

THE JEW AS PARIAH: A HIDDEN TRADITION

When it comes to claiming its own in the field of European arts and letters, the attitude of the Jewish people may best be described as one of reckless magnanimity. With a grand gesture and without a murmur of protest it has calmly allowed the credit for its great writers and artists to go to other peoples, itself receiving in return (in punctiliously regular payments) the doubtful privilege of being acclaimed father of every notorious swindler and mountebank. True enough, there has been a tendency in recent years to compile long lists of European worthies who might conceivably claim Jewish descent, but such lists are more in the nature of mass graves for the forgotten than of enduring monuments to the remembered and cherished. Useful as they may be for purposes of propaganda (offensive as well as defensive), they have not succeeded in reclaiming for the Jews any single writer of note unless he happened to have written specifically in Hebrew or Yiddish. Those who really did most for the spiritual dignity of their people, who were great enough to transcend the bounds of nationality and to weave the strands of their Jewish genius into the general texture of European life, have been given short shrift and perfunctory recognition. With the growing tendency to conceive of the Jewish people as a series of separate territorial units and to resolve its history into so many regional chronicles and parochial records, its great figures have been left perforce to the tender mercies of assimilationist propagandists—to be exploited only in order to bolster selfish interests or furnish alleged illustrations of dubious ideologies.

No one fares worse from this process than those bold spirits who tried to make of the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have been—an admission of Jews *as Jews* to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu. Realizing

only too well that they did not enjoy political freedom nor full admission to the life of nations, but that, instead, they had been separated from their own people and lost contact with the simple natural life of the common man, these men yet achieved liberty and popularity by the sheer force of imagination. As individuals they started an emancipation of their own, of their own hearts and brains. Such a conception was, of course, a gross misconstruction of what emancipation had been intended to be; but it was also a vision, and out of the impassioned intensity with which it was evinced and expressed it provided the fostering soil on which Jewish creative genius could grow and contribute its products to the general spiritual life of the Western world.

That the status of the Jews in Europe has been not only that of an oppressed people but also of what Max Weber has called a "pariah people" is a fact most clearly appreciated by those who have had practical experience of just how ambiguous is the freedom which emancipation has ensured, and how treacherous the promise of equality which assimilation has held out. In their own position as social outcasts such men reflect the political status of their entire people. It is therefore not surprising that out of their personal experience Jewish poets, writers, and artists should have been able to evolve the concept of the pariah as a human type—a concept of supreme importance for the evaluation of mankind in our day and one which has exerted upon the gentile world an influence in strange contrast to the spiritual and political ineffectiveness which has been the fate of these men among their own brethren. Indeed, the concept of the pariah has become traditional, even though the tradition be but tacit and latent, and its continuance automatic and unconscious. Nor need we wonder why: for over a hundred years the same basic conditions have obtained and evoked the same basic reaction.

However slender the basis out of which the concept was created and out of which it was progressively developed, it has nevertheless loomed larger in the thinking of assimilated Jews than might be inferred from standard Jewish histories. It has endured, in fact, from Salomon Maimon in the eighteenth century to Franz Kafka in the early twentieth. But out of the variety of forms which it has assumed we shall here select four, in each of which it expresses an alternative portrayal of the Jewish people. Our first type will be Heinrich Heine's schlemiel and "lord of dreams" (*Traumweltherrscher*); our second, Bernard Lazare's "conscious pariah"; our third, Charlie Chaplin's grotesque portrayal of the suspect;¹ and our fourth, Franz Kafka's poetic vision of the

fate of the man of goodwill. Between these four types there is a significant connection—a link which in fact unites all genuine concepts and sound ideas when once they achieve historical actuality.

I. *Heinrich Heine: The Schlemiel and Lord of Dreams*

In his poem "Princess Sabbath," the first of his *Hebrew Melodies*, Heinrich Heine depicts for us the national background from which he sprang and which inspired his verses. He portrays his people as a fairy prince turned by witchcraft into a dog. A figure of ridicule throughout the week, every Friday night he suddenly regains his mortal shape, and freed from the preoccupations of his canine existence (*von huendischen Gedanken*), goes forth like a prince to welcome the sabbath bride and to greet her with the traditional hymeneal, "Lecha Dodi."²

This poem, we are informed by Heine, was especially composed for the purpose by the people's poet—the poet who, by a stroke of fortune, escapes the grueling weekly transformation of his people and who continually leads the sabbathlike existence which is to Heine the only positive mark of Jewish life.

Poets are characterized in greater detail in Part IV of the poem, where Heine speaks of Yehudah Halevi. They are said to be descended from "Herr Schlemihl ben Zurishaddai"—a name taken from Shelumiel ben Zurishaddai, mentioned in the biblical Book of Numbers as the leader of the tribe of Simeon. Heine relates his name to the word "schlemiel" by the humorous supposition that by standing too close to his brother chieftain Zimri, he got himself killed accidentally when Zimri was beheaded by the priest Phinehas for dallying with a Midianite woman (Numbers 25: 6-15). But if they may claim Shelumiel as their ancestor, they must also claim Phinehas—the ruthless Phinehas whose

... spear is with us,
And above our heads unpausing
We can hear its fatal whizzing
And the noblest hearts it pierces.

[Trans. Leland]

History preserves to us no "deeds heroic" of those "noblest hearts." All we know is that—they were schlemiels.

