was Kafka's *The Trial* about which I am sure all you know and have read, but I really knew nothing about it. I did not know the name of the book, nor even the name of the author. But as soon as I read the first sentence of the first chapter, 'Someone must have slandered Joseph K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested',[4] I thought to myself, 'this is me'. What did this phrase 'this is me' mean back then? I do not mean I found myself, or even identified myself with Kafka in any simple way, who of course I had no idea of, but something in the words pulled me out of myself into something that might be called recognition. For the first time I became a subject, and could bear witness to this birth. For most of the time we are not subjects at all, but just animals who have desires and interests like any other animal (they might be highly complex, but we are very complex animals), and yet we all have the potential to be human beings. I could become a subject because the text made a claim upon me without which I would be entirely empty. It is not the subject that makes the object, but the other way around, and precisely, for this reason, it is perhaps better for us not to talk about an object at all, but an event or situation. For what else am I describing but a little event or situation that caused a profound change in me? When I say that for the first time I became a subject this

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[4] Franz Kafka, *The Trial: A New Translation Based on the Restored Text*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken, 1999). I, of course, had read the early Muir translation, whose opening is slightly different, and for reasons of nostalgia rather than precision, I prefer.

does not mean I became the person whose name is beneath this essay, for I have always been that person, but I was claimed by a truth, which would be always greater than me, and only through which I could lose my name. For becoming a subject is always a 'losing one's name'. Ever since that moment, though many times I would forget it, and many of many actions I would betray it, I had a feeling at the edge of everything I thought there was always something more, and that any time I or anyone else attempted to say it, there would always be something more to say, what you might call the infinite, but not as one normally understands it, as something beyond this world, but that which lies under or beneath all existence, a dark abyss on which we all stand.

Very much later I read Kafka's *Letters to Felice*. In one of those letters he writes to her about what it means to be a writer. He wants her to understand that being married and being a writer are incompatible, which is all part of his strategy to stop her from loving him, and which only makes her, as we know, love him all the more. He does so through a poem of the Chinese scholar who is disturbed by his mistress as he works long into the night (Kafka always wrote at night time, since he worked during the day).[5] It is late at night while he writes this letter and he has been interrupted from his own work not by someone entering his room, but by the very desire that caused him to write this letter to her. He remembers an earlier request of hers that she would like to be beside him while he writes, and he tells her that if she did so he would not be able to write at all. Not because she would make too much noise, or even that her presence would distract him, but to write, to really write, requires that one sinks down to the innermost depths of oneself and thereby lose oneself, and this would not be possible if there were someone else in the room. Yet, Kafka adds, even this is not the case for his kind of writing. For really what he writes is all about surfaces and not depths, since there is nothing he could drag from the darkness of himself. This writing is even more fragile than the tortured writing of the soul, so if there were

[5] This poem returns several times throughout their correspondence and becomes a symbol of the impossibility of their marriage. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, ed. Eric Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 60, 155–6. 165–6.

even the slightest living presence in the room, it would vanish into thin air, so feeble and weak are its powers. This writing, more than the other writing, which still demands some isolation from the writer, demands absolute solitude, a silence more silent than any silence that belongs to the world, as though the night of this writing were blacker, and more closed off from any human presence, than any night that ordinarily follows the day. Such solitude is so grim to bear that one is constantly tempted, even as one sits at one desk, to continually flee this night and find some human warmth and presence. Thus, Kafka's temptation, to which he succumbs, to write her a letter. He imagines, unlike his Chinese scholar, that a room next to his mistress would not be sufficient. He would have to be buried in a deep cellar with no windows, in which there would be only one locked door, and which would be in a long line of doors furthest away from his desk, outside of which his food would be left once a day. He imagines, in such isolation, separation and distance from the whole of humanity, he would be able to write. Story after story would pour out of him. Yet he also knows it would also inevitably lead to failure, since one day he would not be able to write (and what else is he describing but his own situation?), and combined with such seclusion, it would certainly lead to madness.

How strange it is for Kafka to tell Felice that the failure of writing would lead to his madness, when we normally associate it with a profession like any other. It is true that some days it can be worse than others, and we might not be able to find the right word, but if we stick at it and keep writing then surely something will happen? But failure enters into the writer's experience in two ways: it separates the writer from the world, so the writer becomes a failed human being, and it separates the book from the work, so no matter how successful the book becomes in the world (and how more successful could one be than Kafka?), the writer always experiences his work as a failure (Kafka's diaries and letters are littered with remarks about how bad his work was - one cannot imagine Max Brod writing the same). These failures, however, are not contingent, which means that no matter how hard Kafka tried, or how much better a writer he could have become, that somehow he could have prevented them. On the contrary,

failure (in both senses) belongs to the necessity of writing. To belong to literature, and Kafka certainly believed he did so, is to fail both as a human being, and as a writer, if one imagines by the latter someone who gets on in the world, who sells books, wins prizes and finds their name in the newspapers (which is precisely to confuse the writer with a human being, and writing with a project). If I had an image of a writer, I always think of Beckett sitting in his cottage in Ussy-sur-Marne, staring out in the grey sky and dull snow, and not writing a word.

