

# A Theology of Illness: Franz Kafka's "A Country Doctor"

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To write prescriptions is easy, but to come to an understanding with people is hard.

Franz Kafka, "A Country Doctor"

Away with physicians! A savior is needed.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*

No writer speaks to me more forcefully about being a physician than Franz Kafka, and no story is more significant to me as a physician than Kafka's "A Country Doctor," which I occasionally present to medical students and residents as an early (perhaps the first) modernist story about doctoring. Despite the volumes of commentaries written about Kafka's work, this story seems to have been overlooked by most critics. The reason I return to it again and again is that it addresses larger themes important to healing: duty and faith. Kafka was a religious skeptic, and yet, in his writing, he asks, How are we to live without faith? Does unbelief lead inexorably to nihilism and failure? and, specifically for physicians, Without faith can physicians perform their duty to heal? "A Country Doctor" is the story of an unbeliever, or at least a skeptic, whose life and work are predicated on duty and responsibility. Yet this doctor ultimately fails as healer and physician.

Kafka's work belongs to a tradition of storytelling that seeks to glimpse the truth beyond the immediate, material world. I believe that the meaning of "A Country Doctor" is, in part, theological. When a text is theological, our method of reading should be exegetical; through interpretation of the text we can discover meaning beyond life "as it is" and find glimpses of truth about life "as it ought to be." In this

story, Kafka struggles to find the meaning of "duty" and the relationship of duty to his concept of "faith."

### The Story

"I was in great perplexity," the doctor announces in the opening sentence.<sup>1</sup> The doctor is paged by his "night bell" (the fin de siècle equivalent of a beeper or answering service) because there is a medical emergency in a neighboring village (223). At first, the physician feels confident that he is well equipped for his duty. He has his "bag of instruments," his protective fur coat, and his carriage that is "exactly right for our country roads" (220). He is "all ready for the journey" (220). He then realizes that he has no means of transportation because his horse has died. His confidence is immediately shaken and a feeling of paralysis sets in: "I stood there forlornly, with the snow gathering more and more thickly upon me, more and more unable to move" (220). Suddenly, a demonic groom and two unearthly, larger-than-life horses appear. The doctor's perplexity increases. His transportation problem solved, he must now choose between his duty as a physician and his responsibility to Rose, his servant girl, whom the groom has threatened to sexually assault. The choice is made more difficult by the fact that the villagers have often called him for false alarms and because the doctor prefers to stay with Rose, "the pretty girl who had lived in my house for years almost without my noticing her" (223). Yet his duty as a physician has the force of a sacred obligation: "I was the district doctor and did my duty to the uttermost, to the point where it became almost too much. I was badly paid and yet generous and helpful to the poor" (222). He is then rapidly, but passively, transported to his patient's house ("you were only blown in here, you didn't come on your own feet" [224]). Despite his medical training, he feels foolishly inept. He picks up tweezers (a comical detail—his "bag of instruments" now seems useless) and he wonders, "What was I doing there" (222). His first examination reveals that his patient is "quite sound," although the patient, a young boy, inexplicably requests, "Doctor, let me die" (222). A few moments later the doctor discovers that the boy has mysteriously developed a large, "[r]ose-red" wound (223). The wound is infected with "[w]orms" with legs (223). Although the doctor insists that he is "altogether composed and equal to the situation and remained so," his self-confidence has clearly eroded—"And yet I am a doctor. What am I to do? Believe me, it is not easy for me

either" (224). Not only does the physician lose his composure, he also loses his objectivity as the identities of physician and patient merge. The patient's family and neighbors strip the doctor of all symbols of authority, including his clothes, and, accompanied by singing school-children, they carry him into the sickbed of his patient. The doctor and patient lie in bed together, speaking as if with one voice. The doctor reassures the patient but fails to cure him. He finally escapes on horseback, "[n]aked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of ages," regretting his lost medical practice, his ungrateful patients, and his abandoned servant girl (225).

### The Meaning of Duty

Kafka's first title for this story was "Responsibility" and the meaning of duty is clearly one of its major themes. In 1916, when he wrote "A Country Doctor," Kafka himself was wrestling with the meaning of duty, and the doctor's dilemma in "A Country Doctor" parallels events in Kafka's personal life. One year earlier he had moved out of his parents' home, in part to emancipate himself emotionally from his father. He was also struggling to choose between his responsibility to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, (their engagement lasted five years) and his vocation as a writer (as a "chaste bachelor"). The doctor's inability to choose between his duty to his patients and his responsibility (and desire) for Rose mirrors Kafka's rebellion against his father and his indecision about marriage.

