

Kafka: Gesturing, Drawing, Writing

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Franz Kafka: The Drawings, edited by Andreas Kilcher
in collaboration with Pavel Schmidt, with essays by Judith
Butler and Andreas Kilcher, Yale University Press.

EVERYBODY has seen Kafka's pen and ink drawings of stick-like or heavily inked-in single figures with overlong limbs in various attitudes of contortion. For years they have adorned the covers of the Penguin translations of his works, and the standard English edition of the *Diaries* includes the reproduction of manuscript pages with hurried sketches of figures and scenes in among the writing. What few have realized, though, is that for a period in his early life Kafka gave equal weight to his drawings and his writings, and even at the end of his life, in the famous letter to Max Brod asking his friend to burn everything of his that was not already in the public domain, he included a specific mention of the drawings:

Dearest Max, my final request: whatever diaries, manuscripts, letters from myself or others, drawings, etc. you find among the things I leave behind. . . , please burn every bit of it without reading it, and do the same with any writings or drawings that you have, or that you can obtain from others. Yours, Franz Kafka.
(trans. Kurt Beals)

The import of this has been overlooked due to the tangled history of the Brod archive, the full contents of which did not come to light until the final settlement of the decade-long tussle between the descendants of the woman to whom Brod had left his archive and the Israeli government, in favor of the latter. As a result, we now know that instead of the forty-odd drawings that Brod had allowed out into the public domain, there were in fact over one hundred and fifty drawings, including a fifty-two page octavo sketchbook carefully put together by Kafka and from which Brod would occasionally

select a few to adorn his own books on his friend but never showed in its entirety. This sketchbook and Kafka's own conviction, as he was dying, that his drawings were very much a part of his oeuvre, means that we have to rethink the relations of word and drawing in assessing the legacy of the man Auden described as *the* representative artist of our times, as Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare were of theirs. Andreas Kilcher, wonderfully served by Yale in a marvelous new publication (the German edition was published in 2021 by C. H. Beck), helps us do just that.

One thing has been clear ever since the publication of Kafka's letters to his editors: he was adamantly against what was then becoming the fashion, the inclusion of images as title and frontispiece (and sometimes more) to works of fiction. In a typical mixture of horror, firmness, and polite acquiescence, he writes to his publisher Kurt Wolff on receiving his author copies of "The Stoker," which would later become the first chapter of *Amerika* but was published on its own in 1913 with a frontispiece depicting a mid-nineteenth-century schooner sailing into New York harbor:

When I saw the picture in my book I was at first alarmed. For in the first place it refuted me, since I had after all presented the most up-to-date New York; in the second place, the picture had an advantage over my story since it produced its effect before my story did, and a picture is naturally more concentrated than prose; and thirdly, it was too pretty. . . . By now however I have completely come to terms with it and am very glad that you surprised me, for had you put the matter to me I would not have been able to agree and would have been robbed of this beautiful picture. (trans. Richard and Clara Winston)

Two years later, when *The Metamorphosis* was being prepared for publication, he decided to make his feelings about illustrations clear before it was too late:

Dear Sir, You recently mentioned that Ottomar Starke is going to do a drawing for the title page of *Metamorphosis*. Insofar as I know the artist's style. . . the project has given me a minor and



Fig. 1: Drawings by Franz Kafka (The Sketchbook).

The Literary Estate of Max Brod,
National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

Photo: Ardon Bar Hama.

perhaps unnecessary fright. It struck me that Starke . . . might want to draw the insect itself. Not that, please, not that! I do not want to restrict him, but only to make this plea out of my deeper knowledge of the story. The insect itself cannot be depicted. It cannot even be shown from a distance.

If Wolff insists on an image, he goes on to say, then perhaps “the head clerk in front of the locked door” or the parents and sister in the lighted room with the door open upon the adjoining room that lies in darkness. Sadly, since that time, umpteen publishers of the story and theater companies from all over the world, drawn to its compulsive power, have rarely heeded these authorial pleas.

How then to reconcile Kafka’s visceral aniconism with his own practice? There are two points to be made: the first is that Kafka’s mainly pencil and black pen drawings are a different species from the realism (albeit stylized) of the average jacket or frontispiece illustration; and the second is that the bulk of Kafka’s drawings were done while he was still trying to discover what it was he had it in him to write. When he finally did, in the *annus mirabilis* of 1912–13, with “The Judgment,” “The Stoker,” and “Metamorphosis,” all produced in a wild compositional surge, the need to draw seems to have abruptly dissipated, though it still occasionally surfaced to the end of his life.

