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Chapter 2

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: KAFKA AND CERVANTES— TWO WRITERS, TWO LIVES, BEGINNINGS AND ENDS OF THE LITERARY NOVEL

Keywords: Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, doubling, Kafka, *The Castle*, *The Metamorphosis*

MFS: In this interview we juxtapose two writers who have made an extraordinary impact on literature and the world—Miguel de Cervantes and Franz Kafka. Can you discuss why their fiction is transformative?

DS: I would like to make the argument that Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) begins what we generally refer to as the literary novel and Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) ends it. Of course, novels precede *Don Quixote* and follow *The Castle*, but our understanding of literary beginnings and ends are fundamentally shaped by these two works. What's left after *The Castle* are the details: the explications, the colorings, the regional shifts, the detailed micro-histories, if you will, rather than the basic contours that define the starting and end points of the literary novel.

My perspective requires some elaboration. As Carroll Johnson points out in *Don Quixote: The Quest for Modern Fiction*, Cervantes's novel can be seen as the embodiment of intellectual ideas advanced during the Renaissance, including Neoplatonism and Christian humanism personified by Erasmus of Rotterdam (Johnson, 1990). This Renaissance philosophy with its embrace of humanism was shaped by the belief that the written text is the foundation of knowledge. I would argue that what passes today for literature or fiction or creative narrative is no longer steeped in the written word. Our post-textual, Internet-driven virtual reality—saturated in visual and auditory stimulants—has been annihilating to literature, which was shaped by the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Romanticism, and 20th-century Modernism.

As Johnson suggests, there's no escaping the fact that *Don Quixote* lies "at the center of the history of the novel" (Johnson, 1990, p. 19). It remains the "second-best-selling book in

history”, second, that is, to the Bible (Johnson, 1990, p. 19). Cervantes emphasizes that the novel is comprised from books that preceded it. Indeed, the literary critic Lionel Trilling argued that the entire history of the novel is, in fact, “a variation on the theme of *Don Quixote*” extending “from Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1821-1829), to Stendhal’s *Le rouge et le noir* (1830), to *Moby Dick* (1851), to *Madame Bovary* (1857) to *Huckleberry Finn* (1885)”, as well as “Philip Roth, John Irving, and Kurt Vonnegut to Elias Canetti and Milan Kundera (Trilling cited in Johnson, 1990, p. 19).

The Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset commented in 1914 that “every novel bears the *Quixote* within it like an inner filigree, just as every epic poem contains the *Iliad*, like the fruit its core” (Ortega cited in Johnson, 1990, p. 20). For that reason *Don Quixote* reignites all pre-existing theories of literature while anticipating all major theories and strategies of literary criticism since 1605 including those of the 20th century and now our new millennium.

One of the strikingly modern features of *Don Quixote* is that, at Johnson notes, Cervantes “introduces, worries about, and reacts to readers’ and critics’ reactions to *Don Quixote* all through the text” (Johnson, 1990, p. 22). Harold Bloom argues, in the introduction to Edith Grossman’s superb recent translation, that the Knight’s quest “is erotic, yet even the eros is literary. Crazed by reading (as so many of us still are), the Knight is in quest of a new self”, one that is inspired by the mythic exploits of gallantry in all the romance fiction that he reads. While Don Quixote’s quest is madness, as Bloom notes, “lucidity keeps breaking in, reminding him that Dulcinea is his own supreme fiction, transcending an honest lust for the peasant girl Aldonza Lorenzo”. For as Bloom suggests in his introduction to *Don Quixote*, “a fiction, believed in even though you know it is a fiction, can be validated only by sheer will” (citations Bloom, 2003, p. xxvii).

One of the reason’s this novel resonates so profoundly with us is that embedded in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote, Part Two* (begun approximately ten years after Part One but included here in Grossman’s translation as a single edition) was the author’s textual response to a counterfeit second volume penned by another man. This gives *Don Quixote* a postmodern metafictional quality that appeals to literary readers today.

