

Franz Kafka

- individuals in the grip of incomprehensible bureaucracy
- literal political meaning or metaphor for the human condition?
- I suggest: *both*; I acknowledge second level but focus here on first

KAFKA: “[The anarchists] all sought thanklessly to realize human happiness. I understood them. But ... I was unable to continue marching alongside them for long.”





The doorkeeper has to bend low to hear, for the difference in size between them has increased very much to the man's disadvantage.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW NOW?
YOU ARE INSATIABLE!

EVERYONE STRIVES TO REACH THE **LAW**.
HOW DOES IT HAPPEN, THEN, THAT IN ALL
THESE YEARS, NO ONE BUT ME HAS
EVER BEGGED FOR ADMITTANCE?

The doorkeeper realizes that the man has reached his end, and so, to allow his failing senses to catch the answer, roars in his ear.

NO ONE ELSE COULD EVER BE ADMITTED HERE. THIS GATE WAS INTENDED SOLELY FOR YOU! AND NOW...

...I AM GOING TO SHUT IT!



Franz Kafka

Problem of information flow in bureaucratic hierarchies:

“Their remoteness kept the officials from being in touch with contemporary life; for the average case they were excellently equipped, such a case proceeded almost mechanically ... yet confronted with quite simple cases, or particularly difficult cases, they were often utterly at a loss, they did not have any right understanding of human relations, since they were confined day and night to the workings of their judicial system” (*The Trial*)

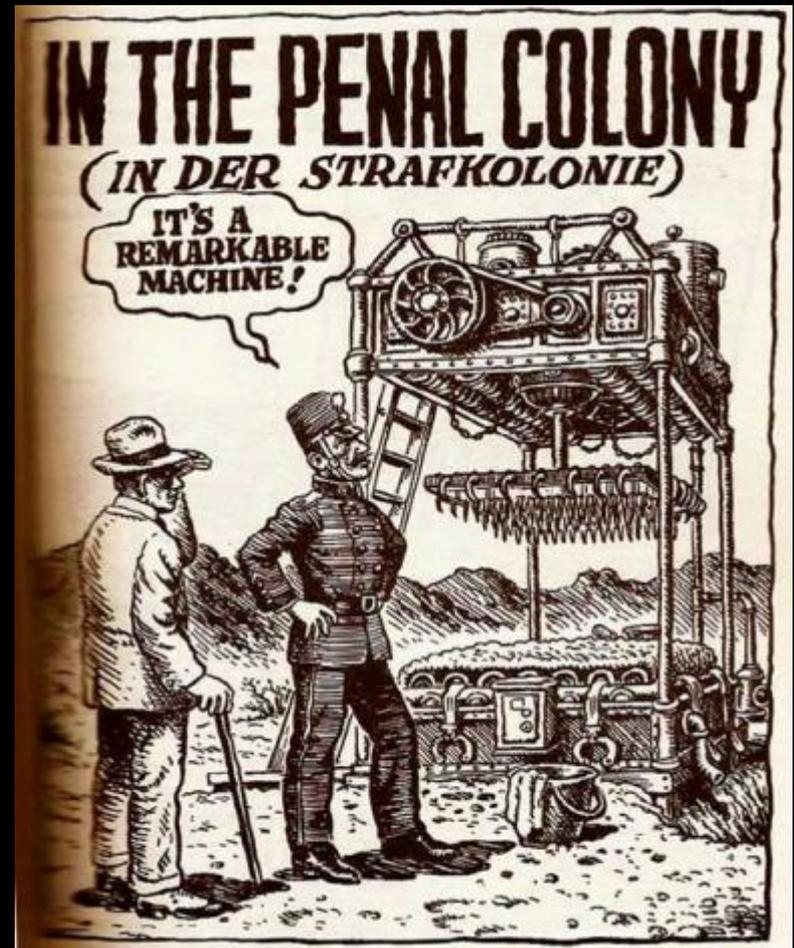


Franz Kafka

“In the Penal Colony”: a punishment device carves written messages into prisoner’s body to instruct him.

Device malfunctions, leaving body butchered and message indecipherable.

Punishment’s educative aims have failed; only brutality accomplished.



Franz Kafka

Authority in Kafka as omnipresent yet elusively absent, indefinitely deferred:

KAFKA: “They were offered the choice between being kings and being royal envoys. Like children, they all wanted to be envoys. This is why there are so many envoys chasing through the world, shouting – for the want of kings – the most idiotic messages to one another. “

ROTHBARD: “A tyrant is but one person, and could scarcely command the obedience of another person, much less of an entire country, if most of the subjects did not grant their obedience by their own consent Every tyranny must necessarily be grounded upon general popular acceptance.”



The Trial



K.: “Behind all the actions of this court of justice ... there is a great organization at work, [which] not only employs corrupt warders [and] stupid Inspectors [but] also has at its disposal a judicial hierarchy ... with an indispensable and numerous retinue of servants, clerks, police, and other assistants, perhaps even hangmen.”

