

CHAPTER 6

Writing

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In recent years, ‘writing’ has become a keyword in Kafka research. Deconstructivist critics argue that Kafka’s primary aim was not the creation of completed works; rather, writing, the continuous transformation of life into *Schrift* (meaning text or scripture), was for him an aim in itself – and, at the same time, the real and only subject of his texts.¹ Such claims should not remain uncontested. Though writing for Kafka was obviously better than *not* being able to write, it was definitely no substitute for the production, and indeed the publication, of finished works. Such debates aside, it is clear that Kafka developed a very original and unorthodox way of writing, which in turn had important consequences for the shape of his novels and shorter prose works. This chapter discusses the main features of Kafka’s personal version of *écriture automatique* (‘automatic writing’ – writing which bypasses conscious control); his techniques for opening a story, continuing the writing flow and closing it; the purpose of his self-corrections; and the consequences that this mode of literary production had for Kafka’s novels.

Writing in Perfection: ‘The Judgement’

Kafka was notoriously critical of his own work, but there is one text that even to him appeared faultless: ‘Das Urteil’ (‘The Judgement’, 1912). Strangely enough, his main reason for approving of the narration was the way in which it had been written:

This story ‘The Judgement’ I wrote at one sitting during the night of the 22nd–23rd, from ten o’clock at night to six o’clock in the morning . . . The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing in water. Several times during this night I carried my own weight on my back. How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again . . . At two I looked at the clock for the last time. As the maid walked through the ante-room for the first time I wrote the last sentence . . . The conviction verified

that with my novel-writing I am in the shameful lowlands of writing. Only *in this way* can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening up of the body and the soul. (23 September 1912; *D* 212–13/*TB* 460–1)

So the narration was written in one piece, in about eight hours, continuously and spontaneously, ‘like a real birth’ (11 February 1913; *D* 214/*TB* 491). And it was written without a plan and quite contrary to the author’s original intentions:

When I sat down to write, after a desperately unhappy Sunday . . . I wanted to describe a war; from his window a young man should see a crowd of people approaching across the bridge, but then everything was turning beneath my hands. (3 June 1913; *LF* 296/*B2* 201–2)

The metaphors which Kafka uses to describe this writing act are very telling: ‘advancing in water’, ‘birth’, ‘complete opening up of body and soul’, the quasi autonomous ‘development’ of the story ‘in front of’ the author, a transforming ‘fire’, almost alchemistic in nature, in which even the ‘strangest ideas’ are ‘burnt’ and ‘resurrected’. All this is the polar opposite to the model of a rational, pre-meditated mode of composition, which is continuously controlled and consciously organized by the author.

Why did Kafka want to write like this? Like many other modernist authors, he believed in the ability of literature and art to question our conventional ways of thinking, perceiving and acting, and to provide us with more than rational insights. If art is to achieve this goal it must be more than the creation of an individual with a limited and particular outlook. Only unpremeditated and uncontrolled writing can enable a text to ‘know’ more than its author. For Kafka, writing like this was an extremely dangerous task – a ‘descent to the dark powers’ and ‘unleashing of spirits bound by nature’ (5 July 1922; *LFFE* 333/*B* 384) – and a chance to be used as a mere ‘instrument’ by ‘a higher power’ (1 November 1912; *LF* 20–21/*B1* 203). It meant an ‘assault on the frontiers’ (16 January 1922; *D* 399/*TB* 878), an attempt to transform ‘the world into the pure, the true, and the immutable’ (25 September 1917; *D* 387/*TB* 838), but can also, conversely, be described as ‘vanity and compulsive pleasure’ – even as ‘serving the devil’ (5 July 1922; *LFFE* 333–4/*B* 384–5).²

Beginning – Writing – Ending

‘The Judgement’ seemed to prove that writing like this could work, that it could lead to a complete and well-composed work. This one example

of seemingly effortless success stands, however, against an endless series of failures, of never completed narrations. Small wonder – for with the notion of pre-planned composition Kafka also abandoned the involvement of a text along plotlines or character development that traditionally serves as the stabilizing backbones of narrative writing. So it is the beginning of a text alone that must build up enough ‘pressure’ to initiate and propel the flow of the writing stream.

