

INTRODUCTION

THE LIFE of Dr. Franz Kafka, a Jewish insurance official and writer in Prague, lasted forty years and eleven months. He spent sixteen years and six and a half months in school and at university, and nearly fifteen years in professional life. Kafka retired at the age of thirty-nine. He died of laryngeal tuberculosis in a sanatorium outside Vienna two years later.

Apart from stays in the German Empire—primarily weekend excursions—Kafka spent about forty-five days abroad. He visited Berlin, Munich, Zurich, Paris, Milan, Venice, Verona, Vienna, and Budapest. He saw three seas, each once: the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Italian Adriatic. And he witnessed a World War.

He never married. He was engaged three times: twice to Felice Bauer, a career woman in Berlin, and once to Julie Wohryzek, a secretary in Prague. He appears to have had romantic relationships with four other women as well as sexual encounters with prostitutes. He shared an apartment with a woman for about six months of his life. He left no descendants.

As a writer Franz Kafka left about forty complete prose texts to posterity. Nine of these can be called stories, if we interpret the genre liberally: “The Judgment,” “The Stoker,” “The Metamorphosis,” “In the Penal Colony,” “A Report to an Academy,” “First Sorrow,” “A Little Woman,” “A Hunger Artist,” and “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk.” The

works Kafka regarded as complete add up to about 350 printed pages in the critical edition of his writings that is currently considered definitive.

In addition, Kafka generated about 3,400 pages of diary entries and literary fragments, including three unfinished novels. According to the directives addressed to his friend Max Brod in Kafka's will, these manuscripts were all to be burned; Kafka himself destroyed an indeterminable but sizable number of notebooks. Brod did not follow Kafka's instructions; he published as much of Kafka's literary estate as he could find. Virtually all of Kafka's approximately 1,500 letters that were preserved have been published.

"HOW ARE YOU?" "Life is the same as ever, thank you." Life is a state of being, not an activity. You find out only at the end whether you had a life. In 1892, Italo Svevo published his first novel, *A Life*, the prototype of the modern novel about a white-collar employee. The protagonist, a minor clerk named Alfonso Nitti, seems almost a malicious caricature of Kafka. Like Kafka, Alfonso fails to find erotic gratification. His resolve is stymied by the dreary routine of endless hours at the office. He clings to the illusion of future intellectual productivity but never manages to generate anything aside from a few paltry fragments. Svevo originally had another title in mind: "Un inetto" ("A Good-for-Nothing"). He eventually opted for the concise and more effective *Una vita*. The title did not help; no one appears to have recognized the paradigmatic quality of this hero, and it is unlikely that Kafka ever heard of the novel.

A life? If one applies the standards of twenty-first-century Western society to Kafka's psychological existence, the result is devastating. We regard a life span of eighty years as a biological minimum, something to which we are entitled. A forty-year-old is at the zenith and does not think in terms of the end. If the end does come early, we regard the life as half lived, incomplete and senseless.

This fundamental deficit is multiplied if we employ the currently fashionable parameters of happiness: health, sexual activity, family life, fun, adventures, independence, and professional achievement. While it is true that Kafka did not live on the margin of society—he had a social life and advanced to the position of deputy department head with pension privileges—he did not love his profession and paid dearly for the modicum of security it offered. The variety of options young people feel entitled to these days was unavailable to Kafka. As a thirty-year-old, he was

still living with his parents. With the exception of just a few months, he spent his life in one city, surrounded by a small, nearly unvarying circle of friends. Everything he owned was eaten up by illness and hyperinflation. He saw little of the “world,” and what he did see was almost always in haste, because his vacation time was severely restricted. He found pitifully few outlets for his recreational needs—namely, swimming, rowing, gymnastics, garden work, sanatorium respites, excursions to the country, and indulgence in the modest excesses of the taverns of Prague. Even more striking was the disparity between his desperate quest for sexual and erotic fulfillment and the rare instances when he came close to finding such happiness. His fulfillment was always blighted by ambivalence.

