

Silence and Legend

Commentary on –

Kafka's War

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PREAMBLE:

Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* suggests that:

Kafka's novels, by exploring the perplexity of man confronted with a soulless, over-mechanized, over-organized world, not only forecast the essentials of developments such as the concentration camps or the bureaucratic tyrannies of totalitarianism, but in fact described their essence more accurately and more truthfully than any purely naturalistic novel could have done.¹

Mostly I agree with this and it is not my intention to detract from the metaphorical power of Kafka's work by examining his life. It is rather my intention to show that an understanding of his life adds further layers of meaning to his tales which makes them richer; whereas misunderstandings can diminish Kafka and his literary achievements. The evils that Kafka described already existed during his life. He showed how things might develop further – he was clear-sighted not clairvoyant. And his metaphysical preoccupations, his ill-health, personal predicaments, and well-grounded fears in a fragmenting empire, meshed perfectly with his understanding of industrial society.

In short, when Adorno argued that, 'an artistic representation is either realistic or symbolic,'² I think he was mistaken in the case of Kafka – for I see Kafka's work as being rooted in reality and perhaps via parody rising towards symbolism.

That was the thinking behind my decision to write a novel about a year in his life, and I will try in this commentary to show that biographical fiction is a legitimate means of pursuing an historical investigation.

Yet this does not mean that I believe I have discovered the 'real' Kafka and laid bare a fixed personality which endured throughout his life – which would be an odd thing to do for an author who could conceive of a character as changeable as Gregor Samsa. My ambition is more modest. By showing a man alive in a particular place and time I hope to remove some misconceptions, and so inch closer to his life and work, without believing that it's possible to reach a final conclusion.

As Virginia Woolf remarked in *Moments of Being*, 'Written words of a person who is dead, or still alive, tend most unfortunately to drape themselves in smooth folds annulling all evidence of life.'³

That's what I tried to struggle against. And even if readers disagree with the Kafka I portray in my novel, they might still question their own view of the man and see him in a new and more vivid light; and that would seem achievement enough; particularly as his principle biographer, Reiner Stach, admits his severe respect for Kafka's aura – 'a cultural aura that thrives on distance, strangeness, an otherness that we do not forget for a moment.'⁴

I feel there's an advantage in forgetting the aura for several moments together – if we do that we might get a glimpse of the man and understand his work a little better.

INTRODUCTION:

This commentary describes how I came to write my biographical novel, *Kafka's War*, it also explores three questions that were raised in the course of my work:

- What is the purpose of biography?
- Where, if anywhere, does the boundary lie between biography and biographical fiction?
- How can fiction serve to examine legends about Kafka in ways which are difficult for a biography?

¹ Esslin (2001), 316.

² Adorno (1988), 243.

³ Woolf (2002), *Moments of Being*, 8.

⁴ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 52.

Contents

The commentary is divided into the following parts.

Part One. The purpose of Biography.

This looks at two metaphors which have often been used to describe biography – ‘autopsy’ and ‘portrait’ – and examines the work of biographers from Plutarch to Jonathan Coe see how useful the metaphors are in understanding the genre in general, and in respect to Franz Kafka in particular.

In light of this discussion, it examines the views of TS Eliot, Nabokov and Sartre on the limits of biographical knowledge – and also considers the comments on Kafka by Albert Camus, Robert C. Solomon, and Theodor Adorno.

This leads on to a consideration of how biographers and biographical-novelists have approached the gaps in the record of their subjects, and looks at Colm Toibin’s arguments about ‘anchoring’ fiction with facts, and Olga Tokarczuk’s advocacy of the ‘conjecture method’ in writing historical fiction.

The conclusion, drawing on the work of Richard Holmes, is that historical biography and biographical-fiction should aim to bring the dead to life imaginatively by shifting between the physical and the mental over time.

Part Two. The boundary between biography and biographical fiction.

This looks at two genres which are widely regarded as distinct and considers how they might be distinguished. It begins with Aristotle’s view that the difference is to be found in authors’ attitude to the archive – using ‘archive’ in the widest sense to include all historical evidence.

It then considers four examples of writing about Kafka, to illustrate that the boundary between biography and biographical fiction is sufficiently vague for the idea of a demarcating line to be unhelpful, and that it is better to consider biographical writing as a scale in its relationship to the archive.

The examples are:

Free Imagination – JP Stern,

Close Fidelity to the Archive – Reiner Stach,

Loose Fidelity to the Archive – Max Brod,

Anchored Fiction – WG Sebald.

This section also considers Olga Tokarczuk’s idea that it is impossible to capture an enduring personality because personalities evolve over a life, and therefore it is more fruitful to consider an individual as being more akin to a wave than a fixed point – and that some notion of gradual change, of instability, needs to be included in a portrait if it is to be vivid and lifelike.

Part Three. Legends about Kafka.

This considers what 'legend' might mean in the context of Kafka and explores how the legends about his life have arisen. Particular attention is paid to Nabokov, Max Brod and Kafka himself, as the source of misinformation. In respect to Nabokov, his lecture on Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and the accompanying biographical sketch are examined at length, and these are compared to Max Brod's two biographies, and Kafka's, *Letter to my Father*. Consideration is also given to the mythopoetic aspect of Kafka's legends, to the way that Kafka evoked his world rather than represented it, and how Kafka transformed himself mythically in *A Hunger Artist*.

Part Four. The Route to Writing my Novel and its Contribution to Knowledge.

Here I will briefly explain my growing interest in Kafka since the 1970s, and show how a greater knowledge of his life revealed the layers of meaning within his works. I will consider my engagement with him as a translator and playwright, and show that my novel is a culmination of many years of reflection, and how by trying to bring Kafka to life as a man I aim to contribute to knowledge of him, the First World War and Central Europe. As part of this I will discuss alternative approaches to biographical fiction, that I decided not to follow. And explain how I intend to develop my work further.

PART ONE:

The Purpose of Biography

Metaphors

Life writing theory has been a growing field in recent decades, as life writing itself has developed, the boundaries between genres have become more porous, and the sense of what constitutes the self has become more fluid,⁵ and I will discuss some of these insights below.⁶ First, though, I would like to concentrate on two metaphors which are often used to describe the art of biography – an autopsy and a portrait.⁷

However according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* an autopsy is, ‘An official examination of a dead body by a doctor to discover the cause of death.’ Biographies generally aspire to do more than examine why somebody’s life ended.⁸ Yet the metaphor does suggest the sensation of cutting into someone’s existence to try and discover their hidden nature.⁹ It’s a retrospective and analytical approach which emphasises looking at an individual as a series of

⁵ Wood (2019), *How Fiction Works*, 194.

⁶ The general surveys I’ve found particularly helpful are: *Biography* by Hermione Lee, *Autobiography* by Laura Marcus, *Autobiography* by Linda Anderson and *Rewriting the Self* by Roy Porter. In particular respect to Kafka, James Hawes’, *Excavating Kafka*, Stanley Corngold’s, *Lambent Traces*, *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, edited by Julian Preece, and *Franz Kafka in Context*, edited by Carolin Duttlinger, have all proved useful.

⁷ Lee (2009), *Biography*, 1.

⁸ Even Hermann Broch’s biographical novel, *The Death of Virgil*, which closely examines its subject’s last hours, intertwines scenes of the end of his life with his long career as a writer. For without an appreciation of a life why should any reader care about the death?

⁹ For this reason Henry James wrote to his nephew and executor shortly before he died to say that he wished to ‘frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter’ by burning a large number of his papers. Quoted in Hamilton (1992), *Keepers of the Flame*, 220. The same motive had moved Samuel Johnson to make a small bonfire before he died to keep many papers out of the hands of James Boswell. Boswell (1906), *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 5. However Boswell was indefatigable and went through the ashes, recovered what he could, and quoted when he desired from any partially burnt documents. *Ibid*, 148.

pieces. In her biographical novel, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar introduces her character by having him report on an examination, 'It is difficult to remain an emperor in the presence of a physician, and difficult even to keep one's essential quality as a man. The professional eye saw in me only a mass of humours, a sorry mixture of blood and lymph.'¹⁰

And this is certainly a danger – of failing to see the individual behind the details. And with Kafka the analytical approach in the hands of Freudians has produced such works as *The Frozen Sea* by Charles Neider who sought to reveal the man through the secret meaning of his work, e.g. in *The Trial*, 'The pleats, pockets, buttons, and belt of the first warder are all sexual symbols.'¹¹ For Neider the details of Kafka's life as manifest in his work took on a particular meaning due to the ideas of Sigmund Freud.¹² It was an autopsy where the conclusion had been reached before the body had been cut open.

The metaphor of an autopsy, of a look inside, is particularly inadequate with regard to the thoughts of an individual. Cutting into the brain doesn't reveal somebody's ideas and passions. The only way to access these is to examine what the individual wrote and what others remember being said – and that will inevitably amount to only a small fraction of a lifetime's thoughts. And moreover, thoughts on paper, and in the ears of others, take on an orderly form that they lack when they are raw in the head – they create an image of the self which is distinct from the evolving and varied personality within.

And when looking at the life of a writer it is all too easy to concentrate on the most famous works – the most prominent details – and construct the individual in their likeness. As Kafka's friend, executor and biographer commented after publishing his novels and some of his

¹⁰ Yourcenar (1959), *Memoirs of Hadrian*, 15.

¹¹ Neider (1948), *The Frozen Sea*, 154.

¹² Kafka was familiar with Freud's theories and found them crude and unhelpful. Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 20.

stories, 'I have experienced over and over again that admirers of Kafka who know him only from his books have a completely false picture of him. [He was] one of the most amusing men I ever met.'¹³

And this suggests the value of the other frequently used metaphor, the portrait.¹⁴ Perhaps the first person to refer to biography in this manner was Plutarch. 'When a portrait painter sets out to create a likeness, he relies above all upon the face and the expression of the eyes and pays less attention to the other parts of the body: in the same way it is my task to dwell upon those actions which illuminate the workings of the soul, and by this means to create a portrait of each man's life.'¹⁵ For this reason Plutarch thought that for a hero's biographer, a chance remark might be more revealing than the decisive order which won a battle.

However, a portrait is a motionless picture. It's a view from the outside of an individual at a particular moment. The painting metaphor, like that of autopsy, is suggestive rather than definitive. And it's uncertain whether 'the workings of the soul' can truly be derived by any means from the outside – there are no windows into the soul. And the more reclusive an individual the less revealing a momentary portrait may become – or even a series of them. Plutarch's biographies dealt with public men – with politicians and generals who revealed themselves in their actions. Kafka was not so public. Indeed as he wrote of himself to his first fiancée, 'All I possess are certain powers that merge into literature at a depth almost inaccessible under normal circumstances.'¹⁶ And much of his productive time was spent daydreaming, as he wrote in his undelivered letter to his father, 'Even in years when I was healthy I spent more time

¹³ Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 39.

¹⁴ Marcus (2018), *Autobiography*, 90.

¹⁵ Plutarch (1973), *The Age of Alexander*, 252. The quotation comes from the introduction to his essay on Alexander the Great.

¹⁶ Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 270.

lying on the sofa than you have in your entire life – sickness included. When I hurried away, with so much to do, it was mostly to lie down in my room.’¹⁷

How revealing would a portrait be of Kafka on his sofa? This sort of problem was tackled by Jonathan Coe in his biography of BS Johnson. The productive moments of Johnson’s career, when, ‘the novelist destroys the house of his life and uses its stones to build the house of his novel,’ are those most inaccessible to a biographer; and indeed any observer watching the novelist at work might decide that nothing was happening at all.¹⁸ Jonathan Coe concluded that there is no alternative to showing the life around the moments of creativity, and to portray the stones of the house before they were re-used. Yet he still distrusted his own work, and indeed the genre:

Take 17 August, 1965, for instance. Johnson got involved in no literary bust-ups that day, wrote no fiery letters for me to quote. He did not go out and get hilariously drunk with a fellow author, to provide me with a spiky anecdote. He did not have a secret tryst with a beautiful journalist, leading to a torrid but eminently disclosable affair.... No, he sat at his desk for six and a quarter hours, and wrote 1,700 words of *Trawl*. Boring, or what? But that is what writers do. Not only is it what they do, but it is what they do best, it is when they are happiest, it is when they are most themselves. If they did not do it, none of the other, superficial, gossipy stuff that fills up books like this would matter in the slightest. It is the essence of the thing. But it is the one thing I

¹⁷ Kafka (2008), *Letter to my Father*, 60.

¹⁸ Coe (2004), *Like a Fiery Elephant*, 8. The quotation is from Kundera (1988), *The Art of the Novel*, 144.

cannot write about, that I cannot make interesting. It shows up the whole process that I am engaged upon for the potentially dishonest enterprise that it is.¹⁹

For the purpose of literary biography, the metaphors of autopsy and portraiture, the inward and outward approach, the study of everything written down, and the memories of contemporaries and all the visual evidence, can take us some way towards an understanding – particularly if combined with the study of the age in which an individual lived. And yet a gap will always remain – a gap at the centre: the working life, the hours of day dreaming and of writing, are almost always lost. Coe wondered if he should have written a different sort of book²⁰ – a novel instead of a biography, given his aim: ‘The important thing is to bring Johnson to life, to find the man....’²¹

Again, bringing the dead back to life is a metaphor – and an impossibility.²² In his work on Robert Louis Stevenson, Richard Holmes expresses his own frustration at the limits of biography, after following the trail of Stevenson and his donkey in the Cevennes²³ and coming to a broken bridge. For this old bridge was the one crossed by Stevenson, and so Holmes clambered down the banks of the river, stumbled through the masonry and thorns, and waded across the water which rose to his waist – because he wanted to follow the footsteps of Stevenson as closely as possible. Later he damply concluded:

¹⁹ Coe (2004), *Like a Fiery Elephant*, 194.

²⁰ Ibid 64.

²¹ Ibid 35.

²² Though Hilary Mantel also describes her historical fiction as a kind of calling up of spirits. BBC (2017), Reith Lecture No. 4, *Can These Bones Live?*

²³ Stevenson (1992), *Travels with a Donkey*.

Even in imagination the gap was there. It had to be recognised; it was no good pretending. You could not play-act into the past, you could not turn it into a game of make-believe. There had to be another way. Somehow you had to produce the living effect, while remaining true to the dead fact. The actual distance – the critical distance, the historical distance – had to be maintained. You stood at the end of the broken bridge and looked across carefully, objectively, into the unattainable past on the other side. You brought it alive, brought it back, by other sorts of skills and crafts and sensible magic.²⁴

There is clearly much to be said for sensible magic. Though, as described by Holmes, the magic seems to amount to summoning an image in the biographer's mind through diligence and perception. Yet it's not a static image. Holmes claimed that eventually he could see a moving Stevenson in his mind's eye – and not just in a physical sense, but in terms of his connections with other people, through 'his enormously intricate emotional web,' and also through time, 'It is the paradox that the more closely and scrupulously you follow someone's footsteps through the past the more conscious do you become that they never existed wholly in any one place along the recorded path. You cannot freeze them, you cannot pinpoint them, at any particular turn in the road, bend of the river, view from the window. They are always in motion, carrying their past lives over into the future.'²⁵

²⁴ Holmes (1985), *Footsteps*, 27.

²⁵ *Ibid* 69.

Implausibility of Biography

However, this purpose of biography, bringing the dead to life imaginatively by shifting between the physical and the mental over time, has been regarded as implausible by some critics – and perhaps, given their views of a writer’s autonomy, it would be impossible. For example, TS Eliot claimed that, ‘...the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.’²⁶

If the creative part of a writer’s mind existed in such isolation, then it would be impossible for a biographer to approach it by any means; what Yeats called ‘the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast’ would be something distinct from the writer at his desk.²⁷ And Nabokov went even further. ‘Can we rely on Jane Austen’s picture of landowning England with baronets and landscaped grounds when all she knew was a clergyman’s parlour? And *Bleak House*, that fantastic romance within a fantastic London, can we call it a study of London a hundred years ago? Certainly not.... The material of the world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says “Go!” allowing the world to flicker and fuse.’²⁸

²⁶ Eliot (1999), *Selected Essays*, 18. The quotation is from *Tradition and the Individual Talent* published in 1919.

²⁷ Quoted in Lee (2009), *Biography*, 93.

²⁸ Nabokov (1980), *Lectures on Literature*, 2. The attitude of BS Johnson was similar though he tried to reject the role which delighted Nabokov when confronting the chaos of life. ‘Faced with the enormous detail, vitality, size, of this complexity, there is a great temptation for a writer to impose his own pattern, an arbitrary pattern which must falsify; or he invents, which is pure lying.’ Johnson (1964), *Albert Angelo*, 170. This conviction led Johnson to write *The Unfortunates*, his lightly disguised biography of his late friend, Tony Tillinghast, in 27 pamphlets boxed together with instructions to the reader to sort them in any way desired – except for two pamphlets which were marked First and Last. Only the Hungarian edition was printed as a traditional book. Coe (2004), *Like a Fiery Elephant*, 343.

This view of the world as unshaped raw material would seem to preclude any possibility of objective knowledge, and so biography, like every other form of writing, would necessarily be highly subjective. It's therefore not surprising that Nabokov allowed himself much freedom when he sketched Kafka's life – and by doing so formed an enduring and influential legend. The traces of this still linger, e.g. 'If biography is the writing of a life, then Franz Kafka is the least rewarding of subjects. Life, in any ordinary sense, was just what he didn't do.'²⁹

Later I will look in detail at Nabokov's work on Kafka and its consequences. However, there are some biographers who allow themselves the same latitude as Nabokov, but who moved in a different direction, and declared that Kafka is Prague, or at least, half of Prague.

To this day, every evening at five, Franz Kafka returns to Celetná Street (Zeltnergasse) wearing a bowler hat and black suit. To this day, every evening, Jaroslav Hašek proclaims to his drinking companions in one or another dive that radicalism is harmful and wholesome progress can only be achieved through obedience to authority. To this day Prague lives under the sign off these two writers who better than all others expressed its irrevocable condemnation and therefore its malaise, its ill-humour, the ins and outs of its wiles, its duplicity, its grim irony.³⁰

Jean-Paul Sartre's criticism of life writing was the opposite of this approach – rather than saying that such things happened every day, he suggested that they never really happened at all,

²⁹ Appignanesi, *The Independent*, 10 October, 2011 – in a review of *Kafka* by Nicholas Murray.

³⁰ Ripellino (1995), *Magic Prague*, 3. It is worth noting that Kafka did not finish work at five o'clock. Before the First World War he worked a single shift from eight until two – and this was vital to him as it gave some time for writing. During the war he was burdened by a second shift of two hours starting at four o'clock. After the war he worked again for six hours a day – when he wasn't ill and away from Prague trying to recover. To bring him to life such details matter.

or, perhaps, they never happened until somebody mentioned them. In his novel *Nausea* the protagonist, Roquentin, argues that to describe a life is in a sense to create it, 'This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.'³¹

A line of argument which brought Sartre close to the position of Nabokov described above. However, Sartre also famously argued that existence precedes essence,³² and therefore people could create themselves by their actions. An argument which Shakespeare put into the mouth of Iago, 'Our bodies are gardens; to the which our wills are gardeners.'³³

Though by the time Sartre was serving in the French army he had retreated somewhat from this man-gardening doctrine. Or, he at least considered that the soil and the climate were given, and therefore a man was only free to work within constraints. Judging by his *War Diaries* that was the position he reached while waiting for the German invasion in 1940.³⁴

But after the war in *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre returned to his earlier position and fatly declared, 'Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.'³⁵

However, when Sartre turned to biography and wrote his life of Flaubert, his approach was altogether different as he used Marxism to define Flaubert place in society and Freudian analysis as a guide to his character – which seems far to me from his earlier principles.³⁶

³¹ Sartre (1938), *Nausea*, 61.

³² Marcus (2018), *Autobiography*, 45.

³³ Shakespeare, (1603), *Othello*, act 1, scene 3.

³⁴ Sartre (1983), *War Diaries*, 324, 11 March, 1940.

³⁵ Sartre (1946), quoted in Solomon (2005), *Existentialism*, 207.

³⁶ See Sartre (1982), *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert*, and Barnes (1982), Sartre and Flaubert. Both were reviewed by Julain Barnes in the LRB on 3 June, 1982.

Yet despite the problems in following Sartre’s arguments from book to book, it is worth considering the gist of his ideas in *Nausea*, because in two ways these relate to Kafka, and how I tried to portray him – firstly, in writing about himself Kafka created a story which has been highly influential; secondly, he struggled with himself and tried to shape a new man.

However these factors need to be balanced against Kafka idea of himself as a product of his circumstances – particularly his father – and Kafka expressed this conviction in his stories.³⁷ That was an important part of his self-image. But this is not to say that Kafka was free to create himself without regard to his circumstances. Father and son struggled to make their way in an anti-Semitic city. They had to flourish amongst hatred and prejudice if they were to rise at all. ‘The heroism of staying on is merely the heroism of cockroaches which cannot be exterminated, even from the bathroom.’³⁸

Gregor Samsa did not decide to become an insect. It was not a life-style choice.

Albert Camus had an understanding of Kafka’s predicament and his response. In his appendix to *The Myth of Sisyphus* which concerns Kafka, Camus argued that in his final novel, *The Castle*, Kafka had expressed the same idea as he had in respect to Sisyphus. ‘One always finds one’s burden again. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.’³⁹

That was how Camus saw K. in his uphill struggle to reach the castle.⁴⁰ K. accepted the burden that fate had inflicted upon him – happy or not, that seems a plausible interpretation of

³⁷ Indeed, countless authors have made the obvious point that they were shaped by things beyond their control – to pick just three examples, David Storey’s elder brother died while David Storey was still in his mother’s womb, and he was certain that the shock of this transmitted to him through her shaped his personality; Jeanette Winterton gave a vivid account of how her life was changed by her mother allowing her to be adopted; and Janice Galloway described the affects of her parents’ separation and her father’s young death.