Innocence is the hallmark of the schlemiel. But it is of such innocence that a people's poets—its "lords of dreams"—are born. No heroes they and no stalwarts, they are content to seek their protection in the special tutelage of an ancient Greek deity. For did not Apollo, that "inerrable godhead of delight," proclaim himself once and for all the lord of schlemiels on the day when—as the legend has it—he pursued the beauteous Daphne only to receive for his pains a crown of laurels? To be sure, times have changed since then, and the transformation of the ancient Olympian has been described by Heine himself in his poem "The God Apollo." This tells of a nun who falls in love with that great divinity and gives herself up to the search for him who can play the lyre so beautifully and charm hearts so wondrously. In the end, however, after wandering far and wide, she discovers that the Apollo of her dreams exists in the world of reality as Rabbi Faibusch (a Yiddish distortion of Phoebus), cantor in a synagogue at Amsterdam, holder of the humblest office among the humblest of peoples. Nor this alone; the father is a mohel (ritual circumciser), and the mother peddles sour pickles and assortments of odd trousers; while the son is a good-for-nothing who makes the rounds of the annual fairs playing the clown and singing the Psalms of David to the accompaniment of a bevy of "Muses" consisting of nine buxom wenches from the Amsterdam casino.

Heine's portrayal of the Jewish people and of himself as their poet-king is, of course, poles apart from the conception entertained by the privileged wealthy Jews of the upper classes. Instead, in its gay, insouciant impudence it is characteristic of the common people. For the pariah, excluded from formal society and with no desire to be embraced within it, turns naturally to that which entertains and delights the common people. Sharing their social ostracism, he also shares their joys and sorrows, their pleasures and their tribulations. He turns, in fact, from the world of men and the fashion thereof to the open and unrestricted bounty of the earth. And this is precisely what Heine did. Stupid and undiscerning critics have called it materialism or atheism, but the truth is that there is only so much of the heathen in it that it seems irreconcilable with certain interpretations of the Christian doctrine of original sin and its consequent sense of perpetual guilt. It is, indeed, no more than that simple *joie de vivre* which one finds everywhere in children and in

the common people—that passion which makes them revel in tales and romances, which finds its supreme literary expression in the ballad and which gives to the short love song its essentially popular character. Stemming as it does from the basic affinity of the pariah to the people, it is something which neither literary criticism nor antisemitism could ever abolish. Though they dub its author “unknown,” the Nazis cannot eliminate the “Lorelei” from the repertoire of German song.

It is but natural that the pariah, who receives so little from the world of men that even fame (which the world has been known to bestow on even the most abandoned of her children) is accounted to him a mere sign of schlemielism, should look with an air of innocent amusement, and smile to himself at the spectacle of human beings trying to compete with the divine realities of nature. The bare fact that the sun shines on all alike affords him daily proof that all men are essentially equal. In the presence of such universal things as the sun, music, trees, and children—things which Rahel Varnhagen called “the true realities” just because they are cherished most by those who have no place in the political and social world—the petty dispensations of men which create and maintain inequality must necessarily appear ridiculous. Confronted with the natural order of things, in which all is equally good, the fabricated order of society, with its manifold classes and ranks, must appear a comic, hopeless attempt of creation to throw down the gauntlet to its creator. It is no longer the outcast pariah who appears the schlemiel, but those who live in the ordered ranks of society and who have exchanged the generous gifts of nature for the idols of social privilege and prejudice. Especially is this true of the parvenu, who was not even born to the system, but chose it of his own free will, and who is called upon to pay the cost meticulously and exactly, whereas others can take things in their stride. But no less are they schlemiels who enjoy power and high station. It needs but a poet to compare their vaunted grandeur with the real majesty of the sun, shining on king and beggarman alike, in order to demonstrate that all their pomp and circumstance is but sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. All of these truths are old as the hills. We know them from the songs of oppressed and despised peoples who—so long as man does not aspire to halt the course of the sun—will always seek refuge in nature, hoping that beside nature all the devices of men will reveal themselves as ephemeral trifles.

It is from this shifting of the accent, from this vehement protest on the

part of the pariah, from this attitude of denying the reality of the social order and of confronting it, instead, with a higher reality, that Heine's spirit of mockery really stems. It is this too which makes his scorn so pointed. Because he gauges things so consistently by the criterion of what is really and manifestly natural, he is able at once to detect the weak spot in his opponent's armor, the vulnerable point in any particular stupidity which he happens to be exposing. And it is this aloofness of the pariah from all the works of man that Heine regards as the essence of freedom. It is this aloofness that accounts for the divine laughter and the absence of bitterness in his verses. He was the first Jew to whom freedom meant more than mere "liberation from the house of bondage" and in whom it was combined, in equal measure, with the traditional Jewish passion for justice. To Heine, freedom had little to do with liberation from a just or unjust yoke. A man is born free, and he can lose his freedom only by selling himself into bondage. In line with this idea, both in his political poems and in his prose writings Heine vents his anger not only on tyrants but equally on those who put up with them.

The concept of *natural* freedom (conceived, be it noted, by an outcast able to live beyond the struggle between bondage and tyranny) turns both slaves and tyrants into equally unnatural and therefore ludicrous figures of fun. The poet's cheerful insouciance could hardly be expected from the more respectable citizen, caught as he was in the toils of practical affairs and himself partly responsible for the order of things. Even Heine, when confronted with the only social reality from which his pariah existence had not detached him—the rich Jews of his family—loses his serenity and becomes bitter and sarcastic.

