

across the state of Illinois sat at their desks, curled over their pencils, stuck their tongues between their teeth, and wrote five-paragraph essays about wearing uniforms to school. All except one. His essay began, "I never thought much about dancin' circles before today, but if that's what you want to know about, well, here goes . . ." And somewhere in North Carolina, some poor soul will reach into the stack of 500 essays she will have to read that day. Four hundred and ninety-nine will be about wearing uniforms, and one won't. It will be "off topic." The IGAP rules say that it must receive the lowest possible score. But I wish I could watch her face when she reads that first line. If she keeps reading and smiles, I know there might be hope for us.

[Remarks]

LAUGHING WITH KAFKA

From a speech given by David Foster Wallace in March at "Metamorphosis: A New Kafka," a symposium sponsored by the PEN American Center in New York City to celebrate the publication of a new translation of The Castle by Schocken Books. Wallace is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine; his short story "The Depressed Person" appeared in the January issue.

One reason for my willingness to speak publicly on a subject for which I am sort of underqualified is that it affords me a chance to declaim for you a short story of Kafka's that I have given up teaching in literature classes and miss getting to read aloud. Its English title is "A Little Fable":

"Alas," said the mouse, "the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into." "You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

For me, a signal frustration in trying to read Kafka with college students is that it is next to impossible to get them to see that Kafka is funny . . . Nor to appreciate the way funniness is bound up with the extraordinary power of his stories. Because, of course, great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common. Both

depend on what communication-theorists sometimes call "exformation," which is a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections within the recipient. This is probably why the effect of both short stories and jokes often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve. It's not for nothing that Kafka spoke of literature as "a hatchet with which we chop at the frozen seas inside us." Nor is it an accident that the technical achievement of great short stories is often called "compression"—for both the pressure and the release are already inside the reader. What Kafka seems able to do better than just about anyone else is to orchestrate the pressure's increase in such a way that it becomes intolerable at the precise instant it is released.

The psychology of jokes helps account for part of the problem in teaching Kafka. We all know that there is no quicker way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it—to point out, for example, that Lou Costello is mistaking the proper name "Who" for the interrogative pronoun "who," etc. We all know the weird antipathy such explanations arouse in us, a feeling not so much of boredom as offense, like something has been blasphemed. This is a lot like the teacher's feeling at running a Kafka story through the gears of your standard undergrad-course literary analysis—plot to chart, symbols to decode, etc. Kafka, of course, would be in a unique position to appreciate the irony of submitting his short stories to this kind of high-efficiency critical machine, the literary equivalent of tearing the petals off and grinding them up and running the goo through a spectrometer to explain why a rose smells so pretty.¹ Franz Kafka, after all, is the writer whose story "Poseidon" imagines a sea-god so overwhelmed with administrative paperwork that he never gets to sail or swim, and whose "In the Penal Colony" conceives description as punishment and torture as edification and the ultimate critic as a needled harrow whose *coup de grâce* is a spike through the forehead.

Another handicap, even for gifted students, is that—unlike, say, Joyce's or Pound's—the exformative associations Kafka's work creates are not intertextual or even historical. Kafka's evocations are, rather, unconscious and almost *sub-archetypal*, the little-kid stuff from which myths derive; this is why we tend to call even his weirdest stories *nightmarish* rather than *sur-real*. Not to mention that the particular sort of funniness Kafka deploys is deeply alien to kids whose neural resonances are American. The fact is that Kafka's humor has almost none of

the particular forms and codes of contemporary U.S. amusement. There's no recursive word-play or verbal stunt-piloting, little in the way of wisecracks or mordant lampoon. There is no body-function humor in Kafka, nor sexual entendre, nor stylized attempts to rebel by offending convention. No Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rapacious adenoids. No Roth-ish satyriasis or Barthish metaparody or arch Woody-Allenish kvetching. There are none of the ba-bing ba-bang reversals of modern sitcoms; nor are there precocious children or profane grandparents or cynically insurgent co-workers. Perhaps most alien of all, Kafka's authority figures are never just hollow buffoons to be ridiculed, but are always absurd and scary and sad all at once, like "In the Penal Colony"'s Lieutenant.

My point is not that his wit is too subtle for U.S. students. In fact, the only halfway effective strategy I've come up with for exploring Kafka's funniness in class involves suggesting to students that much of his humor is actually sort of unsubtle, or rather *anti*-subtle. The claim is that Kafka's funniness depends on some kind of radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical. I opine to them that some of our deepest and most profound collective intuitions seem to be expressible only as figures of speech, that that's why we call these figures of speech "expressions." With re-



From Funny Times.

