Kafka and Mythology
Transformation of Myths

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Sisyphus war ein Junggeselle.
(Sisyphus was a bachelor.)
Franz Kafka: *Diaries* (1910-1923)

I

The beginning of the modern world in the seventeenth century was marked by spectacular developments in the natural sciences. The last four centuries have witnessed the grand march of the scientific revolution which includes the Industrial Revolution and the latest revolution in Information Technology. Flush with success and bolstered with its claim on absolute objectivity, the modern scientific community, beginning with the early modern period in Europe, 1500–1650 AD, lambasted and tore into shreds its mythical and mystical past, equating it with superstition, ignorance and an illiterate primitive mind, thus declaring it incompatible with the rational mind. Tradition could not save itself from the onslaught of modernity which invariably led to a kind of rootlessness of the modern man, like a man without a shadow. Whether this schism, this *tabula rasa* with the past was necessary or not at the threshold of the scientific revolution is a debatable point. In *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, Rose explains the connexion between science and mythology by citing the phenomenon of rains. A scientist would theorize that rains are caused by such and such atmospheric conditions. He would substantiate his answer with verifiable evidence. A myth-maker, on the other hand, would say, without any embarrassment, that it rains because Zeus is pouring down water from the heaven. The former uses reason, the latter imagination. These are two mental processes available to man in his interaction with nature. The more civilized he is, the more likely is he to reason or at least to realize when he is

not reasoning but imagining (Rose 1974: 11). Science works with concepts, whereas myths work with percepts. The point I am trying to make is that the two systems do not necessarily encroach on each other's space. They can coexist in peace, for man, to start with, must have myths in order to doubt them over in the course of time. Myths are, hence, the precursors of science as well as art.

Now that the modern science has established its complete supremacy, at least in the post-Renaissance Europe and America and the threat from the past has receded, certain specialists of the modern world have shown a belated interest in the mythical past that is otherwise more or less lost to the European world. The divorce of the scientific thought from the mythical thought is gradually giving way to a dialogue between the two. Vladimir Propp was one of the first major theoreticians of Russian folktales in the twentieth century. Three decades later, it was the social anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who broke new ground by studying and interpreting Latin American myths in such depths that for the first time science was willing to accept the myths as objects worthy of scientific study. On the other hand, there have always been modern artists, much before Propp and Lévi-Strauss, who have been making use of mythology in literature. If we look beyond the Romantic poets, Nietzsche, Kafka and Chagall—three original minds representing different genres— make good case studies for exploring the role of myths in modernity. This paper presents some literary-mythological motifs in the works of Franz Kafka, the manner in which they are altered and how these narrative strategies and techniques represent mental constructs of Kafka's most intimate universe. *Silence of the Sirens, Prometheus* and *Poseidon* are very small but dense narratives by Kafka, drawing on the remote pagan mythology. These texts are not so well known as they were not taken seriously in the initial years of studies on Kafka, perhaps because they constituted only a few unpublished lines, seemingly fragments, and that too without titles. Initially, they were even excluded from anthologies of Kafka's works because the most unusual ends gave them an impression of unfinished texts. Two clarifications are required in this aspect. Firstly, these narratives are without doubt complete in themselves and secondly, even if they were fragments, their fragmentary nature would still represent the author's signature. These three narratives have been presented here.

The first section of the paper deals with the structure of myths and legends as proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The second section

deals with the above mentioned myths that interested Kafka and an attempt is made to apply to them Lévi-Strauss' method of structural analysis of myths, at least in part if not wholly, in order to arrive at an understanding of these narratives. The rationale of mixing Lévi-Strauss and Kafka works can be decided at the end of the paper.

II

Structure of Myth/Legend

This section is based on my interpretation of 'The Structural Study of Myth' by Lévi-Strauss (1968, 2001). It also refers to Lévi-Strauss' monumental *Mythologiques* in four volumes as described by Harjeet Singh Gill (1996) in his essay 'The Semiotics of the Myths'.

