Capturing the Platonic in Kafka’s Scribblings or
-- for my blood will seep into the ground here and it will never be lost

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My intent in this article is to focus attention on what I perceive as a basic divergence in methodology between what I shall call “the norm” in translation from what I consider to be necessary for “better” translations. Naturally I do realize that there are many in academia who will take umbrage at such distinctions—and I would never deny that there are some exceptions—but by concentrating on the most popular Kafka translations I hope to bring to light some basic principles regarding what I shall call “under-” and “over-translation” and the necessity that every translator, whether or not he or she likes to admit it, also bears a heavier burden of responsibility than is typically accepted. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher is the translator who most inspired me and I endorse his views whole-heartedly, e.g. what he states admirably in his paper: “On the Different Methods of Translation”:

The more, however, the author’s own particular way of seeing and drawing connections has determined the character of the work, and the more it is organized according to principles that he himself has either freely chosen or that are designed to call forth a particular impression, the more his work will partake of the higher realm of art, and so too the translator must bring different powers and skills to his work and be familiar with his author and the author’s tongue in a different sense than the interpreter. Every negotiation that uses an interpreter involves, as a rule, setting down a particular state of affairs within a specific framework; the interpreter is working only for the benefit of participants sufficiently familiar with these affairs, and the phrases that express them in both languages are determined in advance either by law or by usage and mutually agreed-upon conventions. Quite a different matter are the sorts of negotiations that, although often similar in form to the conventional ones, are intended to establish new frameworks. The less the latter can themselves be considered specific instances of a recognized general principle, the more scientific knowledge of technical details and terminology needed for the translator to carry out his task. Upon this twofold ladder, then, the translator ascends higher and higher above the interpreter until he reaches the realm most properly his, namely, those works of art and science in which the author’s free individual combinatory faculties, on the one hand, and the spirit of the language along with the entire system of views and sentiments in all their shadings represented in it, on the other, count for everything; the object no longer dominates in any way, but rather is governed by thought and feeling; indeed, it often comes into existence only through being uttered and exists only in this utterance. [SCH, 44]

Let’s begin by examining the opening sentence to Kafka’s In the Penal Colony:

“Es ist ein eigentümlicher Apparat,” sagte der Offizier zu dem Forschungsreisenden und überblickte mit einem gewissermaßen bewundernden Blick den ihm doch wohlbekannten Apparat. [K, 100]

This opening sentence will be helpful in illuminating how my translation sets itself apart from what I am calling ‘the accepted norms.’ I would hazard to guess that well over 90% of people who read Kafka’s In the Penal Colony in English would be confronted with one of these three translations—listed in their historical sequence: first the original ‘standard’ by the Muirs, then Pasley’s and Neugroschel’s, and mine will be the fourth:

“It’S A REMARKABLE piece of apparatus,” said the officer to the explorer and surveyed with a certain air of admiration the apparatus which was after all quite familiar to him. [MU, 140]

‘IT’S A PECULIAR KIND of apparatus,’ said the officer to the voyager, and he surveyed the apparatus, which was after all quite familiar to him, with a certain admiration. [PA, 111]
“It’s a singular apparatus,” the officer said to the explorer, running his somewhat admiring eyes over the apparatus, with which he was after all familiar. [N, 191]

“IT’S REALLY quite a contraption…” the officer said to his guest, a traveler out doing a bit of research in the field—“it’s something else altogether...”—and he stepped back and cast his eyes upon THE APPARATUS, a machine with which, indeed, he was intimately acquainted though he still experienced a certain amount of awe when he gazed upon it. [LU, 81]

As is immediately apparent, the first 3 translations do look much more like the German original, Kafka’s having 23 words, the Muir’s and Pasley’s 29, and Neugrochel’s 25. How can it be possible that I require 60 words to express Kafka’s 23? As one studies this sentence, however, it should become clear that it is not really a question merely of quantity of words but, rather, that it is the three normal translations that fail somewhat, either by not capturing essential content, or by actually changing what it is that Kafka’s German says. The first and, undoubtedly, the major conundrum is that elusive German word eigentümlich. We see three different attempts to capture it in one word: “remarkable,” “peculiar” and “singular.” Although all three do have some validity, none does the German word complete justice. It seems that somersaults are necessary in order to capture this word fully, which I do first by using the words “REALLY quite,” and then by adding on the specifier: “something else altogether...” At the same time I have brought in a new word, contraption, which allows me to perform these somersaults and, to do justice to the German Apparat, I have cheated a bit by placing THE APPARATUS in bold although it’s no longer at the very beginning of the story.