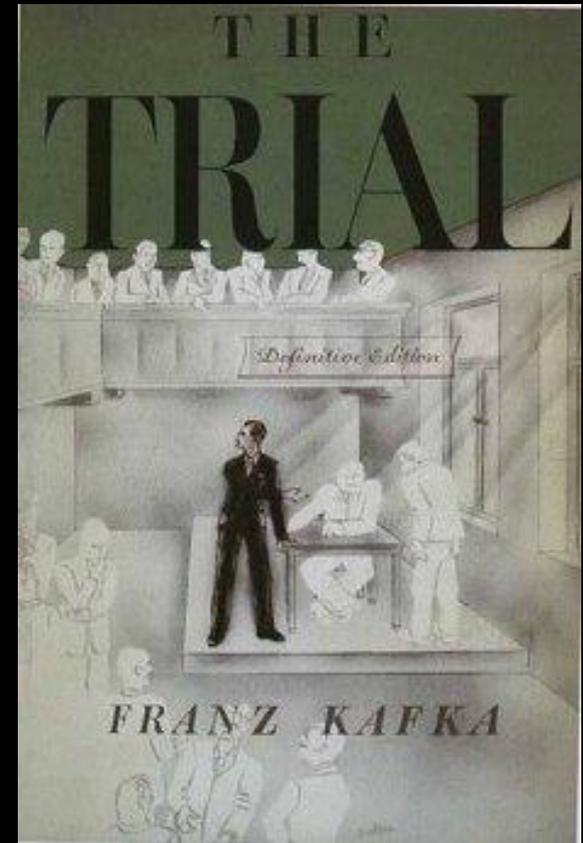


MISES: “Government is in the last resort the employment of armed men, of policemen, gendarmes, soldiers, prison guards, and hangmen.”

The Trial

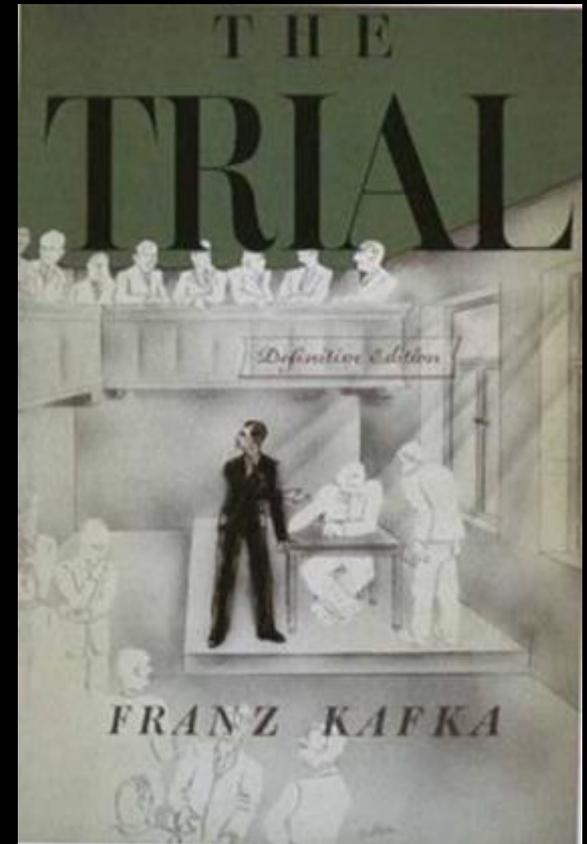
“The high authorities we serve, before they would order such an arrest as this must be quite well informed about the reasons That is the Law. How could there be a mistake in that?”

“I don't know this Law. ... And it probably exists nowhere but in your own head.”



The Trial

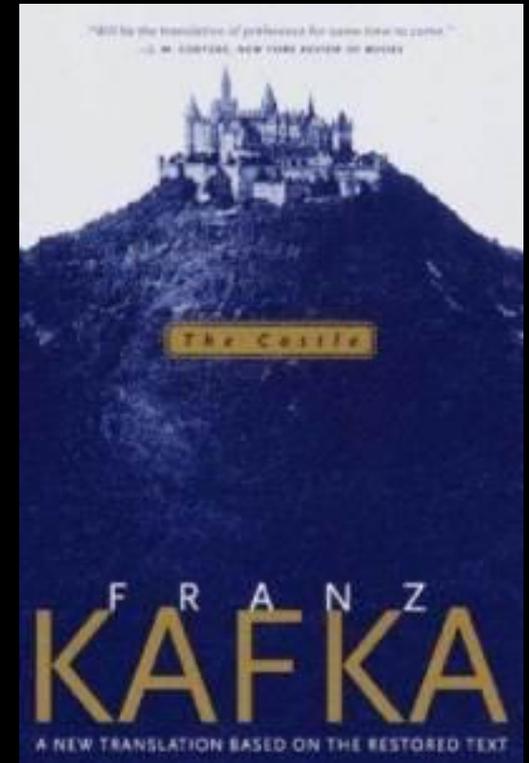
K. finds that the spectators in the courtroom, who have “seized him from behind the collar [and] stretched out their arms to block his way,” are all wearing “badges of various sizes and colours. ... They were all colleagues, these ostensible parties of the Right and the Left Every man jack of you is an official, I see, you are yourselves the corrupt agents of whom I have been speaking.”



