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"*Eine ganz einfache Person*". Frau Grubach's insight in Kafka's *Prozess*

Giorgio Fontana[1]

Abstract

Der Prozess *is one of the most minutely analyzed texts by an author as minutely analyzed in turn as Franz Kafka. For the researcher, the hope then lies in improving our understanding of some underestimated aspects that may shed new light on the whole novel. Minor characters are often a source of such hidden particulars, and among them the "most minor" prove to be sometimes even more interesting. Such is the case of the protagonist's landlady, Frau Grubach. This essay offers precisely an in-depth reading of her opinion on Josef K.'s arrest: in particular, I try to show how it conceals an unconscious but rather profound insight into the true nature of the trial. However, K. is unable to grasp it—both because he reserves to Grubach his typical dismissive attitude, offering yet another side of his machismo, and because this insight is expressed by the woman tentatively, with a mixture of fear and self-denigration. In fact, the language of Frau Grubach (*eine ganz einfache Person*, "a very simple person") is in its way closer to the cryptic language of the Court. This may seem at first paradoxical, but it is only a special case of Kafka's trademark: his unsettling balance between utmost stylistic transparency and utmost enigmatic content.*

Keywords: Franz Kafka, The Trial, feminine figures, secondary characters

[1] Independent Researcher
Email: giorgio.fontana81@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Der Prozess is one of the most annotated novels ever, but luckily, the subtleties of Kafka's art seem to be inexhaustible. Consider a typical moment of anti-climax. The night after the arrest, Josef K. quickly returns home without indulging in his usual pastimes (a walk, a beer) to tidy up the apartment of his landlady, Frau Grubach. In fact, this desire conceals a precise desire to undo, as if by erasing its traces, the unpleasant accident of the morning. He, therefore, knocks on Grubach's door, finding her intent on mending a woolen stocking: everything is already in perfect order, but K. takes pains to apologize for his previous mishap. Whereupon Grubach, with a somewhat comical commotion and taking to heart even the happiness of her tenant (so she says), begins a short and extremely interesting speech. This paper aims to analyze such a scene in depth, showing how Grubach's argument comes very close to the hidden meaning of what happened and suggesting a possible (but ignored) way out for Josef K.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

Even a cursory look at secondary literature on Kafka reveals that Frau Grubach is quite an underestimated character. And understandably so: She pales in comparison to Huld, Titorelli, or the priest conversing with K. in the cathedral. Her symbolic contribution to the whole novel seems limited, and in this sense, scholars have preferred to focus, among K.'s scanty personal relationships, on Fraülein Bürstner: see, for instance, Maché (1992) and Conti (2015).

All in all, Frau Grubach looks like a simple side character, endowed with the most typical features we would expect of a landlady like her: apprehensive, not particularly cultured or bright, somewhat submissive, somewhat self-righteous, and also rather fearful: she certainly does not wish to provoke the wrath of K., an esteemed tenant who pays the rent on time (but also indulges in bullying her). Her entry in the *Franz Kafka Encyclopedia* for instance, reads:

> In *Der Process* (The Trial), the landlady of Josef K.'s boarding house, with whom he has a conversation about his arrest, the event that begins the novel. She is depicted as older, very friendly to K., and hard-working; she is a mother figure from whom Josef K. wants approval. In the course of their conversation, Frau Grubach reveals that she has not only eavesdropped on the arrest but also talked to the guards. To her, the arrest "seems like something scholarly," indicating that she does not and cannot really understand what it means, yet that does not prevent her from giving advice. (Gray, Gross, Goebel and Koelb, 2005, p. 113)

In a chapter for another recent scholarly handbook, Hiebel (2008) also insists on Josef K.'s arrest as a form of mother-child separation. However, putting such a sentimentally demanding simile on the table risks obscuring some of the nuances in Frau Grubach's discourse.

