THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE SOUL[1]

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BOTH St Teresa and Franz Kafka in *The Interior Castle* and *The Castle* explore the geography of the soul. The first is a sixteenth-century spiritual treatise cast in the form of an allegory, the second a modern piece of fiction presented as a novel. In each case, a failure to pursue these terms as definitions has led to a good deal of confused critical comment.

St Teresa begins: 'While I was beseeching our Lord today that he would speak through me, since I could find nothing to say and had no idea how to begin to carry out the obligation laid upon me by obedience, a thought occurred to me which I will now set down, in order to have some foundation on which to build. I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions. . . .' These words say exactly what the writer means them to; she is preparing the way to elaborate her image of the soul as a castle, just as St Augustine referred to Heaven as a city, or Bunyan to some of the landmarks on the way to the Celestial City as Doubting Castle and the Slough of Despond. Each example shows the language to be that of personal comparison—although, whereas the soul is a castle for St Teresa, for Bunyan Doubting Castle is the citadel of the Giant Despair.

In contrast, Kafka's approach to his castle is quite different. He is not concerned with comparisons, and in one passage in his diaries he records that metaphors were one of the things which made him nearly despair of being a writer. K., the central character in *The Castle*, makes a journey somewhat similar to Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*; yet it is not a symbolic but a literal journey. Again the seven stages into which this journey falls do not correspond with the seven mansions of *The Interior Castle*. Admittedly something happens to K. in the course of the novel, something of which the novelist makes the reader quite aware, and yet it is something of which K. remains quite unaware

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during the time it is happening. For Kafka the narrator should never be confused with K. his main protagonist, since there are continual hints that the author has a foreknowledge of his character which of course his character cannot have—'at least at the very outset', as the narrator subtly puts it on one page.

The distinctions that I have been drawing may be fine ones. Some might add that they are the result of modern criticism having become a science. I do not think that this is fully the case. Rather, I suspect that as the world has become older, so the need for greater and greater precision has grown in every branch of activity. Nor am I advocating that the activity of language should be regarded as a science, but I do submit that the effect of high precision instruments with their powers of measuring millesimal exactitude has influenced writers with a desire to have a similar exactitude about their own use of words—among them Kafka (one of his earliest pieces of description was of 'the aeroplanes at Brescia'). Yet whereas St Augustine could compare a peaceful fourth-century city with Heaven, to Kafka such a comparison with a modern city would have been a blasphemy of language.

Now Kafka, whom I believe to be the most symptomatic writer of the first half of the twentieth century, wanted words to mean exactly what they said; and sometimes like a poet he wanted them to suggest two different things at one and the same time. 'Out of weary blue eyes she looked at him, a transparent silk kerchief hung down to the middle of her forehead, the infant was asleep on her bosom. "Who are you?" asked K., and disdainfully—whether contemptuous of K. or her own answer was not clear—she replied: "A girl from the Castle".' This is a precise reporting of what happened, and the reader, like K., must make up his mind whether the girl spoke contemptuously of herself or to her questioner. For it is this continual sustained note of ambiguity, which is not so distant from the religious conception of paradox, that distinguishes and yet makes similar the work of St Teresa and Kafka.

To draw a fine distinction is sometimes associated with phrases such as 'a miss is as good as a mile' or 'to escape by a hair's breadth': Kafka enjoyed drawing fine distinctions, but was particularly fearful of phrases such as those I have quoted not because they were ambiguous, but because they kept on changing their meaning. For instance, during the first World War when Kafka

was drafting fragments of *The Castle*, if a bullet missed by a hair's breadth, a soldier's life might be saved: in the second World War if a bomber was inaccurate by as much as a hair's breadth, it could make the difference between destroying a military target and a thousand civilian lives; quite literally a miss might cause havoc a mile away. Yet common to both experiences, and indeed common to all those that narrowly escape catastrophe, comes the phrase to the lips—'There but for the grace of God go I'; and there, in a word, lies the principal similarity, approached from opposite angles, between *The Interior Castle* and *The Castle*. They are both concerned with the workings of grace—St Teresa with showing how by living a virtuous life it may be won, and Kafka with showing how it may affect a man's whole way of living—even if unapprehended by the beneficiary himself. The contrast between these views is one of time and place—between a united Catholic Christendom as existed in Spain during the sixteenth century and a Central European climate which has been one of growing scepticism and doubt since the turn of this century.