The Castle

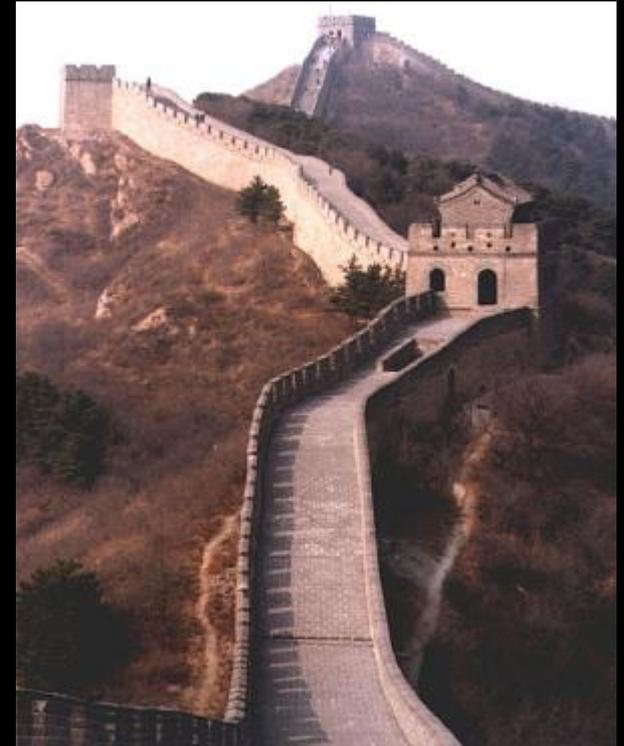
The Castle is “veiled in mist and darkness [without] even a glimmer of light to show that the Castle was there [in the] illusory emptiness above him. ... Never yet had K. seen there the slightest sign of life The gaze of the observer could not remain concentrated there, but slid away the longer he looked, the less he could make out and the deeper everything was lost in the twilight.”

K. is told: “All those contacts of yours have been illusory. ... There’s no fixed connection with the Castle, no central exchange which transmits our calls further. ... There is no difference between the peasantry and the Castle.”



“The Great Wall of China”

“So vast is our land that no fable could do justice to its vastness, the heavens can scarcely span it – and Peking is only a dot in it, and the imperial palace less than a dot. ... Although we are always trying to get information [about the Emperor] it is almost impossible to discover anything. ... [We] do not know what Emperor is reigning [or even] the name of the dynasty. ... Any tidings, even if they did reach us, would arrive far too late, would have become obsolete long before they reached us. ... If from such appearances anyone should draw the conclusion that we have no Emperor, he would not be far from the truth.”



The messenger immediately sets out on his journey; a powerful, indefatigable man. Now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a path for himself through the throng.



If he encounters resistance, he points to his breast to where the symbol of the sun glitters. So the way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man.

