• **WORKS CITED**

Delfel, Guy. *L'Esthétique de Stéphane Mallarme*. Paris: Flammarion, 1951.
Eliade, Mircea. *Traité d'histoire des religions*. Paris: Payot, 1964.
Hermetica. Ed. and trans. Walter Scott. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1924-1936.
Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres complètes*. Eds. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.
_____. *Correspondance: 1862-1871*. Eds. Henri Mondor and Jean-Pierre Richard. Paris: Gallimard, 1959.
_____. *Correspondance: 1886-1889*. Eds. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.
_____. *Les Noces d'Hérodiade*. Ed. Gardner Davies. Paris: Gallimard, 1959.
Poulet, Georges. *La Distance intérieure*. Paris: Plon, 1952.
Priestley, J. B. *Man and Time*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964.
Williams, Thomas A. *Mallarmé and the Language of Mysticism*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1970.

The Elusive Kafka as a Man of His Times: Reflections on Recent Research

Paul F. Dvorak
Virginia Commonwealth University

The name Kafka and the subsequent derivation kafkaesque invariably evoke images of the surreal, of feelings of existential *Angst*, and of deep emotional reactions ranging from utter despair to cautiously guarded hope. The legendary obtuseness and mythical impenetrability that have come to be associated with Kafka and his world stand inversely proportional to the overt intent of the ever burgeoning number of critical attempts to explicate his work. By the most recent count, the number of books, studies, essays, and articles on Kafka over the past three-quarters of a century has surpassed the staggering total of 11,000.[1] Yet so much of Kafka remains hidden deep within the vault of a middle-European capital, notwithstanding the nostalgic appeal Prague exudes and the current widespread entrepreneurial efforts of its Czech citizenry to capitalize on a native son so long summarily ignored.[2] The essential answers to the questions of who Kafka was and what his message means seem increasingly elusive and enigmatic as they are filtered repeatedly through a plethora of ambiguous discourses and subjective interpretations. Though he stands as the paradigmatic representative of modernism *par excellence*,[3] the real Kafka remains today perhaps as veiled as ever.

To be sure, even the casual reader of Kafka is familiar in general terms with the essential biography: with his threefold isolation from Czech, German, and Jewish society, with his problematic relationship with family and friends (captured most incisively in his literary and autobiographical depiction of his relationship with a domineering father and with his two-time fiancée Felice Bauer), with the poor health that plagued him and the tuberculosis that claimed his young life, and with the introverted personality and uncompromising commitment to writing in the face of the harsh realities of everyday life and work. But when this casual reader is nevertheless confronted with a literary legacy that defiantly thwarts explication, he oftentimes submissively accepts the contradictions as the irrational and unfathomable reflections of the dysfunctional, eccentric, modernist mind. And yet each decade from the 1920s to the present has approached

Kafka from its own point of view, while seeking to distill order from amidst the chaos and to shed the penultimate light upon a life and an *oeuvre* so shrouded in light-quenching darkness.

Stephen Dowden's recent work on *The Castle* serves as an example of how the development of criticism to Kafka's last novel can impact our overall understanding of him.[4] In tracing the history of critical reaction from the era of the Weimar Republic through the Cold War and from post-structuralism to postmodernism, for example, Dowden brings into focus for the contemporary reader the considerable subjectivity with which critics have approached Kafka's novel since its appearance in 1926. While the notion that a critic approaches an author and interprets his work from a preconceived set of biases is, in the abstract, blatantly unimaginative and hardly cause for an eyebrow to be raised, actually unearthing the historical record of such a development invites pause for serious reflection. Is it truly the author and his work or merely the critic and his interpretation that we encounter? Dowden's study stands as an invaluable reminder that we must keep these questions consciously before us as we pursue the light at the end of Kafka's long, dark tunnel.