To be sure, when measured by the standard of political realities, Heine's attitude of amused indifference seems remote and unreal. When one comes down to earth, one has to admit that laughter does not kill and that neither slaves nor tyrants are extinguished by mere amusement. From this standpoint, however, the pariah is always remote and unreal; whether as schlemiel or as "lord of dreams" he stands outside the real world and attacks it from without. Indeed, the Jewish tendency toward utopianism—a propensity most clearly in evidence in the very countries of emancipation—stems, in the last analysis, from just this lack of social roots. The only thing which saved Heine from succumbing to it, and which made him transform the political nonexistence and unreality of the pariah into the effective basis of a

world of art, was his creativity. Because he sought nothing more than to hold up a mirror to the political world, he was able to avoid becoming a doctrine and to keep his passion for freedom unhampered by fetters of dogma. Similarly, because he viewed life through a long-range telescope, and not through the prism of an ideology, he was able to see further and clearer than others, and takes his place today among the shrewdest political observers of his time. The basic philosophy of this "prodigal son" who, after "herding the Hegelian swine for many years," at last became even bold enough to embrace a personal god, could always have been epitomized in his own lines:

Beat on the drum and blow the fife
And kiss the *vivandière*, my boy.
Fear nothing—that's the whole of life,
Its deepest truth, its soundest joy.
Beat reveille, and with a blast
Arouse all men to valiant strife.
Waken the world; and then, at last
March on. . . . That is the whole of life.

[Trans. Untermeyer]

By fearlessness and divine impudence Heine finally achieved that for which his coreligionists had vainly striven with fear and trembling, now furtively and now ostentatiously, now by preening and vaunting, and now by obsequious sycophancy. Heine is the only German Jew who could truthfully describe himself as both a German and a Jew. He is the only outstanding example of a really happy assimilation in the entire history of that process. By seeing Phoebus Apollo in Rabbi Faibusch, by boldly introducing Yiddish expressions in the German language, he in fact put into practice that true blending of cultures of which others merely talked. One has only to remember how zealously assimilated Jews avoid the mention of a Hebrew word before gentiles, how strenuously they pretend not to understand it if they hear one, to appreciate the full measure of Heine's accomplishment when he wrote, as pure German verse, lines like the following, praising a distinctively Jewish dish:

Schalet, ray of light immortal
Schalet, daughter of Elysium!

So had Schiller's song resounded,
Had he ever tasted Schalet.

[Trans. Leland]

In these words, Heine places the fare of Princess Sabbath on the table of the gods, beside nectar and ambrosia.

While the privileged wealthy Jews appealed to the sublimities of the Hebrew Prophets in order to prove that they were indeed the descendants of an especially exalted people, or else—like Disraeli—sought to validate their people by endowing it with some extraordinary, mystic power, Heine dispensed with all such rarefied devices and turned to the homespun Judaism of everyday life, to that which really lay in the heart and on the lips of the average Jew; and through the medium of the German language he gave it a place in general European culture. Indeed, it was the very introduction of these homely Jewish notes that helped to make Heine's works so essentially popular and human.

Heine is perhaps the first German prose writer really to embody the heritage of Lessing. In a manner least expected, he confirmed the queer notion so widely entertained by the early Prussian liberals that once the Jew was emancipated he would become more human, more free and less prejudiced than other men. That this notion involved a gross exaggeration is obvious. In its political implications, too, it was so lacking in elementary understanding as to appeal only to those Jews who imagined—as do so many today—that Jews could exist as "pure human beings" outside the range of peoples and nations. Heine was not deceived by this nonsense of "world citizenship." He knew that separate peoples are needed to focus the genius of poets and artists; and he had no time for academic pipe dreams. Just because he refused to give up his allegiance to a people of pariahs and schlemiels, just because he remained consistently attached to them, he takes his place among the most uncompromising of Europe's fighters for freedom—of which, alas, Germany has produced so few. Of all the poets of his time Heine was the one with the most character. And just because German bourgeois society had none of its own, and feared the explosive force of his, it concocted the slanderous legend of his characterlessness. Those who spread this legend, and who hoped thereby to dismiss Heine from serious consideration, included many Jewish journalists. They were averse to adopting the line he had sug-

gested; they did not want to become Germans and Jews in one, because they feared that they would thereby lose their positions in the social order of German Jewry. For Heine's attitude, if only as a poet, was that by achieving emancipation the Jewish people had achieved a genuine freedom. He simply ignored the condition which had characterized emancipation everywhere in Europe—namely, that the Jew might only become a man when he ceased to be a Jew. Because he held this position he was able to do what so few of his contemporaries could—to speak the language of a free man and sing the songs of a natural one.

II. *Bernard Lazare: The Conscious Pariah*

If it was Heine's achievement to recognize in the figure of the schlemiel the essential kinship of the pariah to the poet—both alike excluded from society and never quite at home in this world—and to illustrate by this analogy the position of the Jew in the world of European culture, it was the merit of Bernard Lazare to translate the same basic fact into terms of political significance. Living in the France of the Dreyfus affair, Lazare could appreciate at first hand the pariah quality of Jewish existence. But he knew where the solution lay: in contrast to his unemancipated brethren who accept their pariah status automatically and unconsciously, the emancipated Jew must awake to an awareness of his position and, conscious of it, become a rebel against it—the champion of an oppressed people. His fight for freedom is part and parcel of that which all the downtrodden of Europe must wage to achieve national and social liberation.

