THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and Robyn Warhol, Series Editors
A drawing from Kafka's diaries
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### Abbreviations

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The essays in this volume examine a number of questions presented by narration and narratives in Kafka’s fiction. They originated as papers discussed at a symposium in May 2006 that formed part of the research project Narrative Theory and Analysis directed by Jakob Lothe at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo. The arguments (which have been revised in light of discussions then and since) relate both to the peculiarities of Kafka’s story-telling and to general issues in narrative theory. The decision to select Kafka’s work for discussion in the context of the research project was, if not inevitable, at least unsurprising, given that it has frequently attracted the attention of critics interested in the nature of narrative, arguably because of rather than despite the challenges his stories present to the general categories narrative theorists make it their business to develop. Since general narrative theory and Kafka’s idiosyncratic fictions are both complex and contentious topics, some prefatory remarks are called for to outline the context in which the issues addressed in the individual contributions emerged.

Even to use the term “narrative theory” might be considered to invite misunderstanding, for there are not one but many competing accounts of what narration and narratives entail. For purely pragmatic reasons, we have decided to take as a starting point the basic understanding of narrative as rhetorical communication (a view offered by the theorist James Phelan, a member of the research project team) not because the con-
tributors would all necessarily subscribe to this theoretical model but because it addresses a number of the key components of narrative that were much debated during the research project and that have for long played a role in Kafka criticism. The terms and concepts are not meant to provide “preset molds into which narratives will inevitably fit—or must be made to fit—but rather . . . available tools for opening up the workings of individual narratives” (see James Phelan’s discussion in chapter 1). Phelan’s general definition of narrative asserts that

narrative can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. In fictional narrative, the rhetorical situation is doubled: the narrator tells her story to her narratee for her purposes, while the author communicates to her audience for her own purposes both that story and the narrator’s telling of it. (2007, 3–4)

While this definition is cast in the simplest of terms, each of the elements is susceptible to complex elaboration and to considerable variation in perception, as the contributions to the present volume demonstrate. The essays reflect the complexity of the issues surrounding the “somebody” doing the telling, the attitude of the narrator to what is told, the perceived purpose(s) of the telling, the implied or actual reader, the progression of events, and the progression of the telling. As these elements are interconnected to a high degree, an increased or decreased emphasis on any one of them will have an impact on the others. Where purpose is perceived to be important, for example, the narrator doing the telling is likely to assume a different profile in the mind of the reader than would be the case in narratives that do not convey a clear sense of authorial or narratorial purpose. Similarly, where historical “occasion” is considered to be important (as in Benno Wagner’s chapter on “Building the Great Wall of China”), the critic’s understanding of narration will differ markedly from that of critics who believe Kafka’s understanding of life to have been categorically a-temporal.1 As the range of emphases in these chapters makes clear, Kafka’s mode of narration still appears as stubbornly enigmatic to today’s readers as it did when he began to write, almost exactly a century ago. As the essays also demonstrate, Kafka’s narratives still present a considerable challenge to, as well as a great resource for, narrative theory and analysis.

Of the various elements identified by Phelan, the questions surrounding the “somebody” who tells have long been of particular interest to
Kafka’s commentators. In the development of Kafka criticism, the great editor and philologist Friedrich Beißner deserves credit for having been the first to focus attention effectively on the question of narration in Kafka’s fiction in a trenchant public lecture given in 1952, subsequently published under the title Der Erzähler Franz Kafka (“The narrator Franz Kafka”). The lecture was prompted by Beißner’s irritation at the practice, which had become widespread during the Kafka vogue of the early post-war years, of interpreting Kafka’s fictions as encoded illustrations of various ideological positions (existential, religious, philosophical, psychoanalytic) dear to the hearts of the many interpreters who made the assumption that the stories were told by an authoritative narrator speaking from a position distinct from and superior to those of his characters. Beißner, by contrast, contended that Kafka always narrated from a single perspective (“Kafka erzählt . . . stets einsinnig” [1983, 37]), and that the narrative perspective, even when expressed in the third person, was always co-extensive with that of the protagonist: “There is no place for the narrator other than in the soul of his central figure: he narrates himself, he transforms himself into Josef K. and into the land-surveyor K.” (1983, 38). According to Beißner, the narrator becomes one not simply with the protagonist but also with the events and circumstances of the story:

The narrator is identical not only with the main figure (and this is the case even where Kafka narrates in the third person) but also with what is narrated. The distance between event and narration is cancelled [“aufgehoben”]. . . . Kafka allows the narrator no space beside or above the figures and no distance from events. . . . There is only the sequence of events that is narrating itself (paradoxically in the past tense). (1983, 41–42)

A concomitant effect of this technique is to eliminate any distance between the reader and the protagonist: “If we understand things correctly, Kafka transforms not only himself but also the reader into the main figure” (Beißner 1983, 42).

A further consequence of the narrator’s identification with the self-enclosed condition of the protagonist, in Beißner’s view, is that narrative progression at the level of event effectively does not take place. Although the figure might believe that he is moving toward some goal, the unfolding of the narrative typically reveals the underlying and unchanging stasis of his situation. As Beißner put it with characteristic clarity in his next, equally influential lecture on Kafka, “Der Dichter Franz Kafka” (“Kafka the poet”), Kafka’s enduring theme, was “the failure to arrive or the failure
to reach a goal” (Beißner 1983, 63; emphasis in the original). As Beißner realized, this theme was also relevant to the question of narrative progression at the level of communication between author or narrator and reader. If the stories are told from within an isolated consciousness, the reader, although forced by the narrative techniques into an attitude of identification, can have no assurance of entering that consciousness effectively. Just as the stories told by figures within the stories usually do not achieve the intended effect on the other figures to whom the stories are told, the author’s stories too may fail to reach their goal/reader. Kafka himself recognized this danger when he wrote to Felice Bauer that if his “rather wild and senseless” story “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”) contained “innere Wahrheit” (“inner truth”) this was something that could only be affirmed or denied by each individual reader (KLF, 87).

