

Introduction

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In January 1922, Franz Kafka arrives in the spa resort of Spindlermühle in the Tatra mountains. In the advanced stages of tuberculosis, he has been granted leave from work. The remote wintry setting he encounters will be immortalized in his final novel, *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*); the thoughts he records in his diary, however, are not unique to this period of his life:

Incapable of striking up an acquaintance with anyone, incapable of tolerating an acquaintance, fundamentally full of endless astonishment when I see a group of cheerful people . . . or indeed parents with their children; forsaken, moreover, not only here but in general, even in Prague, my 'home', and, what is more, forsaken not by people (that would not be the worst thing, I could run after them as long as I was alive), but rather by myself *vis-à-vis* people; I am fond of lovers but I cannot love; I am too far away, am banished [ich bin zu weit, bin ausgewiesen]. (29 January 1922; *D* 408/*TB* 895–6)

Kafka has a reputation as a loner, as someone almost existentially disconnected. This perception is not unfounded. Feelings of distance and isolation from his physical and social surroundings appear throughout his personal writings and are integral to his authorial self-image. The above diary entry continues, 'I get my principal nourishment from other roots in other climes, these roots too are sorry ones, but nevertheless better to sustain life [kläglich, aber doch lebensfähiger]'. Food and nourishment are recurring themes in his texts; they are a shorthand for a physical, intellectual and emotional connection to life and everything it has to offer. This is something Kafka repeatedly denies himself. Ten years earlier, he speaks of the need to 'starve' himself of 'the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and above all music', arguing that 'the totality of my strengths was so slight that only collectively could they even halfway serve the purpose of my writing' (3 January 1912; *D* 163/*TB* 341). Another expression of this self-imposed asceticism can be found in a letter to Felice Bauer, where Kafka outlines his ideal mode of existence: to sit 'in the innermost room of

a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp' (14/15 January 1913; *LF* 156/*B2* 40).

Passages such as these paint a consistent picture of self-imposed isolation, of a deliberate withdrawal from life and human company. What is often overlooked is their carefully constructed character. Such pronouncements, whether made to others or to himself, are part of what Reiner Stach calls Kafka's 'personal mythology'¹ – his ongoing attempts to narrate his own life story, casting events in terms of fixed patterns or trajectories. This is a coping mechanism which allows Kafka to give his life a sense of inner necessity in the face of contingency and chance.

To take this private mythology as the whole truth, however, is to fall for Kafka's rhetoric of (self-)persuasion. Only four days after the above litany about his utter isolation, he notes: 'The happiness of being with people' (2 February 1922; *D* 411/*TB* 900). This happiness points to another vital aspect of Kafka's life and character. His contemporaries describe a convivial man with a good sense of humour who deeply cared for those around him. And his writings do not speak only of isolation, but also reflect his wide and varied interests, ranging from theatre, film and the circus to gardening, rowing and aviation. Kafka took a lively interest in the cultural life of his time, in current affairs, and in history, as evidenced by his love of the biographies of writers and other historical figures. Jürgen Born's inventory of Kafka's library is an invaluable resource, for it opens up the literary and intellectual spheres in which he moved.² His travels took him into neighbouring European countries, but in his reading and writing he travelled much further afield.

From early on, Kafka was acutely aware of his own place within the literary tradition. In diaries and letters he mentions authors to whom he feels indebted in his own writing, singling out four nineteenth-century authors – Heinrich von Kleist, Franz Grillparzer, Gustave Flaubert and Fyodor Dostoevsky – whom he calls his 'blood-relatives' (2 September 1913; *LF* 355/*B2* 275). But he was also keenly aware of his place within modernist culture, embracing its formal and thematic innovations. Indeed, this life-long engagement with his context extends beyond his death. The pride he took in his published books, and the fact that he corrected the proofs of his final volume, the collection *Ein Hungerkünstler* (*A Hunger Artist*), on his deathbed, underlines Kafka's (however ambivalent) commitment to the afterlife of his work.

The four sections of this volume trace Kafka's contexts in gradually expanding concentric circles. The articles in Part I, *Life and Work*, focus on his personal and professional surroundings. From his immediate and

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extended family and his friendships, which had a crucial impact on his development as a writer, they take us to his relationships with women, and then on to his work and illness, which shaped Kafka's adult life at different, though overlapping, stages. Kafka frequently described his post at the Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt (Workers' Accident Insurance Institute) as a distraction from his true creative vocation, but his work also fed back into his writing. In the final years of his life, the Insurance Institute was replaced by a succession of sanatoriums and hospitals as Kafka began his seven-year battle with tuberculosis. However, to see office and sanatorium as 'other' spaces, pulling Kafka away from his writing desk, is to misunderstand the role of these and other contextual spaces. In reality, as he occasionally acknowledged to himself, such other contexts were vital for his work, for they prevented his writing from becoming inward-looking and stale. Thus Part I concludes with two articles on Kafka's literary method: on his writing strategy, which depends on parameters such as time, space and the physical tools used for this purpose; and on his style, which, for all its distinctiveness, reveals how deeply he was influenced by literary role models and predecessors.