In a letter to Brod on 28 August 1904 Kafka writes:

It is so easy to be cheerful at the beginning of summer. One has a lively heart, a reasonably brisk gait and can face the summer with a certain hope. One expects something out of the Arabian Nights while disclaiming any such hope with a comic bow and bumbling speech. . . . And when people ask us about the life we intend to live, we form the habit, in spring, of answering with an expansive wave of the hand, which goes limp after a while, as if to say that it was ridiculously unnecessary to conjure up such things.

This is the world of the drawings, which show ludicrously tall or squat people stretching, twisting, leaning from or away from one another. This would be grotesque if it were an attempt at realism, but it conveys perfectly how we sometimes feel both constrained in our bodies

and lunging free, both playing a game and close to desperation. In a late diary entry Kafka recalls this need for gesture: “I deliberately cultivated a facial tic, for instance, or would walk across the Graben with arms crossed behind my head. A repulsively childish but successful game. (My writing began in the same way.)” He doesn’t tell us how the game was successful or what success entailed, but he clearly links his early attempts at writing to his propensity for exaggerated and theatrical gesturing, even when alone.

A man sits at a desk, but instead of working he is slumped forward, his arms and upper body prone on the desk (fig. 1). The position is so unusual we are drawn into making the movement with him and so feel, with him, the hopelessness of *sitting* at the desk and doing the work he is meant to do. A man stands precariously at the top of a ladder while the same man has fallen off and lies at its foot, and on the right a roughly sketched group with sagging faces and bulging eyes looks on in astonishment. Or it may be that there are in fact two men, one at the top and the other at the bottom, and they are acrobats performing an amazing feat, gazed at in admiration by the group of onlookers. That is the interpretation given by both Kilcher and Judith Butler in a fine general essay in the book, and it may well be what Kafka intended since it punctuates a 1910 diary entry in which he describes just such a feat performed by Japanese acrobats. But I cannot help feeling that it is more natural for Kafka to imagine the collapse of the performance rather than its successful outcome. Indeed, he says as much in the diary entry in question.

Elsewhere in this book we find a rapidly sketched drawing of a man swimming in a river seen from the point of view of spectators on a bridge. The man is enormous, as though the water has transformed him into a giant, and his awkward leg gestures remind one—as do many of the wildly gesticulating figures in these pictures—of Jacques Tati’s M. Hulot. But there are also academic exercises, a carefully shaded drawing of his mother reading and of a copy of a Leonardo head no doubt imitated from a book. Of these he later remarked to his sometime fiancée Felice Bauer, “I was once a great draftsman, you know, but then I started to take academic drawing lessons with a



Fig. 2: Drawings by Franz Kafka
(Single Pages and Smaller Folios, ca. 1901–ca. 1907).
The Literary Estate of Max Brod,
National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.
Photo: Ardon Bar Hama.

bad woman painter." And he is quite right, he was a great draftsman. Even when he is "copying" the Borghese *Gladiator* in the Louvre on his 1911 trip to Paris with Brod, he transforms the Roman figure into an extraordinary image of movement done with just two or three quick strokes of the pen. When he and Brod sit down each to sketch Goethe's summerhouse in Weimar in the course of their trip (the visit to Goethe's town and house was a momentous event for him as he sought, quite unconsciously, to position himself in relation to the entire tradition of German literature), the book allows us to compare Brod's careful academic drawing and Kafka's impassioned series of marks, which turn the trees on the right into a great fire and endow the house itself with a disconcerting life.