In this heroic effort to bring the Jewish question openly into the arena of politics, Lazare was to discover certain specific, Jewish factors which Heine had overlooked and could afford to ignore. If Heine could content himself with the bare observation that "Israel is ill-served, with false friends guarding her doors from without and Folly and Dread keeping watch within," Lazare took pains to investigate the political implications of this connection between Jewish folly and gentile duplicity. As the root of the mischief he recognized that "spurious doctrine" (*doctrine bâtarde*) of assimilation, which would have the Jews "abandon all their characteristics, individual and moral alike, and give up distinguishing themselves only by an outward mark of the

flesh which served but to expose them to the hatred of other faiths." He saw that what was necessary was to rouse the Jewish pariah to a fight against the Jewish parvenu. There was no other way to save him from the latter's own fate—inevitable destruction. Not only, he contended, has the pariah nothing but suffering to expect from the domination of the parvenu, but it is he who is destined sooner or later to pay the price of the whole wretched system. "I want no longer," he says in a telling passage, "to have against me not only the wealthy of my people, who exploit me and sell me, but also the rich and poor of other peoples who oppress and torture me in the name of my rich." And in these words he puts his finger squarely on that phenomenon of Jewish life which the historian Jost had so aptly characterized as "double slavery"—dependence, on the one hand, upon the hostile elements of his environment and, on the other, on his own "highly placed brethren" who are somehow in league with them. Lazare was the first Jew to perceive the connection between these two elements, both equally disastrous to the pariah. His experience of French politics had taught him that whenever the enemy seeks control, he makes a point of using some oppressed element of the population as his lackeys and henchmen, rewarding them with special privileges, as a kind of sop. It was thus that he construed the mechanism which made the rich Jews seek protection behind the notorious general Jewish poverty, to which they referred whenever their own position was jeopardized. This, he divined, was the real basis of their precarious relationship with their poorer brethren—on whom they would be able, at any time it suited them, to turn their backs.

As soon as the pariah enters the arena of politics and translates his status into political terms, he becomes perforce a rebel. Lazare's idea was, therefore, that the Jew should come out openly as the representative of the pariah, "since it is the duty of every human being to resist oppression." He demanded, that is, that the pariah relinquish once and for all the prerogative of the schlemiel, cut loose from the world of fancy and illusion, renounce the comfortable protection of nature, and come to grips with the world of men and women. In other words, he wanted him to feel that he was himself responsible for what society had done to him. He wanted him to stop seeking release in an attitude of superior indifference or in lofty and rarefied cogitation about the nature of man per se. However much the Jewish pariah might be, from the historical viewpoint, the product of an unjust dispensation

("look what you have made of the people, ye Christians and ye princes of the Jews"), politically speaking, every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented. From such shame there was no escape, either in art or in nature. For insofar as a man is more than a mere creature of nature, more than a mere product of divine creativity, insofar will he be called to account for the things which men do to men in the world which they themselves condition.

Superficially, it might appear as though Lazare failed because of the organized opposition of the rich, privileged Jews, the nabobs and philanthropists whose leadership he had ventured to challenge and whose lust for power he had dared to denounce. Were this the case, it would be but the beginning of a tradition which might have outlived his own premature death and determined, if not the fate, at least the effective volition of the Jewish people. But it was not the case; and Lazare himself knew—to his own sorrow—the real cause of his failure. The decisive factor was not the parvenu; neither was it the existence of a ruling caste which—whatever complexion it might choose to assume—was still very much the same as that of any other people. Immeasurably more serious and decisive was the fact that the pariah simply refused to become a rebel. True to type, he preferred to "play the revolutionary in the society of others, but not in his own," or else to assume the role of *schnorrer* feeding on the crumbs from the rich man's table, like an ancient Roman commoner ready to be fobbed off with the merest trifle that the patrician might toss at him. In either case, he mortgaged himself to the parvenu, protecting the latter's position in society and in turn protected by him.

However bitterly they may have attacked him, it was not the hostility of the Jewish nabobs that ruined Lazare. It was the fact that when he tried to stop the pariah from being a schlemiel, when he sought to give him a political significance, he encountered only the *schnorrer*. And once the pariah becomes a *schnorrer*, he is worth nothing, not because he is poor and begs, but because he begs from those whom he ought to fight, and because he appraises his poverty by the standards of those who have caused it. Once he adopts the role of *schnorrer*, the pariah becomes automatically one of the props which hold up a social order from which he is himself excluded. For just as *he* cannot live without his benefactors, so *they* cannot live without him. Indeed, it is just by this system of organized charity and almsgiving that the parvenus of

the Jewish people have contrived to secure control over it, to determine its destinies and set its standards. The parvenu who fears lest he becomes a pariah, and the pariah who aspires to become a parvenu, are brothers under the skin and appropriately aware of their kinship. Small wonder, in face of this fact, that of all Lazare's efforts—unique as they were—to forge the peculiar situation of his people into a vital and significant political factor, nothing now remains. Even his memory has faded.

III. *Charlie Chaplin: The Suspect*

While lack of political sense and persistence in the obsolete system of making charity the basis of national unity have prevented the Jewish people from taking a positive part in the political life of our day, these very qualities, translated into dramatic forms, have inspired one of the most singular products of modern art—the films of Charlie Chaplin. In Chaplin the most unpopular people in the world inspired what was long the most popular of contemporary figures—not because he was a modern Merry Andrew, but because he represented the revival of a quality long thought to have been killed by a century of class conflict, namely, the entrancing charm of the little people.

In his very first film, Chaplin portrayed the chronic plight of the little man who is incessantly harried and hectored by the guardians of law and order—the representatives of society. To be sure, he too is a schlemiel, but not of the old visionary type, not a secret fairy prince, a protégé of Phoebus Apollo. Chaplin's world is of the earth, grotesquely caricatured if you will, but nevertheless hard and real. It is a world from which neither nature nor art can provide escape and against whose slings and arrows the only armor is one's own wits or the kindness and humanity of casual acquaintances.