According to Lévi-Strauss, despite the ignorance in terms of the culture or the language of the people where a particular myth originated, a myth is still perceived as a myth by its recipients. Lévi-Strauss detected some kind of 'order' behind the fantastic stories which he decided to investigate. He could see that myths/legends all over the world have certain common features or a common 'language'. Then he presented his astonishing findings, elaborating the common structural characteristics that constitute the 'infrastructure' of a myth.

How does one define myths in terms of time? Myths always refer to events that took place or are supposed to have taken place long ago, but are in a position to explain the past as well as the present and the future. They are neither synchronic nor diachronic, for they transcend both these Sausurrean categories. So, an important feature of myths is their timelessness. Some myths are centuries old. Even the myths that can be approximately fixed historically are often so rich in their mythical value that traces of history are superimposed by a multiplicity of versions, rendering historical facts largely unreliable. No wonder much of folklore prefers the timeless quality of the propositions 'Once upon a time' or 'Long long ago'. Historians would be quick to reject such an ambiguity of time. A mythical discourse is marked rather by a mythological time. The myth or legend is chiefly 'surrealistic' in content even if there are some historic residues as in soldiers' songs. However, in communities where there is no written tradition, mythology acquires the same function as history. This concept of time in myths is largely ignored by many professional folklorists who are hell bent on considering

folklore as an alternate source of history. This applies particularly to mythico-literary discourses which fascinated Kafka in contrast to the majority of myths explored in detail by Lévi-Strauss like the ritualistic myths of American Indians for which one needs, according to Lévi-Strauss, a whole team of specialists from various disciplines such as botany, astronomy, zoology, geography, magic, religion, ethnography, linguistics and anthropology who can conduct extensive fieldwork and sift through masses of data. The shortcoming of Lévi-Strauss' model—which is otherwise charged with intellection—lies chiefly in underestimating the literary and existential content of the myths. He does not appear to attach much importance to scholars from the domain of literature in his team of specialists. After all, myths ultimately deal with human consciousness; they shed some light on the complexities of the human mind that have, all said and done, less to do with the empirical world and more to do with the highly complex and abstract conceptual world. Human actions and activities are not as predictable and precise as science. Myths, hence, cannot be treated in the same way as 'experiments' in a 'laboratory'. Lévi-Strauss' problem was that as an anthropologist at the turn of the century, he was trying to upgrade his discipline by making a science, a 'hard science' out of studies of myths. This is equally true of many other disciplines like history, linguistics and even pedagogy at the turn of the century which were queuing up in order to acquire the prestigious etikett of 'new sciences' so that they could also lay claims on scientific standards of objectivity, impartiality and value-free analysis. Things are slightly but not much different today in the sense that even the natural scientists are admitting, albeit grudgingly, that there can be no such thing as absolute objectivity, for most of the experiments are valid only in certain ideal conditions and then there is always the observer who introduces a subjective factor in the whole enterprise.

To continue with the fine points made by Lévi-Strauss, he asserts that the so-called original text of a myth does not exist. A myth often has more than one version and all versions are equally valid. By the time a narrative attains the status of a myth, it is already a 'translation' or an interpretative mediation of the original event, real or fictional. Hence, there is no need for a quest for the true version or the earliest version. Lévi-Strauss demonstrates his model by breaking up the myth of Oedipus into smaller units, taking into account all its known versions. Whether there was actually a person called Oedipus, which would make him into a historical figure, makes

little or no difference to Oedipus as a mythical figure. This Greek myth has several versions, the more famous being those of Homer, Sophocles and Freud. Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that even if Freud considered his interpretation to be the final version, and it still has prestige attached to it, from the point of the conceptualization of myth, it comprises only one of the several layers of interpretations imposed on it. Later on, Lacan added his version of the myth. Picasso also provides us with another version in his painting *Blind Minotour Guided by a Little Girl* where the image of the aged Minotour with a staff and the little girl is inspired by the blind Oedipus and Antigone.