With all of these expedients, am I the one who has gone too far?—have I allowed my imagination to run wild and delivered Lundberg rather than Kafka? Allow me to point out, however, that the apparatus, the machine, the contraption—this is the centerpiece of the whole story, everything takes place in reference to it and, so, it may be worthwhile to ponder how “it” is to be introduced: that its remarkableness, its peculiarity and its singularity may all be rendered to those who don’t understand German, and in particular this word eigentümlich. It should be noted that my Kafka translation is the only one that I’m aware of that draws the reader’s attention specifically to the German words: eigen, eigentlich, eigentümlich and Eigensinn—as they pop up in critical places in almost every story.¹ The translator’s job is no easy one, to do Kafka’s content justice it appears to me to be necessary to radically alter the concise form of the original, stretching it out to capture all of the nuance that actually is present in the German, and leaving a few endnotes as pointers so that the reader, too, may ponder the inter-connectedness of Kafka’s writings. All of the added words—“contraption,” “guest,” “doing a bit [of research] in the field,” “stepping back,” “cast his eyes,” “machine”—are justified either from the context of the story or from drawing out the German, e.g. “überblickte.” English tends to be a wordy language, translation should not simply be trying one’s best to make the surface appearance match, rather striving to dig into the story and then to re-create it in an English that is quite readable,² and one that, most importantly, catches the right tone and nuance even if it seems far from the original German, thus: reading not only the lines but in-between the lines.³

The next major problem for the translator is the compound noun, one word that’s actually two: “Forschungsreisenden.” All three of the normative translations again translate ‘one word’ for ‘one word’ using either “explorer” or “voyager.” But the precise meaning of Kafka’s German is sacrificed once again. The guest, as it later becomes quite clear, is not really an explorer or voyager—as if he were out to discover the north pole or a new sea route to India—he is nothing more or less than a traveler who is doing research on the idea of justice as it manifests itself in various parts of the world. Social scientist, perhaps, would be the truer way to characterize him, if one wished an appellation that is met. Keeping it vague and actually literal is, however, not all that difficult to do once one gives up the idea of copying Kafka’s very concise German in a ‘word for word’ manner. Moreover, the part that typically gets dropped, ‘researching,’ is actually the more important part: that the person travels around to different parts of the world is only of secondary importance, his travels are due to his research, not vice versa. And finally, by skipping over the “research” part the tie to Forschungen eines Hundes is made less apparent, as is the tie to Plato whose ‘research’ into ‘the most important matters,’ e.g. justice, parallels Kafka in quite a remarkable manner.
Finally, three times a charm: the German “bewundernden Blick” is not merely a look of admiration, it is nothing less than awe, after all the “wonder” lies right there in the German. To substitute admiration for awe is to miss the religious dimension of the officer’s fanaticism. It may be conjectured that the Muirs may have unconsciously influenced later translators to explain how Pasley and Neugroschel both managed to follow this same path—and I wouldn’t so much call it an error, rather to go along with what follows let’s call it an “under-translation,” a flattening out of the German.

Depending upon how one is to count, we have merely looked at 23 or 60 words, in any event only one sentence. A book is composed of tens of thousands of words, Essential Kafka now has 145,385 words and comprises nine stories and three excerpts from the novels, including the critical penultimate chapters of The Trial and The Castle. Obviously, nothing can really be proven here—the proof, if there is to be any, can only be in the pudding. As Neugroschel writes at the end of his own introduction: “While it would be exciting to dig into all the strata involved in translating Kafka, I’d rather let the translation speak for itself.” One has to whole-heartedly agree with this sentiment though it never hurts if the translator highlights just a few examples that may help the reader appreciate his or her unique stand on the trade-offs that are always being made when translating. With over 100,000 words to choose from, any translator should easily be able to come up with dozens of instances where his or her translation has managed to capture something that others have over-looked. What is most important, however, is to call attention to a pattern, and that we might dwell on the implications of what under-translation and over-translation mean and how this relates to “consciousness” as well as, in particular, our comprehension of Franz Kafka and, even more importantly, of ourselves. Now as already mentioned my book, Essential Kafka, contains a postscript “On the Translator’s Art” in which I explore key issues regarding translation. Of these two stand out as particularly relevant and worth a little discussion here.