³⁸ Kafka (1990), *Letters to Milena*, 219, translated by Philip Boehm

³⁹ Camus (1975), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 111.

⁴⁰ Camus (1975), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 124.

the novel. Though Camus acknowledged that his interpretation may not have been the idea in Kafka’s mind when he wrote the book. ‘A symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing.’⁴¹

And yet Robert C. Solomon sees a marked difference between the two writers. He ignores this insight by Camus and states that Kafka’s ‘ultimate despair’ was not shared by him.⁴² On his death bed Kafka was correcting the proofs of a new collection of short stories, which isn’t the act of a man completely immersed in despair – rather it seems to be *The Myth of Sisyphus* turned to flesh. And Solomon quotes one of Kafka’s *Zürcher Aphorismen, Couriers*, but doesn’t discuss others in the collection. For example, No. 54i and No. 60.

*There’s nothing but the spiritual world; what we call the world of the senses is only the evil in the spirit; and what we call evil is just a necessary moment in our eternal development.*⁴³

*Who renounces the world must love all humanity, because he renounces their world as well. And so he begins to grasp the true human nature, which can’t but be loved, assuming he’s equal to it.*⁴⁴

These may not have reflected Kafka’s opinion throughout his life, but the aphorisms were written in the final year of the First World War – a bleak and hungry time. They can’t be

⁴¹ Camus (1975), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 112.

⁴² Solomon (2005), *Existentialism*, 170.

⁴³ Kafka (2021), *Zürcher Aphorismen*, No. 54i.

⁴⁴ Kafka (2021), *Zürcher Aphorismen*, No. 60.

ignored in an evaluation of Kafka. He evidently believed that ‘true human nature’ was loveable – and so he didn’t ultimately despair.

By selective quotation Robert C. Solomon reduced Kafka. It is as if Solomon was viewing Kafka from the perspective of the late twentieth century after Kafka’s family, and millions of others, had been murdered – and reading Kafka as a soothsayer. The anti-Semitism that Kafka experienced was not that of the Third Reich; it was persistent and cruel but rarely murderous. Kafka needs to be seen as a man of his own time.

However the distortions of Solomon were surpassed by Theodor Adorno, who saw Kafka’s stories as having the tone of the ‘ultra-left’⁴⁵ and expressing a decaying capitalist order,⁴⁶ yet Kafka wrote most of his work in a period of rising capitalism in the Habsburg Empire – regulating their expanding enterprises was his daily task in the office. It was the monarchy and aristocracy which were in decline. By not considering the historical Kafka, but placing him into a Marxist schema, and seeing him from the perspective of Auschwitz and the German cities destroyed by bombing, Adorno created a misleading account of the author by forcing him into an account of the early Twentieth Century as forged by post World War II German Marxism. As Stanley Corngold described it, Adorno plundered Kafka’s texts ‘to fit his fable.’⁴⁷

A minor example gives an idea of the tone – Adorno argued that, ‘In *The Castle* the officials wear a special uniform, as the SS did...’⁴⁸ But Adorno doesn’t suggest any similar

⁴⁵ Adorno (1998), 261.

⁴⁶ Adorno describes Kafka’s world as one of ‘late capitalism’ but Kafka was an established author before the First World War – and Adorno wrote about him in the 1960s. See Adorno (1998), 256.

⁴⁷ Corngold (2004), *Lambent Traces*, 158. Corngold devotes a chapter to criticising Adorno’s, *Notes on Kafka*, but this is the essence of his argument. Adorno argued that he was dealing with the historical Kafka in his essay on him – though Adorno’s view of history undermines his ambition. As Anthony Pelan argued, the essay can be seen, ‘...to reflect the political world Adorno had found himself in between 1942 and 1953.’ Duttlinger, Ed. *Kafka in Context* (2019), 273.

⁴⁸ Adorno (1988), 259.

details – ‘a special uniform’ is enough to bring thoughts of the SS to his mind. And it might be said that the officials of *The Castle* were more the heirs of Dickens’ Circumlocution Office from *Little Dorrit*, than forerunners of the Third Reich.

And Adorno’s close reading of Kafka is also questionable when he just concentrates on the stories being told. For example, he says that K. cannot have been summoned to the village in *The Castle*, because he asks at an inn, ‘What village is this that I have wandered into? Is there a castle here?’⁴⁹

Though the novel begins – two paragraphs earlier – with this description. ‘It was late in the evening when K. arrived. The village lay in deep snow. Of the castle’s hill nothing was to be seen, it was hidden in mist and gloom, and not the faintest light could be seen from the great fortress.’⁵⁰

Therefore K. wasn’t sure where he was; he couldn’t see the expected castle; therefore he asks to check he has arrived at the right place. And once he has confirmed where he is, and the dialogue develops, it becomes evident that K. wilfully held back from saying he was the new land surveyor to see what sort of people he was dealing with. ‘Enough of this farce,’ K. says.

Yet Adorno may not have cared for such criticism, he argued, ‘The artist is not obliged to understand his own art, and there is particular reason to doubt whether Kafka was capable of such an understanding.’⁵¹

⁴⁹ Adorno (1988), 247.

⁵⁰ Kafka (2007), *Das Schloß*, 9. My translation.

⁵¹ Adorno (1998), 247.

Anchored Fiction and the Conjecture Method

Between the views, that Kafka’s personal life had no significance at all, and that he embodies Central Europe in the Twentieth Century, I aim to show that Kafka had a life which was individual and particular, and yet embedded in his time and place. To use a term of Colm Tóibín, I have ‘anchored’ my novel in facts, though, naturally, the anchor rests at the end of a long chain.⁵² I also explore the connection between the stories for which Kafka is famous and his personal circumstances. For example, I’ll show in detail how Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and his autobiographical *Letter to my Father* are closely linked, and how an understanding of this connection reveals much about both – that ‘the bundle of accident and incoherence’ was the same man while eating and writing.

Indeed, it can be shown that by a combination of close attention to detail and informed imagination, insights are possible into the nature of an individual, without trying to establish a definitive portrait of the ‘real’ person that was true at all times. Olga Tokarczuk has referred to this approach as ‘the conjecture method’ – ‘...I was working with historical facts. These were the fixed points of my story, which I had to take into account and could not ignore. And then there was the more or less empty space between these points – and it was in that space that the literature began.’⁵³

To summarize her views, this ‘conjecture method’ can do three things: give a greater idea of someone’s personality, offer perspectives on that person’s work which wouldn’t be

⁵² Tóibín (2018), *The Anchored Imagination of the Biographical Novel*. This concept is also discussed by Janice Caulfield (2019), *Writing Biographical Fiction: What is Left Over After?* Toibin argues that it is permissible to invent a servant, but not a voyage across the Atlantic, without raising the anchors and drifting. Lackey (2018), *Conversations with Biographical Novelists – Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, 231.

⁵³ Olga Tokarczuk (2018), *I Believe in the Novel*, an interview with Robert Kusek and Wojciech Szymanski – translated with the help of Jessica Taylor-Kucia – in Lackey (2018), *Conversations with Biographical Novelists – Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, 237.

available to a reader who ignored the life behind the work, and show the individual in a time and place which illuminate both the individual and the age.

Yet Tokarczuk reached a similar conclusion to Holmes regarding our imprecise grasp of personality, 'Today I am sure it is impossible to tell the life of another person in the belief that any kind of whole, cohesive truth about them can be uncovered or a finite, complete picture obtained. Perhaps we should only ever look at people from the dynamic perspective – as a process, constant becoming, change.'⁵⁴

In this she echoes Montaigne in his essay, *On the Inconstancy of our Actions*.⁵⁵ And I've tried to capture the inconstancy of Kafka in my novel, while still striving to achieve the three aims of the conjecture method. For Kafka I believe they are all important despite the great amount of work devoted to him and his writing. And I feel a fictional treatment of his life offers more than would another biography, even allowing for the difficulties in neatly separating these two types of study. Writing a novel about Kafka gives more scope to achieve what Richard Holmes argues a biographer should try and achieve – to make someone move in the mind's eye of the reader, in space, amongst others and in time. And it also allows me to tackle the problem identified by Jonathan Coe – that a writer's life revolves around writing, and without presenting this activity to the reader a hole is made at the heart of the work.⁵⁶

I will look in more detail at the various approaches that have been taken to writing Kafka's life, and argue at greater length for the advantages of a biographical novel, but first I

⁵⁴ Lackey (2018), *Conversations with Biographical Novelists – Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, 239.

⁵⁵ Montaigne, (1991).

⁵⁶ Another criticism of biographical novels was made by Georg Lukacs, who argued that they distracted readers from historical novels, and that they trivialized history by ignoring big themes and concentrating on gossip. In response to this charge Olga Tokarczuk said that she believed the opposite, '...that big history is nothing but the reflected light of many small histories, a kind of phantom composed of hypothetical generalizations. Human life is all that is real.' Lackey (2018), *Conversations with Biographical Novelists – Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, 240.

need to discuss to what extent a biographical novel can be distinguished from a biography. This will help me explain the type of novel I decided to write.

PART TWO:

The distinction between a biographical novel and a biography

The Archive

In the first book on creative writing Aristotle argued that the distinction rests principally on the author’s approach to the archive⁵⁷ – using ‘archive’ in the widest possible sense so as to include everything that survives of the subject, for example, manuscripts, possessions, reminiscences – and also, implicitly, on the author’s approach towards gaps in the archive, the silences: on the writer’s willingness to enter into the possible past.

These silences have been discussed by Xanthe Taylor and Jordan-Baker.⁵⁸ They looked at examples ranging from the photographs taken of prisoners due to be killed by the Khmer Rouge at Tuol Sleng, the fictional African-American actress, Fae Richards, to community archives. And, amongst others, they cite the work of Rodney G.S. Carter.

The power of the archive is witnessed in the act of inclusion, but this is only one of its components. The power to exclude is a fundamental aspect of the archive. Inevitably

⁵⁷ Aristotle (1999), 13. ‘The distinction between a writer of history and an author of drama or epic is not that the historian writes in prose and the others in verse. You could rework Herodotus’ *Researches into the Causes and Events of the Persian Wars* in verse and it would make no difference to its status as history. The real difference is that the historian describes reality (past events) and the others possibility.’ By the term ‘reality’ I understand Aristotle to mean that for which evidence exists, i.e. the archive. Naturally there are complications here, but I’ll discuss them in the body of the commentary. As for more recent examples to illustrate Aristotle’s argument, Jean d’Ormesson wrote *The Glory of Empire* in the style of a historical work, though the empire never existed; and Wiktor Woroszyński’s biography of Mayakovsky is comprised completely of snippets – it’s a collage without authorial comment, one vivid scene after another, it imitates the style of *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos.

⁵⁸ Xanthe Taylor & Jordan-Baker (2018), 201.

there are distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences in the archive. Not every story is told.⁵⁹

Both of these articles make clear the limits of any archive in documenting past lives. They highlight that any attempt at writing history must contend with archival gaps and with the need to establish links between records that will emphasise certain features and mask others.⁶⁰ And as Linda Anderson observes, some silences are deliberate and are therefore a quiet testimony.⁶¹

This does not contradict Aristotle's distinction, but it suggests that Aristotle was being too severe when he tried to establish a firm divide. His view implies that everything of significance has been recorded and is accessible – indeed, that the archive can almost speak for itself without the historian having to exercise any imagination. Instead I believe the difference between biographies and biographical fiction should be seen as points on an axis rather than a binary contrast – an axis which ranges from complete archival fidelity to free use of the imagination.⁶² I want to make the distinction between the different approaches, not because I aim to show that one is essentially better than the other, but to explain why I selected my approach to writing about Kafka.

To help clarify the distinctions here, it's useful to consider the views of BS Johnson on the novel. He argued that the terms novel and fiction should be distinguished. 'The novel is a

⁵⁹ Carter (2006), 216.

⁶⁰ Xanthe Taylor & Jordan-Baker (2018), 201.

⁶¹ Anderson (2001), 16.

⁶² In her study, *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson shows how this view has developed over the last half century, and quotes Barrett Mandel arguing in 1980 that, 'Every reader knows that autobiographies and novels are finally totally distinct.' And this rigidity also applied to the contrast between biography and fiction. Anderson (2001), 6 & 97.

form in the same sense that a sonnet is a form. Within that form, one may write truth or fiction. I choose to write truth in the form of a novel.’⁶³

As to the difference between truth and fiction, he was severe – ‘Telling stories is telling lies.’ Some half a century after BS Johnson reached this conclusion his ideas are reflected in numerous novels which are autobiographical; perhaps the foremost amongst them is the series of six books by Karl Ove Knausgaard which begins with *A Death in the Family*. Autobiographical fiction is one of the chief developments noted by James Wood when he considered changes in writing between the appearance of the two editions of *How Fiction Works*.⁶⁴

Similarly there has been a great increase in the number of biographical novels written in recent years. Some idea of the range of these can be gathered by two collections of interviews by Michael Lackey with a total of 34 novelists.⁶⁵ However to discuss all of these interviews is not possible within the scope of this commentary. Therefore I will just note here that the range of works stretches from the realistic novel as favoured by BS Johnson, which remains anchored by facts, e.g. Colm Toibin's study of Henry James, *The Master*, to the same author's novel on the mother of Jesus⁶⁶ about whom there is virtually no record except a few references in *The Gospels*, and one at the start of *The Acts of the Apostles* – and so the anchors are only provided by the general history of the period. Toibin discusses both of these, but he prefers to describe *The Testament of Mary* as a work, ‘...with a strong connection to cantata, to aria or recitative, or, indeed, monologue in the theatre. It really is connected to voice in a way that – I hesitate to say this – you get in Molly Bloom's soliloquy, a woman suddenly, out of the blue, coming to speak.’

⁶³ Johnson (1973), *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* 14.

⁶⁴ Wood (2019), *How Fiction Works*, 8.

⁶⁵ Lackey (2014), *Truthful Fictions – Conversations with American Biographical Novelists*. And, Lackey (2018), *Conversations with Biographical Novelists – Truthful Fictions across the Globe*.

⁶⁶ Toibin (2013), *The Testament of Mary*.

Toibin's different attitude to these two books suggest that calling my work a biographical novel isn't precise enough. To be clearer about my choice I will illustrate the range of approaches that have been taken to writing about Kafka's life: I will review the works of four authors who occupy different positions on the axis of untethered imagination and fidelity to the archive. The first two are towards the different ends of the scale – fictional and biographical – and between these markers are two writers who occupy more ambiguous positions. The four are, JP Stern, Reiner Stach, Max Brod and WG Sebald.

Writing about Kafka : Example 1: Free Imagination

In his story, *The Matljary Diary*, JP Stern pictures Kafka as surviving until the Second World War, joining the Czech partisans, and fighting against the Germans retreating before the Red Army. He dies heroically – in the words of his corporal and narrator, 'He had been shot through the forehead, he was slumped over the last remaining Bren-gun.'⁶⁷

JP Stern's story was written to make the point, that it would have been far better for Kafka to have reacted against his oppressors, rather than like Josef K in *The Trial*, remain passively in his home city and await his destruction. It blends Kafka and Josef K together, implies that Kafka was a political writer and ignores Kafka's three attempts to join the Austro-Hungarian Army in the First World War.⁶⁸ It is an entertaining read, but it contradicts what is known about Kafka in substantial ways. It also contains the following dialogue:

⁶⁷ Stern (1992), *The Heart of Europe*, 190.

⁶⁸ 'It would be my good fortune to become a soldier.... You ought to hope that I will be accepted, as is my wish.' Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 581.

'You're really a sort of king among writers, aren't you?'

'You have said it,' he replied, and for a brief moment his smile became almost a grin.

'A secret king, though.'⁶⁹

An exchange which echoes Christ before Pilate.

'Art thou the king of the Jews?'

And Jesus said unto him, 'Thou sayest.'

And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders he answered nothing.⁷⁰

Even though it is openly a fictional tale it risks being misleading and myth-making – and being written as fiction doesn't change this. Yet, naturally, it would be more misleading if it were written in the form of a standard biography. On the axis it occupies a position towards one end. It could only be regarded as a possibility if Kafka hadn't died of tuberculosis in 1924, but had survived and hadn't fled Czechoslovakia before the Nazi invasion.

However, despite its anachronism, the story does obliquely question Kafka's attitude to his circumstances. It does show the value of fiction for raising questions about a life by making vivid an alternative existence. Kafka was not politically active. It encourages the reader to wonder why.

It also develops the mythopoetic side of Kafka's writing that can be seen in some of the late fragments which were published after his death. *The Burrow* is the most famous of these, but the fragments below illustrate the point even better.

⁶⁹ Stern (1992), *The Heart of Europe*, 184.

⁷⁰ St. Matthew : Ch. 27 : v. 11 and 12.

It’s shameful to say how the imperial colonel rules our mountain town. His few soldiers could be disarmed at once, if we so wished, and even if he could call for help – but he can’t – it wouldn’t arrive for weeks. So why do we suffer his hated rule?⁷¹

I had posted a guard in the swamp. But now it was all empty, nobody answered the shouts, the man was lost, and I had to post a new guard. I looked into the man’s fresh, bony face. ‘The previous sentry has vanished,’ I said, ‘I don’t know why, but this desolate land lures a man away from his post. So take care!’

He stood upright before me as if on a parade ground. Then I added, ‘Should you let yourself be tempted away, it will just be your loss. You’ll sink in the swamp. I will post a new guard here, and should he prove faithless too, another, and so on without end. Perhaps I won’t win, but I won’t lose.’⁷²

I fight; nobody knows it; some suspect it, that’s unavoidable; but nobody knows it. I fulfil my daily duties, with some distraction, but not much. Naturally everyone fights, but I fight more than the others; the majority fight as if they were asleep, a hand moves as it might in a dream to banish an apparition; but I step forward and fight with the most careful marshalling of all my strength. Why did I step out from the crowd, which so often roars, but here is alarmingly still? Why did I draw attention to myself? Why did I stand in the first rank of enemies? I don’t know. A different life seems to me like a life without value. Military histories call such characters born soldiers. And yet it’s not like that, for I hope for no victory, and I don’t love the fight for the sake of fighting, I love it only as the one thing that must be done. As such it pleases me more than I’m truly capable of enjoying, more than I can give, and perhaps I shall not perish from the fight but from this joy.⁷³

⁷¹ Kafka (1992), *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 278. My translation.

⁷² Kafka (1992), *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 284. My translation.

⁷³ Kafka (1992), *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 288. My translation.

All of these fragments are in the first person. They seem to reflect tales of the war and post-war world that Kafka digested and transformed, so that he might enter the mind of the imagined protagonist. In light of these fragments, it could be said that JP Stern was developing the work of Kafka – once they’ve been considered Stern’s story seems less of an abrupt departure from Kafka’s own tales.

Writing about Kafka : Example 2: Close Fidelity to the Archive

Reiner Stach has written a three volume biography of Franz Kafka and several other books. His professional life has been devoted to him, and he is fully aware of the limitations of the material he works with:

Chance occurrences muddle the picture of a past productive life and even consign entire epochs of this life to oblivion: destroyed manuscripts, letters and photographs scattered in exile, ignorant or unapproachable heirs, the early death or anonymity of witnesses, and the greed of collectors. The biographer has little choice but to forge ahead stoically with what remains after this process of disintegration, disappearance and disregard, yet is unable to shake the nagging suspicion that the very point at which documentation breaks off might represent the most interesting and even crucial episodes.⁷⁴

Given the rate at which legends have grown about Franz Kafka,⁷⁵ this cautious approach is understandable. Though it has given Stach an Aristotelian severity and puts him at the other

⁷⁴ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 83.

⁷⁵ I will consider some of these in the second part of this commentary.

end of the axis from Stern – however Stach is as concerned about writers who slip between the historical record and speculation, as about those who take an openly fictitious approach. In part his attitude probably stems from the nature of the Kafka archive: in some respects it is abundant, in other respects barren – there are loud silences in the archive.

For example, Kafka was intimately involved with at least four women, Felice Bauer, Julie Wohryzek, Milena Jesenska and Dora Diamant. His letters to Felice Bauer and Milena Jesenska amount to hundreds of pages; they lived respectively in Berlin and Vienna. Julie Wohryzek lived in Prague and so there is just one extant letter, and that was written to her sister. Yet Kafka was engaged to her, and though his *Letter to my Father* was prompted by his father's objection to the marriage, she has remained a shadowy figure – she was outside of his circle of friends and so their reminiscences don't include her. Dora Diamant lived with Kafka in the last year of his life after he moved to Berlin, and so there is no correspondence between them, but she did give an account of their relationship many years later. In short, we know more about the women who were remote from Kafka, than those with whom he was physically close. This is a general biographical problem – letters are kept, conversations are lost. Yet with Kafka the problem is worse than in many cases. His first biographer after the Second World War, Klaus Wagenbach, visited Prague in 1957.