Kafka was also struggling with his duty as a citizen. "A Country Doctor" was written during World War I; by 1916 most of Kafka's friends had been drafted into the army. A childhood friend was killed in 1915. Kafka applied to enlist but his application was rejected twice, thus intensifying his own guilt.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, Kafka was struggling with his duty as a Jew; "A Country Doctor" is the title story in a collection of short stories with Jewish themes. Kafka wrote in German, which was the language of middle-class Jews in Prague. Like many of his readers, he was an Austrian subject living in Prague who spoke German. As a German-speaking Jew, Kafka was not at home among the Czechs; as the son of an assimilated Jewish businessman he was not at home in the Jewish culture. Kafka was a marginal writer writing for a marginal audience. He was caught between three cultures: the alluring world of secular European culture, the emerging world of Czech

nationalism, and the aging embattled culture of traditional Judaism. In an oft-cited letter he wrote to Max Brod in 1921, Kafka describes himself as a trapped animal: "Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them, and their fathers approved of this. . . . But with their posterior legs they were still glued to their father's Jewishness and with their waving anterior legs they found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration."<sup>3</sup> Kafka's art is informed, in part, by an exegetical intent to reinterpret the "Jewishness behind" him.

Kafka believed that the concept of "duty" had religious roots. In Christian theology, a vocation or calling is a summons inspired by divine revelation, and performance of one's duty requires self-sacrifice that is rewarded by salvation and redemption. The Jewish concept of duty, however, is inflected inwardly. The Jews were commanded to obey the Law not because they should obey, or because they have to obey, but because they love to obey. This is the meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 ("And thou shalt love the Lord thy God.")<sup>4</sup> The rabbinical tradition interprets this passage to mean that love of God requires "spiritual surrender" to God, and that obedience to divine commands brings a person nearer to the divine.<sup>5</sup> This is the fundamental duty of Jewish life. Moreover, biblical Judaism insists that moral duty is self-evident and requires no priestly intermediary or exegetical interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

The doctor in Kafka's story alludes to the religious definition of duty as self-sacrifice: "I was the district doctor and did my duty to the uttermost, to the point where it became almost too much. I was badly paid and yet generous and helpful to the poor" (222). The master clinician-teacher Sir William Osler summarized the concept of medicine as a religious vocation in 1896: "Chief among the hard sayings of the Gospel is the declaration 'He that loveth father or mother or son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.' Yet the spirit that made possible acceptance, and which is responsible for Christianity as it is—or rather, perhaps, as it was—is the same which in all ages has compelled men to follow ideals, even at the sacrifice of the near and dear ones at home."<sup>7</sup> Kafka's physician faces a dilemma that is immediately familiar to modern readers: Where is our primary duty? How can reason help us choose between following "ideals" and our responsibilities for "the dear ones at home"? Should the doctor choose professional duties or family responsibilities? The dilemma is set in intransigently absolute terms; the doctor must choose one or the other, there is no middle ground. His vocation alienates him from the possibility of intimacy with Rose. Thus, from the beginning, Kafka introduces one of the major themes of his art: life's choices are governed

by rules that are contradictory and impossible, yet one must still try to perform one's duty.

Kafka challenged both the Jewish and the Christian definitions of duty. He did not believe in promises of redemption or salvation, nor did he believe that duty is self-evident. "A Country Doctor" brackets duty as a problem—Kafka complicates the doctor's sense of duty in every imaginable way. What is the doctor's duty? Is it to answer a possible false alarm or is it to stay with Rose? Is staying with Rose a pleasure or a duty? The story provides no answer to these questions.

Duty requires competence, yet the doctor feels foolishly inept. His medical tools are useless; the patient is "past helping" (223). Moreover, the family's expectations exceed his competence: "I am no world reformer and so I let him lie" (222). Understanding physical illness requires competence and medical expertise. We know that Kafka had a low opinion of medical experts; he was plagued by symptoms that his doctors could not cure. He mockingly describes his sister's doctors: "Those revolting doctors! Businesslike, determined and so ignorant of healing that if this business-like determination were to leave them, they would stand at sick-beds like school-boys."<sup>8</sup> In "A Country Doctor," the narrative mocks the doctor, who is so incompetent that he cannot tell whether his patient is "quite sound" or so ill that he is "past helping."

Duty also requires self-control. The issue of control informs Kafka's recycling of the image of a rider on two horses, an image with an esteemed history that Kafka probably knew. In *Phaedrus* (a book that Kafka owned), Plato presents an allegory for his theory of the tripartite human soul.<sup>9</sup> He describes a charioteer with two horses, a white horse that symbolizes intellect and a dark horse that represents instinct. The rider symbolizes moral intelligence and is both rational and moral. Freud uses the same symbol for the self, or ego, to illustrate his model of the human psyche, although he assigns a more modest role to reason: "The ego . . . in its relation to the id is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse."<sup>10</sup> In Plato's model of mental health, the rider has moral agency; in Freud's model the driver retains control over instinct.