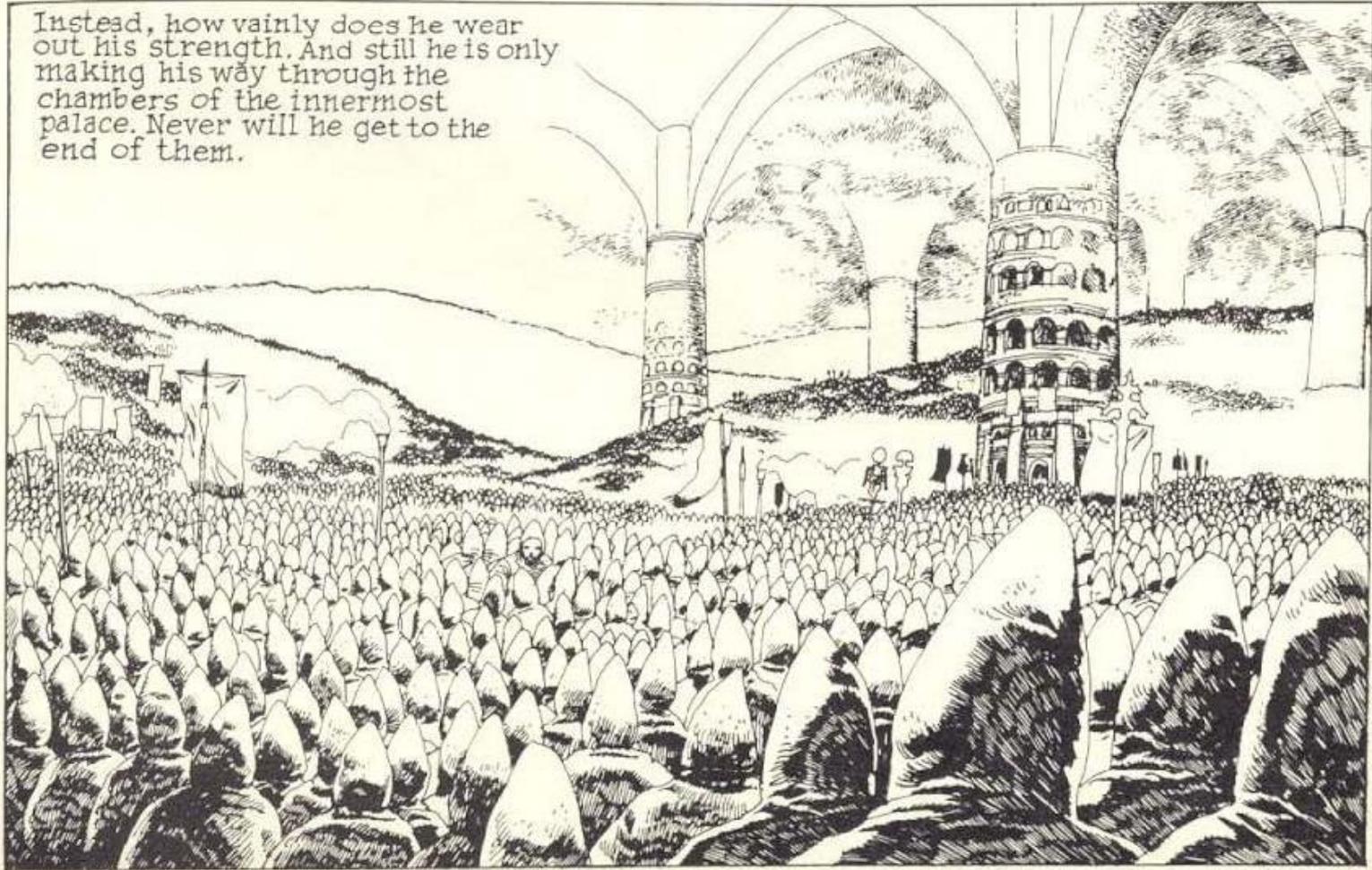


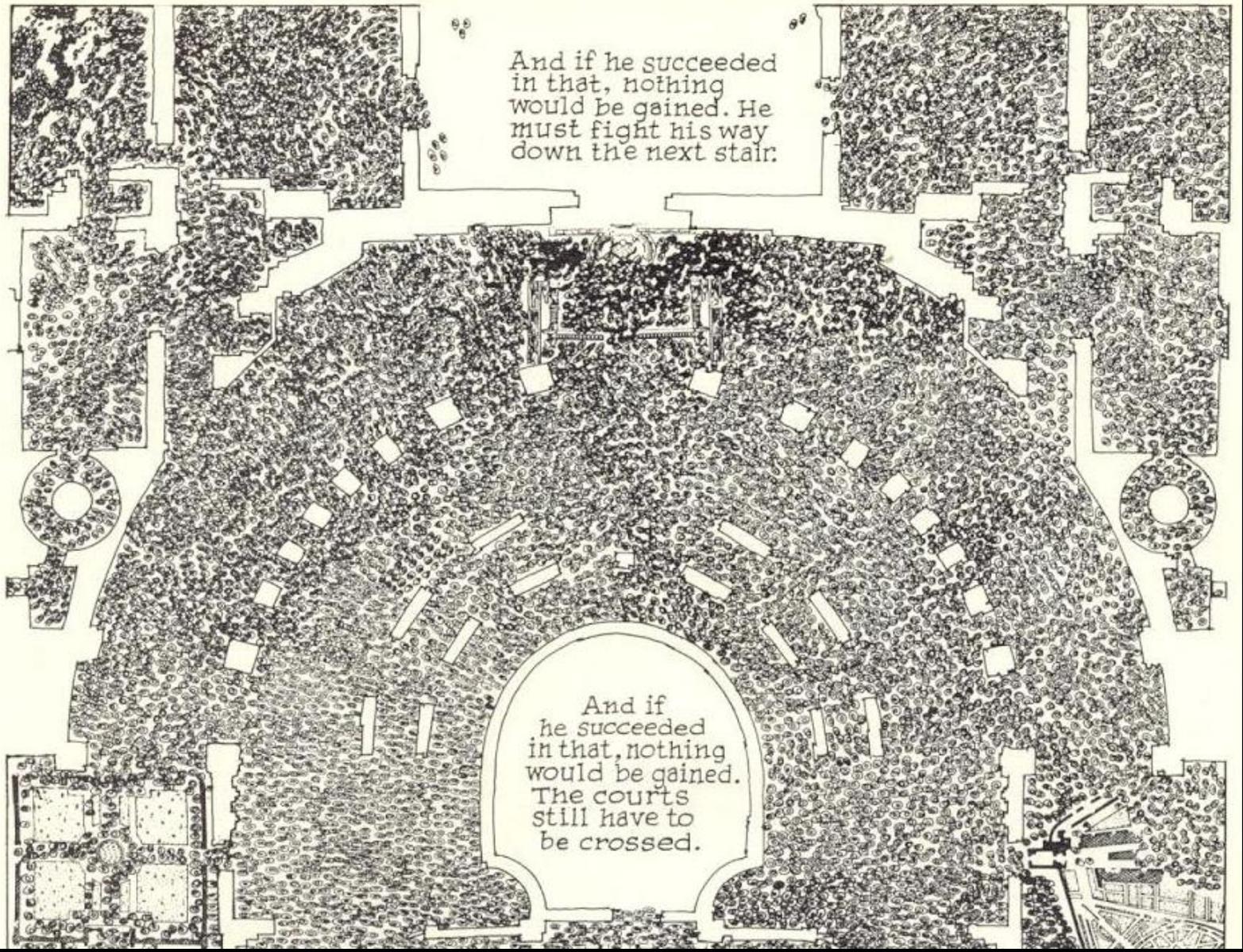
But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields, how fast he would fly.