Kafka's castle is not modelled on the actual Hradschin which towers over Prague, although there is no doubt that the novel's whole conception of authority invested in a castle springs from the authority that was once invested in this medieval citadel from which proclamations used to be made by means of a speaking-tube. There is the telling passage in the novel, distinguishing between the medieval peasant to whom the Hradschin was an accepted part of his natural landscape and the modern peasant whom industrialization has turned into a foreigner in his own native city. The extent to which K. feels cut off from both is emphasized when he says: 'To the peasant I don't belong and to the castle I don't either, I suppose'. But for such pessimism he is rapped on the knuckles by the schoolmaster, and told: 'Between the peasantry and the castle there is no difference'. This is a line of thought which, as the book develops, bears a close resemblance to an echo from the Psalms: 'How can we sing the Lord's praise in an alien land?', and again as Max Brod has pointed out: 'it should never be forgotten that writing was for Franz a form of prayer'.

Today, once more, the Hradschin is the seat of an alien power. Yet there have been happier times in its history when the peasantry have regarded it as a kind of omnipotent power; and it was

this memory, I suggest, that lay at the back of Kafka's mind when in creating his own castle for the purposes of his novel he decided also to make its function that of a seat of grace. However, he was careful that there should be no possible confusion between the magnificent fortress that guards Prague and his own fictional castle. 'It was neither an old stronghold nor a new mansion, but a rambling pile consisting of innumerable small buildings closely packed together and of one or two storeys; if K. had not known that it was a castle he might have taken it for a little town. There was only one tower, as far as he could see, and whether it belonged to a dwelling-house or a church he could not determine. Swarms of crows were circling it.' If there is ambiguity at this stage as to what role the castle is to play, the ambiguity is in the mind of K.; he is only aware at first of a hierarchy in the castle's servants, a hierarchy that may be secular and perhaps bureaucratic, or ecclesiastical and perhaps celestial. Doubt drives him on unaware of what he may discover, since 'man cannot live without an enduring faith in something indestructible within him': at least, at the outset, that would seem the indirect purpose of the journey. Moreover, since revelation never comes by forcing, it is only at the moment when K. ceases to struggle, hands himself over as it would appear, that 'other forces' take command of the situation: from then on his distrust of everyone turns to acceptance, his doubt of everything to faith. Now all this, unwittingly, has been brought about by one man's relationship with a castle and its staff, a staff that is very strict in its observance that none shall step out of their appointed place in the social structure. It might be stated that man asks what he wants of life and that life in turn ultimately gives him what is best for him. Certainly this is what befalls K., since there would seem to be benevolent forces at work on his journey whose presence he does not either accept or understand, but whose role resembles that of guardians. Some would add here the word angels—among them St Teresa —although Kafka in recording the journey of a man from agnosticism to faith can find no word, or words, that are precise enough to express the nature of the transition; it simply occurs —and a reader is left remembering how after two thousand years the theologians are still arguing about a satisfactory definition of grace. Further, if such argument persists—and it was very much a subject of conversation in the circle in which Kafka moved—

it is not surprising if he avoids any explicit use of the word; but even if he avoids any explicit use of the word, the fact of its existence as a reality is taken for granted. That is why he does not write allegorically and liken grace to the seat of a castle in the tradition of some of the early fathers and mystics, but presents instead a castle in a novel which acts as a seat of grace.

This may sound like another ambiguity, and some have argued in the past—notably religious critics—that Kafka tricks his reader by refusing to commit himself over the matter of grace. At this point I would like to quote from St Teresa. 'Sometimes, in addition to the things which [a person] sees with the eyes of his soul, in intellectual vision, others are revealed to him—in particular, a host of angels, with their Lord; and, though he sees nothing with the eyes of the body or with the eyes of the soul, he is shown the things I am describing, and many others which are indescribable, by means of an admirable kind of knowledge. Anyone who has experience of this, and possesses more ability than I, will perhaps know how to express it; to me it seems extremely difficult. If the soul is in the body or not while all this is happening I cannot say; I would not myself swear that the soul is in the body, or that the body is bereft of the soul.' Here the writer is experiencing a difficulty such as Kafka was to experience, since she is making a statement of fact which offers a choice of interpretations. Those who would plead that this is to trick the reader should remember that in such circumstances were authors to give up writing simply because something is 'extremely difficult' to express, then that would be to deny their vocation and the whole sense of calling that goes with such a vocation. Again the word calling has a particular aptness as applied to writers such as St Teresa and Kafka. At one place she admits, 'I know not what I am writing for I am writing as if the words were not mine.' Indeed, she was writing under obedience and, like all such authors following an inner calling, she had merely, as it were, to place the paper over her mind and the writing became simply a tracing of what already was there. Kafka's writing also resembles this kind of tracing, but rather more, as it were, a tracing back to the writing on a wall in a promised land. Sometimes it is said that the Christian religion begins where the Jewish leaves off; one might add that in one sense Kafka begins where St Teresa leaves off.

St Teresa had also been born in a fortress city that had known foreign invaders, and on journeys as a young girl when she rode home across the plain and the dust rose in clouds, so she had often been struck with the impression of her city as a castle built in air whose buttresses rested on faith. In Avila, as well as in Prague, lie the literal foundations of both *The Interior Castle* and *The Castle*. Yet whereas in the first book the city offered an image, in the second it served in suggesting a concept; again whereas in the first a journey is undergone allegorically, in the second it takes place factually.

