K., an Exploration of the Names of Kafka's Central Characters

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FRANZ KAFKA OCCUPIES a unique position among the narrators who use character names symbolically. Where others work with names suggestive of personality traits, background, social status, or function in the plot, Kafka goes one step further by giving clues to the identity of his characters. His names are more than vehicles for characterization; they serve as specific aliases. Yet, Kafka's naming technique has received comparatively scant attention in the almost prodigious amounts of critical Kafka literature.

Even in a work as scholarly and as complete as Heinz Politzer's *Franz Kafka – Parable and Paradox*,[1] the study of names is incidental and sporadic and rarely pursued as far as it might go. The references to Kafka's use of names that one meets in the literature in general are by and large subordinated to whatever view of Kafka the interpreter happens to hold. If one considers that by far the majority of Kafkian characters are either tagged with mere categorizations or remain completely anonymous, this is not surprising. One might even say with some justification that this very anonymity is more revealing than whatever implications could possibly derive from the study of the fewer than a dozen proper names given to heroes throughout all of Kafka's narratives. However, the categorizations of *the Explorer, the Hunger-Artist, the Emperor*, and the animal designations of *an ape, an animal the size of a marten, a giant mole* appear to be generally interpreted as a natural outgrowth of Kafkian parable form and parable style. The question whether this preference for the parable might not be an outgrowth of his inclination towards generic names is not asked, let alone answered.

[1] Ithaca, 1962.

Beyond onomastic interest *per se*, a reliable specialized study in this area, however limited, could be helpful to those interpreters of Kafkian narrative who must base their conclusions on translations rather than on the originals. Willa and Edwin Muir, who were the first to present Kafka to American and English readers, and whose translations of his major works are still the only ones readily available, have, understandably, taken some liberties; they have, in fact, preinterpreted Kafka to such a degree that their own views of the author have become superimposed upon his work.

A few examples from "The Hunter Gracchus" may illustrate the point: "saber-swinging hero" (*säbelschwingender Held*) becomes "hero, flourishing his *sword* on high." The image in the original is unquestionably ironic; it might suggest a dueling *Couleurstudent*, an ineffectual policeman, or a wildly charging cavalry officer, but not a guardian of divine justice or the like. The prosaic "merchandise" (*Ware*, obviously misread as *Waage*) becomes "scales," again manufacturing a symbol of abstract justice from nothing at all.

Proper names, fortunately, are quite immune to this sort of treatment; hence they can furnish more precise tools for drawing the unshifting core, the basic tenets from Kafka's quicksands of paradox and ambiguity.

Kafka himself expressed unequivocally that there was nothing accidental about his choice of names. While his novella *The Judgment* was at the printer's, he made a long entry in his diary, describing the emotions and thoughts that "became clear to me during the course of this story." He felt that "this was necessary, because the story came out of me like a real human birth," and because he wanted to "reach the body itself," divorced from the "dirt and the slime."[2] At first he talks about Georg Bendemann, the main character, and his relationship with the story father in third-person terms, but then he continues, "Georg has the same number of letters as Franz. In Bendemann, the 'mann' is there only to strengthen the syllable (*sic*) 'Bende' ... But Bende has the same number of letters as Kafka, and the vowel 'e' is repeated in the same position as the vowel 'a' in Kafka."[3] A comparison of the

[2] Max Brod, *Franz Kafka, A Biography* (New York, 1963), p. 129.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

name of his fiancée, Félice Bauer, with that of the story fiancée, *Frieda Brandenfeld*, follows.[4] To treat this almost childish word-letter play as a bit of whimsy and let it go at that might appear tempting, but this would not go along with the agonized psycho-analytical tone of the complete entry.[5]

Up to the writing of *The Judgment*, Kafka had only published one small volume, *Meditations*, containing brief parables and even briefer mood sketches, entirely devoid of proper names. *The Judgment* was a departure from everything that he had done before – Brod calls it the "break-through" in Kafka's career –[6] and the author's elaboration on the naming process, precisely at this point, seems most significant. It is as if Kafka had wanted to stress, even if only for his own elucidation, that his new venture, though not narrowly autobiographical, was nevertheless his own story, a projection unto a foreign plane where his personality had to endure shifts and changes and mutilation in a shifting and changing and incomprehensible world and yet to grope for its identity despite almost physical dismemberment. This most Kafkian of Kafka's amalgamations of technique and dogma is developed further throughout a number of variations.

The Georg Bendemann of *The Judgment*, who has drowned himself at his father's command,[7] is reborn again and again. In the novel fragment *America* he appears as Karl Rossmann and introduces two variations on the naming theme, the letter *K.* and the animal designation, for *Ross* is German for "horse." The camouflaged animal designation as well as the assorted *fauna* of the parables in turn constitutes a roundabout play with Kafka's name, for *kavka* is Czech for "jackdaw," and a picture of this bird adorned the letterhead of the business stationery of Kafka's father.[8] It should be

[4] He even explains that, beyond the matching initials, the *Branden* is part of *Brandenburg*, the name of the province where Berlin, Félice's home city, is located.

