

KAFKA'S LANDSCAPE IN AMERIKA

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The mind in milliseconds can idealize landscapes without the body ever having physically experienced the terrain, or else what is a science fictionist for? In my thesis here, I want to examine for a few minutes an artist's unseen territory, a fictionalizing of a reality that is seen as unreal as is the twisted, tormented, poisonous landscape of a scifi writer going full speed on speed. Franz Kafka could easily slide into the category of scifi writers, only more macabre, more confused, more insecure, more guilty, more et cetera. Kafka perhaps is saved from the slough of science fiction only by his ability to skew his way of perceiving the world around him. A science fictionist begins with reality and extrapolates from the given landscape. In the first place, Kafka never quite reaches a reality that can be replicated; his mind was always trying to find landscape reality, not slant it.

Klaus Mann claims that every "detail of Kafka's description of American life is quite inaccurate, and yet the picture as a whole has poetical truth."<sup>1</sup> That it is inaccurate is unquestioned; that it is poetical is debatable. Its inaccuracy is the kind that appears in James Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie, in which the reader who has travel-familiarity with the midwestern part of the United States will feel an eeriness that comes from a recognition of distorted description. Cooper wrote out of travelers' records and descriptions of the grasslands, the accounts of persons who had dared to cross the prairies and had lived to tell about it, and his

own imagination. Although much of Cooper's prose is dull and unspirited, he does manage to capture what we think of as the Wild West, the derring-do, the violence, the spaciousness, the chase, and the rawness. To be sure, The Prairie is simpler than is Amerika, but the earlier novel needs to be read for a comparison and perhaps a preparation.

Kafka (1883-1924) is called a tormented writer, a soul searcher, one who portrays the senseless struggle in a world that is unstable, nightmarish, and absurd. Most of us are familiar with the Kafka, or K., of The Metamorphosis, The Castle, The Penal Colony, and The Trial. We are not so familiar with Karl Rossmann of America, the Karl who embarked--escaped--on an imaginary journey in search of reality and fortune. He can also be the Wandering Jew, an immigrant seeking hope and happiness in the new world,<sup>2</sup> as well as one escaping from an illicit paternal accusation in the Old Country, another trap that made little sense to the innocent Karl.

Amerika, the only novel by Kafka that manifests playfulness and optimism, was not finished, for Kafka could never complete the last chapter, "The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma," that is, if Kafka intended the open spaces (the theatre) to close out his attempt to contain his America. Kafka seems to have had problems all along, for the earlier chapters have an incompleteness about them. Ironically, he was writing The Metamorphosis at the same time he was working on Amerika, the first chapter, "The Stoker" being published in 1913, but Amerika was not to be published until after

Kafka's death.

Filled with the usual characters, situations, ironies, and guilts found in other novels, Amerika carries its load of father-son conflicts, with fathers being the Head Porter and Uncle Jacob. The cook and the innkeeper show up as mother figures. The mistrust and fear of sexual intercourse are noted as the reasons for Karl's going to America, an act of child abuse in his case, he being the one abused by the lusty maid, Johanna Brummer. Provocative situations, never consummated, occur with Clara, Therese, and Brunelda, the latter one quite sordid, but the acts fail sexual fruition. Street mazes appear and are constant. The theme of persecution is always present.

A difference, however, exists between Amerika and the other novels in that the former has a fanciful mood that captures a youthfulness, even a primitiveness, not found elsewhere. Despite being deceived by Delamarche and Robinson, Karl maintains a mood of optimism, a feeling of love, and a faculty of generosity.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Kafka manages a coherence and consistency in Amerika that later became inverted, probably with no less coherence and consistency, but definitely mirrored, a reversal.

