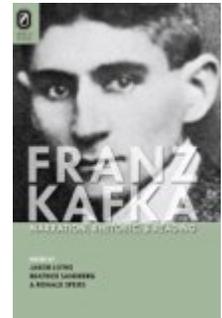




Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, Ronald Speirs, eds.. *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011. x + 251 pp. \$55.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-1150-2.



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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading is a remarkable collection of essays for a number of reasons. To begin with, one would be hard-pressed to find a more compelling group of scholars to focus their efforts on the writings of one of the most influential authors of the twentieth century. The essays in this volume include prominent voices from Europe and the United States, as well as scholars notable specifically for their work on Kafka and those whose research focus has been more general in scope. As a result, the collection includes essays by those who will be known to Kafka scholars (Gerhard Neumann, Stanley Corngold, and Benno Wagner) and essays by those immediately known throughout the field of literary studies (J. Hillis Miller, James Phelan, and Ronald Speirs).

Another reason the text proves quite valuable is the readily apparent direction of its editors. Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, and Speirs have done well to make sure the text is united by a clear and coherent goal. Thus, each essay has been constructed to view Kafka's storytelling

through the lens of narrative theory. Moreover, the collection makes sure to address a broad range of Kafka narratives, including all three novels and a number of his more important short stories. Lothe, Sandberg, and Speirs have also created useful symmetry to the volume as a whole by having the first and last essays address what is considered Kafka's breakthrough story, "The Judgment" ("Das Urteil" [1912]). Indeed, "The Judgment" stands as a seminal experience in Kafka's writing career. Not only does it mark the beginning of his "mature" style, but its composition also was a decisive event in the life of a man so desperate to capture "the tremendous world I have inside my head." [1] Kafka knew that this work--and the experience of having composed it--best represented what he was capable of producing as a storyteller. The attention given to this story rightly emphasizes its place in the study of Kafka's unique use of narrative, making the essays (by Phelan and Speirs) fitting bookends for the text.

Lastly, and most laudable, this collection of essays illustrates what makes for great scholar-

ship by creating a true conversation. Not only have the authors clearly read the rest of the contributions, but nearly all of them also freely cite from each other's work. In addition, they frequently reference and include each other's arguments in the construction of their own work. The result is that all of the essays speak to each other in a way that further illuminates both the scholarship presented and, more important, Kafka's storytelling.

A major reason for the cohesiveness and collegiality that characterizes the book is its origins in a symposium directed by Lothe at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo, held in May 2006. All the papers presented in the volume originated at this event devoted to "Narrative Theory and Analysis." As the introduction notes, this allowed the authors to share a certain set of assumptions concerning narrative theory and Kafka's storytelling. Foremost among these shared starting points is a rhetorical definition of "narrative"--one that is articulated quite clearly by Phelan in the first essay. Another position shared by the authors emerges from their reaction to the work of Friedrich Beißner. His public lectures given in 1952 on narration in Kafka's writing (later published as *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka* [1952]) were extremely influential in shaping Kafka scholarship. In them he argued that "Kafka's narrator always identifies unreservedly with the protagonist" (p. 6). Indeed, according to Beißner, "the narrator becomes one not simply with the protagonist but also with the events and circumstances of the story" (p. 3). For the authors of this volume, however, while Beißner's contributions to the study of Kafka and narrative theory are great, "Kafka's narrative stance is not as solipsistic as Beißner claimed it was" (p. 5). Ultimately, what he failed to recognize is the complexity and multidimensionality of Kafka's authorial voice. As a result, the collection of essays illustrates that "Kafka's narrative practice(s) cannot be captured by a single theoretical approach" (p. 17).

Of the ten essays, nearly all stand out for one reason or another. The best of them, though, use narrative theory to create a unique insight into a particular story from the Kafka oeuvre, or a particular feature of Kafka the writer. To be sure, Phelan's clear presentation of a rhetorical narrative analysis in the first chapter allows him to identify exactly how "The Judgment" functions to compel the reader forward to its surprising, and tragic, conclusion. In so doing, Phelan explains how Kafka managed the pace of the narrative in order to produce and negotiate certain gaps within the story. The resulting "textual stubbornness" produces a story that is a "remarkable aesthetic achievement" while simultaneously a "formally innovative story" (pp. 29, 37-38).

