“Digging the Pit of Babel”: Retranslating Franz Kafka’s *Castle*

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Recently I completed a new translation of Kafka’s splendidly enigmatic novel *The Castle*. The only other English translation, by Edwin and Willa Muir, first appeared in 1930, only six years after Kafka’s premature death in a sanitarium outside Vienna.

Translation is a complex issue, and retranslation doubly so. That is no doubt why the reviewers of new translations of modern works often sound confused. Take, for instance, the reception accorded in the *New York Times Book Review* a couple of years ago to two new translations of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The reviewer was Richard Lourie, who has translated many works from Russian and might therefore seem qualified to pass judgment. However, in the first paragraph Lourie makes a startling statement that ought to have made him think twice before agreeing to write the review. After revealing that he devoured Constance Garnett’s rendering of *Crime and Punishment* at the age of twenty but had only recently read the novel in Russian, he adds: “Of course, the original read at the age of fifty could never shake you like a translation read at twenty.”¹ Lourie’s admission that he prefers Garnett’s English to Dostoevsky’s Russian perhaps explains why he then speaks kindly of Garnett, severely criticizes the authors of the new translations, and concludes—in the language of an Olympic adjudicator—that nobody has yet won the gold.

Lourie’s praise for Constance Garnett is rather odd. After all, she has come to symbolize Victorian bowdlerizing at its most crass. She can even be seen on stage in Christopher Durang’s farce *The Idiots Karamazov*, which pokes fun at her maltreatment of Russian novelists. The gray-haired lady seated all evening in the wings, eavesdropping on the characters, is none other than Garnett. Visibly riled by the antics

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unfolding center-stage, she repeatedly intervenes in an effort to impose her strict British standards on the coarse-mouthed Russians.

The new Kafka translations currently being prepared under the direction of Arthur H. Samuelson at Schocken Books, a division of Random House, are not an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, ours could be called a great era for retranslation—witness the new renderings of Mann, Musil, and Proust that have either appeared recently or are underway. Publishers have, of course, their own reasons for commissioning these new translations. Sometimes it is simply a question of acting before the copyright on the old translation runs out. Another more intriguing reason is the widespread dissatisfaction in literary circles with the first translators of the great modernists, whose sense of style had been formed by nineteenth-century literature and who therefore often failed to capture the modernist idiom.

Nowadays, most reputable practitioners of literary translation have a different conception of the art than that which held sway in the early decades of this century. It is high time for all of us—translators, critics, and readers—to acknowledge this change in the paradigm governing the practice of the craft. Those of us who set about retranslating the modernists endeavor to render the tone of the original with greater accuracy than that sought or even desired by our predecessors, whose priorities lay elsewhere.

The efforts of the first English translators of the modernists were, of course, highly effective. Thanks to their elegant renditions, countless English-speaking readers gained access to important modernists. Given the barriers facing all foreign-language authors in a culture as notoriously self-sufficient as is the Anglo-American one, that is in itself a remarkable achievement. However, it is clear now that the ease with which these authors were naturalized points to a weakness in the translations themselves. The first translators were often more interested in making their translations conform to traditional aesthetic criteria, for example, elegance, vividness, smoothness of texture, than in the pains-taking effort to echo the prose style of the original. They had no qualms about introducing grace notes to compensate for aesthetic "deficiencies" in the original. As a result, their versions often smuggle in through the back door of translation the very prose style that the modernists sought to subvert.

Translators such as Constance Garnett, the Muirs, Helen Lowe-Porter (Mann's principal translator), and Scott Montcrieff were more willing to embellish the prose style of their authors than most of us are now. Two examples must suffice: In his Proust translation, Scott Montcrieff characteristically resorts to a lofty quotation from Shakespeare, Remem-
brance of *Things Past*, to render the straightforward French title *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Today, we frown upon such stylistic enhancements, which were once considered the pinnacle of achievement in translation. In the case of Thomas Mann, Lowe-Porter frankly admits that she is quite willing to “break up” his sentences and “even transpose them.” In a pinch, she simply discards chunks of Mann’s finely wrought prose. Today the reputable practitioners of literary translation—I am not speaking of those who “translate” even though they are incapable of ordering breakfast in the source language—are usually less willing than their predecessors to embroider upon the prose of their authors.

These two conflicting approaches to translation actually go back quite far. The eighteenth century was the great era of embellishing translation, whereas the emphasis on the need to capture the tone of the original as faithfully as possible became pronounced during the Romantic period. As the Russian translator Kornei Chukovskii points out in his study of translation, *A High Art*, with the onset of Romanticism translators began to discard the eighteenth-century notion of a disembodied aesthetic ideal that translators were supposed to strive after. Instead, they began to base the practice of their art on the assumption that there is “a concrete work and a concrete author whose individuality must be preserved in translation even by reproducing his errors and lapses.”

How best to describe the unique style of Franz Kafka in *The Castle*? Thomas Mann speaks of its “precise, almost official conservatism.” However, that is only part of the story. It would be more accurate to say that Kafka is a conservative modernist. The writers in his personal pantheon reflect his oscillation between conservative-classical and modern styles: Goethe, Kleist, the Austrian novelist Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868), the rustic moralist Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826), Dickens (though Kafka disliked his verbosity), Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and that quirky Swiss modernist Robert Walser.

One of the most modern features of *The Castle* is its omission of transitions. As Roger Shattuck suggests in his illuminating study of the French avant-garde, *The Banquet Years*, the “classic” idea of style arose from “the undisputed supremacy of transition,” whereas modern artists have largely concerned themselves with the “art of juxtaposition.” Seen thus, *The Castle* is a hybrid work, combining conservative-classical and distinctly modern traits.