In Amerika, Kafka had no familiar terrain, such as he had in the other novels, where the landscape of Prague consisted of Hradčany Castle, the old Jewish Cemetery and Synagogue, St. Vitus's Cathedral and its choir on Castle Hill (the latter used for details

in The Trial), The Old Town Hall, King Charles IV's Bridge (now closed), Charles University, "The Golden Pike" where Kafka lived in 1915, Old Town Hall Square with Tyn Church and the clock depicting the March of Death, and the John Hus Monument on the site where Hus was burned to death in the Old Town Square.<sup>4</sup> Kafka knew these places and used them in his texts as places, not characters, although the castle, which dominated the skyline during Kafka's time, may be said to be a character in the book that bears its name. The castle in The Castle is not Hradčany Castle as such, but Kafka did not have to invent a castle in the air, since one was already there, securely fixed to land. Kafka may not have had a strong faith in reality, but he could manage the points of reality quite efficiently, especially when they reflected the buildings, streets, and parks of Prague.<sup>5</sup>

When Kafka imagined his America, he turned naturally to his familiar landscape, the Prague environs. This of course was supplemented by pictures, some reading, and Kafka's fertile imagination. Amerika opens with a concern for place, a setting for the purpose of entrenching the reason for being there:

As Karl Rossmann, a poor boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his parents because a servant girl had seduced him and got herself a child by him, stood on the liner slowly entering the harbour of New York, a sudden burst of sunshine seemed to illumine the Statue of Liberty, so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it long

before. The arm of the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and round the figure blew the free winds of heaven.

'So high!' he said to himself ....<sup>6</sup>

It is a romantic, hopeful passage, one that could have been written by any sensitive person entering the New York harbor for the first time and staring with awe and with inspiration on the Statue of Liberty, up close, and ~~drinking~~ in the breathtaking magnificence. So High!

Soon, however, imbroiled in the defense of the stoker, Karl's sense of unreality intrudes while within the conceptual confines of reality in the room on the ship where the stoker and Karl are being treated disrespectfully and cruelly: "And behind them all rose New York, and its skyscrapers stared at Karl with their hundred thousand eyes. Yes, in this room one realised where one was." The room becomes a court where the stoker is tried and is going to lose his case before the captain, who has better things to do than to listen to the complaints of a lowly stoker. Into this space comes Senator Edward Jacob, Karl's mother's brother, to take Karl away and care for him.<sup>7</sup>

Karl is settled into a small room six floors above the street, and one above the five floors belonging to his uncle's business. A balcony ran along outside his small room, with a view on a crowded street that ran "perfectly straight between two rows of squarely chopped buildings and therefore seemed to be fleeing

into the distance, where the outlines of a cathedral loom enormous in a dense haze." The landscape is obviously that of Prague, probably with St. Vitus's Cathedral on Castle Hill in mind, or perhaps the great castle itself. The exaggeration of the teeming street and the distant view fit quite well.

Kafka managed to catch the crowded discontinuity of the New York streets, with traffic changing directions every minute, "as if caught up in a whirlwind and roaring like some strange element quite unconnected with humanity."<sup>8</sup> The Central streets contained the theatres, and patrons drove in vehicles at utmost possible speed. Strikers clogged the thoroughfares, which were as large as squares (Old Town Square in Prague), out of which opened an endless perspective of pavements, comparable to the spoke-circle common in European cities but definitely seldom seen in the United States.

The country house where Mr. Pollunder took Karl was "like the country houses of most rich people in the neighbourhood of New York," and "was larger and taller than a country house designed for only one family has any need to be."<sup>9</sup> The house almost too suddenly became a kind of castle, with hidden hallways, strange nooks, false doors, passageways that abruptly end in walls, all a veritable maze quite in keeping with the Gothic type of castle that Kafka knew.

After the country house, places become more mundane. Karl's next stop is a small sleeping house, where he unfortunately meets Delamarche and Robinson. Having been told that Irishmen must be

avoided at all costs, Karl hardly trusts Delamarche who looks Irish. Kafka here invents his only town name, Butterford, two days on foot from New York. No significance need be attached to the name, except that its homeliness is surprising.