Sometimes these beginnings start off from mere biographical details – the opening of ‘The Judgement’ (*M 19/DL 43*), for instance, is nothing but a slightly veiled transposition of the author’s actual writing scene: Georg Bendemann, the protagonist, sees the view that Kafka saw when looking out of his window, and he is writing, just like his author. But this is merely a prelude to the unfolding of the puzzling constellation of Georg versus his distant ‘friend’: the opposition between himself – as a son, who stayed within the family context, found a bride, took over the family business and has thus almost succeeded in usurping the position of his father – and his friend, who ‘fled’ (*M 19/DL 43*) to Russia and has remained a bachelor and an ‘old child’ (*M 19/DL 44*). It is this constellation, whereby one person is split into two – that is to say two alternative ways of life – which acts as the creative seed as the story develops.

The all-important feature of this initial situation is a puzzling element, a deviation from familiar habits and customs, which creates a riddle, an irritating stumbling block for rational understanding. It ties a knot which is never untied – and thus keeps plaguing not only the reader but also the protagonist. Challenged by a situation which is completely alien to his previously orderly and well-adjusted life, Georg stubbornly clings to his former existence – like Gregor Samsa in *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*) who, though transformed into something like a giant bug, wants to continue his work as a salesman (*M 31/DL 139*); or like bank manager Josef K. in *Der Process* (*The Trial*) who, though inexplicably arrested and accused, tries to approach his trial like any other business transaction (*T 90/P 168*); or like the eponymous protagonist of ‘Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle’ (‘Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor’), who simply tries to ignore and conceal the two strangely alive jumping balls which suddenly turn up in his flat (*HA 81–100/NSI 229–66*).

Thus the fantastic inventions in Kafka’s stories serve primarily to start off the writing flow and keep it going – for the initial riddle never will and never must be solved. The ‘progression’ of the story unfolds as *variations* of this initial situation: the protagonist’s never-ending attempts to come to terms with it in ever new situations and character-constellations – and

the continuous frustration of these attempts in what the critic Gerhard Neumann has called 'sliding paradoxes' (a series of 'inversions', 'distortions' and 'deflections' that change the narrative trajectory).³ Thus the patient in 'Ein Landarzt' ('A Country Doctor') is diagnosed as perfectly healthy – and then only a moment later as fatally ill (*HA* 15–16/*DL* 256–8); the doctor's reflections on his maid Rosa turn into reflections on the patient's pink ('rosa') wound (*HA* 16–17/*DL* 257–8); the medical treatment of the patient is suddenly transformed into an ancient ritual (*HA* 16/*DL* 259).

Even more difficult than keeping the writing flow going, however, is bringing it to a satisfactory closure. Since resolving the initial problem that propels the narrative is not an option, the death of the protagonist is the most obvious choice for a convincing conclusion – and one might well say that the protagonists of 'The Judgement', *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, 'Ein Traum' ('A Dream') and 'Ein Hungerkünstler' ('A Hunger Artist'), to name but a few, die for the sake of a successful ending. Merely finishing the narration's plotline is, however, not enough for Kafka. Contrary to what many critics claim, he strove for texts with an artfully closed form: for him, a novella that is 'justified' must, from the very beginning, contain 'the completed organization' (*D* 322/*TB* 711). The easiest ways to close a text whose problems remain open and unresolved are circular composition, an overarching structural pattern, or ending with a strong contrast. The first strategy can be observed in 'The Judgement', where the bridge, which was mentioned at the beginning (*M* 19/*DL* 43), becomes the setting of Georg's death – but now crossed by an 'unending stream of traffic' (*M* 28/*DL* 61); the second is used in 'A Country Doctor', where the basic topographical pattern is that of departure (setting off from home) and return, yet the return will never be completed. The third strategy can be found in *The Metamorphosis* and 'A Hunger Artist', where the death of the increasingly weak protagonists is followed by the strong, vigorous presence of the sister (*M* 75/*DL* 200) and the panther (*HA* 65/*DL* 349).