Doubtlessly, you would soon hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door.

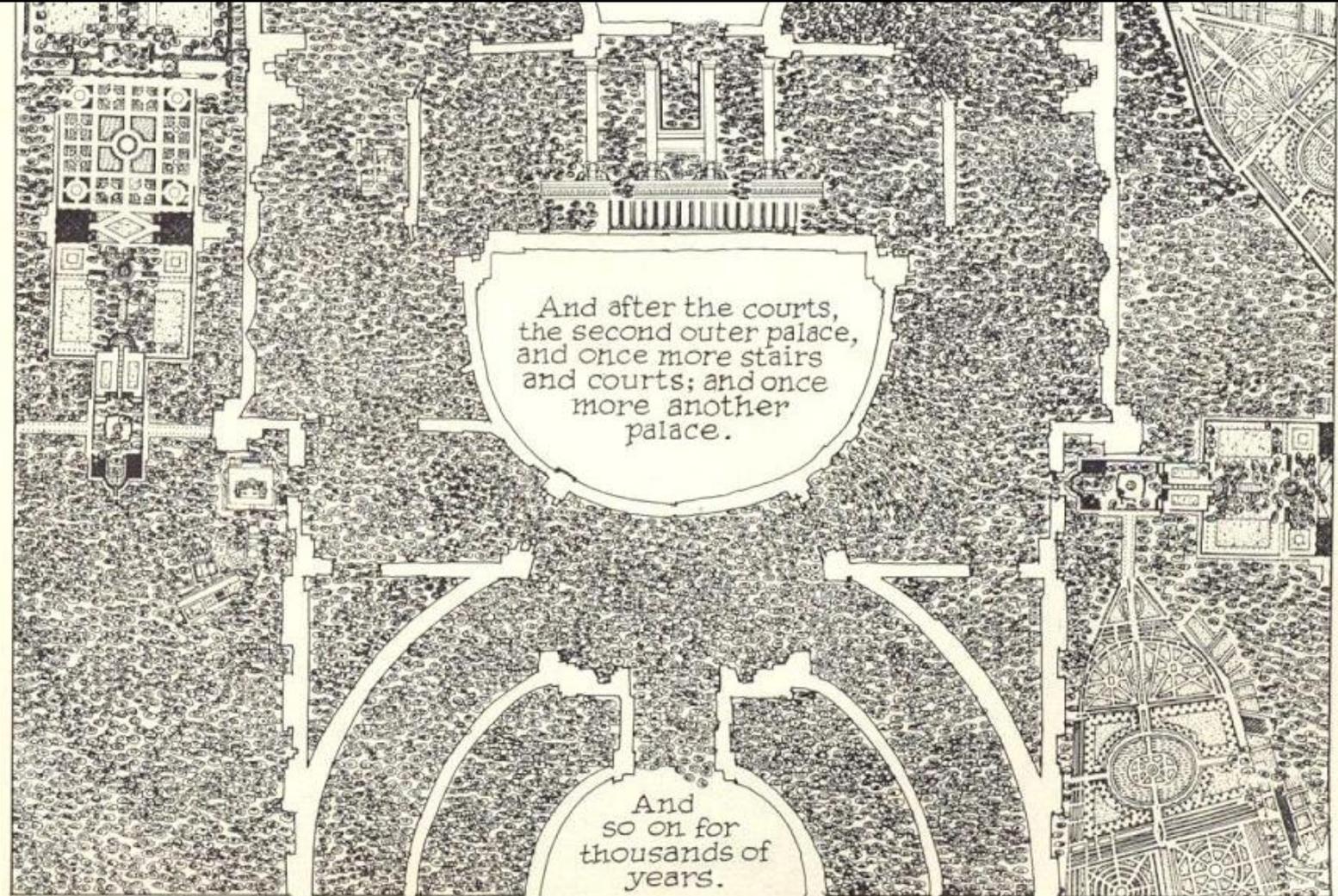
Instead, how vainly does he wear
out his strength. And still he is only
making his way through the
chambers of the innermost
palace. Never will he get to the
end of them.





