

# KAFKA'S SELECTED STORIES



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
STANLEY CORNGOLD

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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# KAFKA'S SELECTED STORIES



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NEW TRANSLATIONS  
BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS  
CRITICISM

*Translated and Edited by*  
STANLEY CORNGOLD  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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## Preface

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The fascination of Kafka's stories borders on the miraculous. In 1945 the poet W. H. Auden remarked that Kafka stands in the same relation to his century as Shakespeare stood to his—he is its representative, the poet who gives it shape and form. It seemed a somewhat extravagant claim to make, but how perceptive it was. Today we might measure the intensity of Kafka's vision by the sheer quantity of hours that men and women devote to the reading and study of his work. There is a bookshop in the center of Prague, just yards away from the Kinsky "palace" where Kafka went to high school and his father had his business in ladies' finery; here, readers from all over the world can be seen poring over the copious new editions and translations of Kafka's work. And to read a story of Kafka's appears to require from the reader that he or she *interpret* it. In a famous image by the critic Theodor Adorno, Kafka's sentences come at the reader with the force of an onrushing locomotive: "Each sentence of Kafka's says 'interpret me'." \* \* \* Through the power with which Kafka commands interpretation, he collapses aesthetic distance. He demands a desperate effort from the allegedly 'disinterested' observer of an earlier time, overwhelms you, suggesting that far more than your intellectual equilibrium depends on whether you truly understand; life and death are at stake."

What propels this fascination? Two qualities can be felt immediately: on the one hand, an extraordinary intelligence, subtle and rational—driven by tireless intellectual energy—as alert to its subject matter as to the condition of *being a writer*. Kafka inscribes his hyperconsciousness in the hero of the great story *The Burrow*, who imagines "the joy of sleeping deeply and at the same time of being able to keep a close watch on myself." On this question of Kafka's intellectual energy, one anecdote speaks volumes. According to Dora Diamant, the woman with whom Kafka spent almost the last year of his life, Kafka wrote all fifteen thousand words of this witty, haunting late masterpiece in a single sitting: he sat down at his desk in the early evening and very nearly finished in the hours before daybreak.

On the other hand, on the side of passion, there is Kafka's acute sensitivity to the irrational currents that move all living beings,

ranging from the badger-narrator's perpetual worry in *The Burrow* about noise, a frightening modulation of the still, sad music of humanity that implies his death, to the murderous lunacy of the figure named Schmar in "A Fratricide" and including, along the way, what the philosopher Nietzsche calls "the milder, more middling and indeed the lower levels of psyche in perpetual play that weave the texture of our character and our fate." The first set of intellectual qualities Kafka terms "the clarity of the gaze"; this, together with the second—a full imagination of the bodily passions—join forces in his writing, so that the net effect is of great energy restrained in small, perfectly turned vessels. One of his translators, Michael Hofmann, speaks of Kafka's "astonishing gift of expression, a compound of imagination, drama, economy, and balance." These qualities are present even in the syntax of individual sentences.

Such features have not gone unnoticed by Kafka's readers and commentators. What is new—a discovery that is foregrounded in this Norton Critical Edition—is Kafka's sensitivity to the deeper political issues of his day, as they were embedded (and concealed) in real, daily events. In the words of Benno Wagner, who has written an essay on this topic especially for this volume, Kafka is a gifted political analyst, whose "writings are intricately connected to the vibrancy of political issues and events of his day" (p. 302). In addition to profiling this new current of thought in freshly translated critical essays by several German scholars, this volume contains the first American translations of many of Kafka's greatest stories, works unpublished in his lifetime but salvaged in manuscript by his friend and editor Max Brod. This volume is also the first American edition of such a wide range of Kafka's stories to include notes and a critical apparatus. And, finally, the German text from which these translations are made is new and reliable—the Fischer "manuscript version" (*Kritische Ausgabe in der Fassung der Handschrift, KKA*)—an edition that has been appearing over the last twenty years under the editorship of Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and the late Malcolm Pasley.