Pavel Schmidt in his careful catalogue raisonné of the drawings is often reduced to remarks such as: "In the left third of the page an elongated human figure appears to be exiting the page to the right. The figure is composed of just a few lines." Or: "Is the figure climbing up or down? Is he stumbling, walking on his hands and feet, or preparing to stand up?" What is in no doubt is that Kafka is not interested in the expressions of a face or the appearance of a person but in *movement* (figs. 2, 3 and 4). People reveal themselves to him in motion, but this is not the sort of motion depicted by Duchamp in *Nude Descending a Staircase* or by Muybridge in his studies of men and animals in motion. Kafka is interested in the entire gestalt of a situation, as the very first sentence of his *Diaries* (they start in 1910) demonstrates: "The onlookers go rigid when the train goes past" (Die Zuschauer erstarren, wenn der Zug vorbeifährt). Note how English has to rely on "go" twice in nine words while the German packs the action of going past and going rigid into the two verbs. Kafka is trying to catch in words what is really a single whole made up of a train rushing through and onlookers on the platform. Part of the excitement of early film lay in its managing to catch, for us to see again and again, the rushing past of these new hectic modes of transport, the train and the automobile, as well as the way this affected bystanders. And we know from Hans Zischler's delightful *Kafka Goes to the Movies* what an avid filmgoer Kafka was.



Fig. 3: Drawings by Franz Kafka
(Single Pages and Smaller Folios, ca. 1901–ca. 1907).
The Literary Estate of Max Brod,
National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.
Photo: Ardon Bar Hama.

Kafka's first book, *Betrachtung* (meditation, observation), consisting of a number of very short pieces written between 1904 and 1912, was published at the end of 1912. The pieces—one can hardly call them stories—are as near as it is possible to get to the drawings, moments of intensity but also of extreme disintegration, almost of insubstantiality, captured in preternaturally calm prose. The one entitled “The Wish to Be a Red Indian” is typical:

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when the horse's neck and head would be already gone. (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir)

There are numerous drawings of riders and horses in the book, sometimes, as here, almost blending into one, sometimes so lightly sketched that key portions of the image are indeed “already gone.”

The pieces in *Betrachtung* are perfect in their brevity and inconclusivity, mirroring the imagist poems Pound was writing at the same time, and the pieces Kafka's Austrian contemporaries Schoenberg and Webern were composing, intensely felt and yet also impersonal, full of meaning and yet devoid of meaning. And this is the world of Kafka's drawings as well. The question for all four artists was: What next? How to bring time and change into their work without losing the intensity of the moment or reverting to the clichés of late-nineteenth-century narrative and musical development?

Kafka had been writing different, longer, more narrative-imbued stories, like “Wedding Preparations in the Country” and “Descriptions of a Struggle,” in these years, but he did not finish them, and it is significant that he chose not to include even the most successful portions in what was, after all, going to be the showcase of his youthful work. Why? And what would he need to do to allow narrative to enter without losing something he clearly deemed essential?

We need to go back here to two scenes of judgment described by Kafka long after they had occurred. The first takes place in a mythical

“once,” though it is also firmly rooted in a family scene from the author’s childhood:

Once I projected a novel in which two brothers fought each other, one of whom went to America while the other remained in a European prison. . . . So once I wrote down something about my prison on a Sunday afternoon when we were visiting my grandparents and had eaten an especially soft kind of bread, spread with butter, that was customary there. It is of course possible that I did it mostly out of vanity, and by shifting the page about on the tablecloth, tapping with my pencil, looking around under the lamp, wanted to tempt someone to take what I had written from me, look at it, and admire me. . . . I sat at the round table in the familiar room and could not forget that I was young and called to great things out of my present tranquility. An uncle who liked to make fun of people finally took the page that I was holding only weakly, looked at it briefly, handed it back to me, even without laughing, and only said to the others who were following him with their eyes, “The usual stuff,” to me he said nothing. I remained seated and bent as before over the now useless page of mine, but with one thrust I had been banished from society, the judgment of my uncle [*das Urteil des Onkels*] repeated itself in me with what amounted almost to real significance, and even within the feeling of belonging to a family I got an insight into the cold space of our world which I had to warm with a fire that first I wanted to seek out.

This extraordinary passage from a diary entry of 19 January 1911 not only describes a scene that will be repeated with variations in many of Kafka’s mature works, but it also reveals the mechanism of need and frustration that drives them. The story of two brothers, one of whom escapes to freedom (America) while the other remains in prison, shows Kafka identifying with the latter—“my prison” is of course “the prison of my story,” but it is also the prison to which he feels he is condemned, even in the bosom of a loving family that ensures that he is given nothing but the softest white bread plentifully laden with butter to eat. To escape it he needs the attention of the family, its praise—“someone to take what I had written from me, look at it, and admire



Fig. 4: Drawings by Franz Kafka
(Single Pages and Smaller Folios, ca. 1901–ca. 1907).
The Literary Estate of Max Brod,
National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.
Photo: Ardon Bar Hama.

me.” In other words, he needs to have his writing and himself recognized by those closest to him as distinctive, unique. What happens is just the opposite. His claim to admiration (“called to great things”) is dismissed not with anger (which might have been just about bearable) but with the damning remark that it is “the usual stuff.” He becomes conscious then that it is with his own fire that he will have to warm himself and no one else’s. It will be his sense of achievement that will light the fire, not the acclaim or dismissal of others. But of course he had known that from the start, since the brother he identifies with in the story is the one left behind in prison—not the one who escapes to make his life and no doubt find praise in the land of the free.

