

Kafka Left No Title

*A Definitive Translation of Kafka's Zürau Aphorisms; or Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope
and the True Way; or The Blue Octavo Notebooks*

Preface

“Do not misunderstand me,” said the priest, “I am merely showing you the opinions there are on the matter. You shouldn’t pay too much attention to opinions. What is written is unchanging, and opinions are often just a despair at that.”

- Franz Kafka, *The Trial*.

Gérard Genette notes how a literary work ‘rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions’ (1991: 261). By ‘productions’ Genette means the features of a text which are secondary to the literary work itself: the author’s name, title, preface, footnotes, bibliographies and so on, alternatively referred to as ‘paratexts’. These paratexts ‘surround and prolong’ the literary text ‘precisely in order to *present* it’ (*Ibid.*, italics original). If I am to present, as I intend, a definitive translation of Franz Kafka’s aphorisms, I had better follow Genette’s advice and the tradition established by Kafka’s previous editors, and begin with a preface.

Damrosch argues that ‘a good editor’s introduction should clarify a work’s historical and literary context’ (2009: 46). Between the months of September 1917 and February 1918, shortly after his diagnosis with tuberculosis, Kafka left his native Prague for the Bohemian village of Zürau to stay with his sister Ottla. A change of scene is a change of style, and it was during this time that Kafka turned to the form of the aphorism. We read in Kafka’s diary entry for September 28, 1917, that his aim in these months was ‘to know the whole human and animal community, to recognize their basic predilections, desires, moral ideals, to reduce these to simple rules’ (Kafka, 1949: 187) and as such the aphorism, as ‘a short pithy sentence containing a

truth of general import' (*OED*: "aphorism, n.2"), lends itself to Kafka's project in these months.

However, Robertson warns that in Kafka's case, placing him in this context, 'brings limited returns [as] the appeal of his work rests on its universal, parable-like character, and also on its presentation of puzzles without solutions' (2009: ix). Not only are these texts, in their very nature, without solutions, but as Pasley emphasises, they were also left with 'no author's title' (1991: xvi). They have since been provided with various titles by subsequent generations of editors and some examples are to be seen in the subtitle to this work. Even though Kafka purportedly 'copied out these aphorisms on separate numbered sheets [and] it seems likely that he considered publication' (*Ibid.*), he also seems to be consciously flouting the need for paratextual apparatus by refusing to title this collection.

Calasso argues that the aphorisms 'should be read in exactly the form Kafka gave them,' yet 'no edition has taken this approach' (2005: x). Calasso's edition does not pertain to this ideology either, since I'm sure not even Kafka could have foreseen the introduction and afterword Calasso would include in the volume. Calasso manages to undermine his own argument by placing this assertion for the autonomy of Kafka's writing within his own preface to the aphorisms, yet this identifies the *need* for paratextual information to allow a modern reader to engage with these texts, and this is further complicated for those reading them in translation.

Derrida claims that ‘if you give someone who is competent an entire book, filled with *translator’s notes* … there is no reason, in principle, for him to fail to render … the ‘formal effects’ of what is called ‘the original’” (2001: 179, italics orig.) and in order to present to you the *true* Kafkan text, it may be necessary to include such notes in the margins from time-to-time. ‘To use translation means to accept the reality that texts come to us mediated by existing frameworks of reception and interpretation’ (Damrosch, 2003: 204) but if you wish to escape from these frameworks, then the original German texts have also been provided for you.

But be warned, the translator is the ultimate reader, and their power is not to be underestimated. Since ‘the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary and some artistic sense’ (Nabokov, 1980: 3) and ‘the chief material a translator works with is words, and...her main tool of the trade is a dictionary’ (Schmid, 1999: 1), the translator is the ultimate reader. Armed with an English-German dictionary, they alone have the ultimate authority to accurately interpret these texts.