Building on this, the articles in Part II, *Art and Literature*, explore Kafka's responses to his cultural context. As already mentioned, Kafka read widely, enjoying both contemporary texts and those written in previous centuries. In fact, for all its drive towards innovation and experimentation, modernism was a period extremely conscious of the past: of existing traditions and earlier movements, to which artists responded in different ways, either rejecting them outright or trying to build on them through new themes, forms and methods. These tensions – between a more traditional and a radically progressive model of modernism – are felt in the literature of the period, but also in the performance arts of dance, theatre and recitation, in photography and film, architecture and music. Kafka's engagement with these different contexts is underpinned by a dual focus. From current practices he tries to excavate the traces of older, sometimes archaic, traditions, which offer striking and often disconcerting glimpses into the history of human civilization.

This dual focus on the past and the present is also integral to Kafka's perception of social and political debates. Part III, *Politics, Culture and History*, opens with Kafka's home, the city of Prague, a space of centuries-old ethnic and religious conflict, before considering the impact of Czech language and literature on his writings. This geographical and linguistic setting is a constant in Kafka's life; the First World War, in contrast, marks a great rupture, radically changing the political map of Europe and spelling the end of

the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire and the foundation of the nation state of Czechoslovakia. The war also brought Kafka face-to-face with Eastern European Jewish refugees; the precarious role of Western Judaism and the foundation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine were among the burning questions of his time and personally affected many of Kafka's friends. But such debates were in turn part of a wider trend: the modernist revival of religion and spirituality, symptomatic of a search for certainty in times of rapid change. Other discourses invested with a similar, self-reflexive charge are philosophy, law – Kafka's professional discipline – and psychology and psychoanalysis. One focal point of Freud's writings is human sexuality, but debates about gender and sexuality are also integral to modernism more generally, where new models of gender identity are being negotiated. The city is *the* space for such experimentation – a cultural melting pot and crucible of social change. For all his love of nature and a simple, rural lifestyle, Kafka lived in cities all his life; he travelled to Munich, Zurich, Vienna and Paris, and he moved from Prague to inflation-torn Berlin in the last year of his life. Indeed, travel – both real and imaginary – is one of the great, recurring themes in his writings, a motif often associated with colonialist practices and the allure of the exotic. This interest in non-Western cultures manifests itself in the emergence of the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography, but forms of 'otherness' could also be found closer to home: the twentieth century was proclaimed to be the 'century of the child', and Kafka shared the period's interest in the minds and lives of children as a sphere distinct from adult life.

As the chapters in these three sections show, Kafka took a lively interest in his immediate and wider contexts, and he engaged with a wide range of cultural practices, issues and debates. His own writings add to this their own distinctive voice, often turning an established conceptual hierarchy on its head or rephrasing questions from defamiliarizing angles. These features account for his enduring appeal with readers of all kinds, from different generations and different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. No single publication could reflect Kafka's vast and extraordinarily diverse influence on academia and the arts, on social debate and common parlance, and on the ways in which we think of his times and our own, still resonantly 'modern' world. The chapters in Part IV, *Reception and Influence*, can therefore only offer a few illustrative pathways into this terrain. Kafka's earliest reception, during his lifetime and in the years after his death, is revealing, for it is shaped by an immediacy and familiarity with Kafka's own context – though the pitfalls associated with such familiarity (particularly of the personal kind) are considerable. Critical theory and deconstruction have

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a place in this survey because of their enduring impact on Kafka scholarship and because they showcase some of the tensions – between readings which focus on the inner workings of Kafka's texts and those which relate them to meanings and issues external to them – which have beset Kafka scholarship from the start. One possible response to such tensions is to return to first principles, by examining the ways empirical readers – particularly those new to his works – respond to his texts, though of course every such encounter is unique in its way. Examining patterns of reception, however, is important not least because these also manifest themselves in more indirect ways – in the work of Kafka's editors and translators, for instance, whose renderings are the result of an infinite number of (often very difficult) choices – choices which are complicated by the often fragmentary character of his texts. The final chapter uses the example of film and television to examine some of the more general issues that arise in creative adaptations of Kafka's works. Like the readings of Kafka that give rise to scholarship, editions and translations, creative adaptations take their departure from a specific encounter with his texts. The contexts mapped out in this volume are intended to aid Kafka's readers, making their reading encounters richer and more resonant, without detracting from the texts themselves.

NOTES

- 1 R. Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, trans. S. Frisch (Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 240.
- 2 J. Born with M. Antreter, W. John and J. Shepherd, *Kafkas Bibliothek: Ein beschreibendes Verzeichnis. Mit einem Index aller in Kafkas Schriften erwähnten Bücher, Zeitschriften und Zeitschriftenbeiträge* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990).