

FRANZ KAFKA, PARTY ANIMAL

We think of him as a recluse, but an unfiltered translation of his diaries reveals an artist who was often antic, alive, and in motion.

By Becca Rothfeld

January 9, 2023



Obsessed with embodiment, Kafka could write about literature in carnal terms. Illustration by Micha Huigen



Save this story

Literature usually reaches us in its finished form, when it has already ossified into irrevocability. By the time a book is bound and printed, it is easy to forget that the words were once in motion. Franz Kafka's fitful fiction provides a reminder. Most of his work was published posthumously, through the efforts of his best friend, Max Brod, and much of it still bears the marks of its author's uncertainty. Kafka finished none of the three novels he started, and his final attempt, "The Castle," leaves off abruptly midsentence.

Not only are Kafka's fictions incomplete; many of them also contain meditations on the impossibility of completion. A messenger in one of his stories travels through one antechamber after another without ever reaching the person to whom his message is addressed. A lawyer in Kafka's second novel, "The Trial," drafts and redrafts a petition that is "never finished," and a character in "The Castle" wonders, as he clambers toward the fortress of the title, "Could this path be endless?" If Kafka's works are as endless as the path to the Castle, it is because they teem with potent indeterminacies. In these "fairy tales for dialecticians," as Walter Benjamin once called them, rules are enforced, then revoked; principles are established, then contravened. The behavior of a bureaucrat from the Castle can "mean that the official procedure has begun, but it can also mean that the official procedure has not yet even begun." Defendants in "The Trial" spend hours mired in Talmudic debates about the conduct of court officials, all without coming to any consensus about what it signifies. They know they live in a world of omens, but they cannot begin to fathom what the omens mean. Before they are found guilty, much less sentenced, they are already condemned to a hell of eternal interpretation.

It's appropriate that an incompleteness as consummate as Kafka also kept diaries—documents that cannot come to a close until the life they chronicle

is over, and that need never be burnished into products fit to publish. Although he occasionally worked in bursts, almost every word he set down in these diaries was once contested, and his twelve private notebooks (along with four sets of notes from his travels) are indices of elaborate indecision. Drafts are attempted, then aborted; passages are reiterated and ruthlessly reworked.

Ross Benjamin's momentous new translation, "The Diaries of Franz Kafka" (Schocken), is the first to convey the full extent of their twitchy tenuousness. Martin Greenberg and Joseph Kresh's previous rendering, published in 1948 and 1949, did no such thing: the manuscript on which it is based had been heavily doctored by Brod, likely in an effort to protect both Kafka's reputation and his own. In the vandalized diaries, entries have been shuffled into a linear chronology, lewd and lightly homoerotic content has been excised, solecisms have been corrected, dialect has been rigidified into strenuously proper High German, punctuation has been inserted, drafts and revisions of stories have been removed so as to impose an artificial distinction between fiction and fact, and passages unflattering to Brod have been cut. The result is prim and polished, less like a diary and more like a monument. The unadulterated Kafka, in the new version, is less stilted and more alive. Kafka neglects to finish sentences and sometimes even breaks off mid-word. Many of his entries are undated, and occasionally long periods pass between one jotting and the next.

The diaries, then, are dually incomplete, both because they are unedited and because of all the biographical staples that they omit. Someone who lacked prior knowledge of Kafka's life could easily come away from them with next to no sense of the major events that defined him. The notebooks begin in 1909, when their author was twenty-five, and end in 1923, a year before his death. Entire monographs have traced the convolutions of Kafka's doomed relationship with Felice Bauer—to whom he was engaged, then unengaged, then re-engaged, then unengaged for good—but Kafka's diary entries about her can be deceptively dry and cursory. "Wrote letter to F. in the office," he

notes. Several days later, “Letter from F.” Julie Wohryzek, the tubercular clerk to whom he was less eventfully and more briefly engaged, appears only a handful of times, in exaggeratedly truncated notes. (“Walked up and down with J.” “Silent with J.”) Several times, Kafka mentions Milena Jesenská-Pollak, the free-spirited Czech translator with whom he exchanged more than a hundred letters, but he abbreviates her to “M” and reduces their romance to a blip. Dora Diamant, the woman with whom he started an anomalously wholesome and uncomplicated relationship in the last year of his life, is entirely absent.

