

# Before the Law

by Franz Kafka

Translation by Ian Johnston

Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in later on. "It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "but not now." At the moment the gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside. When the gatekeeper notices that, he laughs and says: "If it tempts you so much, try it in spite of my prohibition. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I can't endure even one glimpse of the third." The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The gatekeeper often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions, the kind great men put, and at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, spends everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the gatekeeper. The latter takes it all but, as he does so, says, "I am taking this only so that you do not think you have failed to do anything." During the many years the man observes the gatekeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other gatekeepers, and this one seems to him the only obstacle for entry into the law. He curses the unlucky circumstance, in the first years thoughtlessly and out loud, later, as he grows old, he still mumbles to himself. He becomes childish and, since in the long years studying the gatekeeper he has come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him persuade the gatekeeper. Finally his eyesight grows weak, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are merely deceiving him. But he recognizes now in the darkness an illumination which breaks inextinguishably out of the gateway to the law. Now he no longer has much time to live. Before his death he gathers in his head all his experiences of the entire time up into one question which he has not yet put to the gatekeeper. He waves to him, since he can no longer lift up his stiffening body.

The gatekeeper has to bend way down to him, for the great difference has changed things to the disadvantage of the man. "What do you still want to know, then?" asks the gatekeeper. "You are insatiable." "Everyone strives after the law," says the man, "so how is that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?" The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it."

**Interwar Art:  
Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Expressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, and Futurism**

**POST-IMPRESSIONISM**

1. Claude Monet (1840-1926), Impression - Sunrise (Impressionism) (1872)
2. Edgar Degas (1840-1917), Ballet (Impressionism)
3. Henry de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), Quadrille at the Moulin Rouge (1892)
4. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) The Tragedy (1903)
5. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Starry Night (1889)

**ART NOUVEAU**

6. Gustave Klimt (1862-1918), Adele Bloch-Bauer (1907)
7. Gustave Klimt, The Kiss (1907-8)
8. Gustave Klimt, Judith II (1909)

**EXPRESSIONISM**

9. Edvard Munch, (1863-1944), The Vampire (1893-5)
10. Edvard Munch Madonna (painting) (1893)
11. Munch, Madonna (lithograph) (1895)
12. Munch, The Scream (1893) "I hear the scream of nature."
13. Oscar Kokoschka (1886-1980), Dr. Tietle and his Wife (1909)
14. Kokoschka, Oscar Kokoschka and Alma Mahler: Double Portrait (1912)
15. Kokoschka, The Tempest (1914)
16. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919)
17. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919)
18. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919)
- 19-23. Emile Jannings in The Blue Angel (1930) (the process of disintegration)
24. Emile Nolde (1867-1956) The Prophet (1912)
25. Ludwig Ernst Kirchner (1880-1938) Self-Portrait as a Soldier (1915)
26. George Grosz (1893-1959), Dedication to Oscar Panizza (Metropolis) (1917-8)
27. Otto Dix (1891-1969), War Drawing (1924)
28. Otto Dix, KartenspielerU (Card Players) (1920)
29. Kathe Kollwitz, (1867-1945) Volunteers (1922)
30. Kollwitz, Survivors (1923)
31. Kollwitz, Killed in Action (1921)
32. Kollwitz, Death Seizes a Woman (1934)
33. Kollwitz, Never Again War! (1924)
34. Wassily Kandinsky (1886-1944) Study for Composition IV (1913)

**SURREALISM**

35. Carlos Carra (1881-1966), Free Word P
36. Salvador Dali (1904- 1989) Persistance of Memory (1931)
37. Salvador Dali, Exploding Clock
38. Salvador Dali, Face of War (1940)
39. Salvador Dali, Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of a New Man
40. Rene Magritte (1898-1967), The Human Condition
41. Rene Magritte, The Therapist
42. Rene Magritte, The Lovers
43. Rene Magritte, The Blank Check
44. Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1957), Hide and Seek (1940-2)
45. Pavel Tchelitchew, Hide and Seek (detail)
46. Pavel Tchelitchew, Hide and Seek (detail)
47. David Siqueiros (1896-1974), Echo of a Scream (1937)
48. Peter Blume, (1906- 1992), Eternal City (1937)