And if he succeeded
in that, nothing
would be gained. He
must fight his way
down the next stair.

And if
he succeeded
in that, nothing
would be gained.
The courts
still have to
be crossed.



And after the courts,
the second outer palace,
and once more stairs
and courts; and once
more another
palace.

And
so on for
thousands of
years.

“The Great Wall of China”

Yet subjects are commanded to “leave our homes, the stream with its bridges, our mothers and fathers, our weeping wives, our children who needed our care, and depart for the distant city to be trained there,” to build a protective wall against barbarians whom no one has ever seen except “in the books of the ancients [with] gaping mouths [and] great pointed teeth.”



(Written in 1917, when Czechs were sent by a distant imperial capital to fight for poorly understood reasons against foreigners with whom they had no quarrel.)

“The Problem of Our Laws”

“Our laws are not generally known to us; they are kept secret by the small group of nobles who rule us ... The laws were made to the advantage of the nobles from the very beginning, they themselves stand above the laws ... The very existence of these laws ... is at most a matter of presumption.” Some say that “the law is whatever the nobles do” and “see everywhere only the arbitrary acts of the nobility,” while others hope that one day “everything will have become clear, the law will belong to the people, and the nobility will vanish.” But “nobody would dare to repudiate the nobility” and thereby “deprive ourselves” of the “sole visible and indubitable law.”



Jaroslav Hašek

1907: becomes editor of anarchist journal
Komuna

Cecil Parrott, Hašek's biographer: "Most of us, at least those of us who have been used to living under stable governments, can with difficulty repress a shudder of horror when we read the word 'Anarchist'."

Hašek's anarchism is a symptom of "utter irresponsibility," a "pathological craving for exhibitionism," and "psychopathy."



Jaroslav Hašek

1911: lampoons electoral politics by founding and campaigning for the “Party for Moderate Progress Within the Bounds of Law.”

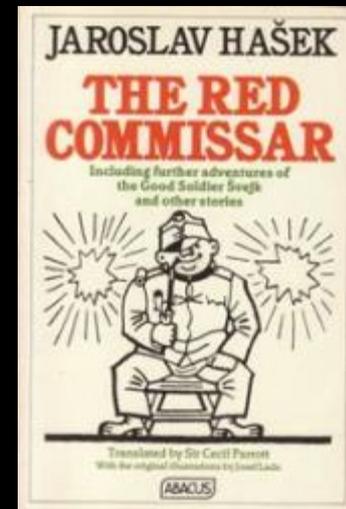
Demands include “Down with freedom of speech!” and “Voters, use your ballot to protest against the earthquake in Mexico!”

Protests that a “milkman’s dog, which patiently and faithfully draws a cart with provisions, is called Nero,” and a “Yorkshire Terrier, which has never injured anyone, and is never tyrannical to anybody, is called Caesar.”



Jaroslav Hašek

- 1915: drafted into World War I, captured at Russian front
- 1916: defects to Bolsheviks
- 1917: becomes minor Soviet official (chronicled in “The Red Commissar”)
- 1920: returns to Prague to “build proletarian revolution” (*i.e.*, to write and drink)



Jaroslav Hašek

Authority figures (e.g., judges and police) :

- In Čapek: well-meaning blunderers inevitably out of their depth
- In Kafka: terrifying, omnipresent, anonymous ciphers
- In Hašek: buffoons, rascals, idiots, sharpers, lunatics



“The Judicial Reform of Mr. Zákon”

Bureaucrat notices that although convicted criminals “habitually promise the court that they will reform,” such promises are “very rarely kept,” because the criminal “regards the judge as merely the representative of a system of justice which is penal, and therefore hostile to him”; hence the bureaucrat proposes “the appointment as judges of criminals who would be the best-known ones in their circles,” on the grounds that “the feeling of solidarity among criminals would make that promise binding” and so “bring about the reform of those unfortunates.”

The project is initially successful in lowering the crime rate – until law-abiding people start taking up lives of crime in the hope of being appointed judges.

“The Criminals’ Strike”

Criminals go on strike for fairer treatment. Crime rate drops to zero. The “importance of the counsellors and officials of the Criminal Court” starts to “dwindle rapidly” as “all authorities – officials as well as prison employees – became redundant.” The government even gives “serious thought” to encouraging crime by “awarding government grants to criminals.” Finally, a mob of “all classes who were suffering as a result of the criminals’ strike,” including “counselors of the law courts, secretaries, investigating magistrates, assistant judges, probationary lawyers, assistant prosecutors, police officials, [and] defence counsels,” begin to riot, demanding work. Since riots are illegal, the courts can go back into session to try the rioters, and so the justice system is saved.

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“An Investigative Expedition”

A police spy tries to trick a suspected malcontent into making disloyal remarks about the Empire, but without success, as the intended victim keeps singing the Empire’s praises – but it is precisely his absurd insistence that he is living under an “efficient administration” that proves his obvious insincerity.



