Affinities between Franz Kafka and British and Irish Writers

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Uneasy Dreams

By

David Lockwood

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PREFACE

I became fascinated with Kafka's novels and short stories as an undergraduate and started looking for other works described as "Kafkaesque." It soon became obvious that many critics used the term to describe just about any novel that involved the arbitrary exercise of power or excessive bureaucracy. What, though, explained the *uncanny* power of Kafka's work—a quality that was largely missing in books like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*? Many years later I wrote an academic dissertation attempting to answer this question. This book is an expanded version of that investigation.

I am not attempting to offer new interpretations of Kafka's work, but rather setting out its most salient features as a prelude to examining how they emerge in his successors. Even so, deciding which features to focus upon is itself an interpretive activity. I am aware that covering such a wide range of topics and authors means that some of my analysis and discussion will be simplified—but have sought to avoid reducing immensely complex issues to hackneyed platitudes. I always favour close reading of the primary text over manipulating it to accommodate a predetermined literary theory. This latter practice—now fortunately much less common than it was thirty years ago—too often generated reams of indigestible material that shed little light on the texts themselves.

List of Abbreviations

Note: in the case of *Metamorphosis* and most short stories, it is the name of the *collection* in which a story appears that is abbreviated. Given the need for every abbreviation to be unique, some titles could not be abbreviated

A: *Austerlitz* (W. G. Sebald)

AD: *Among the Dahlias* (William Sansom)

AP: *Asylum Piece* (Anna Kavan)

AQOE: *All Quiet on the Orient Express* (Magnus Mills)

B: *The Bridge* (Iain Banks)

BCSS: *The Complete Short Stories* (J. G. Ballard)

BG: *The Buried Giant* (Kazuo Ishiguro)

C: *The Castle* (Kafka)

C&C: The City & the City (China Miéville)

CHIM: *Cold Hand in Mine* (Robert Aickman)

CI: *Concrete Island* (J. G. Ballard)

D: *A Disaffection* (James Kelman)

DD: The Daydreamer (Ian McEwan)

Diaries: *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*

DV: *Darkness Visible* (William Golding)

EATR: *Europe After the Rain* (Alan Burns)

EN: *Eagle's Nest* (Anna Kavan)

FF: *Fireman Flower and Other Stories* (William Sansom)

G: *Ghosts* (John Banville)

GFB: *Greyhound for Breakfast* (James Kelman)

GFS: *A Gun for Sale* (Graham Greene)

HD: *The Heat of the Day* (Elizabeth Bowen)

HIO: *A House in Order* (Nigel Dennis)

HL: *How Late It Was, How Late* (James Kelman)

IAL: *I am Lazarus* (Anna Kavan)

IBTS: *In Between the Sheets* (Ian McEwan)

IDS: *The Image of a Drawn Sword* (Jocelyn Brooke)

JB: *Journey to the Border* (Edward Upward)

KCS: *The Complete Stories of Franz Kafka*.

L: *Lanark* (Alasdair Gray)

LF: *Lady into Fox* (David Garnett)

LT: *Lean Tales* (James Kelman)

NLMG: *Never Let Me Go* (Kazuo Ishiguro)

OTF: *Over the Frontier* (Stevie Smith)

OTM: *Over the Mountain* (Ruthven Todd)

PG: *Party Going* (Henry Green)

S: *Saturday* (Ian McEwan)

SA: *Scenes and Actions* (Christopher Caudwell)

SH: *Sleep Has His House* (Anna Kavan)

SLBR: *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again* (M. John Harrison)

TBE: *The Book of Evidence* (John Banville)

T: *The Trial* (Kafka)

TA: *The Aerodrome* (Rex Warner)

TC: *The Cockroach* (Ian McEwan)

TCA: *The Confidential Agent* (Graham Greene)

TCI: *The Course of Instruction* (David Wheldon)

TCT: *This Census-Taker* (China Miéville)

TI: *The Innocent* Ian McEwan)

TLT: *The Lost Traveller* (Ruthven Todd)

TM: *The Magus* (John Fowles)

TMF: *The Ministry of Fear* (Graham Greene)

TP: *The Professor* (Rex Warner)

TRA: "The Railway Accident" (Edward Upward)

TRB: *The Restraint of Beasts* (Magnus Mills)

TTA: *The Time of the Angels* (Iris Murdoch)

TTP: *The Third Policeman* (Flann O'Brien)

TU: *The Unconsoled* (Kazuo Ishiguro)

TV: *The Viaduct* (David Wheldon)

TW: *The Wall* (John Lanchester)

TWGC: *The Wild Goose Chase* (Rex Warner)

U: *The Unicorn* (Iris Murdoch)

V: *Vertigo* (W. G. Sebald)

W: *Watt* (Samuel Beckett)

WG: *Winter Garden* (Beryl Bainbridge)

WWWO: *When We Were Orphans* (Kazuo Ishiguro)

INTRODUCTION

W. H. Auden famously wrote, "Had one to name the artist who comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age that Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe bore to theirs, Kafka is the first one would think of." [1] Harold Bloom concurred, pronouncing the twentieth century "the age of Kafka." [2] This book is chiefly concerned with how Kafka has influenced his fellow writers. As Daniel Medin writes, "Kafka has been instrumental in the self-discovery of countless authors across Europe and the United States. His 'genes' can be detected in much of today's fiction via the physiognomy of literary allusion, thematic variation, and allegorical imitation." [3] Philip Roth expresses similar thoughts metaphorically: in his novel *The Professor of Desire* Daniel Kepesh visits Kafka's grave in Prague and reflects that "Only the childless bachelor appears to have living progeny." [4] Kafka's "progeny" comprises huge numbers of critical discussions, and dozens of novels, short stories, plays and films that bear signs of his influence. "Kafkaesque" is often the first word critics reach for when attempting to characterise works that depict human beings trying to understand a world that apparently lacks all purpose and meaning—especially when cumbersome bureaucracy is involved. Critics rarely explain more precisely, however, what they mean by this catch-all term. My aim is to identify and evaluate the many ways in which post-Kafka writers appropriated from their predecessor. I do not attempt to devise an overriding explanatory framework and espouse only one, unremarkable, generalisation: Kafka's writings have proved remarkably versatile in their adaptability to many different purposes.

