F. Kafka, Everyman

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The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head: Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay
by Louis Begley
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1.

How to describe Kafka, the man? Like this, perhaps:

It is as if he had spent his entire life wondering what he looked like, without ever discovering there are such things as mirrors.

A naked man among a multitude who are dressed.

A mind living in sin with the soul of Abraham.

Franz was a saint. ¹

Or then again, using details of his life, as found in Louis Begley’s refreshingly factual The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head: Franz Kafka: A Biographical Essay: over six feet tall, handsome, elegantly dressed; an unexceptional student, a strong swimmer, an aerobics enthusiast, a vegetarian; a frequent visitor to movie houses, cabarets, all-night cafes, literary soirees and brothels; the published author of seven books during his brief lifetime; engaged three times (twice to the same woman); valued by his employers, promoted at work.

But this last Kafka is as difficult to keep in mind as the Pynchon who grocery-shops and attends baseball games, the Salinger who grew old and raised a family in Cornish, New Hampshire. Readers are incurable fabulists. Kafka’s case, though, extends beyond literary mystique. He is more than a man of mystery—he’s metaphysical. Readers who are particularly attached to this supra-Kafka find the introduction of a quotidiant Kafka hard to
swallow. And vice versa. I spoke once at a Jewish literary society on the subject of time in Kafka, an exploration of the idea—as the critic Michael Hofmann has it—that “it is almost always too late in Kafka.” Afterward a spry woman in her nineties, with a thick Old World accent, hurried across the room and tugged my sleeve: “But you’re quite wrong! I knew Mr. Kafka in Prague—and he was never late.”

Recent years have seen some Kafka revisionism although what’s up for grabs is not the quality of the work, but rather its precise nature. What kind of a writer is Kafka? Above all, it’s a revision of Kafka’s biographical aura. From a witty essay of this kind, by the young novelist and critic Adam Thirlwell:

It is now necessary to state some accepted truths about Franz Kafka, and the Kafkaesque…. Kafka’s work lies outside literature: it is not fully part of the history of European fiction. He has no predecessors—his work appears as if from nowhere—and he has no true successors…. These fictions express the alienation of modern man; they are a prophecy of a) the totalitarian police state, and b) the Nazi Holocaust. His work expresses a Jewish mysticism, a non-denominational mysticism, an anguish of man without God. His work is very serious. He never smiles in photographs…. It is crucial to know the facts of Kafka’s emotional life when reading his fiction. In some sense, all his stories are autobiographical. He is a genius, outside ordinary limits of literature, and a saint, outside ordinary limits of human behaviour. All of these truths, all of them, are wrong.

Thirlwell blames the banality of the Kafkaesque on Max Brod, Kafka’s friend, first biographer, and literary executor, in which latter capacity he defied Kafka’s will (Kafka wanted his work burned), a fact that continues to stain Brod, however faintly, with bad faith. For his part, Brod always maintained that Kafka knew there would be no bonfire: if his friend were serious, he would have chosen another executor. Far harder to defend is Brod’s subsequent decision to publish the correspondence, the diaries, and the acutely personal Letter to My Father (though posthumous literary morality is a slippery thing: if what is found in a drawer is very bad, the shame of it outlives both reader and publisher; when it’s as good as Letter to My Father, the world winks at it).

If few readers of Kafka can be truly sorry for the existence of the works Kafka had consigned to oblivion, many regret the way Brod chose to present them. The problem is not solely Brod’s flat-footed interpretations, it’s his interventions in the texts themselves. For when it came to editing the novels, Brod’s sympathy for the theological would seem to
have guided his hand. Kafka’s system of ordering chapters was often unclear, occasionally nonexistent; it was Brod who collated The Trial in the form with which we are familiar. If it feels like a journey toward an absent God—so the argument goes—that’s because Brod placed the God-shaped hole at the end. The penultimate chapter, containing the pseudo-haggadic parable “Before the Law,” might have gone anywhere, and placing it anywhere else skewes the trajectory of ascension; no longer a journey toward the supreme incomprehensibility, but a journey without destination, into which a mystery is thrust and then succeeded by the quotidian once more.

Of course, there’s also the possibility that Kafka would have placed this chapter near the end, exactly as Brod did, but lovers of Kafka are not inclined to credit him with Brod’s variety of common sense. The whole point of Kafka is his uncommonness. Whatever Brod explains, we feel sure Kafka would leave unexplained; whichever conventional interpretation he foists on the works, the works themselves repel. We think of Shakespeare this way, too: a writer sullied by our attempts to define him. In this sense the idea of a literary genius is a gift we give ourselves, a space so wide that we can play in it forever. Thirlwell again:

It is important, when reading Kafka, not to read him too Brodly.

Take this passage from Brod’s 1947 biography: “It is a new kind of smile that distinguishes Kafka’s work, a smile close to the ultimate things—a metaphysical smile so to speak—indeed sometimes when he used to read out one of his tales for us friends of his, it rose above a smile and we laughed aloud. But we were soon quiet again. It is no laughter befitting human beings. Only angels may laugh this way….” Angels! It is often underestimated, how much talent is required to be a great reader. And Brod was not a great reader, let alone a great writer.

