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Topography and Association in Stifter, Nietzsche, and Kafka

(draft version)

In Kafka's late, great story "The Burrow," the hero, the creature from underground, memorializes Kafka's early story "Description of a Struggle" as follows:

In this area I have built a crazy zigzag structure; that was where my burrow began. . . . I began half-playfully at this little corner, and in this way my initial joy in the work was wildly expressed in building a labyrinth; at the time, this seemed to me the acme of all constructions, but today I judge it, probably more accurately, as overly fussy puttering not really worthy of the burrow as whole.

"The Burrow"-dweller may have blundered in giving his work short shrift. He calls his first construction a paltry debut—a matter of "overly fussy puttering," a trifling tour de force, "a far too flimsy fantasy"—and with this verdict appears to have programmed the judgment of his author's critics. Heinz Politzer counts the "Description" among Kafka's juvenilia; Walter Sokel finds it "perplexing." Yet, despite its obvious formal incoherence, "Description of a Struggle" displays the hallmark character of Kafka's art: its documentary character, in the sense that it records, in the undercooled style of a deposition, the evidence of Kafka's thought-experiments with the professional discourses of his time. In this way, the story anticipates Kafka's technical practice, several years later, as an insurance lawyer, sinking under the weight of protocols. And so, if we now shift our gaze from its formal aesthetic to the discourses it registers, the impression

of paltriness and confusion vanishes, and we see it for what it is: the record of a poetic experiment played on Kafka's contemporaries' knowledge of man and society.

This is the story of two men, who once on a winter evening decide to leave a festive gathering in the city (of Prague) to walk together to the public park of Laurentian Hill. As they stroll along, the first-person narrator and his new acquaintance begin a lively discussion on the connection between the way one chooses to live and the feelings this choice produces—a conversation suddenly interrupted when the narrator introduces a fantastic variation on his theme.

In what sense can this conversation be regarded as a “struggle”? For Sokel, this conversation is the allegory of a struggle to the death. The narrator's ego—a “pure ego,” thus Sokel—is equivalent to the “actual ego of the author Franz Kafka,” while his acquaintance represents a “façade ego,” a facile social mask. Their struggle proceeds at the highest level—“for power, for self-assertion, for existence”—until it comes to an inevitably tragic-ironic end. “The pure ego conquers the acquaintance, but there is a terrible irony in this victory. For its victory is at the same time the loss of his hope of connecting to life through his acquaintance.” Sokel's strong reading is informed by the psychoanalytical concept of the phantasm: “Kafka creates the myth that he thereafter lives out—the myth of a being engaged in a struggle between life and death. *Description of a Struggle* is the earliest extant version of his myth.”

In search of a key to Kafka's poetic world, we will replace the concept of the phantasm (an “interpretation that itself need to be interpreted,” such as Sokel's autobiographical myth) with the concept of the program (that is, the “motor . . . of experimentation”) as a key to Kafka's poetic world. His writing brings together the most advanced experimental programs of his day—

discourses on man and society in which the transcendental ordering of human existence is displaced by a series of trial arrangements.

While studying law at Charles University in Prague, Kafka became acquainted with the oldest and most radical of the discourses involved in “Description of a Struggle.” In the winter term of 1903–04, he learned the basic principles of criminal statistics from Professor Hans Gross, the founding father of modern criminology. And thereafter, in the summer of 1905, Kafka attended the lectures of the renowned national statistician Heinrich Rauchberg on “General and Austrian Statistics.” Both courses undoubtedly included the groundbreaking work of the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quételet. The “average man,” the key epistemic figure of his *Physique sociale* (1835), is a fictive being constructed from the statistical data of a given population on the basis of such items as size, age, behavior, and income. The average man eludes existential definition for the simple reason that he does not exist; in this sense, contemporary critics were not wrong when they hotly declared, “This man cannot possibly exist”. For Quételet, the “average man” is not a model of actual persons but the statistical average of their qualities and hence their “common reference point, a mysterious tie that allows us to consider every individual a necessary element of the whole, a tie that eludes us physically and is perceptible only to the eyes of science.”

But while “[the average man] within the nation is like the center of gravity in a physical body,” his situation does not restrict his freedom of will. “This paradox,” Quételet explains, becomes understandable when we take into consideration the fact that in accordance with his free will and the circumstances around him, every man creates for himself a normal state to which he continually seeks to return. . . . This

state corresponds best to our organization. Certainly, various inessential factors may change it, but we always tend to return to it. . . . It is these inessential factors that cause us to *oscillate* in the vicinity of our average state.

In his *Essay on Normalism*, the literary theorist Jürgen Link explores the consequences of the “second nature” that emerges in Quételet’s statistical perspective—a life increasingly active in Kafka’s social field, which Link calls “life in the landscape of the curve.” Here life is lived as the tension between two drives: on the one hand, the drive to normality; on the other hand, the drive to transgress the norm. Each of these impulses can be accompanied by feelings of desire or fear and disgust, depending on the cultural makeup of the subject.

