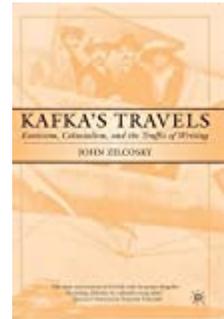




John Zilcosky. *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xvi + 289 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-23281-8.



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Published on H-German (February, 2006)

In Praise of Armchair Travel: Imagined Geography as Cultural Critique

Kafka's Travels originates in a 1998 University of Pennsylvania dissertation supervised by Charles Bernheimer and (upon his death) Frank Trommler. That dissertation has been thoroughly revised, with a new introduction and conclusion, a reshuffling of materials in the name of telling a much more thorough, well-written, and convincing story and the addition of a twenty-page chapter on "In the Penal Colony" (chapter 4). The result is a densely argued, well-documented engagement with some major and some lesser-known Kafka texts in light of contemporaneous intertextualities and a broad range of the secondary literature.

The story that Zilcosky tells is a new one, about Kafka's relation to the cultures of popular travel, colonialism and exoticism from the twentieth century's first decades. Kafka did not himself travel much (and never beyond Europe), but Zilcosky argues convincingly about how the author nonetheless participated in the era's travel obsessions, using all its forms as part of his textual imagination. To make his case, Zilcosky outlines Kafka's broad interest in popular literature about exotic adventures, colonialism, imperialism and travel (espe-

cially Hermann Schaffstein's imperial adventure series, the *Grüne Bändchen* (*Little Green Books*, 1910-70). Zilcosky analyzes Kafka's writings psychoanalytically and historically, setting the author's use of conventional period tropes into their historical contexts, and then tracing what they meant within his oeuvre, as evidence of his personal concerns. Ultimately, Zilcosky argues that Kafka straightforwardly found the "exotic" within Europe, and that the era's imagination about travel is coopted by Kafka to form a private system of metaphors recurring throughout his fictional prose, diaries and letters.

Zilcosky's interpretations rely principally on period intertextualities and on thematic analyses; he weaves a very dense, very rich account of how Kafka's texts play on the popular imagination, as an exercise in mental geography. Each chapter meanders through masses of material on Kafka and his intellectual environment to craft a close reading of a central Kafka work or cluster of related texts. The text's first chapter focuses on an early, incomplete attempt at a novel written by Kafka and Max Brod, conceived on a shared 1911 trip; only one chap-

ter was ever published (in 1912). It nevertheless enabled Kafka to discover the potential of travel narratives for self-expression and for a cultural critique of identity.

The second chapter (on *Der Verschollene/Amerika*) outlines classical exemplars of travel literature that Kafka consciously drew on, including Goethe's *Italienische Reise* and Flaubert's *Voyage to the Orient*. Zilcosky sets these literary masterpieces in travel literature against more popular literature, to show how they offer psychologically rich images of identity and its loss. This argument is particularly interesting in its expositions on how Kafka's work inverts the tropes of the *Bildungsroman*, demonstrating how such travels ultimately lead to dissolution.

After making the case for the travel narrative as a vehicle for psychological investigations that converge with cultural critique, Zilcosky turns in chapters 3 and 4 to more Freudian interpretations, focusing particularly on the tropes of cultural and individual masochism recurring in *The Trial* and "In the Penal Colony." These expositions are particularly significant for their extended dialogues with critics like Laurence Rickels and for their very precise identifications of Kafka's textual exemplars from popular culture, particularly the lurid colonialist and imperialist narratives from the series of *The Little Green Books*. This series recurs in his discussion of *The Castle* (chapter 5), which is convincingly tied into the series' narratives about land surveying, plantations and sugar barons. In such texts, Zilcosky finds evidence of Kafka's exploitation of reader expectations in order to reveal the self-imposed limitations of that essentially colonialist perspective. The reader from imperialist Europe is forced to follow Kafka's characters through failed voyages of self-discovery, and is thus brought to see how impotent Europe's identity politics really are.

The last two chapters, on the *Letters to Milena* (chapter 6) and on "The Hunter Gracchus" (chapter 7) return to less familiar Kafka texts, and to sexual identity politics. In discussing the Letters, Zilcosky plays on the multiple valence of the word "intercourse" to discuss both communications and love as portrayed in exotic metaphors. The unfamiliar "Gracchus" shows Kafka again taking up the failures of the orientalist-imperialist imagination, and especially the individual's (and Kafka's own) need to return home. This kind of word play recurs in the volume's epilogue about Kafka's "Final Journey," taking on corpse/corpus references to illuminate Kafka's thought anticipating his own premature end.

In its strengths, *Kafka's Travels* remains in many

ways a very traditional book: an exercise in literary thematics and intertextuality, a careful address to an author's overall writing program that evokes overtones that the contemporaneous reader might well have heard—echoes of popular culture, current political obsessions, moments of Europe's self-aggrandizement and most especially the evolution of an author's distinctive voice using the materials of his age. As such, Zilcosky integrates (perhaps almost too seamlessly) biography, close passage readings, cultural history, and letter and diary texts that contextualize Kafka's major works in his own thoughts. He does so in full acknowledgment of the major secondary literature (discussions which appear both in the body of the expositions and in copious, well-placed notes), and with an impressive command of the popular literature forms of Kafka's day.

For this, Zilcosky deserves great praise, because he opens up a well-worked author to new critical perspectives, while at the same time reclaiming for cultural studies and for today's criticism an author who all too often is relegated to the status of an outsider or existentialist. His Kafka resonates with today's concerns about identity politics in globalization and imperialism, just as he is thoroughly engaged with his own cultural history.

At the same time, *Kafka's Travels* frustrates, because it does not pursue its intertextualities and the identity politics of Kafka's engagement back into more encompassing contexts. In drawing conclusions, Zilcosky often veers perilously close to psycho-biography rather than to cultural critique of the early twentieth century; he is sometimes too eager to abandon his own vision of Kafka as an engaged and politicized armchair traveler. Where this reviewer would have expected more encompassing conclusions about Kafka's position as a writer in his era, she often finds more abstract (albeit interesting and well-handled) critical wordplay (the aforementioned "intercourse" and "corpse" plays are representative). Quasi-humanist/existentialist interpretations of the works are drawn using concepts like "alienation" to characterize the text's impacts, rather than engaging the political and social implications of Kafka's colonialist exoticism. What might have been a most interesting working through of Kafka's own sense of cultural alienation within and from Europe remains largely unexplored—his alienation is more personal and inward-directed. Zilcosky starts with cultural history, but ends at the dilemmas of an individual writer; he situates an oeuvre within popular cultural discourses, yet does not return to Kafka's successes or failures in engaging (or even wanting) an audience.

Nonetheless, a critic who ignores *Kafka's Travels* will do so at her peril—it is a major contribution to Kafka stud-

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Citation: Katherine Arens. Review of Zilcosky, John, *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

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