F. S. MUELLER

spect to *The Metamorphosis*, then, I might invite students to consider what is really being expressed when we refer to someone as "creepy" or "gross" or say that somebody was forced to "eat shit" in his job. Or to reread "In the Penal Colony" in light of expressions like "tonguelashing" or "She sure tore me a new asshole" or the gnomic "By a certain age, everybody has the face he deserves." Or to approach "A Hunger Artist" in terms of tropes like "starved for attention" or "love-starved" or the double entendre in the term "self-denial," or even as innocent a factoid as that the etymological root of "anorexia" happens to be the Greek word for longing.

The students usually end up engaged here, which is great, but the teacher still sort of writhes with guilt, because the comedy-as-literalization-of-metaphor tactic doesn't begin to countenance the deeper alchemy by which Kafka's comedy is always also tragedy, and this tragedy always also an immense and reverent joy. This usually leads to an excruciating hour during which I backpedal and hedge and warn students that, for all their wit and exformative voltage, Kafka's stories are not fundamentally jokes, and that the rather simple and lugubrious gallows humor which marks so many of Kafka's personal statements—stuff like his "There is hope, but not for us"—is *not* what his stories have got going on.

What Kafka's stories have, rather, is a grotesque and gorgeous and thoroughly modern complexity. Kafka's humor—not only not neurotic but *anti*-neurotic, heroically sane—is, finally, a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms, a harrowing spirituality against which even Ms. O'Connor's bloody grace seems a little bit easy, the souls at stake pre-made.

And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka's wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance.² It's not that students don't "get" Kafka's humor but that we've taught them to see humor as something you get—the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke—that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home. It's hard to put into words up at the blackboard, believe me. You can tell them that maybe it's good they don't "get" Kafka. You can ask them to imagine his art as a kind of door. To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission



This photograph of a drama class at Volterra Prison in Siena, Italy, was taken by Italian artist Alex Majoli. His series of prison photographs appeared in *Dazed & Confused*, a monthly magazine published in London.

but needing it, we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc. That, finally, the door opens . . . and it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along. Das ist komisch.

¹ A more grad-schoolish literary-theory-type machine, on the other hand, is designed to yield the conclusion that one has been deluded into imagining there was any scent in the first place.

² There are probably whole Johns Hopkins U. Press books to be written on the particular lallating function humor serves at this point in the U.S. psyche. Nonetheless, a crude but concise way to put the whole thing is that our present culture is, both developmentally and historically, "adolescent." Since adolescence is pretty much acknowledged to be the single most stressful and frightening period of human development—the stage when the adulthood we claim to crave begins to present itself as a real and narrowing system of responsibilities and limitations^{2a}—it's not difficult to see why we as a culture are so susceptible to art and entertainment whose primary function is to "escape." Jokes are a kind of art, and since most of us Americans come to art essentially to forget ourselves—to pretend for a while that we're not mice and all walls are parallel and the cat can be outrun—it's no accident that we're going to see "A Little Fable" as not all that funny, in fact as maybe being the exact sort of downer-type death-and-taxes thing for which "real" humor serves as a respite.

^{2a} You think it's a coincidence that it's in college that most Americans do their most serious falling-down drinking and drugging and reckless driving and rampant fucking and mindless general Dionysian-type reveling? It's not. They're adolescents, and they're terrified, and they're dealing with their terror in a distinctively American way. Those naked boys hanging upside down out of their frat-house's windows on Friday night are simply trying to get a few hours' escape from the stuff that any decent college has forced them to think about all week.

[Account]

CHRONIC PUBLICITY SYNDROME

From a "Diary" by Elaine Showalter in the April 2 London Review of Books. Showalter is a professor of English at Princeton University.

Last spring, I began receiving death threats—all of them from people with chronic fatigue syndrome. The threats came as I embarked upon a cross-country tour to promote my book *Hystories*, which had just been published by Columbia University Press. In the book, I argue that several contemporary phenomena—chronic fatigue syndrome, Gulf War syndrome, recovered memory, multiple personality disorder, satanic ritual abuse, and alien abduction—are hysterical epidemics, real disorders but caused by psychological conflicts rather than viruses, nerve gas, devil worshipers, or extraterrestrials.

A CFIDS (chronic fatigue immune dysfunction syndrome) action site on the Web called "Handling Showalter" provided a long list of instructions for activists wishing to confront me in public and a regularly updated list of addresses for bookstores where I would be speaking. "Yesterday I phoned CFIDS leaders in every city along Showalter's book tour for this week," wrote Roger Burns, the site coordinator, "so hopefully she will be challenged every-