

CHAPTER 32

Reading Kafka

Emily Troscianko

A Short History of Kafka's Readers

Reading is what we do with literature, but twentieth-century literary criticism doesn't always make this clear. Critical readings of literary texts over the past century or so have often been more concerned with imposing complex theoretical frameworks than exploring the reading experience in which all interpretive efforts originate. Overblown theory enjoyed a particularly long field day with Kafka. But a closer look at the history of Kafka studies reveals a consistent concern with the fundamental question of how specific texts guide the reading process, a concern that begins with Kafka's very first critical readers, the reviewers of his early publications in literary periodicals from around 1910, and continues right up to the present, in twenty-first-century cognitive approaches to his fiction.

Teaching Kafka is always a rewarding experience, because students love reading him. A recurring theme in their initial responses, though, is that they have raced pleasurably through the short stories and the novels, but are left with the feeling that they have missed something crucial, that in some profound but elusive way they 'haven't got it'. This response probably owes something to the tenacious Kafka myth that insists on his preternatural powers of prophecy, but it also derives directly from one particular element of his writing style: its simplicity.

From the very beginning, reviewers have invoked 'the blossoming simplicities of his language' and the way 'his simplicity is so sublime it resonates'¹ as a key to understanding how Kafka's texts work. The funny thing about Kafka's particular way of writing simply is that the simplicity is not sterile: it does blossom, or resonate; it manages to hint constantly at details or complexities it does not articulate. His four-line story 'Die Bäume' ('Trees'), which begins 'For we are like tree-trunks in the snow' (*M* 15/*DL* 33), has elicited reams of critical commentary from every conceivable conceptual standpoint. More recent critical responses have linked

this complexity-within-simplicity with the shift in Kafka from a realist to a modernist style of description: because Kafka's writing achieves precision without the surfeit of concrete descriptive detail typical of nineteenth-century realism, it has the effect of 'present[ing] the reader with the paradox of extremely precise outlines in the absence of the precise qualities for which the realist canon had prepared him'.² This linguistic simplicity has even had a parodic function attributed to it: through his 'seductive intelligibility and simplicity' and the 'economy of his unpretentious style', Kafka may trick us into expecting something straightforwardly realist, before then giving us something altogether more complicated.³

This odd mixture of complexity in simplicity, or of opacity despite transparency, remarked on by students and professional critics of Kafka, is one instance of a broader phenomenon in the reading and reception of Kafka: a feeling of internal contradictions. This feeling provides an explanatory basis for the ubiquitous notion of paradox in Kafka studies, from Heinz Politzer's *Parable and Paradox* (1961)⁴ to more specific concepts like Gerhard Neumann's 'sliding paradox'.⁵ The sense of contradictory dualities also structures Kafka's best-known bequest to humanity: the word 'Kafkaesque'. Analysis of dictionary definitions and colloquial usage shows that the unifying feature of its many disparate uses is the combination of something compelling with something unsettling, or something that is hard to understand with a need to try to understand.⁶ The idea of the Kafkaesque has achieved the feat of escaping from the literary sphere out into the real world of bureaucratic nightmares because Kafka's writing gave early readers so strong a sense of opposites colliding that the term stuck – and now you do not even have to have read Kafka, or have more than a vague sense of who he was, to have it at your fingertips when describing your experiences renewing a driving licence or having sex.⁷

The memetic success of the term and concept 'Kafkaesque' makes clear that if we want to get to grips with what Kafka's texts are, do and mean, we need to take seriously the experiences they make possible – starting with the reading experiences they elicit. Amidst all the critics who have let themselves be carried away by the ease of attributing self-sufficiently dazzling meanings to Kafka's texts without acknowledging the route by which that attribution happened, there are many others who have tried, from rather different starting points, to pin down what happens in the time and space between the words on the page and the reader's mind. I will consider three strands of this collective but largely uncoordinated effort to ask and answer questions about the reading process and its interpretive consequences: the

analysis of narrative perspective, of psychology as textually thematized, and of reading as a cognitive act.

