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SILENCE IN THE UNDERGROUND CASTLE

by

Ellen Cothran

In a lifetime one may run across a handful of stories which not only draw one in, but insinuate their plots and characters into the reader’s own life. Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground and Kafka’s The Castle are for me two such inescapable tales. “Inescapable” here refers to the authors’ craft of molding the characters inextricably inside the reader’s consciousness — no matter how twisted or perverse these characters’ lives may be. The relationships between the Underground Man (hereafter, the Russian) and Liza, and between K. and Frieda, are especially penetrating. The following essay will examine the scenes of final departure between the main characters in both books, in order to point out a common theme. Why must these people say goodbye to one another? The books are separated by over half a century and much of Europe, yet they share a theme, a concern with a stumbling block in many relationships. The block I refer to is silence: silence versus the healthy noise of communication.

Both the Russian and K. demand figuratively silent lives at the expense of losing — or remaining safe from — direct interaction with other people. The similarities between the quiet scenes of departure in the texts are striking, and a closer look at them will reveal the overriding silence between the characters. Finally, the theme of silence can be seen in both a literary and a philosophical light. For the silence lies not only between these four people, it may well be symptomatic of an alienated human condition. If this is true, if this stumbling block is familiar to most of us, the two authors add a glint of hope to the theme of alienation: choice. K. and the Russian have chosen to remain isolated and invulnerable, and even if their conduct is arguable, the women in the stories make the point loud and clear. They choose to leave.

Three telling similarities link the scenes in which the two men realize they are alone again: silence, the men’s fantasies of repentance, and their quick reversion to their former, isolated existences. To begin with, both men notice the silence of their world after the women leave. This silence is not a subtle background condition; it is in a sense loud enough to prompt both men to point it out immediately. The Russian experiences the entire scene quite auditorily. He describes the sound of “footfall on the steps below,” and then after futile efforts to call Liza back, he “heard the glass door leading to the street creak, opening heavily, then shutting closed again. The noise of it rose up the stairs” (Dostoevsky 149).* This description of encroaching and existential

loneliness feels as if it is in slow motion, with every sound torturously dragging out the consequence: she is gone. The Russian then flies down the stairs fantasizing about his apology and repentance. He runs outside. “It was quiet. The snow was tumbling down heavily, almost vertically, blanketing the sidewalk and the deserted street. There were no passersby. No sound was heard” (Dostoevsky 150). Silence: she is definitely gone.

Remarkably similarly, after Frieda has left K., “only now did K. notice how quiet it had become in the passage” (Kafka 331). K. does not, however, seem to feel that this silence is a burden; it is an almost blissful peace so long awaited. One might not even be surprised if a light, padding snow began drifting down in the corridor. K. did not care for the noisy confusion of dependent life; or did he simply get lost in it? Without any apparent painful feeling, K. watches Frieda and Jeremiah, her new lover, go to their room. “Within, it seemed to be bright and warm; a few whispers were audible, probably loving cajolments to get Jeremiah to bed; then the door was closed” (Kafka 330). Like the Russian, K. is left out in the cold. He seems to be at home in the quiet; he is hardly affected by Frieda’s physical departure, and any emotional effect is left to reveal itself in the future. The fact remains, however, that both men are struck by the silence they encounter: the vibration of life which each woman tried to give is no longer heard.

The second and third similarities are really two sides of a broader reaction on the part of both men. Though, in hindsight, the affairs seemed damned from the beginning, it is no mistake that K. and the Russian have fallen in love — they are human beings, after all. For immediately after the women leave, they bitterly fantasize about perhaps having repented, about the possibility of having relinquished themselves to what they saw as the overwhelming care offered them. Just as immediately, though, they realize this repentance is fantasy and return to their own lives. “Where did she go,” the Russian asks himself, “why am I running after her? Why? To fall down before her, to sob with repentance, to kiss her feet, to plead for forgiveness?” (Dostoevsky 150) But the Russian’s self-hatred and demand for alienation cynically bring him back to his real life. “Won’t I begin to hate her, even tomorrow, precisely because I kissed her feet today? . . . Haven’t I learned today again, for the hundredth time, what I am worth? Won’t I torment her to death?” (Dostoevsky 150). Indeed, they did fall in love and are now scrambling desperately to climb back out of the noisy pit, or in the Russian’s case, to crawl back into his own lair.

More sardonically than the Russian, K. asks himself if it might not

... perhaps have been more prudent [my emphasis] to take his cue from Jeremiah, to make a similar display of his own really great fatigue, sink down here in the passage, which would in itself afford much relief, sleep a little, and then perhaps be nursed a little too. (Kafka 331)

Not surprisingly, this postulating does not last long. K. realizes “... it would not have worked out as favorably as with Jeremiah, who would certainly have won this competition for sympathy, and rightly so, probably, and obviously every other fight
too” (Kafka 331). Jeremiah will win any fight for Frieda because he is in life, he is with her and is willing to be vulnerable in the face of her care. He, too, may have joined Frieda for prudence’ sake, but the warmth and care he receives is worth relinquishing the control of objectivity, of silence. K., on the other hand, is not one to fight for sympathy — a very noisy business, fighting. For just as quickly and easily as this fantasy entered K.’s mind, it fades away into sleepiness. Did Frieda ever really matter that much? I see almost no way to avoid answering “no” to this question.