Another characteristically modern feature of the novel is the absence of a unitary style. The tone of the prose varies considerably. At times, it is downright abrupt. Kafka often omits transitions between phrases, leaving it up to the reader to detect the subterranean connections between them. In *The Castle* and other late stories such as “The Burrow”
he is, as he once intimated in a notebook, digging the pit of Babel. Moreover, he requires his readers—not to speak of his translators!—to do quite a bit of digging, too.

The tempo of the prose reflects K.'s inner state. When K. is agitated, it is choppy. When K. loses himself in the labyrinth of his paranoid logic, it is tortuous and wordy. At times, Kafka's language parodies the convoluted jargon of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, which he encountered daily through his job as an insurance official. A key chapter depicts a fateful encounter between K. and the official Bürgel: just as K. is offered a momentous opportunity, he dozes off, understandably enough, since Bürgel is droning on in almost impenetrable pseudo-officialese, which I have tried to make as murky in English as it is in German. Elsewhere, however, the narrative presses forward relentlessly. At such moments, Kafka's stark prose becomes a miracle of precision. As the novel progresses, the lightly punctuated writing becomes increasingly fluid, culminating in a barmaid's breathless speech.

W. H. Auden once said that anybody who presents a new translation of a literary classic ought to justify the endeavor—a task, he adds, "which can only be congenial to the malicious." I am loath to criticize the Muirs, whose smooth translation I read with relief, alongside the more puzzling original, while still an undergraduate in Dublin. Fortunately, I do not have to cast the first stone.

For several decades now critics and scholars have been faulting the Muirs for taking excessive liberties with Kafka's texts, for failing to capture the stylistic tone of the original, for misleading readers about its texture, and even for distorting its intellectual substance. Thirteen years ago, during the centenary of Kafka's birth, S. S. Prawer summed up the case against the Muirs in the Times Literary Supplement: "Scholar after scholar has told us of the Muirs' tendency to tone down Kafka's ominousness and make his central figures more kindly than they are in the original. They misunderstood some of Kafka's phrases and sentences [and] tended to obscure Kafka's cross-references by elegant variation. At other times, the Muirs import connections where there are none in the original."

What's more, the Muirs had to depend on Max Brod's deeply flawed editions. As Kafka's editor, Brod's chief ambition was to transform the manuscripts of his friend into classics of world literature—in his normative understanding of that term. With this aim in mind, he not only made a number of substantive editorial interventions—about two per page—but also regularized Kafka's punctuation, and occasionally his syntax, too. Another problem was Brod's piecemeal approach to publishing Kafka. He was continually "discovering" new Kafka material. Even in the late sixties, he could proudly announce—to the writer H. G.
Adler—that he had discovered a Kafka story. When the visitor asked him where he had unearthed it, he simply said: “Why, here in my desk, of course!”

The introduction of a so-called definitive edition of *The Castle* in 1954 created almost as many problems as it solved. To this day, readers of the novel are confronted mid-way through chapter 18 by an abrupt announcement, coming this time not from the Castle authorities, but from the *Castle* editors: “Here the text of the first German edition of *The Castle* ends. What follows is the continuation of the text, together with additional material (different versions, fragments, passages deleted by the author, etc.) as found among Kafka’s papers after the publication of the first edition and included by the editor, Max Brod, in the definitive, fourth German edition” (331). It’s hard to say whether the tone here is intentionally mock-bureaucratic or not. In any case, after this Brechtian alienation effect the Muirs’s translation yields to that of Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, who translated two remaining chapters, plus an assortment of appendices, which Brod dug out of his famous bottom drawer.

Fortunately, those hodgepodge editions have been superseded by new German editions scrupulously edited by leading Kafka scholars. In the case of *The Castle* and *The Trial*, the critical editions (1982 and 1990, respectively) were prepared by Sir Malcolm Pasley, who adheres scrupulously to Kafka’s manuscripts. It is, incidentally, thanks to Pasley that many of Kafka’s original manuscripts are in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. In 1961 he transported them to England from a Zurich vault, where Max Brod, fearful lest war erupt in the Middle East, had deposited them.

In 1982 Pasley’s German edition of *The Castle* was hailed in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Ritchie Robertson, author of a ground-breaking 1985 study of Kafka’s relationship to Judaism: “this edition will decisively alter our understanding of Kafka, and renders previous ones obsolete . . . The blame lies with the transcribers and/or printers who transposed or omitted many words and entire phrases, and who turned ‘coarse mockery’ into ‘great mockery,’ ‘a jumble of houses’ into a ‘lot of houses,’ ‘not a sound’ into ‘not a guest,’ etc.” In the same issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, S. S. Prawer concluded that it was “irresponsible” of Kafka’s English-language publishers—Secker & Warburg and Penguin in the U.K. and Schocken Books in the U.S.—to continue calling the expanded 1954 version of *The Castle* the “definitive” edition.

The latest voice in this critical chorus is George Steiner. In an introduction to the newly designed reprinting of the Muirs’s translation of *The Trial* (1995), he openly criticizes Brod’s edition and the Muirs’s translation. He points out that Brod’s version of the German text is
“amateurish and, at certain points, arbitrary”; besides, Edwin Muir "reads out of Kierkegaardian Calvinism," that is, out of a synthesis of his original Scottish faith and Kierkegaard’s more skeptical theology. He "misses almost altogether the immersion of The Trial in motifs and concerns of a radically Judaic-Talmudic kind."17

When these comments by Steiner first appeared in Britain a few years ago, in a reprint of the Muirs’s translation of the same novel, some reviewers—including the novelist John Banville writing in The Irish Times—asked, if the Brod/Muir version is as inadequate as Steiner suggests, why is the publisher reprinting it? Unfortunately, to this day Kafka’s principal publishers in the U.S. and Britain continue to claim that the texts on which the Muirs’s translations of The Castle and The Trial are based are definitive. But that is no longer true.