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[1] W. H. Auden, "The Wandering Jew", in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden. Prose: Volume II, 1939–1948* ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton University Press, 2002), 110.

[2] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Book and School of the Ages* (Macmillan, 1994), 448.

[3] Daniel L. Medin, "Liebliche Lüge?: Philip Roth's 'Looking At Kafka'", *Comparative Literature Studies*, 44, nos. 1–2 (2007): 39.

[4] Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (Verso, 1977), 176.

Scope and Translations

A comprehensive account of Kafka's influence upon the world's literature would fill several volumes. I restrict myself to examining his impact upon prose fiction writers in Britain and Ireland between the first publication of Kafka in English translation in the 1930s, and 2025. My criteria for inclusion are either that the author himself/herself acknowledged a significant debt to Kafka, or is frequently compared with Kafka by reviewers and academics.

Some works discussed here were originally written in another language. Samuel Beckett wrote *Molloy* in French but worked closely with Patrick Bowles on the translation. Bowles later said that Beckett "stressed that *Molloy* shouldn't be merely 'translated'; we should write a new book in the new language." [5] W. G. Sebald might not qualify for inclusion, for he never adopted British citizenship and wrote his novels in German. Nevertheless, he lived in England most of his adult life, had a near-native command of the language and, while employing others to translate his books, supervised the process extremely closely. As Carole Angier writes, he "re-Germanised and re-Sebaldised" Michael Hulse's translations, "rewriting almost every line" to produce "great works of English literature." [6] Anthea Bell, translator of *Austerlitz*, confirms that Sebald wrote always "with an eye to the English translation." [7] The translations have effectively become new texts, written jointly by author and translator.

Part I offers a survey of the principal formal and thematic features of Kafka's writings. Many issues are covered, some only cursorily. I argue that although Kafka's fiction resists all-embracing readings, one theme consistently emerges: the representation of conditions favourable to authoritarianism. His protagonists slip between normal and "hallucinatory" states—the latter involving a subjective mixture of memories, unconscious thoughts and imaginings superimposed over perceptions of the real world. Kafka employs defamiliarising techniques that yield the Freudian uncanny, including spatio-temporal dislocations and various manifestations of doubling. Formally, his style is marked by the frequent modification and negation of statements, and narrative structures are repetitive and backward-looping. Crucially, stylistic and structural features *enact* thematic concerns.

Kafka has been translated into every major language, and some critics

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[5] Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (Cape, 1978), 439.

[6] Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 349.

[7] Anthea Bell, "Translating W. G. Sebald with and without the author" in *A Literature of Restitution: Critical Essays on W. G. Sebald*, ed. Jeannette Baxter, Valerie Henitiuk and Ben Hutchinson (Manchester University Press, 2013), 17.

consider him to belong to "world literature". This, according to David Damrosch, encompasses "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin." [8] There is, Damrosch writes, no such thing as *universal* literature; rather "the 'universal' is only a cover for an unconscious process of assimilation to one's own prior values." [9] For example, Edwin and Willa Muir interpret *The Castle* in the light of the Protestant, low-church moralising of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and disregard hints of Jewish mysticism. Some political readings of *The Trial* offered in the 1930s are tinged with the idealism of English public-school communism and take little account of the historical circumstances of the novel's genesis—that is, within the highly authoritarian pre-war Habsburg Empire.

My discussion is based principally around Kafka's novels *The Castle* (*Das Schloß*) and *The Trial* (*Der Proceß*), the novella *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*) and selected shorter fictions: "A Country Doctor" ("Ein Landarzt"); "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" ("Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse"); "In the Penal Colony" ("In der Strafkolonie"); "The Burrow" ("Der Bau"); "A Report to an Academy" ("Ein Bericht für eine Akademie"); "The Hunter Gracchus" ("Der Jäger Gracchus"); and "A Hunger Artist" ("Ein Hungerkünstler"). I occasionally mention *America* (*Der Verschollene*). I refer to the novels by the English titles used in the Muir translations and to the short stories by the titles given in the 1971 Schocken Books collection.

Kafka first appeared in English translation in 1928 with Eugene Jolas's "The Sentence", in the Paris-based *transition*. This journal played a critical role in introducing British readers to the European *avant-garde*. Jolas's translation of *Metamorphosis* appeared across several issues of *transition* between 1936 and 1938. The Muirs published their translation of *The Castle* in 1930, followed by *The Great Wall of China* (1933), *The Trial* (1935) and *America* (1938). The Muir translations achieved very wide circulation after being published in Penguin paperback editions in 1953. [10] They have significant weaknesses, but no other translations were widely available in the UK before the late 1990s. Since my chief concern is Kafka's *influence*, it seems justifiable to quote from the translations which most of his British successors read.

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[8] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

[9] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 138.

[10] 200,000 copies of *The Trial* were sold between February 1953 and the end of 1966. See Dieter Jakob, "Das Kafka-Bild in England: Zur Aufnahme des Werkes in der journalistischen Kritik 1928–1966." *Oxford German Studies* 5, no. 1 (1970): 101–102.