Also of note is the essay by Gerhard Kurz on *The Man Who Disappeared* (*Der Verschollene*) composed between 1911 and 1914 and published posthumously in 1927. The first of Kafka's attempted novels (also known as *Amerika*) is analyzed by Kurz in terms of the multiple levels of narrative discourse presented within the decidedly disjointed novel. As Kurz points out, "embedding narrations is a familiar enough technique of novel writing" (p. 100). How Kafka employed this technique, however, demonstrates his emergent talent for juxtaposing storytelling voices within his works. To this end, Kurz shows how a story told within the novel by one of its minor characters, Therese, can be read as an interpretive allegory for the overall story of the novel's protagonist, Karl Rossman. The result is that Kurz reveals the often overlooked sophistication of *Der Verschollene* while also demonstrating evidence of a narrative technique that became central in Kafka's later novels.

The one essay in the collection not specifically devoted to a particular Kafka story (or the comparison of two) is the effort by Sandberg to explore Kafka's narrative beginnings and progression. Sandberg clearly and compellingly exposes the root of Kafka's all-too-often struggle to begin

and then to complete his stories. The frustration that overwhelmed his writing process, and the sense of failure that consequently overwhelmed him personally, is revealed by Sandberg to be the result of Kafka's particular storytelling style. In her essay, she shows how Kafka was predisposed to begin his narratives *in media res*. This presented an initial (and imposing) challenge that was further complicated by his efforts to guide his protagonists through a series of "hypothetical alternatives, relativizations, and constrictions toward a solution" (p. 136). The result is that Kafka not only had trouble generating a story, but once he had a story up and running he also more often than not was unable to guide it to any type of resolution.

The concluding essay by Speirs is especially insightful in terms of addressing the sense of failure that shadowed Kafka's writing by exposing the existential motivations behind his efforts at storytelling. Although a bit longer than necessary, Speirs's contribution mines a wealth of materials from Kafka's personal correspondence and diaries to illustrate how he understood writing as an "all or nothing" endeavor. Literature was either produced as a "dynamic, organic whole" or it was nothing more than "a forced, artificial construction" (p. 221). Failure to ride the wave of literary inspiration successfully from beginning to end was not simply an artistic defeat, it was an existential calamity. It betrayed the inability to function as a messenger for the truth, directed by some higher being for some greater purpose. Thus, as Speirs points out, the greater part of Kafka's writing career is defined by his effort to recreate his experience of writing "The Judgment." This story that "came out of [him] like a real birth, covered with filth and slime" became the standard by which he would measure all subsequent writing experiences.[2] In so doing, it established a standard for creativity that could seldom, if ever, be met again.

As it should be clear by now, "The Judgment" figures prominently throughout this collection but so do a number of other themes and ideas. There is also a consistent effort to explore the genesis of Kafka's storytelling. In addition to the effort by Sandberg, Lothe likewise examines his narrative beginnings in some detail. And the issue is picked up by a number of other contributors. The suspect nature of Kafka's narrators is another common idea that finds its way into a number of the essays, most notably by Anniken Greve and Neumann.

The intended audience of the book is apparent from its title. Kafka scholars will find the text an invaluable resource. And those interested in narrative theory will find that the rhetorical approach is explored in numerous and truly thought-provoking ways. The essays themselves, all save the one by Sandberg, stand alone as valuable analyses of particular Kafka stories. And while one would surely benefit from being familiar with Kafka's works and his biography, the text is not solely for experts. There is definitely an effort by all the authors to provide a synopsis of the text(s) they are addressing. To be sure, anyone interested in the dramatic turn narrative has taken in the last two hundred years will benefit from this collection and its efforts to locate Kafka's contribution to modern literature.

Notes

[1]. From Kafka's diary, June 21, 1913 (Franz Kafka, *The Diaries: 1910-1923* [New York: Schocken Books, 1976], 222).

[2]. From Kafka's diary, February 11, 1913 (*Ibid.*, 214).

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