Also by Milan Kundera

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Testaments Betrayed
An Essay in Nine Parts

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Translated from the French by Linda Asher

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The image of Kafka that is widely held these days comes originally from a novel. Max Brod wrote it immediately after Kafka's death and published it in 1926. Savor the title: *The Enchanted Kingdom of Love (Zauberreich der Liebe)*. This key-novel is a roman à clef, a novel with a key. Its protagonist, a German writer in Prague named Nowy, is recognizably a flattering self-portrait of Brod (adored by women, envied by the literati). Nowy/Brod cuckolded a man who, by very elaborate wicked schemes, gets him sent to prison for four years. We are instantly plunged into a story cobbled together by the most improbable coincidences (characters meet by complete chance on a ship out at sea, on a Haifa street, on a street in Vienna), we witness the struggle between the good (Nowy and his mistress) and the evil (the cuckold, so vulgar that he fully deserves his horns, and a literary
critic who systematically pans Nowy’s wonderful books), we are pained by melodramatic reversals (the heroine kills herself because she cannot bear life caught between the cuckold and the cuckolder), we admire the sensitive soul of Nowy/Brod, who swoons regularly.

This novel would have been forgotten before it was written if not for the character Carta. Because Carta, Nowy’s close friend, is a portrait of Kafka. Without this key, the character would be the most uninteresting in the entire history of literature; he is described as a “saint of our time,” but even about the ministry of his saintliness we don’t learn much, except that from time to time, when Nowy/Brod is having love troubles, he seeks advice from his friend, which the friend, as a saint with no such experience, is incapable of giving him.

What a marvelous paradox: the whole image of Kafka and the whole posthumous fate of his work were first conceived and laid out in this simpleminded novel, this garbage, this cartoon-novel concoction, which, aesthetically, stands at exactly the opposite pole from Kafka’s art.

Some quotations from the novel: Carta “was a saint of our time, a veritable saint.” “Perhaps his best quality was his remaining so independent and free, so saintly rational in the face of all mythologies, even though deep down he was akin to them and nearly a mythological figure himself.” “He wanted to live in perfect purity—rather, he could not do otherwise. . . .”

The words “saint,” “saintly,” “mythological,” “purity,” are not a matter of rhetoric; they are to be taken literally: “Of all the sages and prophets who have walked the earth, he was the quietest. . . . Perhaps he lacked one thing: self-confidence. With it, he would have become a guide to humanity. No, he was not a guide. He spoke neither to the people nor to disciples, like the Buddha, Jesus, Moses. He did not speak that way. He remained reticent. Was that because he saw more deeply into the great mystery than those three? Because what he undertook was more difficult yet than what the Buddha intended? Because if he succeeded, it would be conclusive?”

And again: “All the founders of religions were sure of themselves. One of them, however—he may well be the most sincere of all—Lao-tze, retreated into the shadows. Carta certainly did the same.”

Carta is presented as someone who writes. Nowy “had agreed to be Carta’s literary executor—Carta had asked him to do this, but with the unusual condition that everything be destroyed.” Nowy “sensed the reason for that last wish. Carta was not announcing a new religion; he wanted only to live his faith. . . . He required the ultimate effort of himself; as he had not succeeded, his writings (mere rungs to help him climb to the heights) had no value for him.”

Still, Nowy/Brod did not want to obey his friend’s wish, because in his view, Carta’s writings, “even as attempts, as mere sketches, bring to wandering humanity a presentiment of something irreplaceable.”

Yes, it’s all there.
Were it not for Brod, we would not even know Kafka's name today. Right after his friend's death, Brod saw to the publication of his three novels. No reaction. So he realized that, to establish Kafka's work, he would have to undertake a real and long war. Establishing a body of work means presenting it, interpreting it. Brod opened a veritable artillery attack: prefaces: for The Trial (1925), for The Castle (1926), for Amerika (1927), for “Description of a Struggle” (1936), for the diaries and letters (1937), for the stories (1946); for the Conversations by Gustav Janouch (1952); then the dramatizations: of The Castle (1953) and Amerika (1957); but above all, four important books of interpretation (take good note of the titles!): Franz Kafka: A Biography (1937), The Faith and Teachings of Franz Kafka (1946), Franz Kafka, He Who Shows the Way (1951), and Despair and Salvation in the Work of Franz Kafka (1959).

Through all of these texts, the image outlined in The Enchanted Kingdom of Love is confirmed and developed: above all, Kafka is primarily the religious thinker, der religiöse Denker. True, he “never systematically set out his philosophy and his religious worldview. Nonetheless, we can deduce rather clear fundamentals from his work, from his aphorisms especially but also from his poetry, his letters, his diaries, and then also from his way of life (from that above all). . . .”