Reading Kafka's Narrative Perspectives

It would be easy to think of narrative perspective as a technical back-alley of Kafka studies, but in fact it is a surprisingly good way of getting right to the heart of the field. Friedrich Beissner is probably Kafka's most famous critic, and his most infamous. He coined the term *Einsinnigkeit*, usually translated as 'monopolized perspective', to encapsulate what seemed to him the most striking effect of Kafka's fiction: that as readers we do not see, or know, any more than the protagonist does, because the narrator doesn't either. Not only does Beissner claim that narrator and protagonist are united in texts like *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*) and *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*) – an innovative effect given the third- rather than first-person perspective; he also suggests that the narrator and the narration actually become identical with what is narrated. Beissner's ostensible subject matter here is narrative perspective, but the point of his analysis is to answer questions about the relation between author, narrator, character and reader; about what Kafka's reader 'feels' or 'detects'; about 'the feeling of inevitability, of magical captivation by the totally absorbing, apparently absurd events, and hence the oft-attested effect of oppressiveness'; about the fact that Kafka and the reader are both transformed into the protagonist, and that Kafka 'does not let [the reader] go'.⁸

Even though its details did not ultimately stand the test of time or more careful analysis (the relationship between protagonist and narration is more complicated than complete identity), Beissner's thesis of monopolized perspective made critics think more carefully about how Kafka's narratives are constructed. Ritchie Robertson built on this tradition in arguing that perspective is the means by which, in *The Trial*, Kafka 'provides for the reader's partial distancing from K.', and gives the reader 'a perspective congruent with but superior to K.'s'.⁹ The suggestion that in the novel 'there is virtually no narrative voice other than Josef K.'s' represents a tentative but distinct distancing from Beissner, and leads to an assertion of opposites colliding in readerly experience which harks back to the contradictory dualities of the Kafkaesque: 'Kafka's achievement as a narrator, here [in *The Metamorphosis*] and elsewhere, is to make the reader share intimately in the hero's feelings, despite having superior knowledge'.¹⁰ This leads, Robertson suggests, to an at once 'compelling' and 'uncomfortable' simultaneity of

‘sympathetic identification’ with ‘the ironic form of identification in which one comprehends the character’s situation from the vantage-point of superior knowledge’.¹¹

Reading Kafka’s Psychologies

If our question is what reading Kafka is like and why, another way of approaching it is to consider psychology as a theme of the texts, and analyse it to draw conclusions about how the reader’s own psychology is engaged. The earliest and still most common angle from which to approach textual evocations of psychology is a psychoanalytic, and specifically Freudian, one. Certain stories, like ‘Das Urteil’ (‘The Judgement’) and ‘Ein Landarzt’ (‘A Country Doctor’), lend themselves to this more than others, and with these two stories, as more widely, the notion of the dream is used to mediate between text-centred observations and the question of readers’ responses. Edward Timms, for example, remarks that ‘A Country Doctor’ ‘is by general consent one of the most dreamlike of Kafka’s narratives, and its surrealist imagery has sometimes seemed to defy comprehension’.¹² Freudian analysis is Timms’s way of trying to show that the story *is* coherently structured after all; he can rescue Kafka from charges of incomprehensibility by rescuing the dream from the realm of the unnarrativized incoherence that without Freud it might seem to inhabit. Again, the point is less the thematic analysis in itself than its pay-off for a certain view of how we read Kafka.

Psychoanalytic approaches raise all kinds of problems relating to the dubious claims of the theory itself and the simplistic readings of literature it tends to yield, but the theme of psychology has also figured in Kafka studies from other, less fraught perspectives. Anniken Greve’s discussion of *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*), for instance, explores embodiment, self and human nature in the story as a way to better understand the difficulties confronting Kafka’s readers, in particular with regard to Gregor’s transformation into some kind of vermin: if we accept the problems with drawing neat allegorical equations between what is given in the text and meta-abstractions of one kind or another, none of which seem adequate, what do we do instead? ‘Is there a way of responding to [features of the text that resist face-value readings] without resorting to an allegorical reading?’¹³ Greve concludes that the reader will take most from the text if he or she does not simply abandon the face-value approach in despair, but follows it to its limit, seeking to recognize and optimize the significance of this limit, specifically by accepting the invitation to ‘*experience* the connection