In the most recently published study on Kafka in translation, Woods regrets how ‘remarkably little has been written, in English, about the translations and translators’ (2014:7), and Cormgold points out that ‘despite the immense amount written about Kafka’s work, a number of the stories (and parables and fragments) ... have gotten too short shrift’ (2002: 95). What follows here, then, is a remedy to these complaints: a translation of Kafka’s 1917-1918 aphorisms with selected editorial footnotes attending to nuances of style, form and translation which aim to provide a definitive

reading of the text, with no room for misunderstanding. Whilst the reader is free to ignore the paratexts provided for them, let me state that without these notes, the reader may find themselves in the position of Kafka's Josef K. when he attends to his Italian client in *The Trial*: 'greatly disturbed to realise that he only understood fragments of what was being said' (Kafka, 2009: 144).

The Editor

27th April 2015, Norwich, Norfolk

Du² kannst Dich zurückhalten von den Leiden der Welt, das ist Dir freigesellt und entspricht Deiner Natur, aber vielleicht ist gerade dieses Zurückhalten das einzige Leid, das Du vermeiden könntest.³

~

You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, that is something you are free⁴ to do and it accords with your nature, but⁵ perhaps this very holding back⁶ is the one suffering that you could avoid.

¹ In the concluding episode of HBO's *The Wire*, Walon (Steve Earle) hands Bubbles (Andre Royo) a piece of paper, upon which is written Kafka's 103rd aphorism. Bubbles considers the words of "Fonzie" Kafka and asks his companion, "What it mean to you?" to which Walon replies "I dunno Bubs. What's it mean to you?" When reading, studying or translating Kafka's aphorisms, this is the question we must always have in mind: what's it mean to *du*?

² A note on the texts: all aphorisms given in the original German are taken from *Die Zürauer Aphorismen* (Kafka, 2006a). All English renderings are from Malcolm Pasley's translation (Kafka, 1973) unless otherwise stated.

³ Ronald Gray argues that 'Kafka is about the easiest author to read [in German, for a novice], so far as grammar, syntax, vocabulary are concerned. Meaning, of course, is another matter. But even Kafka's meaning is ultimately only reachable through the language he used and no substitute is ever entirely satisfactory.' (1977: 216). Any translation of the aphorisms, then, would need to reproduce the text in both languages, if one is to have any hope in extracting meaning from them, but as Benjamin questions, 'is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?' (1999: 70) since it may never resonate with us at all.

⁴ See n.23 below.

⁵ 'But' presents an aphoristic turn: it is a sudden complication of the idea being expressed. Richard T. Gray, in the only book-length study of the aphorisms to date, suggests this 'undermining of its own persuasive structure and logic is constitutive of the aphorism as a genre' (1987: 3) and it would appear that the aphorism has something in common with these footnotes, since, as Grafton argues, 'footnotes buttress and undermine, at one and the same time' (1997: 32). 'An article is an aphorism exploded' (Davis, 1999: 252) and these footnotes are here to help reassemble the pieces.

⁶ You can hold yourself back from seeking the meaning of this aphorism, that is something you are free to do as 'each sentence says 'interpret me' and none will permit it' (Adorno, 1967: 246). But this is not possible for the translator, who as an ideal must interpret the very essence of the aphorism precisely in order to translate it. As Venuti argues, 'a translation does not communicate the source text itself by the translator's interpretation of it' (2013: 113), and this demonstrates an affinity between aphorism and translation since both aspire to expose a universal truth to their audience, but this is only accessible through modes of interpretation. Indeed, 'up until now, to interpret has meant to make explicit the meaning of something, where 'meaning' has meant something like 'intent to signify'... interpretation in this sense is a form of translation' (Connor, 2014: 183); the very function of the aphoristic form means that it strives to be translated, to be interpreted.

Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden.

The true way leads along a tightrope, which is not stretched aloft⁹ but just above the ground.¹⁰ It seems designed more to trip one up¹¹ than to be walked along.

⁷ Whilst Kafka numbered these texts himself (see p.ii above - please do pay attention), it is difficult to see their logic as a sequence. Smith notes that aphorisms 'are generally printed without any definite order or arrangement – they are collections of scraps and fragments of truth' (1928: 5), so this editor has reordered Kafka's arbitrary sequence and imposed, for the first time, a definite order upon them. Grafton takes a scathing view of this, claiming that 'every annotator rearranges materials to prove a point, interprets them in an individual way, and omits those that do not meet a necessarily personal standard of relevance' (1997: 16). I deny these allegations, I have no point to prove, I only aim to make the pathway to truth more accessible.