Nonetheless it would be wrong to suggest that there is unanimity among Kafka critics on the topic of Kafka translations, or on any other topic for that matter. So, before commenting on my own translation, I should like to examine the symptomatic confusion about the goals of literary translation displayed by the British scholar Ronald Gray, whose 1956 study of The Castle was the first monograph on a Kafka novel.18 Although Gray is an astute reader of Kafka, like many critics he has not decided what it is that he expects of translation. On one hand, in a 1977 article provocatively entitled “But Kafka Wrote in German,”19 he sometimes appears to argue in favor of what I would call the new paradigm in literary translation. Using an apt formulation—which I often thought about while I was working on The Castle—he says that “translating Kafka is not a matter of making a daring fling, or of taking the whole meaning of a sentence into one’s ‘English’ consciousness to refashion it entirely anew, with such faithfulness as one language can accord to one another, but rather of a patient attention to the resonance of each word, the rhythm of each sentence, with only occasionally the challenge of retreating out of a totally foreign medium” (251). On the other hand, he praises the Muirs for adding Dickensian flourishes not present in the original—this, he says, shows “a touch of genius” (242–43). I would argue, however, that the Muirs’s inappropriate bursts of creativity undermine the absolutely essential neutrality of Kafka’s tone. Moreover, Gray applauds the Muirs for tidying up Kafka’s prose, which, in his view, is marred by the constant repetition of words expressing doubt or uncertainty: “‘Perhaps,’ ‘probably,’ ‘certainly’ (when there is usually no certainty), ‘indeed,’ and the vague ‘somehow,’ ‘somewhere,’ ‘somebody,’ add to the impression that a barely asserted portrayal is being offered” (246). Here Gray is criticizing Kafka for being his diffident self! He also believes that the Muirs do Kafka a favor by excising those
objectionable features: “Weariness may have played a part in allowing such words to occur so often . . . the Muirs are, thank goodness not doggedly faithful in rendering them” (my italics). One may ask whether the Muirs truly deserve our vote of thanks for thus “improving” upon the prose of a genius.

Gray claims that from 1914 onwards Kafka’s style displays a “lack of full control” (246). If that were already true of Brod’s editions, then the Kafka of the critical editions must be out of control. However, I find that judgment inappropriately normative. It is hardly reasonable to expect full control from a writer of Kafka’s uncanny clairvoyance, a writer, who, having only the vaguest idea of what he was about to write, could dash off his literary breakthrough, “The Judgment,” in one sitting. That story is certainly not in full control either, and yet Kafka himself considered it the most powerful piece that he had ever written. A mere glance at the manuscript of The Castle shows that it, too, was written with the intuitive certainty of a somnambulist. Critics like Gray are clearly seeking in Kafka the polish that we associate with “the classics.” However, Kafka is not quite a classic—at least not in the sense indicated at the outset of this piece. In any case, we translators surely have a duty to render the voice that we hear, however odd it may sound. I, for one, see myself, not as Kafka’s editor, but as his medium.

As in the case of The Trial, one of the major problems with the Muirs’s Castle is that it furthers their theological agenda, which was heavily influenced by Brod’s. Brod regarded the Castle as the seat of divine grace; Muir stated bluntly that “the theme of the novel is salvation.” Moreover, in his introduction to the first English edition (1930)20 he depicts the novel as the modern equivalent of Bunyan’s seventeenth-century prose allegory The Pilgrim’s Progress. That notion, which was to dominate the critical debate for decades to come, is now widely discredited. Muir himself had forceful views on such matters. He was convinced that literature could not survive the demise of religious belief: “If that belief were to fail completely and for good, there would be no imaginative art with a significance beyond its own time. But it is inconceivable that it should fail, for it is native to man.”21

Those strong convictions leave their mark on the Muirs’s translation. Whether consciously or not, they create an English version that fits the religious mold far more neatly than does the original. Of course, they were not the only ones to fall under Brod’s spell. Even Thomas Mann, whose influential foreword spurred interest in the novel, adheres to Brod’s simplistic theological interpretation.

The Muirs’s translations fail to do justice to Kafka’s modernity in part because the literary sensibility of Edwin, the primary stylist, had been
molded by nineteenth-century figures such as Thackeray and Dickens rather than by modernists such as Joyce\textsuperscript{22} and Virginia Woolf. Years before first encountering Kafka, Edwin had launched a frontal attack on modernist currents in literature and the arts in a book with the rather incongruous title \textit{We Moderns}, which concludes with a call for “a new form of prayer.”\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, in a study of the novel published around the time when he and Willa were settling down to translate Kafka, he listed the deficiencies of Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses}: “its design is arbitrary, its development feeble, its unity questionable.”\textsuperscript{24} For Muir unity is a \textit{sine qua non} of great literature. Is it any wonder then that he should seek to impose it on Kafka’s \textit{Castle}?

As for the actual process of translation, Edwin, the poet and man of letters, was most adept at polishing the English, while Willa, with her training as a classical philologist, ensured a degree of accuracy in the rendering of the German. However, she had a pronounced weakness for inappropriately colorful words\textsuperscript{25} and clearly subscribed to the older paradigm of literary translation. She lets the cat out of the bag when she describes their collaborative rendition of Lion Feuchtwanger’s historical novel \textit{Jud Süß}: “I cannot say that we translated \textit{Jud Süß}; what we produced was a polished rendering of it.”\textsuperscript{26}

Edwin Muir was Franz Kafka’s junior by only two years. Indeed, while Kafka was out in the countryside writing \textit{The Castle}, the Scottish pair were in Prague studying Czech. They never met Kafka; if they had, they would have been obliged to converse in the Muirs’s rudimentary Czech, since Edwin and Willa knew “only a few words of German.”\textsuperscript{27} Subsequently the Muirs moved to Dresden, where they learned German.