### *A Word about the Translation*

"God employs several translators"

—John Donne

I have translated each story "cold" and then, after many revisions, profited from consulting other published translations. For it is my firm belief that translators should stand on the shoulders of their predecessors. We are, after all, a collective—translators and

readers alike; we are one community in our devotion to the most truthful possible understanding of the works of this master writer, an understanding that in every case involves a personal "rewriting" of the text. If one were writing an essay on Kafka, would one make a point of never consulting any previous writer who had written on Kafka? Of course not. And should one, as a translator, fail to consult any or all previous translations of Kafka? Of course not. But then the question of the originality of one's reading or writing about the author could arise. There are well-documented practices in the matter of attributing phrases and formulations cited from the works of previous writers: you footnote them. And what is the right thing to do as a translator if you encounter in a previous translation a rendering that is simply, straightforwardly better than your own? Ignore this knowledge for the sake of a putative absolute originality? No. But how can you indicate your debt now and again to your inspired predecessor? You cannot footnote this or that phrase. And so here I wish to compose a blanket dedication to the predecessors whose work has, in Kafka's words, "refreshed me, satisfied, liberated, exalted me" (p. 206) and I hope you too, reader. Chief among them are Stanley Applebaum, Edwin and Willa Muir, Malcolm Pasley, and J. A. Underwood. I have also profited from consulting the work of Kevin Blahut, Michael Hofmann, Siegfried Mortkowitz, Joachim Neugroschel, and Richard Stokes.

In saying that I have not hesitated on occasion to employ the locutions of other translators when they seemed better than my own, I should note, in this vexed matter of "originality," that all too often, with both delight and despair, I found I had hit upon exactly the same formulations as my predecessors. That is inevitably the case, because Kafka's syntax is exquisitely clear, his word choice is relatively limited, and key words are prone to recur. In many instances there are simply no two ways about it.

One further point about my translation practice: I have avoided translating Kafka's plain phrases with colloquial expressions more vivid than his own. You can understand the temptation to give a colorful, colloquial bounce to a certain luminous plainness in Kafka's prose. For example, Kafka writes of the hero of *The Burrow*, a most articulate badger, vole, or mole, that he nurtured the wild hope, which he now considers flimsy, that his vast and intricate burrow would make him "superior to anyone who might come." One excellent translator expresses this idea as granting him "the upper hand of anyone who came." This is vivid but not quite Kafka's tone and somewhat odd, too, considering that we are dealing here with an animal with paws and claws. Again, the hero's antagonist, in my translation, is given "an opportunity for a moment's rest"; he does not "snatch a moment's rest." The Muirs write that

the jackals in "Jackals and Arabs" suddenly "turn tail and flee." That is wonderfully vivid, but Kafka wrote simply that they "run away." I have chosen to keep his fluent evenness of tone; I have rarely sought out or adopted vivid colloquialisms.

At the same time, the level, the major tone, contains fine modulations. In the great late stories, especially *The Burrow* and *Researches of a Dog*, monologues are spoken by narrators who are very smart and very articulate. They love swift, elegant language as much as they love to think, although this elegance is nonetheless at war, once again, with all-too-colorful colloquialisms, with fancy words, archaic words, word coinages. Yet their reports are far less monotonous than the legalistic protocols often claimed to be Kafka's natural tone (the embodied narrator of "Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People," for one, no doubt loves puns; the compulsive-obsessive genius who narrates *The Burrow* sings arias to his burrow while at other times he analyzes its acoustics and its fortifications). I will highlight a general observation on Kafka's style by the linguist Marek Nekula, which emphasizes in Kafka's prose its "range of regional, phonic, morphological and syntactical as well as lexical characteristics," the outcome of a series of choices driven by "Kafka's conscious will to self-stylization."