In the countryside with Delamarche and Robinson, Karl sees a gleaming high mountain, which "receded in wave-like ridges towards a still more distant summit, veiled in a sunlit haze."<sup>10</sup> Badly tilled fields surrounded black factories. Tall tenement buildings with many balconies were filled with women and children. Following such environmentally imaginative descriptions, Kafka notes that much of this territory reminded Karl of his home. In rising country, they looked back on the panorama of New York and the harbor. The Brooklyn Bridge "hung delicately over the East River. The huge cities, Brooklyn and New York, seemed to stand empty and purposeless." As they approached Butterford, they could see "endless fields stretching across gentle hills in their first green; rich country villas bordered the road on either side, and for hours they walked between gilded garden railings; several times they crossed the same slow stream, and often they heard above them trains thundering over the lofty viaducts."<sup>11</sup> The passage is as poetic as any appearing in Amerika, and it does catch something of seeing New York from the New Jersey side, but the countryside is imagined; distances become relative and the landscape is not justified.

One enigma exists. Kafka titles one chapter, "The Road to Rameses," an allusion to Rameses II (?-1225 B.C.), often identified as the pharaoh of Exodus. Rameses is mentioned again in the chapter, "The Hotel Occidental,"<sup>12</sup> where Butterford is said to be named Rameses, a place Karl stayed in for about a month before he was again found by Delamarche and Robinson, his angels of evil. The Hotel Occidental contains the typical Kafkan melange of inconsistent space and insidious and strange characters. Karl escapes from nothing. He is merely absorbed into the distorted picaresque, the impossibility of the reality-ridden Karl to ever understand the cog-slipped officials of the hotel who live beyond the pale of reality. In other words, Karl never finds stable space.

The last chapter of the unfinished book contains "The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma," another mythical organization created by Kafka to symbolize the spatial freedom that awaits Karl, who, as usual, must survive the bureaucratic and clerkish entanglements to obtain a job, perhaps as an actor, or a technician, or even a laborer, but something good supposedly awaits him in Oklahoma, which is reached by going to Clayton to find the employment headquarters at a race course not named, but probably Saratoga Springs, and where he signs on as Negro, the nickname he had held at his last job, also not detailed. Whatever he will find in Oklahoma, Karl has become in Kafka's terms Americanized, living now in a land of pure fantasy.



Kafka, then, imagined his America, or the small portion of it that concerned him, as a place much like his Prague and its environs. His reading about America must have been minor, although he mentioned that he enjoyed Franklin's autobiography, which may have had some desultory influence on the novel, especially Franklin's peripatetic beginnings. Still, the eeriness of Kafka's descriptions of places and the misinterpretations from the point of view of those who are familiar with New York and surroundings lend themselves to artistic interpretations. They also lend themselves to the hallucinatory and bizarre quality of the action and characters. The intrusion of place is so strong that it takes on qualities of a character. Kafka's characters, however, cannot solve the characteristics of places, finding them enigmatic, inconsistent, and maddening, finding places to be more than slightly askew and somehow unfinished. This account of the topological maladjustment of the external world and of man's attempt to cope with it constitutes Kafka's portrayal of the elusiveness of life as ultimately understood through space.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>"Preface" to Franz Kafka, Amerika, trans. by Edwin Muir (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956), p. xi.
- <sup>2</sup>Michel Carrouges, Kafka versus Kafka, trans. by Emmett Parker (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1968), p. 15.
- <sup>3</sup>R. M. Alberes and Pierre de Boisdeffre, Kafka: The Torment of Man, trans. by Wade Basking (New York: Philosophical Library, 1968), p. 32.
- <sup>4</sup>Photographs of most of these places appear in J. P. Stern, ed., The World of Franz Kafka (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), passim. Other places referred to resulted from my visit to Prague in 1972. Instead of the castle now, the Olympic Hotel lifts straight up some 35 storeys and slices apart the skyline.
- <sup>5</sup>See Stern, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>6</sup>Amerika, p. 1.
- <sup>7</sup>Ever conscious of names, Kafka gives the name of Jacob to Karl's son by Johanna Brummer, the thirty-five-year-old maid. Uncle Jacob says that the name evidently "was given in memory of my unworthy self ...." Other cogent reasons could be given. Amerika, p. 26.
- <sup>8</sup>Amerika, p. 52.
- <sup>9</sup>Amerika, p. 54.
- <sup>10</sup>Amerika, p. 107.
- <sup>11</sup>Amerika, pp. 113-114.
- <sup>12</sup>Amerika, p. 156.