I have insufficient space to examine in depth the differing historical, cultural and socio-economic circumstances of the writers discussed. Rex Warner's novels, written in the 1930s and early 1940s, reflect both contemporary political events and then prevalent religious interpretations of *The Castle*. When writing *The Unconsoled*, some sixty years later, Kazuo Ishiguro not only borrowed from the Kafka-influenced Samuel Beckett but would have been aware of the vast output of the "Kafka industry." [11] Sebald's work is shaped by his background in German literary scholarship and his broadly existentialist interpretations of Kafka.

Beckett is the most significant mediating influence between Kafka and subsequent English-language writers, but it rapidly becomes all-but-impossible to disentangle subsequent overlapping pathways and strands of influence. For example, Magnus Mills was inspired by Kafka, Beckett, *and* by the Kafka- and Beckett-influenced Flann O'Brien and Paul Auster. Matters are further complicated by works having a common source in an earlier text. For example, there is compelling evidence for reading *The Castle* and Beckett's *Molloy* as reworkings of Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* (c. 1180). [12]

Several distinct strands of thematic influence are discernible in Kafka's successors. The most prominent are a politicised strand deriving principally from *The Trial*, and a metaphysical one originating in *The Castle*. The specific influence of *America* is harder to detect, largely because it more superficially resembles a traditional realist novel. Indeed, Kafka's fictions are by no means homogeneous. Unlike the novels, *Metamorphosis* is not mono-perspectival, and the central anomaly cannot be explained as the product of hallucination.

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[11] As far back as 1977 around 10,000 papers and books about Kafka were extant. See Christian Goodden, "Points of Departure" in *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Time*, ed. Angel Flores (Gordian, 1977), 2. W. G. Sebald was scathing about "the chaff ground out in the mills of academia," and considered most studies of Kafka "parasitic" (Sebald, "Kafka goes to the Movies" in *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (Penguin, 2013), 154). According to Milan Kundera, Kafka's academic interpreters have devised the pseudo-discipline of Kafkology, "discourse for replacing Kafka with the kafkologized Kafka" (*Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (HarperCollins, 1995), 42).

[12] Jonathan Ullyot, *The Medieval Presence in Modernist Literature: The Quest to Fail* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). Motifs common to the Grail legend and *The Castle* include a land trapped in endless winter, a partly concealed castle that is difficult of access, and women who distract the hero from his quest. Most significantly, the hero might resolve his problems if he asks the right question of an exhausted man (the Fisher King/Bürgel), but he fails this task on account of his inattentiveness.

Authorial Intentions

Some theoretical questions underlying my investigations must be addressed. I argue that the author's inferred intentions are relevant to, but should not determine, our readings. I also defend, where appropriate, a traditional account of influence.

On the first issue, I accept W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's claim that the meaning of texts is not solely and straightforwardly established by authorial intentions. [13] Meaning is never fixed, for every text is susceptible to multiple readings and no final arbiter exists to settle which is "correct." And E. D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance fails to rescue intentionality. Hirsch argued that while the writer's known or inferred purposes settle a work's meaning, its significance fluctuates with the reader's understanding and circumstances. [14] But there *is* no hard-and-fast distinction between meaning and significance, for changes in the meanings and connotations of words cannot be constrained in advance by authorial intentions—which become increasingly indeterminable over time.

According to Jacques Derrida, deconstructive analysis reveals how the "logocentric" view of intention—which takes the writer's purposes to be encased within the text, and discovering which guarantees the validity of a particular interpretation—is undermined by the gaps and inconsistencies revealed by close reading. Nevertheless, Derrida acknowledges that "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance." [15] Moreover, as several commentators point out, deconstructive tendencies are *already* present in Kafka's habit of undermining and negating his own statements. Shimon Sandbank writes that Kafka "disarms deconstruction by being his own deconstructor." [16] But, he emphasises, "deferral of meaning is a conscious product of a subjective consciousness, of a constant 'presence' of an ever-doubting author." [17] Kafka reveals himself, that is, in the act of self-deconstruction—and his inferred intentions accordingly remain relevant.

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[13] W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* ed. W. K. Wimsatt (University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

[14] E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1967), 6-8.

[15] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", *Glyph* I (1977): 192.

[16] Shimon Sandbank, *After Kafka: The Influence of Kafka's Fiction* (University of Georgia Press, 1989), 7.

[17] Shimon Sandbank, "Reading Kafka: A Personal Story" in *Kafka and the Universal*, ed. Arthur Cools and Vivian Liska (De Gruyter, 2016), 280.

Julia Kristeva argues that the non-existence of a "transcendental signified"—of something standing outside the system of signifiers that grounds their meaning—leaves only the "free play" of signifiers; an inherently unstable system that sets few boundaries to a text's meaning. [18] Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein demonstrates, the meaning of signifiers is established through our consensual use of language, and the absence of external grounding is irrelevant. [19] Similarly, we can reasonably reliably infer a speaker's or writer's intentions just because these necessarily incorporate conventional elements, and conventions set limits to plausible interpretations. For such reasons I favour a reader-response approach to interpretation, which assumes readers to have assimilated conventions and codes that structure their understanding of texts. According to Stanley Fish, readers belong to "interpretive communities" that "produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features." [20] Because most members share similar assumptions, these communities create the possibility of widely agreed responses to literary works. Thus we are justified in saying that Kafka enacts his protagonists' frustrations precisely because most Western readers react similarly to his never-ending deferrals. It also follows that some readings will be more defensible than others. As Jack Meiland argues, the cognitive status of criticism is threatened, not by the presence of incompatible readings but by considering each of equal merit. [21]

We must also remember that only rarely does the author possess pre-formed, relatively fixed intentions that are purposefully applied to the work. Rather, authorial intentions *emerge* in the process of writing, and exist as embodied in the work. As a consequence, writers' subsequently expressed thoughts cannot have the last word regarding their intentions. Some authors display startlingly little insight into how their earlier work may be read.