Another vital point Lévi-Strauss makes is that the 'repetition' (duplication, triplication, or quadruplication of the same core sequence) or the multi-dimensional aspect of the myth and more generally oral literature which, at times, appears contradictory, need not be considered a problem because it is this very repetition that ultimately renders the structure of the myth apparent. Quoting Lévi-Strauss,

> Thus, a myth exhibits a 'slated' structure, which comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition.
> However, the slates are not absolutely identical. (...) a theoretically infinite number of slates can be generated, each one slightly different from the other. (Lévi-Strauss in English 1968: 229)

Myths are dense depositions. So a myth is a combination of numerous residues of the past. A myth grows 'spiral-wise'. The various versions and the transformations exercised by successive generations can also be described as complex wholes of structures within a structure. The structures of various versions of a myth explain each other. In fact, they 'talk' to each other. In their various versions, one observes the evolution of one structure into another. The fact is that myths are evolving all the time without our noticing it, just like the colour red evolves into purple and blue without anyone in a position to pinpoint the exact point of demarcation. To that extent, there can be no exact 'repetition' of the structure of a myth. It reminds us of the Heracleitan dictum that there can be no exact repetition and one can never step into the same river twice, for the water is always changing.

In this context, the comparison of myth with music is also relevant. Music is translatable into many melodies. It can be transcribed in different tones. In music, it is always a question of transformations of the same theme. But there are differences too. The versions of the myths often have different signification, whereas the signification

in music largely remains the same. Lévi-Strauss describes mythology and music as

> two sisters, begotten by language, who had drawn apart, each going in a different direction — as in mythology, one character goes north, the other south, and they never meet again — (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 47).

This is roughly and very briefly the structure of myths as proposed by Lévi-Strauss. Mythology is hence a highly sophisticated genre and it is a challenge to the human intellect to decipher a text with a diamond-like crystallization, a mosaic of extremely fine pieces juxtaposed in intricate correlations that has undergone changes over the centuries (Gill 1996: 184). The text itself is often fragmentary in nature and even the fragments are often lost, leaving gaps in the narrative-text, so the task of the mythologist or the folklorist is indeed difficult. It requires skills of the highest order to collect and put together all the jigsaw pieces in their proper setting and then comprehend these structures that give us access to our past in a unique manner and help correlate past with the present and future (particularly when, in certain myths, there is no clear-cut distinction between 'now' and 'then'). Myths often also explore the tension-ridden relation of man with nature. I quote at this point the last part of Lévi-Strauss' remarkable essay which highlights the intellectual quality of our object of study:

> Prevalent attempts to explain alleged differences between the so-called primitive mind and scientific thought have resorted to qualitative differences between the working processes of the mind in both cases, while assuming that the entities which they were studying remained very much the same. If our interpretation is correct, we are led towards a completely different view, namely, that the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and that the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied. This is well in agreement with the situation known to prevail in the field of technology: What makes a steel axe superior to a stone axe is not that the first one is better made than the second. They are equally well made, but steel is quite different from stone. In the same way we may be able to show that the same logical processes operate in myth as in science, and that man has always been thinking equally well; the improvement lies, not in an alleged progress of man's mind, but in the discovery of new areas to which it may apply its unchanged and unchanging powers. (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 230)

III

Silence of the Sirens

In the short narrative, *Silence of the Sirens (Das Schweigen der Sirenen*, title given by Kafka's friend and posthumous publisher, Max Brod), Kafka plays around with the mythology centred around sea inhabitants, the sirens, a product of the lively imagination of the myth-makers from the Greek antiquity. In this well-known Greek myth, beautiful and irresistible sirens resting on the rocks lure the sailors astray with their enchanting voices, causing shipwrecks, with the sailors ultimately perishing in the sea. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus, determined not to fall for the singing of the sirens, ties himself to the mast so that he could hear the singing but not be pulled away and, at the same time, he plugs the ears of his people on the ship with wax so that they can row their boat past the sirens without being disturbed by the 'burden of their song' (Kafka 1995: 86). In this manner, Odysseus easily outwits the sirens. Hence, in Homer's version of the myth, the noble Odysseus saves himself with his superior intelligence and nimble wits. His innocent happiness and pride at the success of his mission are reflected in his face. Kafka provides the famous Odysseus saga with another interpretation or 'version' if we use the terminology of Lévi-Strauss. In his version, the sirens remain silent when Odysseus passes by. Odysseus has no way of knowing that they are not singing for he had, in anticipation of the seduction, taken all the precautions, i.e. stuffed his ears with wax as well as tied himself to the mast. Hence, the title of the narrative. In Kafka's version of the myth, Odysseus comes through as a fool. In fact, it is the sirens, lacking a conscience, who appear to be mocking Odysseus, ridiculing the smug expression on his face. Let us now try to tabularize the differences in the two versions:

	Homer's version	*Kafka's version*
Sirens	Singing	Silent
Companions of Odysseus	Wax in the ears	Absent
Odysseus	Tied to the mast	Tied to the mast + Wax in the ears
	Hears the singing of sirens	Cannot hear singing or silence

What emerges from this table is that the event in both versions is the same but the details are not exactly the same. Two elements have

been changed in the structure: (1) Kafka's Odysseus stuffs wax in his ears. (2) Kafka's sirens are silent. When one element is transformed, then the other elements have to be arranged accordingly. The 'bundle of relations' between the nymphs and Odysseus is accordingly transformed in Kafka. In this case, the new elements are so radical that they disturb the harmony of the Homeric version. The shift generates in the process another structure and thus a whole new field of signification. The legend comprises the following oppositions and correlations: human beings and fabulous beings, man and woman, beauty and intelligence.

So even if the net result in both cases is that Odysseus survives the encounter with the sirens, in the case of Homer, his escape is a victory over destiny or fate, the result of a grand plan. It was said of Odysseus that even the goddess of fate could not conquer him. He comes across as a great mortal who could achieve through his extraordinary deeds immortality, otherwise reserved only for the gods. In Nietzschean terms, he could be described as the super human being (*Der Übermensch*); in the case of Kafka, the hard-of-hearing Odysseus is far from being a clever 'fox'. The absurdity of his plan is highlighted. Kafka ridicules Odysseus' absolute faith in a handful of wax and chains when the 'mighty singers' have a weapon that is more 'deadly' than their singing and that is their silence. Either ways, it is a win-win situation for the sirens. Odysseus' self-deception is complete when he mistakes the sirens with their long tresses for arians. The apparent victory of the human intellect over the fantastic world is hence parodized. Both versions are an expression of the mental universes of Homer and Kafka, respectively. Homer's Odysseus distinctly belongs to the world of antiquity where people held gods in awe and reverence and they even showed a great deal of respect to their ancestors. It was at the same time, a world of high-spirited—one could safely say—happy people (or is this also a myth?), with a sense of healthy competition and heroism; whereas the Kafkan modern world, devoid of faith in gods and heroes, is teaming with 'wax in the ear' characters, anti-heroes, who are crushed and they almost always find themselves elbowed out. Kafka comes across in this narrative as a sharp but subtle critic of modernity. Modernity, beginning with Descartes, proudly placed human being in the centre of the universe but the obsession of the self with the rational mind and its capabilities has led nowhere. After four centuries of modernity, the Being finds himself decentred. Kafka's absurd world has little to offer to those who are die hard believers of

rationality, progress and realism. This reminds one of Nietzsche (he died in 1899, just before the turn of the century), who too had strong reservations about the modern man, his ideals and his institutions. In fact, in the introduction to *On the Geneology of Morals*, 1887, Nietzsche very clearly states that his books are not meant for the modern man. Despite similar objections to modernity and a fondness for fables and aphorisms, however, both thinkers worked with different conceptual frameworks as a result of which their works are also very different.

At the same time, following Lévi-Strauss, there is no 'true' version of this myth of which the other is a copy or distortion. Every version belongs equally to the myth. In this case, both the versions are creations of creative writers, Homer and Kafka, recorded in writing. The point to be noted is that for Lévi-Strauss, the various versions must have somewhat identical underlying structure. Kafka's transformation of the myth, however, creates a new bundle of relations or a new configuration or structure, and hence an altogether different signification even if the characters remain the same; so only the point of departure is common but this point of departure is important and the choice of the genre of mythology is deliberate.

