



Klaus Wagenbach. *Kafka*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. xiv + 176 pp. \$21.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01138-0.



Reviewed by Dawn McKenna (Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, University of Toronto)

Published on H-German (April, 2005)

Life or Literature? Klaus Wagenbach's Kafka Biography

Perhaps the most influential German writer of the twentieth century, Kafka continues to fascinate. University courses focusing on Kafka's works are often filled to capacity while other literature courses remain uncomfortably small. Given this unremitting interest, it is no surprise that a great deal of secondary literature in English focuses on Kafka's life and work. However, Klaus Wagenbach's important introductory level Kafka biography, first published in 1964 and updated in 2002, was not available in English translation until 2003.[1] A relatively quick read, this book is well-suited for a general readership, as Wagenbach avoids jargon and postmodernist theories that might make it less attractive to a general audience without sacrificing the quality of the scholarship presented. This book would also serve as a good place to begin a more in-depth scholarly inquiry into Kafka's life and times, as it gives a solid grounding in the material without getting too bogged down in details that might overwhelm those attempting to get their bearings. One of the most attractive elements of the book is its inclusion of extensive excerpts from not only Kafka's letters, diaries, and works, but also safety reports he wrote for the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. Wagenbach as-

sists the reader in his negotiation of what is likely his first encounter with these primary sources by giving important background information and explaining social and cultural contexts.

The book begins with an introduction by Ritchie Robertson which situates the history of Kafka's life and work within the English language context, including Kafka's influence on the literature of the twentieth century. Robertson also briefly discusses interpretations of Kafka's work and points out that, while early critics were influenced by Brod's religious interpretations, Kafka was seen as a forerunner of existentialism by the 1940s (p. viii). As an alternative to the persistent "cliché of Kafka as [a] prophet of totalitarianism," Robertson suggests reflection on the parallels between the absurdities of the bureaucratic machine with which Kafka, as a civil servant, was well acquainted and the fact that "totalitarian states operate through a perverted bureaucracy" (p. ix). He also points out that Klaus Wagenbach was the first to republish safety reports written by Franz Kafka and draw connections between his professional experiences and the content of his literary works (p. ix).

In this work, Wagenbach presents a portrait of Kafka as a shy, sensitive man with a delicate constitution who was torn between his compulsion to write and the desire to live his life. For him, the two seemed incompatible and, despite a desperate longing for friendship and companionship, Kafka repeatedly withdrew from relationships whenever he perceived a threat to his writing. This pattern is especially evident in his dealings with women; Wagenbach notes Kafka always sabotaged his relationships with women whenever he felt his ability to write would in any way be impaired by the relationship (p. 101). He also shows how Kafka's longing for "reckless solitude" is a characteristic which did not suddenly manifest itself as an adult and traces its presence and development since childhood (p. 30). This description could, perhaps, give the impression that Kafka did not like people and was not liked by them. On the contrary, this does not seem to be the case. Wagenbach quotes schoolmates and co-workers who all seemed to like him, though a former classmate noted that, even as a child, Kafka had a "glass wall" separating him from the others (p. 27).

Because it is an essential element of his argument, Wagenbach takes great pains to explain the context of the unique political, social, and cultural situation to be found in Prague in the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Within this broader context, he positions Kafka and his family and shows how their experiences and choices are in many ways typical of assimilated Jews in Prague at the time. He also shows the effects of this assimilation on Kafka's personal and religious identity—Kafka refers to the Judaism which has been passed on to him as "a joke— not even a joke" (p. 24), and complains bitterly in his "Letter to His Father" of the lack of sufficient religious substance in their lives to constitute a critical mass necessary to pass it on to the next generation (p. 25). Wagenbach argues that Kafka's fascination with the Eastern European variant of Judaism, which he came into contact with via Yiddish theater, is due to its authenticity and its distance from the artificial character Kafka associated with the Judaism of his childhood (p. 74).

Wagenbach's biography underscores Kafka's problematic relationship with his father. The details provided about this relationship in the work are often quite fascinating for the reader; however Wagenbach places a bit too much emphasis on the impact of this relationship on Kafka's life and work in this book. The reader is presented a Kafka who is unsuccessful in removing himself from his father's shadow and suffers from his inability to please his father. At the same time, Wagenbach himself insists, and quite rightly so, that "so-called 'medical' or 'psychological' " interpretations of the father-son rela-

tionship have overshot their mark by not taking into consideration the degree of legitimacy of Kafka's complaints against his father (p. 128). A very poignant example of this is Hermann Kafka's violent rejection of his son's engagement to Julie Wohryzek, a young Czech Jew whose father, as custodian of a synagogue, was at the bottom of the Jewish hierarchy. Expressing a complete disregard for his son's feelings, Hermann suggested that his son would be better off sleeping with a prostitute and proclaims, "If you are frightened, I'll go with you" (p. 130).

Wagenbach's *Kafka* is a cohesive portrayal of Kafka's life as the continuation and expansion upon character traits and tendencies already visible during his childhood years. While this is an effective narrative strategy, it is also what I perceive as the book's main weakness: the presentation of Kafka's life story as though the direction his life took were almost a foregone conclusion from the beginning. To suggest that Wagenbach distorts the facts to fit his desired presentation of Kafka would be exaggerated. There is, however, a tendency in the book to overemphasize certain aspects of Kafka's life to the detriment of other, equally pertinent information, which gives a somewhat unbalanced portrait of the author. Ewald Osers's translation offers readers who are unable to read German access to this important work; however, certain stylistic deficiencies and inexplicable omissions detract from the quality of the scholarly work being presented, as do the presence of mistranslations which at times differ significantly in meaning from the original German text.[2] Despite these problems, the book is definitely worth reading.

Notes

[1]. The original German title appeared as Klaus Wagenbach, *Franz Kafka*. Äberarbeitete Neuausgabe. Rowohlt's Monographien (Reinbek: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002).

[2]. Most mistranslations in the book are relatively minor and, at most, have a slightly different tone than the original. However, this is not always the case. One alarming instance of mistranslation by Osers is the transformation of the original German sentence, "1912 ist der Prozess des Rückzugs, die Vereinsamung fast abgeschlossen und kaum mehr von außen beeinflussbar" (p. 82, German original). I translate this roughly as "By 1912, the process of retreat and loneliness is almost complete and almost impossible to influence from the outside" in contrast to: "By 1912, Kafka felt completely isolated. He was practically beyond external influences" (Osers's translation, p. 78).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Dawn McKenna. Review of Wagenbach, Klaus, *Kafka*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10436>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.