Kafka took this metaphor one step further: his rider-doctor cannot discipline either horse. Duty and desire have escaped his discipline and his control. Doctors have a special obligation to be disciplined in order to impart strength, courage, and hope to their patients. Yet how can the doctor impart strength, or courage, or hope if he lacks self-discipline? How can he perform his duty to heal if he cannot control himself and his desires?

Finally, duty requires a stable sense of identity. A doctor's identity presupposes objectivity and distance from his patients, but Kafka complicates and confuses our understanding of the doctor's identity on multiple levels. In the narrative the identities of patient and doctor merge. Is the doctor also a patient? Does the doctor share our confusion about who is the patient? Moreover, the role of the doctor also seems to be confused with the role of a priest: "That is what people are like in my district. Always expecting the impossible from the doctor. They have lost their ancient beliefs; the parson sits at home and unravels his vestments, one after another; but the doctor is supposed to be omnipotent with his merciful surgeon's hands" (224). Kafka further complicates an already complicated situation by adding the paradox that the physician and the villagers have discordant expectations. The frustrated physician wants only to practice his craft; the villagers want a savior or a priest. Nor is there a clear difference between a doctor's function to prescribe medicines and a priest's duty to administer blessings: "Will you save me," the patient asks, not "Will you heal me?" (224). The patient wants "the impossible"—not therapy, but grace; not a cure, but salvation.

"Cure" can be a religious as well as a medical category. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, faith can heal bodies as well as souls. Kafka's linkage between medicine and religion has an important literary antecedent: Nietzsche repeatedly compares priests to physicians in his study of the origins of morality, *On The Genealogy of Morals*: "But is he really a *physician*, this ascetic priest?—We have seen why it is hardly permissible to call him a physician, however much he enjoys feeling like a 'savior' and letting himself be revered as a 'savior.'"<sup>11</sup> For Nietzsche, the priest pretends to be a doctor. He "enjoys" being mistaken for a physician, perhaps in order to acquire the secular authority enjoyed by physicians. But while Kafka's physician has secular authority, he is neither respected nor revered. He fatalistically accepts being "misused" as a priest ("if they misuse me for sacred ends, I let that happen to me too" [224]). For Kafka, the priest's authority has become obsolete and the physician's authority is ineffectual.

Several scholars have argued that Kafka was influenced by Nietzsche's work. Patrick Bridgwater has thoroughly and systematically assessed the affinities between Nietzsche's philosophy and Kafka's fiction.<sup>12</sup> Bridgwater has found Nietzschean themes in Kafka's work from 1912 onward, especially in "In the Penal Colony," "A Country Doctor," and "The Hunger Artist." By 1916 Nietzsche's writings were well-known throughout Europe. In Germany, Nietzsche's books had

achieved canonical status. Kafka rarely mentions Nietzsche in his journals and letters, nevertheless, some facts suggest that Kafka was familiar with Nietzsche's work. Selma Robitschek recalls that at age seventeen Kafka wooed her by reading passages from Nietzsche to her. He reportedly bought a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1904 for his personal library. He met his lifelong friend Max Brod at Brod's lecture on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in 1902. Kafka's letters and diaries do not refer to Nietzsche explicitly, but many of his stories and parables suggest references to Nietzsche. For example, Kafka writes, "The true way leads along a tight-rope, which is not stretched aloft but just above the ground. It seems designed more to trip one than to be walked along."<sup>13</sup> This aphorism can be read with Nietzsche's prologue to *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss."<sup>14</sup> Kafka has emptied Nietzsche's metaphor of its optimistic content and substituted an ironic and more modest view of the limits of our potential for spiritual growth.

Malcolm Pasley, in his brilliant exegesis of "In the Penal Colony," states, "It seems certain that [On] *The Genealogy of Morals* influenced Kafka's story."<sup>15</sup> I believe that *On the Genealogy of Morals* is a key text for understanding "A Country Doctor." In this essay on moral philosophy, Nietzsche uses elaborate symbols and metaphors of disease, death, and renewal to illustrate the pernicious psychological consequences of religious belief. Nietzsche's text supplies a storehouse of images that Kafka uses and often parodies. For example, Nietzsche describes the physician-priest who brings "spiritual sickness" rather than health or salvation and the symbolic patient ("Man . . . he is the sick animal") who is made sicker, but not morally better, by culture (i.e., religion) (121). Nietzsche describes surrealistic worms ("the worms of vengefulness and rancor swarm" [122]) that are symbols of self-pity and envy, emotions that Nietzsche considers essential to Christianity. Nietzsche refers to the "man of the future" (96), "emancipated" man (59) as a "full-toned bell" (125). This "bell" signals an era of "great health," (96) unlike Kafka's "night-bell" that rings false alarms and catastrophe. Finally, Nietzsche writes of the "air of the sick-room," "the worst kind of air" (121), which he contrasts with the pure air of "winter journeys" (96). Nietzsche uses these metaphors to illustrate his argument that religion is an illness. As a psychologist, Nietzsche thought the cure for this "illness" lay in understanding why we accept concepts like guilt and duty.