As for the oblique references to crucial occurrences that do pepper the diaries, they are impossible to identify, much less understand, without the benefit of background information. At one point, Kafka writes, “No telegram came.” Who could infer from this placid pronouncement that its author was in agony as he awaited an important reply from Felice? “Back from Berlin,” Kafka notes later. “Was bound like a criminal. If one had sat me down in a corner with real chains and placed policemen in front of me and let me watch only in this way, it would not have been worse. And it was my engagement.” A reader might be forgiven for failing to recognize that Kafka is describing not a tribunal but a nominally happy occasion—an engagement party organized by Felice’s family.

We cannot understand these entries without context, much of it helpfully supplied by the new translation’s copious endnotes, but, by the same token, we cannot understand Kafka’s context without consulting his diaries. No one could guess at the circumstances of his engagement on the basis of his notebooks alone, but no one could have any idea how unendurable he found an ostensible celebration if he had not, in writing, likened it to a prison. For Kafka, the relationship between word and world was symbiotic: literature was an appendage to life, but life was flat and senseless without the embellishments of literature.

“I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else”: Kafka’s

famously draconian assertion is from a draft of a letter written to Felice's father, the mailed version of which Felice intercepted and did not pass on. The formulation is memorable, but it is not true. Kafka was, in addition to literature, a person with a history, a family, and a body. Once, he had even been a baby.

He was born on July 3, 1883, in Prague, then in the Austro-Hungarian province of Bohemia. Formerly a cultural capital, the city had long since surrendered its prestige to sleek Vienna and gritty Berlin. The teen-age Kafka grumbled in a letter to a friend that "Prague doesn't let go. . . . This old crone has claws." The complaint proved prophetic: despite his many attempts to flee, he managed to move for only a short period during the last year of his life.

In the Bohemia that Kafka could never escape, tensions between the Germanspeaking minority and the Czech-speaking majority simmered and periodically boiled over into riots. Kafka was fluent in both languages—but as a Jew he was painfully aware that he belonged to neither camp. Although he wrote his great works in crystalline German, he reflects in his diaries, "I have not always loved my mother as much as she deserved and as I could only because the German language hindered me from doing so. The Jewish mother is no 'Mutter,' the designation Mutter makes her a little odd."

Kafka was never especially pious, but he nonetheless took his cultural affinities seriously. He dabbled in Zionism, studied Hebrew, and went out of his way to befriend the members of a Yiddish theatre troupe that passed through Prague. Though his fiction makes no explicit allusion to the plight of his people in particular, it is full of perennial outsiders and senseless persecutions that cannot but recall the trials of the rural Jews from whom he was only one generation removed.

After all, Kafka's parents hailed from small towns in the countryside and attained bourgeois respectability and mainstream acceptance only when they

opened a fancy-goods store in the heart of the city. No wonder they were so flummoxed by their obstinately impractical son, who refused to take an interest in the business. As he wrote in that intercepted letter to Felice's father, "I live within my family, among the kindest, most affectionate people—and am more strange than a stranger."

He was equally estranged from his source of income: convinced of the wisdom of keeping his vocation rigidly isolated from his profession, the young Kafka opted to pursue a doctorate in law, which he once characterized as "a kind of intellectual sawdust that thousands of others' mouths had already chewed up for me." He may have gagged on this flavorless fare, but it helped him secure a post with unusually humane hours at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia. From 1908 to 1922, he spent his mornings and afternoons pressuring reluctant businesses to insure their employees against accidents on the job, answering correspondence from disgruntled workers, and writing promotional materials about the importance of workplace safety. He excelled at these tasks, but he did not enjoy them, and he resented every second that he wasted in the office. The regimen he tried and often failed to maintain was gruelling: work in the daytime, rest in the evening, hours of writing all night. During the fourteen years that Kafka languished in the civil service, he was engaged twice to Felice and once to Julie, but he was loyal above all to the secret life he led when everyone else was sleeping. In the end, he never married. He could commit completely to nothing but literature.

