

# Corngold, Stanley, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner, eds. *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*

by **Esther K. Bauer**

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Corngold, Stanley, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner, eds. *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*. Trans. Eric Patton with Ruth Hein. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 404 pp. \$45.00 hardcover.

*Franz Kafka: The Office Writings* compiles eighteen sets of texts written for the state-supervised Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague, where Kafka, who held a JD in Law, worked from 1908 to 1922 as a legal expert primarily concerned with risk classification and accident prevention. Kafka's professional writings have been available in German for many years, and the critical edition's volume *Amtliche Schriften* (2004,) edited by Klaus Hermsdorf and Benno Wagner, offers the most comprehensive collection of these texts to date. Thus an English translation of selected office writings was long overdue.

The institutional context of these writings renders the traditional notion of the author as the person creating and taking responsibility for texts inadequate. Whereas some texts were written by and circulated under Kafka's name, others were produced collaboratively or signed by superiors who had not contributed to their production. Occasionally, Kafka identified himself as the author in personal letters or diary entries; in other cases the editors relied on style and subject matter to establish Kafka's authorship. Presented mostly chronologically, the carefully selected texts cover a wide spectrum of genres and topics and provide an excellent overview of Kafka's professional duties and interests. They include a speech for the inauguration of the Institute's new director, essays to the Ministry of the Interior arguing for changes in insurance regulations, court appeals, treatises on preventing accidents from wood-planing machines and in quarries, newspaper articles and speeches on accident insurance and prevention, public appeals for the founding of a psychiatric hospital for traumatized veterans, and letters to the Institute's directors requesting pay raises and promotions (a difficult endeavor considering the anti-Jewish climate of public service at the time.)

Kafka's professional texts show the precise language, attention to detail, and subtle nuances familiar from his fictional and personal writings. Concurrently, they reveal his legal expertise, acute awareness of office dynamics, and involvement in political, legal, and social issues of his time, thus contributing to the debunking of his image as the prototypical isolated, desperate modern human being. The skillful translations by Eric Patton and Ruth Hein capture the many facets of these texts, including the wide range in tone from legal, to journalistic, and to literary. The editors' insightful commentaries highlight each text's historical, social, political, legal, technological, and institutional background and draw connections to Kafka's fictional work. Some of these connections appear looser than others, yet the similarities in rhetoric and argument among the fictional, personal, and office writings, and the recurrence of major themes, such as the need to be perceived as an individual, challenges of institutional hierarchies, and the omnipresence of bureaucracy and technology, are striking.

Three lengthy essays by the editors further contextualize Kafka's writings. Corngold's proposes that the notion of bureaucracy as a constant flow of self-sufficient written signs, without determinable source or destination, informed not only all of Kafka's writings, but shaped his understanding of his existence as Schriftstellersein. This compelling narrative pinpoints the crucial role of Kafka's office work for his literary production as both a source of "theme and substance" (16), and a paradigm of modern existence, as Corngold demonstrates for *Das Schloss*. Wagner's essay places the office writings in the historical and institutional context of workmen's accident insurance in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The invention of accident insurance represented a major step for modern industrialized societies, and Kafka and the Institute stood at the forefront of these developments. Many of the chaotic bureaucratic and legal circumstances surrounding early workmen's insurance translated into Kafka's fictional works and their "Weltanschauung" (356), and Greenberg's investigation of the use of the term "Kafkaesque" in current legal practice reveals that the term is used to describe contemporary dynamics most reminiscent of Kafka's fiction.

*Franz Kafka: The Office Writings* offers a fascinating perspective on both Kafka and the social and cultural developments of early 20th century Austria-Hungary, through the lens of workmen's accident insurance. An important addition to Kafka scholarship, this volume is of interest to literary scholars and those interested in history, culture studies, sociology, and the history of Law. The chronology of Kafka's life and the extensive index will be appreciated by scholars in all fields.

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