between the thesis of dualism and the ontological-existential anguish of the Samsa family'.¹⁴ In Greve's argument, the discussion of cognition as evoked in the text and as engaged in the reader dovetail tightly, and Kafka's great achievement is, Greve suggests, that the narrative form 'helps us reconnect the thesis with the anguish'¹⁵ – something of both philosophical and experiential significance. Reading Kafka does not give us a detachable self-sufficient theory of self, but offers us one that is made meaningful through the reading experience; the experience – of recalibrating our conceptual frameworks as we read – is inherent to the idea, and not subservient to it.

Critics who apply the principles of reader-response theory to Kafka's works make the reading experience more explicitly central. Focusing again on Gregor's bafflingly concrete transformation, Richard Murphy uses Wolfgang Iser's well-known remarks on the expansion of textual indeterminacy in modern literature and how this changes the relationship between reader and text as a point of departure for an investigation of how *The Metamorphosis* 'resists closure but simultaneously attracts unending semantic determinations and interpretations by the reader'.¹⁶ Thinking about indeterminacy in another of Kafka's most elusive texts, 'The Judgement', James Phelan elaborates a rhetorical approach which bears similarity to one of the major tenets of Iser's thesis of the implied reader – that all texts are full of gaps that the reader has to fill – but diverges from it by showing how Kafka's story beautifully illustrates the fact that different kinds of gaps manifest different degrees of 'stubbornness', to the extent that some can never be filled at all, and are not meant to be.¹⁷ Phelan's analysis centres on this story's unfillable gap, one just as tantalizing as Gregor's night-time transformation: the gap between Georg's father getting angry and condemning his son to death by drowning, and Georg's immediate capitulation to his father's judgement by running out to the bridge and throwing himself off it. There is simply no adequate explanation for why Georg does this. Phelan argues that here Kafka 'has discovered something remarkable: a way to make a significant interpretive gap surrounding the climax of a narrative enhance rather than detract from an audience's interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic experience'.¹⁸ The apparent simplicity of the narrative description creates an indeterminacy that compels as much as it unsettles.

Reading Kafka Psychologically

In all the examples I have discussed so far, we see Kafka's professional readers converging, from different starting points, on a question that goes to the heart of Kafka studies and literary studies as a whole: what makes

reading (Kafka) feel like this? The latest academic addition to the long line of reader-critics who have asked and answered this question tackles it with a new epistemological toolkit. Drawing on methods and findings from current cognitive science, including experimental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, cognitive linguistics and philosophy of mind, cognitive approaches to Kafka have begun to yield insights into how the relationship between Kafka's texts and their readers is configured. In fact, the history of this way of approaching Kafka is longer than one might expect, going back at least to the late 1970s. The earliest example I have come across, an article by Christine Sizemore, begins, as do so many attempts to grapple with Kafka, with that now familiar structure of Kafkaesque opposition: 'One of the most fascinating and yet discomfiting aspects of Franz Kafka's fiction lies in its attack on the reader's sense of reality. Kafka's work reflects simultaneously a realistic and yet a dreamlike situation.'¹⁹ Sizemore argues that the unexpected shift from the realistic to the unrealistic, without any change in the matter-of-fact tone, makes Kafka's reader uneasy, and that this uneasiness grows as the 'two irreconcilable interpretations of reality remain'. She suggests that our unease can be understood as an example of the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. According to the theory developed by Leon Festinger in the late 1950s, cognitive dissonance is the discomfort we feel when we hold two conflicting opinions at once, which we typically try to reduce either by revising the first-held opinion or by somehow rationalizing away the new, conflicting information. Both strategies for resolution are, she argues, withheld by Kafka's writing in works like *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, including by the common Kafkaesque tactic of holding out to us the possibility that it is all just a dream, but then making it clear that even if it is, this is not the kind of dream that can be woken up from, so it offers no comfort after all. The psychological theory gives Sizemore a way to 'delineate the stages through which the reader progresses' when reading Kafka's work, which are comparable to those passed through in confrontation with drastic change, illness or death.²⁰