So I think the case can be clearly made that *Don Quixote* is the first literary novel. Arguing that Kafka’s *The Castle* is the last great literary work is more challenging since there are, obviously, novels before and since *The Castle* that are important. Yet we have only to be reminded of the poet W. H. Auden’s assessment of Kafka in 1945: “Had one to name the author who comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age as Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe bore to theirs, Kafka is the first one would think of” (Auden cited in Corngold, 2013, p. xxiv). I believe that the characteristic contours of the modern novel and, arguably, the postmodern, intertextual, and post-mimetic renderings evinced today are based upon or reacting to the literary novels of the 1920s—Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926), and Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Yet of these only Kafka’s *The Castle* truly inhabits our contemporary consciousness where realism and fabulism blur our perceptions of reality and illusion and where the nightmarish bureaucratic state—or its stateless counterpart—in which reason and reasonlessness, purpose and purposelessness, moral causality and wantonness seep into the quantum physics laws of uncertainty to render our existence and our understanding of narrative as provisional and less than whole.

To examine *The Castle*, I prefer Mark Harman's relatively recent translation that relies on more contemporary assessments of the text, rather than the readable but less precise translation by Willa and Edwin Muir (Harman Trans., Kafka, 1998). Early on we read the description of the protagonist "K." trying to walk to the Castle and discovering no pathway leading directly to the Castle.

The street he had taken, the main street in the village, did not lead to the Castle hill, it only went close by, then veered off as if on purpose, and though it didn't lead any farther from the Castle, it didn't get any closer either. (Kafka, 1998, p. 10)

A bit later we are introduced to his two assistants, who are to help him with surveying. Yet, it seems that K. has trouble distinguishing them, which suggests he doesn't know them, even though the narrator suggests that he compares "their faces as he had often done before" (Kafka, 1998, p. 18).

With an acute sense of pecking order overlain with bureaucratic malice, K. insists on calling them jointly "Arthur".

"This is difficult," said K., comparing their faces as he had often done before, "how am I supposed to distinguish between you? Only your names are different, otherwise you're as alike as"—he hesitated, then went on involuntarily—"otherwise you're as alike as snakes". (Kafka, 1998, p. 18)

Early on the Castle authorities seem to acknowledge his authority as a "surveyor" (Kafka, 1998, p. 5). Later, that assessment is challenged by a village council chairman with the provisional "as you say": "You were, *as you say* [emphasis added], taken on as a surveyor, but we don't need a surveyor" (Kafka, 1998, p. 59).

The tone of *The Castle* is menacing as K. tries to navigate seemingly endless layers of hierarchical bureaucratic authority. Lower-level decision makers are nameless or interchangeable. Their policies seem infinitely arbitrary and devoid of rationality. One moment K. is powerless. Later, he seemingly has some authority and exerts it with cruel relish. Yet read a little further and, again, we see that K. himself is powerless and forever subject to the variable rules of authority. The morning after arriving K. gives up the idea of presenting himself at the Castle. The story begins with the characterization of him as a land surveyor and ends with his designation as a janitor in the village school. If it appears at the outset that K. "wants access to everything", then, it seems he "must be excluded from everything" (Calasso, 2005, p. 108). Realism interleaves with fabulism. The telephone is the instrument of authority and the means by which to exert oppression. The prose style is relatively simple, but it's ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations, each appearing no more authoritative than its predecessor. The result is an endless labyrinth of modern society where knowledge is unknowable and truth unobtainable. No other novel has rendered the absurdity, the powerlessness, the precariousness, and the sadistic horror of contemporary existence more effectively than *The Castle*.

MFS: What is the role of doubling in these novels or the lives of the authors?

DS: Cervantes and Kafka are defined both by the similarities and their differences. As Johnson notes, it seems likely that Cervantes's relatives were descended from Jews in Spain

who converted to Catholicism to avoid being expelled during the Spanish Inquisition (Johnson, 1990, p. 6). Kafka, as a German Jew living in Czechoslovakia, was very much aware of his provisional role in that society and even considered emigrating to Israel. All three of his sisters died in the Holocaust. He and his parents were spared the same fate because they died before the German occupation in World War II.

