

Kafka and Jünger: Symbols and Inter-textual Connection

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I: Introduction

The fundamental question that motivates the following essay is a simple one, though demanding in its scope: does any piece of literature, in which I include myths, legends, and diary entries ... ect., exist in a vacuum? Put another way, should a piece of literature be viewed as a self-contained universe, mostly unaffected by its physical or metaphysical surroundings?

Our first impulse, no doubt, is to answer in the negative, for, intuitively, it seems clear to any student of the field that literature, like any of the arts, has a direct connection to the outer world. After all, many historians, sociologists, and psychologists, just to name a few, have, to some extent, delved into literature to extract and establish exactly such a connection. Further, students of literature have used painstaking methodology to show the connection between an author, the life he lived, and his work.

Thus, there is a strong precedent for the claim that external factors play a role in the creation of any literary work. If the above question is to be an aid to furthering our understanding of literature, then, our reading of 'physical and metaphysical surroundings' must be taken more narrowly: the interpretation I shall take up here is one in which 'surroundings' refers to other literary works. This reading is justified by the following consideration: given that works are linked in one way or another to the external world, can we not assume, that works of literature must therefore be connected to one other? That is, if we use the (cliché) phrase of a piece of work serving as a 'mirror of society', it seems, at the very least, plausible to suppose that certain elements of society might be reflected in more than one mirror.

Once again, the answer to this question appears to be straight forward, for terms such as 'Zeitgeist', fields of study i.e. most notably that of comparative literature, as well as a great amount of literary research, all indicate that works of literature are often connected in one way or another. Nevertheless, the degree of connection seems to vary inversely in proportion to two factors: time and distance. Thus, literary scholars have little difficulty in finding plausible links between works of authors occupying the same geographical area at roughly the same period of time. One only has to look at the classification that any given piece of literature undergoes to confirm this point. When the interval at which two or more literary pieces were conceived

changes significantly, however, the connection becomes more tenuous, even when the geographical reference point remains the same. Thus, attempts to draw comparisons between the work of Gryphius and that of Lessing, for example, are somewhat more speculative and open to debate than are comparisons made between works originating at roughly the same time. Still, that comparisons of this nature have been made, and that in today's intellectual climate they are not cause for major controversy, shows that a time differential between works does not in itself rule out the plausibility of comparisons. It is only when we take this practice a step further and separate the texts to be compared by geography and time that controversy arises; for once the continuation of thought development has been broken, that is when diffusion, in the anthropological sense¹, cannot account for any resemblance/connection found, then it seems as though we have reached a point where no possible justification for connection can be given. The suggestion I make in this and subsequent papers is that this seeming lack of justification may be illusory; that is, there may be elements in literary works that transgress geographical and chronological divides. If so, we ought to investigate what these elements could be, and what significance they have for the field of literature.

To be certain, this is not the first time that questions of this sort arise; in his paper "Science of Literature" Barthes argues the following:

It is not the images, the ideas or the verses that the mythological voice of the Muse whispers to the writer; it is rather the great logic of symbols and the great empty forms which help him speak and operate (14)

Without entering into a detailed discussion about the merits of the structuralist movement, I will nevertheless address the issue briefly in order to position my enterprise within the context of discussions of this sort. Although the fundamental arguments that structuralists make seem sound, their execution, for the purpose at hand, is too

¹ For a precise definition of this term turn to Marvin Harris, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), pp 11-14.

abstract: the binary matrix so preferred by the majority of its adherents is of limited use when trying to establish a coherent theory of universal elements in literature. Although juxtapositions such as forest/village, land/sky, etc. do exist, they are too general (i.e. too commonplace) to support the claim that such elements exist universally. What is needed instead is an element within any given piece of literature under examination that, in itself -- without the need for 'another' -- shows that it fulfills a similar function within the respective texts. Thus if, for example, it could be shown that 'snake' has a similar function in text A and text B, and that these two texts are separated by time and geography as stipulated above, then we could start arguing for a more anthropological view of literature; namely that, as the literary comparisons suggest, humanity is linked in its understanding by a certain set of universals..

Considering the complexity and scope of such an exercise, it is important to tackle it in a systematic incremental way. What follows, then, is what I consider to be the first step toward the greater line of inquiry: using works by Kafka and Jünger, I will show that evidence exists to allow us to conclude that on a fundamental level, there is a connection between the works of the two authors. Not only will this serve as a foundation for the greater enterprise but, further, it will be a test case for the methodology that I intend to use in the course of this investigation.