For Beißner this narrative constellation marked the end-point of a great historical arc that began with the Homeric epic, in which the poet-narrator derived his nigh-on omniscient authority from a unified worldview encompassing the actions of gods and mortals alike that he shared with his audience and his characters. In Kafka’s fiction, by contrast, a radically different, modern view of the world had found its appropriate form of expression, an enclosed, “monadic” experience of isolated subjectivity in which no “windows” existed through which individuals might gain access either to the inner world of other subjects or to some Archimedean point of objectivity. Kafka’s remark that he was concerned above all with the “Darstellung meines traumhaften inneren Lebens” (KAF, 10: 167) (“representation of my dreamlike inner life”) was taken by Beißner to be the key to understanding the structure of Kafka’s fiction, for within that “dreamlike inner life” no distinctions are tenable between the perspectives of the protagonist, the narrator, and even, ultimately, the author. If ever the narrator failed to abide strictly by the “principle” of identification with the protagonist, he committed what Beißner regarded as a compositional error or a breach of his own rule of narration. Beißner cited as evidence for this view the fact that Kafka left as one of the para-lipomena of Der Proceß (The Trial) a draft chapter in which Josef K. is described from the perspective of an outside observer as the protagonist returns to waking consciousness after dreaming of a sequence of events in which he was a passive participant. Such a break between dreamt experience and a reflective consciousness that recognized the “unreal” nature of dream events could not possibly be acceptable, Beißner maintained, to an artist as concerned as Kafka was with artistic consistency and coherence, because “Das traumhafte innere Leben erscheint nicht einheitlich
The isolation on which Beißner placed such stress was certainly an important element both in Kafka’s experience of life and in his ideal conception of writing. In October 1921, for example, he characterized his situation thus:

Alles ist Phantasie, die Familie, das Bureau, die Freunde, die Straße, alles Phantasie, fernere oder nähere, die Frau die nächste, Wahrheit aber ist nur daß Du den Kopf gegen die Wand einer fenster- und türlosen Zelle drückst. (KAF, 11:192)

(All is imaginary, family, office, friends, the street, all imaginary, far away or close at hand, the woman the closest; the truth, however, is only this, that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell.) (KD, 395; translation modified)

A week later, having taken part half-heartedly in a game of cards his parents were playing, Kafka observed that his whole life had been one of almost complete isolation:

Dieses Grenzland zwischen Einsamkeit und Gemeinschaft habe ich nur äußerst selten überschritten, ich habe mich darin sogar mehr angesiedelt, als in der Einsamkeit selbst. Was für ein lebendiges schönes Land war im Vergleich hierzu Robinsons Insel. (KAF, 11:193)

(I have seldom, very seldom, crossed this borderland between loneliness and community, I have even settled down there more than in loneliness itself. What a fine bustling place was Robinson Crusoe’s island in comparison.) (KD, 396; translation modified)

The distinction Kafka drew here between living in this “borderland” and the elusive complete isolation he longed for as the pre-condition of total immersion in writing is helpful when it comes to understanding the position of the narrator or narrators in his fiction. Just as he was sufficiently involved in communal life at least to make a show of taking an interest in his parents’ card game (a minor but telling example of a life lived in fact in the service of many other lives despite the subjective sense of alienation and the great cost to his own well-being), Kafka’s narrative stance is not as solipsistic as Beißner claimed it was. As has often been
pointed out, there are too many instances of what Beißner considered to be breaks in perspective for them to be mere artistic infelicities. Even if Beißner were correct in supposing that the fictions were the expression of a single personality, this would not necessarily entail the singularity of perspective (Einsinnigkeit) he insisted on, for being “of two minds” is not only a familiar enough experience, but Kafka had a particularly strong sense of the multi-occupancy of the self:

Jeder Mensch trägt ein Zimmer in sich. Diese Tatsache kann man sogar durch das Gehör nachprüfen. Wenn einer schnell geht und man hinhört, etwa in der Nacht wenn alles ringsherum still ist, so hört man z.B. das Scheppern eines nicht genug befestigten Wandspiegels oder der Schirm. (KAF, 6:44)

(Every human being carries a room within himself. One can even test this fact with the ear. If someone walks quickly and one listens attentively, at night, say, when everything around is quiet, one hears for example the rattle of a mirror that is not properly fixed to the wall or the screen.)

