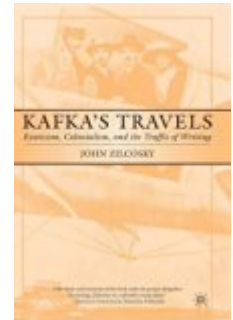


**John Zilcosky.** *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing.*  
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With his recent probing on *Kafka's Travels*, John Zilcosky adds an unusual perspective to the many publications dealing with the figure of Franz Kafka. Within the context of postcolonial thinking, this book provides a close reading of Kafka's work as metaphorical travel literature and on Kafka himself as an imagined traveler. Beyond the field of literary science, this study may broaden not only the history of travel writing itself but also the history of travel in general. Admittedly, this review reflects a very idiosyncratic reading of the book: as a relative "outsider" within the field, the following thoughts will also mirror my own background—the history of travel within a Jewish cultural context.

John Zilcosky understands Kafka as an "avid textual traveler," taking up a phrase introduced by Rolf Goebel, "a voyager who traveled as a reader and a writer despite (or because of) his personal stasis" (p. 1). Starting out from a postcard Kafka wrote to his first fiancée, Felice Bauer, Zilcosky discovers the "otherworldly poet of alienation" as an enthusiastic reader of popular colonial travel stories—Schaffenstein's *Little Green Books* (p. 1). It is

Kafka's fascination for these juvenile adventure stories for boys, which aroused the scholar's curiosity.

Kafka's relations to travel, the reader learns, were varied: apart from his own limited journeys throughout Europe, which are documented in his travel diaries and letters from the Bohemian countryside, Kafka traveled in his imagination along the trails documented by the diaries of Goethe, Flaubert, Fontane, and Hebbel. He himself made textual voyages to America, China, and Africa and in his novels appears a traveling salesman, travel clothing and various means of travel. "Kafka, it turned out," Zilcosky emphasizes, "was a travel writer of sorts" (p. 2).

His friend and traveling companion, Max Brod, described Kafka as a happy and cheerful traveler. Longing for "free space and distant lands," Brod portrayed Kafka's travel fantasies as almost utopian, liberated from his hometown Prague (p. 3). Those memories of the young Kafka, Zilcosky argues, depict him as somebody who hopes to find a better life by traveling or finally

emigrating--irrelevant where to, just to an elsewhere beyond present life.

In this period of time, Kafka went on a journey throughout Europe with his friend Max Brod. The two young writers decided to write a travel novel on well-known European sights. *Richard and Samuel: A Short Journey through Central European Regions* never went beyond the first chapter, but, as Zilcosky maintains, it defined a "crucial, overlooked juncture in Kafka's literary development" (p. 23).

The two young friends' attempt was a critique of superficial, "external" exoticism in famous contemporary travel novels. They claimed to need no exotic regions but to find alterity within the domestic. The wish "to transform foreignness from a mappable geographic space into a structure of mind" can be interpreted as their feeling of alienation from the world (p. 24). In a famous statement to Milena Jesenk, Kafka describes Max Brod (and, thus, himself) as a double outsider--a German Jew in Prague--who, unlike Jesenk, does not have a homeland and must, therefore, constantly ponder this reality (p. 36). This specific Prague German-Jewish nostalgia for a lost *Heimat* therefore transcends modernity's nostalgia, and as Zilcosky assumes, for Kafka's traveling protagonists, *Heimat* is not assumed but unhinged.

The travel diaries Kafka kept during this period were, according to Max Brod, the basis of Kafka's further writings (p. 10). Although he puts Brod's claim into question, Zilcosky suggests that with Kafka's literary break-through he stopped traveling. After a few years of semi-regular journeys throughout Europe, Kafka remains home except for travels connected to his profession or health.

This decision becomes important in view of the historical background of an "era of unprecedented middle-class tourism" (p. 7). The new tourist industry promised a temporary cure for modernity's *Heimweh nach der Fremde* or homesickness for a foreign country. "If modern man

was ill, alienated from his labor, his gods, his home, and himself, then he could regain his health by boarding a train or steamship and traveling elsewhere" (p. 7). Kafka's reaction to this widespread movement was to oppose mass movements of traveling culture. "'This ridiculous thought [that I will be kept away from the desk for at least several days] is really the only legitimate one, since the existence of the writer is truly dependent upon his desk and if he wants to keep madness at bay he must never go far from his desk, he must hold onto it with his teeth'" (p. 36). He remains home writing. "This offers him a utopia, too, in the strictest sense: he goes to a place which is the absence of place," infers Zilcosky (p. 8).