### *A Word about the Critical Apparatus*

The amount of critical literature on Kafka's stories is huge and ever growing. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Kafka, who had been regarded as an enemy of socialist progress and whose works were therefore kept in the dark, has now been duly translated into the light of the public world. Scholars and laypeople in Czechoslovakia, Russia, Poland, Hungary, and other former Eastern bloc countries have not failed to add their voices to that "chorus of voices" that Kafka saw as promising the only true commentary on the text of the world—and, we will add, on his works. This production of voices adds to the secondary literature on Kafka that has continually been produced in the West and in Japan as well. It is said that more criticism of Kafka's relatively slim body of works is published each year than of the work of any imaginative writer except Shakespeare. One can now read more than two hundred critical essays on *The Judgment* alone; imagine the size of the bibliography of such essays on all of the thirty stories included in this volume.

Since it is impossible to print essays on each of these stories without bursting the bounds of this edition, I have been forced to make drastic cuts. This critical apparatus at least mentions almost all the major stories, meaning the longer stories; but a moment's re-

flection will suggest that even Kafka's shorter stories, which barely occupy a page—stories like "Before the Law" and "On Parables"—are by any account also major stories, to judge from the amount of commentary they have produced. Yet, with few exceptions, the essays included here focus on the longer stories, such as the essay on *In the Penal Colony* by Danielle Allen and on *The Burrow* by Gerhard Kurz. One outstanding exception is the article by Benno Wagner that I have already mentioned, which refers to a considerable number of different, shorter works. In another instance, in the essay by Vivian Liska, we have an exposé of a single very short story, "Poseidon," which will illuminate that work, of course, but which is also meant to illustrate how closely—and profitably—Kafka can be read. Hence it will supply a model of reading that can be used with other stories by Kafka as well. The essays by Danielle Allen, Nicola Gess, and Benno Wagner, meanwhile, are models of how the new Cultural Studies approach can be used without losing sight of the special primacy for Kafka of the experience of writing. Finally, the essay by Walter Sokel has the capacious intellectual-historical character that marks the work of one of the greatest of Kafka scholars. As to the apparatus, the notes to *Kafka's Selected Stories* are the editor's unless otherwise indicated.

This volume is graced by the vitality and dedication of my wife, Regine Corngold, who got up at five a.m. in the stillness of an Easter morning in Prague to photograph the detail of the Charles Bridge that appears on the cover—*sine qua non*. I wish to thank Carol Bemis for the warmth and spirited intelligence that she brought to the production of this book; my good friends Peter Mulsolf, Eric Patton, and Benno Wagner, who read through all the translations and made wonderful, incisive suggestions; Jean Yin, for her practical help in reading proofs and constructing the critical apparatus; and the Directorate of the Internationales Forschungszentrum, Geisteswissenschaften, in Vienna, especially Professor Gotthard Wunberg, for allowing me, while in residence there, to spend my nights on this adventure of bringing Kafka's stories to the American language. My greatest debt of gratitude, however, is owed to my editor, Ruth Hein, indispensable collaborator and friend, who has once again brought to a translation of Kafka's work her perfect sureness of touch, leaving only me to blame for any faults that still remain. I hope that we shall continue to work together on many such projects in the future.



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# Contents

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Preface	vii
<b>The Texts of Kafka's Selected Stories</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>The Judgment • A Story</i>	3
<i>The Stoker • A Fragment</i>	12
<i>In the Penal Colony</i>	35
<i>A Country Doctor • Little Stories</i>	59
The New Lawyer	59
A Country Doctor	60
Up in the Gallery	65
A Page from an Old Document	66
Before the Law	68
Jackals and Arabs	69
The Worry of the Father of the Family	72
A Fratricide	73
A Dream	75
A Report to an Academy	76
<i>A Starvation Artist • Four Stories</i> <sup>1</sup>	84
First Distress	84
A Starvation Artist	86
Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People	94
[Posthumously Published Stories]	108
The Bridge	108
The Hunter Gracchus • [Two Fragments]	109
Building the Great Wall of China	113
The Knock at the Courtyard Gate	124
A Crossbreed	125
An Everyday Event	127
The Silence of the Sirens	127
Prometheus	129
On the Question of the Laws	129
Poseidon	131
<i>Researches of a Dog</i>	132
A Comment	161