The first is imagination, a translator who is to be capable of rendering someone of Kafka’s stature appropriately in a different time and culture, such a translator cannot dispense without a living re-enactment of the author’s purpose. In my recent speech at the MLA convention in Philadelphia I spoke of translating what’s written in-between the lines, appropriating Kafka’s stories from one culture into another, from one consciousness into another. In this act of appropriation there needs must be destruction as well as creation. Some “things” invariably will get blurred, but others may possibly become sharper. Not admitting as much I hold to be an illusion, one which, indeed, is very common and is quite in keeping with the narrow, science-like way of viewing everything: this holds us back, this flattens out the world and is something that Kafka too, in his special way, resisted. And Kafka also broke a great many rules, he questioned authority and wrote as much for his own sake as for anyone else’s. It is necessary that one lets go of the German and allows English to find its own way, not simply mirroring the German structure but rebirthing. By stretching 23 words out into 60 I have managed to retain content that other translations blur. How essential this content is certainly depends upon one’s perspective. For those who don’t know German the difference, in my opinion, can approach the difference between day and night: understanding and mystification.

The second issue worth recalling from my postscript has to do with what a book is in itself. I remark that just as with Plato, so too with Kafka: I find that most translations of Kafka’s short stories either try to do too much, or too little. I don’t believe that Kafka would ever have approved of all of his stories and aphorisms being thrown together into one volume, nor would he be particularly thrilled to have just one story being published along with a large number of scholarly papers thrown in for ballast. It may be very idealistic of me to believe that the stories that I have chosen will enable the “novice” to discover what is essential about Kafka. All the same, that is the intent. Of course, serious students of Kafka will still need to learn German and I would hope that all graduate courses would only study Kafka in the original as the incredible blend of naturalness and surrealism strikes one most forcefully in German, a much stricter language than English.

Every translation is an interpretation, some better but most, due to the nature of the undertaking and mankind’s propensity toward being myopic when consciousness is at issue, not so good. Thus, we’ll be needing a great many language teachers to preserve our literary heritage and, moreover, there should always be a big question as regards how much of “it” actually has been well preserved, as Josephine laments: we’re rather awful historians, nor do we really understand her art despite no lack in professional
assurances to the contrary! It seems to me, for whatever it’s worth, that our knowledge tends to be severely biased toward that to which we easily relate and, so, the further back one goes in time or the further removed a given culture is, the less likely our comprehension of “it,” and the more likely our tilting matters to fit our own ‘world.’

In Mark Harman’s recent translation of The Castle, he notes in his preface:

Moreover, the Muirs’ translation furthers the rather simplistic theological interpretation proposed by Brod, who saw the Castle as the seat of divine grace. Edwin Muir even outdid Brod by stating bluntly that ‘the theme of the novel is salvation’; he also suggested that it was a kind of updated version of Bunyan’s seventeenth-century prose allegory, The Pilgrim’s Progress. That allegorical reading, which dominated the critical debate about the novel for several decades, is now widely discredited. [HA, XIV]

It seems to me that the only thing that is simplistic here is the dismissing of the idea itself due solely to its “now” being “widely discredited,” as if an idea that was worth debate for decades could simply fall out of favor “now” and this, then, is reason enough for a translator to dismiss it out of hand and, to continue from the same preface: to take pains to make Bürgel’s droning sentences “as murky in English as they are in German.” [HA, XV] To jump ahead, one of my main concerns in this article will be to make Bürgel’s droning sentences to be as clear as they might possibly be—and to draw attention to Kafka’s habit of having his ‘positive’ outcomes occur before the end of the story, e.g. this scene with Bürgel, or K.’s meeting with the priest in Der Prozess. It should not surprise anyone that just these passages tend to appear as being the most obscure, that is unless one is able to crack the nut and, thus, open them up to the mystery that lies within.