IV

Prometheus

Using the same narrative strategies, Kafka's fecund imagination produced another short and condensed narrative on the cosmological myth of Prometheus, which is an intrinsic part of the fascinating Greek mythology. Kafka narrates four different versions of the fate of Prometheus who defied the gods in order to help the human beings (Kafka 1995: 88).

According to the first version, gods punished Prometheus by binding him in fetters to a mountain rock and sending eagles to gnaw on his ever-growing liver. According to the second version, Prometheus, in terrible pain from the sharp beaks of the birds of prey, presses himself deeper and deeper into the rocks till he becomes one with them. In the third version, his betrayal is forgotten after centuries have passed. The gods forget, so do the eagles and Prometheus himself forgets. According to the fourth version, even the people get tired of his aimless and senseless act. The gods are tired, the eagles are tired and the wound also closes out of sheer

exhaustion. In the end, the author remarks that what remains is the inexplicable mountain cliff. The last proposition of the narrative reads as follows: 'The legend attempts at explaining the inexplicable. Since its origin lies in truth, it must again end in the inexplicable." With this exegesis, typical to the Kafkan discourse, the narrative of Prometheus ends.

The role of gods and that of the animals in the human world is defined and redefined in various versions. The myth is built on a series of oppositions which are, at the same time, also correlations: Prometheus and gods, human beings and gods, Prometheus and the eagles and finally the resolution of the various confrontations. The first version is, of course, the well-known Greek version. The god Prometheus, the creator of man out of clay and water with Athena breathing life into the images, is a well-wisher of man (Greek version of creation of man is different from the Jewish and the Christian versions of Genesis). It makes sense that Prometheus should have a soft corner for his creation. Zeus, on the other hand, has little love for man. So, he is forever creating umpteen problems for man and, among other inflictions, he also denies him access to fire. Prometheus comes to the rescue of his creation. He steals fire for man from the heaven carrying it in a dry, pithy stalk of fennel. It was no ordinary theft, for 'fire' is the mediator between nature and culture. The shift from 'the raw' to 'the cooked' is the first step towards culture. The gift of fire was to transform the life of man. It invariably invites the wrath of Zeus. He has had enough of this troubleshooter who has cheated him on other occasions too. The older god plots vengeance over the younger god. Prometheus is made to pay dearly for the theft. He is carried to a mountain where he is chained to a rock. Eagles visit him daily, tearing at his liver. At night, the liver grows again, thus continuing the never-ending torture. Whether it is the myth of Prometheus or Sisyphus, it must be said that the Greek gods displayed a vivid imagination in handing down punishments. According to various classical versions, Aeschylus' among others, Prometheus is finally 'unbound' by Heracles; released and reconciled with Zeus.

The second, third and the fourth are versions invented by Kafka himself. Interestingly, he ignores the ancient version in which Prometheus is finally forgiven, eventually released and redeemed. It is obvious that 'happy ends' are not in tune with what is described as typically Kafkaesque. The persecutor and the persecuted, both suffer in a vicious circle of cruelty. In Kafka's versions, the project

of the gods is ultimately defeated but it does not imply a victory for Prometheus. It reminds us of Camus' interpretation of the Myth of Sisyphus in terms of his philosophy of the Absurd, where he declares towards the end that despite the punishment by the gods, Sisyphus was a happy man, defeating thereby the whole purpose of the punishment. However, Kafka's Prometheus is far from happy. His fellow gods have forgotten him. Even man, for whose sake he incurred the wrath of the mighty Zeus, has forgotten his existence and his bold act. The creation has forgotten its creator. Modern man is indeed strange as far as Kafka is concerned. The punishment is 'aimless and senseless' but that appears to be the fate of the modern man. This is Kafka's version of absurdity. Typically, Kafka's Prometheus too forgets.