Furthermore Zilcosky claims that traveling becomes for Kafka "an overlooked theme promising utopia and, what is more, a metaphor for the internal process of writing itself," and by that an integral part of his work (p. 5). Yet, although writing and travel share the notion of a possible utopia, Zilcosky marks an important distinction in Kafka's personal experience, which is the disappointment of the traveler, who arrives in a place and by arriving, takes away the place's utopian character, while the writer, who never arrives, holds on to the utopia. As Kafka maintains, writing can lead to the "holiest" spaces of pilgrimage, even to the realm of "'the pure, the true, and the immutable'" (p. 5).

Throughout the book, John Zilcosky elaborates on his theory, which depicts the development of travel in Kafka's writings from the private fascination of his travel diaries into a metaphorical system. Zilcosky's attempt, according to his own words, is to connect cultural history with close readings as a *desiderate* of two seldom combined interpretation models.

This daring concept turns out to be very successful within the context of colonial/postcolonial discourse. Yet, in other respects, the claim to consistent contextualization reflects some of the

weak points of the book: Zilcosky repeatedly refers to the idiosyncratic situation of Kafka as a Prague Jew, which embodies the origin of questioning "being at home" or being "a native"--a thought which remains prominent but yet isolated throughout the book.

To exemplify my considerations, Zilcosky claims his interest to be discursive and therefore intends to relate the protagonists of Kafka's writings to the ways their positions were figured in popular imagination. This fruitful attempt succeeds in most instances, besides the above mentioned; for example in the case of K. in *The Castle*: "the connection between Kafka's surveyor and the Hebrew word for Messiah (*mashiah*, almost the same as *mashoah*, 'land surveyor'), for instance, cannot be overlooked in the quest for sources" (p. 126). Unfortunately, Zilcosky does not elaborate this thought, which he quotes from a 1970s publication on Kafka and the Yiddish Theater.<sup>[1]</sup> In pursuing this very interesting linguistic connection, it seems that evidence for this Hebrew term in Hebrew and Yiddish dictionaries does not exist. Also, it would seem, when opening the question of the Jewish background, Zilcosky creates the need to read Kafka's work within the context of Jewish culture in nationalizing Prague.

Regardless of this, John Zilcosky draws a very convincing image of travel as a metaphor throughout Kafka's work. As a few examples from the book show, Kafka's subversion of "home" narrows more and more. Starting with Richard and Samuel's wish of locating the exotic within what is supposedly "home," Zilcosky draws a line throughout Kafka's work which finally ends with *The Hunter Gracchus*'s endless journey towards death.

In *America*, as Brod named the novel to which Kafka referred to as *Der Verschollene* (*The Man Who Disappeared*), Karls Rossmann gets lost--as do Goethe and Flaubert, Kafka's forbearers as Zilcosky maintains, in their travel novels. Traveling, as well as "writing, Kafka notes, can

also lead to a state of lostness that never ends" (p. 53).

In *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, not travel novels as such, an unusual traveler becomes exotic to himself. While Joseph K. is experiencing an internal displacement, the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa expresses an internalization of an "outside or ex-otic Other" (p. 78). Here, travel has a primarily symbolic meaning for impending shifts in the character's psyche and body, surrounded by a private realm, which is becoming strange and exotic.

As one source for *The Castle*, Zilcosky traces the above mentioned *Little Green Books*. Like the protagonists of those juvenile colonial stories, Kafka occupies terrain devoid of inhabitants (the moon, borderlands, marginal regions), which Zilcosky's postcolonial reading interprets as "a peculiar form of colonialism" (p. 150). *The Little Green Books* also serve as a source for *The Penal Colony*, which Zilcosky reads in the context of colonial politics and Sado-Masochism discourses at the *fin de siecle*.

Continuing his thoughts with the *Letters to Milena* and the *The Hunter Gracchus*, Zilcosky creates a very associative and broad probing, which both answers and yet opens a number of questions on the faraway internal and external landscapes of Kafka's writing. He draws a beautiful picture of Kafka as a utopian traveler, which, like Moses, is on "the track of Canaan" throughout his life, but from which he as the modern writer needs to abstain (p. 5). Like his protagonists, Kafka failed in his nostalgic travels. Kafka never completed his own utopian travels, not even his final one, which was a fantasy of Palestine. As he said, Palestine was the ultimate u-topia: one cannot travel there, one can only "trace one's way [to Palestine] with a finger across the map" (quoted, p. 191).

Note

[1]. Evelyn Torton Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on his Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), p. 195.

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