Coupled with these limitations and losses was Kafka’s immense investment of time and effort on behalf of literature. He saw the act of writing as the focus of his existence. Writing soothed and stabilized him; writing that turned out well made him happy and self-confident. Here too, however, the proportion between effort and reward was almost bizarrely off-kilter. For every manuscript page he considered worth saving, there were ten or even twenty pages he wanted destroyed. All his literary projects that grew beyond the scope of a story failed. Failure plagued his endeavors in other literary genres: the language of poetry was inaccessible to him; his plan to write an autobiography was never realized; and his few halfhearted forays into dramatic writing yielded no tangible results. Let us imagine, as a comparison, that the works of a composer comprise just a few finished pieces of chamber music and dozens of fragmentary compositions, including three unfinished symphonies. Is the composer a failure? An incompetent? Brod tried to gloss over this lamentable situation by adopting a tendentious editorial strategy. Today, however, there is nothing left to conceal: the critical edition of Kafka’s oeuvre is available, and it is impossible to escape the impression that Kafka left a heap of rubble for posterity.

THE WIDER the net an individual casts in the world, the greater the likelihood that we will be captivated and impressed. Possessions, achievements, career, influence, power, sexual partners, descendants, admirers, successors, enemies: it is this horizontal dimension, the social extension of a person’s life, that rescues the life from the undertow of anonymity. Kafka strove to figure out how a net of this sort is fashioned, how one carves out a place in the world. He was a passionate reader of biographies

but did not devour them indiscriminately. An eighteenth-century Austrian countess, a general, a nineteenth-century philosopher and playwright, a plantation owner, a polar explorer, and a twentieth-century social activist lived in mutually incompatible worlds, but all employed comparable strategies and tricks to defend and expand the hard-won domain of their existence. Kafka hoped that by studying these strategies in combination, he would gain insights into the art of living.

That he did not get very far in this pursuit is obvious and indisputable. The earliest readers of his diaries and letters even concluded that he must have been a dreadfully isolated, fragile, almost incorporeal person whose every attempt to cast a social net resulted in the net's fluttering right back on him. Hadn't he portrayed himself in this very way, claiming to lead a "virtual" life? But those readers did not know what to make of him. A ghost, an insect, a soaring dog, an ape, a blind mole, a wandering Jew—all this was taken literally. The Kafka of the 1930s and 1940s was not of this world.

Even today, a biography of Franz Kafka that bore the title *A Life* would seem ironic. The fact that we have gained insight into his social relationships, and that the numerous photographs of him in his milieu make him more approachable, has done little to change that. If a few seconds of film were to turn up somewhere that showed Kafka in motion, or if we were to find his voice recorded on a dictation machine, we would be pleasantly surprised, but not much would be gained. We cannot imagine him here, seated in a chair across from us, at the checkout counter of a supermarket, or at a bar around the corner. His is a cultural aura that thrives on distance, strangeness, an otherness that we do not forget for a moment, and that aura is connected to both his failure and his fame.

It is a narrow ledge onto which we are forced. On the one side there is the meager inventory of his life, a deep deficit that becomes even more distressing as we reduce his existence to its bare bones. On the other side there is blind reverence of the aura, which stops short of probing the sacrifices and suffering that literary achievement of this sort entails. Neither approach grants us access to this life, and both have something barbaric about them.

The question of what Kafka really got out of life is as inevitable as our amazement when confronting his art. No reader of the diaries and letters, and certainly no biographer, can help entertaining doubts on this score, unless the author is observed impartially, like a specimen under glass. How-

ever, it is not for us to decide whether the price Kafka paid was too high. Every epoch, every social group, and every individual judges a life on the basis of criteria that cannot be applied automatically to other contexts. Powerful impulses steer people to set their course in this or that way, to seek happiness here or there, and critics who fail to take note of these impulses or who substitute their own personal criteria for them will find the life of another person an impenetrable enigma, and will wind up offering dishonest solutions complete with moralizing footnotes. “This, precisely, is the sorry nature of trite biographies,” noted Wolfgang Hildesheimer in the preface to his biography of Mozart. “They find easy explanations for everything, within a range of probability we can comprehend.”¹