[insert: Stifter, *Nachsommer*, as N.s topographical frame of reference]

Even before his student days, Kafka had been fascinated by a program composed in explicit opposition to Quételet’s “average man”—Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of life. Whereas the former defines a statistical field comprising and integrating the qualities of—even—the criminal, the freak, and the saint, Nietzsche defines this all-comprehensive field solely with a view to its being transcended. We know that Kafka read *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as early as the summer of 1900—a book whose subtitle—“A book for everyone and no one”—is instantly revealing. Here, the average man (“everyone”) reappears as a cultural type called the “herd man.” In Nietzsche’s scenario, however, the “herd man” is challenged by a second type, the “higher man,” a “solitary type” capable of escaping the attraction of the average. Meanwhile, Nietzsche’s third protagonist, the *Übermensch* (“no one” as yet, and hence the object of Zarathustra’s search), is less another cultural type than an impersonation of a line of flight beyond the limits of the herd man.

I am now going to demonstrate that Kafka's story aims throughout to trace the itinerary of Nietzsche's dynamic figure of the *Übermensch*.

The first part of "Description of a Struggle," the exposition, depicts the narrator at an evening gathering, in a state of enjoyment, of emotional balance. This harmony is destroyed once and for all by an acquaintance who comes up and desperately tries to prolong the erotic bliss he has enjoyed with his girlfriend by telling his friend about it in urgent tones. The *narrator* is clearly embarrassed by the shameless conversation of his *acquaintance*, which has already attracted the attention of several bored guests; and wanting to escape this unpleasant situation, he proposes that they take a walk to Laurentian Hill. N. describes the venture with the powerful image of a going over onto unsteady ground: because of the snowfall, "the paths are like ice skating rinks".

But the force of this image is more than immediately rhetorical; it is conceptual and the spur to an extended allegory. Every step of the walk is a discrete part of an experimental dialogue with Nietzsche, himself the initiator of the great thought of man as an experiment. This walk—a "Gedankengang"—is at once a parody and sober reckoning of the encounter between Nietzsche's incalculable "great man" and the "man of culture" of his nihilistic age, who attempts to cover up its "cultural emptiness" with "contrived gaiety":

But there is . . . something gripping about their manner of simulating happiness, since their happiness is so absolutely impossible to grasp. We are not even tempted to ask them, as Tannhäuser asks Biterolf: "What pleasures have you ever enjoyed, poor thing?" For alas, we know better, we know otherwise. A winter's day lies upon us, and we live high up in the mountains, in peril and in need.

In Kafka's story, the fusion of the transcription of the master text with its parody is striking. Kafka is reading Nietzsche, so to speak, with Quételet—that is, with a view onto the statistically reconfigured social order, all-pervasive and inescapable. True, Kafka's A.-figure simply reproduces Nietzsche's figure of the "man of culture," but there is little of Nietzsche's "great man" or "solitary beast of prey" in N., who is at his best serving up wine and pastries, more like one of the sweet teeth or "stealthy nibblers" that Zarathustra finds in the toy houses of the "herd men". Recall, too, Zarathustra's high mountain range, which, precisely on account of the danger that lowers in it, is a secure refuge from the "danger of dangers," the nihilism of a normed culture. The mountain range comes onstage here parodically displaced as the public park of the Laurentian Hill. Zarathustra's gesture of experimenting without cultural risk insurance—"By many ways, in many ways, I reached my truth . . . a trying and questioning was my every move"—is inscribed in this text as the normal risk of stumbling and falling on the park's icy paths.

Anxiety, shame, and guilt—write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—are the main forms of coercion imposed on the prospective bliss that diverges from the norm. The first two constraints are especially visible in the second part of Kafka's experiment—a sort of playing about with normal life—as they regulate the rise and fall of feelings, the increase and decrease of the intensity of affects. In the first pages of this story, we saw N., the narrator, make his way into the open air, away from the evening's social event, in "evidently great good cheer". As his walk with his acquaintance advances, however, the unexpected taciturnity of the latter makes him regret his having abandoned his wine and cakes. Now his position is the precise reverse of his initial encounter with A.'s erotic reminiscences, but the pleasure of regained normality triggers a sudden access of feeling:

I became somewhat more cheerful, you could say almost exalted. I . . . imagined that I was going for a walk by myself. I had been in society, rescued an ungrateful young man from embarrassment, and was now strolling about in the moonlight. A way of living unbounded in its naturalness: in the office by day, in society in the evening, out on the streets at night—and nothing to excess.