But Kafka did not spend all his time in bed, at his desk, or insuring accident-prone workers. He also met regularly with his circle of friends, travelled widely, and became an apostle of *Lebensreform*, a health fad that fetishized supposedly natural methods. In accordance with *Lebensreform* principles, he followed a strict vegetarian diet and kept his windows open to facilitate airflow. Each day, he performed a fifteen-minute exercise routine, and he irritated his tablemates by fastidiously "Fletcherizing" his food—chewing it until it had liquefied, per the system pioneered by the health faddist Horace

Fletcher, a.k.a. “the Great Masticator.” Kafka believed that the cold would vitalize him and boasted that he walked until he could not feel his fingers, and twice he vacationed at health spas. He often embarked on weekend hiking excursions in the nearby countryside and, on a couple of occasions, arranged to garden in the suburbs. Above all, he loved swimming and sought the water at every possible opportunity, frequenting the Prague docks in the summer and taking trips to picturesque lakes whenever he had the chance.

On top of all this, Kafka found the time to write and publish regularly enough to garner modest recognition. His two collections of short prose received admiring reviews, one of which compared his work favorably with that of Thomas Mann, and a smattering of his stories appeared in newspapers and literary journals. Robert Musil, then an editor at an illustrious publisher, was so impressed with Kafka’s output that he begged the young writer to contribute to the imprint’s in-house magazine. But Kafka knew it would take a novel to launch him to true celebrity, and he was too much of a perfectionist to complete one without years of agonizing, self-loathing, and second-guessing. By the time he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, in 1917, he had been chipping away at two longer works for several years. He embarked on a final attempt in 1922. As his condition worsened, he remained convinced that all three efforts were failures, and he instructed Brod to destroy the drafts after his death. In 1924, exactly one month before his forty-first birthday, his strength gave out for good. It was not long before his best friend set out to defy his dying wish.

This, then, was Kafka’s life. Both its plot and its daily textures are curiously absent from his private reflections. His diaries contain several stray autobiographical divulgements, mostly about his childhood, but they are for the most part surprisingly impersonal. So what fills their pages?

In place of memoir, we find accounts of Kafka’s dreams (which are as dull as anyone else’s), notes on books he is reading (including several pages on a history of Napoleon’s defeat in Russia), summaries of plays and performances

(which Kafka is capable of enjoying even when he recognizes that they are cheesy), and inscrutable snatches that even the volume's scrupulous endnotes cannot demystify ("only the billowing overcoat endures, everything else is contrived"). Kafka commends Kleist and Goethe, disparages Dickens, grapples with studies of Judaism, and meditates on the differences between theatre and the novel. Memoirs, biographies, and collections of letters fascinate him, as if he can imbibe reality only when it has been committed to the page.

Fittingly, he does not bother to cordon fiction off from everything else, and it can be difficult to distinguish his literary essays from his daydreams. Beginnings tantalize and sometimes swell into proto-stories, which then peter out without warning. In one of them, the narrator announces, "I wanted to read, but my neighbor broke the door in two with an axe." In another, the narrator, having fallen asleep, fails to keep an appointment with his friends. When they come to rouse him, he tells us,

I was very startled, jumped out of the bed and attended to nothing but getting ready as quickly as possible. When I stepped out the door fully dressed, my friends backed away from me in apparent fright. "What do you have behind your head" they cried. Ever since I had woken up I had felt something hindering me from leaning my head back and now I groped with my hand for this hindrance. My friends, having pulled themselves together a little, cried "Be careful, don't hurt yourself" just as I grasped the hilt of a sword behind my head.

This particular piece never reappears, but many similar fragments are reworked and regurgitated with minor revisions, often in the course of several years. Six times Kafka fiddles with a sketch about the adverse effects of education, which he ultimately abandons. Occasionally, there are first drafts of full works, including "The Judgment," the story that Kafka completed in a surge of ecstasy in a single night.