From this point of view, a feminist reading can help us to dispel such misunderstandings because it reminds us how the description of Frau Grubach is in any case, defined through the gaze, heavily gendered, of Josef K.: a judgmental, top-down gaze, which (as happens in many other cases in the novel) plenty enjoys its superiority. As Carlo Salzani puts it:

> From these analyses, a much more complex and cogent image of Kafka's women emerges: not only subjugated, marginal, and animalized but also independent, inaccessible, and manipulative. And on the other hand, the image of men –like Joseph K., at the same time authoritarian and servile, pretentious and weak, with whom it is impossible that the readers, even male readers, identify themselves –is progressively weakened, exposed, and ridiculed. (Salzani, 2024, p. 61)

I shall return on that later, as I feel some important clarifications are needed on the indiscriminate application of a "gender lens" to Kafka's work, but for the time being, this point should be kept: however much K. regrets, as we shall see, his course of action during the arrest and approves of

Frau Grubach's words, there is not a single moment in which the balance between him and her is questioned.

So, instead of considering her simply a motherly figure (and thus a mere affective counterbalance to K.'s arid existence), we should focus on the value of her opinion regarding the novel's central problem: namely, the nature of the arrest and the ongoing trial.

Also, as Walter Benjamin sharply pointed out in a famous letter to Adorno in Kafka, "Balzac's types have firmly taken up residence in the sphere of illusion: they have now become all those 'aides', 'officials', 'villagers,' and 'lawyers', with whom K. finds himself confronted as the only individual human being" (Adorno & Benjamin, 1999, pp. 310-311). Among Kafka's several technical abilities, there is indeed this: he knows how to exploit the typified to cleverly conceal the most delicate themes under the most trite everyday life. In this sense, Grubach perfectly embodies the Balzacian character reborn in Kafkaesque guise.

Moreover, as a general rule, one should always be careful when evaluating Kafka's "secondary characters": given the extreme density of his prose and his unparalleled ability to imbue meaning even to the smallest detail, we will not be surprised to find additional finesse and complexity in the case of Frau Grubach as well.

3. Analysis

So, let us start by re-reading the brief exchange between the landlady and K. about the pivotal morning event. After having admitted to eavesdropping a bit at K.'s door and even having had a word with the guards that had him 'arrested', Frau Grubach adds:

> Nun, ich habe also einiges gehört, aber ich kann nicht sagen, daß es etwas besonders Schlimmes war. Nein. Sie sind zwar verhaftet, aber nicht so wie ein Dieb verhaftet wird. Wenn man wie ein Dieb verhaftet wird, so ist es schlimm, aber diese Verhaftung —. Es kommt mir wie etwas Gelehrtes vor, entschuldigen Sie, wenn ich etwas Dummes sage, es kommt mir wie etwas Gelehrtes vor, das ich zwar nicht verstehe, das man aber auch nicht verstehen muß.
> [Well then, I did hear a few things, but I can't say they were particularly bad. No. You have been arrested, true, but not the way a thief's arrested. When someone's arrested like a thief, then it is bad, but this arrest… It seems to me like something very learned, excuse me if what I'm saying is stupid, but it seems to me like something very learned that I can't understand, but which one doesn't have to understand. (Kafka, 2009, pp. 18-19)]

K. agrees with this point of view, saying that he is happy to hear the judgment of a reasonable woman (*vernünftigen Frau*); but it is apparent that he only half-understands Grubach's opinion.

According to the landlady K.'s arrest does not appear particularly bad; more in detail he has not been caught like a thief, which *is* bad: likely because there is a flagrancy, a violation of common and obvious norms. A theft is the most feared and most common misdemeanor for a landlady—let us say it is a *blatant shame*.

K.'s arrest, though, looks like *etwas Gelehrtes vor*, something "learned", coming from another system of values that Frau Grubach admits, humbly but wisely, not to understand. This point is of course not unknown to critical literature: see for instance Beckmann (1991) and Dern (2004). But already according to Rhein, whose essay dates back to the Sixties, the scene illustrates a clash of two entirely different world-views:

> Frau Grubach's interpretation of the arrest is based solely upon feeling. K., unable to perceive through instinct, attempts to explain away the entire episode in rational terminology. He blames the arrest upon his unpreparedness, and his idea of being prepared involves material things exterior to himself: the general telephone, the office phone, clients and clerks. He fails to see that at the bank he is completely submerged in practicalities which are artificial aids to cover his basic insecurity. (Rhein, 1964, pp. 41-42)

That is, Grubach *feels* that there is something else—another entire logic at play. Uneducated as she is, unable to speak properly like her arrogant and learned tenant, she eats her words, mumbles, and apologizes in advance. But this shows not only her sense of deference but also the discomforting insight of her sentences.