True. Maybe we can say instead that Brod was a great talent-spotter. Of his own literary capacities, Brod had few illusions. His friendship with Kafka was monstrously one-sided from the start, a thing carved from pure awe. They met after a lecture on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, given by Brod, after which Kafka approached the lecturer and accompanied him home. “Something seems to have attracted him to me,” writes Brod. “He was more open than usual, beginning the endless walk home by disagreeing strongly with my all too rough formulations.” The familiar pilgrim’s pose, two steps behind the prophet, catching wisdom as it falls. These days we tire of Brod’s rough formulations: for too long they set the tone. We don’t want to read Kafka Brodly anymore, as the postwar Americans did so keenly. It’s
tempting to think, had we ourselves been those first readers, that we would have recognized at once—without such heavy prompting—the literary greatness of an ex-ape talking to the academy or tiny Josephine “piping” for her mouse people. I wonder.

There exists a second Brod account of Kafka reading aloud:

We friends of his laughed quite immoderately when he first let us hear the first chapter of *The Trial*. And he himself laughed so much that there were moments when he couldn’t read any further. Astonishing enough, when you think of the fearful earnestness of this chapter.

Here the crime of Kafka’s first biographer is rather benign: a slight overdose of literary respect. Brod couldn’t quite believe that Kafka was being funny when he was being funny. For how could Kafka, in his fearful earnestness, be funny? But it’s strange: Kafka revisionism is also, after a fashion, in love with Kafkaesque purity. We can’t credit the Brodish idea that Kafka writes of “the alienation of modern man”—too obvious. And how could Kafka be obvious? How could Kafka be anything that we are? Even our demystifications of Kafka are full of mystery.

2.

But if we’re not to read Kafka too Brodly, how are we to read him? We might do worse than read him Begley. Gently skeptical of the biographical legend, Begley yet believes in the “metaphysical smile” of the work, the possibility that it expresses our modern alienation—here prophet Kafka and quotidian Kafka are not in conflict. He deals first, and most successfully, with the quotidian. The Kafka who, like other diarists, indulged a relentless dramaturgy of the self; the compulsive letter-writer who once asked a correspondent, “Don’t you get pleasure out of exaggerating painful things as much as possible?” For Kafka, the prospect of a journey from Berlin to Prague is “a foolhardiness whose parallel you can only find by leafing back through the pages of history, say to Napoleon’s march to Russia.” A brief visit to his fiancée “couldn’t have been worse. The next thing will be impalement.”

The diaries are the same, only more so: few people, even in that solipsistic form, can have written “I” as frequently as he. People and events appear rarely; the beginning of the First World War is a matter to be weighed equally with the fact that he went swimming that day. The Kafka who wrote the fictions was a man of many stories; the private Kafka sang the song of himself:
I completely dwelt in every idea, but also filled every idea…. I not only felt myself at my boundary, but at the boundary of the human in general.

I am the end or the beginning.

Life is merely terrible; I feel it as few others do. Often—and in my inmost self perhaps all the time— I doubt that I am a human being.

One could quote pages of similar sentiments: Kafka scholars usually do. Thankfully, Begley has more of a comic sense than most Kafka scholars, tending to find Kafka in quite other moods; at times whiny, occasionally wheedling, often slyly disingenuous, and, every now and then, frankly mendacious. The result is something we don’t expect. It’s a little funny:

It turns out we really do keep writing the same thing. Sometimes I ask whether you’re sick and then you write about it, sometimes I want to die and then you do, sometimes I want stamps and then you want stamps….

This, writes Begley, is

Kafka’s characterization (in a moment of despondency) of the letters that he and Milena exchanged [and it] is not far off the mark for many of them, and applies with even greater force to many of the letters to Felice.

Certainly the love letters are repetitive; there is something mechanical in them, not deeply felt, at least, not toward their intended recipients—the sense is of a man writing to himself. Impossible to believe Kafka was in love with poor Felice Bauer, she of the “bony, empty face, that wore its emptiness openly…. Almost broken nose. Blonde, somewhat straight, unattractive hair, strong chin”; Felice with her bourgeois mores, her offer to sit by him as he worked (“in that case,” he wrote back, “I could not write at all”), her poor taste in “heavy furniture” (a sideboard of her choosing puts Kafka in mind of “a perfect tombstone or a memorial to the life of a Prague official”).

1. 1

Respectively, Walter Benjamin, Mi-lena Jesenská, Erich Heller, and Felice Bauer. ↩
2. This has not been seriously assailed since Edmund Wilson's "A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka," in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1950).


4. Begley tells us that Brod did not directly publish Kafka's letters to Milena and Felice, but neither did he press them to "surrender his letters for destruction or to destroy the letters themselves." As a result, Brod lost control of them. As the German army entered Prague, Milena entrusted them to Willy Haas, who published them in 1952; Felice, who emigrated to America, sold her letters herself, in 1955, to Schocken Books.

5. Brod championed many artists, including Leos Janácek, Franz Werfel, and Karl Kraus.

6. The truly hagiographic text is Gustav Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka*, translated by Goronwy Rees (New Directions, 1971). The young Gustav befriended Kafka in Berlin in the final year of the writer's life. In this essay, where I quote from the book, it is with the understanding that this is "reported speech" and most probably prettified for publication.