Influence and Intertextuality

Denying a significant role to author's intentions goes hand-in-hand with preferring to talk about *intertextuality* rather than *influence*. The traditional account of influence does not consider writers passive recipients of their

[18] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Blackwell, 1984).
[19] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1967), 20.
[20] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 14.
[21] J. W. Meiland, "Interpretation as a Cognitive Discipline," *Philosophy and Literature* 2, no. 1 (1978).

predecessor's ideas, but nevertheless assumes a dyadic causal relationship between "source" and "target" texts—and hence a pathway by which ideas are transferred between minds. The indeterminacy of authorial intentions apparently undermines these assumptions. According to Kristeva, all texts comprise an infinitely complex pattern of impersonal interconnections, like segments of a vast three-dimensional web. Instead of a diachronic model, by which influence is mediated from earlier to later texts, we have indefinitely many synchronic relationships. The author's role is reduced (in Roland Barthes's words) to that of "orchestrator of the already-written." [22] Similarly, Foucault writes that "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut…it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences." [23] The practice of tracing actual sources constitutes merely "harmless" amusement for "historians who refuse to grow up." [24]

Harold Bloom defends the dyadic model in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), arguing that young writers both admire and resent their predecessors—Freudian father-figures whom they must vanquish before finding their individual voice. Innovative literature emerges from this quasi-Oedipal conflict, with "strong" poets avoiding anything that smacks of repetition or imitation. Bloom proposes six "revisionary ratios"; strategies employed to avoid this danger. The most significant involves *clinamen*, a "swerving away", whereby writers subtly denigrate and intentionally misread their precursors. A *benign* misreading is impossible, for all strong poetry is necessarily competitive, and involves "a violent narcissistic metamorphosis." [25]

Bloom's account is controversial. Not only does it rest on contestable Freudian assumptions but, by insisting that "poetic influence…always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet," Bloom presents a model of influence based principally on conflict and rivalry. [26] Worse, taken literally, his claim that "all interpretation is misinterpretation" is incoherent just because the very notion of misinterpretation implies the possibility of an indubitably correct reading. But there is no such thing: interpretation is not a zero-sum activity, and there may exist multiple defensible, partial, readings. Incidentally, Bloom rarely establishes literary influence by

[22] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Cape, 1974), 21.
[23] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (Pantheon Books, 1972), 23.
[24] Foucault, *Archaeology*, 144.
[25] Harold Bloom, *The Breaking of the Vessels* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 66.
[26] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 30.

documenting specific instances. Rather he "hears" the voice of one writer in another—that of Marlowe in Shakespeare, for example. [27] As one of Foucault's "historians who refuse to grow up" I prefer more tangible evidence of influence.

Two other theoretical accounts of influence seem more explanatorily productive than either Kristeva's or Bloom's. First, Gérard Genette's taxonomy of "transtextual" relationships makes some useful distinctions. [28] *Intertextuality* involves "the actual presence of one text within another", as in cases of direct quotation, plagiarism and allusion; while *hypertextuality* refers to the transformation of an earlier text to create a "palimpsest" bearing traces of the original. *Architextuality* signifies the relationship between a text and others of the same genre. For example, Dickens's *David Copperfield* shares family resemblances with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, widely considered the first *Bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, the *Bildungsroman* genre is so deeply embedded in Western literary culture that, lacking specific textual or documentary evidence, it is inappropriate to speak of Goethe influencing Dickens.

Second, Jonathan Culler suggests that instances of influence and intertextuality lie on a continuum. [29] At one pole lies the impersonal, amorphous notion of a literary *Zeitgeist*, with affinities explained by background ideas and beliefs held in common. Here Kristeva's anonymous, unbounded notion of intertextuality is most appropriate. The bounded, notion of direct influence, which considers texts as links in temporal chains, holds at the other pole. For example, a direct path of indebtedness is traceable from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Moreover, it seems impossible to understand irony, or parody, pastiche and other cases of specific allusion unless we assume authorial intentions and a dyadic relationship between source and text under discussion. Wimsatt and Beardsley disagree. Discussing *The Waste Land,* they argue that "Eliot's allusions work…even when we do not know them, through their suggestive power." Accordingly, "It would not much matter if Eliot invented his sources." [30] This is surely incorrect: as demonstrated below, many of Sebald's allusions lose their evocative power if their source in Kafka is unknown.

I reject Foucault's claim that tracing influences has little intrinsic value, chiefly because borrowings may indicate the presence of deeper affinities.

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[27] Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, xliv.
[28] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature to the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Dabinsky (University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 1-2.
[29] Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality", *MLN* 91, no. 6 (1976).
[30] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Intentional Fallacy", 14-15.

Moreover, what a writer *fails* to borrow may be illuminating. Discussing Dostoevsky's influence on Kafka, William Dodd writes, "merely pointing out the parallels…misses the point that where borrowing is discernible, it is the differences within the parallels that are particularly interesting." [31] And identifying what his successors take from Kafka helps us to understand what is most distinctive about *his* writings. Jorge Luis Borges makes a related point with the seemingly paradoxical claim that Kafka created his own precursors. We now discern Kafka-like qualities in writers as diverse as Zeno of Elea, Kierkegaard and Robert Browning; but without Kafka's writings might not discern what they have in common. [32]

Bloom's insistence that younger writers unconsciously resent their predecessors' achievements may partially explain one phenomenon—namely, that so many of Kafka's successors denied, often indignantly, having been influenced by him. William Golding, for example, considered that attempting to trace his sources amounted to repudiating his originality. The "scholastic literary critic…invariably deduces the making of one book from the making of another," and "either through ignorance or jealousy—tries to explain away the act of creativity." [33] Golding's fear of being considered derivative is misplaced for, as T. S. Eliot demonstrates in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", engagement with existing texts is both inescapable and hugely enriching. [34] Nevertheless, subsequent commentators generally take denials of Kafka's influence at face value.

