

KAFKA, TRUTH, AND AN ART- ARCHIVE PARADOX

» MICHAEL BOURKE

In his essay collection *The Curtain*, Kundera defends Flaubert's fictional work against the expansionist aims of the archivist: "the work, *l'oeuvre*, is not simply everything a novelist writes—notebooks, diaries, articles. It is the end result of long labor on an aesthetic project" (96). Kundera's censure would seem to compound the bad faith of a Kafka scholarship which continues to discover and to organise his unauthorised oeuvre, and by extension the bad faith of Kafka criticism which takes this oeuvre, and much else, as the proper context for recovering the meaning of his stories and novels. If Kundera is right, should we isolate Kafka's fiction from the expanding work of the archivists? And should we, perhaps invoking the modernist credo *l'art pour l'art*, protect it as a pure aesthetic object from all extra-aesthetic reality which doesn't find an explicit home in the work itself? In the brief discussion below I accept Kundera's modernist censure as a constraining heuristic and suggest a conceptual distinction which nonetheless will allow us in good conscience to expand the significance of Kafka's fiction.

The distinction: Non-fictional works—essays, notes, letters, documents of various kinds—contain many truth claims, declarative sentences which are either true or false; they have, as philosophers say, a

propositional content. Fictional works on the other hand make no truth claims; they contain no statements which are literally true, no propositions. This distinction, innocuously, upholds the well-known distinction between showing and telling, between using language indirectly to suggest something to the reader (metaphor is a paradigm of this use of language) and using language explicitly to say something (statements are the paradigm here). But the no-truth-in-fiction distinction is far more radical, and far from obvious. Consider the objection that virtually every fictional work ever written positively brims with declarative sentences, sentences which seem explicitly to say something, to make claims about reality which are either true or false.

This apparently compelling objection trades on a subtle equivocation, namely that sentences per se are the bearers of meaning, as opposed to the entire structure of a language, and the relationship of that language to reality. The objection thus simply assumes the view generally rejected by philosophers of language and linguists that sentences in isolation from a language convey meaning. Without this equivocation, or undefended assumption, it is difficult to imagine how any reformulation of the objection could succeed, even this refined version of the objection: that many sentences in fictional works are indistinguishable from (look the same as) sentences which can be uttered outside the work of fiction. It is straightforwardly true that many sentences in a fictional work could be extracted and, without changing their linguistic appearance, recast as statements, non-mimetic, literal claims about reality; yet it doesn't follow that within the context of the fictional work the same sentences literally say, i.e. explicitly state, anything about the non-fictional world outside the text, about reality. Indeed were they to do so, as readers we would no longer find ourselves reading a purely fictional work.

Perhaps that's not a problem if we decide to reject the purist art-for-art credo, and not let it extend into

semantic theory. There is a trivial sense in which fictional and non-fictional contexts do overlap, a sense in which they allow us to use language interchangeably between these contexts. One of the points of the no-truth-in-fiction distinction, however, is to become clear about the linguistic role, the mimetic role, of any utterance or piece of language in a story or novel and to distinguish this use of language from the way a similar utterance works when used to state facts about the world. A reader might of course still talk about narrative facts as though they have a life outside a novel or story. She might, for example, wonder whether anyone in early 20th-century Prague wore a nightshirt (*The Trial*), or whether there ever existed a penal colony which centred its judicial process on an ingenious sentence-inscribing torture machine (*In the Penal Colony*). But these hypothetical claims, whether true or false, function outside the fictional work, in a language which is capable of expressing propositions, statements which are literally either true or false about reality. Fictional language by contrast has a radically different function, one which we should hesitate to weaken, even if the temptation to do so were coherent.

The temptation to see language working mimetically within a work of fiction as somehow propositional, as simultaneously expressing truths outside the work, standing as it were with one leg placed in the real world, entails insoluble problems for our very understanding of the connection between truth and language. A problem nearer to literary critical concerns is that we would undermine the rich economy of meaning of the fictional work, and as it were create a colony within the work to which all mimetic truths that don't correspond to real-world (non-narrative) facts would be consigned. For example, nightshirts, which after all were once common enough in the real world, would enjoy a special dispensation that would allow them the freedom to move in and out of the work, or to figure in claims that refer simultaneously within and outside the work, whereas a purely imaginal tor-

ture machine would remain fixed inside the work. A practical problem occurs with this arrangement. Even if it could coherently be made, it would substitute a rather trite relationship between fictional and non-fictional facts for the incommensurate and open-ended mimetic relationship which exists between fictional language and the real world, a relationship not of factual correspondence but of suggestive parallels which operate outside the constraints of logic, truth, and conventional linguistic meaning.