This sense of provisional belonging and the ambiguity that comes with this conditional status is apparent in Cervantes's and Kafka's fiction. As Johnson noted about *Don Quixote*, "Ambiguity is the watchword. The same text can be interpreted to support or to subvert the dominant ideology, depending on the reader's own ideological orientation. This applies equally to the reader of 1600 and to the reader of 1990" (Johnson, 1990, pp. 10-11). As I have suggested, *The Castle* is also rife with ambiguity that colors and distorts Kafka's realism. The sense of isolation and aloneness permeates his fiction. *Don Quixote* and *The Castle* are drenched in cruelty. As Nabokov noted, "Both parts of *Don Quixote* form a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty. From that viewpoint it is one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned" (Bloom, 2003, p. xxv). Kafka's lover Milena Jesenská characterized his fiction in her obituary of him as "cruel and painful" (Murray, 2004, p. 386). But whereas the reader might choose to overlook the cruelty in *Don Quixote* in order to savor the irony-drenched absurdity in this story, the pervasive sense of doom—that darkens and deepens in *The Castle* over the course of the novel—never lightens the mood.

MFS: Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Kafka's *The Castle* are their greatest works. Are these the best novels ever written? What are their similarities and differences? Why should we read them today?

DS: These days many readers have trouble making hierarchical judgments of the best fiction ever written. Nevertheless, if we want to understand the human condition, no two novels will provide greater insight. There's a reason why *Don Quixote* is read second to the Bible, and why we perceive *The Castle* as our societal nightmare of a technological bureaucracy indifferent to human needs. While I've highlighted some of the characteristics of *The Castle* earlier, let me illustrate my case here through *Don Quixote*.

For individuals who may be wary of reading the "classics", I encourage them to read *Don Quixote* because it will challenge their assumptions about the Western canon and what is readable. For as dark and cruel as *Don Quixote* may be, it's also very, very funny. Don Quixote wills himself to be a knight errant. He imagines a fair lady who will be the inspiration for his noble deeds. His "nag" of a horse becomes his "celebrated steed". He conceives of a narrator who will ennoble his illustrious deeds. But as Carroll Johnson notes, "We know, but he does not, that his deeds are in fact already being narrated, and that the narrator thinks he is a fool" (Johnson, 1990, p. 44). Thus, the reader experiences "dramatic irony", aware of the "violent contrast between the character's comically mistaken idea of what is going on and what we know to be true" (Johnson, 1990, p. 44).

With Don Quixote's second knightly sally he is now joined by his "squire" Sancho Panza. Here is a quote from the famous windmill scene superbly translated by Edith Grossman.

As they were talking, they saw thirty or forty of the windmills found in that countryside, and as soon as Don Quixote caught sight of them he said to his squire:

“Good fortune is guiding our affairs better than we could have desired, for there, you see, friend Sancho Panza, thirty or more enormous giants with whom I intend to do battle and whose lives I intend to take, and with the spoils we shall begin to grow rich, for this is righteous warfare, and it is a great service to God to remove so evil a breed from the face of the earth”.

“What giants?” said Sancho Panza.

“Those you see over there”, replied his master, “with the long arms; sometimes they are almost two leagues long”.

“Look, your grace,” Sancho responded, “those things that appear over there aren’t giants but windmills, and what looks like their arms are the sails that are turned by the wind and make the grindstone move”.

“It seems clear to me,” replied Don Quixote, “that thou are not well-versed in the matter of adventures: these are giants; and if thou art afraid, move aside and start to pray whilst I enter with them in fierce and unequal combat”. (Cervantes, 2003, p. 58)

And so Don Quixote engages with the windmills. Both horse and knight are hurt. When Sancho tries to reason with Don Quixote, it’s clear that that the knight sees something vastly different than his squire.

