

Franz with benefits

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Franz Kafka, from Andy Warhol's Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century. Andy Warhol Foundation / Corbis

Kafka loved to complain, and his fiction is filled with human misery. *Rachel Sugar* reads a collection of writings from his day job in insurance law, which reveals a man surprisingly happy around the office.

Franz Kafka: The Office Writings

Ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg and Benno Wagner

Translations by Eric Patton with Ruth Hein.

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A truism: artists have day jobs. Less true is the corresponding mythology of miserable hours spent at bureaucratic tasks. There is a tortured romance to the image of the alcoholic file clerk who writes his brilliant novels on office scraps, his genius discovered only posthumously. He reassures us that our own mediocrity might not be what it seems – and it's not an entirely idle hope. The modernist poet Hart Crane split his time between copywriting and factory work,

and AE Housman was a clerk in a patent office. Richard Wright spent his early career reading in off-minutes as a postman.

But actual examples of great verse scrawled on manila folders come few and far between, and are overpowered, in part, by another class of writers – those whose professional lives stray disappointingly far from the Cinderella model. William Carlos Williams ate plums from the icebox as a successful medical doctor, and Wallace Stevens was first a successful lawyer, then an equally successful businessman. With the publication of *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*, the Czech writer popularly identified as much with his misery as with his fiction is outed as a similar professional success.

Kafka himself complained constantly that his day job at the Prague Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute oppressed his artistic calling; this volume's editors beg to differ. In the hands of Kafka scholars Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner and the legal scholar Jack Greenberg, the 18 briefs collected here comprise more than a record of the author's years in the insurance business. By reading between his legal writings and his fiction, the editors argue that Kafka's dual identities are inextricable: the writer is informed by the lawyer, the lawyer by the writer. Franz Kafka is the Franz Kafka we know not in spite of his day job, but rather because of it.

As a young and dissatisfied insurance lawyer, Kafka was drawn to The Austrian Workmen's Insurance Institute in 1907 by a recruitment poster promising free vocational training; a year later, he began working there. "The whole world of insurance itself interests me greatly," he confessed to a fiancée. Interest? Could it be that the same man who immortalised himself in a semi-autobiographical portrait (*The Metamorphosis*) as an insect was not in fact a thoroughly joyless victim of modern life? At least not completely: Writing in the *New York Review of Books* earlier this year, Zadie Smith pointed out that Kafka "indulged in a relentless dramaturgy of the self." He was a "compulsive letter-writer who once asked a correspondent, 'Don't you get pleasure out of exaggerating painful things as much as possible?'" In a letter to a friend, he proclaimed: "God doesn't want me to write, but I – I must." A quick rendezvous with his fiancée "couldn't have been worse. The next thing will be impalement." Keeping in mind both Kafka's self-professed playful attitude toward his own pain and his gift for self-dramatisation allows a fuller picture of both the man and his works to emerge.

Kafka first two years at the Institute were a kind of residency, during which he trained in "every aspect of the Institute's agenda." In the accident department, he was confronted with the bodily costs of modernisation. His job there was to quantify the losses of the crippled, wounded and killed, calculating the harm done in terms of percentage of earning capacity lost. Kafka found his ultimate home at the Institute, however, in the actuarial department. His assignment there in 1909 lay the groundwork for what would become his two fields of responsibility: risk classification and accident prevention. Neither discipline is inherently sinister; both have ostensibly noble aims. And yet Kafka found in them the inspiration for some of the darkest threads of his fiction.

Over the course of his tenure at the Institute, its basic approach to risk classification remained much the same: employer insurance premiums were consistently based on the nature of a firm's work, its record of previous accidents and the safety standards of the firm's machinery. "The entire process of production can be broken down into stages, phases and activities, and finally, separate manipulations and motions," wrote one of Kafka's close collaborators, before going on to argue that "just as it is theoretically possible to establish such subdivisions, it is equally possible, in theory, to establish the accident risk of each separate motion." This

conceptual advance should have improved the treatment – and compensation – of workers. But Kafka the writer saw a grimmer side of such schemes: subdivided into standardised parts, human bodies become hauntingly mechanised and bureaucratised. The idea of rigid and unforgiving subdivision permeates Kafka's stories, from the intricate, mechanised death machine of *In The Penal Colony* and the relentless legal bureaucracy that propels *The Trial* forward.