In fact, bad may be the lesser evil here. If K. were a thief, it would have been a real shame, but he would also been judged by the "normal," uneducated, understandable, everyday court; instead, so in the apparent paucity of his "educated" arrest, we glimpse of the shine of a higher and more terrible court. The blatant shame of theft is nothing compared to the *hidden shame* of such a trial: difficult to grasp, almost impossible to explain, though at the end of the novel, it will be completely manifest: *es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben* ("It seemed as if his shame would live on after him").

Now, hundreds of pages have been written around this word. Scham: What is Josef K. ashamed of? That he did not try hard enough to save himself, or that he tried too hard (when perhaps a kind of indifference to the process would have saved him)? Or does the shame that must as survived him belong instead to the world, forced to witness such an obscene and atrociously ridiculous end? Whatever interpretation we choose, the enigma remains since Kafka's finale is, from a literal point of view, deliberately ambiguous, and so it is perfectly consistent that Frau Grubach's intuition remains equally ambiguous and obscure.

More so, from a narrative point of view, the choice to entrust such an insight to a character outside the trial system is quite felicitous: if Kafka had put it in the mouth of Titorelli, Huld, or even Leni (on the basis of her indirect attendances with the court) a clarification, or at least a form of argumentation, would have been necessary. On Frau Grubach's lips, and with that kind of rhetorical shrewdness, it may remain a vague and suggestive admonition.

Given this vagueness, it is even more understandable that Josef K. completely misunderstands the point: In his impassioned retort, he reduces the morning's event from *etwas Gelehrtes* to *nichts*. In fact, nothing has really happened; the "arrest" has not produced any consequences—*yet*. K. is also right in saying that he was caught off guard; after all, that is precisely what the courthouse does all the time, thus being a veritable *machine of narrative surprises* (think of the chapter *Der Prügler*, or the extension of the judicial offices into almost every urban attic).

K.'s insight, however, stops here and is hastily reduced to the logic of normal events, failing to grasp the suggestion implicit in his own hypothetical: if only he had not minded who stood in front of him, if only he had shot straight, none of this would have happened. *Kurz, hätte ich vernünftig gehandelt* ("if, in short, I had behaved sensibly"); again that adjective, *vernünftig*, first applied to Frau Grubach: if he had acted like an ordinary person who lives *dans le vrai*, to quote Kafka's beloved Flaubertian expression, then everything would have been different.

And there is more. In the following chapter on K. shows again this utter misunderstanding of Grubach's point: during his indignant speech before the examining magistrate, he underlines that

> selbst meine Vermieterin, eine ganz einfache Person – ich will ihren Namen hier in ehrendem Sinne nennen, sie heißt Frau Grubach – selbst Frau Grubach war verständig genug einzusehen, daß eine solche Verhaftung nicht mehr bedeutet als ein Anschlag, den nicht genügend beaufsichtigte Jungen auf der Gasse ausführen.
> [Even my landlady —a simple woman, if I name her here, it is to do her honour: she is called Frau Grubach — even Frau Grubach was sensible enough to realize that such an arrest means no more than an attack boys who are not properly supervised carry out in the street. (Kafka, 2009, p. 36)]

But the *ganz einfache Person* has said nothing like that. K.'s inability to truly listen (a recurring flaw of his throughout the novel) is here added to his peremptory disdain for a woman he believes to be of little worth; the distortion wrought on his words is as *bona fide* as it is revealing of K.'s true character. If the court all knows, as it seems, this failure is also probably registered.