“Be quiet, Sancho, my friend”, replied Don Quixote. “Matters of war, more than any others, are subject to continual change; moreover, I think, and therefore it is true, that the same Frestón the Wise who stole my room and my books has turned these giants into windmills in order to deprive me of the glory of defeating them: such is the enmity he feels for me; but in the end, his evil arts will not prevail against the power of my virtuous sword”.

“God’s will be done”, replied Sancho Panza. (Cervantes, 2003, p. 59)

Not only is this passage tragic, it’s funny and, oddly enough, hopeful. In fact, I would argue that much of our lives consists of “tilting at windmills” (enemies we perceive whom often turn out to be something more or less than our imagination). And isn’t there something noble in Don Quixote’s quest, a narrative that is one of Western literature’s great stories of friendship between men?

Yet the novel’s “strangeness”—a trait Harold Bloom suggests is characteristic of all great works of literature worthy of inclusion in the Western canon—can never be fully assimilated into our imagination. Instead, we assimilate to *Don Quixote* and, in so doing, we perceive it as “adding strangeness to beauty”—a concept drawn from Walter Pater’s idea of Romanticism (Bloom, 1995, p. 3).

By contrast, our current reading of *The Castle* is vastly different. Although earlier interpretations, influenced by Kafka’s literary executor Max Brod and the English translators Willa and Edwin Muir, depicted it as a spiritual quest potentially in search of election or godliness, now we tend to interpret it differently. We regard it as a malignant labyrinth that, over the course of the narrative, creates layer upon layer of unremitting nihilism and despair leading inexorably to individual annihilation and cultural apocalypse. What could be more emblematic of contemporary life than this?

MFS: Kafka's two most significant novels—*The Trial* and *The Castle*—are steeped in the pursuit of “the quest”. The protagonists seek election that seems godless or, perhaps, witnessed by an omniscient, if disinterested, God.

DS: Both works are focused on “the quest”. With *Don Quixote*, the reader can laugh or cry (frequently both) at the mad pursuit of chivalry, which, suggests Bloom, places him “at war with Freud’s reality principle, which accepts the necessity of dying” (Bloom, 2003, xxiii). By contrast, the excruciating pain of *The Castle* never abates, despite the use of irony, and death is always relentlessly close at hand. While Kafka’s friend and literary executor Max Brod saw *The Castle*, suggests Mark Harman, “as the seat of divine grace”, Edwin Muir, the early English translator of his fiction is even more emphatic, suggesting that “the theme of the novel is salvation” (citations by Harman, 1998, p. xiv). However, in Harman’s more recent translation, the interpretation is darker, more menacing, and implicitly godless.

Robert Calasso’s literary interpretation of *The Trial* and *The Castle* is intriguing, even if we don’t necessarily embrace his interpretation. Let me quote from it at length.

The Trial and *The Castle* are stories about attempts to deal with a case: to extricate oneself from prosecution, to have one’s nomination confirmed. The point around which everything revolves is always *election*, the mystery of election, its impenetrable obscurity. In *The Castle*, K. desires election—and this thoroughly complicates every act. In *The Trial*, Josef K. wants to escape election—and this thoroughly complicates every act. To be chosen, to be condemned: two possible outcomes of the same process. (Calasso, 2005, p. 4)

Kafka, in a memorable exchange with Max Brod about the human condition and godlessness commented, “We are nihilistic thoughts that came into God’s head”. He countered Brod’s Gnostic perspective that humans were a demonic outgrowth of the Demiurge, suggesting, “I believe that we are not such a radical relapse of God’s, only one of His bad moods. He had a bad day”. When asked by Brod if there was hope, Kafka replied, “Plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us” (Kafka citations in Bloom, 1986, p. 1).

MFS: Both Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Kafka’s novella, *The Metamorphosis*, are about transmutation. In *Don Quixote* a plebian is reimagined as a knight errant while in *The Metamorphosis* a man is transformed into a giant insect. Is this a literary device used by the two authors?