### **CUBISM**

49. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Fountain (1916-7)
50. Marcel Duchamp, Nude Decending the Staircase (1912)
51. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907)
52. Pablo Picasso, Guernica (1935)

### **FUTURISM**

53. Giacomo Balla (1871-1958) Dynamism of a Dog on a Leach (1912)
54. Giacomo Balla, Street Lamb (1909)
55. Giacomo Balla, Speed of an Automobile
56. Giacomo Balla, Speed of a Motorcycle
57. Umberto Boccioni (1882-1941) Elasticity (1912)
58. Boccioni, Dynamism of a Cyclist (1913)
59. Boccioni, The City Rises (1910)
60. Boccioni, The Laugh (1911)
61. Boccioni, Development of a Bottle in Space (1913)
62. Boccioni, Continuity in Space (1911-12)

# Franz Kafka -- A Common Confusion

A COMMON EXPERIENCE, resulting in a common confusion. A. has to transact important business with B. in H. He goes to H. for a preliminary interview, accomplishes the journey there in ten minutes, and the journey back in the same time, and on returning boasts to his family of his expedition. Next day he goes again to H., this time to settle his business finally. As that by all appearances will require several hours, A. leaves very early in the morning. But although all the surrounding circumstances, at least in A.'s estimation, are exactly the same as the day before, this time it takes him ten hours to reach H. When he arrives there quite exhausted in the evening he is informed that B., annoyed at his absence, had left half an hour before to go to A.'s village, and that they must have passed each other on the road. A. is advised to wait. But in his anxiety about his business he sets off at once and hurries home.

This time he covers the distance, without paying any particular attention to the fact, practically in an instant. At home he learns that B. had arrived quite early, immediately after A.'s departure, indeed that he had met A. on the threshold and reminded him of his business; but A. had replied that he had no time to spare, he must go at once.

In spite of this incomprehensible behavior of A., however, B. had stayed on to wait for A.'s return. It is true, he had asked several times whether A. was not back yet, but he was still sitting up in A.'s room. Overjoyed at the opportunity of seeing B. at once and explaining everything to him, A. rushes upstairs. He is almost at the top, when he stumbles, twists a sinew, and almost fainting with the pain, incapable even of uttering a cry, only able to moan faintly in the darkness, he hears B.--impossible to tell whether at a great distance or quite near him--stamping down the stairs in a violent rage and vanishing for good.

### **Weimar History, Crises, Culture, and Psychology**

German History (political, economic, social, cultural, and psychological shocks)

- a) 1914-1918 – Brutality of World War I
- b) 1918 – Loss of the War and continued blockade of German ports, which led to continued starvation and disease.
- c) 1918 – Revolution of 1918 and its failure to create radical change. Weimar government (Moderate Socialists) had to make a deal with the military and the Freikorps, which led to assassinations through 1919 and Berlin under martial law for 8 months. The deal included the inability of the Weimar Government to replace the Kaiser's military leaders or the civil service. That meant that the conservative elements and institutions blocked many liberal reforms. The radical left (Independent Socialists and later the German Communist Party) continued to oppose the Weimar Government.
- d) 1919 – Treaty of Versailles (which devastated Germany then and in the future.) – Reparations and removal of means to create wealth; War Guilt Clause.
- e) 1919 -- Democratic Constitution passed but not supported by the right or the left
- f) 1920 – Kapp Putsch
- g) 1923 – France occupies the Ruhr because of non-payment of reparations. Germans in the Ruhr go on a general strike. The government prints money to pay the German workers, which led to massive inflation.
- h) 1923 – Hyperinflation – Averaging 20% a day. In August of 1923, the money printed in one day equaled 2/3 of the money in circulation. Mark goes from 4.2 marks to a dollar before WW1 to 4.2 trillion marks to a dollar – Middle class is wiped out while some make huge fortunes through speculation. Middle class values turned upside down. It is much cheaper for foreigners to live in Germany. England sends people living on the dole to Germany. -- "The fundamental quality of the disaster was a complete loss of faith in the functioning of society. Money is important not just as a medium of economic exchange, after all, but as a standard by which society judges our work, and thus our selves. If all money becomes worthless, then so does all government, and all society, and all standards. In the madness of 1923, a workman's work was worthless, a widow's savings were worthless, everything was worthless. 'The collapse of the currency not only meant the end of trade, bankrupt businesses, food shortages in the big cities and unemployment,' according to one historian, Alan Bullock. 'It had the effect, which is the unique quality of economic catastrophe, of reaching down to and touching every single member of the community in a way which no political event can. The savings of the middle