[5] At this stage of his life, Kafka had become interested in Judaism and Judaica. (See Brod, *op.cit.*, pp. 110ff.) Acrostics and all sorts of letter and number manipulations are quite common in the Talmud and have made their way into Yiddish literature and Talmud and Scripture study up to this day.

[6] Brod, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

[7] At the time of the writing of this story, as throughout most of his life, Kafka's feelings about his own father were not at all unlike Georg's. See Kafka, *Dearest Father* (New York, 1954).

[8] Brod, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

mentioned here that in German the concept *animal* (*Tier*) does not have the implication of *mammal* as it has in English but embraces all the classifications of zoology. Here, then, is at least a suggestion that Kafka's liking for the parable form might be an outgrowth of his liking for animal designations rather than *vice versa*. Karl shows his relationship with the author not only by using Kafka's initial, but also by positioning the vowel *a* very much like in *Franz*. Because *America* has remained a fragment, and because the information about its projected ending is contradictory, one can only speculate whether Karl was meant to develop into a "beastly" sort of a man. Chances are that he was not. As he is only sixteen, not a seducer but the victim of a seduction, the fact that he agrees to be packed off to America and to abandon the servant girl whose child he has fathered does not make him seem particularly gross or wicked. It seems more likely, therefore, that Kafka was trying to strike in the horse-man name a balance of animalism and humanness. This is also supported by the name of the mother of Karl's child, *Johanna Brummer*, for *Brummer* is a colloquialism for *Brummfliege*, a sort of deer- or horsefly.

More directly related to Georg as well as to Kafka is Gregor Samsa, hero of *The Metamorphosis*.[9] Through a juggling of the letters, the German Georg becomes a Czech, and the German-sounding *Bende* becomes the Czech *Samsa*, resembling Kafka's own surname more closely in the position of the two *a's* between paired consonants reinforced by another consonant before the second one. The beast-man idea does not appear in the name this time, but in the story itself, for Gregor, the bachelor commercial traveler, lives and dies in the body of a huge, roach-like insect. The creature is clumsy and disgusting, but it is also gentle and harmless; it is the Samsa family, particularly the insect's human progenitor, that becomes more and more brutal as the story progresses. The death of the hero again is brought about by the father, but it lacks the vestige of human dignity, the coluntary self-destruction in swift-flowing water, of *The Judgment*. As befitting a loathsome insect, Gregor ends in slow, horrible decay and is not resurrected again. Karl Rossmann must carry on the line and reappears as a much more sinister version of the horse-man in "The Country Doctor."

[9] Work on both, *America* and *The Metamorphosis* was carried on concurrently. See Brod, *op.cit.*, p. 128.

Though none of the male characters in this strange narrative is identified by a proper name, the "groom" of the Muir translation is actually designed as another Rossmann. There is something centaur-like about the image of the squatting stable hand, the *Knecht*, who has been living in the pigsty below the doctor's *own house* – the author stresses this intelligence – with two gigantic horses, though the doctor has not been aware of this. The word *Knecht*, again a single syllable beginning with *K*, lends the connotation of serfdom to the term for stable hand.[10] Throughout the narrative it is fused with another word for "horse," *Pferd*, into *Pferdeknecht*, hence a twisted but almost literal reincarnation of Rossmann. The *Knecht* behaves like an animal. "Beast," the doctor calls him because the creature has left the marks of his teeth on the cheek of a gentle servant girl (as gentle as Johanna Brummer was bold) who has long served the doctor without being appreciated. The helpless doctor cannot avert disaster. At the *Pferdeknecht's* bidding, the super horses speed the poor man away on a wild sleigh ride from which he never returns. Behind him he can hear the cries of the flower-like Rosa, as the horseman breaks down the door to the doctor's home where she is seeking refuge. Through a subtle emphasis here and there, the implication of a divided personality, powerful stallion, would-be healer, and between them the horseman is inescapable. The brutal animalism, the rape of the girl, becomes an inverted reflection of the incidents between Johanna and Karl in *America*.

Because of Kafka's reluctance to carry his larger works to completion and to release for publication even many of the smaller, seemingly finished stories, it is impossible to establish a definite chronology and to state what piece of writing followed what. Even Brod's "Chronological Table"[11] leaves plenty of room for speculation. Therefore the statement that Kafka "abandoned" one naming technique in favor of another does not mean that a clear-cut change appeared between this work and that one and that the author never reverted to the former method. However, there is a decidedly new approach to the selection of names in the works generally placed in the "second and third period."