Writing Deleted: Kafka's Emendations

Compared with works by other authors, Kafka's texts contain comparatively few corrections – and most of them were made immediately, as part of the writing process. In the few instances when Kafka reworked a text or fragment more substantially, he would, quite often, start to rewrite it from the beginning as, for instance, in his only play, the fragment 'Der Gruftwächter' ('The Warden of the Tomb'; *NSI* 276–89; 290–303). Of course, these self-corrections have various reasons. The ones that are most

important for the understanding of the writing process fall mainly into two categories: (1) the avoidance of solutions and unambiguity, and (2) the tangling and untangling of the writing stream.

A striking example of the first category is the deletion of the final paragraph in the fragmentary *Trial*-chapter 'Das Haus' ('The Building'; *T*182–4/*PA* 345–7, see Figure 3). In a state of dream or half-sleep, Josef K. is undergoing a complete transformation, which ends his fruitless struggle against the court:

The light, which up to now had streamed in from behind, changed and was suddenly shining blindingly from the front . . . Today K. [was wearing] a new, long <, dark> suit; ~~it was~~ it was comfortingly warm and heavy. He knew what had happened to him, but he was so ~~eenten~~ happy ~~with~~ about it that he did not yet want to admit it to himself.

This new state, about which K. is so happy, may well be death, but at any rate it means a non-violent and miraculous escape from his ordeal (reminiscent of the ending of 'A Dream'; *HA* 37/*DL* 298) – and this was probably the reason for the deletion of the passage.⁴ Even some of the corrections within the deleted passage seem to have been made to preserve ambiguity: continuing with 'über' would have forced Kafka to specify the reason for K.'s happiness, which 'darüber' avoids; the inserted 'dunkles' was maybe meant to evade associations with a white shroud; and the crossed out 'es war' would have forced Kafka to give a closer specification of K.'s transformed state.

Most of Kafka's manuscripts contain examples of this type of correction – here is another one from *The Trial*: in the last chapter K. and his two executioners meet a policeman whom K. could ask for help. In the manuscript he whispers into the ear of one of his companions: 'The state is offering me its help . . . What if I transferred [hinüberspielte] the trial into the domain of civil law. Then I might even end up defending the gentlemen against the state' (*PA* 322). This subsequently deleted passage would have made the categorical distinction between the 'law' under which K. is accused and ordinary laws of state ('Staatsgesetz[e]'), between his 'court' and the regular executive and judiciary powers of the state, too explicit – a difference which is clearly implied in the novel and crucial for its understanding.

The second type of corrections, which I call the tangling and subsequent untangling of the writing stream, can be easily recognized by a glance at the manuscript. Here many emendations are accumulated in a single spot – indicating a 'congestion' of the writing flow and Kafka's various attempts to overcome it. These mental blocks will, quite often, happen in textual spaces of particular semantic importance. One of these congestions occurs

149/*NSII* 478). Put simply, the dog realizes that art is not simply opposed to life, but could well be an inspiration for life – an insight which Kafka himself reached only in his late work, and which he therefore probably found difficult to express (*NSIIA* 386–7).

Writing at its Limits: The Novels

It is fairly obvious that Kafka's 'automatic' mode of writing as embodied by the creation of 'The Judgement' was hardly suited to longer texts. As Kafka was well aware of this problem, he invented and tested new strategies of producing more extended narrations in each of his novels.