Ronald Gray is one of several critics who have called attention to the “really surprising . . . number of straightforward misunderstandings” in the Muirs’s translations, which “vary in importance from unimportant slips to misleading versions of quite important passages.”\textsuperscript{28} He attributes those misunderstandings to the economic exigency of the Muirs—the bane of translators, then as now. More to the point, however, is the lateness of the Muirs’s encounter with German—Edwin set about learning German at the age of thirty-five, long past the optimal age for language acquisition.

Moreover, the Muirs fail to render the neutral, dispassionate quality of Kafka’s language. One scholar, Joyce Crick of University College, London, has criticized them for choosing vocabulary that “is more vivid than Kafka’s neutral speech. . . . They opted for the natural surface rather than for the unnatural undercurrent.”\textsuperscript{29}

One cannot discuss translation without giving concrete examples, and that is what I now propose to do. First, I shall compare three versions—
the German original (critical edition), the Muirs’s translation, and mine—of a central, if rather dense, passage early in the novel, in which K. compares the church-tower in his hometown with the tower of the Castle:

Und er verglich in Gedanken den Kirchturm der Heimat mit dem Turm dort oben. Jener Turm, bestimmt, ohne Zögern, geradenwegs nach oben sich verjüngend, breitdachig abschließend mit roten Ziegeln, ein irdisches Gebäude—was können wir anderes bauen?—aber mit höherem Ziel als das niedrige Häusergemenge und mit klarerem Ausdruck als ihn der trübe Werktag hat. Der Turm hier oben—es war der einzige sichtbare—der Turm eines Wohnhauses, wie sich jetzt zeigte, vielleicht des Hauptschlosses, war ein einförmiger Rundbau, zum Teil gnädig von Epheu verdeckt, mit kleinen Fenstern, die jetzt in der Sonne aufstrahlten—etwas Irrsinniges hatte das—und einem süsserartigen Abschluß, dessen Mauerzinnen unsicher, unregelmäßig, brüchig wie von ängstlicher oder nachlässiger Kinderhand gezeichnet sich in den blauen Himmel zackten. Es war wie wenn irgendein trübseliger Hausbewohner, der gerechter Weise im entlegensten Zimmer des Hauses sich hätte eingesperrt halten sollen, das Dach durchbrochen und sich erhoben hätte, um sich der Welt zu zeigen. (S 18)

And in his mind he compared the church tower at home with the tower above him. The church tower, firm in line, soaring unfalteringly to its tapering point, topped with red tiles and broad in the roof, an earthly building—what else can men build?—but with a loftier goal than the humble dwelling-houses, and a clearer meaning than the humble muddle of everyday life. The tower above him here—the only one visible—the tower of a house, as was now evident, perhaps of the main building, was uniformly round, part of it graciously mantled with ivy, pierced by small windows that glittered in the sun—with a somewhat maniacal glitter—and topped by what looked like an attic, with battlements that were irregular, broken, fumbling, as if designed by the trembling or careless hand of a child, clearly outlined against the blue. It was as if a melancholy-mad tenant who ought to have been kept locked in the topmost chamber of his house had burst through the roof and lifted himself up to the gaze of the world. (C 12)

And in thought he compared the churchtower in his homeland with the tower up there. The churchtower, tapering off clearly and unequivocally as it rose, culminating in a wide roof with red tiles, was an earthly building—what else can we build?—but had a higher goal than the low pile of houses and a clearer expression than that of the dull workday. The tower up here—it was the only one in sight—the tower of a residence, as now became apparent, possibly of the main castle, was a monotonous round building, mercifully hidden in part by ivy, with little windows which suddenly glinted in the sun—there was something quite mad about this—ending in a kind of terrace, whose battlements, uncertain, irregular, brittle, as though drawn by the anxious or careless hand of a
child, zigzagged into the blue sky. It was as if some gloomy resident, who should have rightly remained locked up in the most out-of-the-way room in the house, had broken through the roof and risen to reveal himself to the world.

It is particularly important to render the tone of the original as faithfully as possible in pregnant passages such as this, which foreground—to borrow a term developed by the Prague Linguistic Circle only a few years after Kafka’s death of tuberculosis in 1924—language itself, with the help of techniques more commonly encountered in poetry than in prose.30 There is no denying that the Muirs’s version of this passage still reads well. Indeed, critics who regard smooth readability as the prime criterion in translation might prefer their version of this passage to mine. Provided, that is, that they do not look at the original. My English is stranger and denser than the Muirs’s. It is also less vivid than theirs. But then so, too, is Kafka’s German.

Given that the Muirs generally try to make Kafka sound as natural as possible, it is surprising to hear them use the odd term “melancholy-mad.” That compound grates on the ears of English speakers, seemingly for no good reason. Why use such a strange locution for the unremarkable German word trübselig, which contains subtle gradations of meaning but essentially corresponds to “melancholy” or “gloomy”? I chose the latter because I wanted to capture, at least partially, the association in the German text between this gloomy occupant (“trübseliger Hausbewohner”) and the dull workday (“trüber Werktag”). I say partially because I could not find a way to replicate the repetition of the trüb—without sounding inappropriately arch.