In one essay, Kafka uses a series of illustrations – the first to appear in the Institute's annual report – to advocate for the universal replacement of square shafts with cylindrical ones in traditional wood-planing machines. The square model allowed a large and dangerous gap between the shaft's blades and the table's surface – even the most careful worker trying to glide a piece of wood over the planing blade was in danger of losing a finger or two. The cylindrical shaft reduced the danger to mere laceration. As the editorial commentary notes, this imagery has an explicit resonance with Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. For Kafka, the wood-planing device is a tool of “bodily inscription of power in modern society”. The Penal Colony's machine goes just one step further, literally inscribing the text of the law onto the body of those who violate it.

We could go on picking low-hanging fruit like this indefinitely; each brief has clear echoes in Kafka's novels and stories. If we wanted to, we could make a long list of one-to-one correlations. The volume's editors, however, suggest a slightly more abstract – and much more fruitful – method of relating Kafka's office writings to his fiction. As their preface explicitly states, “the world of Kafka's writing, both literary and official, is a single institution in which the factor of bureaucracy is ever present.” Passage between the two lobes is not a unidirectional “matter of transposition, of Kafka's ‘writing up’ his office thoughts” as fiction. Neither are Kafka's fictions simply escapes from “the harsh facts of his empirical life.” Elements from the legal writings contort and resurface in his fiction; disassembled and decontextualised, they are less illustrations of real concepts than a dreamlike scramble of the author's overwhelming preoccupations. And in producing those fictions, Kafka the writer was honing an interpretation of modern bureaucracy that must have moulded the framework by which Kafka the lawyer understood his world.

Walter Benjamin described Kafka's works as “parables without morals, unfolding not as origami boats, to be smoothed back into flatness,” but rather unfurling in the way “a bud turns into a blossom.” This is in contrast to a typical parable, which can be stripped of its details to reveal an unambiguous lesson. Despite their superficial promise, Kafka's legal writings do not smooth his “parables” back to flatness. They may enhance the matrix of mysterious signs weaving through his fictions, but they cannot decode them. Rather, images (bodily inscriptions, empty law books) and themes (bureaucracy, mechanisation) bounce back and forth between the permeable walls of the two oeuvres, seemingly without origin.

Again and again, Kafka's stories seem overwrought with anxiety: what causes events to unfold as confusingly and senselessly as they do? Again and again, Kafka gives no answer. If his office writings provide any key, we might locate one in the nature of law itself. In an impassioned brief concerning “The Scope of Compulsory Insurance For The Building Trades,” Kafka riffs on the ways in which the Institute's policies are inherently arbitrary. Workers' compensation is meant to be awarded in proportion to the earning potential lost in a given accident; physical harm done is explicitly quantified in dollars. It shouldn't be possible – but it is – that “the same worker will be insured against accidents when he is employed in one employer's place of work, but when performing the same work for another employer, he is not.” Similarly, that “the same worker performing the same work who was insured against

accidents in the workshop until July 1, 1908, will no longer be insured after that date” reveals that it is “the date” and not “the work” that determines the risk of accident. And again: commenting on a case bought on by the revision of a risk classification, the editors point out that the reclassification was spurred by a change “not of wool or mechanics, but of paper.” To the worker, insurance policy begins to seem random; the law proceeds as an autonomous machine, a power transcending human logic; bureaucracy disjoins cause and effect.

So much of Kafka’s fiction is propelled by this distinctly modern disconnect. From the first sentence of *The Trial* – “Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning” – Josef K spends the entirety of the novel trying to maneuver his way out of a seemingly unmotivated arrest. We have no guarantee of his innocence. All we know for sure is that, for him, effect has been dramatically divorced from understandable cause. Later, K opens an office storeroom to find two guards being flogged, allegedly for a specific offence. Once again, though, the relationship between the crime and the punishment disintegrates when K returns the next day to see the same scene playing out exactly the same way. *The Metamorphosis* begins almost identically: K woke up guilty, and Gregor Samsa woke up a gigantic insect. Neither has any explanation. Admittedly, waking up as an insect is very different from waking up uninsured on July 2, 1908; and yet, examined side-by-side, Kafka’s workday writings and fictions both read as attempts to sort out the same sort of breakdown.

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