

Confinement in *Die Verwandlung* and *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*

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The prison, as a metaphor or a setting in literature, has a long and ancient history. In modern literature, at least since Dostoevsky, the representation of imprisonment has focused on the lonely, tormented individual face-to-face with himself in a cell or within four walls. The prisoner may be political, as in certain works of Malraux, Koestler, Sartre, Solzhenitsyn, or private, as in some of the writings of Rilke, Kafka, Camus, Beckett, to name only a few. Often he is a combination of both—confined both for reasons of state and by his own moral guilt and anguish. Like Pascal's room, the "existentialist" prison is a place of confrontation with the absurdity of existence and its consequences.

The experiences of World War II and in particular of the incredible world of the concentration camp are obvious explanations for the frequency of prisons and other forms of confinement in postwar literature. Yet in a sense the imprisonment of the war objectified an already existing subjective situation.¹ If the concentration camps were brutal little worlds in which men were condemned without reason to suffer and die, an emotional reality of isolation, captivity, and the threat of a senseless death had been expressed earlier. An example of this phenomenon can be found in the extreme popularity of the writings of Franz Kafka in occupied and postwar France.² French readers must have found in the private world created by Kafka situations and emotions which corresponded to their collective experience. Kafka has been hailed as a "prophet" by many, including R. M. Albérès, who found that the world of *Der Prozeß* and *Das Schloß*, "le monde d'ombre et d'emprisonnement, d'absurdité administrative et de fatalité," was a prefiguration of the more contemporary "règne des polices, des arrestations à l'aube, des interrogations savantes, des aveux forcés."³

The fact that confinement for personal, subjective reasons and confinement because of one's relationship to a collective, political guilt

may have similar implications can be shown by some rather striking parallels in two apparently very dissimilar works: Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, written in 1912, and Sartre's *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, first produced in 1959. Kafka's story, with its unique irruption of the fantastic into the everyday, has no other immediate subject than the familial relationships and financial problems of the Samsa family, while Sartre's play, which does not transgress the boundaries of realism, is concerned with a portrayal of Nazi and postwar Germany and was intended as well to suggest to the French public its own "sequestration" from the Algerian war.⁴ Yet in the core of each work is a man confined to his room and to himself. Kafka and Sartre use imprisonment both structurally and metaphorically. The plot in both works is constructed through the interaction of the son within his prison-room and the family without. Within the prison, which is to a large extent self-imposed in the case of both Gregor Samsa and Frantz von Gerlach, the essential question explored is the nature of freedom. The themes of guilt and responsibility, also present in both works, are related to this. While neither prisoner finds freedom, it is revealing to note that in neither case is freedom directly and simply opposed to imprisonment. Rather, it would seem that the search for freedom is best undertaken in confinement.

Although the "influence" of Kafka on Sartre is not in question here, an affinity between Sartre's particular use of Kafka's doorkeeper parable and his theories on the theater of situation may shed some light on some important similarities and differences in the present context. In *L'Être et le néant* Sartre defines a "situation" as that in relation to which a being (the *pour-soi*) chooses itself, or defines its liberty. It should be seen as "le visage singulier que le monde tourne vers nous."⁵ As an example, he cites the door which was made only for the man waiting before it in Kafka's parable. Sartre omits the doorman's last words to the dying man, in which he tells him that he is going to shut the door, but makes his own addition: "Tel est bien le cas du pour-soi, si l'on veut ajouter qu'en outre, *chacun se fait sa propre porte*."⁶ The