[10] *Knechtschaft* – servitude, bondage, even slavery.

[11] Brod, *op.cit.*, pp. 244–245.

Beginning with *The Trial*, Kafka abandons the letter-shuffling and, with the typical Kafka touch, appears to simplify his approach shile actually complicating it. The hero's surname is indicated boldly by the initial *K.* only, but it is *Josef K.*, not *Franz.* Since the name *Josef* figures in several works, it would be rash to assume that it was pulled out of a hat. Kafka must have found it amusing to plant his sophisticated clues neatly into the first scene, not too close together, to build them up subtly through the narrative, and then to wonder whether anyone caught on. Two *Wächter* (guards or bailiffs), who turn out to be small-time crooks, share the first scene with Josef K. K. discovers their names only through conversation between the two. One addresses the other as "Franz" and is later on addressed as "Willem." From then on they are often referred to as "the one called Franz" and "the one called Willem." Between 1914 and 1916, the years during which Kafka did at least some of the work on *The Trial* (and, according to Brod, also on *The Castle*, which also uses the name *Josef* significantly), a certain Franz-Josef and a certain Willem (corruption of *Wilhelm*) shared the limelight as partners in an enterprise that made them bailiffs of a sort on a grand scale, and criminals in the eyes of some. Kaiser Franz-Josef then was Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian, Kaiser Wilhelm Emperor of the German Empire. Franz-Josef had ascended the throne in 1848, and by the time Kafka was born, a couple of generations of boys throughout the Empire, in Prague especially in the Jewish, German-speaking families, had been named after the Emperor. *Franz-Josef Railroad Station* in Prague was the point of departure for many of the excursions which Kafka and Brod took together.[12] Werfel, another Prague boy named Franz, weaves a whole novel, *Der Abituriententag* (*Class Reunion*), around a mistaken identity caused by the commonness of the double name. In his diary Kafka himself mentions an instance of confusion of the two names: a hotel clerk has registered him as *Josef* Kafka.[13] Whether or not Kafka was actually named *Franz-Josef* is irrelevant; that he notes the hotel-register incident in his diary and with some detail and amusement shows that he could not possibly have been unaware of the commonness of the double name. It strongly suggests that

[12] Brod, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

[13] Brod (ed.), *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914–1923* (New York, 1949), p. 213.

he used it deliberately to identify Josef K. not as just a relative[14] of Franz Kafka, but as Franz Kafka himself. The guard Franz, on the other hand, mirrors K. He shares K.'s food, eating K.'s breakfast, tries to get K.'s clothes, even his underwear, for himself, and undergoes a trial and execution of sorts that foreshadows K.'s experience. A chapter titled "The Flogger" describes how Franz and Willem vainly try to offer excuses for their small misdeeds while the flogger strips them and administers his brutal punishment. K. looks on and half-heartedly attempts to bribe the flogger into sparing the victims. Thus, by retaining *Josef* as K.'s given name while calling one of the guards *Franz*, the author invests their relationship with the suggestion of a division within himself, a division which is further complicated by a subdivision: Franz's experiences are shared by Willem, and both of them have the name of a *Kaiser*, a word beginning with the ubiquitous *K*.

Whether *Josef* is also the given name of K., the hero of *The Castle*, is hard to decide. The name, that is, *any* given name for K., is mentioned only once, and that is in a telephone conversation between K. and one of the officials of the Castle. K. Claims to be the assistant of the land-surveyor and gives his name as *Josef*. Since K. has previously claimed to be the surveyor himself and has been accepted as such by the Castle authorities, at least part of his statement on the phone is untrue. This, of course, does not preclude that he has given his first name correctly; it simply leaves the question open. By this device Kafka again seems to suggest the division within his protagonist that occurs so frequently. The phone conversation, however, takes the reader a step further; it brings him to K.'s crucial question: (if I am not the surveyor's old assistant) "then, who am I?" The minor administrator at the other end of the line will not, or cannot, answer. "You *are* the old assistant," he declares authoritatively though he has vigorously protested this claim before. Because the powers that be are evasive, K. receives official recognition of his dual status.[15]

The name *Josef* appears once more; now modified by a feminine suffix, it designates a squeaky-voiced mouse. At last the animal character has been clearly joined to the author's alias. The self-

[14] Politzer comments on the sequential use of *Josef* but makes of it no more than a chain by which each of the Josefs is related to the next one (*op.cit.*, p. 309).