The second scene of judgment is less tied to a particular moment. It is explored with all the masochistic horror and delight that one probes a wound that will not heal so long as one goes on touching it, in the enormous letter he wrote to his father—but of course never sent—detailing the father’s contempt for his puny body, for his fearfulness, for the kind of life he had chosen to lead, for not being like him, the father—who, by the same token, is so enormous, so strong, so self-assured, that he takes up all the space there is in the family and renders any thought of revolt totally out of the question.

This nexus in childhood of need and frustration seeks an outlet in writing and in drawing. Only in this way, he feels, can he break free. But this freedom cannot be the freedom that comes with worldly success such as his friends Max Brod and Franz Werfel are beginning to enjoy, for Kafka, without ever criticizing them, feels from the start that this will not provide the fire that will truly warm him. That will only come when he himself is satisfied with what he has done. Yet he seems locked in his puny overlong body, condemned to making his outlandish and overdramatic gestures to at least give an outlet to his frustration. Yes, his drawings of such gestures and the pieces in *Betrachtung* are things he can acknowledge, but how to really fly free, how to write out his anger, anguish, and frustration in such a way as to feed the flames of a fire that will truly warm him? He needs to tell stories, yet he is also acutely aware of the fact that such a need has in

it an element of vanity, of wanting others to admire him, and as such is precisely what he hoped his writing would liberate him from.

Judith Butler, in her fine essay in this volume, brings out well the ungroundedness of the drawings. She writes: "The sketch [117 in the book, showing a man dancing along, holding a stick in one outstretched arm] . . . gives us a body relieved of weight, two-dimensional and light, contravening the worldly jurisdiction where the laws of gravity reign, but also the laws of writing that follow the horizontal line, and where shape is restricted to the forms of written letters." The first part of this formulation is spot-on and could apply to nearly all the drawings. But her assertion that Kafka's unease with language is due to its following regular horizontal lines is, I think, to misunderstand what is at issue here. Partly this is a general point about language use, that it differs from drawing not because it is constrained by horizontal lines but because there is no direct relation between the physical nature of words, whether on the printed or the handwritten page, and the meaning that the words convey. But partly, too, it is a specific point about Kafka and language.

In the years when he was drawing and writing the little pieces that he later selected for *Betrachtung*, roughly 1901 to 1912, Kafka was also, in his diaries and in letters to friends like Oskar Pollak and Max Brod, exploring his daily struggles with words and sentences. What he is after in his writing, he notes in January 1911, is "a description in which every word would be linked to my life, which I would draw to my heart and which would transport me out of myself." But that is an ideal that for most of the time is beyond his reach. "Wrote badly," he confides to his diary on 20 October 1911, "without really arriving at that freedom of true description which releases one's foot from the experienced." On 5 November he records his bitterness and sense of isolation as Max Brod read out to a group of friends "my little motor-car story": "The disordered sentences of this story with holes into which one could stick both hands, one sentence sounds high, one sentence sounds low, as the case may be, one sentence rubs against another like the tongue against a hollow or false tooth; one sentence comes marching up with so rough a start that the entire story falls into

sulky amazement.” He could be writing not about words in sentences but about the wild gestures depicted in the drawings. But we also see Kafka’s clear-eyed sense of his failure to do with language what he knows he should be doing, what he knows he is capable of doing.

There are other moods when he feels that his writing gives him almost magical power: “When I arbitrarily write down a single sentence, for instance: ‘He looked out of the window,’ it already has perfection” (19 February 1911). Those early stories “Description of a Struggle” and “Wedding Preparations in the Country,” on which he pinned all his hopes in his early twenties, are clearly written in an effort to maintain just this mood. Here what happens is governed not by the conventions of fin-de-siècle storytelling but simply by the feelings of the protagonist: “Because I love pinewoods I went through woods of this kind, and since I like gazing silently at the stars, the stars appeared slowly in the sky.”