“A Psychiatric Puzzle”



A patient is confined indefinitely to an insane asylum because “the doctors have not yet been able to detect in him that awareness that he is mentally ill which, according to the psychiatric text-books, is the first sign of an improvement in a patient’s mental condition.”

“An Embarrassing Situation in Ochsenhausen”

The Cabinet Council, suspecting their Prince's mental health, call in a medical expert, who testifies that the Prince has indeed turned feeble-minded.

The Councillor of Health has the physician arrested for “insulting language towards His Serene Highness,” and announces that he regards the Cabinet Council as “conspirators and persons guilty of high treason.”

“An Embarrassing Situation in Ochsenhausen”

So the Cabinet Council responds by having the Councillor of Health arrested in turn, on the grounds that it is grossly insulting to the Prince to suggest that “our ruler would take into his confidence conspirators and traitors.”

But now a stalemate has been reached: no more medical experts can be convinced to testify, since they fear being arrested whichever side they take.

So the Prime Minister decides to leave the feebleminded ruler in power, since his mental state “has remained unchanged for some time now, and in spite of it all everything is shipshape.”

“The Austrian Customs”



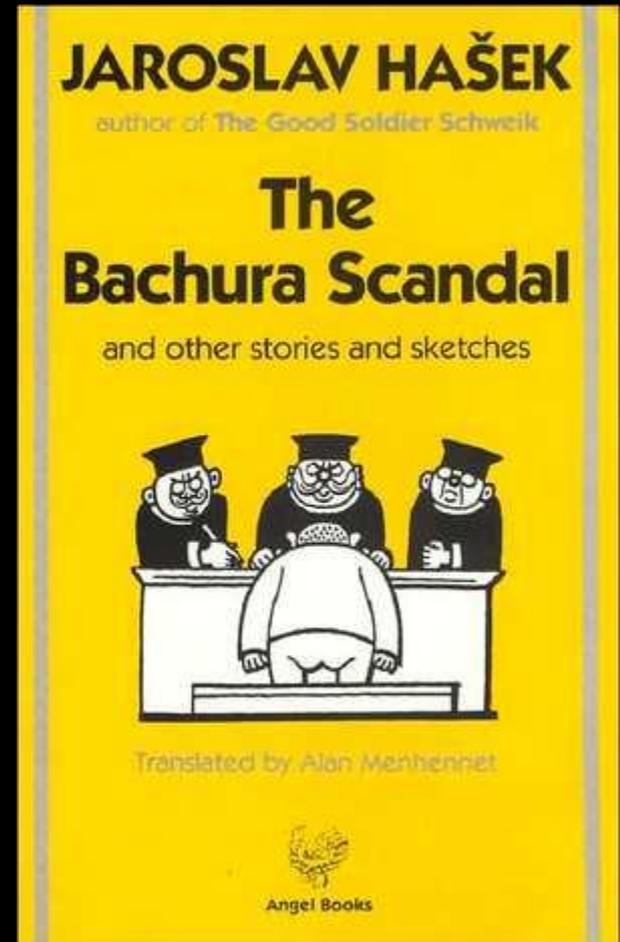
While visiting Germany, a Czech traveler has a serious accident requiring emergency surgery; he ends up with a silver plate in his skull, and a pig's kidney transplanted to replace his own.

When he tries to return to Bohemia, he is denied reentry by the customs officials, since the importation of silver and of swine are both prohibited.

“The Bachura Scandal”

A bar's toilets are decreed to have inadequate ventilation. The owner is instructed to introduce windows, which he cannot do without first receiving a building permit. When he complains, he is told: “Just you calm down ... or you might end up insulting an official person. Do you think it's a joyride for us, going round looking into urinals?”

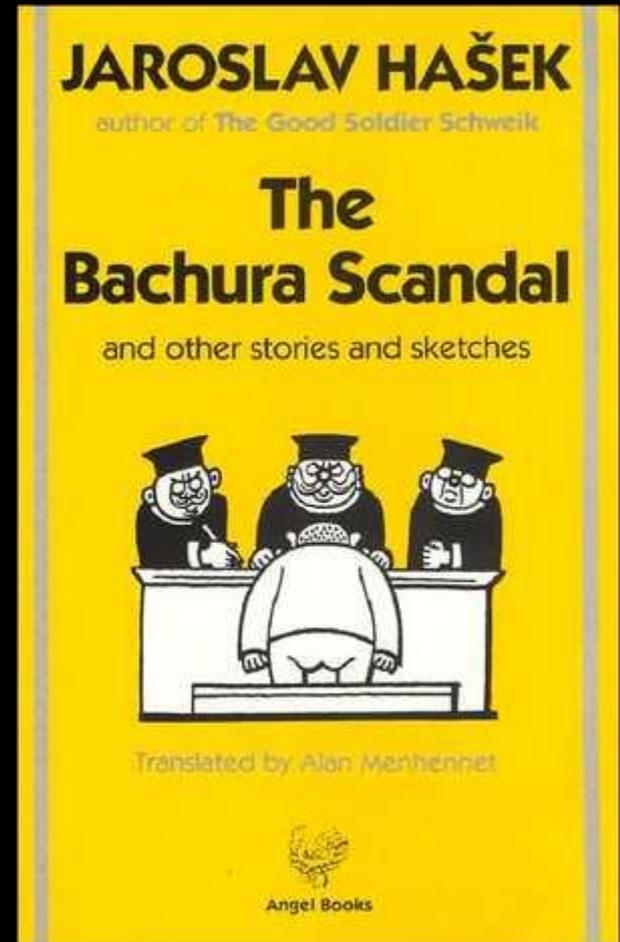
The owner begs, week after week, for authorisation; but although the official paperwork is actually ready, the official delays finalising it.