DS: Yes. Cervantes consciously parodies, subverts, and undermines the chivalric romance genre in order to create a literary novel that implicitly embraces the Renaissance humanistic tradition with its emphasis on the text. Nevertheless, some readers in the 17th century undoubtedly embraced *Don Quixote* as a fantastical reinvention of the chivalric romance. The use of transmutation, which today we might term fabulist, allows the creative means for reinventing and reimagining chivalry within the context of a new era.

In Kafka’s novella, *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa’s transmutation into a giant insect enables the author to bisect the boundaries between realism and fabulism. We witness as Gregor’s physiological change from human to vermin eventually alters his consciousness.

The story reflects a movement away from realism to fabulism, allowing the author to transcend the boundaries of realism in the early 20th-century novel.

For some critics *The Metamorphosis* is Kafka's greatest work. Noted scholar and German literary translator Stanley Corngold, for instance, insists that it "is perfect, even as it incessantly provokes criticism". Elias Canetti, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, concurs. "In *The Metamorphosis*", he suggests, "Kafka reached the height of his mastery: he wrote something which he could never surpass because there is nothing which *The Metamorphosis* could be surpassed by—one of the few great, perfect poetic works of this century" (citations by Corngold 1996, p. ix.).

Certainly, *The Metamorphosis* is one of Kafka's most accessible works. The imagination of Gregor Samsa as post-human is positively inspired. Unlike his novels, *The Metamorphosis* is a finished work. Biographer Nicholas Murray illuminates how Kafka's familial life influenced this story. As for Steven Berkoff, who staged *The Metamorphosis* in London first in 1969 and later in 1976, he found it "haunting" because the reader is presented with a "condemned man who views every fragment of his universe with unconcealed intensity, even if the mood is sometimes cool and austere" (Murray, 2004, p. 141).

I believe *The Metamorphosis* is a way to introduce "youngish" readers to Kafka's fiction. From my perspective it's almost adolescent in perspective: the oppressive family, the overbearing father, the docile mother, the sister who ultimately abandons her verminous brother, counseling her parents to get rid of him. He dies, alone and rejected. His family is rejuvenated by his departure. For young adults today thriving on the zombie and vampire anti-culture, here is a novella that should resonate.

What's intriguing about *The Metamorphosis*, as Martin Greenberg notes, is that the narrative climaxes in the opening sentence: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect". From there, he suggests, "The rest of the novella falls away from this high point of astonishment in one long expiring sigh, punctuated by three subclimaxes (the three eruptions of the bug from the bedroom)". The story, he points out, rejects the classic Aristotelian method of building a story that climaxes with the denouement and provides a tidy ending. Instead, what we're witness to is a sustained, sputtering expiration (citations Greenberg, 1988, p. 19).

MFS: What role do history and personal narrative play in the shaping of these stories and the authors' sense of alienation?

DS: Carroll Johnson's book *Don Quixote: The Quest for Modern Fiction* does a wonderful job of placing *Don Quixote* in historical perspective. During medieval times, Spain was comprised of three ethnic and religious groups: Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Aristocratic Christians held political power. In 1492 Spain became a Catholic nation under the rule of Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabel of Castile. Muslims were forcibly converted. Jews could leave or become Christians. For those Jews who converted—*conversos*—many continued surreptitiously to practice Judaism—including, most likely, Cervantes's ancestors. Christianity for many *conversos* was gleaned through religious texts such as Erasmus's *Enchiridion*. But by the time Cervantes was born (1547), the emphasis on secular texts was discouraged. It's in this context that *Don Quixote* was created. The medieval traditions were coming to an end. Renaissance Humanism was ascending, although under Ferdinand and Isabel, it was increasingly prohibited. During Cervantes's lifetime, Spain was in conflict, the

old and the new fighting for the future. Chivalrous romances, now written in prose, rather than poetry, were becoming dated, but still read, despite the advent of Renaissance humanism. Not surprisingly, *Don Quixote* was conceived in this mélange of old and new. *Don Quixote* mocked chivalry but assumed the cloak of gallantry. The novel was carefully crafted so that readers then and now could interpret it according to their point of view.