Disavowal of Kafkan influence became almost a rite of passage in the 1940s, a variety of justifications being offered for this stance. Edward Upward claimed that his work was utterly dissimilar from Kafka's: but, as noted above, writers are rarely the most perceptive critics of their own work. Most commonly, writers claimed another author as their primary influence—perhaps as a consequence of the scathing comments frequently directed by critics at Kafka's successors. The literary magazine *Partisan Review* published several disparaging reviews of what were considered feeble imitations of Kafka. Philip Rahv described such work as "one-sided" and "inept." [35] William Barrett talked of fiction "simply using so much clever

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[31] W. J. Dodd, *Kafka and Dostoevsky: The Shaping of Influence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 2.
[32] Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and His Precursors", *Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (Viking, 1999), 363–365.
[33] John Haffenden, "William Golding", *Novelists in Interview* (Methuen, 1985), 101.
[34] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood* (Methuen, 1960).
[35] Philip Rahv, "On the Decline of Naturalism," *Partisan Review* 9, no. 6 (1942): 485.

machinery borrowed from [Kafka] and often more ingeniously baroque than his, but which lacks precisely that authenticity of identification." [36] Reviewing *Three*, by William Sansom, Elizabeth Hardwick decries the "misused influence of Kafka" and the author's "exaggeration of the symbolic value of the material." While a Kafka story "can go one for ever…the first thing one notices about most Kafka imitations is that they are immediately exhausted." [37] Some twenty years later, an anonymous British commentator described the 1930s and 1940s as "a period when no Bloomsbury or Chelsea bedsitter was complete without a copy of *The Castle* or *The Trial* and the Soho cafés resounded with misquotations from Kierkegaard." The critic continued, acerbically, "The esoteric world created by Kafka naturally appealed to amateurs who, unable either to delineate character or describe everyday life, trusted that readers might be deluded by nebulous atmosphere and cryptic dialogue into believing their work fraught with a symbolic meaning which it did not actually possess." [38]

The Kafkaesque and the Kafkan

The word "Kafkaesque" was first used by Cecil Day-Lewis in 1938 when reviewing Edward Upward's *Journey to the Border*. It rapidly became shorthand for fiction dealing with what might be summarised in the trite phrase "the individual's sense of alienation in an uncomprehending universe" or, more specifically, for scenarios in which individuals fight helplessly against impersonal bureaucracies. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the Kafkaesque part-tautologically: "of, relating to, or suggestive of Franz Kafka or his writings; *especially*: having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality." [39] Adam Thirlwell considers the term unhelpful. Critics say that Kafka's works "are a prophecy of (a) the totalitarian police state, and (b) the Nazi Holocaust. His work expresses a Jewish mysticism, a non-denominational mysticism, an anguish of man without God…The Kafkaesque describes an indescribable sense of menace. All of these truths, all of them are wrong." [40]

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[36] William Barrett, "Writers and Madness," *Partisan Review* 14, no. 1 (1947): 8. Barrett refers to Kafka's identifying himself with his animal-protagonists.
[37] Elizabeth Hardwick, "Three Stories", *Partisan Review* 14, no. 3, (1947): 320.
[38] Anon. "Sansom and Delilah," *The Times Literary Supplement* (10 May 1963), 340.
[39] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.
https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kafkaesque.
[40] Adam Thirlwell, "Introduction," Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Random House, 1992), xi.

Certainly, Kafka's significance cannot be *reduced* to any of these observations, but Thirwell's conclusion is premature. A useful starting-point is to distinguish between the Kafkaesque and the *Kafkan*. Robert Lemon suggests that "Kafkaesque" "gestures toward both the content and the form of [Kafka's] narratives"; while "Kafkan" is "the more rigorous and restrictive adjective" which "implies a greater degree of similarity with, and/or the direct, attributable influence of, Kafka's actual works." [41] This distinction can be made more precise. Describing a text as "Kafkaesque" need imply no claim about direct influence, but "Kafkan" is appropriately used only of works which *demonstrably* borrow from Kafka. For example, any novel involving arbitrary arrest in a totalitarian society—such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—may be characterised as "Kafkaesque", irrespective of publication date. Similarities shared with Kafka's *The Trial* situate the novel towards the intertextual end of Culler's influence/intertextuality continuum. A Kafkan text, in contrast, will reveal unequivocal evidence of borrowing from Kafka, and will consequently postdate publication of his work. Nevertheless, literary criticism is an imperfect attempt to investigate necessarily flawed accounts of an imperfectly known world—and ragged boundaries will always remain. Little follows from establishing that Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (which refers occasionally to *Metamorphosis*) and David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (one chapter of which pastiches *The Trial*) are technically Kafkan novels.

I attempt to assess the "quality" of borrowing by distinguishing between "superficial" and "deep" markers of the Kafkan. Superficial markers include the presence of spatio-temporal anomalies, doubled characters and motifs involving bureaucracy and surveillance. These features are readily imitable and sometimes appear extraneous and formulaic in Kafka's successors; ingredients added to the mix, as it were. Deep markers, in contrast, are *emergent* qualities arising from the interplay between diverse elements, and cannot be readily tallied and scored. They comprise, first, Kafka's propensity to *incite* and *repel* attempts to provide all-encompassing readings. Second, the principal novels are characterised by a profound sense of *stasis*, with little development of plot or character. Thirdly, Kafka *enacts* his principal themes, with formal and thematic elements working in unison. Stasis, for example, is enacted in resolution-deferring devices—principally, the almost simultaneous assertion, qualification and negation of some state-of-affairs, and repetitive, backward-looping narrative structures. These

[41] Robert Lemon, "The Comfort of Strangeness: Correlating the Kafkaesque and the Kafkan in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*," in *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Stanley Corngold and Ruth Gross (Camden House, 2011), 207.

formal elements are accompanied by appropriate thematic motifs—labyrinthine corridors, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and the like. With the exception of Kazuo Ishiguro and W. G. Sebald, few of Kafka's successors meet the enactment criterion. Kafka's cyclical structures and spatio-temporal anomalies offered Ishiguro appropriate means of modelling the mental disintegration of Ryder, protagonist of *The Unconsoled*; while anomalies, coincidences and repetitions insinuate the chaotic patterns Sebald discerns in history. Both writers introduce doubles to show how patterns of human conduct change little over time.