1. The second of these four stories, "A Little Woman," is not included in this edition.

On Parables	161
<i>The Burrow</i>	162
<b>Backgrounds and Contexts</b>	
[Letters, Diaries, and Conversations]	193
<b>Criticism</b>	
Stanley Corngold • [Preface to an Understanding of Kafka]	217
• In the Circle of "The Judgment"	221
Danielle Allen • Sounding Silence	235
Walter Hinderer • An Anecdote by Kafka: "A Fratricide"	246
Walter Sokel • Identity and the Individual, or Past and Present	252
Nicola Gess • The Politics of Listening: The Power of Song in Kafka's "Josefine, the Singer"	275
Vivian Liska • Positions: On Franz Kafka's "Poseidon"	288
Benno Wagner • "No one indicates the direction": The Question of Leadership in Kafka's Later Stories	302
John A. Hargraves • Kafka and Silence: An Alternate View of Music	321
Gerhard Kurz • The Rustling of Stillness: Approaches to Kafka's <i>The Burrow</i>	333
Franz Kafka: A Chronology	357
Selected Bibliography	361

The Texts of  
KAFKA'S SELECTED  
STORIES





## THE JUDGMENT<sup>1</sup>

### A Story

FOR F.

It was a Sunday morning when spring was at its most beautiful. Georg Bendemann, a young businessman, sat in his private room on the second floor of one of the low, jerrybuilt houses that stretched along the river in a long row, hardly distinguishable from one another except for their height and color. He had just finished a letter to a boyhood friend who was living abroad, toying with it as he slowly put it in the envelope, and then, his elbow propped on the desk, looked out the window at the river, the bridge, and the rising ground on the opposite shore covered in a pale green.

He was thinking about how this friend, dissatisfied with his prospects at home, had practically fled to Russia several years before. Now he was running a business in St. Petersburg, which having gotten off to a very good start, for a long time now seemed to be stagnating, as his friend<sup>2</sup> complained during his increasingly less frequent visits home. So there he was, uselessly working himself to the bone in a foreign country, his foreign-looking full beard imperfectly concealing the face well known to Georg from childhood, its yellow complexion appearing to indicate some incipient illness. As he had told Georg, he had no real contact with the colony of his countrymen there, but he also had almost no social intercourse with local families either, and so was settling into a terminal bachelorhood.

What could one write to such a man, who had obviously become stuck and whom one could pity but not help? Should one perhaps advise him to come home again, to re-establish himself here, take up all the old connections—there was nothing to prevent this—and

1. Kafka wrote this story on the night of September 22–23, 1912 (for the diary entry that tells the story of its composition, see p. 197). “F” on the title page alludes to Felice Bauer, the woman whom Kafka had met at the house of his friend and eventual editor Max Brod on the evening of August 13, 1912. Felice made a strong impression on Kafka; and although they were thereafter engaged (twice!), they never married. On September 20, 1912, Kafka had written the first letter to her in their long correspondence; now, two days later, he sat down to write—indeed he exploded into—*The Judgment*.
2. Literally, “the friend.” As Ruth Hein observes, “Kafka made a deliberate choice between ‘der Freund’ (‘the friend’) and ‘sein Freund’ (‘his friend’); he had that luxury in German. But in American English, ‘the friend’ seems just not possible. The change to ‘his friend’ or ‘Georg’s friend’ is at odds, in its implication of intimacy, with Kafka’s alienating formulation; but it reads normally, whereas the reader is startled and distracted by ‘the friend.’” At various times, though, when the implication was unmistakable and normal English diction allowed it, I have underlined this alienation effect by translating “der Freund” (literally, “the friend”) as “this friend of his” or “this friend of yours.”

for the rest rely on the help of his friends? But that meant nothing less than telling him at the same time—and the more one spared his feelings, the more hurtful it was—that so far his efforts had failed, that he should give them up once and for all, that he would have to come back and be gaped at by everybody as a man who had come back for good, that only his friends knew the score, and he was an overgrown baby who would simply have to do as he was told by his successful friends who had stayed at home. Besides, was it even certain that all the anguish that would have to be inflicted on him would serve any purpose? Perhaps it would not even succeed in bringing him back—after all, he himself had said that he no longer understood how things worked at home—and so, despite everything, he would remain abroad, embittered by the suggestions and alienated even further from his friends. But if he really did take their advice and then became depressed—of course, not from anyone's doing but because of the situation—if he could not make a go of it either with his friends or without them, felt disgraced, and now no longer had either a real home or friends, would it not be much better for him to have stayed abroad, just where he was? Under such circumstances, was it possible to believe that he could actually make any headway here?