	Greek version	Kafka's versions
Prometheus	Tied to a rock. Eagles gnaw on his ever-growing liver.	Becomes one with the rock. Gods, eagles, Prometheus forget. People are also tired of the act. Wound closes out of exhaustion.
Punishment	Ends with forgiveness and reconciliation	Eternal. Forgotten

As in *Silence of the Sirens*, Kafka has again transformed the elements of the Greek myth in such a manner that the sequence of their functions changes and the new structure ends up creating a modern version of the myth or text.

V

Poseidon

Poseidon is the Greek god of seas, the younger brother of Zeus or Jupiter. Zeus, after reaching maturity, overthrows his father, Kronos, who, being an immortal, does not die but is all the same forced to retire from active life. Next, the ambitious Zeus divides the kingdom, their family property between himself and his brothers. The sisters do not inherit anything. The division of the conquered universe is more or less settled amicably. The three gods and brothers—Zeus, Poseidon and Hades cast lots for the three treasured possessions—heaven, sea and the underworld with Olympos and the earth in common. The stakes are high. The elder brother, Zeus, manages to

win the lion's share—the sky, i.e. the broad heavens high amid the clouds, Poseidon wins the sea and Hades, the youngest brother, gets what is left, i.e., the gloomy darkness of the infernal regions where the souls of the dead are taken. The jealousies between the brothers, however, continue. So what the myth-makers could not express through science was often articulated by mythologizing the forces of nature. A good example is the rough, wild and angry god representing the rough and dangerous seas. Also, the anthropological and the cosmological domains are closely linked so much so that they are in a dialectical relation. For example, according to the ancient Greek law, the sisters did not inherit paternal property. The same social and legal norms are superimposed on their creations, the immortals.

Poseidon is thus the Greek god of seas, the less-known brother of Zeus. He is the marine god who presides over the waters, has the capacity to shake the earth and also fertilize it. Homer calls him the Earthshaker and the Girdler of the Earth. Poseidon builds an under-water palace for himself and his emblem is the trident. He is majestic and stately with the look and the strength of a horse. He can also be wild and uncouth. With the trident in one hand, he travels through his empire of vast seas, rising and diving at will. He is known for his short temper, rough nature and numerous feats of destruction. His anger can cause the waters of the world to become extremely violent and treacherous, not only for the marine travellers but also for those who live on its banks. In *Odyssey*, Poseidon gives Odysseus many headaches by generating terrible sea storms and shipwrecking him several times, although he stops short of killing him. According to Homer, a stroke of his trident can easily smash a rock and drown the man standing on it. He is also known for his prodigious speed. He can cross the seas in four strides. He has complete control over the waters but he is no match for his more powerful elder brother, who controls the sky. His trident too is no match for Zeus' thunderbolt. Poseidon and Zeus have massive egos, as a result of which they do not get along.

Now let us see how Kafka transforms this mythical figure. This is how Kafka's narrative opens:

Poseidon saß an Arbeitstisch und rechnete.
(Poseidosa sat at his desk, going over the accounts.) (Kafka 1995: 91)

Kafka's Poseidon is a pale shadow of the grand Greek god. Kafka transforms Lord Poseidon into a modern civil servant, 'employed' to look after the accounts of the waters. Like a typical modern day

bureaucrat with administrative, financial or perhaps technical knowledge, he sits all the time at his desk, in the depths of the waters. He has no firsthand knowledge of his work or his jurisdiction. He has never toured the area he administers for he remains in the depths of the waters. Everything is transformed into accounts and paperwork, which he takes 'very seriously'. A characteristic feature of technocratic societies is to handle everything from one point. The idea of 'cruising through the waves with his trident' only annoys him. At the most, he has a fleeting look at them from far away when he makes 'an occasional journey' to his brother at Mount Olympus.

> He used to say that he was postponing [sailing the oceans] until the end of the world, for then might come a quiet moment when, just before the end and having gone through his last account, he could still make a quick little tour (op. cit.).