In the eyes of society, the type which Chaplin portrays is always fundamentally suspect. He may be at odds with the world in a thousand and one ways, and his conflicts with it may assume a manifold variety of forms, but always and everywhere he is under suspicion, so that it is no good arguing rights or wrongs. Long before the refugee was to become, in the guise of the "stateless," the living symbol of the pariah, long before men and women were to be forced in their thousands to depend for their bare existence on

their own wits or the chance kindnesses of others, Chaplin's own childhood had taught him two things. On the one hand, it had taught him the traditional Jewish fear of the "cop"—that seeming incarnation of a hostile world; but on the other, it had taught him the time-honored Jewish truth that, other things being equal, the human ingenuity of a David can sometimes outmatch the animal strength of a Goliath.

Standing outside the pale, suspected by all the world, the pariah—as Chaplin portrays him—could not fail to arouse the sympathy of the common people, who recognized in him the image of what society had done to them. Small wonder, then, that Chaplin became the idol of the masses. If they laughed at the way he was forever falling in love at first sight, they realized at the same time that the kind of love he evinced was their kind of love—however rare it may be.

Chaplin's suspect is linked to Heine's schlemiel by the common element of innocence. What might have appeared incredible and untenable if presented as a matter of casuistic discussion, as the theme of high-flown talk about the persecution of the guiltless, becomes, in Chaplin's treatment, both warm and convincing. Chaplin's heroes are not paragons of virtue, but little men with a thousand and one little failings, forever clashing with the law. The only point that is made is that the punishment does not always fit the crime, and that for the man who is in any case suspect there is no relation between the offense he commits and the price he pays. He is always being "nabbed" for things he never did, yet somehow he can always slip through the toils of the law, where other men would be caught in them. The innocence of the suspect whom Chaplin so consistently portrays in his films is, however, no more a mere trait of character, as in Heine's schlemiel; rather is it an expression of the dangerous incompatibility of general laws with individual misdeeds. Although in itself tragic, this incompatibility reveals its comic aspects in the case of the suspect, where it becomes patent. There is obviously no connection at all between what Chaplin does or does not do and the punishment which overtakes him. Because he is suspect, he is called upon to bear the brunt of much that he has not done. Yet at the same time, because he is beyond the pale, unhampered by the trammels of society, he is able to get away with a great deal. Out of this ambivalent situation springs an attitude both of fear and of impudence, fear of the law as if it were an inexorable natural force, and familiar, ironic impudence in the face of its minions. One

can cheerfully cock a snook at them, because one has learned to duck them, as men duck a shower by creeping into holes or under a shelter. And the smaller one is the easier it becomes. Basically, the impudence of Chaplin's suspect is of the same kind as charms us so much in Heine's schlemiel; but no longer is it carefree and unperturbed, no longer the divine effrontery of the poet who consorts with heavenly things and can therefore afford to thumb noses at earthly society. On the contrary, it is a worried, careworn impudence—the kind so familiar to generations of Jews, the effrontery of the poor “little Yid” who does not recognize the class order of the world because he sees in it neither order nor justice for himself.

It was in this “little Yid,” poor in worldly goods but rich in human experience, that the little man of all peoples most clearly discerned his own image. After all, had he not too to grapple with the problem of circumventing a law which, in its sublime indifference, forbade “rich and poor to sleep under bridges or steal bread?” For a long time he could laugh good-humoredly at himself in the role of a schlemiel—laugh at his misfortunes and his comic, sly methods of escape. But then came unemployment, and the thing was not funny anymore. He knew he had been caught by a fate which no amount of cunning and smartness could evade. Then came the change. Chaplin's popularity began rapidly to wane, not because of any mounting antisemitism, but because his underlying humanity had lost its meaning. Men had stopped seeking release in laughter; the little man had decided to be a big one.

Today it is not Chaplin, but Superman. When, in *The Great Dictator*, the comedian tried, by the ingenious device of doubling his role, to point up the contrast between the “little man” and the “big shot,” and to show the almost brutal character of the Superman ideal, he was barely understood. And when, at the end of that film, he stepped out of character, and sought, in his own name, to reaffirm and vindicate the simple wisdom and philosophy of the “little man,” his moving and impassioned plea fell, for the most part, upon unresponsive audiences. This was not the idol of the thirties.

IV. *Franz Kafka: The Man of Goodwill*

Both Heine's schlemiel and Lazare's “conscious pariah” were conceived essentially as Jews, while even Chaplin's suspect betrays what are clearly

Jewish traits. Quite different, however, is the case of the last and most recent typification of the pariah—that represented in the work of Franz Kafka. He appears on two occasions, once in the poet's earliest story, "Description of a Fight," and again in one of his latest novels, entitled *The Castle*.

"Description of a Fight" is concerned, in a general way, with the problem of social interrelations, and advances the thesis that within the confines of society the effects of genuine or even friendly relations are invariably adverse. Society, we are told, is composed of "nobodies"—"I did wrong to nobody, nobody did wrong to me; but nobody will help me, nothing but nobodies"—and has therefore no real existence. Nevertheless, even the pariah, who is excluded from it, cannot account himself lucky, since society keeps up the pretense that it is somebody and he nobody, that it is "real" and he "unreal."³ His conflict with it has therefore nothing to do with the question whether society treats him properly or not; the point at issue is simply whether it or he has real existence. And the greatest injury which society can and does inflict on him is to make him doubt the reality and validity of his own existence, to reduce him in his own eyes to a status of nonentity.