Cervantes's life (1547-1616) reflected this age of transition. He enlisted in Spain's naval infantry. Years later he was captured by Algerian corsairs and held for five years until a ransom was paid. After his release he returned to Spain and began to write, publishing his first novel, *La Galatea* in 1585. Writing wasn't profitable and he had to support himself through other means. He became bankrupt. He was imprisoned—twice—but remarkably *Don Quixote* was a success. It was such a success that a rival writing under an assumed name published Part II of *Don Quixote*, prompting Cervantes to publish his own, far superior version. He died one day before William Shakespeare. Cervantes's struggle and alienation are evident in *Don Quixote*, but the source of his rebellion, evident in his early years, was carefully camouflaged. What is remarkable is that despite all the challenges Cervantes experienced, he persevered to write one of our greatest literary novels.

Kafka's life (1883-1924) has become the embodiment of the tortured literary artist: narcissistic, neurotic, feminized, unable to maintain lasting sexual intimacy, the isolated loner whose fiction is steeped in consciousness and whose demands for literary perfection put him at odds with the marketplace. He died early and tragically of tuberculosis. He had difficulty getting his fiction published because of increasing German antisemitism and the policies of Nazi Germany, but also because of the challenging nature of his stories. Despite these significant impediments, today he is regarded as one of the greatest literary writers of modern times. Nicholas Murray's biography of Kafka sets the historical and cultural context of what it meant to be a Jew living in Prague during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Not considered Czech or fully German in identity, although relatively prominent and influential in the community, the Jews were the classic outsider/insider and this provisional status colors and shapes the fiction of Kafka and, arguably, even that of Cervantes given his *conversos* heritage.

A number of studies have been published about how the experience of marginality fostered the ambitions of Jewish writers in America in the years preceding and especially following World War II. It caused them, as Isaac Rosenfeld has suggested in his memorable essay "The Situation of the Jewish Writer" (1944), to become "specialist [s] in alienation" even as it propelled them into the mainstream of American literature (citation in Rubin, 2004, p. 266). We can only imagine, then, the extent of Kafka's alienation and the impact it had on his fiction.

For many Kafka is the very personification of the Jewish artist as victim. For others, he is the neglected German or Prague artist. To walk the streets of Prague—as I have done twice recently—is to experience the ghostly specter of the castle. Perched on a hill, it dominates the city. Just as Kafka suggests in his novel, it's difficult to find the road leading directly to the castle. In fact, it seemed I was always getting lost in Prague and the maps seemed to offer little help. The mood, the place, the sensibility, it's all pervasively Kafkaesque, provided one can overlook the tourists.

The most memorable exhibit I've seen on Kafka was "The City of K.: Franz Kafka and Prague" showcased at the Jewish Museum in New York City in 2002. Created by the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), it was brilliantly curated by Juan Insua. He

created “12 Kafkaesque environments” in order that the museum goer might live the Kafka experience through a mixture of letters, manuscripts, memorabilia, theatrical staging, and cinematography. As Michael Frank noted in his review in *The New York Times*, as visitors walked through the exhibit, they heard eerie music, running water, and a stern voice with a German accent that probably was meant to emulate Kafka’s father (Frank, 2002). Distorted images of Prague were displayed on the walls, creating a sense of vertigo. The most moving segment was the creation of the insurance office environment complete with massive metal filing cabinets and ringing telephones that embodied Kafka’s perception that “True hell is there, in the office” (citing *Letters to Felice*, April 7, 1913, in Insua, 2002, pp. 53 & 134). Kafka was employed by Assicurazioni Generali (1907) before accepting a position at Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute (1908-1922) where his work schedule was more suitable for writing. By 1918, ill with tuberculosis, he took frequent sick leaves. He died at 41 in 1924.

