

Worries of a Family Man
Roberto Schwarz
Translated by Nicholas Brown

Some say the word *odradek* comes from the Slavonic and look for the word's derivation on that basis. Others think it comes from the German, only being influenced by the Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations permits one to conclude that neither applies, particularly since neither leads to a meaning for the word.

Naturally nobody would occupy himself with such study if there were not actually a being called *odradek*. It looks at first like a flat starshaped spool, and in fact it does appear to be wound with thread; which, to be sure, is really only ragged, old, knotted together or simply tangled pieces of string of mixed color and description. But it is not only a spool, since a small crossbar emerges from the middle of the star and another bar joins the first at a right angle. With the aid of this second bar on one side, and one of the points of the star on the other side, the whole thing can stand upright as though on two legs.

One is tempted to believe that this entity once had some purposive form and is now simply broken. Despite appearances, this is not the case. At least, no evidence can be seen for it; one cannot find a mark of incompleteness or rupture that would suggest anything like that. The whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own

Roberto Schwarz's "Tribulação de um Pai de Família" (in *O pai de família e outros estudos* [São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1978] 21-26), first published in 1966, begins with his translation of Franz Kafka's "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" (1917). [The version of "Worries of a Family Man" presented here hews as closely as possible to Kafka's German while following, where feasible, the stylistic choices represented by Schwarz's Portuguese translation. An English version by Willa and Edwin Muir ("The Cares of a Family Man," in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories* [New York: Schocken, 1971] 427-29) is more elegant than my own but differs from Schwarz's, which is closer to Kafka's language, in several respects. — Trans.]

way complete. At any rate, nothing more precise can be said, since Odradek is exceedingly agile and not to be caught.

He hangs around in the attic, on the stairway, in the hallways, in the entryway by turns. Sometimes he is not to be seen for a month at a time, having probably moved on to other houses; but he never fails to return to our house. Sometimes, if one steps out the door and he is leaning against the stair-rail just below, one feels inclined to speak to him. Naturally one doesn't ask him difficult questions, handling him rather — his smallness makes it hard not to — like a child. "What's your name then?" one asks. "Odradek," he says. "And where do you live?" "No fixed abode" he says, and laughs; but it is a laughter such as only one without lungs can produce. It sounds something like the rustling of fallen leaves. Generally that's the end of the conversation. Incidentally, even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he is silent for long periods, as wooden as he looks.

To no avail, I ask myself what will become of him. Can he even die? Everything that dies must previously have had some kind of purpose, some kind of activity which has exhausted itself; this doesn't apply to Odradek. Is he to be then always at the feet of my children and my children's children, tumbling down the stairs with threadfibers dragging after? He evidently harms nobody; but the idea that he is furthermore to outlive me I find almost painful.

"Worries of a Family Man" is a minor masterpiece. Its brief, delicate arabesque is extremely violent and touches the nerve of an entire culture. It doesn't explain, but rather implies bourgeois life with such felicity that the latter emerges pulverized — from a simple, if slightly fantastic, domestic scene. For Kafka, the key to the world is made of tin, and can be found on the outskirts of towns. If Kafka had been a revolutionary, he would have made suppositories instead of bombs.

The German and Slavonic camps argue over the word Odradek. They argue over it, but do not know what it means. This implies that they are idiots, quite unlike the family man who makes the observation and triumphs in these first lines. The family man consolidates his triumph, saying "actually, naturally, at first, in fact, to be sure," words which suppose, and in presupposing establish, a community of good sense. He is so prudent and objective, not to mention droll, that he doesn't say "I" or "we" until near the end. Meanwhile, however, he doesn't come to exist as a character; he is simply a narrative voice. The source of his affirmations is like the grammatical subject "one," which indicates the anonymous, indisputable and happy consensus of men of good judgment.

The reasonable man doesn't want to be a bore. Without endangering his hopes for general approval, the family man gives a comic description of Odradek, which he presents as some old thing whose use has been forgotten. A being in the form of a spool that is not a spool is profoundly ridiculous, all

the more so if it is covered in tangled thread. The smile before the useless and obsolete thing is one of superiority. To the superiority of a practical man is here added that of a humorous fellow with his head screwed on straight. Then comes the superiority of an adult, created by the bonhomie with which he speaks of little Odradek. The procedure is always the same: entice the reader, establish the tacit agreement among adults, whites, civilized men.

Suddenly, a detail which is not a detail: the strange thing can stand upright, it is alive. The fact is mentioned as though it were one more piece of thread on the spool. But it is not, and this changes everything. Why describe a living being as inert? It's like saying: more rounded than angular, yellow, slightly creased, and Arthur Johnson's cousin. With this detail, the physical description of Odradek — the description of a thingamajig — changes meaning: if among useful objects the thingamajig is always negative, among the living its gratuitousness can change polarity — as we shall see. The narrative then begins to seem intentional; there is a strategy in its sensible, descriptive gesture. The procedure might just be humorous, but the next paragraph already shows that it isn't. The anonymity of the voice is false. It allows us to discern, little by little, the family man's anxiety; and it falls apart in the final lines, where the natural pronoun of anxiety — that is, "I" — prevails. In a parallel movement, the family man recognizes the person of Odradek: he refers to him by the personal pronoun ("er," he), not the impersonal "es" as at the beginning. This twin recognition — of the existence of Odradek and of subjective unhappiness hidden only unsuccessfully by the reasonable public face — is what needs to be explicated.