Perpetual postponement is the hallmark of his job even if, at the manifest level, he gives the impression of being busy with 'endless work' all the time. These new gods of the modern world are bored with and alienated from their monotonous work. The speed and the strength of the classical Poseidon is juxtaposed over the lethargy of the bureaucrat, who is glued to his seat, and whose files rarely, if ever, move from the desk. If the classical Poseidon was angry, he could generate, with his divine breath, violent sea storms. It made sense to appease him. So far as the modern Poseidon is concerned, when he is angry and upset, his famous divine breath becomes uneven and his strong bronze chest heaves.

> Sein goetticher Atem geriet in Unordnung, sein eherner Brustkorb schwankte (op. cit.)

If one takes some liberty with the interpretation, it is almost as if he has an attack of asthma, which would not be unusual, for the offices in Kafka's world are often stuffy. With all his administrative efficiency, the modern Poseidon can never accomplish anything similar to the classical Poseidon. At the most he goes over the mundane accounts. Missing is the dynamism, the fun related to the classical gods who completely identify themselves with their empire. They would never apply for a 'more cheerful work' like Kafka's Poseidon. Then there is the existential predicament related to his name. Poseidon is supposed to feel at home in the water department and transfer is not even considered nor is he suitable for

anything else. In his characteristic style of writing, Kafka remarks towards the end,

As a matter of fact, no one took his troubles very seriously (op. cit.)

The only thing he still has in common with his classical name-say is his jealously of his brother who ranks higher in the hierarchy and who manages a more prestigious department. After his visit to Jupiter, which is supposed to provide him with a break from his monotony, he always returns fretting and fuming. The modern Poseidon is thus caught in a typical Kafkan trap.

	Greek version	Kafka's version
Designation	God of Seas	Administrator of waters/ bureaucrat (job, employment)
Place of work/stay	Underwater palace	Desk
Nature of work	Many feats of destruction: causes shipwrecks, storms, earthquakes; fertilizes earth; rises from, plunges into, journeys over the sea.	Accounts; has hardly seen the oceans. never really sailed upon them.
Relation to work	Enjoys work	Alienation, monotony, discontentment, seeks transfer, postpones work.

In this narrative, too, the author appears to be highlighting the crisis of modernity. Modernity has failed miserably to create harmony between the Being and his environment. The alienation of the workers on the conveyor belt has been explored by many artists but Kafka was, one could safely say, the first modern writer to explore the alienation in the technocratic societies in the new space of the office. It is not without relevance that so many Kafkan characters wear tight-fitting clothes, for a peasant or a handworker could never manage in them. Kafka wrote in a letter that the office is not a stupid institution; it belongs more to the realm of the fantastic than of the stupid. This could be one reason why Kafka draws so many motifs from mythology in order to describe the phantasmic nature of a bureaucratized society where the Being is reduced to a mere instrument. The modern man, with his reason, his inventions and institutions, is belittled in all the three narratives. Underlined is the decline or the fall of the man from antiquity to modernity. On the one hand is the nostalgia for the old way of life, on the other hand is

the figure of the modern being, who arouses pity. The grandeur of the ancient world is contrasted with the hollowness of the modern world.

According to Milan Kundera who is also from Prague and holds on ardently to the legacy of Kafka even if he lives in Paris, Kafka beautifully captures the bureaucratization of social and professional activity that turns all institutions into boundless labyrinths and results in the depersonalization of the individual.

> In the bureaucratic world of the functionary, first, there is no initiative, no invention, no freedom of action; there are only orders and rules: *it is the world of obedience.*
>
> Second, the functionary performs a small part of a large administrative activity whose aim and horizons he cannot see: *it is the world where actions have become mechanical* and people do not know the meaning of what they do.
>
> Third, the functionary deals only with unknown persons and with files: *it is the world of the abstract* (Kundera 1993: 112–13).

Kundera is correct in his assessment that Kafka was the first modern writer who not only saw the enormous importance of the bureaucratic phenomenon for man, for his condition and for his future, but also (even more surprisingly) the poetic potential contained in the phantasmic nature of offices (op. cit. 113).