A related issue—one which looms even more ominously alongside the path to our understanding of an author such as Kafka—is the role that the primary texts themselves play in this process. Max Brod, Kafka's lifelong friend and undaunted intermediary, has incontrovertibly played a crucial role from the very outset. While amassing every identifiable extant document linked to the author after his death and subsequently serving as the executor and editor of the *Nachlaß*, Brod's efforts have shaped not only the German but also the international reception of Kafka. Having "rescued" his friend's work for posterity, Brod embarked on a publication and editorial project that virtually established the parameters of Kafka criticism for decades. Though recent projects have resulted in more reliable critical editions and have clearly exposed the extent of Brod's editorial "tampering,"[5] his pervasive influence continues to go largely unchecked. Despite an exhortation to "let the manuscript speak," which can be gleaned from the title of Malcolm Pasley's accompanying study to his critical edition of *The Trial*, entitled *Franz Kafka, Der Proceß. Die Handschrift redet*,[6] his work and that of other recent scholars remains largely drowned out by the thunderous echo of the Brod-influenced editions in all but the most exclusive chambers that comprise the castle of Kafka research. One can only hope that such recent works as Joachim Unseld's facsimile edition of the famous *Letter to His Father*, which documents and describes an historical account vastly different from the widely accepted one Brod promoted, will gradually gain prominence.[7]

But old traditions die hard, as Fischer Verlag's recent paperback edition of the complete works edited by Brod attests. What is significant is the fact that its availability at one-third the cost of the new paperback twelve-volume critical edition will continue to make it the popular choice among most readers.[8] And, furthermore, when one considers the fact that the bulk of the translations of Kafka's works are also based on Brod's editions and then factors in the inevitable degradation that results in even the best of them, one comes to realize—literally—how pervasive, and even insidious, the global assault on the essential Kafka has been.

Probing into several lesser known areas about the author and his work can provide insights for a readership conditioned by the considerations outlined above. A heightened familiarity with deeper cultural and personal aspects of Kafka's world, of his attitudes, reading habits, and associations help "explain" and "enlighten" the reading of some otherwise inexplicable or at least difficult passages. Of course, biographical studies of and approaches to Kafka are hardly in short supply, but considerably less information is available or understood about the author's more elemental, semi-conscious relationship to the times in which he lived and how these factors impacted his life. What Sander Gilman has termed a "psychohistorical approach,"[9] one that stretches beyond the generalities and even the surface-level specifics regarding familial and personal relationships, employment, and Jewish heritage, for example, is revealing. In briefly developing this approach here, material might well be categorized under the labels Kafka, the Jewish patient and Kafka, the purposeful writer.[10] Both designations are significant in their own right, but considered together they contribute to a fuller understanding of the author.

In his recent study, *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient*, Gilman carefully compiles a wealth of historical, medical, psychological, and cultural documentation that defined the Jew as an entity in *fin-de-siècle* Europe. Gilman's stated intent in this work is "to read in the light of the language of Kafka's time a series of texts written by Kafka that constructed specific differences among human beings, differences that may seem to us universal but that in his time had specific forms and directions" (Gilman 1). In doing so, Gilman attempts to "uncover the relationship between either the masked or the effaced discourse of high modernism that dominates Kafka's writing and the contemporary discourses in which he found himself enmeshed" (Gilman 9).

As Gilman unravels these major discourses on race, gender, and illness, the reader of Kafka comes to understand the subtle ways in which they informed the language of Kafka's world. Kafka's self-image was totally dependent on that contemporary world, even if the result produced a negative picture. Kafka's illness—or illnesses—emerged as central and self-defining (Gilman 5); these real and/or imagined illnesses formed the axis on

which he and his world turned. Conditioned by contemporary beliefs, Kafka's anxiety preordained the inevitability that he would become that which he most feared he would become, a self-image of the mendacious Westernized Jew—a counterfeit, a lie .[11]

While much of Kafka's work can be viewed, as it so often has, as a reflection of his desire to rediscover his Jewish roots and heritage, to grasp more fully the "insignificant scrap of Jewishness" left to him by his father, as he phrases it in the famous *Letter*[12], it becomes equally clear that Kafka's thought processes clearly mirror the philosophical, medical, and cultural discussions of the day. A few examples Gilman cites will illustrate the point.