Aside from these forays into fiction, the diaries' most arresting writing is clinically visual. Kafka's many meticulous descriptions of acquaintances,

strangers, and urban tableaux are as cruelly observant as a portrait by Lucian Freud. “Artless transition from the taut skin of my boss’s bald head to the delicate wrinkles of his forehead,” one reads. “An obvious, quite easily imitated failing of nature, bank notes should not be made in such a way.” A Yiddish actor reciting a monologue “clenches the skin of his forehead and of the root of his nose as one believes only hands can be clenched.” Kafka writes unsentimentally about his lovers, but he displays incongruous tenderness about striking scenes around the city: at one point, he effuses, “The sight of stairs moves me so much today.”

The myth of Kafka as an inveterate melancholic has not prepared us for his endearments toward stairs. From this master of self-flagellation we expect only litanies of miseries and maladies. And the diaries do include their share of obligatory despairing. Kafka takes evident pleasure in posturing as an incurable, and he is unfailingly dramatic about minor infirmities. When he has a headache, it is as if he has “two little boards screwed against my temples”; when he cannot sleep, he feels as if he has laid his head “in a false hole.” He was keenly sensitive to sound, and in a short piece later published in a magazine he whines that his bedroom is “the headquarters of the noise of the whole apartment.” His letters have much to say about his phobia of mice. As his biographer Reiner Stach so aptly puts it, “For this man absolutely anything could become a problem.”

Not that all of Kafka’s grievances were so trivial. He certainly had reason to rail against the monotony of his deadening office routine, and it is hard not to sympathize when he laments that his life “resembles the punishment in which the pupil has to write down the same sentence, senseless at least in its repetition, ten times, a hundred times or even more depending on his offense”—except in his case “it’s a punishment under the condition ‘as many times as you can stand it.’ ” There are periods when his depression darkens around him so densely that it blots out even the possibility of light: “Some deny the misery by pointing to the sun, he denies the sun by pointing to the misery.” The only thing that the dusk could not reach was his writing, or so

he was convinced. “When it had become clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction of my being,” he confesses, “everything thronged there and left empty all the abilities that were directed toward the pleasures of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection music first and foremost. I wasted away in all these directions.” And yet even here, in this wail of anguish, he regards his writing as something writhing in his “organism,” in his viscera, not something anemic and apart.

Even the keenest torment can coexist comfortably with a robust appetite for living. Kafka was, like anyone else, a mass of contradictions, and both his letters and his diaries refute the caricature of the writer as a fleshless recluse. If anything, Kafka emerges in the diaries as a surprisingly functional person, subject to the usual vicissitudes of mood. Sometimes he denies the sun, but one day he exults for no apparent reason, “I would like to explain the feeling of happiness that I have within me from time to time as I do right now.”

In a letter to Felice, Kafka fantasizes about retreating to a cellar:

I have often thought that the best mode of life for me would be to sit in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp. Food would be brought and always put down far away from my room, outside the cellar’s outermost door.

And yet the diaries reveal that Kafka made no effort to live ascetically. He is busy attending plays and lectures, and, in later years, the newfangled institution of the cinema. Nor was he ever the solitary hermit of his imaginings: “Wonderful evening yesterday with Max. If I love myself, I love him even more strongly.” In his notes from a 1911 trip to Paris that he took with Brod, he writes, “How easily grenadine with seltzer goes through one’s nose when one laughs.”

And Kafka was too devoted a *Lebensreformer* to remain sequestered in a lightless, airless basement. In the diaries, he waxes with uncharacteristic sentimentality after a stroll outside, “On the garden path the goddess of

happiness drifts toward you.” In an entry from August, 1911, he reports that he does not regret spending the summer swimming rather than writing: “the time that has now gone by, in which I haven’t written a word, has been important for me because at the swimming schools in Prague, Königssaal and Czernoschitz I have stopped being ashamed of my body.”

