Coupled with Sartre: An Existentialist Take on Modern Literary Scholarship

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Normally I hate doing these things. I’ve three small dogs at home that love on me to no end, only requesting a treat once in awhile, and I’ve turned away from them for an entire weekend for this: the annual gathering of the Society of University and College Kafka Scholars (SUCKS), where I’m to read my long-awaited (or so they tell me) paper linking together the core themes of Beckett, Joyce, Faulkner, Proust, and of course Kafka, to one solitary influence. The conference is to be held at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, a place whose biggest claim to fame is that it was the recipient of the 1971 All-American City Award. Since that time, I’m afraid it has degraded so far as to count our yearly gathering of frustrated-poets-turned-pipe-smoking-intellectuals-in-tweed (as Herr H. would say) as its most prominent event. It’s doubtless the hamlet will greet our parade of pedantry with streamers and kazoos it so awaits the readings of our academic briefs. In the past, such gems have included ‘Kafka and You: How The Trial established the modern self-help genre,’ ‘By What Name Should We Call Thee?: An Entomological Examination of Insect Species in The Metamorphosis,’ and the oft-quoted ‘The War Within: Reading Kafka as a foreshadowing of the Pop Tart—Toaster Strudel debate.’ I cannot begin to express my glee at the prospect of this event.

The positive side to all of this is that the lecture hall is said to have an open bar in place for the entirety of the conference. If there is any proof of God, it lies in the other-worldliness of a well-prepared whiskey sour. Maybe the conference will be tolerable. I’m up in my hotel room now, and there’s nothing on the TV except CSPAN II, although even that’s beginning to seem a little interesting at this point, after I’ve nearly cleared out the contents of the mini bar. I’ll follow in the footsteps of Oedipa Maas and stumble into my plot with a Kirsch-saturated body.
Fifteen, er, yeah, fifteen minutes til go time. And I’m a little drunk. As in a lot drunk. They positioned us on stage about thirty minutes ago, and I’m having a little bit of a hard time following what’s going on. Some colleague of mine is babbling away at the microphone about the significance of the overwhelming absence of animals in Kafka’s body of work (wait—does that even make sense? “The Burrow?”), but I’m mostly focused on trying not to fall out of my chair. Old Forester is my friend. Head up. Look forward. Don the intellectual semi-frown of one thinking very hard. “ . . . as a result, Kafka establishes himself as the preëminent modernist focusing on the urban environment.” Much applause, much applause. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. At least there’s a five minute break coming, time to act at least slightly less trashed.

Paper. Paper. Shit. It was in my pocket. Hmm. Sorta remember it. Hmmm. The people are milling about. Larva-like. “Glass of champagne, sir?” the attendant asks me. Room’s at least a fifteen minute walk, and that’s sober. “Please.” I take the drink and down it in one gulp and return the glass to the tray. Can’t hurt. All members rise as I’m announced by some woman, vaguely familiar, who hugs me warmly. A sea of pedagogues flapping their noodley appendages.

“Ladies and gentlemen, beloved colleagues, thank you very much for coming tonight to celebrate the year’s advancement in Kafka-centered scholarship. A big thank you to SIUC for letting us use your place.

“I’ve been at work for the better part of the last two years on the following subject matter, and I hope you will spare me a few minutes of your time so that we can all go back to our rooms and do it all again tomorrow [universal faux-chuckling].

“ . . . recent scholarship in modernism, taken as a whole, and specifically how Kafka fits into that literary body, has long been determined to focus on the lesser details of the corpus of writing, and very little on how they all tie together. I’m pleased to say that I can now put forth a proposal explaining the thematic elements of all these great authors. Colleagues, they all derive their themes from one element: the advent of modern dentistry. It is so clear when examined in the context of the time and the personal notes and letters of Kafka, Joyce, Proust, and other modernists. Faulkner’s entire book, Pylon, which is largely disregarded, unfairly I might add, is focused, at the sub-dermal level, on barodontolgia in the fighter pilots of World War I. Beckett’s discussion of genitalia in a negative light in Waiting for Godot relates to, as found in his letters to his mistress, to the then-current belief that homoerotic relations led to expedited tooth decay. Within Ulysses, Stephen’s qualms with his mother, if we regard Stephen as a Joyce fill-in, can be explained by Joyce’s mother having forced her son to take part in a rudimentary root canal procedure at the age of sixteen.

“ . . . and our beloved Kafka: is he a product of an unsure era? If, as we all can agree, he is the greatest capturer of the universal modernist emotion of paranoia, what was his reasoning for his portrayals? War, famine, the coming of the
automobile? All of these have been thrown around the lecture circuits for years, but
in light of this my scholarship, specifically looking for symbolism in the personal
letters of Mr. Kafka to his editor, Max Brod, it can be concluded that the paranoia
largely stems from an idea that was during Kafka’s time being discussed: the
fluoridation of public water. All of Kafka’s paranoia stems from this alone. And I will
leave you with this teaser, colleagues, in hopes that you may look into my book, The
Mouths of the Modernists, due to be completed this year and released next year from
the Colorado State University Press. Thank you for your time, and I appreciate your
listening.”

Everyone stands and applauds. I bow a little. Perhaps they missed the point.