“The Bachura Scandal”

The official thinks: “It’s only an innkeeper; let him wait a bit. We in the City Council have got to keep these people firmly in their place.”

But when the same official, out on a walk, is seized by a call of nature with no money for the public toilet, the attendant (the barkeeper’s sister) lets him in for free; so out of gratitude he finalises the paperwork he should have finalised over a month earlier – whereupon he is dismissed for bribe-taking.



“Emperor Franz Joseph’s Portrait”

During the war, a man selling portraits of the Emperor advertises them with the blurb “In these difficult days, no Czech home should be without its portrait of our severely tried Monarch” – only to be reprimanded by the police for this pessimistic assessment of the war effort.

So the man changes “difficult” and “severely tried” to “glorious” and “victorious” – and is threatened once more, this time for trivialising the Empire’s losses.

When nobody buys the portraits, he reduces the price (to “2 crowns”) and is imprisoned for this final insult to the Emperor.

The Good Soldier Švejk

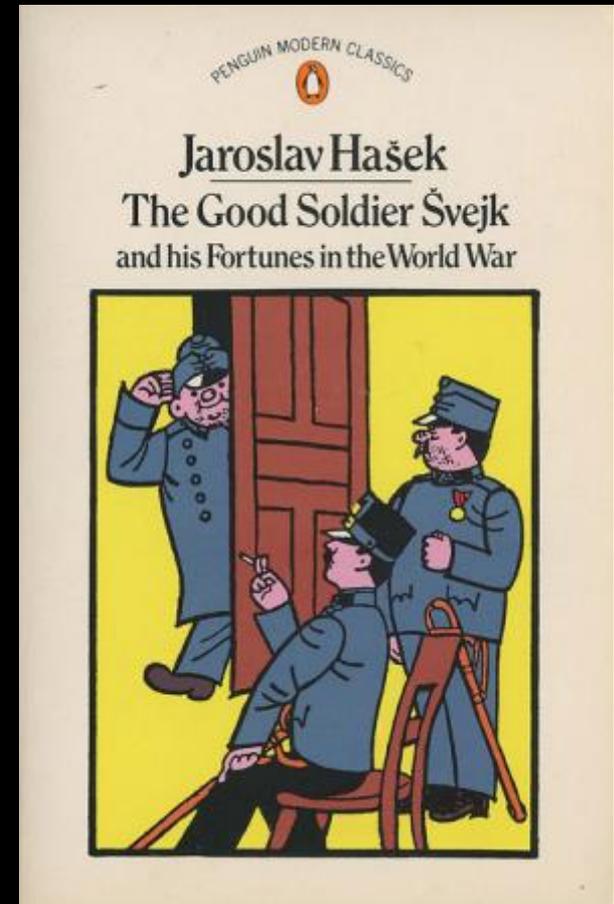
A barkeeper finds that his portrait of the Emperor has been soiled by fly poop, so he takes it down and puts it away, since otherwise “somebody might be so free as to pass a remark about it and the there could be unpleasantness.”

But then he gets in trouble for having taken the Emperor’s portrait down.

So he explains his reason for taking it down – and is promptly arrested for talking about fly poop in connection with the Emperor.

The Good Soldier Švejk

- Hašek's best-known work, an antiwar classic
- Unlike Kafka's protagonists, Švejk does not wriggle helplessly in the clutches of bureaucrats, but instead outwits and frustrates them by playing the role of amiable, bumbling idiot who blocks his superiors at every turn via verbatim compliance, work-to-rule, and feigned misunderstanding of orders (thus exploiting rulers' dependence on ruled).



The Good Soldier Švejk



“The undersigned medical experts certify the complete mental feebleness and congenital idiocy of Josef Švejk, who appeared before the aforesaid commission and expressed himself in such terms as: ‘Long live our Emperor Franz Joseph I’, which utterance is sufficient to illuminate the state of mind as Josef Švejk as that of a patent imbecile.”



The Good Soldier Švejk

Gustáv Husák,
General Secretary
of Czechoslovak
Communist Party
during the 1970s,
issues a command
to the population:



**STOP
ŠVEJKING!**