In fact, Josef K.'s paternalism and machismo is absolutely evident here as in it is in the rest of the novel. Towards all of the young women he takes a predatory attitude, which sometimes becomes overt harassment (as in the case of Fraülein Bürstner: causing in her a fear-laden

exhaustion, and in him a satisfaction with his own behavior). Instead for Frau Grubach, elderly and devoid of erotic interest, the protagonist reserves words laden with paternalism and sufficiency; even the quality he recognizes in her are diminished into basic, almost animal-like forms of insight (so to say, it is as if Grubach *sniffs out* deception).

This masculine approach can be (and has been) generalized to Kafka's fiction: the female characters are scarce and never play a crucial role, with the best-known exception being Amalia in *Das Schloss*—who, however, does not rise to the role of protagonist.

The bibliography on gender studies in Kafka is, of course, extremely vast; for the sole purpose of our subject, Beck (1995), Boa (1996), and Lorenz (2002) come to mind among the others. But a certain philological caution is also necessary. Gender studies have been crucially important in unraveling the world of male domination that now appears transparent in Kafka's work: with his instinct for exposing the grotesque distortions of power, Kafka certainly could not have missed such a vast and ubiquitous field of domination. However, like any particularly sharp critical weapon, gender studies also risk cutting off the hand that wields them; in the case of Kafka in particular, an author so elusive and refractory to unambiguous interpretations, it is wise not to stray too far from the text.

For instance, the omnipresence of this masculine gaze should not automatically be traced back to biographical reasons (especially since Kafka, in his lifetime, was far removed from the model of violent masculinity dominant at the time; to get the pulse of his difference, Stach's monumental biography, (2005) and (2017) in particular, remains the key reference). And there is certainly a profound difference between Karl Rossmann's gaze and Josef K's. The "K-function", an expression introduced in literature by Deleuze and Guattari's (1975) and that Robert (1979) finds recurring in the three novels, should thus not be understood as a critical *passe-partout*. There are similarities, but more importantly, there are deep differences between Kafka's male characters as they are among his female ones: reducing them all to a binary opposition means treating Kafka more like a sociologist than an artist.

So, back to our landlady, there is another important issue to tackle: how aware is Frau Grubach of her intuition? Apparently not much, and therein lies Kafka's great art: not exactly a brilliant person, she speaks without fully understanding the extent of her insight. Shortly thereafter a small break in focus informs us that she did not understand much of the speech made by K., and so she is embarrassed; because of the embarrassment

> sagte sie aber etwas, was sie gar nicht wollte und was auch gar nicht am Platze war: "Nehmen Sie es doch nicht so schwer, Herr K.," sagte sie, hatte Tränen in der Stimme und vergaß natürlich auch den Handschlag.
> [she said something she certainly didn't intend and which was certainly out of place. "Don’t take it to heart so, Herr K.," she said. Her voice was filled with tears and of course she forgot to shake his hand. (Kafka, 2009, p. 19)]

K., suddenly tired, retorts he is not taking it hard; then the talk veers to another subject, Fraülein Bürstner. But let us stop for another moment here: Frau Grubach's advice has been that K. too must not force himself to understand (*man aber auch nicht verstehen muß*); neither, she now adds, he should be too worried (*Nehmen Sie es doch nicht schwer*). The advice itself, the narrator hints, is "out of place"; perhaps because it is a bit too daring: it sounds, in fact, as a motherly talk, not a landlady-tenant conversation. But it is a very good point, too: In theory, K. should not worry too much and rather accept the court's logic to save himself. But

> The law of *The Trial* has a curiously empty quality, and this vague immateriality—so far from the specificity of the Decalogue, for example—reflects quite accurately the nature of the law as K. comes to understand it. The law of reason that Socrates portrays and that K. derives on his own is essentially *a priori*; it has the philosophical necessity of a law like Kant's categorical imperative, and it seems, as Frau Grubach says of the arrest, *etwas Gelehrtes* ["something very learned"]. (Stringfellow, 1995, p. 179)