Further on: Kafka's true importance cannot be understood “unless two currents in his work are distinguished: (1) the aphorisms, (2) the narrative writings (novels, stories, fragments).

“In his aphorisms Kafka expounds the positive word [das positive Wort] that he gives to mankind, a faith, a stern call for each individual to change his own life.”

In his novels and stories, “he describes the horrible punishments in store for those who do not wish to hear the word [das Wort] and do not follow the path of righteousness.”

Note the hierarchy: at the top: Kafka's life as an example to be followed; in the middle: the aphorisms, that is, all the meditative “philosophical” passages in his diaries; at the bottom: the narrative works.

Brod was a brilliant intellectual with exceptional energy; a generous man willing to do battle for others; his attachment to Kafka was warm and disinterested. The only problem was his artistic orientation: a man of ideas, he knew nothing of the passion for form; his novels (he wrote twenty of them) are sadly conventional; and above all: he understood nothing at all about modern art.

Why, despite all this, was Kafka so fond of him? What about you—do you stop being fond of your best friend because he has a compulsion to write bad verse?

But the man who writes bad verse turns dangerous once he starts to publish the work of his poet friend. Suppose the most influential commentator on Picasso were a painter who could not even manage to understand the impressionists. What would he say about Picasso’s paintings? Probably the same thing Brod said about Kafka's novels: that they describe “the horrible punishments in store for those who . . . do not follow the path of righteousness.”
Max Brod created the image of Kafka and that of his work; he created Kafkology at the same time. The Kafkologists may distance themselves from their founding father, but they never leave the terrain he mapped out for them. Despite the astronomical number of its texts, Kafkology goes on elaborating infinite variants on the same discussion, the same speculation, which, increasingly unconnected to Kafka’s work, feeds only on itself. Through innumerable prefaces, postfaces, notes, biographies and monographs, university lectures and dissertations, Kafkology produces and sustains its own image of Kafka, to the point where the author whom readers know by the name Kafka is no longer Kafka but the Kafkologized Kafka.

Not everything written on Kafka is Kafkology. How then to define Kafkology? By a tautology: Kafkology is discourse for Kafkologizing Kafka. For replacing Kafka with the Kafkologized Kafka:

1) Following Brod’s example, Kafkology examines Kafka’s books not in the large context of literary history (the history of the European novel) but almost exclusively in the microcontext of biography. In their monograph, Boisdeffre and Alberèse cite Proust rejecting biographical explication of art, but only to say that Kafka requires exception to that rule, as his books are “not separable from his person. Whether he is called Josef K., Rohan, Samsa, the Surveyor, Bendemann, Josefine the Singer, the Hunger Artist, or the Trapeze Artist, the hero of his books is none other than Kafka himself.” Biography is the principal key for understanding the meaning of the work. Worse: the only meaning of the work is as a key for understanding the biography.

2) Following Brod’s example, in the hands of the Kafkologists Kafka’s biography becomes hagiography; such as the unforgettable bombast with which Roman Karst ended his talk at the famous 1963 conference on Kafka in Czechoslovakia: “Franz Kafka lived and suffered for us!” Various kinds of hagiography: religious; secular—Kafka, martyr to his solitude; leftist—Kafka “assiduously” attending anarchist meetings and “very interested in the 1917 Revolution” (according to a mythomaniacal assertion frequently cited but never verified). To every church its apocrypha: Conversations with Kafka by Gustav Janouch. To every saint a sacrificial gesture: Kafka’s wish to have his work destroyed.

3) Following Brod’s example, Kafkology systematically dislodges Kafka from the domain of aesthetics: either as a “religious thinker” or else, on the left, as a protester against art, whose “ideal library would include only books by engineers or mechanics, and declaratory jurists” (in the book by Deleuze and Guattari). Kafkology is tireless in examining his connections to Kierkegaard, to Nietzsche, to the theologians, but ignores the novelists and poets. Even Camus, in his essay, discusses Kafka in terms one would use not for a novelist but for a philosopher. His private writings are treated the same way as his novels, but with a marked preference for the former: taking at random the Kafka essay Roger Garaudy wrote while he was still a Marxist: fifty-four times he quotes Kafka’s letters, Kafka’s diaries forty-five times; the Janouch Conversations thirty-five times; the stories
twenty times; The Trial five times, The Castle four times, Amerika not once.