Kafka's Reception in Britain

Several critics have applied what German scholars call *Rezeptionstheorie* to Kafka's reception in Britain, and only a brief survey appears here. [42]

The first recorded mention of Kafka in British literary circles occurred in 1928, with a review of the 1926 German edition of *Das Schloß* in the *Times Literary Supplement*. [43] In the Afterword to this edition Max Brod described the novel as an allegory dealing with the incompatibility of divine grace and human experience. [44] Edwin Muir's introduction to the English translation of 1930 closely followed Brod's line of thought. Characterising Kafka as a "profoundly religious thinker," Muir wrote

> Perhaps the best way to approach *The Castle* is to regard it as a sort of modern *Pilgrim's Progress*, with the reservation, however, that the "progress" of the pilgrim here will remain in question all the time, and will be itself the chief, the essential problem. *The Castle* is, like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a religious allegory; the desire of the hero in both cases to work out his salvation. [45]

[42] For detailed accounts of Kafka's early reception in Britain see Peter F. Neumeyer, "Franz Kafka and England", *The German Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1967) and Dieter Jakob, *Das Kafka-Bild in England*, 2 v. (Oxford: The Author, 1971).
[43] Anon., "Some German Novels", *Times Literary Supplement* (November 28, 1928): 935.
[44] Max Brod, "Nachwort zur ersten Ausgabe," in Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß* (Fischer, 1951), 484.
[45] Edwin Muir, "Introductory Note," Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (Secker, 1930), iii.

The absence of historical and geographical reference points in the novel undoubtedly buttressed the allegorical reading—but, I argue below, Kafka is no allegorist. [46]

Ritchie Robertson suggests that in comparing Kafka with Bunyan, Muir sought a painless way of introducing the novel to English readers. [47] Ten years later Muir still insisted that *The Castle* and *The Trial* have at their centre "the dogma of the incommensurability of divine and human law"—such incommensurability being the cause of the protagonists' failure to achieve their goals. [48] As indicated above, a translator's presuppositions may result in (possibly unconscious) adjustments to the translation. Mark Harman argues that the Muirs distorted their version of *The Castle* to harmonise with their religious reading—making, for example, the church tower of the opening chapter symbolise "the superiority of religious truth over the confusion of everyday life." [49] According to Ronald Gray, the Muirs' perception of *The Castle's* K. as a pilgrim affected their subsequent translation of *The Trial*, resulting in Josef being less abrasive than Kafka's character. [50] Other critics point to further weaknesses. Breon Mitchell argues that the Muirs miss or understate several theatrical and legal references in *The Trial*. [51] Michael Hoffman notes that the Muirs substituted synonyms for much of Kafka's vocabulary, not understanding that he intended the "drily controlling" effect of blunt repetition. [52] David Damrosch claims that Edwin Muir smoothed over awkward transitions in Kafka's novels because he "had little patience for the fragmented narratives and unreliable narrators" of modernism. [53] Michelle Woods disagrees: Muir

[46] Brod subsequently changed his mind, writing that "Kafka never is allegorical, but he is symbolical in the highest sense" (Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (Schocken, 1947), 193).
[47] Ritchie Robertson, "Edwin Muir as Critic of Kafka", *The Modern Language Review* 79, no. 3 (1984).
[48] Edwin Muir, "Franz Kafka" in *A Franz Kafka Miscellany: Pre-Fascist Exile* (Twice a Year Press, 1940).
[49] Mark Harman, "'Digging the Pit of Babel': Retranslating Franz Kafka's *Castle*", *New Literary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): 300.
[50] Ronald Gray, "But Kafka wrote in German" in *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Time*, ed. Flores Angel (Gordian, 1977).
[51] Breon Mitchell, Preface to Frank Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (Schocken Books 1998).
[52] Michael Hoffman, "Introduction", Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Penguin, 2008).
[53] Damrosch, *What Is World Literature*, 196.

was "steeped" in modernism and made changes solely to conform to the demands of British publishers. [54]

Writers may be influenced, then, both by flawed translations and by the misjudged comments of their predecessors. What we might call the Brod-Muir reading not only over-emphasised religious features of *The Castle*, but distracted attention from the open-ended nature of Kafka's writing. Nevertheless, it was highly influential in forming the British "Kafka-Bild" in the 1930s. Religious interpretations dominated early critical assessments of Kafka in Britain, and continued to exert influence for many years. Alasdair Gray, for example, conceded that *Lanark* (1981) was partly shaped by Muir's comparison of Kafka with Bunyan.