Although Beißner’s argument that Kafka’s narrator always identifies unreservedly with the protagonist was crucial in directing attention to the issue of narrative perspective and modes in Kafka, many subsequent critics, including the contributors to this volume, stress the element of irony in his presentation of events, and argue that the repeated and contrasting patterns created by the narrated images show a shaping consciousness at work that invites us to look at things from a perspective (or perspectives) distinct from the protagonist’s. There is also external evidence that the author Kafka at times far exceeded the quietly ironic distance detectable in his narrators. When reading aloud the first chapter of *The Trial*, for example, it is reported by Max Brod that Kafka was so convulsed with laughter that he could scarcely finish the reading (1996, 156). Reading “Die Verwandlung” (“The Metamorphosis”) to friends, by contrast, had two quite different effects on Kafka, with laughter following hard on the heels of a “frenzied” recitation, possibly to release the tensions generated by the oral delivery: “Ein schöner Abend bei Max. Ich las mich an meiner Geschichte in Raserei. Wir haben es uns dann wohl lassen und viel gelacht” (F, 320) (“A pleasant evening at Max’s. I read myself into a frenzy with my story. But then we did let ourselves go, and laughed a lot” [KLF, 209]).
On another occasion Kafka contrasted his own detached view of the death of a character with the sympathetic response he expected his manner of narrating to elicit from the reader:


(On the way home told Max that I shall lie very contentedly on my deathbed, provided the pain isn’t too great. I forgot, and later purposely omitted, to add that the best things I have written have their basis in this capacity of mine to meet death with contentment. All these fine and very convincing passages always deal with the fact that someone is dying, that it is hard for him to do, that it seems unjust to him, or at least harsh, and the reader is moved by this, or at least he should be. But for me, who believe that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game, indeed in the death enacted I rejoice in my own death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention that the reader concentrates on death, have a much clearer understanding of it than he, of whom I suppose he will loudly lament on his deathbed, and for these reasons my lament is as perfect as can be, nor does it suddenly break off, as is likely to be the case with a real lament, but dies beautifully and purely away.) (KD, 321)

Yet this is not in fact how Kafka always responded to his own descriptions of painful subjects. When, late one night, he re-read to himself a
passage from Der Verschollene (The Man Who Disappeared), for example, Kafka confessed to being so moved that he feared his sobbing might wake his parents in the next room (KLF, 72).

The views Kafka expressed at different times about the point or purpose of his writing were equally contradictory. In one particularly black moment, he described writing as a sweet reward for “service to the devil,” devilish both because it unleashed powers that nature otherwise held in check and because it led to a narcissistic withdrawal from normal life:

Und das Teuflische daran scheint mir sehr klar. Es ist die Eitelkeit und Genusssucht, die immerfort um die eigene oder auch um eine fremde Gestalt—die Bewegung vervielfältigt sich dann, es wird ein Sonnensystem der Eitelkeit—schwirrt und sie genießt. (Br, 385)

(And what is devilish about it seems very clear to me. It is the vanity and addiction to pleasure which constantly flutters around its own figure and enjoys it—or around some other figure, the movement then multiplies, it becomes a solar system of vanity.)

Yet there were other times when he felt writing to be a form of Erhebung (“elevation”) that permitted things to be seen from a new, freer point of view:

Merkwürdiger, geheimnisvoller, vielleicht gefährlicher, vielleicht erlösender Trost des Schreibens: das Hinausspringen aus der Totschlägerreihe Tat—Beobachtung, Tat—Beobachtung, indem eine höhere Art der Beobachtung geschaffen wird, eine höhere, keine schärfere, und je höher sie ist, je unerreichbarer von der “Reihe” aus, desto unabhängig wird sie, desto mehr eigenen Gesetzen der Bewegung folgend, desto unberechenbarer, freudiger, steigender ihr Weg. (KAF, 11:210)

(The strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps saving comfort that there is in writing: it is a leap out of the murderers’ row, action-observation, action-observation, that is made possible by the creation of a higher type of observation, a higher, not a keener type, and the higher it is and the more out of reach of the “row,” the more independent it becomes, the more obedient to its own laws of motion, the more incalculable, the more joyful, the more ascendant its course.) (KD, 406–7)

At such moments, Kafka felt confirmed in the belief that writing was
the purpose or even the mission that it had been given to him to fulfill, whatever it might cost him:

Die ungeheuere Welt, die ich im Kopfe habe. Aber wie mich befreien und sie befreien ohne zu zerreißen. Und tausendmal lieber zerreißen, als sie in mir zurückhalten oder begraben. Dazu bin ich ja hier, das ist mir ganz klar. (KAF, 10:179)

(The tremendous world I have in my head. But how to free myself and free it, without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me.) (KD, 222)

Yet such affirmations of his purpose or calling as a writer exist alongside a sense of the self as a non-identical, multiple and even dispersed being from whom singleness of purpose or viewpoint is hardly to be expected:


(He lives in dispersal, in diaspora. His elements, a horde that lives freely, fly around the world. And only because his room also belongs to the world does he sometimes see them in the distance. How is he to bear the responsibility for them? Can that still be called responsibility?)

Seen in relation to Phelan’s definition of narration as a purposive communicative act, the extra-textual evidence Kafka provided about his writing is too contradictory to support any simple view. For Kafka, writing stories involved, on the one hand, cutting himself off utterly from others, ideally in some deep dungeon where he was provided only with the means to write (KLF, 156), and in consequence feeling guilt that writing might merely be an act of vain self-reflection and self-indulgence. On the other hand, despite this view of his writing as non-communicative behavior, Kafka did actually publish a number of stories during his lifetime (and was punctilious in demanding that the printer should adhere precisely to his at times idiosyncratic punctuation, which had both a rhythmic and psychological purpose), dedicated stories occasionally to real people, read some stories aloud, and believed, at good moments, that
it was the purpose of his being “here” to get the “tremendous world in his head” down on paper and thus make it accessible to others. In a late letter to Max Brod in which he apologized for writing so few letters recently, explaining that he had done so out of “strategic” consideration for his friend’s feelings, Kafka even insisted that art alone, because it is free of such personal constraints, could enable truthful communication to take place: “Manchmal scheint mir überhaupt das Wesen der Kunst, das Dasein der Kunst allein aus solchen ‘strategischen Rücksichten’ erkläbar, die Ermöglichung eines wahren Wortes von Mensch zu Mensch” (Br, 172), (“Sometimes it even seems to me that such ‘strategic considerations’ alone explain the essence of art, the existence of art, the making possible of a true word from one human being to another”). 9 Circumstantial evidence suggests, then, that the author Kafka at least wanted to communicate through his writing, even if the narratives themselves are profoundly enigmatic and frequently raise severe doubts about the very possibility of communication. Whatever the external evidence of authorial intention or self-understanding, however, what matters to the textual critic is the actual practice of narration found in the stories themselves. Accordingly, the evidence considered in the essays in the present volume is for the most part intra- or inter-textual, assuming “a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response” (Phelan 2007, 4).

