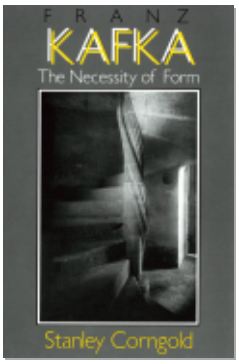
Preface



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Preface

To say what Kafka's work means is to say more than one can, if meanings depend on descriptions of experience, having beginnings and ends. For here, in Hölderlin's words, "beginning and end no longer allow themselves to be coupled together like rhymes."[1] Kafka himself doubted that "The Judgment"—the story he loved the best—meant anything "straightforward" and "coherent."[2] But the want of such meaning should not suggest something fugitive or arabesque about his achievement. Kafka's work is informed by a literally cabalistic stringency that draws reading after reading to itself—including readings based on experience. This is a fact about its power to invite disclosure by experience, not its need to be improved by it. Indeed, recent studies of Kafka have been less and less concerned with reproducing the description of personal experience that Kafka's work purportedly makes. In other words, Kafka is rarely read today as if he were writing in the discursive system of 1800, in which, as Friedrich

1. This sentence is Friedrich Hölderlin's description of Nature in dissolution; see *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1961), 5:220. Sources for the foregoing epigraphs are LF 313; Gottfried Benn, "Züchtung I," in *Gesammelte Werke: Essays, Reden, Vorträge* (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1959), 1:217; GW 269.

2. In a letter to Felice Bauer dated June 2, 1913, Kafka wrote: "Can you discover any meaning in 'The Judgment'—some straightforward, coherent meaning that one could follow? I can't find any, nor can I explain anything in it" (LF 265). Silvio Vietta notes, "In Kafka's stories 'meaning' itself is thematized"; see "Franz Kafka, Expressionism, and Reification," trans. Douglas Kellner, in *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin, 1983), p. 210.

Kittler says, "all depicted events are explained in the psychological or philosophical culture of a voice in the margins of the text."[3] The power of Kafka's work consists in the many ways it suggests that literature can function without meaning—that is, without provoking substitutions or analogies that appeal to the beginnings and ends of experience. Kafka's works are the signs of a body in labor; signs of a consciousness needing to be; signs, above all, of the being who *is* literature, seeking through language the ecstatic consumption of experience.

These relations can be put into concepts and ideas, and certainly powerful formulas are found in Kafka's notebooks, in which writing is defined as "a form of prayer" (DF 312) and literature as an "assault on the last earthly frontier" (DII 202). But all such gnomes leave an irreducible remainder of startling images, suggesting that they are fragments torn from only a dream of textbook poetics. Critics' redescriptions of these relations tend to be derivative, flattened-out stories of the way Kafka's writing arose and mattered for him. His work is the braille of a being that loads the rifts beneath its runes. Kafka's sense of the continuity of poetic desire and writing is at once the ink relation of script and the blood relation of birth, and thus he acknowledged all of his live, published works in a story called "Eleven Sons."[4] What is at stake for him is not encoding meanings in fiction but, simply put, writing—his last word. He writes as one who must write, whose works enact the craving for a final breath: "There is no having, only a being, only a state of being that craves the last breath, craves suffocation" (DF 37).

The animation of Kafka's writing self proceeds from a great depth, whence it is guided "above ground" into an "incredible spate of new things" (GW 263).[5] A good deal of this novelty is produced by pecu-

3. Friedrich A. Kittler, "Ein Erdbeben in Chile und Preußen," in *Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft: Acht Modellanalysen am Beispiel von Kleists "Das Erdbeben in Chile,"* ed. David E. Wellbery (Munich: Beck, 1985), p. 27 (translation mine, as are all translations not otherwise specified). Cf. Kittler's *Aufschreibesysteme 1800 . 1900* (Munich: Fink, 1985).

4. Toward the end of his life, when Kafka despaired of publication, he declared that the relation between him and his works was precisely not that of a family. But the metaphor, whether with a positive or negative value, makes the point of the "blood bond" between Kafka and his work (DI 134).

5. In his diaries Kafka wrote of his "great longing to write my state entirely out of me, write it into the depths of the paper just as it comes out of the depths of me" (DI 173).

liar devices of literary rhetoric, which in the past have been avoided by historians, since they pose special difficulties to interpretation. Kafka's distinctive tropes and strategies, such as "metamorphosed metaphors" and "monopolized" narrative style, appear to affirm the power to excite interpretation as the warrant of literature at the same time that they prevent this activity from reaching a conclusion. Indeed, wrote Kafka, his works are "scarcely tolerable, incapable of becoming history" (GW 263–64). In this book, however, I try to show that Kafka's rhetoric can be recovered as the enactment of the project of one who had to live his life as literature, in works bearing witness to this fate.

In modern literature the threat to meaning and its overcoming have a history of their own, which Kafka's literary past helps to define. The tradition of Kafka takes readers to Cervantes, Flaubert, and Nietzsche as writers who provoke a comparable disruption by such narrative strategies as framed narration and "veiled discourse," as well as by themes related to Kafka's own: the phenomenon of unwilled self-reversal, consternation between persons, the difficulty of conceiving of an individual life as rounding to a close.