MFS: Don Quixote is on a futile pursuit of a goal—to embrace chivalry, to win the hand of his fair lady, and to conquer evil. Kafka’s novels all reflect the futile pursuit of a goal—to come to some understanding of a dilemma (in *The Trial* the crime is never revealed while in *The Castle* the hero is bewildered and trying to grasp his situation). Were these characterizations a manifestation of some existential dilemma? In other words, are Cervantes and Kafka anticipating Albert Camus?

DS: One of the brilliant devices of Cervantes is to mock the tenets of chivalric romances while employing many of its techniques. This led some of his contemporary readers to interpret *Don Quixote* as a manifestation of the genre while others viewed it as an entirely new literary innovation. The author’s “doubling” approach drenches the novel in irony. Perhaps for some readers that resembles the existential angst represented in the fiction of Camus. Or maybe it’s the pointless futility of the heroic quest that wedded comedy to tragedy. The effect, whatever the cause, is that *Don Quixote* reads as if it’s a modern or even a post-modern novel. Nevertheless, there is an optimism and romantic sensibility underlying the story that never abates. This gives the novel a far more optimistic aura than Camus’s fiction. Thus, at the end of the novel when Don Quixote comes to his senses and, apparently, renounces his “mad” chivalry, we, like Sancho Panza, long for his resumption of the quest.

The Castle lends itself more readily to an existential interpretation since the story is without hope and appears to exist seemingly only in the moment. However, we must take care not to associate it too closely with existential French fiction, which was born out of Nazi occupation and France’s defeat (Sheets, 2011). As a Jew, Kafka was certainly sensitive to historical currents and may have anticipated some of the nihilistic and existential tendencies, but his fiction stands apart from easy assimilation with other literary designations. Nevertheless, it still may be loosely interpreted with respect to existentialism. For that reason Albert Camus’s brilliant essay “Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka” makes for fascinating reading (Camus, 1962).

Thus, Camus suggests in *The Trial* Joseph K. stands accused: “But he doesn’t know of what. He is doubtless eager to defend himself, but he doesn’t know why. The lawyers find his case difficult. Meanwhile he does not neglect to love, to eat, or to read the paper” (Camus, 1962, p. 147). Thus, the absurdity of his situation coexists with the reality of day-to-day existence and in that sense most nearly embodies the actions and behavior of existential

characters. As Camus notes, “this fundamental ambiguity” is Kafka’s trademark since “these perpetual oscillations between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the everyday, the absurd and the logical, are found throughout his work” (Camus, 1962, p. 148).

For Camus, *The Castle*, “that strange novel in which nothing concludes and everything begins over again” is, in his words, “the essential adventure of a soul in quest of its grace” (Camus, 1962, p. 150). He argues that K. renounces “morality, logic, and intellectual truths in order to try to enter [the Castle], endowed solely with his mad hope, the desert of divine grace” (Camus, 1962, p. 152). It’s a beautiful passage. The interpretation by Camus here is characteristic of both Max Brod and his early English translators the Muirs (Murray, 2004, p. 388). Today critics, myself included, are less likely to interpret Kafka’s work as embodying characters in pursuit of divine grace and more likely to view the responses of the characters as futile efforts manifested by soulless individuals inhibiting a nihilistic universe as they attempt to navigate the unnavigable. Nevertheless, Camus’s interpretation is subtle and profound. It elevates our understanding and appreciation of Kafka.

MFS: Cervantes wrote eight plays and eight farces. But Kafka held back much of his work, and if it were not for his literary agent, Max Brod, much of Kafka’s work would have been burned. What does this say about the personality and self-esteem of these two writers?

DS: Cervantes’s life, as with Dox Quixote’s, was colorful and, in its fashion, heroic. He and a young woman named Josefina fell in love. They never married, probably because her father felt that Cervantes had no reasonable means of supporting her. Cervantes left Spain for Italy, possibly under financially questionable circumstances. He joined the Spanish Navy as a marine and fought in battles. Later he was captured by Algerian corsairs and toiled in slavery. Several times he attempted to escape. Finally, he was ransomed and returned to Spain. This colorful and exciting background helps to explain why Cervantes could write with authenticity about Don Quixote’s misguided, if heroic pursuits. Despite the challenges of finding an audience, he wrote, ignoring the obstacles. Success came with *Don Quixote*. Nevertheless, he died poor.