...almost all of the buildings in which Kafka lived or worked survived.... On the other hand, time and again my search for documents ended in plundered archives; my search for surviving witnesses almost always ended in a room of the Jewish Town Hall on the Maiseglasse (Maislová ulice), the walls of which held shelves filled with hundreds

of cards listing their first name, surname and place of birth – all invariably bore the same rubber stamp: Oświęcim – AUSCHWITZ.⁷⁶

Kafka's three sisters were killed by the Nazis – Gabriele and Valerie died in the Łódź Ghetto in 1942, along with Valerie's husband, Josef Pollak.⁷⁷ Ottla was deported to Theresienstadt where she remained until 5 October 1943, when she accompanied a group of children to Auschwitz and died with them on arrival in a gas chamber.⁷⁸ His nephew, Felix, died in occupied France in 1940 either in a camp, or trying to flee to Spain (there are two accounts of his death), and Kafka's niece, Hanne, also died in the camps. His uncle, Siegfried, who inspired the story, *The Country Doctor*, killed himself to avoid being deported.⁷⁹

Julie Wohryzek died in Auschwitz, Milena Jesenská died in Ravensbrück⁸⁰ – but Kafka's other two girl-friends survived: Felice Bauer emigrated to Switzerland in 1931, and from there to the United States in 1936; Dora Diamant stayed in Berlin until she was arrested by the Gestapo, who took all of the notebooks and manuscripts of Kafka that she had preserved, but she managed to escape Germany and move to the Soviet Union, though life there proved to be equally intimidating, and she fled again, and died in London and is buried in East Ham.⁸¹

Many friends and acquaintances were also killed and their possessions seized. In the early 1960s the doctor and former classmate of Kafka, Hugo Hecht, started to research what had happened to those who had been at school with him. He found that by the end of the Second World War – at which point the men should have been in their early sixties – only 5 out of 22

⁷⁶ Wagenbach (2011), 3.

⁷⁷ Wagnerová (1997), 197.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 203.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 198.

⁸⁰ Buber-Neumann (1990), 204. The letters she wrote to Kafka have not survived.

⁸¹ Diamant (2003), 317.

had survived. Kafka had outlived three of them – two had killed themselves, and his friend, Oskar Pollak, had died on the Insonzo Front in 1915. If five of the class hadn't become doctors, and proved themselves useful to the authorities, the tally of the dead in 1945 would have been higher.⁸²

A collection of reminiscences of Kafka has been published by Wagenbach⁸³ – it's just 230 pages long. It is not possible to write about Kafka without confronting this silence.

Part of the reason for Reiner Stach's reticence about straying from the record is that it's easy for a biographer to slip from documented history to conjecture given the amount that isn't known. This is not to say that Stach objects to all speculative writing, he evident felt the need at times to make his biography vivid by occasionally inventing scenes. For example, he gives a fictional account of Kafka being medically examined by the army, and being passed fit for service.⁸⁴ Yet his own use of biographical fiction⁸⁴ does not prevent him from criticizing others who employ this approach. He objects to the liberties Sebald took with the historical record – which I will discuss below.

And Stach is also critical when there's a shift to speculation without this being made apparent to the reader. For example, in his biography, *The Nightmare of Reason*, Ernst Pawel gives an account of Kafka meeting his fiancée in Berlin in 1913, '...they spent a few painful hours walking around Grunewald Park, total strangers to one another.'⁸⁵

But there is no record of how they talked to each other or how they felt – only that at one point they sat together on a tree, and that he smelt the scent on her throat.⁸⁶ And Stach

⁸² Stach (2016), *Is That Kafka? – 99 Finds*, 267.

⁸³ Ed. Koch (2005), *"Als Kafka mir entgegenkam..." – Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka*.

⁸⁴ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 50.

⁸⁵ Pawel (1998), 291.

⁸⁶ Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 348.

comments, ‘...the imagination of the biographer carries him one step too far. This is how legends arise.’⁸⁷

However complete self-discipline is hard and Stach is not free from such over-stepping himself, e.g. ‘He did not grasp the significance that there were German army officers strutting about everywhere.’⁸⁸ Stach is convinced that Kafka didn’t understand why the German army was present in Hungary in April 1915 when he went to visit one of his brothers-in-law. Kafka left no record of any analysis of Austro-German relations in the second year of war, but given the comments in his diary of the previous autumn about Habsburg defeats,⁸⁹ he must have followed the war’s progress, and I find it hard to imagine that he couldn’t grasp the obvious implication of seeing German soldiers: that help had been offered and accepted. Particularly as in the previous month the Galician fortress of Przemyśl had fallen to the Russians. The Habsburgs lost 2,500 officers, including nine generals, and 117,000 other ranks; and though the Austrian press had written about the heroic spirit of the defenders, the disaster could not be disguised.⁹⁰ Kafka had no reason to write an analysis of Austro-German relations – the lack of a document is not conclusive proof of a lack of understanding.

In May 1915 Kafka wrote to Felice Bauer ahead of his enlistment-medical which would determine whether he would be recruited into the army – if his office didn’t object. According to Stach, she ‘...could hardly believe her eyes.’ Kafka had written, ‘...it would be my good fortune to become a soldier, assuming that my health allows, which I am hoping will be the case.’⁹¹

⁸⁷ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 267.

⁸⁸ Ibid 514.

⁸⁹ Kafka (1972), *Diaries*, 314.

⁹⁰ Watson (2019), *The Fortress*, 212.

⁹¹ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 52.

Yet Stach offers no evidence regarding Felice Bauer’s thoughts. As her letters have not survived this is not surprising. It’s conceivable that she would have regarded Kafka’s words as part of his consistent inconsistency – at times he wanted to be with her, at times he didn’t; they got engaged, they got un-engaged, he was writing love letters to her once more; as far as she could tell he was difficult and changeable. It’s also conceivable that Kafka had told her of his feeling of being overshadowed by his father, and now wanted to surpass him, for his father had been a soldier and often spoke of his years in uniform – they could even be regarded as his university⁹² – but he hadn’t served in a war. And it’s conceivable that she regarded Kafka’s attitude as part of the Jewish determination to serve the Austro-German cause – Jews were over-represented in the army as they were determined to prove their patriotism, and so many unlikely Jewish soldiers must have been in uniform.⁹³ Indeed Felice Bauer could have had many thoughts when she read Kafka’s words, and we can’t know what they were.

A larger problem with Stach’s approach is his reverence of Kafka. In the introduction to the earliest volume of his biography⁹⁴ he wrote, ‘We cannot imagine him here, seated at in a chair across from us, at the checkout counter of a supermarket, or at a bar around the corner. His is a cultural aura that thrives on distance, strangeness, an otherness that we do not forget for a moment, and that aura is connected to both his failure and his fame.’⁹⁵

⁹² Wagnerová (1997), 60.

⁹³ Watson (2014), *Ring of Steel*, 86. Unfortunately this did not protect them from anti-Semitism as the war dragged on – as Walter Rathenau foresaw, ‘The more Jews die in this conflict, the more persistent will be their opponents’ complaints that the Jews did nothing but sit behind the front lines profiteering from the war. The hatred will double and triple.’ Quoted in Elon (2002), *The Pity of it All*, 337.

⁹⁴ Stach wrote first about his life between 1910 and 1915, as he was hoping that Max Brod’s estate would release a cache of papers. Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 15.

⁹⁵ Ibid 4.

Yet Kafka wasn't 'a cultural aura' – he was a man. And thanks to the vignettes left by his friends we can see him in a few mundane moments. Milena Jesenská, for example, described him in a letter to Max Brod.

Were you ever in the post office with him? After he composes a telegram and picks out whatever little counter he likes best, he shakes his head, then drifts to another counter, and so on, without the slightest idea as to what end or why, until he finally stumbles on the right one, and when he pays and receives change, he counts it and discovers one krone too many, and so gives one back to the girl behind the counter. Then he walks away slowly, counts once again, and in the middle of descending the last staircase he realizes that the missing krone belonged to him after all. So there you stand next to him, at a loss, while he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, wondering what to do. Going back is difficult; upstairs there's now a crowd of people pushing and shoving. "So just let it go," I say. He looks at me completely horrified. How can you let it go? Not that he's sorry about the krone. But it's not good. There's one krone missing. How can you forget about something like that? He spoke about it for a long time and was very dissatisfied with me.... Of course, this same man would be eager and extremely happy to give me twenty thousand krone with no questions asked. On the other hand, if I were to ask him for twenty thousand and one krone and we had to exchange money somewhere and didn't know where, he would seriously worry about the one krone I hadn't been allocated.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Kafka (1990), *Letters to Milena*, 249.

Apart from ignoring this evidence, Stach's attitude seems too reverential for a biographer and too disembodied – certainly when compared to that of Holmes describing his attitude to Robert Louis Stevenson:

Beyond this sense of physical presence growing upon the biographer – which includes the whole aura of personal body influence, the sound of Stevenson's voice, his particular loose-limbed gait, his mixture of frail boniness and hectic energy, the large mobile brown eyes, the quick thin wrists and ankles, the smell of tobacco and cognac and cologne and sweaty Scottish tweed mixed with the rank odour of Modestine [his donkey] – there is a growing awareness of psychological complication.⁹⁷

If a biographer does not have the courage to approach his subject with a degree of equality then the biography must surely be muted. In a way this can be seen by the lack of humour in Stach's work. It's evident that Kafka was an entertaining man who could freely laugh. Yet Stach condemns him to seriousness.⁹⁸

And though there is a recognition of the limitations of biography,⁹⁹ Stach does not show the same awareness as Coe as to the essential shortcomings of conventional biography in tackling the life and work of a highly imaginative writer. The very thing that made Kafka worth writing about, his silent work pen in hand, remains hidden. Yet Coe is a novelist himself and Stach isn't.

⁹⁷ Holmes (1985), *Footsteps*, 68.

⁹⁸ See the review of Stach's biography by Rivka Galchen (2014) *What kind of funny is he?* – London Review of Books.

⁹⁹ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 15.

Writing about Kafka : Example 3: Loose Fidelity to the Archive

A special place is held by Max Brod amongst writers on Kafka. They met at university and remained friends for the rest of their lives. Brod encouraged Kafka to publish his work, helped him find outlets in the press in Prague, and introduced him to his first publisher, Kurt Wolff;¹⁰⁰ he collected his manuscripts, and refused to burn them after Kafka died – as Kafka requested.¹⁰¹ He had his three unfinished novels published in the 1920s, *Amerika*, *The Trial* and *The Castle*; he arranged for the royalties to be divided between Dora Diamant and his parents on a ratio of 45:55, and refused to take any fee for his efforts;¹⁰² he wrote the first biography of Kafka, which was published in 1937; and when Prague was seized by the Nazis in 1938 he fled with a suitcase containing Kafka’s manuscripts. As his train reached Poland at 4am he looked out of the window and saw the German army close the border – one train later would have been too late.¹⁰³ Despite being wanted by the Gestapo he wouldn’t abandon his friend’s work, but carried everything he could from Central Europe to Palestine. His bag contained:¹⁰⁴

1. The drafts of the three unfinished novels: *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *Amerika*.
2. Drafts of many of the short stories.
3. Kafka’s diaries and travel journals.
4. Kafka’s aphorisms.

¹⁰⁰ ‘From the first moment I had the impression of an impresario presenting the star he had discovered. Of course that was how it was.’ Kurt Wolff quoted in Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 75. As befitted an impresario, Brod ensured that there were many favourable reviews published of Kafka’s work. For Kafka’s first book, *Contemplation*, Brod wrote two himself. These are included in the appendix to this commentary.

¹⁰¹ Kafka asked Brod to do this twice. After the first request Brod made it clear that he wouldn’t – and indeed given his devotion to collecting and preserving Kafka’s work he was an unlikely candidate. And Kafka had opportunity to burn much of his work himself, but refrained from doing so. Karl (1991), 718.

¹⁰² Wagnerová (1997), 187.

¹⁰³ Balint (2019), 146.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 151.

5. Kafka's Hebrew exercises.
6. Kafka's letters to Brod.

Brod went on to write a second book on Kafka and edit and publish much of the archive. His editing was coloured by his Jewish faith and a religious view of his friend. 'The category of sacredness (and not really that of literature) is the only right category under which Kafka's life and work can be viewed.'¹⁰⁵

This might have surprised Kafka given how he described himself in a love letter to Felice Bauer, 'I have no literary interests, but am made of literature. I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else.'¹⁰⁶

And Brod asserted that, 'A characteristic that places him in the realm of the sacred was his absolute faith.'¹⁰⁷ Yet he also recorded a conversation from 28 February, 1920, that ended like this:

KAFKA : I believe we are not a radical relapse of God's, only one of his bad moods.

He had a bad day.

BROD : So there would be hope outside our world?

KAFKA : [smiling] Plenty of hope, for God, no end of hope, only not for us.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 428. I'll discuss Brod's view of Kafka holiness further in the second section of the commentary when I look at the legends about him. But it is worth noting here Kafka's reaction to Brod's review of his first slender book – a collection of sketches, *Contemplation*. 'Max's review is more than excessive. Just because of his friendship for me has roots far deeper than those of literature, and for this reason it's effective long before literature gets a chance, he overestimates me to a degree that makes me feel embarrassed, and vain, and conceited....' Franz Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 428. The review, *A Literary Event*, was published in *März*, No.7 February, 1913, and re-published in Born (1979), 24-27. It's included in the appendix below.

¹⁰⁷ Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 75.

Brod went further in his second book on his friend when he called him, '...a religious hero from the ranks of the prophets.'¹⁰⁹ And this attitude coloured his editing of Kafka's work for publication. For example, when he published the Zürau Aphorisms in 1931, and again in 1953, he left out this:

A stinking bitch – mother of countless litters – who was everything to me as a child, follows me faithfully and I can't bear to beat her away, though I shun her breath, and if I can't decide otherwise, I'll continue to retreat step by step to the corner of the wall, which is already close by, and there on me and with me – to honour me? – she'll decay and her flesh is riddled with worms and pus and her tongue is on my hand.¹¹⁰

Despite this entry Max Brod argued that Kafka's aphorisms expressed, '...the positive word that he had to say to people, a faith, a firm request to reform their lives in detail – in a similar way to Tolstoy.'¹¹¹ The stinking bitch muddied the water.

¹⁰⁹ Brod (1974), *Über Franz Kafka*, 223. Even the title of the second part of this book, *Franz Kafka's Faith and Doctrine*, seems questionable. For the earliest criticism of this see Walter Benjamin's essay, *Max Brod's Book on Kafka*, where he describes Kafka as a writer of parables without a doctrine. Benjamin (1999), 142.

¹¹⁰ Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, (1953). The full text has been published by Suhrkamp after Roberto Calasso studied the original manuscript which is now held by the Bodleian Library in Oxford – Kafka (2006), *Die Zürauer Aphorismen*, 20 – aphorism 8/9, my translation. (The manuscript reached Oxford due to a bombing raid by the Italian air force on Jerusalem on 9 September, 1940, which killed 137 people. Max Brod decided that he needed to hide the original manuscripts in a secure place, and handed them over to the Schocken Library which had a fireproof safe. In 1956 the library, without telling Brod, transferred the manuscripts which belonged to the Kafka Estate to Switzerland. And in 1961 Schocken and the Kafka Estate gave Malcolm Pasley permission to work on the manuscripts, and he collected them in his car and drove them through France to Oxford. Balint (2019), 150.)

¹¹¹ Brod (1974), *Über Franz Kafka*, 223.

Yet when Kafka revised his aphorisms and struck a line through some of them, what remained had no reference to God.¹¹² And even the most religious of the original set had no firmer affirmation of faith than this:

A man can’t live without faith in something indestructible within him; though he might be unaware of both this indestructible thing and this faith; and the lack of awareness can lead to faith in a personal god.¹¹³

And the following is closer to the spirit of many of them.

The leopards break into the temple and lick clean the sacrificial bowls; this happens again and again; finally it can be foreseen and becomes part of the ritual.¹¹⁴

It is hardly an affirmation of religion. On the other hand it’s not a denial, yet it shows an ironic detachment – a desire to question faith and ceremonies.

Max Brod’s selective editing also had an impact on the version of Kafka’s diary that he published. Here is the end of the first entry from Zürau – dated, 15 September, 1917:

O, beautiful hour, masterful setting, a garden turning wild. You leave the house, go round the corner and the Goddess of Fortune rushes down the path towards you.

Majestic appearance, prince of the realm.

¹¹² Regarding Brod’s interpretation of the aphorisms, Stach concludes, ‘It must have been abundantly clear to any reasonably attentive and objective reader that he was wrong.’ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 232.

¹¹³ Kafka (2006), *Die Zürauer Aphorismen*, 61 – aphorism 50, my translation.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30 – aphorism 20, my translation.

Five bulldogs – Phillipp, Franz, Adolf, Isidor and Max.

The village square given to the night. The wisdom of the children. The primacy of the animals. The women – cows nonchalantly roam about the place. My sofa floats over the land.

The sentences I've underlined are those that Brod did not include,¹¹⁵ but now can be found in the published edition of the full diary.¹¹⁶ Again the dogs are removed. And the last sentence gives a whimsical air to the passage and suggests the spirit of Chagall – it transforms it all.

Brod's editing here flattens our image of Kafka by removing one earthy image, the dogs, and one that's ethereal, the floating sofa – an image which hints that the village is somehow insubstantial. Having created a rural scene in the reader's mind, Kafka then calls it solidity into question.

Here is another, and later, aphorism which Kafka noted down in his diary on 13 January, 1920, but which Brod excluded from the edition he edited.

He could come to terms with prison. To be a prisoner to the end – that could be his life's aim. But there was the cage. Yet through this cage streamed the commotion of the world – as if it were at home – and the prisoner was free to take part in it all, nothing escaped him, and he could escape if he wished, the bars were a yard apart, he was never a prisoner.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Kafka (1972), *Diaries*, 383.

¹¹⁶ Kafka (2004), *Tagebücher 1914-1923*, 161, my translation.

¹¹⁷ Kafka (2004), *Tagebücher 1914-1923*, 175, my translation.

As with the first diary entry from Zürau, there is a sense of a world being created and then dissolved – with words a picture is painted in the mind's eye of the reader and then it's transformed until only a trace of it remains. Kafka's sense of the irrationality and insubstantiality of the world eluded his closest friend, 'Max does not understand me, and where he does, he is wrong.'¹¹⁸

Max Brod created silences in the archive, which only came to light when the full texts of the diaries and aphorisms were published. By his biographies and by hiding some of Kafka's work Brod created a partial picture in the mind of his readers. Given that his life in the 1930s and 1940s was over-shadowed by the Nazi regime, it's understandable that Brod reacted by declaring a great German writer to be a great Jewish religious thinker and an exemplary pious man – he refused to accept that a Jew could have no part in German culture; nor that writing in German was a barrier to being fundamentally Jewish. Yet still he masked a side of his friend's character and work. It was a form of negative creation.

Writing about Kafka : Example 4: Anchored Fiction

In his story, *Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva*, Sebald gives a fictional account of Kafka's journey in September, 1913, from Prague to Vienna, Trieste, Venice and Riva.¹¹⁹ He went to Vienna to attend a health and safety congress on the behalf of his employer, and also to visit a Zionist congress for his own sake. After which he continued travelling south for a holiday. And

¹¹⁸ Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 527.

¹¹⁹ Sebald (1999), 139.

broadly Sebald follows Kafka's itinerary and bases his story on Kafka's letters and diaries, plus some additional research. Yet Stach describes it as 'unrealistic' and 'plainly short of empiricism.'¹²⁰ One of the reasons for this is a dream of an angel bursting through a ceiling that Sebald describes as a vision of Kafka's in a hotel during his one night in Trieste – 14 September, 1913. But which Kafka recorded in his diary on 25 June, 1914. In his travel diary Kafka does complain of headaches and a bad dream,¹²¹ but there is no evidence of a vision of an angel in Trieste. However, just because Kafka recorded something on a certain day, it doesn't mean that it reflects that day's experience. And given Kafka's other thoughts around the time of his trip – documented in his diaries and letters¹²² – the angel remains a possibility. The dream might have been dreamed more than once.

But the main point I want to make here does not depend on the accuracy of all the details in Sebald's story. I believe it is more fruitful to look at the voice Sebald used in writing. This is the opening paragraph:

On Saturday the 6th of September, 1913, Dr K., the Deputy Secretary of the Prague Workers' Insurance Company, is on his way to Vienna to attend a congress on rescue services and hygiene. Just as the fate of a man wounded on a battlefield depends upon the quality of the first dressing, he reads in a newspaper he has bought at the border-post of Gmünd, so too the first aid administered at everyday accidents is of the greatest importance for the casualty's recovery. Dr K. finds this statement almost as disquieting

¹²⁰ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 369.

¹²¹ Kafka (2003), *Reisetagebücher*, 111. The short travel diary from 1913 is not included in the travel diaries edited by Max Brod. Is that because of Kafka's disparaging description of the Zionist congress, his boredom there, and his mention of an equally bored woman throwing paper balls from the balcony?

¹²² For example, his fantasy of being brutally murdered described in a love letter to Felice Bauer on 2 September, 1913. Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 441.

as the reference to the social events which will accompany the congress. Outside, Heiligenstadt already: an ominous deserted station, the trains empty. Dr K. feels he has reached the end of the line and realises he should have begged the director on bended knees to let him stay in Prague. But of course it is too late now.¹²³

Sebald uses the present tense and the third person. This takes the reader into the train compartment with Dr K, as he reads the newspaper, and even into his head as he reflects on it. Then there is the implied glance out of the window, 'Heiligenstadt already,' and the description of the station heightens the impression of his bleak mood and regret. And the rhythm of the prose and its flow from one sentence to another hints at the motion of a train, and the sad inevitability of the journey which is just beginning.

Through his manner of telling Sebald says much. In comparison, Stach described the journey like this, 'He was travelling now in an official capacity, on the way to the first (and only) major event in which he would participate as an official delegate of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute.'¹²⁴ And he goes on to say that the congress had, 'weighed heavily on his mind for a long time.' And this is a perfectly reasonable description, but it doesn't convey as much – it conveys the facts but not the feelings. It doesn't make the scene vivid in the reader's mind in the same way. Sebald's story has its own form of accuracy. Form has function.