Even when K. and the Russian include a seemingly passionate relationship in their lives, it is still by and for each man himself. K. considers repentance, or at least a good show of it, but not for comfort or to help Frieda feel needed. He considers it for prudence’ sake alone. It might have suited his interests, his future plans, or his goals more aptly, had he made one last embarrassing plea for Frieda’s company. But it would not have been worth the challenge to his absolute sovereignty over his life. In Hegelian terms, K. seems incapable, or at least unwilling, to lose himself in the other for even one moment. The Russian is helplessly driven to this emotional loss, but cannot continue the dialectic in a healthy way nor regain himself enriched. According to Hegelian thought, neither the Russian nor K. has found the correct application (meaning also limitation) of rationality in his life.

To continue investigating the existential silence to which K. and the Russian cling, let us inquire directly of the text why these people must say goodbye to one another. The question is more appropriately put, why must the women leave? For I believe it is they who realize the unreal, worse, the surreal lives they will lead if they continue to be in partnership with these men. Perhaps hatred and anger lead the two women to depart. Frieda cries, “... you always persecute me; oh, K. why do you always persecute me?” (Do we ever once hear K. so passionate as to uncontrollably utter “oh . . .”?) Frieda continues, “I’ve always tried to keep you from going there, with little success, but all the same I’ve tried; all that’s past now, you are free” [my emphasis] (Kafka 330). In a different context, Liza communicates precisely the same thing when she throws down the bill — the insult — which the Russian gives her, and walks out. But if either woman had been deeply angry, as I do not believe they were, they might have remained and hashed things out once again, “... For to a woman love means all of resurrection, all of salvation from any kind of ruin, all of renewal of life . . .” (Dostoevsky 148). But the Russian is not on target here.

But the Russian is not on target here. Liza must leave him, but she still loves him. She realizes with great clarity that this man is incapable of accepting her love, and that resurrection is impossible. When encouraged to leave, she gets up, gives him a “heavy look,” and quietly vacates the premises and his life (Dostoevsky 148). In trying to see beyond this skeptic’s interpretive narrative, I think the heavy look may be disappointment, albeit seasoned with a bit of disgust. Beyond this, it is a look of profound insight, strength, and understanding. She realizes the impossibility of relating to this man in any productive manner. Perhaps she even realizes that his only lasting relationship is with himself, because he can always hate himself. With this self-hating-self relationship, there is no chance that the other will catch one off guard
and expose one as a helpless being. It is the most powerful of irrational relationships, fighting itself out in one consciousness.

This, then, is exactly why the partings must take place. K. and the Russian stepped into no other shoes but their own, saw through no other eyes but their own, and were concerned for no other welfare — however ironic this may sound — but their own. This goes beyond mere selfishness, of which we frequently accuse one another. These men have lost the world. In the Russian’s case, he sees “real life” as an idiot lumbering monster, incapable of having the consciousness with which he feels himself afflicted. Until meeting Liza, the Russian has the monster in his sights; he can hate, rationalize, examine, tear apart, and even shamefacedly join the ranks of the social dragon. Until meeting Liza, he is in control. But when hate ceases for a moment with Liza, when in fits of passion (not only sexual), the Russian relinquishes himself to Liza’s care, the monster of the outside world becomes an innocent fairy with a sting of damnation. Could she have known that her love was killing him? One cannot say for sure, but I would hope that in leaving she realized, finally, that his acceptance of her love would mean the death of his understanding of himself. And threatening this man’s understanding is threatening his very existence. Perhaps Liza knew that silence was his real bedfellow, and that the clamour of her love was self-defeating.

K. has also lost the world, perhaps long before we met him in the story. He seems to have missed the fact that the village in which he lives, his vehicle to the Castle, is not a featureless entity, a means to his end. The village is individual people, Frieda included, and exerts far more power over him than the Castle ever will. For the village is persons insisting on contact, commitment, suspicion, rejection, in short, relationships with each other and with K. At first glance, Frieda may look like a hussy when she leaves K., immaturity running from one lover to the next. But the loner is not always the hero. It is Frieda who is brave when she leaves him. Giddy, uncontrolled emotion does not drag Frieda away; she is motivated, rather, by respect for her own intuition. Frieda does what the Russian claims he cannot do: she supports the reason in her head with the power of her heart.

At this point the philosophical implication of K.’s and the Russian’s isolating relationships become more apparent. By leaving, the women save what is left salvageable: themselves. Again, the Russian is sadly mistaken; resurrection is for the dead. These women know they must take their lives and move on, not try to perform miracles. They leave silence and fantasies behind them. If the Russian and K. are to remain in control of themselves, silence is inevitable. Before leaving, Frieda and Liza were making the noises of love, acceptance, and vulnerability, and they accepted the fact that they were doing just that. The Russian exposes himself quite a few times to Liza, but he never accepts this exposure as that of an intellectual man. K. falls prey to this view also. Vulnerability is insanity.

With the utmost irony, the only way to love and “relate” to these men on their own terms is to leave them. Because to love freely this type of person is to kill him or her and oneself. K. would lose his controlled poise by becoming too subjective, and so remains the half-alive stoic. The Russian will remain the skeptic, underground, hating
the monster and most of all, himself. Surely we are all to some degree silent and alienated persons, or the novels would not be painful or, at the least, embarrassing. Unfortunately, silence, even while screaming, is all too familiar to our lives. When I reflect on these stories as they live and grow in my thoughts, I realize that the world is as unpredictable as K.’s village, and as isolating as the Russian’s home. But just as we begin to pity ourselves and our inevitable (but safe) alienation, Frieda and Liza come riding through, jingling bells, talking with us, and riding right back out. There is choice here. Let us not create in ourselves any more lifeless characters. Let us, like Frieda and Liza, leave them behind in our past identity, always remembering they were once here with us, and may return any day.