Nietzsche challenged the religious justification of duty as a moral obligation. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he proposes that the concept

of duty originated in our primordial cultural past and was devoid of any moral justification. He argues that duty is by nature, that is, originally, coercive. Duty simply means submission to someone else's rules, someone powerful enough to enforce obedience through punishment. Nietzsche links the genealogy of "duty" to "guilt." Those who were compelled to obey transformed their suffering by internalizing it and renaming it "guilt"—"I must obey" became "I *should* obey." Religion intensifies guilt by teaching that guilt is the psychological consequence of sin. "Duty," "guilt," and "sin" are all closely linked in Nietzsche's text. Thus "sin" is the origin of a sense of guilt, and guilt is transformed into a sense of duty. Religion teaches that it is our sacred duty to obey divine commands, therefore submission to religious authority acquires a sacred (i.e., moral) justification. Nietzsche argues that the religious submissive posture is transformed by Christian morality into a sign of moral superiority. Religion compels submissive obedience, thus Nietzsche calls duty a form of "self-destruction" (121). It would follow that, without faith, that is, submission to God, there would be no guilt and no duty.

When Nietzsche "announced" the death of God in 1882, he believed that the larger culture had not yet fully absorbed the significance of this news. He spent the next ten years attempting to smash the values of Judeo-Christian morality into "broken old tablets."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he anticipated the decline of faith as the beginning of a spiritual rebirth for mankind: "[W]ith the irresistible decline of faith in the Christian God there is now also a considerable decline in mankind's feeling of guilt; . . . the complete and definitive victory of atheism might free mankind of this whole feeling of guilty indebtedness. . . . Atheism and a kind of *second innocence* belong together" (90–1, Nietzsche's italics).

Nietzsche was an atheist. He welcomed the decline of religious faith and sought to subvert the religious justification of duty. This stance is central to the theme of "A Country Doctor." Kafka agrees with Nietzsche that faith is declining: the doctor is not an atheist, but he lacks faith in a deity. He observes ironically that the "gods," if they do exist, are neither benevolent nor providential: "'Yes,' I thought blasphemously, 'in cases like this the gods are helpful'" (222). Similarly, the patient lacks faith in the doctor: "I have very little confidence in you. Why, you were only blown in here, you didn't come on your own feet" (224). Even the villagers lack faith: "This is what people are like in my district. . . . They have lost their ancient beliefs; the parson sits at home and unravels his vestments, one after another" (224). However, although the villagers have lost their faith, they still want



salvation. “[W]hat do people expect?” the doctor asks (223). “[I]f they misuse me for sacred ends, I let that happen to me too. . . . Believe me, it is not too easy for me either” (224).

Although he was not an atheist, Kafka was a religious skeptic. He absorbed Nietzsche’s skepticism but stopped short of Nietzsche’s atheism. Kafka’s doubts, and his desire for faith, led him to a unique theological understanding of illness.

### A Theology of Illness

The notion that illness is a metaphor for spiritual and moral decadence was an important theme in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature (for example in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*). In this context, Kafka’s “wound” has multiple allusive meanings. In the story, the speaker (doctor and patient, we can no longer distinguish between the two), complains, “A fine wound is all I brought into the world; that was my sole endowment” (225). The wound in the side suggests Adam’s wound, which facilitated the birth of Eve: “And God took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh under it . . . and from the rib He made a woman” (Gen. 2:21–4). Kafka expands the image of the wound with blatantly erotic language that compares it to a vagina: “Rose-red, in many variations of shade, dark in the hollows, lighter at the edges, softly granulated, with irregular clots of blood, open as a surface mine to the daylight. That was how it looked from a distance” (223).