The coverage of the infamous Dreyfus Affair galvanized latent popular prejudices and became part of the literary world of educated Jews around the turn of the century. Dreyfus's conviction precipitated a visible rupture in the Enlightenment, which provided the traditional undergirding in the thinking of Westernized Jews. The hope that this idealistic philosophy had fostered among Jews was now being undermined by a growing anti-Semitism, of which the entire Dreyfus matter was a prime example. Knowing the newspapers and journals Kafka read in Prague, we can safely conclude that these widely publicized accounts were totally familiar to him.

Upon this backdrop, one can thus argue that parallels to *In the Penal Colony* represent Kafka's digestion of the matter, and that other works such as *Josephine, Arabs and Jackals*, *The Hunger Artist*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle* also incorporate motifs related to the affair. Is not Dreyfus's case closely aligned to the archetypal court case facing K. in *The Trial*? Are Kafka's torture machine and penal colony so far removed from Devil's Island, where Dreyfus was exiled?

Kafka, of course, offers us little direct support for such a view by way of evidence in his diaries or letters, but we have come to expect that of him, when we consider, for example, that during the four years of the Great War, which coincided with one of the periods of Kafka's greatest productivity, such scant mention is made of that horrific conflagration. Rather, it is self-effacement and introspection that characterize even Kafka's non-literary works.

Interestingly, throughout his entire ordeal, Dreyfus never referred to himself as a Jew, as Gilman states. Kafka too never uses the designation in his purely literary work, and in fact has Westernized the few specifics that might even loosely be connected with religious orientation by clothing them in Christian garb. The famous cathedral scene in *The Trial* is one that readily comes to mind. But just as Dreyfus cannot elude the stereotypical Jewish label pinned upon him by his accusers and a prejudicial

public, so too does Kafka attempt—largely ineffectually—to efface references to his external world and to his own Jewishness.

One can pursue the impact of the Dreyfus Affair further as it relates to the entire discourse about Jewish fitness for military service, as Gilman does. According to widespread public belief, the Jew's chest condemned him to be a poor soldier, a male who is not fully a male. The Jew is a feminized intellectual whose nervousness can be read on his body; his tuberculosis is of the soul, a sign of the hypochondria of this Jewish patient. His body marks a loss of status as a "real" man. Such common popular thinking characterizes the marked body of the Jewish soldier of Kafka's age. One need perhaps only recall the anti-Semitic remarks of Arthur Schnitzler's Lieutenant Gustl to appreciate the widespread attitude in Central Europe towards the Jews as being unfit for military service (Gilman 57-61, 104).

Kafka's father though, a prime example of a Jew seeking full assimilation into Western society, had been a soldier. Is it far-fetched to view the "war wound," an otherwise seemingly disjointed, inexplicable phrase describing the awesome dominance of the father, that "giant of a man," in *The Judgment*,[13] as a reflection of the popular discourse on the military fitness of Jews? The reader's insight into *The Judgment* can deepen when the related discussion of the Jewish soldier is taken into account.

Acculturated Jews in Central Europe had long looked to stable political and social structures as guarantors of their identity, and indeed of their physical safety. Brod, Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig, Karl Kraus, and Joseph Roth, among others, viewed Austria-Hungary, that aging Double Monarchy under Habsburg rule, as their chosen protector. The beginning of *The Trial* alludes to a world much like that corresponding to the conception of the Westernized Jews of the day: "K. lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who dared seize him in his own dwelling?"[14] The Dreyfus Affair, as a reflection of increasing anti-Semitism, undermined the very concept of the trial of law as an affirmation of that order. The "lies" spread about K. disclose Kafka's acknowledgment of this disintegration (*The Trial* 1).

According to Gilman, traditional charges of ritual killings of Christians by Jews and actual newspapers accounts of such acts of *Lustmord*, including widespread suspicions that Jack the Ripper was a Jew, persistently confronted the Jewish population of Western and Central Europe. Between 1881 and 1900, for example, fifteen cases of ritual murder were reported throughout Europe and in Prague's press. It is upon this background that Kafka's comment on a postcard to Felice from October 28, 1916, should be understood. In it Kafka describes himself moved to tears after reading Arnold Zweig's tragedy *Ritualmord in Ungarn*.[15] One might

reasonably conclude that Kafka mediated this sort of experience through texts such as *In the Penal Colony*, which originates from this approximate period (Gilman 121).