And this is particularly important given Kafka's aim in writing. Only once did he state explicitly what this was, but it's a vital passage for understanding his work.

¹²³ Sebald (1999), 141.

¹²⁴ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 350.

It was like this: once many years ago I was sitting, certainly sad enough, on the slopes of the Laurenziberg.¹²⁵ [I was probing my wishes for my future. The most important thing, or the most attractive, was to gain a view of life (and – this was necessarily bound up with it – to convince others by my writing), and this view should encompass life’s grave, natural falling and rising, yet acknowledge with no less a clarity the dream, the drift, the nothingness that also was life. A beautiful wish perhaps, if I had wished it sincerely. It was similar to wishing to hammer together a table with precise craftsmanship and at the same time to do nothing and to do it in such a way that it wouldn’t be said, ‘hammering is nothing to him,’ but rather, ‘his hammering is truly hammering and it’s nothing,’ and so the hammering would have become more daring, more resolute, more real, and, if you will, more senseless. But he couldn’t wish like that, for his wish wasn’t a wish, it was just a defence, a bourgeois masking of a void, a whistling in the dark, for though he had hardly taken his first conscious steps in nothingness, he sensed it was his element.] It was a sort of parting from the illusions of youth, which had never deceived him directly, but which had allowed him to be deceived by the authorities which surrounded him. So that’s how the ‘wish’ became inevitable¹²⁶

As has already been discussed, Kafka’s work conveyed a sense of the uncanny. And there was a deep purpose to this – Kafka wanted to express his insight into the deceptive illusion of our world. Sebald seemed to have grasped this, and makes his own biographical story

¹²⁵ A hill above the river in Prague with a view of the city. (Petřín in Czech.) Kafka starts here with ‘I’ then shifts to ‘he’ as if becoming remote from himself.

¹²⁶ Kafka (2004), *Tagebücher 1914-1923*, 179, my translation. The passage breaks off in mid sentence.

uncanny in a way that reminds the reader of Kafka. When Stach accuses him of a lack of empiricism, he is missing the point. For Kafka empiricism was naive.

Later I'll discuss the relationship between Kafka's *Letter to my Father* and his *Metamorphosis*. But the novella also needs to be considered in respect to Stach's criticism of Sebald. *Metamorphosis* is an autobiographical tale which expresses Kafka's sense of isolation in his family and his fear of his father. Gregor Samsa is transformed into a giant insect and killed by violence and neglect. Franz Kafka never became a giant insect and was not killed by his family. By the standard of Reiner Stach, *Metamorphosis* fails for its lack of empiricism. And many other tales by Kafka could illustrate this point.¹²⁷ Indeed, given Stach's attitude to the value of imaginative writing, it's puzzling why he has devoted his life to Kafka.

Summary of this Section

The work of these four authors show that historical distortions do not depend on the genre of the writing. The inventions of JP Stern and the omissions of Max Brod are both misleading; Reiner Stach and WG Sebald are more faithful to the record – in their own ways. Whether the authors stand back and summarise and analyse in the traditional manner of biographers, or move forward and show scenes in detail as novelists, is not important with regard to accuracy – both approaches can give accounts which are accurate or inaccurate. The distinction between biography and fiction is more significant when it comes to entering into the silences – it is more to do with the willingness to go beyond the record, but doing so without

¹²⁷ For example, *The Judgement* is a tale of a son driven to suicide by his father. In almost all its details it is distinct from Kafka's life, but it does convey the sense of a son who feels himself doomed by his father's overwhelming power. It expresses the fear that Kafka describes at length in *Letter to my Father*. Anthony Northey, *Myths and realities in Kafka biography*, in Kafka, Ed Preece, 198.

ignoring the record. Yet Sebald’s approach follows the spirit of Kafka’s metaphysics – and so, to my mind, conveys a deeper impression of Kafka’s character.

Barbara Caine makes the following argument in *Biography and History*:

The gaps in the record call for the exercise of imagination, and both microhistorians and some biographers have stressed the need to draw on their imagination in order to produce their work. There is no suggestion here that the use of imagination makes the work into a fiction. On the contrary, Zemon Davis and others stress that their use of imagination is contained within the documents and sources available, and depends on their detailed knowledge of the period and place under discussion.¹²⁸

Given her desire to distinguish history from fiction, Caine might be understood to be upholding Aristotle’s firm distinction between different genres. However I believe that biography and biographical fiction merge at certain points, and that fiction does not necessarily mean distortion. Though given her endorsement of the use of imagination, she seems to be following the same line of thought as BS Johnson – that the techniques of the novel can convey truth without the need for free invention. Yet I think it’s possible to go further than that, at least with regard to Kafka, and say that empirical biography, anchored novels and fiction can all help reveal and portray his character and life – but given the variety of approaches to writing about him, the choice made by Sebald is for me the most fruitful. This is not to say that I want to write

¹²⁸ Caine (2019), 111.

in exactly the same manner, and I will explain why in the third part of this commentary, but Sebald's story was my starting point.

I reached a similar conclusion to Olga Tokarczuk, which she stated emphatically.

I believe in the novel. I believe that the novel is one of the most sublime genres of literature: it has the power to enrapture the reader and take her into a kind of trance. So much can be communicated in a novel, not just information. The novel has the ambition to build up a kind of virtual world, in which the reader is immersed up to her ears, and must make herself at home for a while. It operates on several levels, because it forges an emotional bond with the reader, and stimulates the mechanisms which generate sympathy. It's a form of total communication.¹²⁹

With similar conviction, Stephen King described writing as a form of telepathy – images are created in the writer's mind and passed to the reader's mind through the medium of words. A red table cloth and a white rabbit in a cage can be put into a novel and they will appear before the mind's eye of anybody who reads that page.¹³⁰ In the words of Edward Mendelson, 'This private image-making is an essential part of the act of reading, and helps to explain why no impersonal theoretical account of a book can ever be adequate.'¹³¹

White rabbits are important – details make a scene vivid, they give life to whatever is taking place, they help the reader see, and when the reader sees the characters are more readily

¹²⁹ Lackey (2018), *Conversations with Biographical Novelists – Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, 235.

¹³⁰ King (2020), *On Writing*, 116.

¹³¹ *The New York Review*, December 8, 2022. *Life, Death, This Moment of June*. A review of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, 33.

grasped by the imagination. Therefore the biographical novel has an advantage over the biography – fictional technique, going beyond the archive, can bring the dead to life in a way that a biography can't if it does not go further than the scant remains of the written record.

To return to the train that Kafka took from Prague to Vienna in 1913, and the accounts by Stach and Sebald – the novelist offers more by allowing the reader to picture the scene in the theatre in the head. Kafka is brought to life because Sebald exercises more of the reader's mind. Reading is not a passive activity – the brain engages with the text, and it does so in different ways depending on how a scene is described, and psychologists are gradually discovering how it happens.¹³²

And before neuroscience had the tools to investigate the brain's responses, the case for reading as an imaginative activity was made by Wolfgang Iser, not only because of the mind's instinctive picturing of events, but also because of the need to fill in the gaps and make sense of dis-connections.¹³³ All of which becomes even clearer when the theatre is considered.

It is always the popular theatre that saves the day. Through the ages it has taken many forms, and there is only one factor that they all have in common – a roughness.

Salt, sweat, noise, smell: the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre in carts, on wagons,

¹³² Research has been conducted into the effects of reading fiction, for example see, Christopher Bergland, Psychology Today, *Reading Fiction Improves Brain Connectivity and Function*, 4 January, 2014.
Gregory S. Berns, Kristina Blaine, Michael J. Prietula and Brandon E. Pye, Brain Connectivity, *Short and Long Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain*, 9 December, 2013, Vol 3, No 6.

However, I have not yet found an article which details a comparative test on the same people reading, say, a telephone directory, a motorcycle manual, a biography and a novel – to see how differently their brains responded. I think this would be a fruitful line of enquiry but such an experiment is far beyond the scope of this commentary.

¹³³ Iser (1978), *The Act of Reading*, 22.

on trestles...; the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned across the hall, the battered screen to conceal quick changes...¹³⁴

The roughness of theatre in a pub’s spare room, for example, doesn’t matter, if an audience’s imagination is engaged. The ruins of Troy can be a black silhouette painted on a yellow wall, if those watching are lost in the dream of the show. The minds following the actors are busy transforming what they see into what they want to see.

And fiction makes minds equally busy – because readers, in the theatres inside their heads, transform marks on a page into a railway station in the final years of the Habsburg Empire.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Brook (1968), *The Empty Space*, 73.

¹³⁵ Therefore I think Laurent Binet – or, at least, the narrator of his novel, *HHhH* – is misguided when he says, ‘I just hope that however bright and blinding the veneer of fiction that covers this fabulous story, you will be able to see through it to the historical reality that lies behind.’ For the techniques of fiction, when well deployed, enable the reader to see into the past, and give some life to the dead. Binet (2012), Section 1. (*HHhH* was printed without page numbers.)

PART THREE:

Legends about Franz Kafka

In the previous section I looked at four writers on Kafka with the aim of creating a distinction between biography and biographical-fiction. I did this to show the advantages I saw in writing a novel about Franz Kafka. This entailed some description of the ideas that have developed around him. In this section I will go further into the legends around Kafka.

By ‘legend’ I mean an understanding that is widely believed – it is a notion that may rest on some archival evidence, or very little, or even none at all. I am not using ‘legend’ in a pejorative sense – legends are not necessarily false. The purpose of this section is to help explain what sort of portrait I wanted to create in my novel – how by a fictional portrayal I could engage with some of the legends.

My aim followed that of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie when she urged that fiction should avoid single stories.¹³⁶ For many of the legends stem from a partial view of Kafka – taking part of the man and substituting it for the whole. And, beyond that, Adichie’s talk suggests a limitation of the British view of the First World War – that it also is a single story: one of a conflict which has been almost reduced to the trenches of Flanders. Therefore the secondary purpose of my novel is to bring attention to the wider war – to try and shift readers’ perspective to the battles in the east, the hunger of Central Europe, and the opportunities for women that arose because the men were away or dead.

¹³⁶ TED Talk 7 October, 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Yet my central preoccupation was Kafka. Naturally, it is hard to say precisely for every legend about him how it arose and how it spread, yet there are three authors who appear to have contributed more than any others – Vladimir Nabokov, Max Bod and Franz Kafka himself.

I dealt with Brod in the previous section, so here I will concentrate on Nabokov and Kafka, but no discussion of the ideas around Kafka's life can avoid repeatedly returning to the influence of Brod.

Nabokov's academic career spanned seventeen years at Wellesley College and Cornell University – 1941 to 1958. He lectured on Russian, British, Irish, French and German writers from Gogol to Joyce. He only revised his lecture notes for one book – a biography of Gogol¹³⁷ – otherwise the notes were left together with the annotated copies of the texts he had read for their preparation. The handwritten sheets on Kafka's, *Metamorphosis*, were used after Nabokov's death by Fredson Bowers to make one of the essays in the collection called, *Lectures on Literature*.¹³⁸ So it is unclear to what extent the essay reflects Nabokov's considered opinions, and to what extent he was speaking to stimulate his students rather than strictly informing them.¹³⁹ There is another silence in the archive here. Yet the essay has been accepted as Nabokov's judgement on *Metamorphosis* and Kafka, and it is still in print and referred to and translated. In 2014, for example, Fischer republished the novella with Nabokov's essay and no

¹³⁷ Nabokov (1944), *Nikolai Gogol*.

¹³⁸ Nabokov, Ed. Bowers, (1980), *Lectures on Literature*.

¹³⁹ To suggest the mischievous nature of Nabokov's teaching, in her biography Jane Grayson quotes one of his former students who was left confused over Dostoevsky's nationality – she knew, '...he wasn't a Russian because Professor Nabokov had said so, so many times, but since he was so gloomy, she thought he might be a Swede.' Grayson, (2001), *Vladimir Nabokov*, 88.

other commentary.¹⁴⁰ In short, because of Nabokov's fame as a novelist, his criticism is widely read.¹⁴¹

The essay starts with some background remarks about Kafka, there then follows a lengthy summary of the story broken down into its three parts, each of which Nabokov divided into a number of scenes, and the essay concludes with a discussion of the themes which Nabokov saw as most significant for an understanding of the work.

Nabokov's Essay

After comparing *Metamorphosis* with *The Overcoat* by Gogol and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Stevenson, Nabokov gives a brief sketch of Kafka's life. It begins, 'Born in 1883, Franz Kafka came from a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, Czechoslovakia.'¹⁴²

Yet Czechoslovakia didn't exist until 1918 when Kafka was thirty-five. Kafka was born, educated, and employed in the Habsburg Empire and he was awarded an imperial medal for his civilian services during the war.¹⁴³ As Kafka wrote of himself, 'I have forcibly received the

¹⁴⁰ Kafka, (2014), *Die Verwandlung Mit einem Kommentar von Vladimir Nabokov*.

¹⁴¹ On Amazon.com Nabokov's lectures have been rated 114 times and have an average approval score of 4.7 out of 5. 'Best writer in English gives lectures on great works,' is how one reviewer describes the book and this captures the general tone. This review was posted on 11 March, 2020. The essays are evidently still influencing people's opinions. In 1989 the lecture was made into a short film directed by Peter Medak, featuring Christopher Plummer as Nabokov, called *Nabokov on Kafka*. On IMDB.com this has been rated 39 times and has an approval score of 7.8 out of 10. The latest review was posted on 22 November, 2017. The lecture has its own page on the *The Kafka Project* website – which, according to its published statistics, has been visited by almost three million people.

¹⁴² Nabokov, Ed. Bowers, (1980), *Lectures on Literature*, 255.

¹⁴³ Stach (2016), *Is That Kafka? – 99 Finds*, 250.

negative influence of my time, it is to be sure very close to me, and I have no right to struggle against it, but rather to represent it to a degree...'¹⁴⁴

For Nabokov to mislocate Kafka is to misrepresent him. The mention of Czechoslovakia encourages people to think that Kafka belonged to a later generation – that he was a writer of the mid-twentieth century who experienced Hitler and Stalin in power.¹⁴⁵ Yet the atmosphere of the late Habsburg Empire permeates his work. Kafka was not born in a capital city, but in a provincial administrative centre, where orders were received from a government built around a centuries old family whose feudal mentality was struggling to cope with the industrial age. And, furthermore, 'The uppermost court authorities were the only ones who reported personally to the emperor and received personal orders from him. This buffer zone between monarch and administration secured the degree of aloofness which had always been the hallmark of the monarchy and was also the personal intention of Franz Joseph.'¹⁴⁶

The remoteness and obscurity of authority is one of the distinguishing features of Kafka's work. Joseph K is a representative of the world of Franz Joseph as experienced by Franz Kafka. However, to reduce *The Trial* to a parody of the empire in its final years would be to exaggerate this connection, for the novel can be interpreted in a number of ways,¹⁴⁷ and yet the Habsburg regime has left its trace. In the summer of 1914 when First World War started, and Kafka began

¹⁴⁴ Kafka (1992), *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 98. My translation.

¹⁴⁵ This is a misconception I've come across more in conversation than in writing, but it's something I've encountered several times as a playwright discussing adaptations of Kafka before and after performances with members of the audience.

¹⁴⁶ Winkelhofer (2012), *The Everyday Life of the Emperor*, 53. Translated by Jeffrey A. McCabe.

¹⁴⁷ The most famous interpretation is by Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial*. This argues for the influence of Kafka's relationship with Felice Bauer and the interrogation he suffered in Berlin due to his vacillation – his seeming desire to escape from their engagement without actually saying so. *Kafka's Other Trial*, translated by Christopher Middleton, is published as the introduction to, Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*. There is no shortage of alternative readings, for example, 'Joseph K.'s arrest is a symbolic one. It is not caused by a civil authority. He is not incarcerated. It is a psychic arrestation, a fixation classical in neurosis. He is arrested on the anal level of sexual development. And he is the victim of a castration complex.' Charles Neider (1948), *The Frozen Sea – A Study of Franz kafka*.

The Trial, there was a wave of arbitrary arrests throughout the empire. People were taken in by the police after being denounced by anybody who cared to act as an informer.¹⁴⁸ And, seemingly by accident, Kafka left a mark of the war on his manuscript. 'Somebody must have maligned Joseph K because he was captured one morning without having done anything wrong.' Only later was 'captured' replaced by 'arrested' – otherwise the sentence remained unchanged.¹⁴⁹

Max Brod recorded that Kafka's reading of the first chapter was entertaining, '...he laughed so much that there were moments when he couldn't read any further. Astonishingly enough, when you think of the fearful earnestness of this chapter. But that is how it was.'¹⁵⁰

In part, I believe, this was because of the mockery and irony it contained. Brod described Kafka's work as standing, '...in a curious twilight of humour.'¹⁵¹ However given Kafka's reluctance to explain his stories and novels, no definite conclusion can be reached about the connection between his life and his art. This silence is one of the most significant obstacles to conclusively understanding Kafka. Yet this elusiveness was part of the meaning.¹⁵²

Yet Kafka did record the following in his diary as he was beginning *The Trial*, 'My fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for revealing my dreamlike inner life has pushed everything

¹⁴⁸ Watson (2019), *The Fortress*, 63. For example, 4,000 people were arrested in Galicia alone during the first week of the war. The primary target was those with Russian sympathies, but paranoia and false denunciations led to many loyal and law-abiding citizens being visited by the police – it was quickly grasped that 'preventive arrests' could be used to persecute political opponents, or anybody an informer disliked. Kafka expressed this in one of his fragmentary short stories, 'Two soldiers came and seized me. I struggled, but they held firm. They conducted me to their master, an officer. How cheerful was his uniform! I said, "What do you want with me, I am a civilian." The officer smiled and said, "You are a civilian, but that does not prevent us from seizing you. The army has power over everything."' Kafka (1992), *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, 21. My translation.

¹⁴⁹ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 465.

¹⁵⁰ Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 178.

¹⁵¹ Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 50.

¹⁵² Kafka's friend Jaroslav Hašek didn't trouble himself with elusiveness, his parody of the end of the empire, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, was abundantly clear in its treatment of secret policemen and arbitrary arrests. This novel should be read along with *The Trial*.

else into the background and it’s all crumbled dreadfully and nothing will stop it crumbling further. Nothing else will give me peace.’¹⁵³

Therefore no straight line can be drawn from life to art in Kafka’s case – experience was transmuted. Even so, his ‘dreamlike inner life’ was formed in the Habsburg Empire, and it has left its mark on *The Trial* and on *The Castle*, where the invisible Count Westwest dominates the village through the officials who reside in the inaccessible castle on the hill lurking above them – just as Vienna loomed over Prague.

And the imperial trace can also be seen in the stories set seemingly in the Chinese Empire. *The Great Wall of China*¹⁵⁴ is concerned with a piecemeal, confused and peculiar approach to defending the imperial border. It’s a wartime comedy that serves as a companion to *The Good Soldier Švejk*.¹⁵⁵ Hašek’s work is a farce from the perspective of a private soldier in the field; *The Great Wall* is a farce from the intellectual’s perspective. ‘Judging from appearances, if anybody concluded that we truly had no emperor, he wouldn’t be far from the truth.’¹⁵⁶

About the same time – at the end of winter in 1917 – Kafka wrote *The Imperial Messenger*. It is a deathbed tale of a messenger sent by a dying emperor, who must struggle through the vast numbers of people crowding the bedchamber, and then through court after court of the palace, until at the end of the story there is the even more exhausting prospect of crossing the imperial city, ‘...but never, never could that happen – nobody could fight his way through there, even with a message from a dead man.’¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Kafka (2005), *Tagebücher 1912-1914*, 167, my translation.

¹⁵⁴ The story was drafted in a notebook in March, 1917 – perhaps it seemed safer to set the tale far away rather than at home. Kafka (2012), *Abandoned Fragments*, 181.

¹⁵⁵ Hašek (1973), *The Good Soldier Švejk*, trans. Cecil Parrott.

¹⁵⁶ Kafka (2008), *Die Erzählungen*, 301, my translation.

¹⁵⁷ Kafka (2008), *Die Erzählungen*, 306. My translation.

At the start of that winter Franz Joseph had died after a reign of sixty-eight years. Clearly Kafka had found inspiration in this –though he shifted the tale to another ancient empire.¹⁵⁸ The prescience of the story was illustrated a year and a half later when Kafka was awarded his medal. Before the decoration could be confirmed each police department had to search its files. There is a surviving letter from the police to say that all of the checks had been made and ‘no incriminating records’ had been found. However this clerical search took some time and Kafka’s medal did not arrive until after the empire had vanished.¹⁵⁹

The bureaucratic peculiarities of the late Habsburg Empire, and its fragile ethnic mix, which saw the Jews protected in law, but still hated by many,¹⁶⁰ is vital to understanding the environment in which Kafka grew up and developed as a writer. Therefore, although Nabokov’s slip may seem slight, it is hugely significant.¹⁶¹

Nabokov then praises Kafka, ‘He is the greatest German writer of our time. Such poets as Rilke or such novelists as Thomas Mann are dwarfs or plaster saints in comparison to him.’¹⁶² But then Nabokov diminishes Kafka, ‘...he worked as a petty clerk, a small employee, in a very Gogolian office for an insurance company.’¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ China is not named in the text, but the description of the palace and its officials gives a Chinese impression. Mark Harman (2011), *The New York Review of Books*, September 29, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Stach (2016), *Is That Kafka? – 99 Finds*, 250.