N. affirms the economy of feeling that belongs to the culture of normality (“and nothing to excess”)—its status as a second nature and the basis for a claim to emotional autonomy. But as the story advances, this constructed intensity of feeling collapses. Forget that it has just triggered the elation of autonomy, the feeling of being carried along entirely by one’s own chosen life; now N. is oppressed by the idea of “returning to my rooms and passing the hours there alone between my painted walls”. He will even try to save himself by applying himself rigorously to his habits, which now do not seem “unboundedly natural” but rather a desolate rationale: “we will go home, it’s late, and I have to be in the office early tomorrow; you know that one can sleep there, though that’s not the right thing to do”.

In the next scenario, and despite N.’s claim to normality, his acquaintance, on a confidential note, calls N. “strange,” whereupon N. imagines a happy complementarity between his own aberrant body and behavior and those of A., who is of average size and has had a love affair. N. imagines the following report made by A. to A.’s beloved on the topic of himself, A.’s odd acquaintance, N., the narrator:

He looks like . . . a pole swinging back and forth, on which a yellow-skinned and black-haired forehead has been somewhat awkwardly impaled. From his body dangle a lot of pieces of cloth, rather small, glaring, yellowish, which covered him completely yesterday for in the still wind of the night they hung smoothly on him.

. . . It's possible that he's unhappy, and so he keeps quiet, and yet being next to him one feels a happy restlessness, which never stops.

However, A. shatters even this idea by alluding to the totally expectable and routine character of even nocturnal adventures, so that at the end N. comes up short, continuing to be embarrassed by his abnormally tall, thin body. No further intensification of feelings follows; instead, we have Kafka's first little squib on assimilation, a bemusing anticipation of his ape story of 1917, "A Report to an Academy":

It began to pain me that he might find my long, tall body disagreeable, because alongside it he might have seemed too small. And this state of things tormented me . . . so badly that I crouched down with my back, my hands rubbing against my knees while walking. But so that my acquaintance did not notice what I was up to, I changed my stance only very gradually and cautiously.

While the "tall man" continues his implicit dialogue with the "great man" Zarathustra—"Oh, when shall I get back to my homeland, where I need no longer stoop—no longer stoop before *those who are small*?"—another voice joins in Kafka's thought-experiment. It is Mach, who, in the "Antimetaphysical Remarks" to his *Analysis of Sensations*, formulates the basic constellation of ideas and images dictating Kafka's experimental procedure:

My friend may put on a different coat. His countenance may assume a serious or a cheerful expression. His complexion, under the effects of light or emotion, may change. His shape may be altered by motion, or be definitely changed. Yet the number of the permanent features presented, compared with the number of the gradual alterations, is always so great that the latter may be overlooked. It is the same friend with whom I take my daily walk. . . . The apparent permanency of the

ego consists chiefly in the single fact of its continuity, in the slowness of its changes.

By “playing with” Mach’s physiology of the senses, Kafka can mitigate the gap between the statistical “large number” and the individual case. For Nietzsche, the great individual, a creator of values, on the one hand, and the normed “herd man,” on the other, are irreconcilable opposites. On the other hand, Mach’s monistic view of the relation of self and world allows ostensibly opposing concepts of the self to join forces: the self is at once world creator and statistical item. Social conventions are no longer external frames of action for the individual’s free will but constitute his very self. Corresponding to the continuum of the statistical distribution of qualities across the totality of individuals is a continuum of sense data comprising both the “inner world” and the “outer world” of the percipient self. With this epistemological baggage, Kafka’s “tall man” investigates and makes strange the “dangerous paths” of the “great man” Zarathustra.

Kafka’s literary debut experiments with experiments with human nature around 1900 by putting various current programs into play.

Clued-in readers of the following section of the story, “Merry Making,” have regularly detected in it the voice of Hofmannsthal’s “Lord Chandos Letter.” While the surmise is right, Hofmannsthal’s is not the main voice informing N.’s digression, for this distinction belongs to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*—a text that N.’s fantastic doppelganger, whom we will now call N.*, follows step by step.

First of all, after having parodied Nietzsche’s “great man,” N.* proceeds to parody Zarathustra’s “higher man.” The latter offers this counsel:

If you would go high, use your own legs. Do not let yourselves be *carried* up; do not sit on the backs and heads of others. But you mounted a horse? You are now riding quickly up to your goal? All right, my friend! But your lame foot is sitting on the horse too.

Kafka's N.* gaily makes light of the advice:

I sprang with unaccustomed dexterity onto the shoulders of my acquaintance and forced him into a light trot by shoving my fists into his back. The road on which I rode was stony and inclined sharply, but that was exactly what I liked, and so I let it get even stonier and steeper. As soon as my acquaintance stumbled, I pulled him up by his hair, and as soon as he sighed, I boxed his ears. Doing this I felt how healthful this evening ride was for me in this good mood, and in order to make him even wilder, I let a strong headwind blow at us in long blasts. . . . I laughed and trembled with bravery.