Thus the “rose-red” wound is erotically linked to Rose, the “pretty” servant girl. However, this image of the wound/vagina evokes disgust rather than desire: “But on a closer inspection there was another complication. I could not help a low whistle of surprise. Worms, as thick and as long as my little finger, themselves rose-red and blood-spotted as well, were wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the wound toward the light, with small white heads and many little legs. Poor boy, you were past helping” (223). Kafka’s description of the repulsive infestation of the wound/vagina suggests an aversion to physical intimacy; it also suggests that sex is another responsibility the doctor cannot perform, just as he is unable to perform his professional duty. The biographer Ernest Pawel has noted that Kafka had a “morbid aversion to sex.”<sup>17</sup> In many of his other stories, Kafka’s marginal heroes rarely have intimate relations; when they do, they are seldom consummated and never sustained. Kafka’s anxiety about sex

had no Jewish source; the same passage that describes Adam's wound also blesses the sexual union of man and woman: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and shall join his wife as one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Furthermore, the biblical wound is generative: it produces Eve, who in turn creates the human race. However, Kafka's physician-patient's wound is barren and brings nothing into the world except worms. Thus Kafka fuses his anxieties about sex and marriage, his struggle against Judaism, and his guilt about his inability to establish a "normal" middle-class Jewish life.

The spiritual symbolism of the wound can be better understood by returning to *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche writes of the "wound" caused by physician-priests: "The No he says to life brings to light, as if by magic, an abundance of tender Yeses; even when he wounds himself, this master of destruction, of self-destruction—the very wound itself afterward compels him to *live*" (121, Nietzsche's italics).

Nietzsche uses a wound as a metaphor for "ascetic ideals" (160). "Ascetic ideals" are moral demands we make upon ourselves. These self-imposed demands require self-control and self-criticism; they compel us to evaluate ourselves honestly and painfully. Nietzsche believed that honesty may be brutal and cruel at times, but he thought that painful self-evaluation is a necessary stage in the development of the human spirit. Nietzsche frequently uses illness as a metaphor for the ascetic self-discipline that is a spiritual propaedeutic for achieving self-awareness and, ultimately, self-perfection: "The bad conscience is an illness, there is no doubt about that, but an illness as pregnancy is an illness" (88). And again: "[S]ickness is instructive, we have no doubt of that, even more instructive than health—*those who make sick* seem even more necessary to us today than any medicine men or 'saviors'" (113, Nietzsche's italics). For Nietzsche, the illness of "bad conscience" (i.e., guilt) is a necessary stage in one's duty to perfect oneself. Most importantly, he believes that this "illness" teaches us that our duty is only to ourselves, not to a deity.

Kafka adopted Nietzsche's metaphors but used them for opposite purposes. He disputes the "instructive" value of illness and uses the metaphor of a wound to illustrate the doctor's impotence and incompetence. He also recycles Nietzsche's metaphor with macabre humor: when the physician looks deeper into the wound, he does not find "an abundance of tender Yeses"; he finds worms!

Kafka's surreal "worms" may echo another theme from Nietzsche. It has been suggested that Nietzsche and Kafka shared a fantasy of "literary paternity."<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche claimed that artistic achievement is

superior to real paternity as a form of self-reproduction and self-perfection. Stanley Corngold has proposed that Kafka, tormented by his emotional inability to marry and have children, viewed his stories as "miserable substitutes" for real children.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the little "worms," like his stories, are "miserable" proxies for real progeny.

There is unmistakable irony in Kafka's use of Nietzsche's images. In Kafka's reinterpretation of Nietzsche's metaphors, "illness" does not generate a potent affirmation of life; rather it exposes deeper decay. Unlike Adam's wound that created life, or Nietzsche's wound that led to self-perfection, Kafka's wound pessimistically negates faith in self-renewal or self-perfection.

Kafka's theology of illness negates faith in another respect. While critics have rightly noted that Kafka used illness as a metaphor for guilt, some scholars have suggested that Kafka viewed his own "Jewishness" as a form of illness. Sander Gilman has shown that many of Kafka's images are a conflation of racial and sexual ideas about illness with anti-Semitic myths about Jews and disease.<sup>20</sup> "A Country Doctor" demonstrates a chain of associations linking doctor-as-patient, doctor-as-Jew, and doctor/patient-as-Jew/victim. For example, the boy's wound, a wound that is sometimes voluntarily inflicted ("Many a one proffers his side" [225]), suggests the wound of circumcision. In his diary, Kafka describes his nephew's circumcision in grim detail.<sup>21</sup> He considered circumcision an obsolete custom and he observes sardonically that brandy was often served at these occasions (similar to the "glass of rum" in "A Country Doctor" [222]), perhaps to fortify the onlookers as well as to steady the circumciser's hand. Not surprisingly, Kafka's sympathies were with the victim.

Kafka's diary also describes the circumciser's unhygienic practice of staunching the bleeding wound with his mouth. Gilman notes that, in the late nineteenth century, the Mohel was suspected of transmitting syphilis during circumcision by staunching the bleeding wound with saliva from his tongue. Thus, Jewish ritual was linked to the transmission of disease.

