Franz Kafka

Amerika: The Missing Person

Der Verschollene

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Der Verschollene is the first of the three great fragmentary novels by Franz Kafka, written mostly in 1912, though it was the last novel of his to be published, in 1927, under the title *Amerika*, given to it by Max Brod. Even as it stands in the shadow of the two undeniable masterpieces of 20th-century literature, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and despite being on the whole less artistically accomplished than them, *Der Verschollene* is still a major achievement containing remarkable passages and is Kafka's most obviously political novel.

The novel consists of seven completed chapters (six of them titled by Kafka, the seventh untitled) and two more chapters in fragments. Apart from the last two, the novel was written between late September of 1912 and January of 1913. Kafka then stopped working on the novel, though he re-read the manuscript in March 1913 and decided to publish the self-contained first chapter, "Der Heizer" ("The Stoker"), as a separate story with publisher Kurt Wolff in May of that same year. In the autumn of 1914, while working on *The Trial*, Kafka returned to his first novel and wrote two more fragmentary, untitled chapters, the longer of which – on the Oklahama Theatre – he hoped would serve as the end of the novel. As with his other two novels, Kafka never completed the manuscript, but that last chapter went on to become the most celebrated part of the entire novel. It came to be known under the title The Nature Theatre or Oklahoma, which Brod gave it to emphasise its purported utopian dimension, though in the manuscript it is just called Theatre of Oklahama, with the name of that American state consistently misspelt.

The novel follows Karl Rossmann, "a seventeen-year-old youth who had been sent to America by his poor parents because a servant girl had seduced him and borne a child by him," (Kafka 2008, 3) and the many hardships he goes through in that vast, inhospitable and unfamiliar country as a Prague-born German immigrant. Initially, he is welcomed by his uncle Jakob, the state senator and a major capitalist whose life story "seems to validate the all-American 'From Rags to Riches' fairy tale." (Fuchs 2002, 25)

His larger-than-life uncle gives him a place to stay and helps him settle in. Indeed, if it were not for him, "perhaps he wouldn't even have been admitted to the United States, which was very likely according to his uncle, who was familiar with the immigration laws, and the authorities would have sent him home, completely ignoring the fact that he no longer had a home country. For one could not hope for pity here in this country, and the things that Karl had read about America in that regard were quite true; here it was only those who were fortunate who truly seemed to enjoy their good fortune amid the indifferent faces on all sides." (Kafka 2008, 35) Besides presenting the experience of immigrants with great nuance, Kafka also critiques America's rampant capitalism of the robber baron era. For example, Jakob's is an intermediary trading business which does not convey "goods from producers to consumers or perhaps to merchants," but rather distributes them "between the

large manufacturing cartels." (43)

One of Jakob's business friends, Mr. Pollunder, invites Karl to his country house outside New York, which Karl accepts even though his uncle is not keen on him going. There, Karl goes through the enormous country house and reflects on "an unbelievable waste of space," especially considering the eastern neighbourhoods of New York where Karl knew that "several families apparently lived together in one little room, and a family home amounted to no more than one corner, where children flocked about their parents." Whereas so many of the rooms in the country house "stood empty, their only purpose being to make a hollow sound whenever anyone knocked." (64)

Karl is later informed that because he disobeyed his uncle in coming to the country house, the uncle had cut him off completely, and Karl would, from now on, have to fend for himself. From the highest social circles, Karl is immediately thrust into the lowest, among the vagrant people in search of any employment, where he hears that his uncle's Jakob corporation is "notorious all over the United States" for its "fraudulent way of hiring people", as well as such practical wisdom as – where there is "a shortage of labour", there, "the wages [are] quite high." (97)

Back when he was in his uncle's good graces, Karl's first acquaintance was a millionaire's son with whom he went on horseback riding lessons. Now he learns from the newspapers and people talking "excitedly about the construction workers' strike," that his father is "the biggest building contractor in New York" and that the strike is "costing him millions and possibly also jeopardizing his business. Karl could not believe a word of this gossip, coming as it did from such ill-informed and malicious people." (98)