Jean-Paul Sartre describes the status of laws in a comparative study of Kafka and Blanchot:

> You are violating [the law] when you think you are following it, and when you rebel against it, you find yourself obeying it unknowingly. No one is supposed to be ignorant of it, and yet no one knows what it is. Its aim is not to keep order nor regulate human relationships. It is the Law, purposeless, meaningless and without content, and none can escape it (Sartre 1955: 64–65).

These new but to a large extent anonymous forces of power assume cosmological dimensions which means that they display features which were once attributed to the divine, such as omnipresence and omnipotence. Kundera points out that power behaves like God. The stifling and the chilling ambience of this world is often described as *Kafkaesque*. Similarly, Hannah Arendt, in her famous book *On Violence*, aptly describes bureaucracy as the rule of Nobody, for it is the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no man, neither one nor the best (monarchy), neither the few (oligarchy) nor the many

(democracy) can be held responsible. Arendt calls it the worst form of tyranny, a tyranny without a tyrant (Arendt 1970: 38-9, 81).

The inversion of the Poseidon myth proceeds on the same lines as the inversion of the Odysseus and the Prometheus myths. Many aphorisms of Kafka also underline the same technique of inversion. One of them is as follows: 'One who looks does not find, one who does not look is found'. It reminds an individual of the fate of Kafka himself, who never got the recognition he deserved in his lifetime. He never went out of his way for publications, sending manuscripts only when they were specifically asked for. It is only many years after his death that his works were discovered or 'found'. Or, another one-liner in which he inverts the creation myth: 'The world was created by the devil'. This also corresponds to Kafka's mad world in which none of the characters are aware of what is happening to them, they are sucked into labyrinths that lead nowhere and such a world has to be the creation of none but the devil.

VI

Conclusion

Kafka was, on the one hand, wary of tradition; at the same time he was also very respectful. In her introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt states that 'Kafka's reaching down to the sea bottom of the past had this peculiar duality of wanting to preserve and wanting to destroy' (Arendt 1992: 46). It means that Kafka draws on the rich imagination of the ancient world and administers transformations on the conventional mythological elements in order to evolve a new poetics of presentation, which is modern, grotesque, absurd and, above all, existential. In the words of Sartre, the fantasy is thus domesticated; it transcribes the human condition, albeit through the fusion of the real and the surreal. The pagans accepted their myths, pure and simple. Much of their mythology springs from the imaginative treatment of physical forces like Zeus representing the sky, Hera for air, Poseidon for the seas and so on so forth. So, myths explore on the one hand man's tension-ridden relation with nature while on the other hand, myths also represent the juxtaposition of the anthropological and cosmological worlds of the myth-makers. Kafka transforms, however, these powerful myths into allegories, transforming the incredible into the credible by relating them to the reality of the

modern man. The ancient myths are powerful narratives that can explain the past as well as the present and Kafka shows how they can explain even the contemporary world. He makes the ancient world 'talk' to the modern world so that it is obvious on whose side Kafka, the storyteller and the modern myth-maker of bureaucratic modernity, stands. Kafka's poetic imagery appears to be a critique of the dictatorship of scientific and technical reason and modern institutions governed by impersonal laws. What began with the grand idea of liberation of the individual resulted ultimately in the alienation of the individual who is not even conscious of his alienation. The idea of progress is typically modern. In his diary, Kafka recorded that 'the belief in progress does not necessarily mean that progress has actually been made. That would be no belief at all.' In such 'destitute times', when god has been expelled from the universe, and the being has become a technological being, Kafka and some other writers and philosophers of his time like Hesse, Nietzsche and Chagall were drawn towards mythology. Kafka's *Castle* and *Metamorphosis* are also structured as fairy tales.

At the same time, Kafka has contributed to the continuous process of the evolution of myths and their 'spiral-wise' growth. He has added another 'slate' to the series of already existing slates, even if this slate is not 'slightly' but radically different in structure. The method of Levi-Strauss hence helps, to some extent, in analysing the use made of myths by creative writers. It highlights the transformations administered by the author. But it must be conceded that a complete analysis of the Kafkan discourse often remains elusive and the riddle often remains unsolved.

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