⁸ 'The break between individual aphorisms [is] a 'space' opened up in the surface of the greater aphoristic 'text'" (Gray, 1987: 58). To read the aphorisms as a sequence, then, requires a crossing of borders, much in the same way that a translation does. Both aphorisms and translations strive for self-sufficiency and autonomy, to exist undisturbed within their own textual space and to be understood as standalone pieces of literature. Yet an aphorism and a translatable text both also strive to be universal and break free of these confines. This paradox creates tension at the borders of the aphorisms and translations; these footnotes are designed to mediate it.

⁹ Aphorisms do not aspire to a heavenly understanding, but to a human one. They are designed to send their readers tumbling downwards, rather than providing a pathway to the divine above. Their fragmented nature points to human frailty, and our fear of falling short of our desire for ultimate truths.

¹⁰ The act of editing this volume has required some unorthodox methods. This editor has a washing line suspended above their bed, upon which is pegged a constantly shifting series of Kafka's aphorisms. The purpose of this project was to rearrange the aphoristic sequence to see the different ways in which order establishes meaning. As it turns out, this rope was designed neither to be walked along nor to trip one up, but rather to be walked into on a nightly basis.

¹¹ Rhine argues that 'a Kafkan text does seem more designed to foster stumbling than to allow any easy determination of meaning' (1989: 447), but instead of revelling in this stumbling (arguably the intended effect of aphoristic expression), Rhine chooses to gloss over the aphorisms in her book. She uses them as a point of departure for a discussion about Kafka in translation, without considering the way that they themselves have been translated. These aphorisms are almost always treated as secondary texts and they 'have only infrequently been treated as texts in and of themselves' (Gray, 1987: 1); people need to recognise that the secondary texts are often the most important. After all, what is a footnote if not a secondary text necessitated by the shortcomings of the primary text?

Der entscheidende Augenblick der menschlichen Entwicklung ist immerwährend.

Darum sind die revolutionären geistigen Bewegungen, welche alles frühere für
nichtig erklären, im Recht, denn es ist noch nichts geschehn.¹³

~

The decisive moment in the development of mankind is everlasting. That is why the
revolutionary spiritual movements that declare all former things to be of no account
are in the right, for nothing has yet occurred.¹⁴

¹² This sequence of aphorisms progresses in the same manner as these footnotes: tangentially stumbling towards meaning.

¹³ Kafka's language in these aphorisms is devoid of any local references or national roots, and thus seems to speak in a universally recognisable way (once you overcome the obvious language barrier). However, as Damrosch highlights, 'the reading of foreign works can pose serious problems...the work is probably in dialogue with a range of previous authors we haven't read; the very form of the work may be strange and hard to access' (2009: 46). It is only when we look to the form that Kafka uses that we recognise how deeply rooted in local references these texts are: they are elusive to the English reader in part because the aphorism is not an English form.

The aphorism is dated back to Hippocrates' statement that 'art is long, life is short' (Smith, 1928: 5) and for many centuries was associated with scientific discourse. In the Middle Ages it was developed in Western Europe and split into two diverging traditions: the French *maxime* (with a moral focus) and the German *aphorismen* (with a philosophical one). As such, many critics attribute Kafka's use of the aphoristic form to his German philosophical ancestors: Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Schlegel and Nietzsche (see Gray, 1987; Bloom, 1994; Calasso, 2006).

What is interesting, is that these philosophers not only wrote aphorisms but also treatises on translation. For example, Schopenhauer points to the 'necessary inadequacy of all translation [since] it is almost never possible to transpose a sentence pregnant with meaning in one language into another so as to make precisely and perfectly the same impression on a speaker of the second' (1851: 247), whilst Nietzsche wrote that 'translation is a form of conquest: should we not make new for ourselves what is old and find ourselves in it? Should we not have the right to breathe our own soul into this dead body? For it is dead afterall; how ugly is everything dead!' (1882: 262). Therefore, if Kafka is writing out of a German philosophical tradition, he is also writing out of one which is aware of both the need for translation and its risks. Perhaps the way the aphorisms lend themselves so well to translatability was a conscious effect on Kafka's part: he recognised its inevitability and thus strove to make the task of the translator easier by removing local references; on the other hand, maybe this is just part of the universality of the aphoristic form and something Kafka thus could not avoid.