When Kafka tells Felice that even with this extraordinary seclusion and silence, which he always found necessary for his writing even in the ordinary world, he would fail, I do not think he meant he was not good enough to succeed (though he might have felt that as well), but failure was intrinsic and not extrinsic to literature. I think this is why it is not just envy we feel towards writers who are successful during their lifetimes, but they have, in some inexplicable way, betrayed literature itself, and also why we admire those writers who have the strength and fortitude to reject recognition, even when it comes there way. Not because they have been loyal to literature, as though one could do so, but because literature itself turns its back on these affairs, which have nothing to do with it.

Writing would appear, then, to be fundamentally linked to failure even if it is successful and this might the cause of the madness, which Kafka describes in his letter. If you write not for you own sake, for your success in the world, but for the sake of the words themselves, then sooner or later you will feel this sense of failure, because to write means eventually to destroy your ability to write. For in the end the writer has nothing to say, even if others want her to say something, but this ‘having nothing to say’ is very important in a world where everyone else has a lot to say, even though they do not have much to say with it. The more I am loyal to language the more it betrays me, so much so that I do not really like saying ‘I’ any more. Did I write that sentence, or did it write me? Did the sentence become possible through me, or did I become possible through it?

The sentence is written down on a piece of paper, it has a meaning, communicates something, what could possibly be difficult or extraordinary about that? Well if we think about it for a while we will discover something. We will find out that the writer is a liar, and is always a liar, or at least is a half-liar. She might not mean to lie, but she will always end up lying. If a writer writes about her misfortunes or unhappiness, then she cannot really be that upset or she would not be able to write at all.[6] Or if she tells us, like Kafka, that she needs to be alone, and that writing demand the most severe solitude, in writing one sentence she immediately connects herself to others, for to write without readers, even if they are imaginary and future ones, is an absurdity. Her solitude is pretence, and only exists so she can break out of it. But maybe this reproach is quite silly. You can easily imagine it the other way round. You do not write because you are unhappy, but you are unhappy because you write, and what makes you feel even worse is that people admire you because you say you are worthless. Some might suffer because they cannot find the words to express their sadness, and others for precisely the opposite reason, because they can find the words. But why does not the writer just choose not to write. Why did not Kafka, if he felt that writing, even in the most perfect imaginary situation, shut deep in a cellar with a thousand doors preventing any one from interrupting, would lead to inevitable madness, just stop writing and become a better lawyer? If he really were in despair would he not be unable to write? Would he not go mad like an animal, rushing around his room sobbing and pulling his hair out? These images have a wonderful sentimental ring to them, and there are some who probably think the writer's life is something like that (perhaps Felice did). But even the madman is not truly alone, for he needs others to witness his madness to confirm it, just as loneliness is a privation of society, and not the other way around.

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[6] Blanchot writes about this lie in 'The Narrative Voice'. See, Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 379–87.

The writer is alone in a different way. It is the words themselves that bear witness to their unhappiness. Not because they can express this loneliness in a beautiful way that would move others (which would be a success after all), but because there is a subtle proximity between their loss of language, and the need to express this loss in language. I write from the power of not being able to write, which gives me the strange sensation of moving forwards by only moving backwards. I have nothing to write, no way of writing it, but I must write. Why does the writer have nothing to say? Because what interests her is the nothingness at the heart of language. If she did have something to say, some message, lesson or wisdom, then she would cease to be a writer. It is this absence that we tend to confuse with mystery or profundity, and which tempts us to fill it with our own truth as critics. The critic turns the writer into a prophet of her own times, which is precisely what she does not want to be, and which would embarrass her, perhaps, more than anything else. For the writer, things, ideas and persons are only reference points across a void, elements within an imaginary universe, part of a novel, story or narrative, whose very insertion in this space robs them of any permanent reality at all. This explains the terror of writing, in the way that Kafka felt it, that it destroys everything stable and solid in the world, and may also explain his temptation to marry Felice, which would have offered him, impossible for sure, because he had already been delivered over to writing, a way out of his cellar.

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