On closer inspection, it becomes obvious that the Muirs insert the word mad in the passage because they are disconcerted by such associative leaps. Kafka often juxtaposes phrases without transition; the Muirs tend to put in the “missing” links. Here they use the adjective mad because they want to bridge the narrative gap that they perceive between the description of the Castle—and K.’s allusion to the insane effect of the sun lighting up the windows—and the startling final image of the possibly deranged man who suddenly breaks through the roof. If Kafka leaves it up to the reader to construct such bridges, his translators surely ought to follow suit.

The Muirs often whittle away at the interpretive choices open to the reader. Generally, Kafka sounds more tentative and oblique in German than he does in their English. Indeed, in the passage above, they transform the cryptic language of the original into an unambiguous sermon about the gulf between the human and the divine.31 In German a pregnant phrase—“mit klarerem Ausdruck als ihn der trübe Werktag hat”—merely hints at the symbolic implication of the church-tower. I
echo Kafka’s terseness by rendering the phrase as “a clearer expression than that of the dull workday.” That phrase may sound baffling, though no more so than it is in German. The Muirs spell out what is merely implicit in Kafka: they attribute to the church-tower “a clearer meaning than the muddle of daily life.” Characteristically, they thereby transform Kafka’s ostensibly neutral—if covertly figurative—phrasing into clear-cut value judgments. In their translation the church-tower symbolizes all too clearly the superiority of religious truth over the confusion of everyday life. The voice we are hearing here is not Kafka’s, but Brod’s.

Since the Muirs view K. as a pilgrim in search of salvation—a twentieth-century incarnation of Bunyan’s Christian—it is not surprising that they should fail to render the criticism that Kafka continually directs at K.\(^3\) I myself have no quarrel with the view that Kafka is a skeptical mystic. However, like most critics nowadays I do not subscribe to the simpleminded theological exegesis advocated by Brod and the Muirs. And that is one reason why K. is about as calculating and self-centered in my translation as he is in the original. For instance, in the very first chapter Kafka uses the potentially ambiguous phrase “nach seinen Berechnungen” (S 30) to describe K.’s thinking. The Muirs translate this phrase—which on account of the differing chapter breaks in Brod’s edition occurs at the beginning of their second chapter—as “by his reckoning” (23); I render the phrase as “according to his calculations” because I hear in it a covert allusion to one of K.’s most salient characteristics. Besides, that phrase is doing double duty here; it also alludes to K.’s ostensible profession as a “calculating” (berechnender) land-surveyor.

Kafka and his audience often burst out laughing when he read aloud from his works. Some attribute this explosion of mirth to gallows humor. However, no such label can do justice to Kafka’s oblique sense of humor. It is unfortunate that, as several critics and at least one translator have pointed out, the Muirs often fail to catch deliberate uses of humor on Kafka’s part while gratuitously injecting inappropriate humor in other instances.\(^3\)

In The Castle, K. is the main butt of Kafka’s irony. One of the challenges that I faced in translating the novel was to catch that delicate innuendo without making it more audible in English than it is in German. Here is a characteristic example from the first chapter: K., who has just taken a nap in one of the village houses, is described as “ein wenig hellhöriger als früher” (24). The Muirs say that K.’s “perceptions [were] somewhat quickened” (17); sticking closer to the German, I write that K. was “slightly keener of hearing than before.” I render Kafka’s seemingly innocent phrase as literally as I can, not because I am a doctrinaire Nabokovian, but because I overhear in it a sly dig at K.’s
obtuseness. By translating Kafka all too freely, the Muirs miss many of these subterranean allusions.

The underground humor of The Castle emerges in the following exchange between K. and his two assistants, who may have walked in from the silent films that so captivated Kafka:

"This is difficult," said K., comparing their faces as he had often done before, "how am I supposed to distinguish between you. Your names differ, but otherwise you're as alike as"—he hesitated, then continued involuntarily—"otherwise you're as alike as snakes." They smiled. "People can usually distinguish quite easily between us," they said in self-defense. "I can believe that," said K., "since I witnessed it myself, but I can only see with these eyes and they do not permit me to distinguish between you. So I shall treat you as one person and call you both Arthur, that's what one of you is called, you, perhaps?"—K. asked one. "No," he said, "My name is Jeremiah." "Well, it doesn't matter" said K., "I shall call you both Arthur."35

The almost slapstick humor in such scenes is far from incidental. This odd pair, Arthur and Jeremiah, are said to be K.'s assistants. Yet they actually work for the Castle and have been assigned to K. We do not learn the purpose of their mysterious assignment until close to where the novel breaks off. By then the two have become so disenchanted with K.'s harsh treatment that Arthur files a complaint against K. at the Castle; whereupon K. asks Jeremiah what the complaint is about:

"What is your complaint, then?" asked K. "Our complaint," said Jeremiah, "is that you cannot take a joke. . . . When Galater sent us to you . . . he said—I took careful note of this, since it is of course the basis of our complaint—you are being sent there as the surveyor's assistants.' We said: 'But we know nothing about that kind of work.' He: 'That isn't so important; should it become necessary, he will teach you. It is important, though, that you cheer him up a little. From what I hear, he takes everything very seriously. He has come to the village and immediately considers this a great event, whereas in reality it is nothing. You should let him know this."35

Hitherto, K. has always regarded Arthur and Jeremiah as obstacles obstructing his path. Yet it now turns out that they were his closest links to the Castle. They constitute a new twist on that ancient stock figure, the wise fool, for, as Walter Benjamin once observed, in Kafka's world "those seeing to help fallen man are fools; but only fools can help." The ultimate significance, if any, of the Castle authorities may always elude us, but one thing we can say with certainty: they do have a sense of humor. Otherwise why would they assign two Chaplinesque assistants to K. with instructions to cheer him up?