For these reasons, if one still wanted to keep up this connection by way of correspondence, one could not communicate freely, the way one could with even the most casual acquaintances. His friend had not been home for over three years now, attributing this, rather lamely, to the unstable political situation in Russia, which would not permit even the briefest absence of a small businessman while a hundred thousand Russians went calmly traveling all over the world. In the course of these three years, however, a great many things had changed, especially for Georg. News of the death of Georg's mother, which had occurred about two years earlier, since which time Georg had been sharing a household with his old father, had obviously reached Georg's friend, and in a letter this friend of his had expressed his condolences with a dryness whose only cause could be that the grief provoked by such an event was simply unimaginable for someone living in a foreign country. Since that time, however, Georg had taken hold of his business, as with everything else, with greater determination. Perhaps while his mother was alive, his father's insistence that only his own opinions counted in running the business had kept Georg from taking a truly active part in the company. Perhaps, since his mother's death, his father, although continuing to work at the office, had become more withdrawn; or perhaps—something that was very likely—lucky coincidences had played a far more important role; in any case, in these two years the business had grown in completely unexpected

ways. The number of employees had had to be doubled, the sales volume grew fivefold, and further growth was no doubt just around the corner.

Georg's friend, however, had no idea of this change. In the past, the last time being perhaps in that letter of condolence, he had tried to persuade Georg to emigrate to Russia while expounding on the prospects that St. Petersburg offered to Georg's particular line of business. The figures were infinitesimal next to the volume of business that Georg was now doing. But Georg had had no desire to write to this friend of his about his business successes, and to do so now, after the fact, would have seemed truly odd.

So Georg always confined himself to writing his friend about insignificant events in the way they accumulate pell-mell in one's memory when one reflects on a quiet Sunday. He wanted nothing more than to keep intact the picture of his hometown that his friend had probably formed and come to terms with during the long interval. And so it happened that three times, in letters written fairly far apart, Georg announced to his friend the engagement of some inconsequential fellow to an equally inconsequential young woman, until his friend, completely contrary to Georg's intentions, actually began to take an interest in this curious fact.

But Georg was much happier writing such things to him than having to admit that a month before, he had himself become engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandefeld, a young woman from a well-to-do family. He often spoke to his fiancée about this friend and the special relationship of correspondence between them. "So, he won't be coming to our wedding," she said; "but don't I have a right to meet all your friends?" "I don't want to bother him," Georg replied; "don't misunderstand, he would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel constrained and at a disadvantage, perhaps envious of me and certainly dissatisfied and incapable of ever shaking off his dissatisfaction, and then he'd go back alone. Alone—do you know what that means?" "Well, but can't he find out about our marriage in some other way?" "I can't prevent it, of course, but it's unlikely, given his way of life." "Georg, if you have such friends, you should never have become engaged." "Well, that is both our fault; but now I wouldn't want it any other way." And when, breathing rapidly under his kisses, she still exclaimed, "Really, I am hurt," he considered it harmless after all to write to the friend and tell him everything. "That's the way I am, and that's the way he'll have to accept me," he said to himself; "I can't cut myself into the shape of someone who might be better suited to a friendship with him than I am."