Kafka's attitudes toward diet and exercise, his vegetarianism, frequent visits to spas, and attempts at physical fitness—he actually played tennis—reveal a vanity in the physical domain. His experience at the camp for Eastern European Jews in Müritz in 1923, where he meets his last real love, Dora Dymant, is indicative not of his return to his Jewish heritage, as Brod and others would have us believe, but of his desire to radically change his life, much as the initial impetus to move to Berlin had represented in the first place. The move to Berlin, long planned and often thwarted as has been documented elsewhere,[16] came to be but a false destination, another dead-end along the path to the "castle." Fast approaching the end of his life, Kafka came to view the metropolis Berlin as unhealthy, as the locus of illness and corruption, while the camp in Müritz came to represent a place where one could breathe more easily. The countryside became the antithesis of the city; here all Jews, at least all of the Eastern Jews, might breathe well.

To conclude this section, one might cite the revealing reference to externals in the title of Mark Anderson's work, *Kafka's Clothes*.[17] Kafka's preoccupation with physical appearance, his dandyism, revealed his attempts to overcome the psychological nakedness of innate fears, his real or imagined illness. A reading of Kafka's last story, *Josephine*, may symbolize his heightened sense of marginality, where no healthy assimilation was possible. As a *Mischling*, Kafka saw himself as an end product of the process of Jewish degeneration. Existential inauthenticity reveals itself very directly in Kafka as that of the Western Jew, as the inauthenticity of the converted but non-assimilated pretender.

Examining Kafka's life as writer provides further insight into the importance of the biographical approach developed here. Joachim Unseld's book, *Franz Kafka. Ein Schriftstellerleben*,[18] continues to be an excellent but underutilized source for understanding the relationship of Kafka to his publishers Ernst Rowohlt and Kurt Wolff. The clear picture that emerges from Unseld's study is of a writer purposefully intent upon breaking into the world of publishing, a view which runs counter to the traditional one of the author's desire to have his entire work destroyed. Brod, the willing intermediary, plays an important role here too to be sure, but it is Kafka himself, despite all the attendant psychological and physical baggage, who so ardently desired and who so unsuccessfully strove to participate materially in the literary life of his day. We know of his early attempts at journalistic and literary publication; for example, after Brod's invitation in 1909 to write *The Aeroplanes at Brescia* for the Prague newspaper *Bohemia*, Kafka responded positively and undertook the task with delight.[19] His readiness and willingness to publish has been overshadowed by the lingering effects of Brod's account of Kafka's last will and testament.

The *Letter to His Father* is an interesting example of how Kafka's work has been misread through the years. As Unseld's more recent publication of the actual handwritten manuscript demonstrates,[20] Kafka actually wrote the letter with the intention of delivering it. On the basis of his disclosure of the existence of a handwritten version of the letter, which Brod was apparently unaware of, Unseld is able to demonstrate that the reading of the text as transformed into a literary one by Brod is inaccurate and largely misguided. Though all of Kafka's work is to some degree "literary," as the diaries and letters reveal, it is clear that Kafka had no intention of raising this work to the level of his other creative work. Brod's assessement of the break towards the end of the letter as an indication of its literary nature,[21] is cast into doubt when Unseld lays out the background which can be traced from the summer through the fall of 1919 and which prevented Kafka from actually forwarding it. Though writing the letter at the age of thirty-six, Kafka still cannot bring himself to disregard the Fourth Commandment. Rather than the prodigal son, Kafka reveals himself as the eternal son.

Had Kafka intended this piece as a literary work, there is no doubt he would have published it. Based on Unseld's findings regarding the author's attempts to publish virtually everything literary he wrote up until his death, which includes *A Country Doctor, The Hunger Artist*, and the earlier *Metamorphosis*, for example, this work from 1919 would therefore also have been sent to a publisher, had Kafka intended it as such.