Moreover, the overtones in Kafka's spare—and at times even dull-
looking—prose emerge most clearly when it is read aloud. This became clear to me during a reading that I gave from my translation at the Czech Center in Vienna in June 1995. At first, the audience was grim-faced. One Viennese woman told me that in preparation for the reading she had read eighty pages of the novel in German, without finding the slightest reason to smile. During the reading, however, I could hear her chuckling.

In German-speaking countries Kafka is not read aloud as often as he used to be. Perhaps that is why some readers there have lost touch with the irony and humor that immediately struck the first reviewers of Kafka—and even more strikingly—his first audiences. Indeed, it has been suggested that Kafka achieved his greatest impact on his contemporaries through public readings from his work by the reciter Ludwig Hardt, who, at Kafka’s request, occasionally included in his program pieces by Kafka’s literary favorites, for example, a humorous anecdote of Kleist’s about a deceptively sluggish Prussian.36

Kafka often leaves it up to readers to discern his transitions, which are often hidden. Sudden alterations of tone, even within a single sentence, catch the reader off guard. Take, for instance, this rather perplexing instance from the first chapter:

Er bewegte sich freier, stützte seinen Stock einmal hier einmal dort auf, näherte sich der Frau im Lehnstuhl, war übrigens auch der körperlich größte im Zimmer. (S 24).

He felt less constrained, poked with his stick here and there, approached the woman in the arm-chair, and noted that he himself was physically the biggest man in the room. (C 17).

He moved about more freely, rested his stick here and there, approached the woman in the armchair; besides he was the biggest in the room.

To readers unaccustomed to modern narrative, the last phrase of this sentence may seem out of place. The first three phrases describe a sequence of actions and clearly belong together; the fourth belongs to a different category since it describes an attribute of K.’s. The Muirs evidently thought something was missing, and in an effort to close this apparent gap in narrative logic, they insert an explicit link such as one would find in a nineteenth-century novel—a linking phrase for which there is no counterpart in German: “he noted that he himself. . . .” Baffled by the original, they edit Kafka until he makes sense to them. Unfortunately, the resulting English is more conventional than Kafka’s occasionally startling German.

That particular shift in mid-sentence reflects the original narrative
voice employed by Kafka in *The Castle*. It is evident from the manuscript that Kafka began writing the novel in the first person, but then, as Dorrit Cohn has pointed out, in the middle of the astonishing love-making scene with Frieda at the end of the third chapter, he changed his mind, and cast the novel in the third person. Yet, even though he immediately went back and replaced all of the first person pronouns with "K.," one can still sense the ghostly presence of that "I."38

In *The Castle* indirect interior monologue alternates with narrative exposition, but it is not always easy to tell the two apart. Here it is clearly the narrator who is describing K.’s effort to locate Barnabas, his messenger:

Trotzdem schrie K. noch aus aller Kraft den Namen, der Name donner te durch die Nacht. (§ 47)

None the less K. yelled the name with the full force of his lungs. It thundered through the night. (C 36)

Nevertheless, with full force K. shouted out the name, the name thundered through the night.

In rendering that sentence I echo the effect of Kafka’s syntax by making the first phrase end with the word “name” and the next begin with the same word. The instant repetition creates an acoustic clash that mimics K.’s yell. The Muirs make no attempt to catch this effect, even though, in the words of one critic, they “overlooked certain problems of idiom, mainly in their care for the syntax.”39 One such instance of excessive fidelity to the German word order can be found in the Muirs’s version of a phrase in the sentence immediately following the example I have given. They invert the usual English word order by rendering Kafka’s phrase—“so weit war also Barnabas schon”—which is perfectly colloquial German as “so far away was Barnabas already.” What the Muirs fail to discern here, I believe, is that K. is talking to himself. I render the phrase as “so Barnabas was already that far,” which sounds like something K. could say to himself. The Muirs, who were brought up on the nineteenth-century English novel, were not as familiar as we are today with devices such as indirect interior monologue.

Of course, no translator’s solutions can ever be perfect. To some ears, my placing of the phrase “with full force” may sound slightly jarring. However, that is the best compromise I could find. Modern English shies away from inversions, and this restricts the options available to the translator. One simply has to strike the best balance one can. The ideal solution, of course, would be to replicate Kafka’s wonderfully elastic
syntax without making him sound less natural or more jarring—and he can be both—than he is in German. However, that is not always possible.

Over the years The Castle has defied the efforts of armies of interpreters from every conceivable ideological camp. It is easier for us today than it was for the Muirs to realize that the very act of interpretation is a central concern of Kafka’s. That obsession with interpretation is perhaps most evident in the second chapter, in which K. subjects a six-sentence letter from a mysterious official called Klamm to a brilliant analysis that would satisfy the most exacting of New Critics. Fittingly, the chapter ends with an allusion to interpretation:


“What did you want with the landlord?” she asked. “I wanted a bed for the night,” said K. “But you’re staying with us!” said Olga in surprise. “Of course,” said K., leaving her to make what she liked of it. (C 45)

“What was it you wanted from the landlord,” asked Olga. “I wanted to spend the night here,” said K. “But you are spending the night with us” said Olga in astonishment. “Yes, of course,” said K., leaving it to her to interpret the phrase.

Unlike the Muirs, I felt that it was necessary to keep this explicit reference to interpretation in a novel that consists of K.’s endlessly proliferating interpretations.

The Kafka brought to light by the critical editions has proved controversial. In Germany some critics objected to Malcolm Pasley’s decision to adhere to Kafka’s idiosyncratic punctuation, especially in the paperback version of the critical edition of The Castle. Of course, one could argue that Kafka would have tidied up the manuscript and inserted conventional punctuation prior to publication. However, his gradual abandoning of all punctuation save for commas, a few semicolons, and an occasional full-stop suggests that he is deliberately throwing his usual punctiliousness to the wind. He fails to abide by the conventional rules for printed texts because he is writing primarily for the ear.