One only needs to read the first paragraph of The Castle which concludes: “. . . gazing upward into the seeming emptiness” […] und blickte in die scheinbare Leere empor] to get the proper feeling that, yes, Kafka was describing man’s loss of ‘spiritual substance,’ the only question is how one is to move beyond the ‘emptiness of the ego’ which is the theme that, in multifarious ways, surfaces again and again in Kafka’s writings. There are, however, two variants on each side of the equation that one needs to consider. On the one side we have the fictional character ‘K.’ and Franz Kafka himself; on the other side we have, if I might distinguish the two in a similar manner, religion and spirituality. The debate has probably failed to distinguish these facets and by conflating them inappropriately has managed to come out in favor of itself, namely that K. isn’t seeking “divine grace” but is simply being himself, a battling composite of ambitions that is striving in various directions—perhaps seeking an orientation to the absolute, but more likely just looking for a good job, or perhaps a new home or even a [new?] wife—but, as it were, all of these “somethings” prove to be beyond his grasp despite K.’s considerable efforts to attain them. Just as with Plato who often ends his dialogues on a negative note—having become more confused than ever about what courage, or whatever the topic of the dialogue is about, is—so too with Kafka: failure is a much better teacher than success. Thus, K.’s failure to make his way up into the ‘higher realm’ of the castle is instructive for us, that we won’t be so likely to repeat his mistakes.

Now, to be sure, a careful reading of The Castle tends to make it difficult to come down hard and fast on anything whatsoever. For instance, K. is said to be a surveyor but it’s equally valid that he’s just as much [if not more] a tramp and a vagabond as he is a land surveyor. He claims to have assistants who are following him but the assistants who duly arrive aren’t his assistants, they don’t have the promised equipment and they’re even coming from the wrong direction, having been sent from the castle. K. can’t even distinguish them one from the other and makes do with this strange problem by calling them both Artur. Not only has “the divine seat of grace” been enveloped in fog, our day-to-day relations appear to be suffering from a similar malaise: everyone’s become an enigma, layer upon layer of appearance gets stripped away revealing only more enigmas that are hiding beneath. Are Frieda and K. in love or are they merely using one another for their own ulterior motives?—and do they even themselves know what it is that determines their actions or what love itself would be? Such is the beauty of The Castle, and in such also lies its great difficulty. The closest that K. gets to penetrating into the enigmas of the castle happens near the end of the story with his meeting with Bürgel, here he only need state what it is that he wants and Bürgel promises to fulfill his every wish—what more could be desired?—and what a pity that he couldn’t
stay awake and comprehend what was being offered, he probably shouldn’t have quaffed his thirst with that
carafe of rum that was left behind by Frieda.

In that this meeting with Bürgel is the high point in K.’s quest—very much analogous to Josef
K.’s meeting with the priest in Der Prozess—it may be worthwhile to examine the different translations of
how it begins: the moment when K. first stumbles into Bürgel’s room. Unfortunately, due to copyright
issues, such an examination must limit itself to only three of the four relevant versions. First the German,
then the translation by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, and finally my own:

“Wer ist es?” Nun konnte K. nicht ohne weiters mehr fort, unzufrieden betrachtete er das
üppige, aber leider nicht leere Bett, erinnerte sich dann an die Frage und nannte seinen
Namen. Das schien eine gute Wirkung zu machen, der Mann im Bett zog ein wenig die
Decke vom Gesicht, aber ängstlich, bereit sich gleich wieder zu bedecken, wenn draußen
etwas nicht stimmen sollte. Dann aber schlug er die Decke ohne Bedenken zurück und setzte
sich aufrecht. Erlanger war es gewiß nicht. Es war ein kleiner, wohl aussehender Herr,
dessen Gesicht dadurch einen gewissen Widerspruch in sich trug, daß die Wagen kindlich
rund, die Augen kindlich fröhlich waren, aber die hohe Stirn, der schmale
Mund, dessen Lippen kaum zusammenhalten wollten, das sich fast verflüchtigende Kinn gar
nicht kindlich waren, sondern überlegendes Denken verrieten. Es war wohl die
Zufriedenheit damit, die Zufriedenheit mit sich selbst, die ihm einen starken Rest gesunder
Sie,” sagte der Herr lachend. [K, 243]