The more independent and creative the person we are attempting to understand, the more pressing becomes the question of the hermeneutic horizon. The richness of Kafka’s life developed primarily in the unseen sphere of his psyche, in a vertical dimension that appears to have nothing to do with the social landscape and yet penetrates it everywhere and in every way. A first-time reader of *The Man Who Disappeared (Amerika)* or *The Castle* would be hard pressed to figure out what the author’s profession, family status, and likes and dislikes have to do with anything. The diaries reinforce the impression of an altogether autonomous inwardness. Kafka’s ability to size up a situation at a glance, to distill the significant details, to tease out hidden connections, and to capture everything in a language suffused with precise imagery borders on the miraculous and mocks any conceivable social or psychological explanation. This ability is called genius, which is not bound to any time or place, coming from deep within. But if genius is possible everywhere and at all times, what purpose does a biography serve? To tell us that geniuses also have to eat and digest their food?

Of course the concept of genius is suspect. A racehorse can have a stroke of genius (to cite Robert Musil’s famous example), but a writer does not want to be praised for what comes naturally. Literary criticism contextualizes what seems unique in history. For its practitioners the notion of “genius” is a methodological error, an annoyance, and those who endorse the term confirm that they are nothing but amateurs. However, literature precedes literary criticism. Readers well versed in Kafka’s writings are sure to have experienced moments of shock when encountering his genius—even if they regard the texts as humorless, overblown, cruel, or gloomy.

Kafka's world is inhospitable, and it takes a long time for readers to find their way into it. Still, his words get under one's skin, provide food for thought, and resist being shaken off. Two questions come to the fore: "What does all this mean?" and "How does something like this come about?" Pursuing the first question, readers wind up in a jungle of textual interpretation; pursuing the second, they toil at a biographical cross-word puzzle that cannot be completed.

In both his diaries and his letters, Kafka frequently evoked the image of an inner abyss: "All I possess are certain powers that merge into literature at a depth almost inaccessible under normal circumstances." "Complete indifference and dullness. A dried-up well, water in unreachable depths and uncertain even there." There are infinite variations on this theme. The truth does not come from above, as inspiration or an act of mercy, nor does it come from what the world has to offer, from physical experience, work, or human compassion; true literature comes only from within, and anything that does not have deep roots there is merely an elaborate "construction." The image applies well to Kafka, even if we might prefer to substitute the more guarded term "authenticity" for his oft-cited "truth." But if the idea of an unapproachable inner depth really does reveal something about Kafka's art, which was sometimes phenomenal, sometimes quite limited, there is no choice for us but to follow him down there and check for ourselves.

FRIEDRICH HEBBEL once noted in his diary, "Another new book about Lessing! And yet if Lessing himself were to rise from the dead, he would not be able to add anything new about himself." That is precisely the oppressive feeling that befalls the first-year college student who scans the K offerings in the German studies section of the library. Nonstop Kafka. Well-worn "complete interpretations" from the 1950s and 1960s, handbooks and tomes that explicate specific passages, essay collections, dreadfully hefty but nonetheless outdated bibliographies, and finally an immense array of academic monographs on the structure of fragment x , the influence of author y , or the concept of z "in Kafka." The Internet is no better. An American student naive enough to attempt to obtain some basic information by typing "Kafka" into a search engine would have to choose from more than 130,000 English-language sites—twice as many as for Humphrey Bogart and even a few more than for Johann Wolfgang von

Goethe. Indeed, it appears unlikely that if Kafka were to rise from the dead, he would be able to tell us something that has not already been discussed.

Disillusionment soon follows. Most of this material consists of unsupported speculation or academic verbiage. No theory is too far-fetched to have been advocated somewhere by someone; there is no methodological approach that has not been used to interpret Kafka's work. Some monographs resemble autistic games; it is impossible to imagine a reader who might reasonably benefit from them. Half a dozen classic quotations are found in nearly every analysis, and most studies quote extensively from other studies. It seems like an industry that is an end unto itself, a kind of sect to which one is admitted or from which one is excluded. It is striking that the few pearls in the lot—beautifully crafted essays, thought-provoking mind games—are written almost without exception by nonspecialists. Equally disappointing is the frothy profusion on the Internet. Despite the colorful images, fancy fonts, and Java animations, the Web turns out to be a decidedly second-rate medium in this regard. It has no quality filter—with predictable consequences. This latest medium is dominated by the principles of repetition and plagiarism, and the only question is whether what is being played out here is the escalation, the parody, or the imminent decline of the Kafka cult.