The reality of his existence thus assailed, the pariah of the nineteenth century had found escape in two ways, but neither could any longer commend itself to Kafka. The first way led to a society of pariahs, of people in the same situation and—so far as their opposition to society was concerned—of the same outlook. But to take this way was to end in utter detachment from reality—in a bohemian divorce from the actual world. The second way, chosen by many of the better Jews whom society had ostracized, led to an overwhelming preoccupation with the world of beauty, be it the world of nature in which all men were equal beneath an eternal sun, or the realm of art where everyone was welcome who could appreciate eternal genius. Nature and art had, in fact, long been regarded as departments of life which were proof against social or political assault; and the pariah therefore retreated to them as to a world where he might dwell unmolested. Old cities, reared in beauty and hallowed by tradition, began to attract him with their imposing buildings and spacious plazas. Projected, as it were, from the past into the present, aloof from contemporary rages and passions, they seemed in their timelessness to extend a universal welcome. The gates of the old palaces, built by kings for their own courts, seemed now to be flung open to all, and even unbelievers might pace the great cathedrals of Christ. In such a setting the

despised pariah Jew, dismissed by contemporary society as a nobody, could at least share in the glories of the past, for which he often showed a more appreciative eye than the esteemed and full-fledged members of society.

But it is just this method of escape, this retreat into nature and art against which Kafka directs his shafts in "Description of a Fight." To his twentieth-century sense of reality, nature had lost its invulnerable superiority over man since man would not "leave it in peace." He denied, too, the living actuality of monuments which were merely inherited from the dead and abandoned to everybody—that same everybody whom contemporary society would call a "nobody." In his view, the beauties of art and nature when used as an escape mechanism by those to whom its right had been refused were merely products of society. It does no good, he says, to keep thinking of them; in time they die and lose their strength. For Kafka only those things are real whose strength is not impaired but confirmed by thinking. Neither the freedom of the schlemiel and poet nor the innocence of the suspect nor the escape into nature and art, but thinking is the new weapon—the only one with which, in Kafka's opinion, the pariah is endowed at birth in his vital struggle against society.

It is, indeed, the use of this contemplative faculty as an instrument of self-preservation that characterizes Kafka's conception of the pariah. Kafka's heroes face society with an attitude of outspoken aggression, poles apart from the ironic condescension and superiority of Heine's "lord of dreams" or the innocent cunning of Chaplin's perpetually harassed little man. The traditional traits of the Jewish pariah, the touching innocence and the enlivening schlemielism, have alike no place in the picture. *The Castle*, the one novel in which Kafka discusses the Jewish problem, is the only one in which the hero is plainly a Jew; yet even there what characterizes him as such is not any typically Jewish trait, but the fact that he is involved in situations and perplexities distinctive of Jewish life.

K. (as the hero is called) is a stranger who can never be brought into line because he belongs neither to the common people nor to its rulers. ("You are not of the Castle and you are not of the village, you are nothing at all.") To be sure, it has something to do with the rulers that he ever came to the village in the first place, but he has no legal title to remain there. In the eyes of the minor bureaucratic officials his very existence was due merely to a bureaucratic "error," while his status as a citizen was a paper one, buried "in piles of

documents forever rising and crashing" around him. He is charged continually with being superfluous, "unwanted and in everyone's way," with having, as a stranger, to depend on other people's bounty and with being tolerated only by reason of a mysterious act of grace.

K. himself is of the opinion that everything depends on his becoming "indistinguishable," and "that as soon as possible." He admits that the rulers will assuredly obstruct the process. What he seeks, namely, complete assimilation, is something which they are not prepared to recognize—even as an aspiration. In a letter from the castle he is told distinctly that he will have to make up his mind "whether he prefers to become a village worker with a distinctive but merely apparent connection with the Castle or an ostensible village worker whose real occupation is determined through the medium of Barnabas (the court messenger)."

No better analogy could have been found to illustrate the entire dilemma of the modern would-be assimilationist Jew. He, too, is faced with the same alternative, whether to belong ostensibly to the people, but really to the rulers—as their creature and tool—or utterly and forever to renounce their protection and seek his fortune with the masses. "Official" Jewry has preferred always to cling to the rulers, and its representatives are always only "ostensible villagers." But it is with the other sort of Jew that Kafka is concerned and whose fate he portrays. This is the Jew who chooses the alternative way—the way of goodwill, who construes the conventional parlance of assimilation literally. What Kafka depicts is the real drama of assimilation, not its distorted counterpart. He speaks for the average small-time Jew who really wants no more than his rights as a human being: home, work, family, and citizenship. He is portrayed as if he were alone on earth, the only Jew in the whole wide world—completely, desolately alone. Here, too, Kafka paints a picture true to reality and to the basic human problem which assimilation involves, if taken seriously. For insofar as the Jew seeks to become "indistinguishable" from his gentile neighbors he has to behave as if he were indeed utterly alone; he has to part company, once and for all, with all who are like him. The hero of Kafka's novel does, in fact, what the whole world wants the Jew to do. His lonely isolation merely reflects the constantly reiterated opinion that if only there were nothing but individual Jews, if only the Jews would not persist in banding together, assimilation would become a fairly simple process. Kafka makes his hero follow this "ideal" course in order to

show clearly how the experiment in fact works out. To make a thorough success of it, it is, of course, necessary also that a man should renounce all distinctive Jewish traits. In Kafka's treatment, however, this renunciation assumes a significance for the whole problem of mankind, and not merely for the Jewish question. K., in his effort to become "indistinguishable," is interested only in universals, in things which are common to all mankind. His desires are directed only toward those things to which all men have a natural right. He is, in a word, the typical man of goodwill. He demands no more than that which constitutes every man's right, and he will be satisfied with no less. His entire ambition is to have "a home, a position, real work to do," to marry and "to become a member of the community." Because, as a stranger, he is not permitted to enjoy these obvious prerequisites of human existence, he cannot afford to be ambitious. He alone, he thinks (at least at the beginning of the story), must fight for the minimum—for simple human rights, as if it were something which embraced the sum total of all possible demands. And just because he seeks nothing more than his minimum human rights, he cannot consent to obtain his demands—as might otherwise have been possible—in the form of "an act of favor from the Castle." He must perforce stand on his rights.