Kafka also links the wound to the Jewish tradition of ritual slaughter (the wound is "[d]one in a tight corner with two strokes of the ax" [225]). Certain details in "A Country Doctor" suggest that Kafka, the grandson of a kosher butcher, was familiar with the details of kosher animal slaughter. The physician inspects the boy's wound, an examination that is "ordained by heaven" (223). Gilman suggests that this possibly refers to the ritual of *Bedikah*, a procedure described in the Talmud that requires medical inspection of a ritually slaughtered

carcass for signs of disease before it can be declared kosher and ritually clean.<sup>22</sup>

Nineteenth-century anti-Semitic myths about ritual slaughter provided justifications for accusations of ritual murder. In *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann provides a vivid illustration of these myths in his description of Leo Naphta's father, a kosher butcher whose "blood-boltered calling" plays a part in his murder by crucifixion.<sup>23</sup> Blood libel refers to the accusation that Jewish ritual requires murdering Christians and using their blood for ritual celebrations. There were many cases of blood libel during Kafka's lifetime. Gilman notes that at least fifteen cases occurred between 1881 and 1900; Kafka knew about them and commented on them to friends.<sup>24</sup> Gilman argues that Christian-European culture viewed Jewish rituals, especially circumcision and ritual slaughter, as immoral acts and/or vehicles of contagion, and many Europeans, including Jews, viewed "Jewishness" as a disease. In addition, Gilman posits that Kafka believed that he inherited a specifically Jewish form of "impaired masculinity" (206) from his father and a genetic predisposition to tuberculosis from his mother (165, 180). Gilman maintains that Kafka's own chronic ill health, anxiety about masculinity, and neurotic sexual life were reinforced by these cultural "discourses" and sexual anxieties. He suggests that Kafka's fiction conflates anti-Semitic myths about ritual slaughter with "his illness," "his impaired masculinity," and "his Jewishness" (206). According to Gilman, Kafka "internalized the understanding of the Jew's body that dominated his age" (241).

There is ample textual and biographical evidence to support many of Gilman's interpretations. For example, his interpretation of the doctor's house call as a nightmarish circumcision ceremony has merit, especially when we recognize that Kafka believed that this ceremony had lost its spiritual significance ("in the narrow confines of the old man's thoughts I felt ill" [222]). However, in his hunt for Kafka's "real" (i.e., psychological) meaning, Gilman has chased Kafka into a psychosexual corner. I believe it is a serious misprision of Kafka's art to reduce his concept of illness to a fusion of Jewish self-hatred and hysteria about his sexuality. For Kafka, the cultural meaning of illness is its originally religious meaning. Gilman's insights into Kafka's art may have merit, but Kafka's own understanding of his illness was theological. Kafka did not believe that the causes of his illness were psychological. Unlike Nietzsche, whose concept of illness was primarily psychological and antireligious, Kafka's concept was ineluctably theological.

### Matters of Faith

Kafka left explicit evidence that refutes attempts to reduce his work to psychoanalytic categories. "Never again psychology!" Kafka writes in his collection of aphorisms of 1917–18.<sup>25</sup> He elaborates his opposition to psychoanalytic reductionism in a letter to Milena Jesenka in 1920:

I consider the therapeutic part of psychoanalysis to be a hopeless error. All these so-called illnesses, sad as they may appear, are matters of faith, efforts of souls in distress to find moorings in some maternal soil; thus psychoanalysis also considers the origin of religions to be nothing but what (in its opinion) causes the "illness" of the individual. . . .

Such moorings, however, which really take hold of solid ground, are after all not an isolated, interchangeable property of man, rather they are pre-existing in his nature and continue to form his nature (as well as his body) in this direction.<sup>26</sup>

Thus illness is fundamentally spiritual in origin and cannot be explained in terms of psychological mechanisms any more than religion can be described as a form of neurosis. Moreover, the sources of illness, like "matters of faith," are suprapersonal, not "isolated" in individual selves.

When Kafka was stricken with symptoms of TB, his illness only confirmed his metaphysical concept of disease. In a letter written in 1920, three years after his first episode of coughing blood, he writes, "Would you care for a lay diagnosis? The physical illness is only an overflow of the spiritual illness."<sup>27</sup> Even when he was "ill in bed with a high fever," and his own physicians had diagnosed tuberculous consolidation of the left lung, Kafka wrote in 1921: "I am willing to believe that tuberculosis will be controlled; every disease will ultimately be controlled. . . . Tuberculosis no more has its origin in the lungs than, for example, the World War had its cause in the ultimatum. There is only a single disease, no more, and medicine blindly chases down this one disease as though hunting a beast in endless forests."<sup>28</sup> Kafka believed that the diseases physicians treat are epiphenomena of the real illness, which is not physical but spiritual.