Indeed, as one critic has pointed out, the manuscripts of the novels resemble score-sheets and are meant to be read aloud. In a diary entry of March 26, 1911 Kafka described the visceral impact of punctuation: “Omission of the period. In general the spoken sentence starts off in a large capital letter with the speaker, bends out in its course as far as it can towards the listener and with the period returns to the speaker. But if the period is omitted, then the sentence is no longer constrained and blows its entire breath at the listener.”
The starkness of Kafka's style could scarcely have escaped Beckett. Beckett had spent years trying to emerge from Joyce's shadow, however, and was not keen to have his work labeled as "Kafkaesque." In a rare newspaper interview, with a journalist from the New York Times, he stressed the distance between Kafka and himself: "I've only read Kafka in German—serious reading—except for a few things in French and English—only The Castle in German.... The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose. He's lost but he's not spiritually precarious, he's not falling to bits. My people seem to be falling to bits. Another difference. You notice how Kafka's form is classic, it goes on like a steam-roller—almost serene. It seems to be threatened the whole time—but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form." Beckett, the great practitioner of the literature of silence and failure, is not necessarily praising Kafka when he call his style "classic." One can detect in those comments a whiff of what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence. Beckett's anxiety would surely have increased had he read The Castle, not in Brod's normalized edition, but in that of Malcolm Pasley, who refuses to iron out Kafka's idiosyncrasies. In any case, as Ruby Cohn and Edith Kern have shown, Beckett's Watt owes a great deal to Kafka's Castle. When the new editions/translations of Kafka's novels are finally released, the stylistic affinities between these two often quite dissimilar modern masters should become apparent.

I must admit, though, that when I first read Beckett's comments about Kafka's prose, I was not sure what he meant by the "steamroller" effect. Only while working on the translation did I begin to see his point. There is something relentless about the forward momentum of passages such as the following, in which Kafka blends external narrative and indirect internal monologue:

Zufällig kam dann der Lehrer vorüber, trieb K. mit einem ärgerlichen Blick hinab, beim Absprung verletzte sich K. am Knie, nur mit Mühe kam er nachhause, aber auf der Mauer war er doch gewesen, das Gefühl dieses Sieges schien ihm damals für ein langes Leben einen Halt zu geben, was nicht ganz töricht gewesen war, denn jetzt nach vielen Jahren in der Schneenacht am Arm des Barnabas kam es ihm zuhilfe. (S 50)

By chance the teacher had come past and with a stern face had made K. descend. In jumping down he had hurt his knee and he had found some difficulty in getting home, but still he had been on the top of the wall. The sense of that triumph had seemed to him then a victory for life, which was not altogether foolish, for now so many years later on the arm of Barnabas in the snowy night the memory of it came to succor him. (C 36)
By chance the teacher along and with an angry look he drove K. down, in jumping off K. hurt his knee and only with difficulty reached home, but still he had been up on the wall, at the time he had thought that this feeling of victory would sustain him throughout a long life, and this hadn't been entirely foolish, for now, after many years, on the arm of Barnabas in this snowy night that feeling came to his aid.

The Muirs regularize Kafka's punctuation even more consistently than Max Brod did.\(^4\) As a result, they fail to capture the relentless quality described by Beckett. In contrast, I have tried, insofar as possible, to adhere to Kafka's frugal punctuation, which, with its rejection of semicolons in favor of commas, anticipates the practice of Beckett, who avowed his dislike of semicolons in *Watt* (1953) and abandoned them thereafter. Malcolm Pasley aptly describes Kafka's predominant prose style in *The Castle* as "flowing parataxis"\(^4\)—a term that also applies to Beckett's *Molloy*.

Nonetheless, I realize that my decision to retain Kafka's idiosyncratic punctuation will probably prove controversial. The resulting run-on sentences may well unsettle some readers. Indeed, one English professor told me that the prose of the new Kafka, as reflected in my translation, reminds him of the barely punctuated sentences that he all too often encounters in student papers. However, in an analogous instance in American literature, readers have come to accept the idiosyncratic punctuation of Emily Dickinson.

Brod's alterations have obscured the modernity of Kafka's prose for far too long. Since the early eighties, German-speaking readers have been able to savor the new Kafka. Unfortunately, English-speaking readers still lag behind. Besides, there is another reason for looking forward to the new Kafka translations: The critical debate about Kafka is currently in the doldrums, and fresh translations could help to rekindle it.\(^4\)

Unlike the Brod/Muir edition of *The Castle*, which relegates the most tantalizing passage in the novel to an appendix, the critical edition—and my translation—ends when Kafka lifts his pen in mid-sentence, letting the words fade into the page:

*She held out her trembling hand to K. and made him sit down beside her, she spoke with difficulty, it was difficult to understand her, but what she said*

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NOTES


2 See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962). Kuhn's brilliant analysis of the nature of scientific change can help shed light on the change that has taken place in the practice of literary translation since the early decades of this century. As Kuhn points out, the awareness of change in the sciences is often extremely localized. A paradigm change can happen "in a special segment of the scientific community," while other sections, even within the same physical science, remain unaware that there has been any such change (p. 61).

In the case of translation, many practitioners realize that a fundamental paradigm change has occurred, but this awareness has not caught on in some sections of the literary world. For instance, many reviewers, especially those writing for newspapers, continue to assess a translation exclusively on the basis of whether the English is "smooth" and "natural." This insistence on conventional aesthetic qualities often precludes any consideration of the specific texture of the original. Whether consciously or not, such critics subscribe to the old paradigm of literary translation. The tenacity of that outdated conception of translation brings to mind Max Planck's wry observation that "a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it" (p. 150).