4) Following Brod’s example, Kafkology ignores the existence of modern art; as though Kafka did not belong to the generation of the great innovators—Stravinsky, Webern, Bartók, Apollinaire, Musil, Joyce, Picasso, Braque—all born, like him, between 1880 and 1883. When, in the 1950s, someone proposed the notion of his kinship with Beckett, Brod immediately protested: Saint Carta has nothing to do with such decadence!

5) Kafkology is not literary criticism (it does not examine the value of the work; the previously unknown aspects of existence that the work reveals, the aesthetic innovations by which it affected the evolution of the art, etc.); Kafkology is an exegesis. As such, it can see only allegories in Kafka’s novels. They are religious (Brod: the Castle = the grace of God; the surveyor = the new Parsifal in quest of the divine; etc., etc.); they are psychoanalytical, existentialistic, Marxist (the surveyor = a symbol of revolution, because he undertakes land redistribution); they are political (Orson Welles’s The Trial); Kafkology does not look to Kafka’s novels for the real world transformed by an immense imagination; rather, it deciphers religious messages, it deciphers philosophical parables.

“Carta was a saint of our time, a veritable saint.” But can a saint go to brothels? When Brod published Kafka’s diaries he censored them somewhat; he deleted not only the allusions to whores but anything else touching on sex. Kafkology has always expressed doubts about its subject’s virility, and it delights in discussing the martyrdom of his impotence. Thus Kafka long ago became the patron saint of the neurotic, the depressive, the anorexic, the feeble; the patron saint of the twisted, the précieuses ridicules, and the hysterical (in the Orson Welles film, K. howls hysterically, whereas Kafka’s novels are the least hysterical in the entire history of literature).

Biographers know nothing about the intimate sex lives of their own wives, but they think they know all about Stendhal’s or Faulkner’s. About Kafka’s I would dare say nothing but this: the (not very easy) erotic life of his time had little resemblance to ours; girls in those days did not make love before marriage; for a bachelor, that left only two possibilities: married women of good family, or easy women of the lower classes: shopgirls, maids, and of course prostitutes.

The imagination of Brod’s novels drew on the first source; whence their kind of eroticism—rapturous, romantic (involving dramatic cuckoldries, suicides, pathological jealousies), and asexual: “Women are wrong to believe a good man cares only about physical possession. That is merely a symbol and is by far less important than this feeling: the woman loves me, and so she is entirely well-disposed toward me. All of man’s love seeks to win woman’s good will and kindness” (The Enchanted Kingdom of Love).

The erotic imagination in Kafka’s novels, on the contrary, draws almost exclusively on the other source: “I walked past the brothel as though it were the house of a beloved” (diary, 1910, sentence censored by Brod).
Masterful as they were at analyzing all the strategies of love, nineteenth-century novels left sex and the sexual act itself hidden. In the first decades of our century, sex emerged from the mists of romantic passion. Kafka was one of the first (certainly along with Joyce) to uncover it in his novels. He unveiled sex not as the playing field for a small circle of libertines (in eighteenth-century style) but as a commonplace, fundamental reality in everyone’s life. Kafka unveiled the existential aspects of sex: sex in conflict with love; the strangeness of the other as a condition, a requirement, of sex; the ambiguous nature of sex: those aspects that are exciting and simultaneously repugnant; its terrible triviality, which in no way lessens its frightening power, etc.

Brod was a romantic. By contrast, at the root of Kafka’s novels I believe I discern a profound antiromanticism; it shows up everywhere: in the way Kafka sees society as well as in the way he constructs a sentence; but its origin may lie in Kafka’s vision of sex.

Young Karl Rossmann (the protagonist of Amerika) is put out of the parental home and sent to America because of his unfortunate sexual mishap with a housemaid, who “had seduced him and got herself a child by him.” Before the coition: “‘Karl, oh my Karl!’ she exclaimed... while he could see nothing at all and felt uncomfortable amid all the warm bedding that she had apparently piled on especially for his sake...” Then she “shook him, listened to his heartbeat, offered him her chest so that he could listen to hers the same way.” Next she “groped between his legs in so disgusting a manner that Karl’s head and neck came thrashing out from among the pillows.” But then she “pushed her belly against him several times—he felt she was a part of himself and that may be why he was overcome by a terrible need.”

This minor copulation is the cause of everything to follow in the novel. Realizing that our destiny is determined by something utterly trivial is depressing. But any revelation of some unexpected triviality is a source of comedy as well. Post coitum omne animal triste. Kafka was the first to describe the comic side of that sadness.

The comic side of sex: an idea unacceptable to puritans and neolibertines both. I think of D. H. Lawrence, that bard of Eros, that evangelist of coition, who, in Lady Chatterley’s Lover, tried to rehabilitate sex by making it lyrical. But lyrical sex is even more ridiculous than the lyrical sentimentality of the last century.