Although he never entirely exorcised his distaste for his gaunt physique, he remains so obsessively attentive to the ordeal of embodiment that it is hard to tell whether his form disgusts or delights him. Nowhere is it more apparent that hypochondria is a kind of perverse sensuality than in Kafka’s diaries. He wonders how he can “bear” his future “with this body pulled out of a junk room”—but he also marvels over his ear, which is “rough cool juicy to the touch like a leaf.” Even pain can be a delicacy: “The pleasure again in imagining a knife twisted in my heart.” Often, he thinks with a frisson of chopping and stabbing.

Kafka’s fiction is full of animals who resemble people and people who lapse into animality. In “The Metamorphosis,” the unfortunate Gregor Samsa regards his old furniture as a reminder of his erstwhile humanity, even in the wake of his transformation into a giant insect who can no longer sit in a chair; in “Investigations of a Dog,” the canine narrator endeavors to distinguish himself from the rest of his ravenous species by fasting. The Kafka of the diaries resembles these characters, alternately suppressing and succumbing to his overpowering appetites. Sometimes he is a human who yearns to become an animal, sometimes an animal straining to become a human. “This longing I almost always have, once I feel my stomach is healthy, to heap up in myself fantasies of taking terrible risks with food,” he writes hungrily:

I shove the long rinds of rib meat unbitten into my mouth and then pull them out again from behind tearing through my stomach and intestines. I eat dirty grocery stores completely empty. Fill myself with herrings, pickles and all the bad old sharp foods. Candies are poured into me like hail.

He is no less avid for literature: “indubitable in me is the greed for books. . . . It’s as if this greed came from my stomach.”

Reading is also carnal, perhaps because Kafka so often spoke the lines of his work aloud, or had friends read them to him: after one such reading, he thinks, “one sentence rubs against the next like the tongue against a hollow or a false tooth.” Later, he reads sentences by Goethe “as if I were running along the stresses with my whole body.” Even abstractions take on a lush tangibility. Kafka’s gifts smart like injuries: he senses his “abilities, as if I were holding them in my hand; they tightened my chest, they inflamed my head.” When he squanders his talents on reports and memos at work, he regards the results “with a feeling of disgust and shame as if it were raw meat, cut out of my own flesh.”

Manifestly, writing was not an intellectual exercise for Kafka; it was a somatic shiver. Sometimes it was a spawning: “The Judgment” came out “like a veritable birth covered with filth and slime.” Sometimes it was a wounding: “I will jump into my novella even if it should cut up my face.” In one of the most often quoted passages of his letters, he compares great writing to a weapon smashing us open, insisting that “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.” These are gloriously mixed metaphors, always muscling their way from one image to the next. “I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else” can mean that life is subordinate to literature—but it can also mean that literature is coaxed to breathe and bleed.

Biography bursts into Kafka’s art at the level of content. “The Castle” and “The Trial” are full of the sorts of files and bureaucratic inanities that he would have encountered daily at the Accident Insurance Institute, and the workplace inspections that Vice-Secretary Kafka had to conduct probably inspired a bustling hotel scene in his first novel, “The Man Who Disappeared.”

But life also bursts into literature at the level of form, and in Kafka’s diaries

even the words are acrobatic. As Ross Benjamin notes in the thoughtful introduction to his new translation, his aim is to capture the extent to which the diaries were a “laboratory for Kafka’s literary production” and thereby catch the author “in the act of writing.” He has succeeded. Everything in the diaries thrashes. From one draft to the next, characters squirm into new shapes. Phrases are mutilated and mangled back together.

One of the most harrowing stories in Kafka’s œuvre, “In the Penal Colony,” envisions a device that carves the text of broken laws into offenders’ skin. The image is brutal but strangely consoling, a dream of wholeness in which there is no distance between description and its object. The victims suffer for hours, but a “look of transfiguration” eventually dawns on each penitent’s face. At last, the mute body has been transmogrified into language. The diaries are not unlike Kafka’s sinister apparatus. They, too, serve not to disembody life but to embody literature: they are the intimate incisions of an author who could write only by etching words into the flesh. ♦