Having now grown weary, the reader turns to biography. It is widely believed that an intelligent, colorful description of a life, illustrated if possible and written by an author who knows the latest research without needing to flaunt the fact, is still the ideal way to get acquainted with a canonical writer. There is no need to worry about coming away with nothing but chronological data and hagiographic commonplaces, because the times when biographies were produced like widgets are over. Readers' expectations are now loftier, and the recent biographies of Goethe, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett justifiably raise the question as to whether the time has finally come to grant biography the status of an independent form of literary art.

However, the next surprise is just around the corner. No definitive biography of Franz Kafka exists. Even the number of attempts at a comprehensive biography is unexpectedly limited, and to date there are no more than three or four introductions to Kafka published anywhere in the world that are worth reading. In Germany, where Kafka's language is

read and spoken, three-quarters of a century after his death and half a century after the first decent edition of his works, not a single biography of Kafka has appeared—apart from Klaus Wagenbach's account of Kafka's youth, which is hard to come by even at antiquarian bookstores, and Hartmut Binder's *Kafka-Handbuch*, which has also been out of print for some time and reads more like an encyclopedia than a biography. What is going on here? Why this startling silence amid all the noise, why this reticence?

There is certainly no dearth of material, despite considerable lacunae. Our knowledge about Kafka's life and milieu has burgeoned since the 1970s. Decades of research have yielded a plenitude of facts, which require further elaboration, and it is difficult to gauge the extent to which our view of the author will change in the future. There are monographs about Kafka's family (Northey, Wagnerová), his relationships with his publishers (Unsold), the question of his Jewish identity (Baioni, Robertson), and the cultural milieu of Prague (Spector). The diaries and letters have been published with an extensive apparatus, and the critical edition of Kafka's works as well as facsimile editions of several manuscripts allow readers deep insights into his creative process. Even biographical sources that have been with us for some time, such as the *Letters to Felice*, have yet to be systematically evaluated. It is heaven compared to the stark presentation that was regarded in the 1960s as the "biographical background." Today's biographer can and must draw on a multitude of resources.

The reason hardly anyone has opted to paint a panoramic biographical portrait stems from the subject itself. Quantity is not always an advantage: a puzzle that consists of a great many pieces is more interesting but also more difficult. Biographical fact and biography do not correspond like numbers and their sum, and the task of the biographer is not just a matter of putting index cards full of scribblings into a nice order and closing the file (even though, strange as it may seem, some prominent Kafka specialists cling to this notion). Nicholas Boyle wrote in the foreword to his biography of Goethe: "What I can offer is only a synthesis of syntheses, whose value will long be outlasted by that of the compilations on which it is based; yet if such a synthesis is not attempted from time to time, and for a particular time, to what end are the compilations made?"² Boyle's statement is precise and forthright and poses quite a challenge. When applied to Kafka, "synthesis" assumes a particular meaning that may be of help in making sense of the odd biographical abstinence.

Let us assume that we are faced with the task of writing the biography of a prominent athlete. This athlete comes from a broken home and dabbled in drugs, but he overcame his problems. He now takes care of his children when not in training and is also active in Amnesty International. The set of themes in a life of this kind provides a blueprint, a framework: the athlete's background, devotion to sports, career, crisis, interest in social causes, and finally marriage and children as private sphere and window to the future. The thematic blocks and even the chapter divisions are clearly defined, and if the biographer does not decide in favor of montage techniques and patchwork, the synthetic result will inevitably be limited to connecting the blocks by means of smooth transitions—smooth, lest the reader get the impression that a life is being checked off like items on a shopping list.

Most biographies, even the best among them, are composed in this way, through a kind of honeycomb technique. The picture of how a life was lived breaks down into a number of thematic segments, each of which is relatively independent of the others and calls for separate research: background, education, influences, achievements (or misdeeds), social interactions, religion, and political and cultural background. Ultimately some interdependences blur this initially clear picture, but if the biographer does not want to subject readers to a hodgepodge, the fiction of topical clarity must be maintained, each subject must be synthesized separately, each cell of the honeycomb must be closed. Only then, in a second step, will the biographer try to merge the cells in such a way as to minimize the empty spaces: a synthesis of syntheses. The result is the portrayal of a life whose events are narrated in linear fashion, their causal connection thus made evident. The honeycomb cells lie in a row, and the conceptual paradigm of this kind of biography is the journey through life.