If illness is fundamentally spiritual, then a physician needs moral knowledge to truly heal. In a miraculously condensed yet extraordinarily rich passage, Kafka states, "To write prescriptions is easy, but to come

to an understanding with people is hard" (223). This remarkable statement is at the center of "A Country Doctor." What does Kafka mean by "understanding"? He uses the word *verständigen*, which not only means "understanding" but also implies reaching a consensual agreement. In this sense, the doctor and the villagers do not "understand" each other. Their lack of understanding exists because they have discordant definitions of a doctor's duty. The villagers need a moral healer, not a physical one. Their suffering is spiritual, not sensual.

Understanding physical illness requires medical expertise; understanding suffering requires moral knowledge. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, moral knowledge is not learned from empirical investigation of the external world or by Socratic self-examination and reasoning. Knowledge of right and wrong is revealed, first to Adam and Eve in Paradise when they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and then to future generations, through a chain of divinely appointed messengers. In Kafka's interpretation of the Fall, moral knowledge is a given: "To perform the negative is what is still required of us, the positive is already ours."<sup>29</sup> The "positive," that is, knowledge of right conduct, was given in Paradise. In these traditions, moral knowledge requires faith. But faith means more than knowing what is right; it also means doing it. Kafka states our moral duty succinctly: "No one can be content with knowledge alone, but must strive to act in accordance with it."<sup>30</sup> Duty means knowing what is right and doing it. In this way, duty presupposes faith. Kafka believed that, without the knowledge that comes from faith, humans are prone to error and failure. Without faith, a physician cannot truly heal. For Kafka, what really cures is performing one's vocation in a community conditioned by faith.

In an era without faith, the moral knowledge that makes duty meaningful is elusive. The carnage of World War I convinced many European intellectuals that civilization was nearing an end and many of Kafka's contemporaries felt that Europe had plunged into an abyss of nihilistic violence. Kafka believed that the world he inhabited was devoid of spiritual meaning: "We no longer recognize the metaphysical order of things. In spite of all the noise, everyone is dumb and isolated within himself. The interrelation of objective and personal values doesn't function any more. We live not in a ruined but a bewildered world."<sup>31</sup>

Kafka suggests that it has become impossible to perform one's duty in a "bewildered world." There is a sense of personal inadequacy and self-doubt expressed in the doctor's narrative—"I am no world

reformer" (222), he apologizes, and again, "[I]t is not too easy for me either" (224). Pasley notes that most of Kafka's work during this period "linked themes of inadequacy and high calling."<sup>32</sup> In "A Country Doctor," the doctor refuses the role of savior or Messiah ("I am no world reformer"). In the eyes of the villagers, the doctor is pathetic and weak. Contrasted against a Nietzschean "overman" who will be the "new man of the future" (96), Kafka's physician is overpowered by a mob of schoolchildren who sing, "Only a doctor, only a doctor" (224). The doctor is truly "abandoned in a dreadful void."<sup>33</sup> By the end of the story, Rose has been violated, the patient has been abandoned, and the doctor's "flourishing practice is done for" (225).

It has been said of Kafka that he balanced on a thin line between religion and nihilism. Kafka's physician, like many of his marginal heroes, is alienated from figures of moral authority. His art offers a modernist theory of alienation. Like other versions of this theory, whether religious, Marxist, or Freudian, this doctrine presupposes an era when internal character and external social order were reconciled. Kafka's despair was that he yearned for a culture that he believed was irrevocably lost. It is in this sense that Robert Alter is correct, I believe, when he says that Kafka's thinking expresses a "tough-minded nostalgia for tradition."<sup>34</sup>

While "A Country Doctor" may be, in part, an elegy to a dying culture, Kafka was not willing to substitute temporal authorities for spiritual ones. His debunking of physicians' spiritual pretensions and their claims to ultimate authority were presciently in advance of his contemporaries. His skepticism of the authority of science is one of the great pedagogic lessons of this story for doctors-in-training. The language of medicine, like science in general, is morally neutral. It teaches no doctrine of salvation.