II: Text Analysis

What follows is a straightforward examination of the meaning of colour in Kafka's "Der Brudermord" in light of Jünger's "Die blaue Farbe". Although their genesis is separated by roughly a decade, Jünger's analysis can, as will be shown, be applied to Kafka's work. The decision to base this comparison on the concept of colour, rather than on a more conceptually demanding topic, becomes clear when considered in light of the more comprehensive thesis,

for colours not only have a long history of possessing symbolic qualities but, further, they are one of the elements readily found in the breadth of the world's literature, myth, and legend, making them an ideal subject for comparison. We will progress, then, by first summarizing Jünger's musings on the meanings of colours such as 'blue' and 'red', followed by an examination of these views in light of Kafka's short story.

"Die blaue Farbe"

In this short passage from the *Capriccios* selection, Jünger makes some rather astute observations about the role that colours, in this case 'blue' and 'red', play in our experience of reality. Interestingly, he refrains from a strict juxtaposition, preferring, as will be shown, to view colours in an hierarchical, perhaps even in a slightly symbiotic manner.

Jünger starts by establishing a link between the colour red and the realm of the earth. He states that red " ist ihr [Mutter Erde] innerer Stoff, den sie unter ihrem grünen Rücken verbirgt..." (22). By connecting humanity to the earthly realm he creates a bridge between 'red' and human existence: 'red', therefore, is not only the earth's "innere Stoff" but, perhaps more importantly, it is also the substance out of which we are molded, for it is our "irdischer Lebensstoff; wir sind ganz und gar ausgekleidet von ihm" (22). 'Red', then, evolves into the colour of the here-and-now, " die Farbe der Gegenwart" (22).

Yet, there is a fundamental dualism that Jünger observes; on the one hand, 'red' is indeed the colour associated with life and sexuality ("die vollen Lippen die halb geöffnet sich uns zuwenden" 22); on the other hand, it cannot be separated from the aspects of death, war, and destruction, or, as Jünger metaphorically states, the "Anblick... Blaubarts Kammer" (23). To combat the second, more ominous of these qualities, two mechanisms -- one natural, one man-made -- exist. First is the fear of 'red' itself: "wir schrecken ebenso heftig vor ihr zurück"(22). Humanity's inborn fear of death and decay is described here and serves as the first mechanism. Also controlling this "Hobbesian" quality of 'red' are the social structures that have emerged (23): these serve as the second mechanism. In what appears to be an almost paradoxical piece of irony, the colour red is used by the hierarchy of this social structure, the "priestliche und

königliche Macht" (25). 'Red', according to Jünger, is thus imbued with a range of symbolic qualities: the human life cycle for one and the artificial structures that guide it for another. The common denominator found is that 'red' is associated with man and earth, in short, with the physical realm.

The relationship of 'red' to 'blue' appears, at first glance, to be of a sharply divided, contrastive nature. After all, Jünger's concluding sentence states unequivocally that 'blue' belongs to the realm of the metaphysical while 'red', as shown above, is grounded in the physical domain:

Das Verhältnis von Blau und Rot bietet Stoff zur hohen Meditation:
Im Kosmischen über Himmel und Erde, im Menschlichen über
priestliche und königliche Macht (25).

Yet, if we look at the passage in which Jünger switches his discourse from the 'red' to the 'blue', the dependence of the earthly realm on that of the 'blue' indicates not so much a bipolar relationship, but rather an hierarchical one between the two spheres. As Jünger describes it, referring to the earthly hierarchical structure which saves humanity from itself:

Diese Sparsamkeit, die uns zum Ruhm gereicht, setzt indessen das Prinzip des hohen, gesetzgebenden Geistes voraus, dem die blaue Farbe zugeordnet ist (23).

'Blue', then, is clearly placed in the realm of the metaphysical ('Geist'); however, the matter is somewhat more complex, for although Jünger firmly plants 'blue' in the realm of the 'Geist', he proceeds to subdivide it into two basic categories which can be roughly translated into 'the mysterious' and 'the void':

In dieser Farbe deuten sich die beiden Flügel des Geistes an: das Wunderbare und das Nichts. Sie ist der Spiegel der geheimnisvollen Tiefen und der unendlichen Entfernung (23).