Kafka intensifies and undercuts Zarathustra's paradoxical way of empowering himself to outface the dangerous life of the mountains *without danger*, for in the mountains "all things come caressingly to your discourse and flatter you, for they want to ride on your back. On every parable you ride to every truth". Kafka, for his part, converts these mountains into an experimental object à la Mach. If Nietzsche issues a warning: "When you reach your goal, when you jump off your horse—on your very *height*, you higher man, you will stumble". Kafka, reader of Mach, counters with: "But because as a pedestrian I feared the exertion of the mountainous road, I made the path ever more level". In this new scenario, it would seem that thanks to Mach, Kafka could be done not only with Nietzsche's overman but Quételet's average man as well. True, N.* seems at first to confirm the law of averages given his wan *jets d'esprit* parodying

Zarathustra, namely, “Unripe fruits fall madly from the trees and hit onto the ground”, a remark made to mock Zarathustra and his contemporary disciples. Here we see N.*’s impulse to undo norms at work triggering a reflexive counter-movement that brings him back to the center of gravity of customary habits, namely, “I already wanted to turn around so as to leave this place and return to my previous way of life.” And yet it is precisely Mach’s conferring of equal rights on ideas vis-à-vis physical and bodily facts that now allows N.*, unlike in the second scenario, to carry on his experiments, namely, “when I suddenly had this insight . . .”.

What follows is an experiment transgressing the signals on the outer limit— anxiety, shame, and guilt—which were active in the first two parts of the story; instead we have a series of experiments again along Nietzschean paths. A truly “great man” appears, with all the features of a Buddha, emerging from the shrubbery alongside a river, carried on a sedan chair by four bearers. His “Address to the Landscape” further tests Zarathustra’s mountain-trope: “Here you may talk fairly and frankly to all things”. This speech is followed by the Buddha’s Mach parody, as when he muses on the “mountain at the water’s edge”:

But this speech would have been a matter of indifference to him [the mountain!], like my earlier one, if I did not speak with eyes wide open. Otherwise he is not satisfied.

And don’t we have to keep him well-disposed to us, so that basically we can keep him upright, him, who has such a whimsical predilection for the stew in our heads.

The experiment ends with a listing of the dangers of the “great man.” After the address of the fat man has passed into the key of world denial—“But now—I bid you—mountain, flower, grass, shrubbery, and river, give me a bit of room so I can breathe” —his fate follows the

prognosis that Nietzsche addressed to Schopenhauer, *his* “great man” and world-denier: “that Schopenhauer the man would perish and leave, under the best circumstances, a residue of ‘pure knowledge.’”²⁰ Having denied the mountain, the fat man entrusts his fate to that very river—“But you river give me so much pleasure that I will let myself be borne along on your flexible waters”. It is precisely this river that, following the prescript of the other master text, must seal his fate: “Your will and your values you have placed upon the river of becoming,” Zarathustra warns the wisest of men.

Now the river carries your bark farther; it *has* to carry it. It avails nothing that the broken wave foams and angrily opposes the keel. Not the river is your danger and the end of your good and evil, you who are wisest, but that will itself, the will to power—the unexhausted procreative will of life.

According to script, the four chair-bearers drown in the river—“The unwise, of course, the people—they are like a river on which a bark drifts”—while the fat man drifts helplessly downstream. At this point, N.*, that conductor of experiments, once again finds himself in the position that Nietzsche assigns to the “theoretical man” in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

It is certainly the sign of the “breach” of which everyone speaks as the fundamental malady of modern culture, that the theoretical man, alarmed and dissatisfied at his own consequences, no longer dares entrust himself to the terrible icy current of existence: he runs timidly up and down the bank.

The return of this diagnosis in the “Description of a Struggle” marks the point at which N.*’s will to transgress limits finally flips over into a *libido scientia* in the manner of Quételet and indeed, well in advance, in the name of the land surveyor of *The Castle*:

I got up and rushed in angular jumps over the stony descent that separated me from the water. I paid no attention to the fact that it was dangerous. . . . I ran so heedlessly that down below at the water's edge I could not hold back and had to run a bit into the splashing water and then just stood still until the water came up to my knee. . . . I swiftly crept back up the thicket so as to keep the fat man company on his way, for to tell the truth, I loved him. And perhaps I could learn something about the danger of this seemingly safe land.

This passage figures forth the nucleus of Kafka's land surveyor figure. His will to knowledge is always greater than his will to action, as here the flow of information produced through a sequence of experiments must not be disturbed by any sort of active intervention, let alone decisive engagement. At the crucial moment, N.*, who was determined to help, performs a turnabout, but in this way assures the continuation of both his own person and the experiment.

Conclusion

[To be made in the context of the conference]