And in fact, in the long letter that he had written this late Sunday morning, he informed his friend of the engagement that had

taken place, in the following words, "The best news I've saved for last. I'm engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a young woman from a well-to-do family that did not move here until long after you left, so it is hardly likely that you know them. There will certainly be opportunities for me to share with you further details about my fiancée, but for today just let me say that I am truly happy and that our relationship has changed only to the extent that now, instead of a perfectly ordinary friend, you will have in me a happy friend. Furthermore, you will have in my fiancée, who sends you her warmest regards and will soon write to you herself, a true friend of the opposite sex, something not entirely insignificant for a bachelor. I know that there are many things keeping you from paying us a visit, but wouldn't my wedding be just the occasion to sweep all obstacles aside for once? But be that as it may, act without concern for us and do only what you think best."

With this letter in his hand Georg had sat at his desk for a long time, his face turned to the window. He had barely responded with an absentminded smile to an acquaintance passing by who had greeted him from the street.

Finally he put the letter in his pocket and went out of his room across a small corridor into his father's room, where he had not been for months. There hadn't been any particular need, since he and his father continually interacted at work. They both had lunch at the same time in a restaurant; and although evenings each fended for himself as he saw fit, they usually sat for a little while, for the most part each with his newspaper, in the shared living room, when Georg was not seeing friends as he usually did or, these days, visiting his fiancée.

Georg was amazed at how dark his father's room was, even on this sunny morning. So, the high wall that rose up on the far side of the narrow courtyard cast so much shadow! His father was sitting by the window, in a corner adorned with various mementos of Georg's late mother, reading the newspaper, which he held off at an angle in front of his eyes so as to compensate for some weakness of sight. On the table were the leftovers of breakfast, which seemed hardly to have been touched.

"Ah, Georg," his father said and immediately went toward him. His heavy robe fell open as he walked, the sides flapping around him—"My father is still a giant," thought Georg to himself.

"It's unbearably dark in here," he then said.

"Yes, it certainly is dark," replied his father.

"You've closed the window, too?"

"I like it better that way."

"It's really very warm outside," said Georg, as if in afterthought to what he had just said, and sat down.



His father cleared away the breakfast dishes and put them on a cabinet.

"I just wanted to tell you," Georg continued, who absent-mindedly followed the old man's movements, "that I've sent news of my engagement to St. Petersburg after all." He pulled out the letter from his pocket a little, then let it fall back in.

"To St. Petersburg?" his father asked.

"To my friend, of course," said Georg, attempting to meet his father's eyes. "At work he's a totally different person," he thought; "look how he sits here all spread out, with his arms crossed over his chest."

"Yes. Your friend," said his father, with emphasis.

"You remember, Father, at first I wanted to keep my engagement a secret from him. Out of consideration for his feelings, for no other reason. You know yourself that he's a difficult person. I said to myself, true, he might hear about my engagement from some other source, even if it's unlikely given his solitary way of life—that's something I can't prevent—but he's definitely not going to hear it from me."

"And now you've changed your mind?" his father asked, putting down the big newspaper on the window sill and then, on top of the newspaper, his glasses, which he covered with his hand.

"Yes, now I've changed my mind. If he is a good friend, I said to myself, then my being happily engaged will make him happy too. And that's why I haven't hesitated any longer to tell him. Still, before I mailed the letter, I wanted to tell you."

"Georg," his father said, stretching wide his toothless mouth, "listen to me! You've come to me about this matter in order to ask my advice. That does you credit, no doubt. But it's nothing, it's worse than nothing, if you don't tell me the whole truth now. I don't want to stir things up that don't pertain. Since the death of our dear mother, certain unpleasant things have taken place. Perhaps the time is coming for them too, and perhaps it's coming sooner than we think. At work there's a lot that escapes me, maybe it's not being hidden from me—I don't want to start assuming that it's being hidden from me—but I don't have the strength anymore, my memory is going. I can no longer keep track of all the different things. That is, first of all, the course of nature, and secondly our dearest mother's death has taken a lot more out of me than of you. But since we're now on this subject, this letter, I'm pleading with you, Georg, don't fool me. It's just a trifle, it's not even worth mentioning, so don't fool me. Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?"

Georg stood up, embarrassed. "Let's leave my friends out of it. A thousand friends cannot replace my father for me. Do you know what I think? You're not taking good enough care of yourself. But