Political readings of Kafka appeared slightly later, chiefly because an English translation of *The Trial*—less easily positioned within the allegorical tradition than *The Castle*—appeared only in 1935. In the years leading up to the Second World War Kafka's novels were reviewed by, among others, Arnold Bennett, Elizabeth Bowen, Arthur Calder-Marshall, L. P. Hartley, V. S. Pritchett and Herbert Read. He was discussed at length in the two most influential literary periodicals of the age, *The Criterion* (edited by T. S. Eliot) and F. R. Leavis's *Scrutiny*. During the 1940s Kafka's short stories were published in Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* and in John Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing*. A group of intellectuals circling around W. H. Auden was particularly influential in promoting Kafka. It included Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis, Edward Upward and Rex Warner—most of whom either espoused or flirted with Marxism. They accordingly rejected religious readings of Kafka, finding instead a portrayal of man's rootlessness in capitalist society, or a warning against (principally fascist) totalitarian ideologies. Samuel Hynes is worth quoting at length:

> What Kafka seemed to provide was a parabolic form for the perception of reality as nightmare that was increasingly the way the world looked. In Kafka's books, reality is fantastic and frightening, but is recorded as though it were ordinary and to be expected: authority is absolute and incomprehensible, and man is powerless, and only guilt and suffering are certain. One can see how, as young writers lived through the 'thirties, they came to see Kafka as the true realist of their reality. It is impossible, of course, to prove that all young writers of the 'thirties read Kafka, and one might reasonably argue that the necessity of nightmare was a conclusion that they all reached independently; but what is clear is that by the mid-'thirties Kafka-like effects were turning up in their writings, and that these effects increased in the later

[54] Michelle Woods, *Kafka Translated: How Translators Have Shaped Our Reading of Kafka* (Black, 2013), 75.

> years of the decade. One could say, perhaps, that nightmare had become the parable-form of the time, and that what Kafka provided was a sophisticated example of how to turn nightmare into literature. [55]

In the 1940s a "Kafka-industry" of critical and biographical literature started up in earnest. In 1945 a symposium dedicated to Kafka and Rex Warner—then widely considered the "English Kafka"—discussed *Die Einflussfrage*, the question of influence. Four contributors raised issues that resurface throughout my discussion. D. J. Enright argues that Kafka "*creates* an experience [that] Warner merely *reproduces*"; and represents elusive emotions "in a void, without any apparent 'objective correlative.'" [56] Julian Symons observes that in Kafka's novels "the individual must always lose his fight against that collection of abstractions which is never called explicitly Society or God." Kafka represents the temptation to collude with the oppressor, and "*always supported the forces that destroyed him*." [57] Balachandra Rajan contrasts Kafka's "hovering eternities" with Warner's tendency to simplify complex issues. [58] And Walter Allen insists that "the English imitators of Kafka have so signally failed. Each has seized on certain aspects of Kafka, and, in each case, the result has been nothing like Kafka." They have produced "only works of fancy in Coleridge's sense of the word." [59]

By the mid-1940s psychoanalytical interpretations of Kafka—fuelled by the publication in English of Max Brod's biography and Kafka's diaries—were becoming commonplace. Some critics dissented from the prevailing view of Kafka's significance. In 1941 an anonymous reviewer of *The Aerodrome* referred to Kafka's "world of portentous nothings." Rex Warner "had drunk at the fountain of Franz Kafka", a fountain whose waters were "thin, tepid and rather muddy." [60] David Paul found little but the expression of neuroses: only those who shared Kafka's "spiritual sickness" would feel

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[55] Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (Bodley Head, 1976), 316.
[56] D. J. Enright, "The Use and Misuse of Symbolism" in "A Symposium on Kafka" ed. Balachandra Rajan and Andrew Pearse, *Focus One* (Dobson, 1945): 38–39.
[57] Julian Symons, "A Comment", in "A Symposium on Kafka": 43.
[58] Balachandra Rajan, "Kafka—A Comparison with Rex Warner" in "A Symposium on Kafka": 13.
[59] Walter Allen, "A Note on Franz Kafka", in "A Symposium on Kafka": 32. According to Coleridge, a work of fancy is merely "associative"; reassembling existing ingredients in new combinations.
[60] Anon., Review of *The Aerodrome* by Rex Warner, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 April 1941.

at home with his writing. [61] Edmund Wilson insisted that it was "obviously quite absurd" to compare Kafka with Joyce and Proust. His novels are "ragged performances", the "half-expressed gasp of a self-doubting soul trampled under." Their author is neither "a great artist [nor] a moral guide." [62] Some of the harshest denunciations came from leftist critics, who condemned Kafka's work as a decadent, bourgeois representation of a world of pure intellect.

According to John Sutherland, the Muir translation of *The Castle* "exploded like a bomb on insular British culture." [63] Frank Swinnerton concurred: in the 1930s Kafka rapidly became "the very latest and most admired thing." [64] The younger generation of mid-century English writers, already accustomed to seeking inspiration in foreign literatures, enthusiastically appropriated from Kafka—perhaps, a cynic might say, to demonstrate their literary sophistication. [65] As Gregory Ariail points out, "By imitating Kafka's work, writers and thinkers could occupy (or imagine themselves occupying) an exhilarating and dangerous imaginative frontier, at both the center and periphery, in between languages and cultures." [66] Nevertheless, Kafka's initial impact on literary practice should not be overstated. In his magisterial survey of 1930s English literature Valentine Cunningham barely mentions Kafka other than to observe that his writings "inched their way only very slowly and in translation into the '30s English consciousness." [67] The *Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the 1930s* ignores Kafka altogether. And by mid-century Kafka's reputation in Britain seemed to be waning. In 1956 Hans Reiss insisted that "The high tide of enthusiasm for Kafka has undoubtedly ebbed away." [68] Two years later, David Daiches