Of the various elements cited in James Phelan’s rhetorical definition of narrative, the question of authorial purpose receives particular attention in three contributions to this volume, those by James Phelan, Anniken Greve, and Benno Wagner. Phelan’s analysis of the rhetorical strategy in “The Judgment” aims to advance both our practical understanding of the dynamics of the story and our theoretical understanding of narrative progression, narrative judgment, and narrative speed. Phelan views progression as the “interaction of two kinds of change over time: that experienced by the characters and that experienced by the audience in its developing responses to the characters’ changes,” and he views those readerly responses as the result of three kinds of judgment: interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic (see James Phelan’s discussion in chapter 1). According to Phelan, the interaction of the two kinds of change arouses three kinds of readerly interest, which develop and interact across the span of the narrative: the mimetic (interest in characters as possible people and the events as occurring in a recognizable possible world); the thematic (interest in the characters and situations as representative of ideas, attitudes, ethical values, political positions, and so on); and the synthetic
(interest in the characters, situations, and arrangement of events as artificial constructs). Tracking these interests, Phelan suggests, is a good way to discover a narrative’s purposes. As Phelan notes, this model displaces thematic interpretation from its usual position at the center of critical commentary and directs critical attention instead to the ethical, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of reading. Phelan uses this model to explain why a story like “The Judgment,” which changes its speed and which has an unbridgeable “hermeneutic gap” at the very point where the action reaches its climax, is not only amenable to so many, often widely divergent, thematic interpretations, but actually has its narrative and ethical force enhanced rather than diminished by the deliberate, stubborn inscrutability of its final turning point. Just as important, Phelan uses “The Judgment” as the basis for some theoretical generalizations about the interaction of narrative speed and readerly judgments and for revisions of some of his previous generalizations about surprise endings.

In her analysis of “The Metamorphosis,” Anniken Greve argues, along similar lines, that Kafka’s narrative techniques create both the difficulty and the necessity of confronting the issue of authorial purpose. From the first paragraph of the story onward, the reader is faced with a perplexingly contradictory text that resists assimilation to any of the familiar codes we are tempted to apply in an effort to make some sense of its strangeness. On the one hand, some features of the story point toward the genre of a realist family drama in which one member finds himself in unexpected conflict with the rest of the family. Yet the fictive event that precipitates the conflict is incompatible with our entire experience of the kinds of things that can happen in the world where family dramas take place. The author articulates the reader’s resistant, habitual assumptions about the world through the reaction of the protagonist (“What has happened to me?”), only to cut off the obvious escape route out of the dilemma by the very same means (“It was no dream”). Equally, the pull of the extraordinary event toward the story’s generic assimilation (and hence naturalization) as fairy tale, legend or myth is frustrated by the absence of any supernatural power whose intervention might otherwise have caused the laws of the natural world to be suspended. The result is an effect defined by Greve as “ontological fuzziness” (see Anniken Greve’s discussion in chapter 2). The rhetorical design appears calculated to induce conflict and confusion in the mind of the reader; Greve concludes that it compels us to search for some implied philosophical and ethical purpose to account for the story’s pulling-apart and re-assembly of the world as we thought we knew it.
According to the analysis offered by Benno Wagner, the underlying purpose guiding Kafka’s choice of narrative technique in “Building the Great Wall of China,” a later, fragmentary story with an intra-diegetic narrator, was a political one. In opposition to Karl Heinz Bohrer’s insistence (2005) on the strict separation of literary art from culture (understood as the expression of social consensus), Wagner argues that Kafka’s story needs to be examined in its historical context, as a literary response to the mobilization of culture undertaken in support of the German and Austrian national cause during the First World War. Wagner describes Kafka’s narrative method as the construction of a kind of echo-chamber in which multiple allusions to the stereotypes used in war-time discourse reveal the enterprise of defending German culture from the encircling “barbarians” to be as fragmentary, as contradictory, and hence as inef-fectual as the conception and execution of the Great Wall of China (as re-invented within this fiction). Kafka’s aim, Wagner argues, was to free the reader from the manipulative rhetorical designs of the war’s cultural advocates by exposing the fragmentary and groundless nature of all “grand narratives” purporting to link the attainment of national unity to the destruction of other nations.