¹⁶⁰ In 1908 Vienna’s chief rabbi, Dr. Moriz Gründermann, announced his loyalty, ‘Our Emperor has repeatedly said that all subjects of his large empire are equally close to his paternal heart, regardless of their nation or faith.... After all, it is precisely the lack of distinction, and equal rights for all which the Emperor has sanctioned and regards as sacrosanct, which obliges the Jews to feel the deepest gratitude to him.’ And yet Gründermann had to live in a city ruled by Mayor Lueger – an avowed anti-Semite. Hamann (1999), *Hitler’s Vienna – A Dictator’s Apprenticeship*, 331.

¹⁶¹ Indeed, in a literal sense Franz Kafka ceased to exist when the Habsburg Empire vanished, because the new government in Prague issued him with a Czechoslovak passport and renamed him František Kafka. The name Franz being unbearably German for the new country. (The passport was sold by Bonhams in 2015 for \$37,500.)

¹⁶² Nabokov, Ed. Bowers, (1980), *Lectures on Literature*, 255.

¹⁶³ Ibid. An idea which reached the cinema with Steven Soderbergh’s 1991 film, *Kafka*.

Kafka wasn’t petty, he was a significant employee, his national-insurance office was at the forefront of improving working conditions and providing for care for those who had suffered industrial accidents. To pursue these errors at length would take me beyond the purpose of this commentary, yet some examples are needed to show how Nabokov undervalues Kafka.

Kafka joined the Workers Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague in 1908 as a temporary assistant – an intern. By 1912 he was one of the three assistant managers in a department of seventy clerks, and he was the assistant who was delegated, ‘...the most important or rather the most unpleasant matters.’¹⁶⁴ And when the head of the department was away for any reason, Kafka was left in charge.¹⁶⁵

The next year he was promoted to vice secretary after writing a sixteen-page petition to his board of directors. It was closely argued and irrefutable¹⁶⁶ – and hardly the action of a Gogolian clerk. In *The Overcoat*, Bashmashkin is a copyist who shies away from anything more demanding; in *Diary of a Madman*, Poprishchin sharpens his manager’s quills.¹⁶⁷

Kafka was a remarkably useful employee with his ability to grasp a vast amount of detail, summarise it, and express his findings in lucid prose. His boss, Eugene Pfohl, regarded him as ‘first rate,’¹⁶⁸ and Kafka gave Pfohl considerable help in refuting the protests of the businesses which complained about the insurance premiums they were instructed to pay. The manner in which he resolved the dispute with The Association of Toy Manufacturers in the Erzgebirge is a delight, according to Reiner Stach, to specialists in insurance history.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Kafka (1978), *Letters to Felice*, 200.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 185.

¹⁶⁶ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 285.

¹⁶⁷ Gogol (1972), *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*.

¹⁶⁸ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 285.

¹⁶⁹ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 287.

He represented his institute in court – most notably in Kratzau on 26, November, 1912, though he was writing *Metamorphosis* at the time, and long afterwards blamed the Kratzau case for the deficiencies he saw in the story.¹⁷⁰ And he was the sole member of his institute to accompany his director, Marschner, at The Second International Congress for Rescue Services and Accident Prevention in Vienna in 1913¹⁷¹ – he went because he had written his director's speeches.

During the First world War he was assigned to his institute's work with wounded veterans, not only helping them individually, but he was involved with the campaign to fund and establish a psychiatric hospital, and wrote an appeal for the press which was published in the *Rumburger Zeitung*.

Soon after the outbreak of war, a strange apparition, arousing fear and pity, appeared in the streets of our cities. He was a soldier returned from the front. He could only move on crutches or had to be pushed along in a wheelchair. His body shook without cease, as if he were overcome by a mighty chill, or he was standing stock-still in the middle of a tranquil street, in the thrall of his experiences at the front. We see others, too, men who could move ahead only by taking jerky steps; poor, pale and gaunt, they leaped as though a merciless hand held them by the neck, tossing them forward and back in their tortured movements....¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ 'Great antipathy towards *Metamorphosis*. Unreadable ending. It's wrong almost fundamentally. It would have been much better if I hadn't then been interrupted by that business trip.' Kafka (2005), *Tagebücher 1912-1914*, 226, my translation.

¹⁷¹ Kafka (2003), *Reisetagebücher*, 111.

¹⁷² Kafka (2009), *The Office Writings*, 336. Translated by Eric Patton with Ruth Hein.

By the time Kafka retired in 1922 due to ill-health he was a senior secretary. Despite the ill-health he had suffered from 1917, and the lengthy periods of sick-leave he had been granted, and despite being a Jew in an openly anti-Semitic environment, and despite the switch from it being a German to a Czech organization, the institute had kept him employed for as long as possible. His work was important and valued, and he was well liked.

Beyond misrepresenting Kafka's office life, Nabokov's comment about his Gogolian position implies that his life was one of routine – that he lived a secluded, monotonous existence. For that is how Gogol portrays the clerks in his stories. And though it can't be said that Nabokov is solely responsible for this,¹⁷³ the legend endures. To repeat a remark by a reviewer, 'If biography is the writing of a life, then Franz Kafka is the least rewarding of subjects. Life, in any ordinary sense, was just what he didn't do.'¹⁷⁴

Yet, evidently, his work was important and varied and took him about the Habsburg Empire. Although he never got married, he was not a celibate. He describes visits to brothels in his diaries, and in his twenties had an affair with a waitress, Hansi Julie Szokoll, he was engaged to Felice Bauer and then Julie Wohryzek, he had a relationship with Milena Jesenska, and finally lived with Dora Diamant in Berlin. He did not have a sexless life.

Kafka experienced a turning point in history which involved fundamental transformations. Not only did his job give him a direct view of industrial development in Central Europe, his family owned an asbestos factory, which his father expected him to help manage. Kafka was one of the first people to write about an air show; his fiancé, Felice Bauer, promoted

¹⁷³ Even in the first edition of his biography published in 1937, Brod was keen to refute the idea of Kafka as a recluse, as a man lacking any interest in the outside world. Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*, 116.

¹⁷⁴ Appignanesi, *The Independent*, 10 October, 2011 – in a review of *Kafka* by Nicholas Murray.

and sold Parlophones, which were then the most advanced dictating machines – her job focused on office automation.

Although he was not allowed to join the army, despite making three attempts, Kafka's work gave him a close a view of the mutilation of men by war as probably any civilian outside of a hospital. He saw the Habsburg Empire collapse and the creation of Czechoslovakia and the birth of Zionism. He witnessed the pogrom in Prague in 1897, and the attempts to launch a similar assault on Jews in 1920 – which he described in a letter to Milena Jesenska, 'I've been spending every afternoon outside on the streets, wallowing in anti-Semitic hate. Isn't it natural to leave a place where one is so hated?... I just looked out of the window: mounted police, gendarmes with fixed bayonets, a screaming mob dispersing....'¹⁷⁵

And Kafka moved to Berlin in 1923 when hyperinflation impoverished vast numbers of the German middle-class, and for the first time in his life he lived in poverty, and couldn't afford a daily newspaper, but they were some of his happiest months as he was with Dora Diamant.¹⁷⁶ Yet, still, in the background post-war politics was being fought out across the city and anti-Semitism raged. In November the Jewish district of Scheunenviertel was attacked, 'Shops owned by Jews were looted. Jewish quarters were raided. Jews were robbed and beaten. In many streets lying outside the Jewish quarter every passer-by was held up by groups of youthful roughs, and if he was at all Jewish in appearance he was severely beaten.'¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Kafka (1990), *Letters to Milena*, 219, translated by Philip Boehm. Those rioters who were arrested were quickly released from custody due to the intervention of Baxa, the anti-Semitic mayor of Prague. Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 619.

¹⁷⁶ Kafka received his pension in Czech crowns, however exchanging money and transferring it to Germany took time, and time consumed money. In the three days it took to reach him a payment could lose a third of its value, or more, and landlords were always looking to increase rents as any agreement was soon rendered absurd by inflation that at one point halved the value of the mark overnight. Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 521.

¹⁷⁷ Frederick A. Voigt – *Manchester Guardian* – 07 November, 1923.

Compared with his contemporary, Ernst Jünger, who fought on the western front throughout the war and wrote *Storm of Steel*,¹⁷⁸ Kafka’s life was sedate. But Jünger was the exception. And when Kafka is compared to, say, Henry James, TS Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Marcel Proust, it is hard to understand why he should be accused of having a lifeless life.¹⁷⁹

Another consequence of Nabokov linking Kafka with Gogol’s clerks is the idea that he lived in poverty. Bashmashkin had to go without food each evening in order to save the money for his new overcoat.¹⁸⁰ He was painfully poor. And the suggestion of financial hardship has dogged Kafka.¹⁸¹ But financially he was untroubled. By his late twenties he was earning enough to maintain a family – for that is what other men of his grade managed – yet he remained at home.¹⁸² Indeed his income was sufficient for him to save at a substantial rate. After only five years of paid employment at the Workers Accident Insurance Institute he had sufficient money in the bank to resolve to give up his job. He described his plan in a letter to his parents written in July, 1914, from Marielyst on the Danish island of Falster.

¹⁷⁸ Jünger (2003), *Storm of Steel*, translated by Michael Hofmann.

¹⁷⁹ It also makes it hard to understand how it can be claimed that, ‘Placing Kafka in his historical context brings limited returns.’ As Ritchie Robertson stated in his preface to Kafka (2012), *A Hunger Artist and Other Stories*. Like all great writers Kafka was timeless and of a time.

¹⁸⁰ Gogol (1972), *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, 86, translated by Ronald Wicks. Yet Kafka had a reputation for elegance in Prague. Anderson (1994), *Kafka’s Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle*.

¹⁸¹ For example, Nathan Scott McNamara, *Each Moment Bleeding into the Next: On Yoshiharu Tsuge’s “The Swamp”* – *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 8 August, 2020. He regards Kafka’s poverty as partially responsible for his ‘anxiety-fuelled stories.’ And the drawings of Robert Crumb in his illustrated life show a woebegone clerk – Mairowitz and Crumb (1993), *Kafka for Beginners*.

¹⁸² This is one of the paradoxes of his life – he complained so much about his father, and yet continued to live with him when he could have found himself rooms elsewhere, as he did during the First World War. I will discuss it in the section below on *Metamorphosis*.

Outside of Prague I can gain it all, that is, I can become an independent, calm man, who is able to use all of his abilities in fruitful and truthful work, and through this gain a worthwhile life and enduring contentment.... I have five thousand crowns. That would enable me to live somewhere in Germany, in Berlin or Munich, for two years. There two years would allow me to devote myself to writing and bring out from me works of clarity, fullness and unity, that would be impossible for me to achieve in Prague, caught as I am between outer disturbances and inner sluggish habits. This literary work would enable me to support myself after these two years – modestly perhaps. But no matter how modestly, it would be better than the life I've experienced in Prague up till now, and which awaits me there in the future.¹⁸³

As well as revealing how comfortable he was financially, this letter also flatly contradicts the view of Kafka as a man psychologically incapable of escaping his office – of a man, 'Never remotely trusting himself to write for a living....'¹⁸⁴

The only thing which prevented Kafka making his escape was the First World War.

And even after the war (despite the money he lost through buying government bonds from a government that ceased to exist in 1918¹⁸⁵) he was still sufficiently wealthy to offer to support Milena Jesenska – he suggested she abandon Vienna and her husband and live at his expense.¹⁸⁶ An offer which she declined. And when Kafka retired from work due to his

¹⁸³ Kafka (2005), *Briefe April 1914-1917*, 102. My translation.

¹⁸⁴ Michael Hofmann in his foreword to, Kafka (2017), *The Burrow*, trans. Michael Hofmann.

¹⁸⁵ Stach (2005), *Kafka – The Decisive Years*, 509.

¹⁸⁶ Kafka (1990), *Letters to Milena*, 41, translated by Philip Boehm.

tuberculosis, his pension was equal to 60% of his salary as a senior secretary – and so matched the income of a mid-ranking civil servant.¹⁸⁷

Only for a few months in Berlin was he poor due to the turmoil created by Germany’s hyper-inflation – but in this he was no different to millions of others. Yet still the image endures of Kafka as a struggling clerk – a man only a notch or two above destitution.¹⁸⁸

Nabokov also claimed that, ‘Hardly any of his now famous works, such as his novels *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926) were published in his lifetime.’¹⁸⁹ The implication is, that he died almost unknown. However, six short books were published while he was alive, and he corrected the proofs of a seventh on his deathbed –

Contemplation (1913),

The Judgement (1913),

The Stoker (1913),

Metamorphosis (1915),

In the Penal Colony (1919),

A Country Doctor (1920),

A Hunger Artist (1924)

¹⁸⁷ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 454.

¹⁸⁸ For example, Nathan Scott McNamara, Los Angeles Review of Books, 8 August, 2020, review of *The Swamp* by Yoshiharu Tsuge.

¹⁸⁹ Nabokov, Ed. Bowers, (1980), *Lectures on Literature*, 255.

Apart from *The Trial* and *The Castle*, only *The Burrow*, amongst his posthumous work, matched the reputation of *Metamorphosis*. And he was well reviewed in his lifetime.¹⁹⁰ For example, here is Josef Körner surveying Kafka's first four books in 1917 –

Franz Kafka's bright, noble language is unparalleled in German prose at this time, and it preaches indefatigably against the sin of individualism – it is a hater of all isolation. Indeed, there is only one kind of sin for the people in his tales (which hurry on with previously unknown directness and consistency), and that is being alone, being detached from any kind of community, of lacking brotherly feelings towards fellow creatures.

Metamorphosis, a grotesque novella, and Kafka's deepest creation to date, is one of the greatest things that modern narrative art has produced – a fairy-tale-like event, which, however, is neither rationally nor mystically explained. From its strange start it develops with the strictest causality, and every act and gesture is seen and reproduced so sharply, that it might be a factual event which was being faithfully reported. And this should also be underlined as praise (because the accusations of confusion and coarse language are so frequently directed against the literary youth). In Franz Kafka's books there is not a single vague or inaccurate expression, and nowhere is there a redundant image. What Nietzsche demanded of writers, to make prose as vivid as a pictorial column, has been achieved by Franz Kafka.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ The reviews included in the appendix to this commentary show how quickly and widely Kafka was praised.

¹⁹¹ Josef Körner, *Dichter und Dichtung aus dem deutschen Prag*, published in *Donauland*, Vienna, September 1917. My translation. As well as being a reviewer, Körner was a literary historian who specialised in early Romantic German literature. The reviews included in the appendix of Kafka's first book, *Contemplation*, reveal how he was immediately acknowledged as a master of German prose.

And even prior to the publication of *Metamorphosis* Kafka was awarded the money for the Fontane Prize of 1915, if not the prize itself. This was given to Carl Sternheim for a collection of three novellas, but because he was a millionaire it was decided to offer the money to Kafka to acknowledge his talent. Though this embarrassed Kafka, who protested that he wasn't poor, 'My feeling is that I would have no right to accept it, since I don't have the requisite immediate need for money.'¹⁹²

But eventually he was persuaded to take the 800 marks – a half year's salary for a clerk.¹⁹³ And this gesture of support from the prize givers may in part explain why Kafka has a reputation for living at the edge of poverty.

An even more significant acknowledgement of his talent came in the form of Ludwig Hardt's public readings. News of these were a surprise to Kafka. Hardt was famous for his performances – he had trained as an actor but developed his own particular shows in which he combined classic works of German literature and the most recent fiction. Hardt memorized every text and recited naturally, even playfully, and managed to give the impression of experimenting each time.¹⁹⁴ In the winter of 1920/21 he picked three short pieces by Kafka to include in his routine, and according to the reviewer of Berlin's, *Vossische Zeitung*, '...they made the most powerful impression of the evening.'¹⁹⁵

Thus encouraged, Hardt continued to include Kafka's work in his repertoire as he travelled about Germany. The significance of these readings were recognised at the time by those who were keen to promote Kafka's work, such as Kurt Tucholsky. Writing under his

¹⁹² Kafka (2005), *Briefe April 1914-1917*, 142. My translation.

¹⁹³ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 454.

¹⁹⁴ Stach (2013), *Kafka – The Years of Insight*, 404.

¹⁹⁵ Anonymous review, *Vossische Zeitung*, Berlin, 10 March, 1921. My translation.

reviewing name of Peter Panter, he was able to praise Hardt's performances, and Kafka's writing at the same time, 'He [Kafka] is a great son of Kleist – but still completely independent. He writes the clearest and finest German prose of our time. It flourishes out of the fantastical but its sentences and rhythms are strong and factual. There's none of the conventional softness of Prague – which is where he lives – and there's none of the current fashion. It has grown out of another world.'¹⁹⁶

Given that Nabokov lived in Berlin from the early 1922 to 1937 his vagueness about Kafka's life and reputation is perhaps surprising. Though it can be explained by his own account of his existence then.

As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, emigres, happened to dwell. These aborigines were to the mind's eye as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane...¹⁹⁷

Given this attitude it is a shame that Nabokov has had such an influence on Kafka's reputation. And it is worth considering this in the light of Carter's discussion of archives. 'Inevitably there are distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences in the archive. Not every story

¹⁹⁶ Peter Panter, *Drei Abende*, in *Die Weltbühne*, Berlin, 1 December, 1921. My translation.

¹⁹⁷ Nabokov (1969), *Speak, Memory*, 211.

is told.’¹⁹⁸ This is true and important, but the limitations of the archive become secondary when evidence is blithely ignored. For Nabokov the people of Central Europe had less significance than the characters of Russian literature. As he acknowledged himself, his devotion to Gogol had led to his eyes becoming ‘Gogolized’¹⁹⁹ – and so he saw Kafka in a distorted way. Despite living in Berlin, and despite his mother living in Prague, Nabokov never considered the evidence for Kafka’s life – he wrote about him according to his preoccupations.²⁰⁰

And this all leads back to the two metaphors used for life writing – autopsy and portrait – as they help to show the failings of Nabokov’s approach: he explicitly had no interest in dissecting Kafka’s life in order to understand him; and he didn’t provide a portrait, just a caricature, which has developed a life of its own and remains in flourishing health.

Nabokov had one story to tell about Kafka – a cliché of the poor, neglected artist struggling through life in isolation.

Max Brod – First and Last Comments

Brod’s view of his friend influenced by his devotion to Judaism and Zionism and his veneration for Kafka.²⁰¹ These points have already been discussed, but it is important to note that Brod’s attitude towards his friend’s writing was reverential from the beginning. For example, he began his first review of Kafka’s first collection of short stories, *Contemplation*, by

¹⁹⁸ Carter (2006), 216.

¹⁹⁹ Grayson, (2001), *Vladimir Nabokov*, 6.

²⁰⁰ Indeed, it’s probable that Nabokov enjoyed his inventive approach to Kafka’s life. At the same time as he was writing his lectures, Nabokov was working on his novel, *The Gift*, which contains, as a book within a book, a biography of Chernyshevski. And Nabokov gives the following remark to a fictional reviewer, ‘But he makes fun, not only of his hero: but he also makes fun of his reader.’ Nabokov (1991), *The Gift*, 306.

²⁰¹ Northey, *Myths and realities in Kafka biography*, in Kafka, Ed Preece, 190.

claiming, ‘I could easily imagine someone taking this book in his hand and from that hour changing his life completely, and becoming a new man.’

It evidently wasn’t even necessary for the reader to open the book – holding it would be sufficient for his life to be transformed.²⁰²

The book, *Contemplation*, consists of 18 pieces of prose which the publisher managed to turn into a book by printing just 16 short lines on each page – even so the volume only has 99 pages. It is a remarkably slender book for such huge praise.

Over the next fifty-six years Brod’s reverence for his friend did not diminish in the slightest. If anything, it became greater. In a television interview in 1968 Brod tried to illustrate Kafka’s prophetic powers by claiming that the uniforms of the officers who arrested Josef K in *The Trial*, with their pockets and belts, were a thing unknown at the time – and they hinted at the Nazis. Yet the first chapter of *The Trial* was written in the late summer of 1914 when hundreds of thousands of men were putting on uniforms for the first time – uniforms which matched Kafka’s description.²⁰³ And the Nazi uniforms were derived from those of the First World War.

Also in the interview Brod claimed that Kafka made some prophetic remarks about deportations which reflected Europe of the 1930s. But vast numbers of people were driven from their homes in the First World War. Prague saw a great influx of Jewish refugees from the east – indeed Max Brod was highly active in the attempts to provide aid.²⁰⁴ Though by 1968 he seemed to have forgotten his charitable work of half a century before.²⁰⁵

²⁰² The entire review and Kafka’s thoughts on Brod’s extravagance can be found in the appendix.

²⁰³ Jung (2009), *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I – 1914-16*.

²⁰⁴ Kafka, Kafka (2004), *Tagebücher 1914-1923*, 11 March, 1915.

²⁰⁵ *Max Brod in Gespräch (1968)*. The interview with Georg Stadtler is on YouTube. And with regard to refugees and ethnic cleansing it is worth considering the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 as these evidently had an impact on Kafka. ‘For a whole week I saw nothing but Montenegrins in my sleep, in extremely disagreeable clarity, which gave me headaches, I saw every detail of their complicated dress’ he wrote to Felice Bauer on 1 November, 1912.

Brod’s attitude to Kafka’s Jewishness was shared by others in his circle – for example, Otto Pick. The first sentence of the first review of Kafka’s first book, proclaimed him to be a Jewish writer.²⁰⁶ As has already been discussed, others, such as Kurt Tucholsky, saw him as a descendent of Kleist, and Nabokov linked him to Czechoslovakia.