¹⁴ For some critics, see Nietzsche's remarks in n.13 above, translation is a continuation of the life of the original text. Benjamin points out that 'a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translations marks the stage of their continued life' (1999: 72). This need for continued life stems out of the fact that aphorisms strive to be a timeless form, yet are written and read in particular moments in time, which impacts on our faculties of interpretation. They are reinvented in the mind of each new reader, and at each new time of reading or re-reading. Likewise, translations date in a way that the original does not and therefore, whilst it aims to be an extension of the life of the original, the original

An Fortschritt glauben heißt nicht glauben daß¹⁵ ein Fortschritt schon geschehen ist.

Das wäre kein Glauben¹⁶.

~

To believe in progress does not mean believing that any progress has yet been made. That would be not real act of belief.

will almost always outlive the translation. This suggests another commonality between aphorism and translation: both have flawed ambitions to escape the trappings of time. Only footnotes are capable of recognising this as they ‘are a step in the direction of discontinuity: of organising blocks of discourse simultaneously in space rather than consecutively in time’ (Kenner, 1964: 40). It would appear, therefore, that the three disparate blocks of text on the page before you are of a mutual desire to overthrow Father Time.

¹⁵ Durrani points to how ‘Kafka tends to avoid using ‘ß’ in favour of ‘ss’’ (2002: 207), yet editors of the German texts continue to use ‘ß’. This may be because ‘ß’ instantly appears German on the page, since it is not a character used in the English alphabet. Yet it is now an outdated symbol in German and was already becoming by the time Kafka came to write. Likewise, Davis notes than ‘aphorisms ceased to be a major mode of publication two centuries ago’ (1999: 257), so these texts show Kafka turning to an archaic form.

Kafka was not the only writer of his time to do so: his contemporary, Karl Kraus, ‘whose writings held Kafka’s interest throughout his life’ (Gray, 1987: 32), was also a fervent writer of aphorisms. I cannot help but think Kraus would approve of my edition, having written that aphorisms ‘need a commentary. Otherwise they are too easily understood’ (Kraus, 1976: 57) – I’m not making this too easy for you, I hope. Yet this does not explain the formal decision of these two writers. An earlier aphorism from Augustus Hare provides a clue: ‘the main employment of authors, in their collective capacity, is to translate the thoughts of others ages into the languages of their own’ (quoted in Gross, 1983: 282). It would seem that these writers are engaged in a process of translation themselves, not across borders, but across *time*; they are engaged in an act of progress.

¹⁶ In the German text ‘glauben’ is repeated three times, each time emphasising the nuances contained in the meaning of the verb ‘to believe’. In the first instance, it is used in the sense ‘to have conviction’ or ‘to lend credence’ to something already proven; in the second case the modifier ‘nicht’ negates the verb, causing it to mean ‘to suppose’ or ‘to think’; and finally, the capitalised ‘Glauben’ becomes a noun derived from the infinitive form of the verb, meaning ‘absolute faith’. In the English translation these differences are registered by the changing suffixes of ‘believe’, ‘believing’ and ‘belief’. Whilst the word root of these is the same in each case, the actual words are different, resulting in a less nuanced rendering of the destruction and reconstruction of the concepts of belief and faith than in the German text, where it occurs on a structural level. This shows that whilst translation can express the ideas of the original, it loses some of its formal effects. Therefore, whilst a translation is seen as a progression of the source text, it doesn’t mean that any progress has been made; rather, it is often a case of taking one step forwards and two steps backwards again.

Ein Glaube wie ein Fallbeil,¹⁷ so¹⁸ schwer,¹⁹ so leicht.

~

A belief is like a guillotine, just as heavy, just as light.²⁰

¹⁷ In 'miniature, compact texts such as aphorisms, variants in a single word...can radically alter the significance of the entire text' (Gray, 1987: 4) and a comparison of translations may prove fruitful at this point. 'Reading the various translations together along with the translators' prefaces and footnotes opens up how we read' (Woods, 2014: 264) and in this instance, the translation of 'Fallbeil' effects the overall interpretation of this aphorism. Pasley translates it as 'guillotine' but Hofmann's later translation reads: 'A faith like an ax. As heavy, as light.' (Kafka, 2006b: 87).