A few decades later, my own research has aimed to do something similar: to create hypotheses about what the reading experience may be like for real readers of Kafka based on the connections that specific qualities of the text establish with facets of readers' minds. In particular, this line of research has uncovered what seems a powerful correspondence between how Kafka's texts evoke key areas of cognition (like vision and emotion) as inherently embodied and enactive, and how current cognitive science understands these faculties as operating. This correspondence, a form of 'cognitive realism', may account for some of the compelling characteristics

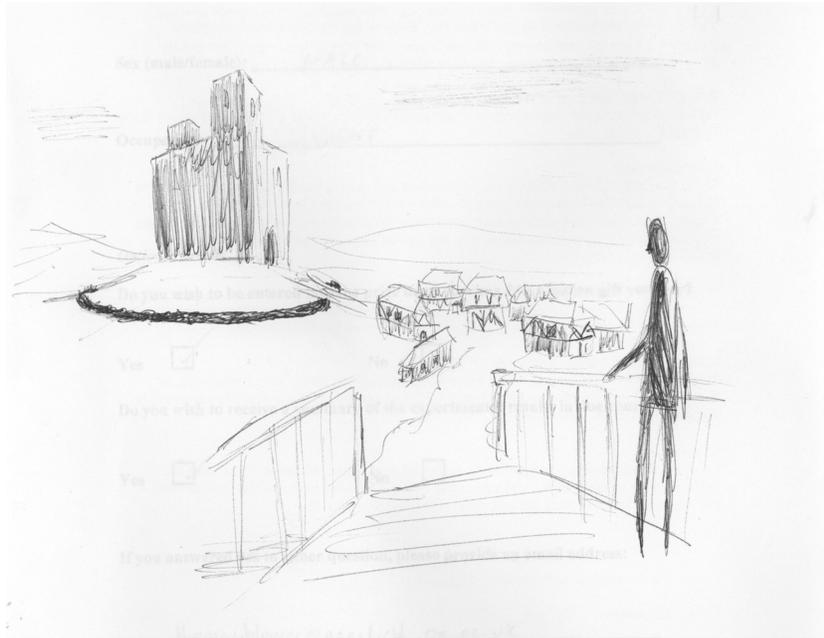


Figure 6 ‘Of the castle hill there was nothing to be seen.’ A reader’s Kafkaesque imagining.

of Kafka’s prose (because it evokes cognition as it really is) and also its unsettling qualities (because in both cases our folk-psychological intuitions tell us that our minds work otherwise, as separable from our bodies). This kind of inquiry can therefore start to explain the ubiquitous dualities of response that contribute to what it feels like to read Kafka.²¹

Empirical work can take this research one step further, going beyond the critic’s own experiences and preconceptions by investigating how other, often non-expert, readers respond to specific texts. In an experiment on reading *The Castle*, readers were asked to draw what they imagined when they read the opening paragraph of the novel (in English translation). Although the only thing the text says about the eponymous castle is that it cannot be seen – ‘of the castle hill there was nothing to be seen, not even the faintest gleam of light hinted at the great castle’ (my translation; see *C 5/S 7*) – just over 50 per cent of readers (where $n = 81$) drew the castle, many in quite some detail (ivy, crenellations, big wooden door with round handle, etc.).²² Around 10 per cent also remarked on the paradox that they imagined what was meant to be invisible (see Figure 6). This tells us something

we may perhaps have intuited: the strange capacity of Kafka's prose to make us richly but uncomfortably imagine things it does not even need to describe. Such experiments also allow us to give substance and detail to the critical hunch, with reference to readers who are, crucially, not ourselves.