The benefits of a language which operates outside these constraints: In a real-world/natural language, statements are fixed, so that a sentence expressing a statement has a univocal meaning and expresses a single truth. Were the fictional language in Kafka's penal colony story to operate under a similar regime, all narrative talk describing the torture machine would roughly be confined to a description of a mechanical device which once upon a time performed a rather pointless task and now no longer adequately works. Even if the description were fleshed out, we would be left with an imperceptive, unimaginative, perfectly literal reading, the kind of reading that the officer might offer were he to materialise as Kafka's most unflinchingly literal reader. Under a more flexible regime, which sees fictional language as inherently indeterminate and (therefore) non-propositional, the seemingly literal narrative description can be maintained; it doesn't become literally false the way we're sometimes told every metaphor does once we fasten onto its real meaning. For there is no question of truth and therefore no question of the narrative description being false; nor of it embodying a special meaning which it conveys to us and which can be formulated as the truth that the fiction is really expressing. Instead we have as many interpretations, ascriptions of non-literal meaning, as the particular words and sentences of the story can productively yield.

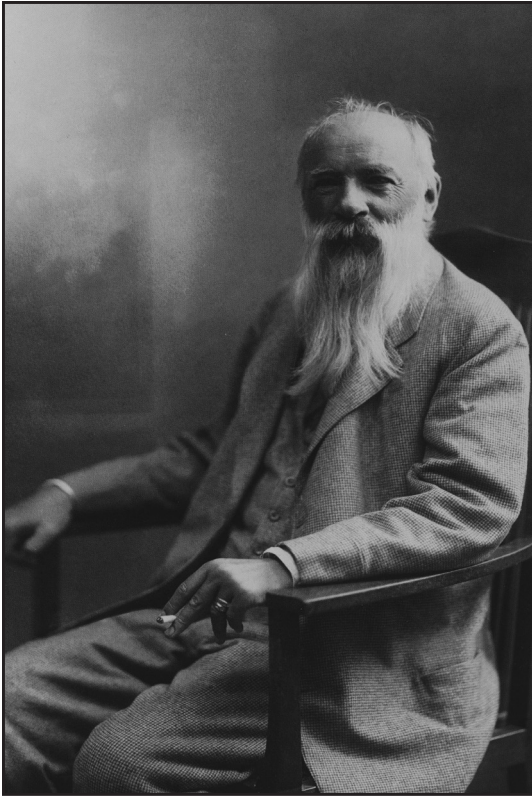
The Insurance Man installation tacitly observes the no-truth-in-fiction distinction, by playfully turn-

ing a diverse assortment of archival and other materials into an open-ended aesthetic response to Kafka's penal colony story, and thus avoids simply collapsing the wall between art and reality. In this way, the installation suggests a tension in the issue that Kundera raises concerning the autonomy of aesthetic works. It resists treating the story and these materials as a common work—as Kundera would have it “an enormous common grave” in which the novelist is buried under the weight of the totalising archival oeuvre—even while displaying the materials as part of the potential context of the story, as informing prospective interpretations of the story. In his curatorial statement, Jerry Zaslove hints at this tension when he describes the installation as bringing ordinary objects and interests from Kafka's life into contact with the story, through “a mise en scene [which] allows us to see the execution as an everyday affair” (4-5). Were we to take Kundera's

comment as a prescription to wean ourselves from all such contact, we would absorb something of the reductive spirit of the aforesaid hypothetical officer's literal, non-mimetic reading. Not only would we cordon this text and others off from the prosaic actuality of Kafka's own interests, but, more importantly from the standpoint of the modernist aesthetics which Kundera supports, from the artistic virtuosity with which his stories and novels transform these interests into an aesthetic product, modestly in the case of a night-shirt turned into a minor variation of the larger joke through which the narrative of *The Trial* unfolds, and with spellbinding dexterity and scope in the case of the central mimetic device of the penal colony story, a literally unimaginable execution machine which artfully recovers discourses, materials, and events, which literally remain outside the story.



Frantisek Zaver Salda 1924, Literary Critic, Langhans Portrait Gallery. Reproduced with permission Langhans Portrait Gallery.



Jaroslav Vrchlický 1911; poet, translator, dramatist, critic.
Langhans Portrait Gallery. With Permission of Langhans portrait gallery



Portrait of Nathalie, 1905; Princess of Montenegro. Langhans Portrait Gallery. With Permission of Langhans portrait gallery. Photographed in the Langhans studio at Vodickova 37, Prague, from 1880 to 1948. Reproductions in Collection of Jerry Zaslove.