If the essays by Phelan, Greve, and Wagner all argue that Kafka achieves his authorial purpose by engaging in a form of deliberately difficult, even obstructive, communication designed to provoke disturbed reflection in the reader, the next three chapters, by Gerhard Neumann, Gerhard Kurz, and J. Hillis Miller, focus on communication as a problem in itself, a problem of which Kafka was acutely aware:

Ich suche immerfort etwas Nicht-Mitteilbares mitzuteilen, etwas Unerklärbares zu erklären, von etwas zu erzählen, was ich in den Knochen habe und was nur in diesen Knochen erlebt werden kann. (M, 249)

(All the time I am trying to convey something unconveyable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I have in my bones and which can only be experienced in these bones.) (KLM, 220)

In all three essays, the emphasis is on the deficiency of communication apparent in the internal acts of narration performed by various characters in Kafka’s first and last novels, The Man Who Disappeared (discussed by Neumann and Kurz) and Das Schloß (The Castle) (discussed by Miller).

In his analysis of “The Stoker” (originally intended to be the open-ing chapter of The Man Who Disappeared but published separately when
Kafka realized he would not complete the novel), Gerhard Neumann elaborates on the significance of a detail noticed only in passing by the protagonist Karl Roßmann, namely an unoccupied writing desk in an empty cabin in the bowels of the ship on which he has sailed to New York. Neumann reads this detail as a hint by the author that “The Stoker” is a story lacking the kind of narrator who might act as a single source of narrative coherence and authority and thus help the reader to grasp the hidden originating event of the action that lies beyond the reach of the characters’ verbal recall. Neumann’s suggestion that we are dealing with an auctor absconditus in Kafka’s work recalls Beißner’s early observation that “the action (Vorgang) narrates itself” (1983, 42), but with the difference that the narrator now appears far more detached from events than in Beißner’s conception of the narrator as the co-sufferer along with the protagonist (and the reader) of the unfolding action. Neumann sees Kafka rather as allowing the narrator to shed responsibility almost entirely for relating events by having him act simply as the unseen recorder of a whole series of stories being told and retold, either to themselves or to one another, by the figures of his narrative. Although the narrator may have vacated his seat at the writing desk in the cabin below deck, his hovering presence can still be detected in the ironies built into this sequence of retellings, as, for example, when Karl is obliged to listen to what he regards as a distorted account of his life just after he in turn has assumed that he can narrate the experiences of the ship’s stoker more effectively than the man himself.

The aspect of communication dealt with by Gerhard Kurz is not so much the problem of an un-tellable experience at the heart of personal narrative (though this does play a part) as the problem of a story’s arrival, or rather failure to arrive, at its intended destination. Kurz examines in some detail the scene in which a young serving girl, Therese, who is as much a refugee in the Hotel Occidental as Karl Roßmann, tells him about her own experiences of abandonment, wandering, and exclusion in America. Although Therese’s story about her mother’s death has greater poignancy than most narratives within the novel, it is embedded in a context of irony, which reveals the failure of even this story to capture the interest of Karl, in whom Therese believes she has found a sympathetic listener. Even similarity of fate, it appears, is no guarantee that the telling and hearing of life-stories will facilitate genuine communication.

That non-communication is the rule rather than the exception in human interaction, both in Kafka’s fictional universe and arguably elsewhere, is a view strongly supported by J. Hillis Miller’s analysis of the
irremediably isolated condition of K. and of all the other characters he encounters in his fruitless efforts to enter the Castle. The darkness enveloping the mysterious Castle on the hill at the moment when K. first pauses at the bridge before crossing over to the village has its human counterpart in the impenetrability of every individual in the novel. The many lengthy stories they tell to and about one another or about the Castle do little or nothing to lighten that darkness, for they all offer interpretations that are contradictory and unverifiable. If the disappearance of narratorial authority was signaled in “The Stoker” by the unoccupied writing desk, the “strange, disembodied power of narration” that “stages” events in The Castle appears to have only marginally less restricted access to what is going on inside K. (the only character to whom it has any such access) than the characters have to one another or to the facts of many situations. According to Miller, the incompleteness of the novel (the manuscript breaks off mid-sentence) is of a piece with its lack of overall narrative progression, “as it wanders this way and that, always starting over again from the beginning and never getting any closer to the Castle.” The overall effect is an illusion of movement centered on stasis. Thus, Miller’s reading of the novel suggests that, provided the notion of “purpose” is kept flexible enough to encompass the expression of a particular experience of the world, Phelan’s definition of the constitutive elements of narrative is helpful in understanding the features of even such strangely inconclusive tales as The Castle.

As the fragments of The Man Who Disappeared and The Castle confirm, narrative progression, in the basic sense of writing stories with a beginning, middle, and end, was a lifelong problem for Kafka. Many diary entries show that he was unusually dependent on inspiration or the occurrence of a narrative idea or Einfall, a term which in his case remained close to its root sense of a “falling into” his imagination of a figure, situation, or image capable of initiating a narrative, which means of course that “purpose” could, at best, only enter the process of writing once the writing had begun. As Malcolm Pasley, one of the main editors of Kafka’s complete works, demonstrated from the evidence of the manuscripts, Kafka normally did not compose his stories on the basis of a pre-existing plan. The physical organization of the manuscripts, such as the closely spaced lines, which militated against inter-linear corrections, confirms Max Brod’s report that Kafka’s chosen method of composition was to write as if going through a tunnel, following the figures wherever they led, without any prior knowledge of where this might end (1966, 114). As a result, many of Kafka’s stories were abandoned in a fragmentary state because he simply did not know where they were meant to go next.
On one occasion Kafka did try to ensure that he was not left with yet another fragment by writing the last chapter of his second novel, *The Trial*, immediately after he had ended the first chapter, but the novel remained a fragment nevertheless, because Kafka’s linear method of writing within each chapter did not produce the sense of narrative progression and *Zusammenhang* (“connectedness” or “coherence”) that would carry him in a compelling way from the beginning to the pre-conceived yet ambiguously open ending.