Kafka was well aware of this nationalistic competition for his writing. In a letter to Felice Bauer in 1916 he refers to a recent review in *Neue Rundschau*, which asserted, ‘There is something fundamentally German about Kafka’s narrative art.’ And then he compares it to the claim in Brod’s latest article, ‘Kafka’s stories are among the most typically Jewish documents of our time.’

Kafka finished his letter by describing himself as, ‘A difficult case. Am I a circus rider on two horses? Alas, I am no rider, but lie prostrate on the ground.’²⁰⁷

To follow the debate about Kafka’s nationality through the decades is beyond the scope of this commentary. Yet it still continues. For example, in a recent publication *Czech Out Franz Kafka*²⁰⁸ – part of a series of Czech promotional books – it’s stated that, ‘Franz Kafka was, and remains to this day, one of the Czech Republic’s most famous and influential writers.’

The country didn’t exist until 1993 – ie 110 years after Kafka was born. And there were violent objections to the presence of Jews in the new country, as Kafka’s letters from the autumn of 1920 reveal. ‘Isn’t it natural to leave a place where one is so hated?’²⁰⁹ And the mayor of Prague after independence was Karel Baxa, the anti-semitic Young Czech politician and lawyer, who had represented the murdered girl’s family during the Hilsner Trial, and led the accusations

²⁰⁶ See Pick’s review in the appendix below.

²⁰⁷ Letter to Felice Bauer, 7 October, 1916. In his article, Brod accepted that the word ‘Jew’ never appeared in Kafka’s work.

²⁰⁸ Novak (2017) The quotation comes from the back cover.

²⁰⁹ Kafka (1990), *Letters to Milena*, 219, translated by Philip Boehm.

of ritual murder against Leopold Hilsner – who was sentenced to death, but the this was commuted by Franz Josef, and Hilsner was freed by his successor, Emperor Karl.²¹⁰

Yet Kafka has become a symbol of the city and, as Milan Kundera has argued, a symbol of the Czech's European credentials.²¹¹ A far sharper debate continues between Germany and Israel over Kafka's legacy. This manifested itself recently in rival claims for the last part of Kafka's archive held by Brod's estate. This ended in a court case in Jerusalem.²¹² Israel and the current German republic are also far younger than Kafka, though, of course, Jewish and German culture are vastly older, though at times Kafka was sceptical about both labels.²¹³

But each of the single stories about Franz Kafka is misleading. As I have already argued, he was a subject of the Habsburg Empire. Alan Bennett put the matter simply and eloquently. Franz Kafka was named after the Kaiserlich und Königlich (Imperial and Kingly) Franz Josef – and Kafka named his most famous character, Josef K. Franz Kafka and Josef K are unthinkable without Franz Josef K & K.²¹⁴

Kafka was born in a multicultural empire which was destroyed by nationalism. This nationalism still distorts ideas about Kafka – he needs to be seen in relationship to the Brothers Grimm, Sholem Aleichem and Karel Čapek (to pick three authors out of a potential list of dozens).

But single stories have appeal – they are simple to tell.

²¹⁰ Pawel (1998), 43. For an extensive discussion of Czech-Jewish-German relations see, Robert B. Pynsent's, Conclutory Essay: Activists, Jews, The Little Czech Man, and Germans. *Central Europe*, Vol. 5, No. 2, November 2007. Scott Spector's, *Prague Territories – National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siecle*, is also very helpful on the cultural background.

²¹¹ Kundera (2023), *A Kidnapped West – The Tragedy of Central Europe*.

²¹² Balint (2019). *Kafka's Last Trial* describes the tortuous legal process.

²¹³ Kafka (1990), *Letters to Milena*, 20, translated by Philip Boehm.

²¹⁴ Bennett (1991), xii.

What nationality was Kafka? It does seem a reasonable question – though it is a question from an age of nation states, and rests on the assumption that nationality is vital to placing an individual.

Kafka belonged to the first generation of Jews in the empire who were free to move to the major cities if they so desired – his father left a rural ghetto permeated by religion and ritual for a major industrial city. It was a journey akin probably to moving from rural India to London. Although Kafka's life was shaped by the Habsburg Empire, his experience was similar to that of many second generation immigrants, who find themselves in-between cultures – so I learned from comments made to me after performances of my play *Kafka v Kafka*, which was staged in London first in Lewisham and then in Camden.²¹⁵

Nationalistic single story can be distorting in other ways as well – for example, the British view of the First World War.

In 1967 Adrian Henri published, *Great War Poems*, it contains the lines,

‘The same old soldiers walking along the same old skyline.’

‘The ghost of Wilfred Owen selling matches outside the Burlington Arcade.’

‘DON'T BE VAGUE – BLAME GENERAL HAIG.’²¹⁶

This captured British preoccupations with the Western Front. And more than half a century later the preoccupations remain the same. As one historian put it recently, ‘... the

²¹⁵ This is also the opinion of Julian Preece. See *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, 117.

²¹⁶ Henri, McGough & Patten (1967), *The Mersey Sound*, 17.

“Memory” of 1914-18 is now the sole province of the sacred dead who fell in France and Flanders.’²¹⁷

Indeed, the latest six films about World War One screened in Britain are, *Warhorse*, *They Shall Not Grow Old*, *Journey’s End*, *1917*, *Benediction*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Each of them is concerned with the trench-warfare in France and Belgium. It is as if the rest of the war never happened. It is a single story of blinding significance. The ramifications of the fighting in the east and the subsequent peace treaties are evident today in the War in Ukraine and in tensions throughout Eastern Europe.

Similarly, there is an established view of the naivete of the young men going off to fight.

‘Never such innocence again,’ is the concluding line of Philip Larkin’s, *MCMXIV*.²¹⁸ Yet in the east there had been decades of pogroms in the Russian Empire which had caused hundreds of thousands of Jews to flee. And the First and Second Balkan Wars had seen the Ottoman Empire destroyed in Europe and the successor states fight amongst themselves. The fear in the Habsburg Empire was that if they didn’t stand and fight, it would be destroyed, and decades of war would follow amongst its fragments. As has already been shown, the savagery of the Balkan fighting disturbed Kafka’s dreams for a week.

To try and shift the British view of World War One, to make readers think about events in the east, was one of my reasons for writing my novel. I don’t expect the attempt to succeed widely.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Lewis-Stempel (2014), xv.

²¹⁸ Larkin (1988), *Collected Poems*, 127.

²¹⁹ Obviously the repercussions of the First World War are still felt today, and a wider knowledge of the conflict helps explain current tensions in Eastern Europe. The Ukrainian War is a consequence of the collapse of the Russian Empire, as is the furore over Viktor Orban’s scarf which shows a map of Hungary before the Trianon Treaty of 1920 – as reported by Reuters on 22 November, 2022.

Franz Kafka’s Letter to my Father

It is not possible to consider all of the myth-making comments in Kafka’s diaries and letters within this commentary. Instead I will concentrate on the 104 page letter that he wrote to his father in 1919, as this is the closest that Kafka came to writing his autobiography and it provides a reasonable summary of his opinions of himself.

In order to write it he asked for leave. In the autumn of 1919, he wanted a fortnight’s holiday to go to a health resort some forty miles north of Prague. He’d been there before, Schelesen – or Želízy, as it had become after the creation of Czechoslovakia. Kafka had gone there previously for the sake of his tuberculosis. And so his request was granted. But this time he wasn’t going for his TB. He got on well with his boss, Jindřich Valenta, but he was wary of mentioning his true purpose. It would have been difficult to have explained that he wanted to write to his father, when they lived together in the same apartment.²²⁰

The immediate cause of the letter was Kafka’s engagement to Julie Wohryzek – who he had met at Schelesen the year before – and his father’s vehement objection, due to the poverty of her family. And the preceding year had also seen lengthy arguments between Kafka’s favourite sister, Ottila, and their parents over the man she wanted to marry, Josef David. He wasn’t Jewish and he hadn’t been selected by her mother as a suitable spouse – which was how Ottila’s two elder sisters had come by their husbands.

Yet behind these conflicts there were decades of antagonism and unhappiness. And it all loomed so large in the mind of Franz Kafka that his father, Hermann, had become the cause and

²²⁰ Reiner Stach : *Kafka – The Years of Insight* : page 307.

focus of his stories and novels, 'My writing dealt with you, I lamented there only what I could not lament on your breast.'²²¹ Or so the son claimed.

Hermann Kafka came from a village of about 100 people, Wosek – now renamed Osek – which was some 70 miles and several centuries from Prague. Hermann's father had been a kosher butcher and a man of prodigious strength capable of lifting a sack of flour with his teeth. And as a child Hermann had been forced to drag his meat cart from village to village, and had been sent away from home at the age of 14 and apprenticed in a textile firm in Pisek, then had joined the army and had risen to be a platoon leader – the equivalent of a sergeant in the British Army. And he remained something of a sergeant in his dealings with people all of his life.²²²

After he left the army in 1875 he moved to Prague. The city had a rapidly growing population and would reach 600,000 people in 1910. Industrialization drew in Czech workers and according to the census of that year only 32,000 people regarded German as their first language, and about half of these were Jews.²²³

It was a small enclave divided by religion, an administrative outpost of the Habsburg Empire, with its own German dialect which lacked any working class influence – Prague-German was a language of civil servants and lawyers.²²⁴

Hermann Kafka settled in the inner city, the most Jewish part of the town, but even so he was in a very different environment from what he was use to – the ritual of the Jewish village

²²¹ Franz Kafka : *Letter to my Father* : page 57.

²²² Alena Wagnerová : *Die Familie Kafka aus Prag* : page 59.

²²³ Wagenbach : *Kafkas Prag – Ein Reiselesebuch* : page 11. But as recently as 1850 half of the population had been German. By 1880 they were only 14% of the city's population. By 1910 they were reduced to 7% of Prague. Mike Mitchell : *Vivo – The Life of Gustav Meyrink* : page 25. Throughout his life Kafka was part of a small and shrinking minority in a city where the Germans had been dominant.

²²⁴ Begley : *Franz Kafka* : page 66. And a letter from Kafka to his friend, Max Brod – sent from a sanatorium in Merano – suggests that Jewish-Prague-German had its own particular character. For a general at his table continued to question him about his dialect until Kafka explained that he was Jewish. After which he expected to be shunned. Yet the curious general became ever more friendly. Franz Kafka : *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* : pages 233 and 236.

and the discipline of the imperial army were now behind him and he was on his own.²²⁵ Yet he must have been an impressive young man for his wife, Julie Löwy, came from Prague's upper middle class – a rich and cultured family of doctors, businessmen and rabbis.²²⁶ They must have seen something in Hermann Kafka to allow the match to take place, and with their financial help he opened a haberdashery shop.²²⁷ And the money from this provided the means to educate their eldest child until he was a doctor of law.

Franz Kafka did not take after his father, nor his father's father. For example, he wasn't a butcher, but a vegetarian – and not just a vegetarian, but a Fletcherite. He was a follower of Horace Fletcher, The Great Masticator, who was convinced that people ate too much and taught a doctrine with three principles: firstly, eat only when you have a good appetite; secondly, chew the food until it's pulp and drink that pulp; and thirdly, drink sip by sip – never in gulps.²²⁸ Kafka was six foot tall and at his heaviest in his twenties weighed just ten stone.²²⁹ By the time he was thirty-six, when he wrote the letter, he was down to eight stone, ten pounds – which

²²⁵ The granting of civil rights to Jews in 1849 had made this possible. Hermann Kafka belonged to the first generation of Jews who grew up without severe legal constraints. Ernst Pawel : *The Nightmare of Reason* : page 5.

²²⁶ Kafka was always much more interested in his mother's family and claimed to be far more of a Löwy than a Kafka. *Letter to my Father* : page 4. And his diary entry of 25 December, 1911, records what his mother could tell him about her grandparents and great-grandparents. However he was particularly concerned with the pious members of her family. And the contrast he describes between the Kafkas and the Löwys seems to exaggerate their differences – at least amongst his parents' generation. Two of his maternal uncles, for example, were international businessmen who between them worked in France, Spain, Canada, Panama, the Congo and China. And his father's wider family included distinguished lawyers. Anthony Northey : *Kafka's Relatives*. Yet there was one obvious difference between the siblings of his mother and father – out of his mother's five brothers only two found wives; all of his father's five brothers and sisters got married.

²²⁷ Wagenbach : *Kafka* : page 11. The couple were brought together with the aid of a marriage broker. Perhaps Hermann Kafka found it hard to understand how his son could view marriage as anything but an alliance between families. Jewish life was insecure – wealth and influential relatives offered some protection. For example, when Franz Kafka's oldest sister, Gabriele, got married to Karl Herman, the family opened an asbestos factory. Karl Herman's father contributed, as did Hermann Kafka, Franz Kafka, and one of his maternal uncles, Alfred Löwy – three families and two generations worked together, and the contract allowed for the rights of the next generation. Anthony Northey : *Kafka's Relatives* : page 91. But the factory failed.

²²⁸ New York Times : *Horace Fletcher Dies in Copenhagen* : obituary (14 January, 1919).

²²⁹ In these years the average Czech male was five foot, six inches tall; and the average Jewish male was just five foot. Franz Kafka towered over his contemporaries. Begley : *Franz Kafka* : page 30.

equates to a perilously low body mass index of 16.5. And the way he ate drove his father mad. 'For months on end, until he grew used to it, my father had to hide his face behind the newspaper while I ate my supper.'²³⁰

And mostly they met for meals. 'One man fights at Marathon, the other in the dining room, while the god of war and the goddess of victory are omnipresent,' as Kafka put it to a friend.²³¹

Yet the physical contrast with his father impressed itself on Franz Kafka long before he acquired any views on what and how he should eat. Swimming lessons were an early torture, 'For I was borne down just by your physique. I remember how we often undressed together in a changing room. I – meagre, weak, small. You – strong, great, broad. And already in the changing room I was miserable... and though your intentions were good, you instilled in me a deep shame.'²³²

This sense of inadequacy reached its peak in an incident which may well have seemed trivial to Hermann Kafka – but not to his son. It marked him for good. 'For years I was tormented by the thought that this giant man, my father, could almost without reason come to me in the night, and lift me out of bed, and leave me on the balcony: he was my final court of appeal, and for him I was such a nothing.'²³³

Whether Hermann Kafka did remember the incident isn't known. He never received the letter. Franz Kafka asked Ottla to read it and then he gave it to their mother, and she gave it

²³⁰ Franz Kafka : *Letters to Felice* : page 131 (07 November, 1912).

²³¹ Franz Kafka : *Letters to Milena* : page 127 (31 July, 1920).

²³² Franz Kafka : *Letter to my Father* : page 10.

²³³ Franz Kafka : *Letter to my Father* : page 8. Though it's curious that Kafka dwells so much on this but never mentions the ferocious riots of 1897 when a dispute about language laws escalated into days of violence. The Young Czech movement inspired an assault on German cultural institutes and then roving mobs set about the Jews. But the Kafka's shop was spared, Hermann had a Czech name, spoke the language and looked nothing like the anti-Semites' caricature of a Jew. The father stood before his family. Ernst Pawel : *The Nightmare of Reason* : page 42. As Linda Anderson observes, 'Silence is also a testimony.' Anderson (2001), 16.

back. Presumably to avoid a domestic explosion for it contained accusations more damning than setting a child outside for a few minutes. 'In your armchair you ruled the world. Your opinion was right, all other opinions were mad, extreme, freakish – not normal.' And the passage ends with the generalisation, 'And you became for me that puzzle which belongs to all tyrants: the law lay in your person and not in your wisdom.'²³⁴

But the fundamental accusation was that the father had deformed the son and yet still blamed the son for his deformity. From all of which it would be hard to guess that Franz Kafka was a respected and significant civil servant.²³⁵ And in his spare time managed to write a series of short books which established his reputation in the German-speaking literary world.²³⁶

However Kafka's achievements didn't touch his self-doubt and his bottomless sense of dread.²³⁷ And he saw his father as the primary cause of his inadequacy.

But to what extent was the Hermann Kafka in his mind a true reflection of his father? This is a subject that deserves a vastly longer answer than that which I can attempt here.²³⁸ But it's worth noting the opinion of two of his closest friends – Max Brod and Hugo Bergmann.

²³⁴ Franz Kafka : *Letter to my Father* : page 12. A remark which led J P Stern to compare Hermann Kafka with Adolf Hitler, which seems to me to be stretching a point. J P Stern : *Hitler – The Fuhrer and the People* : page 60.

²³⁵ In 1908 Kafka joined the Workers Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague. This was responsible for industrial health and safety and for getting businesses to pay for insurance. By the time he had to leave in 1922 because of ill health he was a senior secretary, and he was the only Jewish employee the Czechs had retained after the break-up of the empire – the previous management had allowed two, though officially the institute was closed to Jews. Begley : *Franz Kafka* : page 33. Kafka's office writings are available in one volume edited by Corngold, Greenberg and Wagner, with ample commentary and notes.

²³⁶ Wagenbach : *Kafka* : page 94.

²³⁷ Franz Kafka : *Letters to Milena* : page 123. Wagenbach : *Kafka* : page 80.

²³⁸ The conflict between generations was particular intense in the first decades of the twentieth century. According to Kafka's friend, Max Pulver, *The theme of father-killing hung in the air and was extensively handled in plays and poetry.... This hatred of fathers seemed to me to be an illness – and almost a blasphemy.* Ed. Hans-Gerd Koch : *Als Kafka mir entgegenkam : Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka* : page 144. (And from this manure flowered the works of Sigmund Freud.)

Brod knew Kafka throughout his adult life and wrote the first biography, and recorded his bewilderment, 'In how many talks did I not try and make clear to my friend... how he overestimated his father, and how stupid it is to despise oneself.'²³⁹

And Bergmann knew Kafka before they went to infants' school, and they studied together until they left university, and as a child he often did his homework with his friend on Kafka's desk in his family's apartment. Therefore he must have seen Hermann Kafka hundreds of times. In his memoir written in the 1960s he says, 'His father stands vividly before my eyes, which I admit are not the eyes of his son, who described him in his Letter to my Father (which I believe and hope never reached his hands). On the contrary, I see him as a Jewish businessman of those years who had both feet planted on the ground of his physical reality – his shop.'²⁴⁰

In *Metamorphosis* a travelling salesman is transformed into a giant insect. It could be argued that *Letter to my Father* transforms a shopkeeper just as drastically.

When he promised to send the letter to Milena Jesenská, Kafka acknowledged the transformation himself – though he described this in different terms.

'As you read it understand all the lawyer's tricks: it's a lawyer's letter.'²⁴¹ Though he qualified this by adding, 'And at the same time never forget your great Nevertheless.' However Milena Jesenská's letters have been lost and so we don't know what Kafka was acknowledging here.

Written in great agitation and in a style that carries the reader along with its momentum, the letter is convincing and still shapes the perception of Kafka. Yet it was a self-caricature and

²³⁹ Max Brod : *Franz Kafka – A Biography* : page 23. And he also commented, *What Kafka set down in the Letter to my Father didn't seem to exist on the surface – or rather revealed itself only in hints, and then only in confidential talks.* Max Brod : *Franz Kafka – A Biography* : page 39.

²⁴⁰ Ed. Hans-Gerd Koch : *Als Kafka mir entgenkam : Erinnerungen an Franz Kafka* : page 112.

²⁴¹ Franz Kafka : *Letters to Milena* : page 65 (4-5 July, 1920).

a caricature of his father.²⁴² It provides a finally judged pair of opposites: it is part of the archive, but it masks as it reveals.

And Hermann Kafka never read it, and his thoughts about his son have not survived – his silence is perhaps the loudest of them all.

Franz Kafka’s Hunger Artist

However, to understand Kafka’s autobiographical myth-making, it’s important to consider stories other than *Metamorphosis*. Indeed, they are all worth considering for this purpose, yet that would take several volumes to achieve. Here I want to concentrate on one story – *A Hunger Artist*. This is the story of a ‘freak show’ entertainer who displays his thin body to a crowd of ticket-buying gawpers. The trade is becoming unfashionable and eventually he ends up in a cage on the edge of a circus, and finally starves himself to death; and his cage is then used to house a panther.

In a way this continues with a theme from *Letter to my Father* – the meagre body of the son confronting the giant of a father who is taken to be a symbol of the world. ‘At times I imagine the map of the world laid out and you stretched across it. And all that is left for my life are the areas you don’t cover or can’t reach. And because I see you as a giant, my territory is miserable and small...’²⁴³

Yet there was also a strain of pride in Kafka in his body – as if his physique had inspired him. ‘I am the thinnest person I know (and that’s saying something, for I am no stranger to sanatoria).’²⁴⁴

‘I can stand up to the cold almost better than a chunk of wood.... even now in November [I’m] not wearing an overcoat, neither a light nor a heavy one, walking round among well-

²⁴² Preece (2002), 117, and Hawes, (2008) 137.

²⁴³ Kafka (2008), *Letter to my Father*, 75.

²⁴⁴ Kafka : *Letters to Felice* : page 120 (31 October, 1912).

dressed pedestrians like a lunatic in a summer suit and little summer hat, on principle without a vest (I am the inventor of vestless attire).²⁴⁵

He went on to say that in addition to meat he also abstained from chocolate, coffee, tea, alcohol and tobacco. In a sense, he was following the ideal of Jean-Paul Sartre in developing himself, but actually it was Jorgen Peter Müller²⁴⁶ who inspired him; though Kafka did so in reaction to the world in which he found himself – in particular his father.

And the hunger artist is tough enough to follow his vocation to his own death. And, appropriately, Kafka checked the proofs for the story on his death bed when he was little more than a skeleton.