### Kafka's Religious Humanism

Critics have read opposing messages into Kafka's thick texts. Gershom Scholem considered him a Jewish mystic; Walter Benjamin claimed him as a fellow modernist who chronicled the "sickness of (religious) tradition"; John Updike called him "the last holy writer."<sup>35</sup> Kafka's densely ambiguous and often paradoxical stories certainly seem to suggest that it is impossible to live a meaningful life in a culture of unbelief. However, he refused the role of saint or prophet: "Now you would like to have some advice from me. But I am not a good adviser. All advice seems to me to be at bottom a betrayal."<sup>36</sup>

Kafka's language of despair seems to offer little room for hope. If it is true that the real origin of illness is spiritual, what can a doctor do? Yet Kafka did not eliminate all hope. Once, in a private moment with Gustav Janouch, a favorite pupil, Kafka allowed himself a moment of optimism. Janouch reports that Kafka gave him a copy of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. Kafka claimed that he did not know Whitman's poetry and essays well (perhaps a disingenuous claim, *Leaves of Grass* was controversial even in 1921) and that while he respected Whitman's talent, he considered Whitman's true genius to be in his exemplary life, his "real masterpiece" (168): "Walt Whitman became a medical orderly. He did then what all of us ought to do, particularly today. He helped the weak, the sick and the defeated. He was really a Christian and—with a close affinity especially to us Jews—he was therefore an important measure of the status and worth of humanity" (167–8).

During the Civil War, Whitman visited wounded soldiers at New York Hospital and became a volunteer nurse in a military hospital. It was not Whitman's art that attracted Kafka's interest; Kafka considered Whitman's art mere "embers" of his true "fire": "What he wrote, his poems and essays, are only the flickering embers of the fire of a faith consistently and actively lived" (168). Nor was it Whitman's celebration of an expansive self that Kafka admired—it was his spiritual connection to humanity. For Kafka, Whitman's legacy was a form of religious humanism.

Whitman's life, and to some extent Kafka's life, exemplify what Kafka meant by "duty." Whitman volunteered to work as a medical orderly; Kafka helped provide medical assistance to thousands of disabled veterans of World War I. Kafka is credited with helping to establish Czechoslovakia's first hospital for psychiatrically disabled veterans who suffered from "traumatic neuroses" (what we now would call post-traumatic stress disorder).<sup>37</sup>

Although neither Kafka nor Whitman was a physician, both performed medical duties helping "the weak, the sick and the defeated." They were both humanists, one an assimilated Jew, the other a secular Quaker, who tried to live decent lives without formal religion. Kafka's art suggests that skepticism and doubt do not cancel our moral obligations, even in the absence of religion. Faith means commitment to a higher communal purpose even in the face of doubt. Kafka and Whitman both found significance and meaning in acts of healing without the felt presence of a personal deity. In this sense, the practice of medicine can be considered an act of faith.



“A Country Doctor” is a story about a medical failure. Kafka’s own doctors failed to cure his illness, and he died of complications of TB in 1924. Modern-day physicians can successfully treat TB, as well as many other diseases that Kafka never knew. However, optimism about technical progress, while comforting and reassuring, misses Kafka’s essential point about what really heals. He believed that to know one’s duty, and to do it, requires faith. Kafka’s darkly humorous vision is paradoxically illuminating, and not only for doctors-in-training. He reminds us that the ancient wisdom of the Bible remains true. The Fall from innocence to moral knowledge revealed our spiritual duty. Ever more modern techniques of knowing cannot erase this duty. Without faith, “It cannot be made good, not ever” (225).

## NOTES

1. Kafka, “A Country Doctor,” 220. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
2. See Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason*, 326.
3. Kafka to Max Brod, June 1921, in Heller, *The Basic Kafka*, 291–2.
4. Deut. 6:5, in Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 769–71.
5. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 770.
6. See Deut. 30:11–19.
7. Osler, “An Alabama Student,” 1.
8. Kafka, *The Diaries*, 191.
9. See Bridgwater, *Kafka and Nietzsche*, 157.
10. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 19.
11. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 129–30 (Nietzsche’s italics). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
12. See Bridgwater, 157.
13. Kafka, “The Collected Aphorisms,” 79. These aphorisms have also been published under the title “Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way.”
14. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 126.
15. Pasley, “In the Penal Colony,” 300.
16. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 308.
17. Pawel, 287.
18. See Corngold, “Nietzsche, Kafka and Literary Paternity.”
19. *Ibid.*, 150.
20. See Gilman, *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient*.
21. See Kafka, *The Diaries*, 147–8, 151–2.
22. See Gilman, 143.
23. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 441.
24. See Gilman, 114. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
25. Kafka, “The Collected Aphorisms,” 95.
26. Kafka to Milena Jesenka, 1920, in Heller, 272–3.
27. Kafka to Oskar Baum, June 1920, in Gilman, 192.
28. Kafka to Max Brod, April 1921, in Gilman, 105.
29. Kafka, “The Collected Aphorisms,” 83.
30. *Ibid.*, 93.

31. Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, 103.
32. Pasley, "Semi-Private Games," 198.
33. Kafka to Felice Bauer, November 1912, in Heller, 276.
34. Alter, "Kafka as Kabbalist," 94.
35. Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," 143; John Updike, foreword to Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, xxi.
36. Janouch, 83. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
37. Pawel, 333.

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