The first part of this book deals with a few short works in which the basic figures of Kafka's thought and composition can be found most clearly—figures prominently informed by principles of resemblance and difference in a state of high tension. These are chiefly the tropes of metaphor and symbol on the one hand, allegorical allusion on the other. Their principles shape, moreover, the kinds of criticism that Kafka's works have attracted. This is to say, the works themselves construct, dramatize, and reject principles generating types of interpretation.[6] The figures of sameness and strangeness found in the earliest stories recur as patterning devices within the novels.[7]

6. Metaphor is constituted by a principle of resemblance over time, which is to say, by repetition despite disparity—the conditions enabling metaphor to function are fundamentally historical. The difference constituting Kafka's allusion includes the "mere difference" of metonymy, the "double difference" of chiasm, and the "interminable difference" of allegory. At times Kafka inverts the usual order of priorities. He does not appear to use the tropes of rhetoric (and their principles) as devices for the literary representation of experience. Rather, he operates with principles of resemblance and difference as prime reality, and writing, when scrupulously done, is the occasion of their greatest freedom and comprehensiveness of interaction.

7. In an unpublished paper "On Repetition," James Rolleston singles out "the drastically foreshortened second half of *Das Urteil* ('The Judgment'), the uncanny

Kafka's stories raise a great many general questions, which they rain like arrows into nearby fields. Three of these questions are particularly important for this book—they concern the possibility of literary history, the effect on readers of fictively enacted shocks to understanding, and what I call "prereading" or implied reading. When I needed other examples of these topics, I sought them in writers whose relation to Kafka was already instructive. Kafka made the choice easy. He was attracted to Flaubert more than to any other author, and the work he loved most was *Sentimental Education*.[8] In writing about this novel, I spend a considerable amount of time exclusively on its closing chapters. This procedure is justified by Kafka, who, in an astonishing diary entry, gave *Sentimental Education* the importance of the fifth book of Moses by connecting their endings: both works record the failure of a man to arrive at his goal—Moses, "not because his life is too short but because it is a human life" (DII 196). Meanwhile, the figure of Don Quixote rides through Kafka's fiction—through "Spain" the Promised Land of K.'s longed-for emigration from the world of *The Castle*,[9] through the parable "The Truth about Sancho Panza," and through other aphoristic fragments from the great posthumous volume *Dearest Father*. Finally, the valuable foil among philosophers is Nietzsche, whom Kafka read early: they are both to the same degree philosophers of ethics and rhetoric—of the intimate involvement of scruples and tropes—laying weight, when the choice could be made, on the first term. The essays on other writers in the second part of this book have therefore been importantly prompted by Kafka. This middle section (chiefly Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight) deliberately repeats, though with a difference, texts

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repetition of the whipping scene in *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*), the culminating death-in-life of the country doctor." Equally important are odd and marginal interferences by the narrator in an otherwise uniform perspectival structure.

8. See the major study by Charles Bernheimer, *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), and further his "Psychopoetik: Flaubert und Kafkas *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*," in *Der junge Kafka*, ed. Gerhard Kurz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 154-83. Albert Mingelgrun has compiled a register of salient points of contact between the lives, themes, and aesthetic obsessions of the two writers in "Kafka à la rencontre de Flaubert," *Europe* 49 (1971):168–78.

9. Gerhard Kurz, "Die Literatur, das Leben, und der Tod: Anmerkungen zu Cervantes und Kafka," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 212 (1975): 265.

and issues discussed in the first part of the book, with the intention of giving them new emphasis from context. Thus, "Kafka, Nietzsche, and the Question of Literary History" (Chapter Six) takes up the matter of "Kafka's Double Helix" (Chapter Five); "Consternation: The Anthropological Moment in Prose Fiction (Cervantes, Flaubert, Kafka)" (Chapter Seven) takes up "The Hermeneutic of 'The Judgment'" (Chapter Two); and "The Curtain Half Drawn: Prereading in Flaubert and Kafka" (Chapter Eight) takes up the "*The Trial* / 'In The Penal Colony': The Rigors of Writing," which for reasons of continuity actually follows as Chapter Nine. An "Excursus" considers the relation of these chapters and concerns to the institution of Kafka studies.

This book itself generates a relation between two approaches to Kafka's work. On the one hand it proposes, as a necessary but insufficient condition of reading, Kafka's intelligibility—his symbolic images, his experiences of thought, the narrative of a life, a developing discourse—in individual works and in Kafka's career as a whole. On the other hand it lingers on Kafka's characteristic figures, the constituents of his rhetorical imagination—such as metamorphosed metaphors, fictive perspectives, and chiastic reversals—considering always the disruptive bearing, on the usual tale of a tale told, that such figures have. What effect, in other words, do Kafka's rhetorical decisions have on the reader's desire to read Kafka's work as an intelligible whole, modeled on a life story?