By contrast, subjects with a small number of *topoi* that do not seem to fit together require an altogether different approach. These are complex characters coping with everything and everybody. Kafka is the paradigm of the subject who struggled with the same questions throughout his life and rarely tackled something new. Conflict with the father, Judaism, illness, struggles with sexuality and marriage, the professional life, the creative process, literary aesthetics: no lengthy analysis is required for the focal points of this life, which seems so static that one has to wonder whether any development at all took place. This net, it would appear, was never cast out into the world.

That it is a net is precisely the problem. Everything is equidistant to everything else. Kafka's conflict with his domineering father shaped his Jewish identity, his physical self-image, and his sexual life. His involvement with Zionism and Eastern European Jewish culture, his hypochondria, and his "marriage attempts" aggravated the conflict and twisted the oedipal knot beyond the point of disentanglement. Should one portray Kafka's relationship to Judaism in connection with his education, his reading of Jewish texts, his friendship with Brod, his view of life as a whole, or his personal experience of anti-Semitism? What is the cause, and what is the effect? The slightest shift of emphasis, and the picture changes. A conclusion can prove false or crumble. How much can a biographer afford to simplify? How far can a biographer go to reconstruct the bits and pieces in order to recount them? The sheer number of interrelations between the thematic honeycomb cells makes any narrative geometry impossible. It is as though one were confronted with the task of rendering a four-dimensional structure in three dimensions—the shadow of this object, as it were. This task can be accomplished, but the solution entails a loss of detail and hence of vividness. A piece of string and a razor blade may cast an identical shadow.

KAFKA TEACHES us modesty. Anyone who tackles him has to anticipate failing. There are innumerable secondary texts in which the gulf between the explanations offered by the author and the interspersed Kafka citations is so huge that a shudder runs down the reader's back. Even the best synthetic achievements—for instance, Elias Canetti's book-length essay *Kafka's Other Trial*—contain passages whose linguistic and intellectual sophistication lags markedly behind Kafka's. Biographers have to be keenly aware that they are entering into a competition they cannot win. However, it is equally impossible to dodge it. A biographer of a piano virtuoso cannot be expected to have perfect pitch, nor should the biographer of an explorer be required to pass a sailing test. The biographer of a philosopher, however, should be able to think, and the biographer of a writer should be able to write. That requirement may seem trivial, but its hermeneutic consequence is intimidating. In an incomparably willful and consummate manner, Kafka made language a medium of self-development. His biographer must take the same tools in hand, must employ the same medium, to recount this self-development.

In doing so, the biographer uses a craft that Kafka already per-

fect—*and* Kafka was not subject to lapses. There were no empty phrases, no semantic impurities, no weak metaphors—even when he lay in the sand and wrote postcards. His language does not “flow” out of itself, nor does it ever run aground; it is controlled, like a glowing scalpel that cuts through stone. Kafka missed nothing, forgot nothing. There is little evidence of the absentmindedness and boredom he always complained about; on the contrary, his incessant presence of mind is almost painful to witness, because it renders him unapproachable. Someone must stay awake, but this wakefulness deprived him of a sense of home and alienated him from the world and from people, in a mundane and sometimes comical sense. Nabokov’s novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which highlights the impossibility of writing an adequate biography, expresses the suffering associated with profound wakefulness from the point of view of someone experiencing it:

... a hungry man eating a steak is interested in his food and not, say, in the memory of a dream about angels wearing top-hats which he happened to see seven years ago; but in my case all the shutters and lids and doors of the mind would be open at once at all times of the day. Most brains have their Sundays, mine was even refused a half-holiday. That state of constant wakefulness was extremely painful not only in itself, but in its direct results. Every ordinary act which, as a matter of course, I had to perform, took on such a complicated appearance, provoked such a multitude of associative ideas in my mind, and these associations were so tricky and obscure, so utterly useless for practical application, that I would either shirk the business at hand or else make a mess of it out of sheer nervousness.³

This statement applies to Kafka word for word. It is astonishing how little he “made a mess of” in spite of everything: wherever his life took him, he stood the test, as a pupil, student, and official. But nothing came easily to him; every decision, even the most trivial, had to be wrenched from that stream of associations. He once wrote, “Everything sets me thinking.” Everything set him writing. But first he had to translate life.