Writing of this sort may initially feel promising, but it soon palls. If I have simply to write something down to summon it into being, if everything depends entirely on my mood as I write, then what is the point of writing anything at all? If the pieces in *Betrachtung* give us the gestures that arise out of frustration, these stories give us an insight into the causes of the frustration: such writing seems at once to be what will lead him out of his present condition and at the same time the last thing that can do this since it merely allows him to day-dream and fantasize in ways he knows in his heart of hearts have no value because no purchase on the world. What he needs is writing that will, somehow, come to terms with and, by so doing, transform the world.

No wonder then that these stories peter out and are abandoned. But the urge to write, the sense that if he could only find the right way he would arrive at a better, truer, more meaningful world, never leaves him. In the end, on that night of 22–23 September 1912, which he never ceases to look back on as the moment of his miraculous breakthrough, he does find his way. He finds it not by escaping the linearity of language but by recounting the death of such solipsistic fantasies, the death, in effect, of storytelling. Not surprisingly, it has

at its center a father's judgment and is indeed called "The Judgment" (Das Urteil). It tells of a man, Georg Bendemann, whom we first meet in the act of writing to a friend in Russia to tell him of his impending marriage. It ends with Georg's bedridden old father rising up in wrath, accusing him of making up the story of his marriage and condemning him to death by drowning, a verdict that is no sooner uttered than it is carried out: "Georg felt himself urged from the room, the crash with which his father fell on the bed beside him was still in his ears as he fled. . . . Out of the front door he rushed, across the roadway, driven towards the water." The force that drives him on makes all hesitation, all daydreaming, a thing of the past. He swings himself over the side of the bridge, "like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents' pride," and then he lets himself drop. "At this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge."

The fevered production of this wild and perplexing, yet utterly convincing story is described by Kafka in his diary immediately after he has set it down there:

This story, "The Judgment," I wrote at one sitting during the night of 22–23rd, from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning. I was hardly able to pull my legs out from under the desk, they had got so stiff from sitting. The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. . . . How everything can be said, how for everything, even the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again. . . . 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 complete opening out of the body and soul.

Were Judith Butler right, the words of this story would have escaped the linearity of print and floated all over the page like some of the drawings. But no. There are no Poundian capitals or ideograms, no Joycean italicizings here, just the steady march of the narrative in a pure and simple German. So what is it that makes Kafka feel that he has at last escaped the lowlands of his earlier writing and found his voice?

It is one of the clichés of our time that we all have our stories to tell. But Kafka tells us here that such stories are always self-serving, created by us to protect ourselves from reality and out of the desire to “shine,” as he had confessed in describing the episode of the uncle. In “The Judgment” he tells a story about the nature of stories and dramatizes a ritual of exorcism. Exorcism not just of the writer and day-dreamer of the start, with his fantasy of marriage that he passes off as reality in the letter he is writing to his friend (although his father casts doubt even on the nature of their friendship), but also of the gesturing youth and the artist of the drawings, here ironically described as “the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth.” By so doing he saves both himself and storytelling. Instead of seeing the excessive gestures of his youth as ridiculous and shameful, he builds a drama out of excessive gestures: “For everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again.” (Recall the fire he felt he had to find within himself because it would never be provided by the world, not even by his family.) He has discovered that while words are far more recalcitrant than drawing, it is only in the art of words that narrative can be produced and can then turn against itself and uncover its corrupt origins and motivations. By so doing it reveals its beneficent and healing power: the power to speak the truth about our desires and the world of others. By writing stories that dramatize writing and the fantasies of the imagination and then dramatizing their destruction, he escapes the realm of fantasy, of solipsism, and finds at last that “description in which every word would be linked to my life, which I would draw to my heart and which would transport me out of myself” for which the early diaries show him so feverishly searching.

Of course the healing lasts only as long as the moment of writing, and so has to be fought for and found afresh every day. But that is the path that has opened itself up to him, and from then on, though he occasionally produces a quick drawing, the impulse to draw has dissipated. Now he knows he is a writer and only a writer; or, as he will tell Felice, he is not a man with “literary interests”; rather, he is “made of literature”—and it is literature that will make him.