[15] Kafka, *Das Schloss* (New York, 1962), p. 33.

identification is emphasized throughout the narrative. Josefine is an artist, a singer who, according to her critics, does not sing at all, but merely whistles in quite an ordinary, even rather weak, mouse voice. Perhaps she is so effective because her songs express the age-old race memories of her people, give voice to their fears and emotions. Josefine does not care about that. She feels that no one really understands her and that she should be allowed to live for her art alone, for she is not strong, and the ordinary mouse-work quite exhausts her. The story teller realizes that Josefine must die soon and that the mouse folk will have to get along without her, and probably will.[16] Actually, "Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" is not so much a story as a treatise on the relationship between the artist and the public. During the last years of his life, when Kafka no longer could work at his job with the insurance office, he was much concerned with this subject, and the four stories of the collection *A Hunger Artist* all deal with it. "Josefine" was one of these. Shortly before his death, when Kafka was not supposed to use his voice and communicated by writing notes, he scribbled, "The story is going to have a new title, 'Josefine the Songstress – or the Mice Nation.' Sub-titles like this are not very pretty, it is true, but in this case is has perhaps a special meaning."[17]

It is strangely fitting that the theme of his last story cycle, art and the artist, is also the theme of some of his very earliest writings. Contained in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (*Description of a Struggle*), which Brod dates as before 1907,[18] is the much interpreted "Hunter Gracchus," in two versions. One is the completed story as it appears in several collections, the other a fragment, even more ironic in tone and almost slangy in language. Gracchus has been variously interpreted as Everyman,[19] the homeless Jew in the Diaspora,[20] modern man in a suspension and despair that even transcends death,[21] and finally as Christ.[22] None of these interpretations appears

[16] Kafka, *The Penal Colony* (New York, 1963), pp. 256–277.

[17] Brod, *Franz Kafka*, pp. 205–206.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 244.

[19] Bernard Knieger, "The Hunter Gracchus," *Explicator*, XVII (1959), item 39.

[20] Pavel Eisner, *Franz Kafka and Prague* (New York, 1950), p. 46.

[21] Charles Neider, *The Frozen Sea* (New York, 1962), p. 123.

[22] Caroline Gordon, "Notes on Hemingway and Kafka," *Kafka* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), pp. 80–82.

very satisfying, particularly because not one of them even mentions that there might be some importance in Kafka's selection of such a literally outlandish name. Why the name of a Roman orator for a hunter in Germany's Black Forest in a tale set in the part of Northern Italy that belongs to the Austro-Hungarian Empire? It seems incredible that such a *tour-de-force* could be haphazard and meaningless, even more so in the work of an author who has always remained remarkably consistent in limiting his choice of names to a small number of interrelated appelations. A perusal of some short biographies of the Gracchi offers only one very thin clue: both brothers were eloquent orators and both suffered an ignominious death. The name of an orator might fit into a story about an author seeking an audience; the ignominious death might parallel the fall from the mountain peak that is described in the story; still, these seem to be far-fetched reasons for using such an incongruous name, for Kafkian absurdity usually is based on very concrete imagery, not on vague historical allusions. When all other clues seem to trail off into obscurity, the philological approach sometimes provides a more concrete basis for investigation. In this case it leads to an Italian dictionary, for Kafka sets his story in Riva, a town where Italian is the language of the natives. This at last clears up the mystery: In Italian *gracchio* means "jackdaw" just as *kavka* means "jackdaw" in Czech. Once Kafka's self-identification in this story is established via his tri-lingual pun, a great many clues, too numerous and too involved to be discussed in the context of a name study, present themselves. Together they create a very clear image of the scribbling jackdaw, the jackdaw who hunts with his pen, who aspired to lofty heights and suffered a living death as a consequence of his audacious folly. Beyond that, all these clues support the contention that, from his earliest works to his last, Franz Kafka's central character was Franz Kafka.

Had his work been literally autobiographical, such a lifetime preoccupation with self would have seemed unbearably egocentric. Neither masterly style nor compelling imagery, neither subtle wit nor sympathy-evoking *Weltanschauung* could have fully compensated for such egotism. However, if Kafka's self-identifications are seen in their proper perspective, that is, in relation to their incomprehensible and hostile environment, they do not add up to an exaggerated sense of self-importance, but to a confused and search-

ing humility. All the Kafkas in all their disguises are seekers. All are trying to establish their own identities, their own positions and their own values in a world scheme that forever eludes them. Essentially, Kafka wrote for himself; publication was a byproduct, often engineered by his friends. He wrote because he had to, and he had to write because he could neither take his own place in the scheme of things for granted, nor could he fathom it. Thus Georg Bendemann, Gregor Samsa and Karl Rossmann were created so that they might ask, "Where do I, the bachelor Franz Kafka, fit in regarding my family, Félice, my daily work, and the bourgois existence of a Jewish family father?" The two Josefs K. were made to wrestle with Kafka's position regarding ethical absolutes, justice, morality, divine purpose, while Gracchus and Josefine sought to define Kafka's place as a writer. Together with the many who have no name, all these characters echo the crucial question asked by the land-surveyor's old assistant, "Then, who am I?"