In *Der Verschollene* (*The Man who Disappeared*) Kafka used a paradigmatic structure to compensate for the missing (syntagmatic) plotline. In all episodes of the novel, Karl Rossmann is banished from a community because of an actual or apparent failure to comply with its rules; this community always has the basic structure of a family constellation with a father-, mother-, and sister-figure and Karl as the son.⁵ In this way Kafka could compose a longer text by combining smaller, similar units which were far more manageable for his way of writing. Yet this did not solve the problem of closure. Thus Kafka gave up on *The Man who Disappeared* in January 1913 – only to take it up again in October 1914, after he had developed a new, more parabolic type of narration in *The Trial* and 'In der Strafkolonie' ('In the Penal Colony'). The result was the episode describing Karl Rossmann joining the Oklahama Theatre. However, the blending of two different narrational styles failed and Kafka abandoned the text for good.

In *The Trial* Kafka tried to tackle the thorny problem of closure by writing the final chapter immediately after the first narrational unit.⁶ Having thus created a stable frame and defined the fixed time-space of one year – the novel starts on the morning of Josef K.'s thirtieth birthday and ends on the eve of his thirty-first – Kafka merely had to fill in the middle part. For this he used the paradigmatic technique of *The Man who Disappeared*, this time, however, based on the parabolic opposition between K. in the familiar surroundings of boarding house and bank on the one hand and K. in the unfamiliar, puzzling and threatening world of the court on the other. This provided Kafka with two devices to create a sense of progression: the court-world would increasingly infiltrate K.'s familiar surroundings, and the protagonist would gradually become more and more distraught and doubtful about his innocence. Still, Kafka failed – but also succeeded in a paradoxical way: although a fragment, *The Trial* is certainly his most

‘completed’ long narration, which is why it became the first of his fragments to be posthumously published by Max Brod.

In his last novel, *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*), Kafka used a topographical framework.⁷ The space the protagonist K. enters by crossing a bridge is separated from the rest of the world and, like an ellipse, has two focal points: the village and the castle. For the villagers, this polar system underpins the self-evident unity of their daily lives, but for K. it becomes the grid of a journey composed of starting point, path and destination: desperately and ruthlessly he keeps striving to get into the castle. Again, closure would have been difficult – as K. could not be allowed either to succeed or to give up and leave the village. As in *The Trial*, the ‘progress’ of the novel lies in the protagonist’s gradual exploration of his new environment: getting to know the villagers and their habits and customs, collecting information about the castle and trying to get into direct contact with its representatives. Yet this time the protagonist’s reconnaissance mission dissolves into an ever-growing multitude of storylines and life-stories, which Kafka found increasingly difficult to integrate. In September 1922, he wrote to Max Brod: ‘I’ve had to abandon the Castle story, apparently for good’ (B 413). The preceding sentence reads: ‘have spent this week in not very good spirits’ – the deeply understated lamentation of an author who always struggled to write completed texts.

NOTES

- 1 See for instance C. Schärf, *Franz Kafka: Poetischer Text und heilige Schrift* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) and D. Kremer, *Kafka: Die Erotik des Schreibens* (Bodenheim: Philo, 1989), where the strange machinery in ‘In der Strafkolonie’ (‘In the Penal Colony’) is even interpreted as a mere gigantic typewriter, pp. 149–50.
- 2 Cf. M. Engel, ‘Zu Kafkas Kunst- und Literaturtheorie’ in M. Engel and B. Auerochs (eds.), *Kafka-Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), pp. 483–98.
- 3 G. Neumann, ‘Umkehrung und Ablenkung: Franz Kafkas “Gleitendes Paradox”’, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 42 (1968), 702–44.
- 4 See C. Duttlinger, ‘Franz Kafka, *Der Proceß*’ in P. Hutchinson (ed.), *Landmarks in the German Novel* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 135–50.
- 5 See M. Engel, ‘*Der Verschollene*’ in Engel and Auerochs (eds.), *Kafka-Handbuch*, pp. 175–91, esp. pp. 178–81.
- 6 See M. Engel, ‘*Der Process*’ in Engel and Auerochs (eds.), *Kafka-Handbuch*, pp. 192–207, esp. pp. 192–5.
- 7 See W. Fromm, ‘*Das Schloss*’ in Engel and Auerochs (eds.), *Kafka-Handbuch*, pp. 301–17, esp. pp. 301–4.