What went into a story by Kafka came into being, then, not beforehand but at the very moment he wrote it down, and what he wrote down he seldom corrected, so important was it to him that each word should generate the next in an unbroken stream of connectedness. He once characterized the immediacy of the relation between inspiration and writing thus:

*Die besondere Art meiner Inspiration in der ich Glücklichster und Unglücklichster jetzt um 2 Uhr nachts schlafen gehe . . . ist die, daß ich alles kann, nicht nur auf eine bestimmte Arbeit hin. Wenn ich wahllos einen Satz hinschreibe z. B. Er schaute aus dem Fenster so ist er schon vollkommen.* (KAF, 9:27)

(The special nature of my inspiration, in which I, the most fortunate and unfortunate of men now go to sleep at 2am . . . is such that I can do everything, and not only what is directed to a definite piece of work. When I arbitrarily write a single sentence, for instance, “He looked out of the window,” it already has perfection.) (KD, 38)

This gift was a double-edged sword, however, for the inspiration that could yield such “perfect” sentences was also the source of much misery, abandoning Kafka to long periods of utter barrenness because it was quite simply not in his power to summon up inspiration or even determine its duration by an act of will. Thus, stories that began promisingly enough would often come to a sudden halt. When this happened to Kafka during the writing of *The Man Who Disappeared*, he simply landed Karl Roßmann with the unsolved problem of progression by abandoning him in the dark at the unprotected edge of an unfinished building and breaking off the manuscript at that point; fortunately for Karl, it occurred to Kafka later how he might have him called away from the abyss and taken back along the unlit corridor that had led him to its edge (Schillemiet 2007, 145).

As the chapter by Beatrice Sandberg demonstrates, Kafka’s writing
impulse could be frustrated not only by stories suddenly stopping in their tracks, but also by the “special nature of his inspiration,” which created problems with beginnings. He once complained that things which “fell into” his imagination did so not from the “root” but “somewhere about the middle” (KD, 12); later, he wrote of having to struggle with beginnings and endings like a fisherman who gets hold of a long, heavy, and unwieldy “sea-snake” around the middle. Sandberg considers the range of strategies Kafka developed to deal with this particular quirk of his imagination, the most important of which was intertextual allusion to some well-known, often mythical, “well made” story with a familiar shape that gave him the freedom to create the sudden reversals, deviations, or inconsistencies that conveyed the resistance of the stories he pulled up from his unfathomable inner self to any attempt to accommodate them within traditional narrative patterns.

In his chapter on “In der Strafkolonie” (“In the Penal Colony”), Jakob Lothe argues that, whether formally completed or not, there is a sense in which every story Kafka wrote begins “somewhere in the middle,” for this is the existential situation in which all of Kafka’s characters find themselves, without full or possibly even any access to the point at which “their” story could be said to originate and without knowledge of what might evolve out of any situation in which they find themselves. Beginnings that pitch the characters in medias res favor a form of narration that consists in the unfolding and elaboration of a dilemma. Regardless of the (generally only implied, not narrated) preceding chain of events that placed them in the given situation, what each character is faced with is the question of justification (Rechtfertigung), a haunting question for Kafka himself, as a much quoted diary entry attests: “Kämest du, unsichtbares Gericht!” (KAF, 9:106) (“Were you to come, invisible judgment!”) (KD, 31). Here as elsewhere, Kafka’s narrative techniques ensured that neither his characters nor his readers could evade the dilemmas he placed them in by withdrawing to a position of observational neutrality, while at the same time denying them any firm ground on which to make the ethical choices the fictional events demand of them.

The issue of narrative progression provides the central focus for the last two contributions to this volume. Stanley Corngold examines the unfolding of the narrative and the mental movements of the first-person narrator in one of Kafka’s later stories, “Forschungen eines Hundes” (“Investigations of a Dog”), while Ronald Speirs considers narrative progression in connection with both physical and mental movement, a persistent and unusually prominent feature of Kafka’s narratives from
Betrachtung (Contemplation), his first published collection of prose, onward. The feature of “Investigations of a Dog” that particularly interests Corngold is the peculiar “looping” movement by which the story proceeds, a pattern that reflects competing tendencies in the mind of the dog-narrator as he feels compelled both to confront and to avoid facing an early, overwhelming experience of music, something he first encountered when he came across a group of dancing, hovering dogs. For Corngold, the obsessively circling movements of this story, going off in one direction only to be pulled back reluctantly in another, illustrate the characteristic self-referentiality of narration in Kafka as it seeks a lost, haunting point of origin.14

The subject of the chapter by Ronald Speirs is the role played by movement in three areas: the “something that happened”; the source of narration for Kafka; and the feature relating the sequence of words, sentences, and paragraphs to the succession of mental and physical events being described. The conflict noted by Corngold between forward-moving and retarding or deviating impulses is already to be found in Betrachtung, a collection of very short narratives in which it is possible for the protagonists neither to realize, at one extreme, the impulse for pure movement that is articulated in “Wish to Become a Red Indian” nor, at the other extreme, to withdraw completely from the hectic motion of the surrounding world into a condition of isolated stasis. Although Kafka’s stories are frequently marked by narrative irony, it is problematic, Speirs argues, to characterize Kafka as a writer who sets out to narrate with a “purpose,” since, by his own evidence, the dynamic force that found a shape in his stories lay largely beyond his control, much as the fictional figures often find themselves having to submit to an irresistible restlessness that will carry them to their destruction (as in the case of Georg Bendemann), forcing the reader to leap across unbridgeable “hermeneutic gaps.” If, on the one hand, Kafka can at times be seen as using movement and stasis to narrate the conflicts in his “dreamlike inner life” in an ironically reflective manner, it is equally possible to see the narrative dynamism at work in his writing (as he himself did repeatedly, despite his metaphysical reflections on the inherent stasis of the human condition), as an irresistible creative force that used him as the vehicle for its own expression.