The story is mythopoetic and revealing. It evokes part of Kafka’s character in a way that a naturalistic description could never manage – and it’s gruesome. To quote Dermot Healy, ‘Mythology is full of sordidness. The fears of the storytellers are exaggerated in the tales. The unbelievable takes on a human presence.’²⁴⁷

For example, the panther suggests the dangers of the post-war world – the life depicted by Otto Dix and George Grosz.

Yet *A Hunger Artist* is also misleading, because Kafka’s art did not consist of vanishing in an obscure cage, but of reaching a wide readership during his life. Indeed, in his last year he was particularly keen to see his work published. And, despite his request that his work should be burnt as far as possible after his death, during his last days he prepared a collection of stories for publication. Hardly the act of a man who wants to see his words vanish.²⁴⁸ And he had tuberculosis for seven years. He could have found a match.

Max Brod was the least likely person to burn Kafka’s work, and he made this clear to his friend. By asking Brod, Kafka could enjoy the purity of his devotion to disappearing while making sure it didn’t happen.

²⁴⁵ Kafka : *Letters to Felice* : page 131 (07 November, 1912).

²⁴⁶ Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, 547 (25 May 1914).

²⁴⁷ Healy (1996), *The Bend for Home*, 268.

²⁴⁸ Brod (1995), *Franz Kafka*. Brod claimed that Kafka’s mood had lifted in the last year of his life and his desire to see his work destroyed had diminished. But he had already made it clear that he wasn’t going to do it. Balint (2019), 128.

Is this true?

It can't be known.

Perhaps in his heart of hearts Kafka would have been happiest just writing in isolation. In a love letter to Felice Bauer he describes his fantasy of working in a cellar where he could sit undisturbed forever with his food brought to the outermost door, and left there for him – so his only breaks from his desk would have been the walks to fetch it, and to return the dirty plates for collection. 'And how I would write! From what depths I would drag it up!'²⁴⁹

In short, it's another myth which reveals and hides the man. For if this was truly his desire, why was he pursuing Felice Bauer?

Literary Legends

Though Kafka's stories reveal a great deal about the author, there is a danger in reading them too closely, and constructing a life for Kafka out of the details. For example, in his discussion of *The Judgment*, Stanley Corngold refers to Kafka's diary entry where he delights in having worked on his story through the night and completed it in a single sitting – which ended at dawn. The story concludes with a son being sentenced to death by his father and jumping off a bridge. Corngold asks of Kafka's joy, 'How can this bliss be squared with the horror of a family execution?'²⁵⁰ And he concludes that the son in the tale is the type of man who Kafka dreaded becoming – an heir to his father's business with the prospects of starting his own family. Therefore, deep down, unknown to Kafka's conscious mind, there was the need to kill the story's hero.

Yet Kafka was all too aware of his father's dismay at his aversion to running a business. If that had been a reason for his joy, he would surely have referred to it in his diary. And he had just met Felice Bauer, and was at the time of writing the story glad at the prospect of a girlfriend. Corngold believes he knows Kafka better than Kafka.

But there is to me a far deeper problem with Corngold's attitude. For his question implies that an author can't delight in a story unless it has a happy ending. Kafka was excited by

²⁴⁹ Kafka : *Letters to Felice* : page 272 (14-15 January, 1913).

²⁵⁰ Corngold (2004), *Lambent Traces*, 32.

the exercise of his craft. For the first time he had managed to write exactly as he wanted to – ‘Only in this way is it possible to write, only with such cohesion, with such complete opening of the body and soul.’²⁵¹

Isn't this reason enough for joy? Corngold seems more interested in Kafka as a psychological case than as an artist. Perhaps only another writer of fiction can feel Kafka's satisfaction.

Will Self has written about the ‘primacy of the imagination’ that runs throughout Kafka's work and compares him to Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll.²⁵² And his ability to create fables that live in the reader's mind must be reckoned with in any account of Kafka. Many other writers had a similar background to Kafka but didn't write in the same way – his magical transforming imagination was unique to him in his age, and allowed him to fashion fairy-tales out of an industrial city. This mystery must be acknowledged in any account of Kafka.

²⁵¹ Kafka (2005), *Tagebücher 1912-1914*, 101, my translation.

²⁵² This is from his introduction to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll, (2001), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, xv.

PART FOUR:

The Route to Writing my Novel and its Contribution to Knowledge

Childhood Preparation

Whenever we walked past a parked car my mother would cry out, 'Run!' She was convinced that every vehicle at the kerb had a kidnapper lurking inside. And so we ran along the pavement. This is one of my earliest memories. Fortunately in Brixton in 1965 there weren't too many parked cars.

When my mother had to give a sample of her blood, the nurse struggled – as they sometimes do – to find a vein. And my mother started shouting, 'Don't say I haven't got any blood! Don't say I haven't got any blood!' But she did have blood – and eventually, despite my mother's frantic behaviour – the nurse managed to extract some.

For our long holiday in Scotland, my parents decided not to book ahead, but to find accommodation as we travelled about. The rashness of this, considering mother's character, was revealed in Fort William when she broke down in tears. 'We're just like refugees!' she said over and over. But there was a tourist information centre with a helpful lady with a brochure, which listed all of the small hotels and B&Bs in and about the town. And my father picked one, and the lady made a phone call, and we were accommodated. For my mother this was a miracle – and not the efficiency of the Scottish Tourist Board.

On our return south through Glen Coe my mother looked up and said, 'Indians!' She expected either the Comanche or the Sioux to swoop down from the ridge and slaughter us in our Morris Oxford. But we escaped from the glen without a scratch.

My father was a man of few words and he was probably made more taciturn by my mother. He quietly carried on as if everything was normal – as indeed it probably was to him by then.

In short I was wonderfully well schooled in paranoia, and the thought of a travelling salesman transformed at night into a giant insect seemed to be something from my kind of world.

From the First Encounter to the Stage

As far as I remember it started in the Dog & Bull by Surrey Street Market in 1979, when a fellow student at Croydon College pulled out a copy of *The Trial* from the inside pocket of his parka and handed it to me. And I still haven't returned it.

As an undergraduate at Keele I read more of Kafka's work and I was impressed by the clarity of his prose and the obscurity of his meaning. In the late 1980s I started to study German. Reading Kafka in the original motivated me more than anything else. In the early 1990s I made a couple of trips to Prague. I remember the city as a building site. It was being transformed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps it was closer then to how it was in 1917 than it is today.

I continued to read works by and about Kafka, but I became puzzled that one of his most important texts, *Letter to my Father*, wasn't being published in Britain. So I resolved to translate it myself. And when I had a complete draft I worked through it three times with a German editor, and self-published it - assuming that no commercial publisher would be interested in a Kafka translation by a fledgling translator.

Yet I wasn't finished with *Letter to my Father*. It's a wonderful piece of rhetoric but, naturally, one sided. I thought Kafka's father should have an opportunity to reply - and his mother and Ottla probably also had contributions to make. Therefore I wrote *Kafka v Kafka*, and produced it myself at the Jack Studio Theatre in 2012, and another company took it on and staged it at the Etcetera Theatre in Camden.

Then I wrote an adaptation of *The Trial* as a monologue - with Joseph K in a cell awaiting execution. And it was staged at the Jack in 2016.

Subsequently, an American actor, Larry Cedar, discovered my Kafka work on-line. And produced his own monologue version of *Letter to my Father*. And then I adapted *The Burrow* and *Hunger Artist* for him. He produced both of these as films due to Covid restrictions. And in 2021 *Hunger Artist* was included in the Hollywood Fringe Theatre Festival.

In that year I also published my translation of Kafka's, *Zürkau Aphorisms*, which was an essential part of my research for *Kafka's War*.

Another influence stemmed from my creative writing MA at Goldsmiths. There it occurred to me that as well as writing biographical plays, such as *Kafka v Kafka* and *As a Man Grows Younger* – about Italo Svevo – I could also take such an approach to writing a novel. Francis Spufford recommended *A Country Road, A Tree* by Jo Baker – which is about Samuel Beckett in World War Two – and Blake Morrison encouraged me to write something similar about Kafka.

I had previously attempted a Kafka novel in the style of Julian Barnes' novel, *Flaubert's Parrot* – in that it was a novel about somebody with a passion for Kafka. However I found it difficult to make the narrator live, because there was little space for him between me as the author and the true subject of the book – whatever I did the narrator always seemed to be a transparent cipher.

Another potential model was *Murmur* by Will Eaves. I'd reviewed this novel about Alan Turing for a local paper in Hastings – as he was brought up in the town. However, after my first reading I was baffled – and I had to read a couple of biographies, and several other books, before returning to *Murmur*, and re-reading it. Then the novel made sense. But I wanted to write something which was clear to readers who knew nothing previously of Franz Kafka.

By way of experiment, I turned to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje. This is a collection of fragments which is clearer than *Murmur*, but which still leaves wide gaps. It is fragmentary, and that was Blake Morrison's verdict on my chapter drafted in this style – and I agreed.

Therefore, I was reassured that my first inclination was correct – that *A Country Road, A Tree*, was a good model for me to follow. And I re-read Sebald's, *Dr K Takes the Waters at Riva*, and this re-assured me further. Both stories are in the third person and present tense, but Sebald's has more mystery to it – and I thought this was essential to *Kafka's War*. I didn't want to write a book that was completely naturalistic.

And also I wanted to include a variety of material – in the manner of Ondaatje – and so I opted to write about thirty-six days scattered over ten months, and include newspaper articles, letters, reviews, diary extracts, aphorisms and some very short stories.

Though concentrating on Kafka's life in 1917/18 wasn't my initial aim. I had wanted to write about the last seven years of his life. This though would have led to a novel which moved forward too quickly to reveal the man – or so I thought. Then I read *The Magician* by Colm Toibin – about the full life of Thomas Mann, and this encouraged me to concentrate on just one year, as I thought *The Magician* moved too quickly to do Mann justice.

As Karl Ove Knausgård has argued, ‘The role of the novel has always been to wriggle underneath these overarching narratives, to break them down, formally and thematically, to get closer to the concrete experience of life.’²⁵³

This is only possible, in my opinion, if the novel concentrates on a slice of life which is not too great – the reader must be given the chance to feel the texture of the characters’ existence.

Yet, despite my conviction that writing a novel about Kafka was the best way for me to explain him and his work, I still have scepticism about the undertaking. To capture a life in words is to make an abstraction, it’s an attempt to see beyond the physical man into his mind, and into a world that vanished a century ago. As Kafka argued, ‘Language can only hint at things beyond the world of the senses, it can’t even be used for crude comparison, because language comes from the physical world and so is bound to possessions and all that goes with possession.’²⁵⁴

The past isn’t a foreign country, it’s an imaginary land which we can only visit in our dreams, so the scepticism of Kafka could apply to *Kafka's War* – for our senses detect nothing but the present moment.²⁵⁵

As Alan Bennett said in *Kafka's Dick* through an aspiring biographer, ‘Try as we will, we can never quite touch Kafka. He always eludes us. We never do know him.’²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Knausgard, Goldsmith Prize Lecture, 2022 – New Statesman, 28 October, 2022.

²⁵⁴ Kafka (2021), Zürau Aphorisms, No. 57.

²⁵⁵ In this aphorism Kafka hints at ideas which were taken up decades later by such writers as Barthes. Anderson (2001), *Autobiography*, 71. And Kafka’s aphorism No. 80 is also worth considering here, ‘Truth can’t be divided, therefore can’t know itself; whoever wants to know truth must be false.’ A mirror always gives a mirror image, not the true one – a thought which has links to a Stoic insight, expressed by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*, ‘...the eye sees not itself but by reflection, by some other things.’ Act I, Scene II.

²⁵⁶ Bennet (1991), *Two Kafka Plays*, 63.

But there are degrees of error and approximation – even if we can't touch him, with some effort we can get closer, we can reduce the errors, we can see a little more clearly into the vanished world of Kafka's life, we can have better dreams.

And I'm still drawn to my original ambition of writing about the end of Kafka's life. I don't now think it would serve to write about all of his last seven years. However, having written about 1917/18 and the start of his illness, I think I should move to 1923/24 and write about his last year – much of which was spent in Berlin. That would give me scope to show how Kafka changed – how he settled down with a woman he wanted to marry and how he mellowed towards his family, particularly his father.

Auden argued that every autobiography is influenced by two characters, a Don Quixote of an ego, and a Sancho Panza of the self.²⁵⁷ In *Letter to my Father* Franz Kafka could be seen as a knight tilting at windmills. In his deathbed letter written in a sanatorium near Vienna²⁵⁸ he was a different man – and with this letter I'll bring my commentary to an end.

Kierling,
Sanatorium Dr. Hoffmann,
2 June 1924

Dearest Parents,

Regarding the visit which you sometimes write about, I think of it every day, for it's a very important matter to me. It would be so good, it's been ages since we were together – I don't include that last time in Prague which just overturned everything at home – but a couple of days, by ourselves, in some pleasant place, I can't even remember when it was, a few hours once in Franzensbad. And then 'a good glass of beer' together,

²⁵⁷ Auden (1989), *The Dyer's Hand*, 96 – in the essay *Hic et Ille*.

²⁵⁸ Franz Kafka : Briefe an die Eltern aus den Jahren 1922-1924 : page 80.

as you write, from which I see that father doesn't think much of the recent local wine, and I agree with him in respect to the beer. By the way, now while it's hot, I often recall us regularly drinking our beer, years ago, when father took me to Civilian Swimming Pool.

That and much more argues for a visit, but too much argues against it. Now, first of all, father probably won't be able to come because of the problems with his passport. That, naturally, takes away a great part of the point of the visit, and it would mean for mother, regardless of who came with her, that she would be too focused on me, too dependent on me, and I'm still not very pretty, not a sight to see. You know about the difficulties I had at first around here and in Vienna, they wore me down a little and stopped the fever dropping quickly, so they weakened me further; the surprise about the larynx weakened me more at first than was reasonable – and only now am I starting to work my way free of this weakness with the help of Dora and Robert,²⁵⁹ whose aid from a distance is completely unimaginable. (Where would I be without them!) There are also some other disturbances, e.g. intestinal catarrh in the last few days which hasn't yet been completely overcome. All of this combines, so that despite my wonderful helpers, despite good air and food – almost daily air-baths – I've still not quite recovered, and overall I'm not even as fit as I was recently in Prague. If you also consider that I can only speak in a whisper and not too often, you'll gladly postpone your visit.

Everything is starting in the best way possible. Recently a professor noted a significant improvement in the larynx, and even if I [think he was exaggerating] the words of this friendly and generous man were a great comfort to me – he comes out here once a week in his own automobile and charges almost nothing. As I said, everything is starting in the best way possible, but the best of starts is nothing if one can't show visitors – particularly visitors as you would be – a great and undeniable progress that can be seen by a layman's eyes, so it's better to put it aside. Shouldn't we put it aside for the time being, my dear parents?

²⁵⁹ Dora Diamant – the woman Kafka lived with in Berlin during the last year of his life. Robert Klopstock – his friend and doctor.

You mustn't believe that you would be able to improve or enhance my treatment here. It is true that the owner of the sanatorium is an old, sick man who can't bother himself with matters much, and the talks with the very pleasant assistant doctor are more friendly than medical, yet there are the occasional visits by specialists, and Robert doesn't move from me, and instead of thinking of his exams devotes himself to me with all his strength, and then a young doctor comes here 3 times a week in whom I have great confidence (I have the architect Ehrmann to thank for him and the doctor I mentioned above).

That's how I consider the visit,

[On another piece of paper]

but not in an auto, rather he comes here three times a week modestly by train and bus.

[Dora Diamant added]

I have taken the letter out of his hand. It was anyway a great effort. Only a couple of lines more which, judging by his request, seem very important to him:²⁶⁰

[In Ottla Kafka's hand in pencil]

Written Monday 2.6.1924

died 3.6.1924

[On the envelope in pencil in his mother's hand]

The last letter of our dear Franz.

²⁶⁰ What they were is not known.

Appendix:

Below are the reviews published for Kafka’s first book, *Contemplation*, a collection of eighteen very short prose pieces. To my knowledge these reviews have not been translated into English before, except for a few quotations. They show that Kafka was not an obscure writer – even after his first collection appeared he was noticed.

Hans Kohn

'Prague Writers'

Selbstwehr (Self-Defence)

20 December 1912

Prague

Hans Kohn was a friend of Max Brod and a member of Prague's Zionist circle. He wrote regularly for the Jewish weekly magazine, Selbstwehr. He was also a keen member of Bar Kochba, the Zionist student group led by another of Kafka's friends, Hugo Bergmann. His review was the first to appear and he managed to get it out in time for Christmas. In this article, as well as reviewing Contemplation, he discussed four other books:

Die Höhe des Gefühls (The Height of Feeling)

by Max Brod,

Der Weltfreund (The World Friend)

by Franz Werfel,

Gedichte (Poems)

by Axel Juncker,

Die Memoiren der Frau Marianne

(The Memoirs of Mrs Marianne)

by Oskar Baum.

Apart from Axel Juncker, who ran a bookshop in Berlin, all of the writers were well known to each other.

Four books are before me, and all four of these are books by Jews; none of them mention the Jews, and yet in each of them one senses the Jew, the Jew that one knows and of whom one carries something with oneself somewhere.

Three of these books belong closely together: the authors are from Prague and have the same way of facing the world – they are full of friendly, comforting love, of the discovery of beauty and goodness in the smallest, hitherto unnoticed things, and they let their feelings grow into gigantic proportions.

Connected to Brod, and partly dependent on him, are two Prague authors whose first books have appeared: Franz Werfel, whose *World Friend* is already in its second edition, and Franz Kafka, whose slim volume, *Contemplation*, was very carefully printed in an edition of 800 copies by Rowohlt in Leipzig – who are also the publisher of Brod's, *The Height of Feeling*. Kafka's little contemplations form something hitherto unknown in German literature; I don't know of any predecessor. Very quietly picking up on some passages in Brod, they proceed in the art of resolving any momentary feeling or mood into its ultimate elements, usually connecting these feelings to objects; and, with the love that is characteristic of this circle of poets, delving into the heart of things and people, as in the story about the merchant; and with an original and often wonderful force going beyond Brod. There are passages that take your breath away, like *The Late Walk*, and there are eerie tales, reminiscent of Kubin,²⁶¹ like *Unhappiness*,

²⁶¹ Alfred Kubin, artist and author of the novel, *The Other Side*. Kafka knew Kubin and records an evening with him in his diary on 26 September, 1911, when Kubin had urged him to try Regulin – a laxative he held to be superior to all others.

that leave the reader baffled but completely immersed in their mood – which can be as little resisted as the infinitely good, if perhaps somewhat sentimental love, present in *The Passenger*. This love constitutes Kafka's nature just as much as Werfel's; yet Kafka's love is always very quiet within itself, while Werfel puts love before us everywhere in his poems and will therefore probably be much more popular.

Kurt Tucholsky

'Three New Books'

Prager Tagblatt (Prague Daily)

27 January 1913

Prague

Kurt Tucholsky had met Kafka and Brod in Prague in September, 1911, and was well disposed to both men. He was already on his way to establishing himself as one of the most prolific and respected German writers of the first decades of the twentieth century.

In this article, as well as Kafka's book, he reviewed:

Die Höhe des Gefühls

(The Height of Feeling) by Max Brod,

Die Strasse komme ich entlang geweht

(I'm Being Blown Down the Street)

by Ernst Blass.

After starting his review with a few words of praise for Brod, Tucholsky shifts to Contemplation.

Similarly from Prague, Franz Kafka in his first work shows some of its influence – but there is much that is new. There is only one person who can write this singing prose – Robert Walser.²⁶² Yet it is here. For example, Kafka's, *The Excursion to the Mountains*. A trip with nothing but a company of nobodies.

²⁶² Robert Walser was a Swiss writer who moved to Berlin and wrote sketches, short stories and novels. By the time Tucholsky wrote his review Walser was already famous for *The Assistant* and *Jakob von Gunten*. In his fifties he was confined in a sanatorium after being diagnosed as a schizophrenic and remained there until he died – see Carl Seelig, *Walks with Walser*.

‘How these nobodies squeeze together, how all these arms stretch out and clasp tight, and how all these little feet are separated by nothing but little steps! And, of course, everyone’s dressed in a tailcoat. We’re so la-la that the wind blows through the gaps that open between us, and our throats swell, free in the mountain air, and it’s a wonder we don’t burst into song!’

The book is full of sharp observations. It's a bit like Lafourge²⁶³ and the Frenchman could have captioned it, The Bachelor’s Lament, and Kafka writes:

‘...carrying dinner home in one’s hand, marvelling at others’ children whilst murmuring, “I don’t have any,” and trying to model oneself, in appearance and behaviour, on a bachelor or two remembered from childhood.’

There is melody in what he says, and if one can argue about the legitimacy of such literature, it does not disguise Kafka's great ability. Children on the Country Road, has the most beautiful Shakespearean ending:

‘I was set on reaching the city to the south, of which it was said by our villagers:

“There are people, just think, who never sleep!”

“And why don’t they?”

“Because they never get tired.”

“And why don’t they get tired?”

“Because they are mad.”

“Don’t the mad get tired?”

“How could the mad get tired?” ’

²⁶³ Jules Lafourge, French symbolist poet, who also wrote an account of Germany’s capital in the 1880s – *Berlin : The City and The Court*.

Here, it seems to me, is the way that leads to Parnassus: something like that is deep and made with the most sensitive fingers.

Otto Pick,

'Franz Kafka's, Contemplation'

Bohemia,

30 January 1913,

Prague.

Otto Pick was a short story writer, poet and translator, and a literary colleague of Max Brod – they started working together in 1909 – and Pick and Kafka were in the same circle of friends, and indeed, later in 1913, they would travel together to Berlin and to Vienna; which makes Pick's opening sentence remarkable.