The outcome is not, and should not be, a single field or principle. Kafka described, typically, his attempts to write as seeking "that freedom of true description which releases one's foot from experience [*die einem den Fuß vom Erlebnis löst*]" (DI 100; Ta 104), but Gustav Janouch also records Kafka as asking, "The material must be worked on by the spirit [before it can develop into eternal art]? What does that mean? It means to experience, nothing else except to experience and to master what is experienced. That is what matters" (J 159). It therefore comes as no surprise that for Kafka "the point of view of art and that of life are different even in the artist himself" (DF 86)—a difference that I understand as itself varying. My chapters make various attempts to define the main modes of this relation, stressing on the one hand the sheer disparateness of art from human life and the deadly estrangement which that difference required Kafka to live, and

on the other the exemplary wholeness of Kafka's life and the perfection and truthfulness of its representation in his work. The first mode stresses the impossibility of grasping Kafka's life and work in a systematic way; the second, the assured possibility of their recovery. But this is not to suggest that the major pattern of such a life lies in the therefore monotonous binary of Kafka's thought about art and life, its mainly two tones. Hölderlin's poetry of poetry (to take a counterexample) was, as Hölderlin perceived, too "regulated" in its tonality, consisting only of an upper and a subordinated tone. Kafka's "poetry" of writing—a poetics explicit in his letters and journals, and all-present though hidden in his stories—is one of the richest, most intricate, and varied ever composed, an entire diapason of values and connections ranging from the metaphysical heights of writing as a "new Kabbalah" to the technological flatlands of writing as a kind of strenuous use of the "parlograph" (a primitive dictaphone).[10] I try to reflect some of this variety within Kafka's continual thought about literature.

This book is rather parsimonious in the number of works of Kafka treated. That is because its choice of texts is determined by my previous work on Kafka's early stories and aphorisms—work done originally from the desire to begin at the beginning and to which I return in the hope of getting a better grasp. I have decided, however, not to add on many new chapters in the name of an unattainable comprehensiveness. Work done "a long time ago" promises the unity of whatever belongs to the past. Equally, in bringing older and newer essays together, I can generate something they never displayed in the past: namely, a common perspective—one which, I realize, has needed a good deal of rewriting to achieve. While doing this I regis-

10. Gerhard Neumann, "'Nachrichten vom "Pontus"': Das Problem der Kunst im Werk Franz Kafkas," *Franz Kafka Symposium—1983: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur zu Mainz*, ed. Wilhelm Emrich and Bernd Goldmann (Mainz: V. Hase & Koehler, 1985), p. 115. Neumann's discussion is indebted to Kittler, whose *Aufschreibesysteme* distinguishes between *Dichtung* and *Literatur*—the latter practice being importantly preoccupied with the materiality of script, especially the technical character of the modern writing medium, involving dictation, typewriting, telegraphy, etc. Kafka was fascinated with technological innovations; he is the author of the first published description of modern airplanes in German literature. See Joachim Unseld, *Franz Kafka—Ein Schriftstellerleben* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1984), p. 29.

tered, at first with alarm, the number of times certain passages from Kafka's confessional writings recur. More than twice I have set down his description of how his organism withered for the sake of writing and how his writing could treat of truthful things only "allusively." These apothegmatic rumors from the life of literature are elaborated and inserted into arguments dealing with the intensity of Kafka's devotion to writing as a way of being and his belief that, as a way of being, his writing could and did tell the truth. But couldn't these repetitions be eliminated? Kafka is eloquent on the subject of his writing, and it should not be difficult to satisfy the reader's reasonable expectation of novelty and inclusiveness by substituting other passages for ones already used.[11] I have finally decided to let them stand. There are too many advantages in doing so.

First, repetitive citation could be reckoned a fact about Kafka himself, whose sense of identity was, to an extraordinary extent, a constant. His "being," which he called by the unwonted *Schriftstellersein,* "being [as] a writer" (Br 385; L 333), was determined by the decision to write—a decision he described as not his to make but made for him. His fate obliged him to be the same thing always: the being who has to write and in many ways cannot, for he can never write well enough—cannot write with the wholeheartedness that writing requires, so as to say, having written: I am entirely that sentence.

Second, in having to reread the same passages, the patient reader will be rewarded, I think, by the consciousness of how inexhaustibly interesting they are. The effect of their recurrence in a variety of contexts is intensified power: they ray out light in more and more directions.

My final reason for keeping them is personal: this selection of citations necessarily has my signature—even though, as the mark of a collector and based on taste, it could sign equally, as Benjamin noted, ignorance as to how these objects were actually produced. Still, they sank into me when I first began to write about Kafka twenty years ago, and they keep returning. I cannot now imagine life without

11. In his letters and diary entries but not in his fiction. See Gerhard Neumann's elaboration of this distinction in his "Nachrichten vom 'Pontus.'" For a useful compilation of Kafka's texts on his own writing, see *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen: Kafka*, ed. Erich Heller and Joachim Beug (Munich: Heimeran, 1969).

them, and I want to see them again in all the places where they come up.

Like Hölderlin's persona in his early poem "To Quietness" ("An die Ruhe"), who builds with this very poem an "altar of thanks" to Rousseau, I would be happy if *mutatis mutandis* this book could mark my gratitude to Kafka. If there is anything good in it at all, that is what my gratitude to him is for.

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