What emerges from the essays in this volume is that Kafka’s narrative practice(s) cannot be captured by a single theoretical approach. As the implied author of his stories and novels adopts the lowest of profiles, whether hidden behind an intra-diegetic, first-person narrator or
employing a variant of free indirect discourse to describe events largely from the perspective of a protagonist, or simply “staging” the events dispassionately, discerning the meaning or purpose of the “something [that] happened” depends to an unusual, perhaps unique degree on the perceptions and preconceptions of the reader. The limited, often erroneous efforts of Kafka’s characters to grasp their own predicament offer little assurance to his readers, professional or otherwise, that they will fare any better. The “system of partial construction” employed by the builders of his Great Wall of China seems, so far, to be the best we can hope for.

Notes

1. See, for example, the influential essay by Beda Allemann, “Stehender Sturmlauf: Zeit und Geschichte im Werk Kafkas” (first published in 1962), which puts at the center of attention Kafka’s aphoristic observations on the relation between the time before time in the Garden of Eden and the mortal existence of human beings trapped forever at the threshold of expulsion, where they must live separated from the unchanging peace originally enjoyed by Adam and Eve, never to be released to live wholly within a temporal world. Allemann’s emphasis on the notion of “stehender Sturmlauf” (“charging on the spot”) has been taken up, elaborated on, and interpreted in contrasting ways by numerous critics interested in narrative progression in Kafka, notably Klaus Ramm (1979), Gerhard Neumann (1968), and Stanley Corngold (1986).

2. Beicken (1979, 36), for example, follows Beißner’s account of the situation of the modern narrator. Even in the most recent Kafka-Handbuch, edited by Jagow and Jahraus (2008), Beißner’s fundamental importance for the development of a “philological” reading of Kafka is still acknowledged (343), whether in the form of elaborations on his central concept of Einsinnigkeit (e.g., by Beißner’s pupil Martin Walser, with his emphasis on artistic autonomy rather than psychological expression [1961]) or in disagreement with him, as when Klaus Ramm argues that Kafka “neither narrates from the perspective of the protagonist nor presents his standpoint as the standpoint of the protagonist” (1979, 102).

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this introduction have been supplied by the editors.

4. For examples of such failures of communication within the narratives, see the chapters by Kurz, Miller, and Neumann in the present volume.

5. Thus the central argument in Walter Sokel’s major study, Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie (1964), is that Kafka’s entire narrative world is structured not by a singular perspective but by conflict between two aspects or dimensions of the self. See also his essay of 1984 on “Narzißmus, Magie und die Funktion des Erzählens,” where narration as a communicative act is expressly set against the “magic” of withdrawal into a solipsistic world of self-indulgent Belustigungen (“amusements”).

6. See, for example, Richard Sheppard’s study of The Castle (1973) in which the patterns of repetition, parallelism and inversion are likened to Brecht’s technique of
distancing. The narrator’s critical posture toward the protagonist is also central to the studies by Henel (1967), Kobs (1970), and Pascal (1982).

7. The shifting narrative perspectives analyzed in Gerhard Neumann’s chapter on “The Stoker” may be rooted in this “dispersed” sense of identity. See also the comments by Ronald Speirs on the very early story about a shopkeeper’s return from work. The metaphor of the “rhizome” in the study by Deleuze and Guattari (1986) elaborates this idea in the context of an “anti Oedipal” reading.

8. Kafka repeatedly referred in his letters to Felice to an incident in which Flaubert, observing a family out for a walk, commented “ils sont dans le vrai.” The conflicts in Kafka between the compulsion to write and his guilt about writing, and the imprint of these conflicts on his method of narration, are a central concern of Stanley Corngold’s *Lambent Traces* (2004).

9. By “strategic considerations” Kafka was referring to his having become increasingly reluctant to write letters because correspondence brought with it not only the danger of being less than entirely honest (out of tact) but also the risk of having one’s feelings distorted by the “ghosts” that play with words during their epistolary transmission.

10. For an analysis of the elusiveness or instability of meaning generated by Kafka’s narrative techniques, see Neumann’s influential essay of 1968, “Umkehrung und Ablenkung: Franz Kafkas ‘Gleitendes Paradox.’” Neumann’s close reading of short texts gives a more detailed account of paradox as a linguistic effect than that provided by Politzer (1961).

11. For a study that puts the metaphor of the “staging” of behavior and events at the center of the analysis of narration, see James Rolleston’s study *Kafka’s Narrative Theater* (1974).

12. See Malcolm Pasley, “Der Schreibakt und das Geschriebene: Zur Frage der Entstehung von Kafkas Texten” (1978). The essays by Pasley (1978) and Schillemeit (2007), which are based on their work on Kafka’s manuscripts as editors of the critical edition, have demonstrated convincingly the intimate connections between the processes of writing and the progress of narration in Kafka’s texts.