But as time goes on, Karl grows to know intimately the dire straits working people find themselves in, constantly squeezed between "the misery of unemployment" on one side, and the impossibility of finding a decent job on the other, with the only positions available being "repugnant" and impossible to do without having your spirit and morale broken. (215) As one of his down-on-his-luck fellow workers, Robinson, explains, the servile position he is in is what you have to do not to go hungry. In response, Karl thinks to himself, "if you keep on being treated like a dog, you start thinking this is in fact what you are." (202)

Karl also judges a student he ends up talking to because the latter works during the day as a door-opener at the Montly's department store, but stays up at night to study medicine, because if Karl ever got his desired position of some office job, "he would occupy himself exclusively with his office work and not dissipate his energy like the student." Indeed, Karl believes that he would "think only of the interests of the business he served" and then the omniscient, third-person narrator (who is mostly focalised on Karl throughout the novel) adds that these "good intentions jostled one another in his head as if his future boss stood before the settee reading them from his face." (240-1)

Even the student admits that he perseveres in his studies due to single-mindedness alone, because even the medical degree would not be a guarantee for a decent future, given "America is full of bogus doctors." Furthermore, he considers his job as a door-opener to be the greatest achievement of his life, one, moreover, he would choose over his studies if he was forced to. Earlier that evening there was a parade for the election of the district judge, and the student adds that "here, of course, it is easier to become a district judge than a door- opener at Montly's." (237-8) This comment could be read as saying that in America, there is at least a semblance of democratic control in the political realm, but none whatsoever in the economic one.

Der Verschollene works simultaneously on many different levels, and is, among other things, "an episodic picaresque tale, a bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel, a story of emigration or exile, a

dark vision of urban civilization, a self-reflective modernist novel, and finally an at times dryly humorous send-up of the American dream." (Harman 2008, xv) It has long been recognised that *Der Verschollene* is Kafka's most realistic novel, packing the most obvious punch in the form of social criticism, and even containing "one of the most clear-sighted poetic exposures of modern industrial society that exist in world literature." (Emrich 1968, 276)

This is hardly surprising considering that immediate sources for the novel, besides Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield,* were Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791), and especially a Hungarian Jewish socialist Arthur Holitscher's travelogue *Amerika Heute und Morgen* (*America Today and Tomorrow*) from 1912 and a Czech socialist František Soukup's illustrated lecture on his travels in America, which Kafka attended.

More than a straightforward social criticism, Mark Harman insists that Kafka's greatest accomplishment in this regard is how he "transforms abstract critiques of modern urban civilization into vivid tableaux, thereby anticipating such early movie classics as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*." (Harman 2008, xxi) Harman gives examples of the back-breakingly busy telegraph room in the headquarters of Uncle Jakob's business, and the information-dispensing office of the gargantuan Hotel Occidental where workers cannot last for more than an hour as amazing and deliberately exaggerated pictorial representations of the Taylorization process.

Another institution, over-the-top in its enormity, is the Theatre of Oklahama, which promises to accept everyone as part of their troupe. Karl joins but decides not to give his name to the theatre authorities, but to use the name Negro, so written in the original German, instead. In light of this, it becomes especially haunting to notice that Holitscher also misspells Oklahoma as Oklahama and that in his book there is "a photograph of a lynched African American, with the title "Idyll aus Oklahama" (sic)." (Thompson 2016, 37) Mark Christian Thompson, in his magisterial study *Kafka's Blue: Figurations of Racial Blackness in the Construction of an Aesthetic* (2016), shows how Kafka can be read as politically most potent and explosive when he uses existing negative stereotypes – in Thompson's study, of blackness – to create a positive representation of what it means to be a writer as someone necessarily opposed to the prevalent socio-economic conditions.

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