“Who is it?” Now K. could not withdraw again so easily; discontentedly he surveyed the
voluptuous but unfortunately not empty bed, then remembered the question and gave his
name. This seemed to have a good effect, the man in the bed pulled the quilt a little off his
face, anxiously ready, however, to cover himself up again completely if something was not
quite all right out there. But then he flung back the quilt without qualms and sat up. It was
certainly not Erlanger. It was a small, good-looking gentleman whose face had a certain
contradictoriness in it that the cheeks were chubby as a child’s and the eyes merry as a
child’s, but that the high forehead, the pointed nose, the narrow mouth, the lips of which
would scarcely remain closed, the almost vanishing chin, were not like a child’s at all, but
revealed superior intellect. It was doubtless his satisfaction with this, his satisfaction with
himself, that had preserved in him a marked residue of something healthily childlike. “Do
you know Friedrich?” he asked. K. said he did not. “But he knows you,” the gentleman
said, smiling. [WK/ MU, 333]

“Who is it?” Now K. wasn’t able simply to leave and so he stood there unhappily taking
measure of this king-sized bed that, unfortunately, was already occupied; then he
remembered that he had been questioned about his name and, so, he replied: naming his
name. This seemed to have an immediate, positive effect: the man peeked out a little from
beneath the covers, but cautiously as if he’d be ready to pull himself back out of sight if
anything didn’t look quite right. But then he tore back the covers without any more
hesitation and sat there upright. It wasn’t Erlanger, that much was certain. It was a smallish
man who had a good-looking countenance, but at the same time his face had a certain
contradiction: the cheeks were well-rounded like a small child’s and the eyes sparkled with
joy, but he also had a high forehead, a pointy nose and small, tight lips that were pressed this
way and that, and beneath it all a chin that tapered off into nothingness, all of which
contrasted to his childlike appearance, indeed all of this indicated a highly developed
intellect. It must have been his satisfaction with the latter, his total contentedness with his
own being which had preserved the dominance of his childlike nature and gave him, on the
whole, a healthy appearance. “Do you know who Friedrich is?”—he questioned K. K.
replied that he didn’t. “But he knows who you are”—countered the official with a smile.
[LU, 174]
As with the opening quotes from the first sentence of In the Penal Colony, so here too one notes that my version is longer, rather than 14 lines it takes 18 lines. Had Mark Harman’s version been included, it too would have mirrored the brevity of Kafka’s, and I don’t see any particularly noteworthy differences between it and the translation published in 1969. There are, however, once again three significant differences between my translation and the one quoted. The first is the repetition of “name” [naming his name] which one sees both in Kafka’s German and in my translation. This is the only place within the whole novel in which K. uttered his own name. It is, thus, a pivotal spot. Bürgel hears K.’s actual name—we don’t—and he recognizes it and comes out from underneath the covers. His first question to K. is: “Do you know who Friedrich is?” K. doesn’t. There is a lot going on here. Both Bürgel and Friedrich know who K. is, they know him and, of course, they also know his name, his real name, something that Kafka keeps hidden from us. But, on the other hand, K. doesn’t seem to know anything about them, of course he’s awfully tired. Names are extremely relevant, and having a name—or only an initial—is itself a matter worthy of much thought. If we are all “K.” does that not imply that we hardly know ourselves? Perhaps we’re all too worn out from another day at the office, another deadline to be met, another Idiot to be dealt with. Then the name Friedrich is quite remarkable. Who is “he” and is there some relation of “K. to Frieda” and “K. to Friedrich”—two relationships that never amount to much. I only wish to point out all of these questions. Thus, at least for me, “naming his name” is ever so much better than merely “giving his name.”

The second difference that strikes one as rather significant is my having translated “fröhlich” as “joy.” Obviously, this is a bit of an over-translation. Not very far from this point, when Bürgel explains his function as being the “Verbindungssekretär,” I translate: “he immediately starts to rub his hands together vigorously and with an uncontrollable joy” [unwillkürlicher Fröhlichkeit]—this latter is translated by the Kaisers as “involuntary merriment” which goes well with their translation above: “the eyes merry as a child’s”—but, all the same, I like mine better. It seems to me that sometimes over-translating a little bit is, if not necessary, at least helpful. Which brings us to the third difference: my italicizing of “he” in “But he knows who you are,” as well as the substitution of the word “countered” rather than simply “said”—both of which, naturally, are over-translations, a bit more than the neutral German. Now, we all know that translators aren’t supposed to be interpreters . . . —Right? Well? I ask you: mightn’t it be OK if the translator brings out that which actually is right there in-between the lines?—that he or she attempts to make up for the very large amount that invariably gets lost by supplying just a little more on the “plus” side? Have you ever looked into the eyes of a very small child, does it not seem that they are looking out at our world from a different world altogether?