The symbolic power of 'blue' has two functions. Using the

metaphor of the ocean, Jünger assigns it qualities such as having depth, magic, and distance. Though 'godly', these aspects of 'blue' can be perceived by mankind for they (much like the ancient gods) are intertwined with the physical realm. Still, their exact nature can never be grasped in any real sense. The second function of 'blue' is to be found on a different plane of existence; merging with the black of the universal void it points towards a sphere bereft of human insight:

Jenseits des irdischen Dunstes aber leuchtet das Gewölbe in seinem tiefsten, sich dem Schwarz nähernden Glanz, und es ist wohl möglich, daß die gewaltige Macht des Nichts, sich dort dem Auge sich offenbart (23).

The theological ramifications are not quite clear here, though, by attributing to 'blue' the "Macht des Nichts" Jünger seems to be pointing towards a domain in which neither gods nor humans belong.

What emerges, then, is a dichotomized metaphysical realm stripped of any significant traditional religious attributes on the one hand (the dark 'blue'), yet nevertheless entwined with the ephereal side of earthly existence. Speculation is possible, then, over the degree to which at least a part of the realm of the 'blue' is dependent upon the very existence of the realm of the 'red'; speculations which Jünger indicates are very much warranted, as witnessed by his call for meditation on the subject (25). It now remains to be shown whether any aspects of Jünger's musings can be applied to Kafka's work.

The 'Blue' in Kafka's "Der Brudermord"

The danger that emerges when embarking on an exercise of this nature is all too insidious, for the temptation to 'stretch' a text in order to prove one's point is rather great. With this in mind, the following analysis will include only those passages within Kafka's text which

uncontroversially lend credence to a plausible comparison with Jünger's text. What will be left out are a number of references to colour found in Kafka's work; most notably the references to the 'blue' garment that Schmar is wearing, and the foxfur that adorns Frau Wese's nightshirt. In both cases, connections to the Jünger text can be drawn, however, the extent of speculation involved would weaken the general conclusion towards which this paper is contributing.

The reference to colour that most directly relates to Jünger's observations is to be found in Kafka's description of the sky. As Wese reaches the crossroads on his way home from work he stops. Kafka continues with this short sentence: "Der Nachthimmel hat ihn angelockt, das Dunkelblaue und das Goldene" (145). This passage is virtually mirrored in Jünger's text, for he states that in the vault of the heavens "schweben die Sterne, wie Kristall in der Mutterlauge schwebt"(23). No doubt, the evidence is rather banal, considering that all we possess at this point are two descriptions of the night sky. It is only when we examine the respective contexts in more detail that the connection emerges.

As shown previously, one aspect of Jünger's view of the symbolic power of 'blue' is that when it merges with 'the black' it points to what he labels as 'the power of the void' ("die Macht des Nichts") -- that aspect of the cosmos in which meaning, as we know it, does not exist. In Kafka's text, the passage just cited continues in the following manner:

Unwissend blickt er [Wese] es [das Gewölbe] an, unwissend streicht er das Haar unter dem gelüpften Hut; nichts rückt dort oben Zusammen, um ihm seine Zukunft anzuzeigen; alles bleibt an seinem unsinnigen, unerforschlichen Platz (145).

Clearly, then, Kafka creates a link between the dark 'blue' of the night sky with the notion of a metaphysical void. That the godly element is not to be found here, thereby minimizing any form of redemption, gets reinforced by the character of Pallas who impotently watches the goings on from his second story apartment.

By now a connection between Kafka's and Jünger's text has been established. Based on what at first appears to be a minutia, the appearance of the colour 'blue', a point of contact has been

made. Further examination of the symbolic role that this colour plays within the corresponding texts reveals that, in both cases, indications are that they point toward a common sphere. For the sake of the larger argument, the nature of this sphere is of lesser importance than the fact that it serves as an indicator of the type of link that we are trying to establish.

III: Conclusion

At this stage, it has become clear that when theory meets an attempt at its application within the confines of a short essay, exactitude has to suffer. I readily acknowledge that the theoretical aspect described in the first part of this paper is still in its developmental stage.

Further, the analysis that made up the second part far from exhausted the topic at hand; the intricacies of both Jünger's philosophical musings and Kafka's stories warrant a much more in-depth investigation, including a more detailed look at the role that colours play in the authors' respective works. Nevertheless, this essay should be viewed as a start in the direction of a more universal view of literature. Hence, the Kafka/Jünger comparison illustrates the ease with which works which are not greatly separated by time or space can be examined for commonalties. What has also emerged is a sense that analyses of texts can proceed using isolated symbolic elements without sacrificing the attempt at understanding the more elusive meaning behind these signs. It remains to be seen whether or not such an exercise will survive if geography as well as time form a greater barrier than the one we have encountered here.

IV. Bibliography

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