As soon as the villagers discover that the stranger who has chanced to come into their midst really enjoys the protection of the castle, their original mood of contemptuous indifference turns to one of respectful hostility. From then on their one desire is to cast him back upon the castle as soon as possible; they want no truck with the "upper crust." And when K. refuses, on the grounds that he wants to be free, when he explains that he would rather be a simple but genuine villager than an ostensible one really living under the protection of the castle, their attitude changes in turn to one of suspicion mingled with anxiety—an attitude which, for all his efforts, haunts him continually. The villagers feel uneasy not because he is a stranger, but because he refuses to accept favors. They try constantly to persuade him that his attitude is "dumb," that he lacks acquaintance with conditions as they are. They tell him all kinds of tales concerning the relations of the castle to the villagers, and seek thereby to impart to him something of that knowledge of the world which he so obviously lacks. But all they succeed in doing is to show him, to his increasing alarm, that such things as human instinct, human rights, and

plain normal life—things which he himself has taken for granted as the indisputed property of all normal human beings—have as little existence for the villagers as for the stranger.

What K. experiences in his efforts to become indistinguishable from the villagers is told in a series of grim and ghastly tales, all of them redolent of human perversity and the slow attrition of human instincts. There is the tale of the innkeeper's wife, who had the "honor" as a girl to be the short-lived mistress of some underling at the castle, and who so far never forgets it as to turn her marriage into the merest sham. Then there is K.'s own young fiancée, who had the same experience but who, though she is able to forget it long enough to fall genuinely in love with him, still cannot endure indefinitely a simple life without "high connections" and who absconds in the end with the aid of the "assistants"—two minor officials of the castle. Last but not least, there is the weird, uncanny story of the Barnabases living under a curse, treated as lepers till they feel themselves such, merely because one of their pretty daughters once dared to reject the indecent advances of an important courtier. The plain villagers, controlled to the last detail by the ruling class, and slaves even in their thoughts to the whims of their all-powerful officials, have long since come to realize that to be in the right or to be in the wrong is for them a matter of pure "fate" which they cannot alter. It is not, as K. naïvely assumes, the sender of an obscene letter who is exposed, but the recipient who becomes branded and tainted. This is what the villagers mean when they speak of their "fate." In K.'s view, "it's unjust and monstrous"; but he is "the only one in the village of that opinion."

It is the story of the Barnabases that finally makes K. see conditions as they really are. At long last he comes to understand that the realization of his designs, the achievement of basic human rights—the right to work, the right to be useful, the right to found a home and become a member of society—are in no way dependent on complete assimilation to one's milieu, on being "indistinguishable." The normal existence which he desires has become something exceptional, no longer to be realized by simple, natural methods. Everything natural and normal in life has been wrested out of men's hands by the prevalent regime of the village, to become a present endowed from without—or, as Kafka puts it, from "above." Whether as fate, as blessing, or as curse, it is something dark and mysterious, something which a man

receives but does not create, and which he can therefore observe but never fathom. Accordingly K.'s aspiration, far from being commonplace and obvious, is, in fact, exceptional and magnificent. So long as the village remains under the control of the castle, its inhabitants can be nothing but the passive victims of their respective "fates"; there is no place in it for any man of goodwill who wishes to determine his own existence. The simplest inquiry into right and wrong is regarded as a querulous disputation; the character of the regime, the power of the castle, are things which may not be questioned. So, when K., thoroughly indignant and outraged, bursts out with the words, "So that's what the officials are like," the whole village trembles as if some vital secret, if not indeed the whole pattern of its life, had been suddenly betrayed.

Even when he loses the innocence of the pariah, K. does not give up the fight. But unlike the hero of Kafka's last novel, *Amerika*, he does not start dreaming of a new world and he does not end in a great "Nature Theatre" where "everyone is welcome," where "there is a place for everyone" in accordance with his talents, his bent, and his will. On the contrary, K.'s idea seems to be that much could be accomplished, if only one simple man could succeed in living his own life like a normal human being. Accordingly, he remains in the village and tries, in spite of everything, to establish himself under existent conditions. Only for a single brief moment does the old Jewish ideal stir his heart, and he dreams of the lofty freedom of the pariah—the "lord of dreams." But "nothing more senseless," he observes, "nothing more hopeless than this freedom, this waiting, this inviolability." All these things have no purpose and take no account of men's desire to achieve something in the here below, if it be only the sensible direction of their lives. Hence, in the end, he reconciles himself readily to the "tyranny of the teacher," takes on "the wretched post" of a school janitor, and "does his utmost to get an interview with Klamm"—in a word, he takes his share in the misery and distress of the villagers.