Bürgel is the only secretary who really opens up to K. and, indeed, as one reads and re-reads his speech it becomes ever the more amazing how much he actually says! Normally it is the secretaries, the “Gentlemen of the Castle” who appear to be sleeping whilst K. is overly self-conscious, analyzing whatever is happening mercilessly. But now the roles have become reversed! As K. becomes sleepier and sleepier Bürgel is getting more and more animated, his speech is an amazing reversal, as he himself declares of the strange things that can happen in the wee hours—zur Unzeit—there’s no fog here, the split between “this world” and “yonder world” is bridged: K. can have anything he wants, he need only ask. Does this sound biblical? Is this, perhaps, the proper place to translate Fröhlichkeit with joy?

“Where now, then,” said Bürgel—two of his fingers were playing with his upper lip, his eyes were now fully open, his neck stretched out, just as if he’d be approaching an amazing vista after having wandered a great distance in the mountains—“Where now, then, is that previously mentioned, seldom or practically never occurring possibility—? The heart of the mystery lies buried in the regulations regarding responsibility. [LU, 185]

What I translate as “responsibility” is generally translated as “jurisdiction.” However I do endnote my translation [Endnote# 48, p. 192: Zuständigkeit – A word that includes competency along with responsibility; a Zustand is simply a situation, Zuständigkeit is being “up to” the situation. Most translations use the word “jurisdiction,” narrowing the word to this aspect, the judicial one.] I should note, before bringing this little piece to an end, that besides the “content/form” or “quantity/quality” variance that I hope this article illuminates sufficiently, my translation is the only one that I’m aware of that makes efforts to inform the reader of the German {deutsch} when I perceive some need to do so. Thus, the name
“Bürgel” has a distinct resemblance to the German verb “bürgen” and this is duly endnoted along with the meaning of the verb where it appears:

What sort of an outlandish, hair-brained screwball would such a person have to be to fall through an organization that’s as well devised and as carefully and painstakingly constructed as is the one that I’ve sketched out. You don’t believe that it could happen? Well, you’re quite right: it couldn’t. But then one night… who can really guarantee what all isn’t possible!—it actually does happen. [LU, 187]

That (to my knowledge) no other translation even bothers to make such pertinent notes, this—at least this is my erstwhile opinion—this doesn’t particularly say much for their concern that Kafka’s meaning might ever shine through the English as well as it might. Now, one might believe that I’ve placed myself in an untenable position in that on the one hand I criticize others for their having made changes and on the other hand I have no qualms in admitting to having made changes myself. One would certainly like a translation that is neither “too little” nor “too much.” The main argument of this piece, however, is that such simply isn’t possible. The translator’s own understanding of what he’s translating—along with the underlying reasons of why he’s translating at all, and how he conceives Kafka’s works within the whole of his world conception—these factors invariably tilt the translation in one direction or another, there is no such thing as a neutral translator! It is my opinion that Max Brod—our most reliable source who knew Franz Kafka personally for decades—despite whatever short-comings and simplifications of which he may be guilty, was basically correct in his belief that he states far better than I might:

Was ich betone und was, wie ich glaube, meine Darstellung Kafkas von anderen Darstellungen (zum Beispiel von Schoeps, Vietta, Stumpf) unterscheidet, ist die Tatsache, daß ich das Positive, Lebensfreundliche, liebevoll Wirkende und im Sinn eines rechten erfüllten Lebens Religiöse, nicht aber Selbstverlornenheit, Lebensabgekehrtheit, Verzweifelung, >tragische Position< für sein entscheidendes Wort halte.9 [BR, 150]

Moreover and most importantly, “under-translating” is not only an easier matter than “over-translating”—as it’s much simpler to blur meaning than it is to focus it— it’s also a good deal less capable of “striking gold,” if I might express myself allegorically. It is not due to his murkiness that Bürgel stands out amongst the secretaries. Rather there really is another element entirely that glistens and glitters throughout his seeming gibberish. And it gladdens me to believe that the evidence for what I am proposing needs only to be presented in the proper light: that there is a necessary connection between our world and the higher world—and that both partake in self-consciousness, that aspect which separates man from beast and which likewise unites the human spirit with those spirits in whom we need to rekindle our trust. That we might dwell a long while over this matter that K. doesn’t know who Friedrich is, but that he knows who K. is, who he really is.