Investigating the process of reading Kafka can also tell us important things about reading and cognition beyond Kafka. Another experiment on Kafka has uncovered potential weaknesses of standard measures of mental imagery in psychology, the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire: readers who scored zero on all the imaging tasks in the questionnaire (for example visualize a rising sun, and then a rainbow appearing) nonetheless reported rich imaginative experiences in response to Kafka's short story about a European traveller in a desert, 'Schakale und Araber' ('Jackals and Arabs').²³ Another use of Kafka's texts to contribute to empirical research on the human mind involved asking people to read 'A Country Doctor' before taking a test involving identifying patterns in long strings of letters.²⁴ The group who had read Kafka performed better on the task than a control group who had read a simple, specially constructed story without any of Kafka's strangenesses, brilliantly titled 'A Country Dentist'. The researchers interpreted this result as indicating that the threat to cognitive frameworks of meaning caused by Kafka's story increased participants' motivation and ability in their efforts at maintaining meaning through pattern detection. Experiments like these pave the way for future explorations of what reading Kafka might reveal about the human mind.

In Conclusion

Underlying all these varied approaches to trying to understand what it means to read Kafka are the questions of what is meant by 'the reader' or 'readers', and what is meant by the process of 'interpretation' in which those readers supposedly engage. These questions are among the greatest challenges facing literary studies in the twenty-first century. The complexity of Kafka's fiction, not to mention its intriguingly indeterminate simplicities, make it a great candidate for helping us tackle them, from both the textual and the cognitive perspectives and the points where they converge.

Kafka is so suitable an object for the question of how we read precisely because it is so difficult to come up with satisfactory 'readings' of his texts, which is in turn part of why he is so compellingly readable in the first place. Thematic interpretive readings easily end up glaringly simplistic with Kafka, so considering *ways of reading* him, rather than insisting on singular *results of reading*, is all the more rewarding. In all literature the cognitive

context is the most immediate and the most encompassing of all – and consequently as hard to appreciate as the earth’s atmosphere. But Kafka often makes the air feel thinner and headier, and so forces us to think as we breathe.

NOTES

- 1 In J. Born (ed.), *Franz Kafka: Kritik und Rezeption: 1924–1938* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1983), pp. 173, 121.
- 2 R. A. Berman, ‘Producing the Reader: Kafka and the Modernist Organization of Reception’, *Newsletter of the Kafka Society of America*, 6 (1982), 14–18: 16.
- 3 S. D. Dowden, *Sympathy for the Abyss: A Study in the Novel of German Modernism: Kafka, Broch, Musil, and Thomas Mann* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), pp. 102–4.
- 4 H. Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962).
- 5 G. Neumann, ‘Umkehrung und Ablenkung: Franz Kafkas “Gleitendes Paradox”’, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 42 (1968), 702–44.
- 6 E. T. Troszianko, *Kafka’s Cognitive Realism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 35–6.
- 7 www.usabilityviews.com/uvo08824.html; *Annie Hall*, 1977, directed by Woody Allen (USA: Rollins Joffe).
- 8 F. Beissner, *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka: Ein Vortrag* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1952), pp. 40–2.
- 9 R. Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 91, 101–2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 E. Timms, ‘Kafka’s Expanded Metaphors: A Freudian Approach to *Ein Landarzt*’ in J. P. Stern and J. J. White (eds.), *Paths and Labyrinths* (Institute of Germanic Studies, University of London, 1985), pp. 66–79: p. 71.
- 13 A. Greve, ‘The Human Body and the Human Being in “Die Verwandlung”’ in J. Lothe, B. Sandberg and R. Speirs (eds.), *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011), pp. 40–57: 40.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 55 (original emphasis).
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 R. Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 199.
- 17 J. Phelan, ‘Progression, Speed, and Judgment in “Das Urteil”’ in Lothe, Sandberg and Speirs (eds.), *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*, pp. 22–39.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

- 19 C. W. Sizemore, 'Anxiety in Kafka: A Function of Cognitive Dissonance', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 6 (1977), 380–8: 380.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 21 In Troscianko, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism*.
- 22 Troscianko, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism*, pp. 220–1.
- 23 'Reading Imaginatively: The Imagination in Cognitive Science and Cognitive Literary Studies' in M. Burke and E. T. Troscianko (eds.), *Explorations in Cognitive Literary Science*, special issue, *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 42 (2013), 181–98. See <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/MarksVVIQ.htm>.
- 24 T. Proulx and S. J. Heine, 'Connections from Kafka: Exposure to Meaning Threats Improves Implicit Learning of Artificial Grammar', *Psychological Science*, 20 (2009), 1125–31.