On life's journey a distinction is frequently drawn in which the Jew is regarded as a wanderer, the Christian as a pilgrim. Neither St Teresa nor Kafka would have accepted this, since she would have said that all pilgrims were essentially wanderers, and he that all wanderers were essentially pilgrims; in the fineness of their distinctions would have met the overlapping of the Jewish and Christian religions. For, in both their letters and their works, a reader is made acutely conscious of how each religion had persecuted the other. Yet what was the meaning of Christianity if it allowed Jewry to be hounded down the corsos of Europe?—asked St Teresa. Was not every human being a potential Christian in the broadest sense? And these questions perhaps met an answer when Kafka, equating the catacombs with the ghettoes, went on to emphasize how every human being was a Jew when he said of anti-semitism, 'they beat the Jews and murder humanity'. *The Castle* is not, as some have supposed, a Zionist epic of a people searching for a promised home, nor does it offer, as others claim, solely a satire on bureaucracy. If such readings are possible then that is because, like *The Interior Castle*, it is a book that moves on numerous planes of existence.

In this enquiry it might have proved a neat summing-up if I could have declared that Kafka in his wide reading had come across St Teresa. But only once have I heard this suggested—and that over ten years ago at a discussion group. In my subsequent researches I have found no confirmation for the authenticity of this suggestion and I must leave it as an open question of fact, as another ambiguity to tease the reader. Instead, I am forced back to the point at which I began—namely, the geography of the soul that the two books share. This is not to imply that they are maps (I am thinking of the maps that illustrators have provided

for some editions of *Pilgrim's Progress*), or to say that when St Teresa begins by likening the soul to a diamond she is saying that all souls are diamonds; that is merely her way of approach—and there is her saving clause, which is a saving clause for all her language of analogy, 'as far as one can understand'. For man, as Kafka used to repeat, would cease to be man if he had full understanding; he would become another kind of being, and spiritual treatises such as those of the mystics, or novels such as his own about man and his relationship with God, would cease to be necessary. Kafka makes K. learn what St Teresa always accepted —that life is not a muddle but a mystery.

There is a sentence in the Talmud which reads: 'We Jews yield our best, like olives, when we are crushed'. Whenever Kafka reached this place he would bow his head low—thus accompanying the words with a gesture of respect or subservience that characteristically offered a choice of interpretation. In contrast, St Teresa was fond of lifting up her head when giving praise to the Lord for olive-trees, remembering that Pauline reasoning by which Christians, compared with Israelites, belonged to 'a wild olive-tree' and who accordingly had been engrafted on to an old tree in order that their new life might take root through the ancient stem. Kafka's recitation from the Talmud was for him a means of accepting and understanding the destiny of his people as laid upon them by Jehovah; St Teresa's recitation from the Scriptures was a means of giving and rendering thanks to Almighty God. For him the language of the olive-tree was allegory at one remove, whereas for her it was the language of reality; she accepted the graceful silver stems that rose from the terra cotta earth as a natural part of the Spanish landscape, whereas in Czech kitchens butter always took precedence over oil. Likewise, whereas the Hradschin is seen at one remove from the sprawling group of castle buildings to which K. makes his journey, St Teresa, coming from a country proverbially famous for its castles, made hers an equivalent of the soul—a castle not built on this earth but *in the air*; and these, both literally and metaphorically, are the hardest of all to keep up. Her book is a triumph of sustained imagery and exactitude in words. Again in contrast, Kafka's book is a work of the imagination, with a castle not set in the air but earthbound and surrounded *by air*. This is a vital distinction. For what a reader must do is first follow K.'s journey,

seeing the castle through his eyes, and then on re-reading the story, he must try and forget the castle and concentrate more on that enveloping insubstantiality which seems so alive with mysterious birds ('swarms of crows') and celestial presences ('other forces'). But the book is *only* a novel, some may retort; yet none the less it is the kind of novel which demands a concentration of effort similar to that which a reader should be *prepared* to give to a spiritual classic. For authors such as St Teresa and Kafka do not make concessions; they ask to be read with an inner silence and spirit of contemplation such as they themselves experienced when writing. Moreover, if this degree of concentration is given to the air that surrounds K.'s castle, to the grace that enfolds it like the grace which upholds that 'interior castle' St Teresa calls the soul, then a geography is established, not perhaps easy to chart, but at least as real to these two writers as the air that they breathed. A castle, whether on the ground or in the mind, is inconceivable without air. Yet once air is accepted, then at that moment all things become possible. . . .[2]

2 I should like to make an acknowledgment of thanks to Dr Ronald Gray, whose book, *Kafka's Castle* (Cambridge University Press, 1955), is an inspiration to anyone in this field.