Kafka, unlike Cervantes, came from a family with means. Edmund Wilson, borrowing from D. S. Savage, has suggested that interpretations focused on Kafka’s search for election or divine grace were challenged by “the Kafka Problem”, namely, that “the trouble with Kafka was that he could never let go of the world—of his family, of his job, of his yearning for bourgeois happiness—in the interest of divine revelation” (Wilson, 1962, p. 92).

Nevertheless, however we choose to interpret Kafka and the challenges facing his moral or literary quest, we should never minimize his talents as a writer and literary sage. As Robert Calasso reminds us, Kafka reinterprets Don Quixote “as a puppet” in his diaries, thereby subjecting the master to his subject’s will. Under this interpretation Don Quixote, Panza’s creation, endures the hardships, the injuries, and pain while Sancho Panza, his creator, “sits quietly and reflects” (Calasso, 2005, p. 112). Thus, Kafka inverts the traditional interpretation of knight errant and his trusty squire to invest Panza with all the power. Indeed, suggests Calasso, Sancho Panza might rightly be interpreted as “the only person Kafka ever characterized as ‘a free man’” (Calasso, 2005, p. 113). If anyone ever doubted Kafka’s astuteness as a literary writer and, by implication, his talents as a critic, this analysis

demonstrates his brilliance. It also affirms Harold Bloom's contention that writers and critics in their quest for greatness (Kafka) are deliberately engaging in a "strong misreading" of the work of their predecessors (Cervantes) in order to foster their own literary genius (Bloom, 1997, p. xxiii).

MFS: The psychological distinctions between the character Don Quixote and many of Kafka's heroes bears discussion. Don Quixote is truly out of touch with reality. Whereas many of Kafka's heroes are keenly and astutely aware of their situation—being turned into an insect, engaging in an endless and ultimately failed effort to gain entrance to a castle, standing trial for a crime that is never revealed. How do you explain these differences?

DS: Cervantes inhabits a manly world of action and deeds in the real world. His novel *Don Quixote* is about a heroic quest, however misguided, to right the world of wrongs. Kafka's quest is internal, psychological. Although the external world exists, we understand it only in a very distorted way through his character's consciousness. In that sense, as Erich Heller noted, it resembles Plato's Cave where reality can only be perceived through its distorted reflections (Heller, 1974, pp. 98-99). Cervantes's world consists of "manly" men seeking heroic stature. Kafka's world is a feminized world, an interior domain where individuals are powerless to affect external reality.

MFS: In *Don Quixote*—love is cherished, love is unrequited, love is pure and to be sought and fought for. In Kafka's novels—love seems repressed (although the history of Kafka seems to reveal a sex-obsessed individual). What conclusions can be drawn or discussed if any?

DS: Each man was a product of his age and environment. Cervantes was a man of the late Renaissance. Even if the age of chivalry was receding and era of the Enlightenment looming, those knightly values still shaped the lives of men aspiring to nobility, which Cervantes clearly did.

Kafka lived in an era when many European men had their first sexual experiences with prostitutes or servant girls or women from a different social class before later, sometimes much later, marrying. They married only if they became financially settled. Kafka, for me at least, is sexually ambiguous. It's not entirely clear that he was heterosexual. That might, in part, explain his difficulty with women. As with many literary writers in the 20th century, he felt having a family posed a challenge, if not a threat, to his writing. His sexual behavior seems to be dictated by someone who must be alone, yet craves intimacy, a man who felt he should desire women, but seems drawn to illicit and (possibly) for him the unspeakable, although, of course, today almost everything is permissible and generally verbalized if not acted upon. Having fleeting sex with casual partners was a means of having contact without necessarily having the emotional maturity necessary and essential for intimacy. That's how I would explain his "sexual deviance".

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