This peculiar dialectics of presence and absence reaches into the innermost core of his literary work. The innumerable odds and ends culled from daily life and the most private concerns are hard to miss in his work,

but just as manifest is its exemplary universality. This contradiction, this enigma may well be the touchstone of every biographical endeavor. If a person who was so inconspicuous in his social surroundings was capable of generating a shock wave in the history of world culture, the echoes of which still resound today, it seems inevitable that we need to regard life and work as incompatible worlds, each with its own set of laws. "The life of the author is not the life of the person he is," Paul Valéry said apodictically in his marginalia to the "Leonardo" essays. Kafka dug even deeper: "Within the artist there is a different attitude toward art and toward life." We have to respect that difference, but the biographer cannot stop there. The biographer's task is to explain how a consciousness that is set thinking by everything could evolve into a consciousness that set everyone thinking.

"WE KNOW only ourselves," noted Georg Christoph Lichtenberg in his *Sudelbücher* (Waste Books), "or rather, we could know ourselves if we wished to, but we can know others only by analogy, like the men on the moon." This contention is flawed in two respects. To know oneself, it is far from sufficient to want to know oneself. And as far as others go, it is astonishing how often one gets by with a combination of life experience and the simplest psychological precepts for envisaging certain actions and even impulses and thoughts. Yet some things burst forth in such a spontaneous, brutal manner that no analogy can lessen our dismay.

The magic word of biographers is empathy. Empathy comes into play when psychology and experience fall short. Even a life that is empirically very well documented remains elusive if the biographer fails to rouse the reader's willingness to identify with a character, a situation, and a milieu. Hence the curious sterility of some massive biographies that are bloated by data and references. They purport to say everything that can be said but completely miss their subject and therefore fail to satisfy our curiosity.

On the other hand, empathy can be a methodological drug, and over-indulgence will take its toll. Empathy certainly provides welcome moments of illumination, enabling one person to reenact what another has experienced. When that happens, everything that was enigmatic falls into place, or seems to. Still, empathy is not a psychological state that can be summoned at will. Like the quality we refer to as intelligence, it is complex and needs to be fed by knowledge and education. Empathy in the absence of adequate knowledge is pointless. Gaining insight into the

compulsive, neurotic impulse in Kafka's habits and decisions does not necessarily entail being neurotic oneself (even if that sometimes comes in handy). Empathy is of no use in understanding the situation of the boy, the only son, who goes to temple three or four times a year on Jewish holidays, holding the hand of his father, and sits there bored while his father's mind is on business or the most recent anti-Semitic slogans. Even an observer who grew up in the Jewish faith will attain no insight if he knows the historical situation only secondhand.

The outer limits of the capacity for empathy are reached when events are culturally and chronologically remote or involve psychotic aspects of the individual or the society as a whole. There is also an inner limit and one far more difficult to determine: unrestrained identification. Anyone who oversteps this limit will end up understanding less rather than more. Identification can be helpful, and the intellectual and emotional effort of liberating oneself from a state of reverence may not be a bad route of entry, especially for a Kafka biographer. The ability to identify tentatively, as it were, is one of the prerequisites for anyone who would explore the life of another. We may be tempted by a fulfillment that seems so easy to achieve, but we need to pull back after taking just a taste of its alluring essence.