13. For an exploration of this topic from a variety of perspectives, see Sandberg and Lothe (2002).

14. Arguably, the most radical version of the view that Kafka’s narratives are concerned entirely with the act of narration itself, which struggles incessantly with the impossibility of knowing how to begin or how to proceed beyond the arbitrarily set beginning marked by the first words on the page, is that developed by Klaus Ramm both in his monograph, *Reduktion als Erzählprinzip bei Kafka* (2006) and in his contribution to the *Kafka-Handbuch* edited by Hartmut Binder (1979). Here “Reduktion” refers to the reduction of writing to concern with its own processes. The studies by Corngold (2004) and Koelb (1989) also concentrate on the self-reflexivity of Kafka’s “linguistic imagination.”

15. See, for example, David Constantine’s chapter “Kafka’s Writing and Our Reading” (2002, 9–24), the chapter “Reading Kafka” in Speirs and Sandberg (1997, 17–28), and Schmidt’s survey of approaches to the “Türhüterlegende” (2007).
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ANNIKEN GREVE is associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Tromsø, Norway. She obtained her doctorate in philosophy in 1998 for the dissertation “Her: Et bidrag til stedets filosofi” (“Here: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Place”). She obtained in 2009 her second doctorate with the dissertation “Litteraturens meddelelse: En litteraturvitenskapelig tolkningsmetodikk i teoretisk, praktisk og skeptisk lys” (“The Communicative Effect of Literature: A Theoretical, Practical and Skeptical Discussion of a Methodical Approach to the Interpretation of Literature”). She has published articles in Norwegian books and academic journals on issues ranging from Wittgenstein’s philosophy, philosophy of language and philosophical anthropology to modern Norwegian, Irish and English poetry, narrative theory, and especially methodological issues.

GERHARD KURZ is professor emeritus of German literature, the University of Giessen. His books include Traum Schrecken: Kafkas literarische Existenzanalyse
(Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980), Metapher, Allegorie, Symbol (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), and Macharten: Über Rhythmus, Reim, Stil und Vieldeutigkeit (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999). He is the author of numerous essays on Kafka, Hölderlin, and other German authors, as well as on literary theory and literary history.

JAKOB LOTHE is professor of English Literature at the University of Oslo. His books include Conrad’s Narrative Method (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989) and Narrative in Fiction and Film (Oxford Univ. Press, 2000). The author of numerous essays, he has edited or co-edited several volumes, including Franz Kafka: Zur ethischen und aesthetischen Rechtfertigung (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 2002; with Beatrice Sandberg), The Art of Brevity (Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2004), Literary Landscapes (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2008; with Jeremy Hawthorn and James Phelan), and the forthcoming After Testimony (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press; with Susan R. Suleiman and James Phelan). During the 2005–2006 academic year he was the leader of the research project Narrative Theory and Analysis at the Centre for Advanced Study, Oslo.


GERHARD NEUMANN is professor emeritus of Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität München. His main publications include Konfiguration: Studien zu Goethes “Torquato Tasso” (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1965) and “Ideenparadies”: Untersuchungen zur Aphoristik von Lichtenberg, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel und Goethe (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1976). The author of many essays on various aspects of German literature, he has written extensively on Kafka and was one of the principal editors of the major new edition of Kafka’s works based on the manuscripts.

JAMES PHELAN is Distinguished University Professor of English at The Ohio State University. He is a founding member of Project Narrative at OSU, the editor
of the journal *Narrative* and co-editor (with Peter J. Rabinowitz) of the Theory and Interpretation of Narrative series. He has also edited or co-edited several collections in the field, including *Joseph Conrad* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2008; with Jakob Lothe and Jeremy Hawthorn), *Teaching Narrative Theory* (New York: MLA, 2010; with David Herman and Brian McHale), and the forthcoming *After Testimony* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press; with Jakob Lothe and Susan R. Suleiman). Phelan has written extensively about the rhetorical theory of narrative, especially in *Worlds from Words* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981); *Reading People, Reading Plots* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989); *Narrative as Rhetoric* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1996); *Living to Tell about It* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005); and *Experiencing Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2007).

**BEATRICE SANDBERG** is professor in German literature at the German Department, University of Bergen, Norway. She has published widely on Swiss literature, Franz Kafka, the twentieth-century novel, and national and cultural identity. Co-author (with Ronald Speirs) of *Franz Kafka* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), she has edited or co-edited a number of volumes, including *Fascism and European Literature* (Bern: Lang, 1991), *Franz Kafka: Zur ethischen und aesthetischen Rechtfertigung* (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 2002; with Jakob Lothe), *Autobigraphisches Schreiben: Grenzen der Identität und der Fiktionalität* (Munich: Iudicium 2006), *Meldungen aus Norwegen 1940–45* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), and *Familienbilder als Zeitbilder: Erzählte Zeitgeschichte bei Schweizer Autoren vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2010).

**RONALD SPEIRS** is emeritus professor of German at the University of Birmingham, England. He is an editor of the journal *German Life and Letters* and the author of *Brecht’s Early Plays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), *Bertolt Brecht* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), *Thomas Mann: Mario und der Zauberer* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1990), and *Franz Kafka* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998; with Beatrice Sandberg), and of a number of essays on German literature. He has also translated and edited Max Weber’s *Political Writings* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994; with P. Lassmann) and Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy and other Writings* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999; with R. Geuss), and is the editor or co-editor of several volumes of essays, including *Fascism and European Literature* (Bern: Lang, 1991; with B. Sandberg and S. Larsen), *Brecht’s Poetry of Political Exile* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), *H. G. Adler und Hermann Broch: Zwei Schriftsteller im Exil. Briefwechsel* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004; with J. White), and *Germany’s Two Unifications: Anticipations, Experiences, Responses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005; with J. Breuilly).

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