Of course, one could object to the analogy I am drawing here on the grounds that there are few such generally accepted "truths" in the humanities. However, as Kuhn points out, "something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself" (p. 112).


16 Ritchie Robertson, "Not by Brod Alone," Times Literary Supplement (October 14, 1983).

17 George Steiner, "Introduction," in Franz Kafka, The Trial, ed. Edwin and Willa Muir with additional material by E. M. Butler (New York, 1995). George Steiner’s incisive comments about the Muirs are worth quoting in full: “Its translation [of The Trial] into English, by Edwin and Willa Muir, which followed in 1935, itself took on a classic aura. This is in one sense regrettable. Max Brod’s recension of Kafka’s text had been amateurish and, at certain points, arbitrary. Despite its famous conclusion, The Trial remains unfinished and there is argument about the order of various chapters . . . . It is, however, the Muir version, with its stylistic distinction and freshness of encounter, which, so far as the English-language world goes, remains canonic. But Muir’s reading and the translation which it underwrites are distinctly his: ‘His imagination moves continuously within that world and does not acknowledge that there is anything, no matter how trivial and undignified, which it does not embrace. Accordingly, it is in its unique way a complete world, a true though not unexpected reflection of the world we know. And when Kafka deals in it with the antinomies of religion, he is throwing light at the same time on the deepest riddles of human life.’ The religious core, claims Edwin Muir, is that of the incommensurabilities between divine and human law which ‘Kafka adopted from Kierkegaard.’ For such adoption there is hardly any evidence. Muir reads out of Kierkegaardian Calvinism. He misses almost altogether the immersion of The Trial in motifs and concerns of a radically Judaic-Talmudic kind” (p. xii). See also Leigh Hafrey, “Blasphemous Writing, Blasphemous Translation: Breaking the Language in Kafka’s Trial: Thoughts on the Forthcoming Translation,” Journal of the Kafka Society of America, 13, no. 1/2 (1989), 44–48. A note states that Hafrey’s translation of The Trial, commissioned by Schocken Books and based on Pasley’s critical edition, appeared in the Spring of 1991. However, it never did. United States readers must still rely on the Muir translation, which is of course based on Brod’s obsolete edition. For copyright reasons, a British translation, by Douglas Scott and Chris Waller (London, 1977), is unavailable in the U.S. In any case, the Scott/Waller translation is also based on the old Brod edition and received lukewarm reviews in the Times Literary Supplement and elsewhere.


20 Das Schloß was first published in Munich in 1926 by Kurt Wolff. The Muirs’s translation was brought out four years later by Secker & Warburg (U.K.) and Alfred A. Knopf (U.S.). A so-called definitive edition, with additional material translated by Ethne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, was first published in 1954 by Schocken and is still being reissued, most recently in 1995.


23 Edwin Muir, We Moderns (New York, 1920), p. 244.
28 Gray, "But Kafka Wrote in German," p. 246.
30 See Jan Mukařovský, "Standard Language and Poetic Language," in *Spisová cestina a jazyková kultura* [Standard Czech and the Cultivation of Good Language] (Prague, 1992), rpt. in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. Paul L. Garvin (Georgetown, 1964). Mukařovský defines foregrounding as "the esthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components" (p. viii). In an essay contrasting standard and poetic language he describes two techniques an author can use to foreground language: "the deautomatization of meanings in a certain work is consistently carried out by lexical selection (the mutual interlarding of contrasting areas of the lexicon), in another equally consistently by the uncommon semantic relationship of words close together in the context" (p. 20). In *The Castle* the eclectic Kafka makes use of both devices. I am grateful to the linguist Dr. Senta Trömpl-Plötz for drawing my attention to Mukařovský’s essay.
31 One critic, Meno Spann, uses this passage to illustrate the implications of the Muirs’s choice of diction for an interpretation of the novel: "It should be noted here that the English renders 'gächid von Epheu bedeckt' (mercifully hidden by ivy) as 'graciously mantled with ivy,' thus weakening the strikingly derogatory remarks about the Castle and making it more inhabitable for the divine powers and abstractions who dwell there, according to some critics." One might add that these negative remarks stand out precisely because Kafka’s narrative generally sounds neutral, on the surface, at least. See Meno Spann, *Franz Kafka* (London, 1976), p. 144.
32 As Gray points out, in the case of *The Trial*, the Muirs were "strongly influenced by the view of Kafka as a modern Bunyan which dominated most early interpretations. . . . The more optimistic view taken by the Muirs is reflected almost from the outset. . . . K. is altogether a better-disposed character, as he emerges from the translation, than he is in the original" (Gray, "But Kafka Wrote in German," p. 248). The same holds true for *The Castle*.
modernist: 

die word Euphorion, 

retranslating Ruby Kleist," Kafka gar gekommen powerful 

42 41 40 

44 43 42 

elevated coincidensevere, 


43 At times, the Muirs resort to a lofty vocabulary that reflects their assumptions about the theological meaning of the novel. At the end of the passage just cited, they use the word succor, which smacks of The Pilgrim’s Progress or even of the King James Bible. Such elevated language is uncalled for, since the corresponding German verb (“zuhilfe kommen”) is relatively common. 


45 After putting the finishing touches to this paper I came across Milan Kundera’s powerful recent essay about Kafka and other artists whose legacy has been “betrayed” by translators and others. Although I find Kundera’s strictures about translation unduly severe, I was pleased to see that his observations about French translations of Kafka often coincide with those I make about the Muirs. His chapter-length discussion of four different translations of a single sentence from The Castle is particularly astute. See Milan Kundera, Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts, tr. Linda Asher (New York, 1995), pp. 101–20.