Empathy allays the pain of our lack of knowledge without providing adequate compensation. There are months in Kafka's life for which we have no documentation; the stream of information just runs dry. What sense would it make to bridge over these gaps or even mask them with fictional constructs? By contrast, there are days on which we can reconstruct his life virtually from one hour to the next, and it is exhilarating when the density of the extant material allows us to sketch out a scenic representation and experience the pleasure of successful detective work. But what does such a representation mean for a person whose life unfolds in the depths, in an overwhelming inner intensity? Kafka often spent half the day in bed or on a sofa, languid, inaccessible, daydreaming. He complained about this routine so often that one could keep a running record of it. But what do we really know about it? We know that millions of people would later be awestruck by some of what he daydreamed. Even the cleverest methodology will not lead biographers beyond the image of an image. The mood, the hue, the associations, the fears and desires that ate at him, the grimaces and gestures, voices, sounds, smells . . . everything could have been different from the way we imagine it. Certainly

more complex. Even the most precise imagination, armed with both knowledge and empathy, remains in the dark. No mind, not even the most powerful, can conquer the frustration of not knowing, the progressive fading of historical memory, the fact that what is past is past. The best we can do is produce evidence, sharpen the contours, and increase the dimensions of the image. The best we can say is, It may have, could have, must have been this way.

MY BIOGRAPHY of Franz Kafka does not fill in the gaps. All the details, even occurrences that are self-evident, are documented; nothing has been invented. Connections between events and dates that can be deduced with a high degree of probability but only indirectly are put on an equal footing with documentable facts in some cases, but only when a failure to do so would result in a disproportionate narrowing of the hermeneutic perspective. Unreliable sources are marked as such wherever possible. Had every item in Kafka's letters and diaries been verified empirically and documented in footnotes, the sheer number of notes would have exceeded all sensible bounds.

Developing the scenes, situations, and historical context of Kafka's life requires time and space, more than can be accommodated in a single volume of reasonable length. The decision to raise the curtain in 1910 was dictated by the source material: it is the year in which the extant diaries begin. The most amply documented period of his life starts here and reaches into the early months of World War I. This period is without doubt the most significant, because a rapid succession of decisions on Kafka's part defined and delimited the remaining decade of his life. Kafka experienced two extremely productive creative phases in 1912–14. During this time, he wrote several complete stories and two of his three unfinished novels. Moreover, these were the years of his most intensive correspondence with Felice Bauer, which is invaluable as source material. Several agonizing experiences that he considered life-altering shaped his self-image during this epoch, especially the dissolution of his engagement just weeks before the beginning of the war. His circumstances changed in early 1915, which marked the beginning of a long unproductive period.

The decision to begin this biographical work not in 1883, the year of his birth, but rather at the end of his adolescence and on the threshold of his first major creative period may appear odd at first glance, but it was

dictated by the availability of the sources. Since the 1958 publication of Klaus Wagenbach's informative biography of Kafka's youth—at that time many eyewitnesses could still be interviewed—there has been little new information about Kafka's childhood, school years, and university studies. Because of a lack of autobiographical material from those years there were, and still are, substantial gaps where quite a few surprises may be lurking. This unsatisfactory situation would improve greatly if the literary estate of his longtime friend Max Brod were finally made available to researchers. This first-rate resource would contribute valuable insights to our understanding of the literary and historical issues concerning Kafka and the period as a whole. These materials, particularly Brod's diaries and correspondence, would obviously be a desideratum for all the phases of Kafka's life, but they are indispensable for the period between Kafka's twentieth birthday and the beginning of his own diaries. It would be irresponsible and frustrating for any biographer to work on the basis of knowledge that will be substantially expanded and therefore require revision in the foreseeable future. A temporary solution that serves the purpose only of retaining the chronological balance would not serve the reader well. But certainly that does not imply that we ought to give up altogether.

Biographers have a dream, whether it is utopian or nothing more than a secret and ambitious vice. They wish to go beyond what was. This biographer seeks to experience what was experienced by those who were there. What it was like to be Franz Kafka. He knows that this is impossible. The reader is not the only one to experience that notorious sadness implicit in every life story, which ends with separation and death; the biographer is also keenly aware of it. He has to realize that the prospect of employing a combination of thorough research and deep empathy to go one step further, to get just a little bit closer, is only an illusion. The life of another human being draws back, comes into view like an animal at the edge of the forest, and disappears again. Methodological snares are of no use; the cages of knowledge remain empty. So what do we achieve for all our efforts? The real life of Franz Kafka? Certainly not. But a fleeting glance at it, or an extended look, yes, perhaps that is possible.