The effect is remarkably different in these two versions. A guillotine is a device for separation, an instrument of execution which separates the head, the faculty of belief, from the body. Derrida links separation to the aphoristic form: 'as its name indicates, aphorism separates, it marks dissociation (*apo*), it terminates, delimits, arrests (*horizo*). It brings to an end by separating, it separates in order to end' (1986: 117). An aphorism, paradoxically, separates us from belief, and *is* the belief itself.

In contrast, whilst an ax can be used as a weapon, it is mainly used to cut and shape wood. Hofmann translates 'Glaube' as 'faith' as opposed to Pasley's 'belief', adding religious connotations to the aphorism. Could Kafka then, according to Hofmann's interpretation, be claiming that religious faith both hurts us and shapes our existence? Furthermore, unlike the guillotine which has a machinated mechanism, an ax is a hand tool, and so it requires a greater level of human intervention as it needs a human to swing it. To have faith *like* an ax (note how Hofmann translates it as a simile in contrast to Pasley's metaphor), is to allow your faith to shape your future, whilst recognising that the person behind the faith is the believer himself, not some higher power.

The complexity in translating this aphorism allows it to be interpreted in many ways. Pasley and Hofmann offer just two interpretations, and I have offered interpretations upon them. Whilst an aphorism may seek to express a singular truth, Kafka's language undermines this and allows for a multiplicity of interpretation. Likewise, whilst translation appears to seek the *true* essence of the text, many translators remain sceptical of the idea of ventriloquizing a text's "true essence" as there is no singular way to do so. Both translation and aphorism strive for an unattainable singularity.

¹⁸ For Derrida, 'nothing is more serious than a translation' and 'every translator is in a position to speak *about* translation in a place which is more than any not second or secondary' (1985: 226, italics orig.), so in order to justify the remarks made in n.17 I will offer my own translation of this aphorism:

A faith that is a guillotine. So heavy, so light.

Notice that this is different again. Unlike Hofmann and Pasley, I have not felt it necessary to change 'so' from the original German, since it can mean the same in both languages. The German 'so' and English 'so' are not always mutually translatable, they can be 'false friends' – it is perhaps unwise to always trust either language, just as you would be foolish to trust either a guillotine or a belief. I have kept my translation as close to Kafka's words as possible, surely that makes me a trustworthy editor?

¹⁹ A guillotine blade is 'schwer' in the concrete sense of 'heavy', and because of its heaviness it glides easily ('leicht'). A belief is 'schwer' in the intangible sense of 'difficult', but once this difficulty is overcome, all else is 'leicht'. In this example of wordplay, Kafka applies the same adjectives to concrete and abstract nouns, reinforcing that guillotines and beliefs have something in common.

²⁰ This aphorism is incredibly compact compared to the previous ones in this volume, giving the illusion that its meaning is easy to grasp. This is actually the most elusive aphorism so far. My notes have taken steps to unlock its meaning, but they also reveal that the (s)lighter the aphorism, the more commentary that is required. Perhaps Kafka kept this aphorism short to leave space for my notes. Nabokov desired 'translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so to leave only a gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity' (1955: 143), and I shall not disappoint. This is the only way to make you, the foreign reader, aware of the untranslatable elements in the text and the processes it has endured to reach you. You may think these notes distance you from the text, but they only serve to draw you closer to it.

Ein Käfig ging einen Vogel²¹ suchen.²²

~

A cage²³ went in search of a bird.²⁵

²¹ At first this seems like a straightforward inversion. And then you think about it. You realise that a cage seeking a bird is no more improbable than a bird seeking a cage. Birds are a universal symbol for freedom, so there is no conceivable circumstance under which it would seek entrapment. To exist in a cage is to be isolated; Schlegel argued that ‘an aphorism ought to be isolated from the surrounding world like a little work of art and complete in itself like a hedgehog’ (1968: 35). The *form* of the aphorism is the cage which seeks to capture the freedom of thought, yet doesn’t thought need some form in order to exist at all? What would thought look like without a form, I wonder.