On the face of it, all is fruitless, since K. can and will not divorce himself from the distinction between right and wrong and since he refuses to regard his normal human rights as privileges bestowed by the "powers that be." Because of this, the stories which he hears from the villagers fail to rouse in him that sense of haunting fear with which they take pains to invest them and which endows them with that strange poetic quality so common in the folk-

tales of enslaved peoples. And since he cannot share this feeling he can never really be one of them. How baseless a feeling it is, how groundless the fear which seems by some magic to possess the entire village, is clear from the fact that nothing whatever materializes of all the dreadful fate which the villagers predict for K. himself. Nothing more serious happens to him, in fact, than that the authorities at the castle, using a thousand and one excuses, keep holding up his application for legal title of residence.

The whole struggle remains undecided, and K. dies a perfectly natural death; he gets exhausted. What he strove to achieve was beyond the strength of any one man. But though his purpose remained unaccomplished, his life was far from being a complete failure. The very fight he has put up to obtain the few basic things which society owes to men has opened the eyes of the villagers, or at least of some of them. His story, his behavior, has taught them both that human rights are worth fighting for and that the rule of the castle is not divine law and, consequently, can be attacked. He has made them see, as they put it, that "men who suffered our kind of experiences, who are beset by our kind of fear . . . who tremble at every knock at the door, cannot see things straight." And they add: "How lucky are we that you came to us!"

In an epilogue to the novel, Max Brod relates with what enthusiasm Kafka once repeated to him the story of how Flaubert, returning from a visit to a simple, happy family of many children, had exclaimed spontaneously: *ils sont dans le vrai* ("Those folk are right"). A true human life cannot be led by people who feel themselves detached from the basic and simple laws of humanity nor by those who elect to live in a vacuum, even if they be led to do so by persecution. Men's lives must be normal, not exceptional.

It was the perception of this truth that made Kafka a Zionist. In Zionism he saw a means of abolishing the "abnormal" position of the Jews, an instrument whereby they might become "a people like other peoples." Perhaps the last of Europe's great poets, he could scarcely have wished to become a nationalist. Indeed, his whole genius, his whole expression of the modern spirit, lay precisely in the fact that what he sought was to be a human being, a normal member of human society. It was not his fault that this society had ceased to be human, and that, trapped within its meshes, those of its members who were really men of goodwill were forced to function within it as something exceptional and abnormal—saints or madmen. If Western Jewry of the nineteenth century had taken assimilation seriously, had really tried to

resolve the anomaly of the Jewish people and the problem of the Jewish individual by becoming "indistinguishable" from their neighbors, if they had made equality with others their ultimate objective, they would only have found in the end that they were faced with inequality and that society was slowly but surely disintegrating into a vast complex of inhuman cross-currents. They would have found, in short, the same kind of situation as Kafka portrayed in dealing with the relations of the stranger to the established patterns of village life.

So long as the Jews of Western Europe were pariahs only in a social sense, they could find salvation, to a large extent, by becoming parvenus. Insecure as their position may have been, they could nevertheless achieve a *modus vivendi* by combining what Ahad Haam described as "inner slavery" with "outward freedom." Moreover, those who deemed the price too high could still remain mere pariahs, calmly enjoying the freedom and untouchability of outcasts. Excluded from the world of political realities, they could still retreat into their quiet corners there to preserve the illusion of liberty and unchallenged humanity. The life of the pariah, though shorn of political significance, was by no means senseless.

But today it is. Today the bottom has dropped out of the old ideology. The pariah Jew and the parvenu Jew are in the same boat, rowing desperately in the same angry sea. Both are branded with the same mark; both alike are outlaws. Today the truth has come home: there is no protection in heaven or earth against bare murder, and a man can be driven at any moment from the streets and broad places once open to all. At long last, it has become clear that the "senseless freedom" of the individual merely paves the way for the senseless suffering of his entire people.

Social isolation is no longer possible. You cannot stand aloof from society, whether as a schlemiel or as a lord of dreams. The old escape mechanisms have broken down, and a man can no longer come to terms with a world in which the Jew cannot be a human being either as a parvenu using his elbows or as a pariah voluntarily spurning its gifts. Both the realism of the one and the idealism of the other are today utopian.

There is, however, a third course—the one that Kafka suggests, in which a man may forgo all claims to individual freedom and inviolability and modestly content himself with trying to lead a simple, decent life. But—as Kafka

himself points out—this is impossible within the framework of contemporary society. For while the individual might still be allowed to make a career, he is no longer strong enough to fulfill the basic demands of human life. The man of goodwill is driven today into isolation, like the Jew-stranger at the castle. He gets lost—or dies from exhaustion. For only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men, without exhausting himself. And only when a people lives and functions in consort with other peoples can it contribute to the establishment upon earth of a commonly conditioned and commonly controlled humanity.

1944

Notes

1. Chaplin has recently declared that he is of Irish and Gypsy descent, but he has been selected for discussion because, even if not himself a Jew, he has epitomized in an artistic form a character born of the Jewish pariah mentality.

2. "Lecha Dodi": "Come, my beloved, to meet the bride; Let us greet the sabbath-tide"—a Hebrew song chanted in the synagogue on Friday night.

3. Yet of all who have dealt with this age-long conflict Kafka is the first to have started from the basic truth that "society is a nobody in a dress-suit." In a certain sense, he was fortunate to have been born in an epoch when it was already patent and manifest that the wearer of the dress-suit was indeed a nobody. Fifteen years later, when Marcel Proust wanted to characterize French society, he was obliged to use a far grimmer metaphor. He depicted it as a masquerade with a death's-head grinning behind every mask.