And so, now, to sum up (and I would certainly advise those who haven’t read chapter 23 of The Castle recently that now would be a very good time to do so as I can only highlight some of the beauty of Kafka’s glorious prose):

When one’s “working time” and one’s “normal time” are indistinguishable, and all of “the other work”—any work that doesn’t have the “to and fro” aspect that Bürgel mentions—seems “so insipid,” and when one has to constantly be ready to make this trip (at a moment’s notice) into the higher realm; when one is healthy and merry and fully content with oneself—with one’s own being—and one’s intellect is superior and, perhaps, even lofty; when one also has managed to retain one’s childlike nature and one is willing to overstep the bounds of what’s legally prescribed and expected, and one’s actions are ruled
primarily by passion—an infinite passion that is one and the same wherever it appears—this, to say it in one word: this is when you can bridge the divide between the mundane and the heavenly. Bürgel, the Verbindungssekretär, is the character who shows us the way to cross this divide, he is the guarantor of the possibility of attaining what seems as being quite impossible—as such “doesn’t belong in our world”—assuming only that one is awake enough to ask the right questions. We don’t know who Friedrich is, but I’d say that we had better start asking this question and see if we can’t work toward finding the answer. In that he knows who “K.” is, he also—I’d like to infer—knows who each and every one of us “is”—at least in as much as we are all “K.” It’s much better if we don’t hide underneath the blankets in fear but allow our self-consciousness to pivot, accepting the responsibility to understand what is written there in-between the lines and this means not simply playing the neutral party and mirroring the surface meaning as murky and seemingly as “accurately” as possible, but likewise sometimes taking on the added responsibility of capturing the occult or subsurface meaning as best we might and in accord with the spirit that shines forth to us from the original. When we wake up from out of our dream perhaps rather than always being in the “attack mode” and wanting to toast our victory with champagne, and perhaps rather than pulling someone else out of their “feather bed” {aus den Federn}—perhaps we might think it wiser to get our own feathers (for me an indirect reference to Plato’s Phaedrus and Theaetetus). This would then have the added advantage of our not smashing the glass and the pain of awakening with splinters in our feet.

Every translator of prose which goes beyond the ‘run-of-the-mill’ has not only the right but also the duty to restore the sparkle of the original by his or her own creative efforts. Needless to say a great deal of the original will be lost all the same. And this “duty” certainly has its limits. It is my opinion that it’s better to admit as much, accept the risk, das Risiko des Lebens [K, 360] and let the reader know that the translator is attempting to do more than a dictionary ever could. In closing let me also remark that I believe that Kafka is very much like Plato in that they both reach their “happy endings” before the end of the story. Generally Plato’s dialogues are marked by a “return” to the beginning quandary and it is left up to the reader to go back and figure out how, despite all of his considerable efforts, he still ends up having gotten nowhere at all. It is my opinion that along with his considerable insights into everything that is so tragically wrong with our world—the haste, the greed, the superficiality and the ignorance that pervade the modern world—Kafka was no beginner in his study of Plato. And so, for another instance of a “happy ending” that comes quite a bit before the actual ending (which in any case has been lost), let me attempt to tie everything up yet a second time with this quote from The Burrow:

If I am standing in my citadel surrounded by staggering piles of meat, my provisions, and if I turn my head toward the ten passages that all intersect in this chamber, each one going its own way, some sinking, some rising, some with flatter walls, some that have walls that are well-rounded, some getting narrower, some increasing in girth, and all of them are still and empty, and each one of them is ready to lead me on to all of the many chambers, and these chambers, likewise, are still and empty—then the thought about safety hardly enters my head, then I know precisely that this is my castle, my castle that I have won through scratching and biting, through stamping and ramming, I have won it from the stubborn earth, my castle that cannot belong to anyone other than me and which is so intrinsically connected to my being that in the final end I’m ready and able to calmly withstand the death wound that my enemy shall deliver, for my blood will seep into the ground here and it will never be lost. And what else other than this is the sense of all the beautiful hours that I—half peaceably sleeping, half joyfully awake—routinely spent in the passages, passages whose dimensions are calculated to fit me precisely, for me and for my rolling about, my childlike dancing around and for my lying about mornings in a dream state or passing into a deep sleep of bliss every night. And all of my smaller chambers, each one of them I know so well that even if I’m not in the least bit interested, still I can recognize where I am with my eyes shut simply by feeling the slope of the wall, they all embrace me with their calming peace and warmth, better than the nest of any bird you might choose. And everything, everything so still, so empty. [LU, 154]