²² It is significant that the verb ‘suchen’ comes at the end of this anacoluthon sentence where it holds the most potential to disrupt what has come before it, providing the revelatory turn of the aphorism. This is not so formally sophisticated in the translation, since ‘search’ appears in the middle of the sentence and is denied the build-up it has in the German text and consequently ‘the selection and sound of the words, the architecture of the sentences and the harmony, the peculiarity of literary expression, everything vanishes’ (Brandes, 1899: 25). Thirlwell considers this dilemma when he writes that ‘the most perfect translation is at once precisely the same size as the original it mimics and an entirely different thing – as if you’ve mimicked the exact measurements of Michelangelo’s David, but also made it out of Jell-O’ (2013: 1). The translation may resemble the original, but is made from different composite parts, the bars of its cage are different.

²³ ‘Words have a way of freeing themselves ...gaining independence and lives of their own’ (Gray, 1987: 128) and translation aims to free a text from its national linguistic cage. Yet for Nietzsche, ‘the German is virtually incapable of *presto*²⁴ in his language: thus ... also of many of the most daring and delightful nuances of free, free-spirited thought’ (1886: 262). This raises the question of whether you can free something which is, in its very nature, not suited to freedom. If you were to release a pet bird into the wild, is this an act of setting free or one of sending it to its death? Is there a difference?

A translation is never free, although many editors wish to give the illusion of freedom. Venuti notes how ‘publishers, copyeditors, reviewers, have trained us, in effect, to prefer translation with an easy readability which enables them to appear untranslated’ (2013: 110). This editor takes a different approach by showing a translation for what it is, and offering no easy readability, particularly if this text is to be read aloud. Kenner stresses that ‘you cannot read a passage of prose aloud, interpolating the footnotes, and makes the subordination of the footnotes clear, and keep the whole thing sounding natural’ (1964: 39). Translation is not easy, aphorisms are not easy, so therefore it makes sense to present the translated aphorisms in a form which performs this impossibility for an easy, *free*, reading. If translation aims to set these texts free, my notes aim to pin it down again.

²⁴ The use of the Italian ‘*presto*’ emphasises that this concept is inaccessible since there is no German equivalent of the word. We are constantly engaged in an act of translation as we absorb words from other languages into our vernacular; the etymological history of ‘aphorism’ is an example. The English ‘aphorism’ is inherited from the French ‘*aphorisme*’, which was adapted from the Medieval Latin ‘*aforismus*’, which has its origins in the Greek ‘ἀφορισμός’, meaning a distinction or a definition (*OED*, “aphorism, n.”). All language is at some level engaged in an act of translation, it is inescapable; as Corn highlights, ‘all language is foreign, especially one’s own’ (1995: 116).

²⁵ In his introduction to these aphorisms, Calasso highlights how ‘there exists an invisible chain, of a generous length, that allows one to wander here and there without noticing it, as long as one doesn’t go too far in any single direction. If one does, the chain will suddenly make itself felt’ (2006:111). Kafka considered a similar thought: ‘human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds and its very self’ (1935a: 27). It is a common misconception that the reader is free to interpret a text however they choose, but the very chains that bind us are those of our own freedom of interpretation: our contingency ties us to a particular reading of a text.

Das Wort »sein²⁶«²⁷ bedeutet im Deutschen beides: Da-sein und Ihm-gehören.

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The word “sein”²⁸ means two things in German²⁹: Being³⁰ and Belonging-to-Him.³¹

²⁶ ‘Sein’ as a verb means ‘to be’; as a possessive adjective it means ‘his’. By drawing on this equivocality of the German language, Kafka highlights a tension between the modes of being and possessing: two abstract concepts are both contained in a single written word. The subtlety of this effect may be lost on the non-German reader, since ‘as usual in the case of wordplay, the translation has to forego one of the layers of association’ (Mathews, 1985: 41), and we simply do not have an equivalent English term which renders the same effects. As such, whilst it strives for universality, the nuances of the original language of the aphorism results in a meaning only accessible to those within the source culture (see discussion of ‘glauben’ in n.16 above).