What Kafka read, what he was clearly exposed to in the press and media of the day, and what he absorbed and inherited from his personal Jewish background and Czech surroundings are all important factors in forging a more comprehensive view of the author. What creates the underlying unity among these facets is the demonstrable fact that Kafka struggled on many fronts to ascertain his place in the world. Writing for Kafka was less a means of escape than a vehicle for transcending the limitations he encountered daily in his private life. Writing was a form of prayer,[22] as he stated; it was a means of recreating his life, a substitute for life and one that, as the *Letter to His Father* reveals, might therefore be interpreted as differentiating little between "*Dichtung*" and "*Wahrheit*." The seeming incongruities of his texts are perhaps somewhat less so when one reads them in the comparative light of such works as those of Gilman, Unseld, and Anderson.

Revision and reevaluation are the lifeblood of the serious reader and critic. What I have attempted to demonstrate here is how my own personal

reading and partial understanding of Kafka have been enriched by a more acute understanding of how he lived and how he thought and how to frame this understanding within the context of the primary and secondary literature.

Kafka the enigma is surely not in jeopardy. He is and will remain the essential embodiment of modernism, "representative man," as Frederick Karl has labeled him. What hopefully has come out of recent work on Kafka will focus his work and thought within the context of his day and the events and happenings that were likely to have influenced him directly. A clearer understanding of Kafka's personal life, attitudes, and world leads to a clearer understanding of his texts, and provides "one more key to the ring of keys necessary to unlock Kafka's world and gain admission into it."[23]

• NOTES

1. Mark Harman, "The Latest from the Kafka Factory" (Review Essay), *The German Quarterly* 69, 1 (1996): 63-67.

2. A most recent account of the commercialization of Kafka is Greg Steinmetz, "Kafka is a Symbol of Prague Today; Also, He's a T-Shirt," *The Wall Street Journal* 10 October 1996: 1.

3. Frederick Karl, *Representative Man* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1991) 8-10.

4. Stephen D. Dowden, *Kafka's Castle and the Critical Imagination* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995).

5. For an analysis of the limitations of the Brod editions, see Jens Dirksen, "Kafka wörtlich—Zur kritischen Ausgabe der 'Schriften, Tagebücher und Briefe,'" *Franz Kafka* (Munich: *Text und Kritik* 7, 1994).

6. Malcolm Pasley, *Franz Kafka, Der Proceß. Die Handschrift redet(Marbacher Magazin* 52, 1990).

7. Joachim Unseld, ed., *Franz Kafka. Brief an den Vater* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1990).

8. Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke in acht Bänden*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1994); Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1994).

9. Sander Gilman, *Franz Kafka. The Jewish Patient* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 9.

10. These two phrases are taken respectively from the title of Gilman's work and from a chapter title of Joachim Unseld, *Franz Kafka. A Writer's Life*, trans. Paul F. Dvorak (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1994).

11. See Elias Canetti, *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: Schocken, 1974) 116.

12. Franz Kafka, *Letter to His Father. Brief an den Vater*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken, 1966) 76-77.

13. Franz Kafka. *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1972) 81.

14. Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Schocken, 1984) 4.

15. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice* (New York: Schocken, 1973) 530.

16. See Unseld, *Franz Kafka. A Writer's Life* and Paul F. Dvorak, "Vienna and Prague: Affinities and Aversions," *Geschichte der österreichischen Literatur I* (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Univ. Verlag, 1996) 269-284.

17. Mark Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes. Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

18. Joachim Unseld, *Franz Kafka. Ein Schriftstellerleben* (Munich: Hanser, 1982).

19. Max Brod, *Über Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1974) 94.

20. Unseld, *Franz Kafka. Brief an den Vater*, 208-209.

21. Brod of course included the letter in the volume *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1966).

22. Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father. Stories and Other Writings* (New York: Schocken, 1954) 312.

23. Heinz Ludwig Arnold, ed., *Franz Kafka* (Munich: *Text und Kritik*, 7, 1994).