[61] David Paul, "A View of Kafka", *Polemic* (July-August 1946): 30–33.
[62] Edmund Wilson, "A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka" [1947] in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. D. Gray (Prentice-Hall, 1962), 97.
[63] John Sutherland, *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* (Yale University Press, 2012), 472.
[64] Frank Swinnerton, *Figures in the Foreground: Literary Reminiscences 1917–1940* (Hutchinson, 1963), 192.
[65] As Valentine Cunningham points out, "youths had stormed the citadels of the literary world" in the 1930s (Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 8). In 1930 Spender, Auden, Beckett, Warner, Day-Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, Henry Green and Graham Greene were all in their early to mid-twenties.
[66] Gregory Ariail, "Kafka's Copycats: Imitation, Fabulism, and Late Modernism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2018), 7.
[67] Cunningham, *British Writers*, 343.
[68] H. S. Reiss, "Recent Kafka Criticism—A Survey", *German Life and Letters* 9, no. 4 (1956): 294.

claimed that while he "had a tremendous vogue, Kafka never really entered the English literary imagination." [69] Franz Baermann Steiner's poem "Kafka in England" (1954) conveys the sense of bewilderment attributed to English readers. [70] As Jeremy Adler and Richard Fardon point out, Steiner satirises the "cultural appropriation" of Kafka by "uncomprehending English characters" with comical names. [71] Mrs Brittle, Mr Tooslick and Miss Diggs make banal comments about Kafka during the characteristically English rituals of breakfast and tea, but their understanding is shallow. Miss Diggs, for example, reflects the left-wing view that non-realistic fiction is necessarily reactionary. Geofrey Piltzman, a Jewish refugee and Kafka's representative, connects the author with the fate of Czech Jews in Nazi concentration camps.

Pessimistic appraisals of Kafka's reputation in Britain turned out to be premature, and since the 1960s scholarly studies have proliferated. European literary theory dominated university departments of English and Modern Languages from the 1970s onwards, and Kafka was reinterpreted using the tools of Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the like. The new theoretical approaches had little impact on fiction writers, however—certainly when compared with the Brod-Muir account of *The Castle*. Rather than produce all-encompassing readings, many critics now prefer to focus on particular topics: such as Kafka's relationship with photography, or the significance of animal motifs.

Kafkan tropes are so familiar that unless the borrowing is done in a playful and self-consciously ironic fashion, obvious imitations risk inviting the scorn of critics. Later writers are accordingly unlikely to pastiche Kafka's work *in toto*, rather borrowing and adapting just those features that suit their purposes. Recently, and in response to the dangers posed by creeping authoritarianism, governmental and commercial surveillance and climate change, there has been a revival of Kafkan motifs being adapted to political purposes.

Why has Kafka been Influential in Britain?

At first sight it seems that Kafka's work offers little to the "typical" British reader—commonly thought to favour novels examining social mores and

[69] David Daiches, *The Present Age: After 1920* (Cresset Press, 1958), 18.
[70] Franz Baermann Steiner, *Unruhe ohne Uhr: Ausgewählte Gedichte aus dem Nachlass* (Lambert Schneider, 1954), 51.
[71] Jeremy Adler and Richard Fardon, "Orientpolitik, Value and Civilisation: The Thought of Franz Baermann Steiner" in F. B. Steiner, *Selected Writings, Vol. 1: Taboo, Truth and Religion* (Berghahn Books, 1999), 82.

individual psychology over more abstract, cerebral material. And his world is far removed from that of country house, village green and cricket-match; of the spinster cycling to church and the jokey banter of the public school. Writing in the early 1950s, Jacob Isaacs noted that Kafka was widely considered "most un-English"; a writer who "mirrors the special problems of a Central European minority" (that is, of Jews). [72] Thirty years later, Joseph Strelka asserted that "the Anglo-American mentality is too pragmatic and realistic to create the closed-in, unreal fictional world of Kafka's parables." [73] Moreover, not having experienced the tumultuous history of Central and Eastern Europe, British audiences may not readily grasp Kafka's black humour. The Hungarian author Szilárd Borbély declares "We Eastern Europeans are all Kafka's sons"—the implication being that people living under authoritarian governments respond to threats and absurd bureaucratic demands by adopting comical survival strategies of the kind represented by Kafka. [74]

It is not immediately obvious, then, why Kafka has had such a lasting impact on English-language literature. One reason, perhaps, is that British writers who wished to explore philosophical ideas found few models in mainstream English literature. The often critically disregarded genres of science fiction and allegorical fantasy and fable offered some pointers—and Kafka offered a bridge between these genres and the European novel of ideas. As Joe Kennedy writes, Kafka "straddled the border between Fairyland and the Waste Land", and "effected an unlikely tessellation of modernism's narratives of alienation with an older tradition of macabre, parabolic fantasy." [75] The publication in the 1920s of Constance Garnett's translations of Dostoevsky and Gogol—both significant influences upon Kafka—also helped prepare the ground. And Kafka's affinities with Dickens, the quintessentially English novelist, suggests that critics who considered him profoundly "un-English" were incorrect. [76]

Kafka's reception in Britain was probably also facilitated by the prior popularity of genre fiction. Although guardians of the English literary canon

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[72] Jacob Isaacs, *An Assessment of Twentieth-Century Literature: Six Lectures Delivered in the B.B.C. Third Programme* (Secker & Warburg, 1951), 62.

[73] Joseph Strelka, "Kafkaesque Elements in Kafka's Novels and in Contemporary Narrative Prose", *Comparative Literature Studies* 21, no. 4 (1984): 437.

[74] Szilárd Borbély, *The Dispossessed*, trans. Ottilie Mulzet (Harper, 2013), vii.

[75] Joe Kennedy, "'On Not "Getting There': Henry Green's *Party Going* and the Derailment of Metaphor" (UEA School of Literature Faculty Research Seminar, 21 April 2010) p. 5. https://www.academia.edu/1680437.

[76] See Peter Beicken, "Franz Kafka and Anglo-American Literature: A Personal View", *Germanic Review* 60, no. 2 (1985). In a diary entry of 8 October 1917 Kafka mentioned plans for writing a "sheer imitation" of *David Copperfield* (*Diaries*, 388).