This emptiness is a wicked and deeply ironic distortion of Kantian ethics, just like Grubach's being *vernünftig* is readable as a distortion of Kant's *Praktische Vernünft*. As a matter of fact, the law in Der Prozess has equally universal validity and does not tolerate utilitarian objections, but unlike the Kantian moral project, it remains an empty shell that can only be filled by the exercise of arbitrary power. In one of the not infrequent moments of clarity (gotten mostly in heated states, and never capitalized as a proper strategy) K. himself understands this:

> Und der Sinn dieser großen Organisation, meine Herren? Er besteht darin, daß unschuldige Personen verhaftet werden und gegen sie ein sinnloses und meistens wie in meinem Fall ergebnisloses Verfahren eingeleitet wird.
> [And the point of this large organization, gentlemen? It consists in arresting innocent persons and instituting pointless and mostly, as in my case, fruitless proceedings against them. (Kafka, 2009, p. 17)]

Punishment becomes then a self-sufficient activity. Like art, as Roberto Calasso (2002, p. 247) subtly remarks, though it is much more casual and devoid of the rules of art, not least because it takes place in the total absence of a shared and manifest tradition. The "introductory writings" of the Law evoked by the priest in the cathedral (and referred to in a moment) are as unavailable to K. as to anyone else. It is to be doubted that they even exist.

To be sure, Frau Grubach does not get this alternative logic and all its subtle consequences: as said, it is just a superficial, even if correct, intuition. And, of course, neither K. gets it, but Grubach at least has the humility to recognize that the game at stake follows different rules, however obscure. As paradoxical as it may sound, the *ganz einfache Person*'s language is the closest to the Trial's cryptic jargon, but K.'s haughtiness lies in holding firm within his own position, of fretting, of struggling through the hands of the court when he should give up.

But to do what instead, exactly? Hard to say. It is now commonplace to link K.'s experience to the countryman's in the parable exposed by the priest in the chapter Im Dom. In fact, this is precisely the priest's aim, although it is now too late: to lead K. back to the logic that is alien to him, to the very foundations of the incomprehensible Law with which he struggles, so much so that the parable is placed in the "introductory writings".

An exemplary element of the parable, in addition to other manifold finesses that go far beyond this article's scope, lies in the fact that the entrance to the Law is intended *only* for the countryman and no one else: in perfect consistency with a court that judges entire lives and not particular crimes. Out of metaphor, the countryman's inability to plow through his own door exemplifies K.'s inability to accept the aberrant but, in his own way, consistent logic of the court (whereby there are no norms applicable to categories of individuals but only existential judgments for individuals).

4. Conclusion

The main question has not been answered yet: What exactly did K. have to do? Ignoring the alleged arrest? Continue to live one's life as if nothing happened? Perhaps, more likely accepting one of the two options suggested by Titorelli to ensure an existence shielded from court problems. The court's supreme perfidy also lies in endlessly multiplying the defendant's possibilities without giving him any operational direction: rather than blocking K., his arrest amplifies enormously his freedom in a very dangerous context. Thus, the court watches him struggle without moving a finger, even allowing him to save himself, and then delivers the *coup de grace*.

As I hope to have shown, in conclusion, one possible hint to escape came right from a person K. would normally dismiss, a *ganz einfache Person*. Her counsel of humility and reasonableness then sounds like the caution of the God-fearing before an all-powerful force. But Josef K. desires what is rightfully his, namely total acquittal: Isn't that what the innocent would be entitled to? Why, in spite of all his faults, not at least give him the merit of courage? He could never follow Grubach's advice. After all, even in the parable, nothing suggests to the countryman how to enter the door intended for him, so he takes the doorkeeper at his word and simply waits. Both he

and K. "play by the book", not realizing that the court plays by quite other, capricious and incomprehensible rules, where condemnation depends only on arbitrariness—and salvation as well, as we read in the *Oktavhefte*:

> Ein Rest von Glauben wirkt dabei mit, während des Transportes werde zufällig der Herr durch den Gang kommen, den Gefangenen ansehen und sagen: »Diesen sollt ihr nicht wieder einsperren. Er kommt zu mir.«
> [In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: «This man is not to be locked up again. He is to come to me.» (Kafka, 2004, p. 88)]

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