The erotic gem of Amerika is Brunelda. She fascinated Federico Fellini. For a long time, he dreamed of making a film of Amerika, and in his Intervista there is a scene that shows the casting for this dream project: a bunch of incredible candidates turn out for the role of Brunelda, women Fellini had picked with the exuberant delight he was known for. (But I say it again: that exuberant delight is the same as Kafka’s. For Kafka did not suffer for us! He enjoyed himself for us!)

Brunelda, the former singer, “the very frail woman”
with "the gout in her legs." Brunelda with her plump little hands and the double chin, "immeasurably fat." Brunelda, sitting legs apart, "with the greatest effort, after many tries and frequent pauses to rest," bending over "to tug at her stocking-tops." Brunelda hitching up her dress and using the hem to dry the weeping Robinson's eyes. Brunelda unable to climb two or three steps and needing to be carried—a sight that so impresses Robinson that for the rest of his life he will sigh: "Oh God, oh God, how beautiful she was! What a woman!" Brunelda standing naked in the bathtub, moaning and complaining as Delamarche washes her down. Brunelda lying in that same tub, furiously pounding the water with her fists. Brunelda whom it takes two men two hours to get down the stairs and put in a cart, which Karl then pushes across the city to some mysterious place, probably a brothel. Brunelda in this handcarts, with a shawl covering her up so well that a cop takes her for a cargo of potato sacks.

What is new about this portrait of massive ugliness is that it is alluring; morbidly alluring, ridiculously alluring, but still alluring; Brunelda is a monster of sex on the borderline between the repugnant and the exciting, and men's admiring cries are not only comic (they are comic, to be sure, sex is comic!) but at the same time entirely true. It is not surprising that Brod, that romantic worshiper of women, for whom coition was not reality but a "symbol of feeling," could see no truth to Brunelda, not the faintest shadow of real experience but only the description of "the horrible punishments in store for those who... do not follow the path of righteousness."

The finest erotic scene Kafka ever wrote is in the third chapter of The Castle: the act of love between K. and Frieda. Scarce an hour after seeing that "unprepossessing little blonde" for the first time, he is embracing her behind the bar, "among the beer puddles and the other filth covering the floor." Filth: it is inseparable from sex, from its essence.

But immediately thereafter, in the same paragraph, Kafka sounds the poetry of sex: "There hours went by, hours of mutual breaths, of mutual heartbeats, hours in which K. continually had the feeling that he was going astray, or that he was farther inside the strange world than any person before him, in a strange world where the very air had in it no element of his native air, where one must suffocate from strangeness and where, in the midst of absurd enticements, one could do nothing but keep going, keep going astray."

The length of the coition turns into a metaphor for a walk beneath the sky of strangeness. And yet that walk is not ugliness; on the contrary, it attracts us, invites us to go on still farther, intoxicates us: it is beauty.

A few lines later: "he was far too happy to be holding Frieda in his hands, too anxiously happy as well, because it seemed to him that if Frieda were to leave him, everything he had would leave him." So is this love? No indeed, not love; if a person is banished and dispossessed of everything, then a tiny little woman he hardly knows, embraced in puddles of beer, becomes a whole universe—love has nothing to do with it.
In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton speaks severely about the art of the novel. He complains that the novel is incurably hobbled by mediocrity, by banality, by everything that is contrary to poetry. He mocks its descriptions and its tiresome psychology. This criticism of the novel is immediately followed by praise of dreams. Then he ends by saying: “I believe in the eventual fusion of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak.”

Paradox: the “fusion of dream and reality” that the surrealists proclaimed, without actually knowing how to bring it about in a great literary work, had already occurred, and in the very genre they disparaged: in Kafka’s novels, written in the course of the previous decade.

It is very difficult to describe, to define, to give a name to the kind of imagination with which Kafka bewitches us. The “fusion of dream and reality” — that phrase Kafka of course never heard — is illuminating. As in another phrase dear to surrealists, Lautréamont’s about the beauty in the chance encounter between an umbrella and a sewing machine; the more alien things are from one another, the more magical the light that springs from their contact. I’d like to call it a poetics of surprise; or beauty as perpetual astonishment. Or to use the notion of density as a criterion of value: density of imagination, density of unexpected encounters. The scene I cited, of the coition of K. and Frieda, is an example of that dizzying density: the short passage, scarcely a page long, encompasses three completely distinct existential discoveries (the existential triangle of sex) that are stunning in their swift succession: filth; the intoxicating dark beauty of strangeness; and touching, anxious yearning.