²⁷ As with the retention of ‘ß’ (see n.15 above), the use of German quotation marks helps to tie the text to its language of origin. There is no logical reason this could not have been retained in the translation, particularly when the German ‘sein’ has been kept. Translators make peculiar formal choices.

²⁸ However skilled the translator, there are some things which are simply not translatable and as such English translators of this aphorism have unanimously retained the German ‘sein’, and Kafka himself explicitly draws attention to the untranslatability of this word as a material entity that possesses two meanings in the German language. Derrida points out that ‘the materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes’ (1978: 210). We can use an English-German dictionary, or its modern guise of Google Translate, but we will not find an adequate translation of ‘sein’ which carries the precise meaning of the original. But that is fine. Part of translation’s job is to recognise translation’s own shortcomings and impossibilities: that is what footnotes are for. If a word or a phrase or a paragraph or an entire text could be said just as well in another language, then it would have been written in that language in the first place. Materiality is lost because the translation is made from the fabric of a different language; a dress cut from the same pattern could be made from viscose or silk, both would be equally as beautiful, but they would be different. One would be natural whereas the other will be necessarily synthetic; it aspires to look like the natural material but it has undergone a different process so can never achieve this. It is beautiful and desirable nonetheless.

²⁹ The word ‘aphorismen’ means two things in German, as Gray points out: ‘within the German tradition the terms ‘aphorismus’ and ‘aphoristisch’ are equivocal, referring at once to a fragmentary, anti-systematic, non-expository mode of philosophical meditation ... and to a literary genre in which rules of structure, expression and form take precedence over philosophical content’ (1987: 17). Expression and meaning are always disparate within the aphorism, to translate both the words and the ideas contained within them into another language is impossible.

³⁰ These texts first came into being, as far as I am concerned, during a module on ‘Modernism’ inflicted on second-year undergraduate students. They were provided as additional reading to help students gain an understanding of Kafka’s style in *The Trial*, which retrospectively seems rather odd, since the aphorism was already an archaic form before the Modernists were even born. They have since resurfaced across my academic career. It is as if these texts seek to possess me, and not the other way around. Each time I read them, their meaning changes, and it is important to recognise the instability of these texts and their reader. They reinvent themselves upon every reading. As such, whilst what you read here is indeed a ‘definitive’ translation and annotation of the aphorisms, it is only definitive for one individual at this particular moment in time. When you read these texts, and my notes, they will already mean something different to me, and to you.

³¹ This body of work belongs to *me*. I’m sure there are some who will argue it belongs to Kafka, but as Kinbote so rightly said, ‘for better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word’ (Nabokov,

1962: 23) and like Kinbote, this work is sending me mad. ‘A footnote can be a way for the author to reveal more of his or her personality to step out of the bounds of the self created by formal academic discourse’ (Stevens and Williams, 2006: 211). I have a curtain of Kafka’s aphorisms suspended from the ceiling, imprisoning me, like a cage seeking a bird. When surrounded by such truth, one cannot help but discover an abounding profoundness in the world.³²

³² ‘Marijuana users believe their thoughts are profound because each thought seems to have more implications than they can work out...motivating the search for ever more inclusive answers:

Why am I saying this?³³

Why am I saying ‘Why am I saying this?’? etc....’ (Davis, 1999: 264)

³³ Why am I saying this in a footnote?³⁴

³⁴ Why am I saying ‘Why am I saying this in a footnote?’ in a footnote? I can hear Genette whispering reassuringly in my ear that it is because ‘there does not exist, and there never has existed, a text without a paratext’ (1991: 263).

80

Wahrheit ist unteilbar, kann sich also selbst nicht erkennen; wer sie erkennen will, muß Lüge sein.

~

Truth is indivisible, hence it cannot recognise itself; whoever wants to recognise it must be a lie.³⁵

³⁵ 'An aphorism, finally, has to be able to stand by itself.' (Gross, 1983: viii).

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* If footnotes 'often go unnoticed or unread' (Stevens and Williams, 2006: 210), bibliographies almost always do. To fully understand and appreciate a source text, the ideal reader will read all of the texts in its bibliography, then read all of the texts in the bibliographies of these works, and so on *ad infinitum*. Of course, the chances of this footnote to a bibliography being consumed by a reader are virtually nil.

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