classes and the working classes were wiped out at a single blow with a ruthlessness, which no revolution could ever equal... The result of the inflation was to undermine the foundations of German society in a way which neither the war, nor the Revolution of November, 1918, nor the Treaty of Versailles had ever done. The real revolution in Germany was the inflation." -- *Otto Friedrich, Before the Deluge*

- i) 1923 – Hitler Putsch – unsuccessful but Hitler, sentenced to 5 years in prison spends on 9 months in prison, where he writes *Mein Kampf*.
- j) 1923-4 -- Dawes Plan and the Rentenmark re-stabilized Germany's economy and international relations leading to a short period of calm and growth.
- k) 1925 – Locarno Treaties stabilizes German – European foreign relations
- l) 1926 – Germany enters the League of Nations
- m) 1929-30 – Great Depression hits Germany. By 1932, only 33% of Germans were fully employed with 44.4% unemployed and 22.6% with short term employment. Unemployment benefits went from 6 months to 6 weeks.
- n) 1933 – Hitler is appointed Chancellor
- o) By 1934 – Germany has been converted from a democracy to a totalitarian dictatorship

The Weimar period exacerbated an extreme division between the ultra-rich and the hopeless poor.

Politically, extreme right and left clash in the streets.

### **The PSYCHOLOGICAL and CULTURAL EFFECTS of All of These CRISES.**

You cannot control anything in your life; the world is turned Upside Down; rootless; no expectations for the future; feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness; desire for order in the midst of all this chaos, no matter what the cost.

Besides the political conflicts of the era, especially between the Nazis and the Communists, this situation created a unique culture, which emphasized Anything Goes.

Before, middle class morality was based on frugality, stability, saving for the future, social respectability, cultural continuity, virginity (or its appearance), and modesty. Now everything was reversed. "People of good families co-habited and had illegitimate children. The impossibility of making marriage economically secure apparently led to a disappearance of marriage itself. Love was old-fashioned, sex was modern – Pearl Buck noted." "Love is a foolish overestimation of the minimal difference between one sexual object and another."

The Weimar period created a new, decadent and dissolute generation that put Berlin on the cosmopolitan pleasure seeker's map.

Sexual liberation

- Many sexual partners

- Hotels hired male gigolos and female prostitutes

- Open homosexuality

- Women often seen as destroyers of men – femme fatales

Drugs – cocaine, morphine, heroin

The underworld

Anything for a thrill – especially something new and extreme

Aggression and blame turned towards Jews and immigrants (Many Jews became rich during the inflation and became visible, while it was very cheap for foreigners to live in Berlin)

It was a blend of pleasure seeking, sexual and political extremism, and a yearning for strange gods. The cult of the irrational. Moral ambiguity.

“One year in Berlin revealed more of the perversions in which man’s lower nature can indulge than a normal lifetime spent anywhere else.”

This lifestyle eventually led to a quest for an alternative – stability and a cleaner and morally clearer society. This was part of the appeal of Nazism.