Notes:
E.g.: “Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du ja eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch!” [K, 32]. My endnote (on eigentlich) #35 [LU, 171] is cross-endnoted five times: endnotes: #3, #6, #13, #21 and #37. I also draw attention to repetitions of “writing table,” “hissing,” and “looking out of open windows”—thus helping the reader see connections between the stories.

Kafka’s German is remarkably well written, it’s chiseled—and a pleasure to the eye and the ear, or should I say to the mind and the soul—?

The speech that I gave in Philadelphia at the 2009 Modern Language Association convention (Translating What’s Written In-between the Lines) approaches my work in translating much more from the subjective side—The Personal as the Key to Ontology was my initial title for that piece. These two pieces, along with my Postscript to Essential Kafka, are meant to complement each other and anyone who is interested in having them both is encouraged to download from my website: http://home.earthlink.net/~ushaphil/

An expanded third edition of Essential Kafka is slated to come out in April of 2012 from Northwestern University Press; this article has been reworked accordingly but all page numbers are from the 2nd edition.

Our current intellectual ‘climate’ is one that likes to think of itself as being open-minded, which, if indeed it were true, would assuredly be a good thing. Unfortunately, as may perhaps be evidenced by the first three translation choices for the opening sentence of In the Penal Colony given on page one, all of the choices fit the same mold, the underlying idea is to stick as close to the surface as possible, mirroring the German into English as if what makes for beautiful prose in German would work just the same in English. And, naturally enough, for those readers who know and have read the German this does work very well. But translations should be written not for those fluent in the source language but for those who easily become puzzled by such expressions as, e.g. “human room” [Menschenzimmer]—another extremely common translation that only confounds non-German speakers.

From the Definitive Edition of The Castle, Modern Library Edition, Feb. 1969, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc—most of this book is the Muirs’ translation, but the section we are looking at is from the “additional materials” which were translated by Ethine Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser.

It is my general belief that unless a book is worth reading at least twice, it’s probably not worth reading at all. What I love about translation is that it seems to be only in this way that one really gets to know what it is that one is “reading.” What our digital age has done to the ‘art of reading’ is a matter that I can only indicate by pointing to the extreme superficiality and arrogance which is so common these days, or by lamenting the utterly decadent state of philosophy, Gott sei dank I don’t even pretend to know what passes for such these days.

bürge—To guarantee, a verb that only occurs once in this chapter; note the connection to the secretary’s name: Bürgel. On a similar note the secretary whom K. was seeking is Erlanger, the verb erlangen means “to achieve or attain.”

“Kafka’s fundamental worldview is summed up in the formula: Most everything is full of uncertainty but once you have obtained sufficient depth in your knowledge, from that point onward you won’t go astray. And this is Plato’s teaching too, one that he presents in Phaedrus, that all of those who have made their way onto the higher path, that these will no longer wander in the lower realms. Despite all of the sadness, misery and insufficiency of human life, Kafka still was convinced that there are some truths that will never be shaken.” (my quick translations)

Both “fassen” and “Augenblick” are key terms in Schleiermacher’s translation of Plato.

Note the close relation to the Ape’s musings in A Report to the Academy: “A higher purpose began to glow inside of me, like the sun dawning. Nobody gave me any promises that if I should become like them that then my cage would be opened, that thereby I’d gain my release. Such promises for things that have never been heard of—what seems to be impossible—such promises simply aren’t given. But, if one solves the riddle and accomplishes that which seems to be impossible, well then, the promises suddenly and miraculously appear as if from nowhere.” [LU, 212]
Which means that, yes: *The Pilgrim’s Progress* for the 21st century—but “K.” isn’t really the hero, I’d say that he’s more the “anti-hero” or the typical “failure” and that Bürgel represents the heroic in his convoluted prose.

*Works Cited:*