Just as he withheld life from Odradek, the family man supposes for a paragraph that he is "simply broken" — even though the narrator soon recognizes, and repeats three times, that he is not. Quite to the contrary, Odradek is "in [his] own way complete." If we re-read the story we note, behind the objective posture — or better, in it — the impalpable but sustained defamation of Odradek: in the choice of words, in the careful reticence of the narrator. Why?

Odradek is mobile, colorful, irresponsible, free from the system of obligations that bind the man to the family. More radically put: Odradek, as a construction, is the impossible of the bourgeois order. If, in a capitalist society, production for the market permeates the social order as a whole, then concrete forms of activity cease to have their justifications in themselves. Their end is external, their particular forms inessential. Now, Odradek has no purpose (i.e. he has no external end) but he is in his own way complete; therefore he has his end (without which we could not speak of his being complete) in himself. Odradek, therefore, is the precise and logical construction of the negation of bourgeois life. Not that he is simply in a negative

relation to it; he is rather the very schema of its negation, and this schematism is essential to the literary quality of the story. This is what guarantees the details of this trivial and matter-of-fact prose their extraordinary reach and power; referring to Odradek, they become options facing culture.

On a modest scale, Odradek's Utopian existence is subversive: it's the family man's temptation. Gratuitous existence catalyzes the contradictions of bourgeois vocabulary, which values, but doesn't value, freedom. This is how we are to understand the mixture of disdain and envy that Odradek awakes, and therefore the defamatory strategy of the narrator. And there is yet another meaning for Odradek's seductive gratuitousness: its properly pecuniary, or better, anti-pecuniary side. Odradek is made of leftovers, of disreputable materials without name or price, eliminated from social circulation. He is the extreme image of liberty amidst the effort required by propriety; a perfection neglected but perfectly safe, since it is made of parts that nobody wants; a lumpenproletariat without hunger and without fear of the police. The dismissive gesture of the prose — a class gesture, emphasizing Odradek's sorry threads — is a tacit admission of the force and exertion behind the narrator's finer cloth — and of the risk of losing it. The social place of a reconciled life on the bourgeois map cannot be named; but it is trash.¹

Because he is the image of the absence of worries, Odradek worries the family man. The story owes its literary violence, however, to an astonishing phrase that frames the entire story. Odradek, after saying that he doesn't have a place to live, laughs; the narrator comments: "but it is a laughter such as only one without lungs can produce." The sentence is clearly different from the others. It has greater weight, since it is written with the body. To describe Odradek's laugh, the family man abandons the visual, "objective" posture, whose object is by nature indifferent and external, and looks for an image of internal feeling: what separates him from Odradek's happiness are his lungs. Because it is unintelligible without reference to our own body, the sentence does not allow us the distanced reading that the narrator invites. Its terror is in the "verification" it compels, verification which is entirely personal: to experience it and Odradek's prodigious laugh is to catch oneself in the act of the ambiguous laughter to which the narrator leads us. Bodily feeling, a limit facing Odradek's inorganic lightness, gives new viscerality to the description, even retrospectively. This is the context that stings, the restoration of the truth of the prose's matter-of-factness.

Odradek's charm is inhuman, and human life is dreary. It appears that there has been a displacement of the problem: the bourgeois order, which is not a biological fact, can be transcended; but the lungs in question cannot. A metaphysical reading presents itself, according to which Kafka is not speaking of a particular society but of mortality in general, of the anguish of

having entrails. According to this school of thought, what hurts is not being a family man, but being mortal. To me, the choice between the two readings does not appear free: were mortality the problem, the eternalization of a humdrum life of obligations would be the formula for paradise; God help us. The suspension of bourgeois obligations figured in Odradek, on the other hand, sustains its air of happiness in spite of the permanence of death. A laugh "such as only one without lungs can produce": unhappiness has become embedded in the body itself. What separates the family man from life is not death, but present life turned into an irremediable body.

From this perspective, the paradox and the sinister force of the final lines can be explained. On first sight, it appears that the narrator is jealous of Odradek's immortality. But we have already seen that immortality would not make sense to him. Also, from its position in the sentence, survival is demoted to a secondary consideration by "furthermore": "but the idea that he is furthermore to outlive me I find almost painful." The family man does not want to live forever, he wants to outlive Odradek: in other words, he wants Odradek to die first. Naturally he's too urbane to wish death upon a being who does harm to nobody, who is in his own way complete; but his urbanity doesn't prevent the existence of such a being from causing him pain. Respectable in every regard, the family man is the unacknowledged partisan of destruction.

Notes

¹ In a capitalist regime, any form of utility suffices to make anything or anyone "an official member of the world of commodities" (Marx, *Das Kapital* II, 20.8).