Only once, in Franz Blei's,²⁶⁴ *Hyperion*, did we come across the name of Franz Kafka from Prague. Between verses by Hofmannsthal, and a fragment of a play by Claudel, appeared a few diary-like notes by a strange man, as if they'd accidentally blown in. These concise prose pieces – some of them consisting of a single sentence – apparently report the daily experiences of a middle-class man, yet they are stylistically of incredible maturity, with the lightness of French masters of prose, but rhythmically they are like the lamentations of lonely girls; and they lack any ostentation, yet they are aware of their novelty, and allow all the highs and lows of enduring feelings. This new kind of observer – as represented by Kafka in a complete and therefore inimitable way – doesn't see things in themselves or as they appear; instead, concepts shift, the everyday becomes extraordinary, the eerie becomes all too familiar.

²⁶⁴ Blei was associated with Brod, Pick and Kafka. For a description of their tangled relationships, and Blei's pornographic magazines, see James Hawes' *Excavating Kafka*.

Kafka feels directly; but his directness leads him to places where we usually go by mistake, without striving for it. For him, the accidental acquaintance who joins him along the way becomes, in an uncontrollable outburst of excitement, a crook, an archenemy whom he tries with all his might to unmask.

In this book the world is viewed as something infinitely puzzling: not only is it unreal in its crude reality, but it is a kind of market square where lonely people wander around, suspecting many dangers, avoiding each other suspiciously, and where everyone believes he can see through his supposed opponent and shyly evades him by trotting down hidden by-ways. Somehow we are reminded of certain passages in Rilke's, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*,²⁶⁵ where perhaps for the first time the shadowy aspects of our external life were revealed.

Franz Kafka is the one who always slips out of his earthly form, the unhappy stromer through the room, the discoverer of the ghosts of the day, the melancholy man with the gestures of somebody who is far too busy. Some of the stories are superficially amusing, eg, *The Businessman*, *The Bachelor*, *The Jockeys* – but they hint at Alfred Kubin's, *The Other Side*; and what is unusual about them, is that the thoughts don't appear just to be things which occur to the characters, but which personify the author.

If one tries to find a formula for this way of looking at life, one gets embarrassed. Perhaps, one says to oneself, that real 'indifference' is at work – for it allows one to see the air behind things, since things in themselves are irrelevant and all too easy to see through. Or has the dormant power of the weak man found expression here? The powerful parts of the book suggest it, eg *Wishing to be an Indian*. This wish is a longing where the impetus expresses the impossibility of fulfilment. Or in *The Excursion to the Mountains with the nobodies* whose

²⁶⁵ Rilke's only novel which was published in 1910.

urges and capers the dreamer describes so vividly they couldn’t be replaced by real people. And yet there are ‘resolutions’ which are lived through to their ultimate consequences, until the justification for them has been lost; and there is the terrible fate of the abandoned soul who decides to be content with contemplating life from his street window: such passages in *Contemplation* betray the anguish of a new and self-conscious Kaspar Hauser²⁶⁶ – and the unmatched talent of an author who is greeted with awe.

²⁶⁶ A youth who claimed to have been brought up alone in a dungeon. Jakob Wasserman’s novel about him was published in 1908.

Max Brod,

'A Literary Event'

März, (March – a weekly literary review.)

15 February 1913,

Stuttgart.

The magazine was edited by Ludwig Thoma²⁶⁷ and Hermann Hesse²⁶⁸ – who evidently gave Max Brod the freedom to enthuse about his friend's work.

I could easily imagine someone taking this book in his hand and from that hour changing his life completely and becoming a new man. Such absoluteness and sweet power emanate from these few brief prose passages. At first one can't grasp them or dissect them. I do not know of any modern or classic author with whom Franz Kafka has much in common. Nothing here is reminiscent of Peter Altenberg²⁶⁹ or Robert Walser other than the size of the pieces, the number of lines – nothing else. So one is tempted to describe the whole book and its effect with nothing but negative qualities. It is without gaps, without flaws, without frailties – like a good plate of armour. But then one finds that this impeccability is more than an endless negative, and

²⁶⁷ Ludwig Thoma was a Bavarian humourist whose comic tales satirized village life, but who also gained a reputation for his serious rural novels. Later, his experiences in the First world War, and Germany's treatment after its defeat, turned him into an ardent nationalist and anti-Semite. However he is remembered in Germany for his comic sketches, such as *Der Müncher im Himmel (The Munich Man in Heaven)*, which was made into an animated film in 1962 – and can be watched on YouTube : *Der Müncher im Himmel : BR Kabarett & Comedy*.

²⁶⁸ Hermann Hesse had already established his reputation with his short stories and poetry. At the start of the First World War he volunteered to serve in the German army but was turned down for medical reasons. Soon afterwards he wrote an essay urging Germans not to lose themselves in nationalistic hate – which made him the centre of a political storm. In later years he wrote *Steppenwolf* and *The Glass Bead Game*, amongst many other works, and was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1946.

²⁶⁹ Peter Altenberg was a writer of sketches and short stories in Vienna. He was widely praised as a miniaturist. A collection of his work, *Telegrams of the Soul*, is available in English. A life-size waxwork of him can be seen just inside the door to the right in Vienna's Café Central.

everyone who knows Franz Kafka personally, the reserved man of the very finest nature, will confirm what I am writing here: his character is such that he prefers to have nothing than something which is marred or deficient. This extreme, heart-warming, unaffected rigour touches all aspects of his life. When he cannot attain perfection, the most ecstatic happiness, he renounces a matter entirely. Thus he fashioned a way of life and a way of thinking which, fully revealed, was bound to shake the unbeliever. In our time of compromises, there is a power of mediaeval contemplation, of a new morality and rigour at work, quietly, deeply.... Just read the piece Resolutions. It is easy, says Kafka, to violently tear oneself out of a state of natural unhappiness.

‘But still, even if it should go on like this – together with those mistakes which can’t be helped – the whole thing, both the easy and the difficult parts, will come to a stop, and I will have to fall back into my circle. That’s why the best advice is to accept everything.’

With such a credo of imperturbability and firmness, a new man enters the stage of literature.

It would be wrong to apply here the standard measure for an author’s first book. Not just because of external reasons, but because Kafka has been an industrious writer from his youth and he is now in his thirties. Yet his rigour and absoluteness initially restricted his work’s publication, and it took years of pleading by his friends before a book appeared, and for that he chose only these few prose pieces from his stacks of manuscripts – which Rowohlt have exquisitely printed in a one-off edition of 800 numbered copies. Even the most intimate of friends, however, failed to notice that the writer has selected pieces for this volume in preference to the treasures which he has decided to keep hidden.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ It is possible that Kafka hadn’t told Brod how much of his work he had burnt the previous year. Though soon after sending *Contemplation* to his publisher, Kafka wrote *The Judgement*, *The Stoker* and *Metamorphosis*.

The distinction may not lie in the details here, but in the purity of the feeling with which the writer keeps watch with the imperturbability of Flaubert.²⁷¹ The love of the divine, of the absolute, speaks from every sentence. And with such ease is this expressed that not a word is wasted – and it is this which sets the book apart from the mass of edifying literature on the market.

No, here the mystical immersion in the ideal is finally experienced, without it being declared, and on its plateau a new pathos, a new humour, a new melancholy is built up with seemingly playful ease. Fantastic images: a trip by no one but 'nobody' to the mountains. Or dialectical dances of the most delicate, almost inconspicuous paradox:

‘Then we are as tree trunks in the snow. Seemingly just resting on the flat ground, and movable with the slightest touch. No, that can't be done – trees are bound to the earth. But that also is just seemingly so.’

Bibliographically, it should be noted that Blei's 'Hyperion' contained something by Kafka. The yearbook 'Arkadia' (published by Rowohlt) will include a novella by him, 'The Judgment.'

(On 14 February, 1913, Kafka wrote to Felice Bauer about these comments:

Midday today I needed a hole to hide in, because I read Max's review of my book in the new issue of March; I knew it was due to appear, but I hadn't seen it. A few reviews had appeared

²⁷¹ Brod was well aware of Kafka's admiration for Flaubert. It was something which Kafka often declared, for example in a letter to Felice Bauer written on 15 November, 1912, 'A *Sentimental Education* is a book that has been more important for me for years, than only two or three people; whenever and wherever I open it I'm startled and succumb to it completely; and I've always considered myself a spiritual son of the author, albeit one who is weak and awkward.' As Flaubert died three years before Kafka was born, it can't be known what he would have made of his spiritual son.

already, naturally by people who know me, worthless in their exaggerated praise, worthless in their remarks, and explicable only as a sign of misguided friendship, of an overrating of the printed word, and of a misunderstanding of the public’s view of literature. Ultimately that’s what they have in common with the majority of reviews, and if they didn’t act as a sad, if fleeting, spur to pride, one could quietly accept them. Max’s review flies over the mountains. Just because the friendship he feels for me at its most human, has roots far deeper than literature, and so begins before literature can draw breath, he overestimates me in such a way that I feel embarrassed and vain and conceited; yet with his literary experience and discernment, he has available powers of judgement which are nothing but judgement. Nevertheless, that’s how he writes. If I was working, if I was in the full flow of work and carried along by it, I would be untouched by the review, in my thoughts I would kiss Max for his love, and the review itself wouldn’t trouble me! But as things are... And the terrible thing is that I have to admit, that my attitude to his work is the same as his to mine, but sometimes I know this, but he never does.

In another letter to Felice Bauer – written on 20 April, 1914 – Kafka remarked that, ‘Max doesn’t understand me, and where he does he is wrong.’

Max Brod is the primary witness for Franz Kafka’s life.)

Albert Ehrenstein,

'Contemplation'

Berliner Tageblatt,

Literarische Rundschau (Literary Review)

16 April 1913,

Berlin.

Albert Ehrenstein was a Hungarian-Jewish poet from Vienna, who lived for much of his life in Berlin. By 1913 he was already famous within the German literary world for his expressionist poem, Wanderer's Song, which had been published with illustrations by Oskar Kokoschka. Ehrenstein had met Kafka on 23 March in Café Josty at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, and they, together with the other writers there, had sent a postcard to the publisher they all shared.

A strangely great, strangely fine book by a brilliant-tender writer. In contrast to other Prague writers, Franz Kafka is a discreet gentleman. 'Whoever recognises him, greets him.'

One never learns from his sketches that 'she' is called Emma and 'he' is Erwin. No 'he' and no 'she' is pretended, no fleshly fulfilment is properly and 'excitingly' prepared and precisely executed. Kafka is discreet, he only hints at things, he deliberately and for the sake of cleanliness refrains from the depths of feeling. He is always a world away from arranging or administering a book or forcibly piling things together – his book is fundamentally home-made. An enduring sign of this masterpiece, hidden from the crowd like any other, is that it is indescribable, inaccessible to the analysis of a realm of glosses, stands on its own and rests

untouchably on itself for a pretty while – and yet is of such a morbid nature it seems the next wind could carry you away.

Kafka delivers small acts, small effects, all delicate and shy, like the rare formations of a conscious yet indestructible dream. His noble book flies away in gently mad arabesques, in marginal notes of a vanishing, untraceable landlord and sub-tenant of life. Such depressive (yet luminous) books are only written in countries that are not politically expansive, in countries that are not fighting. Kafka asserts himself, so to speak, only in relation to his notebook. What he says sounds like someone whispering of the few dear, quiet existences, such as can only be found in the Austrian kingdoms. A strangely lyrical prose, lacking punchlines, and less humorous than that of Peter Altenberg. A remarkably great, remarkably fine book by a brilliant-tender writer.

Hans von Weber,
'Von Bildern und anderen Büchern'
(Of Pictures and other Books)
Der Zwiebfisch
(The Onionfish),
June 1913,
Munich.

Hans von Weber was a German publisher who founded Hyperion in 1906, and the house magazine published a selection of Kafka's short prose pieces – the nucleus of Contemplation. In 1913 Weber sold Hyperion to Kafka's publisher, Kurt Wolff. Weber is also credited with launching the career of Kafka's friend, Alfred Kubin.

Small sketches and marginal notes on everyday life by a sharp-witted man whose literary importance has already been confirmed in the narrow circles of Prague. The thin booklet is lavishly printed, in a magnificent Antiqua typeface of great quality: every detail of the publication is of the highest taste.

Max Brod,

'Kleine Prosa'

(Short Prose)

Die Neue Rundschau

(The New Review),

July 1913,

Berlin.

*Not content to just write one review of *Contemplation*, Brod followed his first bout of praise with a second five months later. In this article, as well as Kafka's book, he reviewed, *Aufsätzen* (Essays) by Robert Walser, and a collection of short stories by Heinrich Eduard Jacobs, *Das Leichenbegängnis der Gemma Ebria* (The Funeral of Gemma Ebria). The review was re-published the following year by Kurt Wolff.*

Franz Kafka expresses the same sovereignty of prose style over its material [as Robert Walser]. His book, *Contemplation*, can be understood as a sequence of images, revelations and visions experienced by a highly idiosyncratic individual.

But Kafka refuses to describe the psychology of characters. Psychological motivation can always be used by an author at will, it can make every action and its opposite plausible; and if not essentially a second-rank artistic device, it can easily become so. With such a new and peculiar prose intonation as Kafka's, the undertaking can therefore dare to forego the hero's psychology altogether and, mastering the material from this side, the unity of a spiritual character through the unity of the style, ie, to recreate it in a whole other medium. The freedom here is different from that of Walser: the impression that arises is not that of lightness, but that of

absoluteness. The words don't dance, they are necessary, but necessitated by nothing but one's own spirit and innermost sincerity. Kafka represents neither the soul nor the experience, but rather the delicate tactile area between the two, which his nerve-racking style, which has been worked through to the smallest detail, allows him to grasp. This style is in constant dialectic movement, but the intellectual game never seems dry; it is, if one may say so, a dewy dialectic, a progression in dreamy paradoxes, in lovely sophistications. And quite similar to Walser's way of looking at things, this new way of looking at each object, covers it and, despite all the changes in material, always makes the reader feel as if he is in the front row. And all shades from humour to pathos to despair are possible in it. Through a special kind of contradiction, through stubborn arguments and contrasts, the essence of things is looked at more deeply than usual. So when an external event appears it is in sharp focus: 'Then the birds flew up as if sprayed into the sky, and I gazed after them as they soared until I felt no more that they were climbing, but that I was falling...'

Or when inner symbolic moods are brought up in the image of an everyday event it is with casuistic-melancholic justification: 'Nothing, when one thinks about it, can be sufficient temptation to want to be first in a race.'

Yes, very special connections are recorded, such as the thoughts of a young businessman after the end of his working day, thoughts which have broken free and roam with pathos around the whole world; or that of the bachelor who lets the vision of his sad future end in the words: 'That's how it will be, except that in addition, then and for evermore, you will stand there holding your head up and beating your all-too-real brow with your hand.'

The immediacy with which Kafka uses his own formal language, instead of reality, shows his affinity with the expressionistic direction of contemporary painting. When he wrote

his new tale, *The Stoker*, set in America, he didn't want to hear about America, although he's never been there. He wrote of the America in his head and heart, where the Statue of Liberty carries a sword instead of a torch, because that fits the sentence better – I think Walser would have done it the same way.²⁷²

²⁷² Brod seems to have reconsidered the similarities of Kafka and Walser between writing his two reviews.

**Paul Friedrich,
‘Gleichnisse und Betrachtungen’
(Comparisons and Reflections)
Das Literarische Echo –
Halbmonatsschrift für Literaturfreunde
(The Literary Echo –
Fortnightly Review for Friends of Literature),
15 August, 1913,
Berlin.**

The magazine had been established in 1898 and many of Central Europe’s leading writers and critics contributed to its pages.

Paul Friedrich’s article also covered Hans Reinharts’, Die Seltene Schale, (The Rare Shell) – which he reviewed unfavourably – and Hetta Mayrs’, Gleichnisse und Legenden, (Parables and Legends), which he treated more kindly. Then he turned to Kafka.

I see new land in Franz Kafka’s curious book, *Contemplation*. It becomes clearer in its uniqueness when one thinks of Peter Altenberg’s lyrical sketches. With Altenberg the lyricism rounds off every impression and shows how he is enjoying the beauty of the world, regardless of whether he is portraying an Ashante girl, a drummer, or a Viennese woman sitting wearily in a rocking chair with her boots being unbuttoned.

The world is not given a rosy glow in Kafka's bachelor art.²⁷³ The resistance of the ego – its dissonance with the 'outside' – is greater and cuts deeper. There is more wonder between the individual and existence than in Altenberg. Altenberg is the lover who is absorbed in the things he loves. But Kafka caught between the ego and the world, shows a man in a third condition where he is no longer himself and not yet the 'other.' He objectifies the most subjective, while Altenberg subjectifies the objective. It's not 'the merchant' that interests him, but rather the feeling of tension that only arises after the store has closed: 'being a merchant.' Not 'the passer-by,' but the miracle of passing by. Unstressed intermediate states attract him, like *Lost in the View*, or standing as in *Passenger* on the rear platform of a tram, or sudden decisions as in *The Sudden Walk* – in short, what interests him is the most uninteresting. And here he finds psychological gold that is still minted virginally. In the description of *Children on the Country Road* one stumbles upon this gem: 'And there was no reason not to climb up onto the parapet.' Can one write better and more intuitively of boys' psychology? And aren't the words 'groundlessly loyal' for domestic faces surprising? And the feeling phrase 'half-naked,' for a gentleman in his shirtsleeves who meets a lady, is richly expressive. However these isolated golden examples only give half the impression of Kafka's compact stories. Three tales alone seem to me to show complete craftsmanship – *Rejection*, *Reflections for Gentlemen Jockeys*, *The Trees*.

Allowing for that, here are valuable approaches to a new, more sensitive prose that deserve the most serious consideration.

²⁷³ Kafka mentioned this review in a letter to Felice Bauer on 14 August, 1913, he thought it was very friendly, but not otherwise remarkable, except for his stories being labelled as, 'bachelor art' – 'What do you think of that, Felice?' Sadly her letters have not survived, and so her reply is lost.

Robert Musil,
'Literarische Chronik'
(Literary Chronicle)
Die Neue Rundschau
(The New Review),
August, 1914,
Berlin.

The New Review's predecessor first appeared in 1890. After a couple of changes of name and editor it became, under Oskar Bie, one of Central Europe's main literary magazines. Robert Musil already had two books published when, in January, 1914, he became an assistant editor and one of the magazine's main reviewers. He was sufficiently impressed with Kafka's work to ask Max Brod for Kafka's address. When Brod told him he had given this to Musil, Kafka wrote to Brod to complain, 'You should definitely not have given Musil my address. What does he want? What can he, could anyone, want from me? And what can he get from me?'

*Kafka soon found out. Musil wrote and asked him for a contribution to the magazine. In his diary on 23 February, 1914, Kafka noted. 'I am on my way. Letter from Musil. Pleases me and saddens me, for I have nothing.' A few months later, Robert Musil, like millions of others, was in uniform. In this review he covered Kafka's story, *The Stoker*, as well as *Contemplation*.*

It seems to me that Walser's special type of writing should remain such, and that it is not suitable to being developed into a literary genre, and to my discomfort Kafka's first book does seem like a special case of the Walser type. Here too there is the contemplation of a style for

which a writer, some fifty years ago, might have invented the book title, Soap Bubbles; but then it was funny, now it is sad; then it was freshly baroque, now its long sentences make it consciously melancholy – like an ice skater making long loops and figures. There is a very great artistic mastery here, the sound of small infinities in emptiness, a humbly chosen nothingness, a friendly gentleness like in the hours of a suicide between resolution and action, or whatever you want to call the feeling that can variously be described, because it resonates like a very quiet, dark intermediate tone – and that is very appealing, if vague and quiet. It touches on that inwardness of experience that makes Kafka's other book, the novella, *The Stoker*,²⁷⁴ so delightful. This story is all fluttering and all restraint. It is actually without construction – without any external or internal action worth mentioning – and yet it sets out the steps so finely and is so full of activity, that one feels how long and moving the path is from one uneventful day to the next for some people.

A young man travels from Europe to America – away from his family and towards a good and respected uncle, who appears unexpectedly as if in a fairy tale. On the way he makes friends with a stoker, gets involved in his fate, and attempts nothing but unachievable things, which, seen from the world, hang in it like torn wires; and he thinks nothing but thoughts which he doesn't conclude. And that's all. It is intentionally naïve and yet has none of the unpleasantness associated with such stories. Because it has real naivety – it is indirect, complicated, and has a longing, an ideal. Though in literature the falsely naïve can look the same; the difference lies elsewhere! There is something in it which bears reflection, a well-founded story, grounded in living feelings; whereas the popular, simple naivety lacks this and therefore is worthless. In Kafka's story an original drive for good develops, not resentment, but

²⁷⁴ Though initially published by itself, *The Stoker* was also the first chapter of Kafka's novel *America* – which was published by Brod after Kafka's death following *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Kafka finished none of these.

something of the buried passion of childhood for the good; that feeling of excited children's prayers, and something of the restless zeal of careful schoolwork, and much for which there can be no expression than moral tenderness. The demands here of what should be done, are made by a conscience that is not driven by ethical principles, but by a subtle, insistent irritability that continually asks small questions of great importance – questions that to others seem flatly insignificant – and it makes altogether strange marks visible. And then in the midst of all this there is a passage where it is revealed how a maid, who is old and without love, awkwardly and embarrassingly seduced a little boy; it is quite short, but of such concentrated power, that the hitherto merely gentle narrator, appears a very conscious artist who acknowledges small but significant sensations.

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