The whole third chapter is a whirlpool of the unexpected: within a fairly tight span come, one after the other: the first encounter between K. and Frieda at the inn; the extraordinarily realistic dialogue in the seduction, which is disguised because of the presence of a third person (Olga); the motif of a hole in the door (a trite motif, but it shifts away from empirical plausibility), through which K. sees Klamm sleeping behind the desk; the crowd of servants dancing with Olga; the surprising cruelty of Frieda, who runs them off with a whip, and their surprising fear as they obey her; the innkeeper, who arrives as K. hides by lying flat under the bed; the arrival of Frieda, who discovers K. on the floor and denies his presence to the innkeeper (meanwhile amorously caressing K.’s chest with her foot); the act of love interrupted by the call from Klamm, who has awakened, outside the door; Frieda’s astonishingly courageous gesture of shouting to Klamm, “I’m with the surveyor!”; and then, to top it all off (and here empirical plausibility is completely abandoned): above them, on the bar counter, sit the two assistants; they were watching the couple the whole time.

The two assistants from the castle are probably Kafka’s greatest poetic find, the marvel of his fantasy; their existence is not only infinitely astonishing, it is
also packed with meanings: they are a couple of pathetic blackmailers and nuisances; but they also stand for the whole threatening "modernity" of the castle's universe: they are cops, reporters, paparazzi: agents of the total destruction of private life; they are the innocent clowns who wander across the stage as the drama proceeds; but they are also lecherous voyeurs whose presence imbues the whole novel with the sexual scent of a smutty, Kafkaesquely comic promiscuity.

But above all: the invention of these two assistants is like a lever that hoists the story into that realm where everything is at once strangely real and unreal, possible and impossible. Chapter Twelve: K., Frieda, and the two assistants camp in a grade-school classroom that they have turned into a bedroom. The teacher and the pupils come in just as the incredible ménage à quatre are starting their morning toilet: they get dressed behind the blankets hung from the parallel bars, while the children watch—amused, intrigued, curious (voyeurs themselves). It is more than the encounter of an umbrella with a sewing machine. It is the superbly incongruous encounter of two spaces: a grade-school classroom with a dubious bedroom.

This scene with its enormous comic poetry (which should head the list in an anthology of modernism in the novel) would have been unthinkable in the pre-Kafka era. Totally unthinkable. I stress this in order to make clear the full radical nature of Kafka's aesthetic revolution. I recall a conversation, by now twenty years back, with Gabriel García Márquez, who told me: "It was Kafka who showed me that it's possible to write another way." "Another way" means: breaking through the plausibility barrier. Not in order to escape the real world (the way the Romantics did) but to apprehend it better.

Because apprehending the real world is part of the definition of the novel: but how to both apprehend it and at the same time engage in an enchanting game of fantasy? How be rigorous in analyzing the world and at the same time be irresponsibly free at playful reveries? How bring these two incompatible purposes together? Kafka managed to solve this enormous puzzle. He cut a breach in the wall of plausibility; the breach through which many others followed him, each in his own way: Fellini, Márquez, Fuentes, Rushdie. And others, others.

To hell with Saint Garta! His castrating shadow has blocked our view of one of the novel's greatest poets of all time.
gown with the minced genitals of a bitch in heat. As she leaves the church, all the dogs roundabout (six hundred thousand and fourteen, says Rabelais) run up and piss on her. I remember living in a workers’ dormitory when I was twenty, my Rabelais in Czech translation under my bed. The men were curious about this fat book, and time and again I had to read them the story, which they soon knew by heart. Even though these were people of a rather conservative peasant mentality, their laughter hadn’t a trace of condemnation for that rhetorical and urinary harasser; they adored Panurge, so much so that they gave his name to one of our companions; no, not a womanizer, but a youngster known for his naïveté and his exaggerated chastity, who was ashamed to be seen naked in the shower. I can hear their cries as if it were yesterday: “Panurk”—our Czech pronunciation of the name—“get into the shower! Or we’ll wash you down with dog piss!”

I can still hear that hearty laughter, making fun of a pal’s modesty but at the same time showing an almost marveling affection for it. They were delighted by the obscenities Panurge addresses to the woman in church, but equally delighted by the punishment the woman’s chastity inflicted on him and then, to their great pleasure, her own punishment by the dogs’ urine. With what or whom did my erstwhile companions sympathize? With modesty? With immodesty? With Panurge? With the woman? Or with the dogs who had the enviable privilege of urinating on a beauty?

Humor: the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty.

But humor, to recall Octavio Paz, is “the great invention of the modern spirit.” It has not been with us forever, and it won’t be with us forever either.

With a heavy heart, I imagine the day when Panurge no longer makes people laugh.