

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 38 | Issue 1

Article 15

2014

Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, and Ronald Speirs, eds. Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. x + 251 pp.

Richard T. Gray
University of Washington, woyzeck@u.washington.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Gray, Richard T. (2014) "Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, and Ronald Speirs, eds. Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. x + 251 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1018>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, and Ronald Speirs, eds. *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. x + 251 pp.

Abstract

Review of Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, and Ronald Speirs, eds. *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. x + 251 pp.

Keywords

Kafka, narration, rhetoric

Jakob Lothe, Beatrice Sandberg, and Ronald Speirs, eds. *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011. x + 251 pp.

The essays in this volume emerged from a symposium at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo as part of a research project on “Narrative Theory and Analysis.” According to the editors’ introduction, the essays focus first on the peculiarities of Kafka’s art of storytelling, and secondarily on challenges to narrative theory presented by Kafka’s works (1). In fact, however, one should reverse these priorities, for although the contributions do deal with issues of narrative and storytelling in Kafka’s fiction, they are largely indebted to a single theory, namely to James Phelan’s conception of narrative as a rhetorical act. At the heart of this theory lies a communicative approach to narrative, its role as an expressive medium that transfers information between an implied author and an envisioned ideal reader, or authorial audience. The editors cite Phelan’s definition of narrative already on the second page of their introduction, and it is repeated in the volume’s first essay, authored by none other than Phelan himself. Here narrative is defined as “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened,” with the additional proviso that in fictional accounts this rhetorical act is doubled insofar as “the narrator tells her story to her narratee for her purposes” (2, 24). The limitations of this rhetorical approach to Kafka will be obvious to anyone who reflects on the difficulty of applying this definition to his texts. What exactly is the “something” that “happened” in Kafka’s tales that needs to be communicated? If it is only the “fact,” for example, that Gregor Samsa has been transformed into a giant beetle, or that Josef K. has been arrested, then both texts could end after their first paragraphs. Nor can either be classified as an analytical story in which the narrative exposition explains the opening event. Further, what might be the “occasion” that motivates Kafka’s (or his implied author’s) telling of these events? The problem with applying Phelan’s definition to Kafka’s narratives is that these do not so much represent narrative acts as they instantiate narrative processes whose “occasion” seems to be nothing other than this very process of narration itself. The bulk of these essays are thus hampered by their narrow adherence to a narrative theory that cannot do justice to the complexity of Kafka’s works.

These limitations are reflected in the editors’ and authors’ rather meager engagement with prior narratological investigations of Kafka. The primary antecedent discussed in the introduction is Friedrich Beißner, whose 1952 essay *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka* (‘Franz Kafka the Storyteller’) proposed that Kafka’s narrators inevitably tell their stories from the restricted vantage point of their protagonists. Although undoubtedly a landmark in Kafka criticism, Beißner’s thesis has subsequently been revised and refined, and yet one finds scarcely any

trace here of other narratological approaches to Kafka. One searches in vain, for example, for references to Dorrit Cohn's seminal essays on innovations in Kafka's first-person narratives, and even J. M. Coetzee's brilliant investigation into problems of time and aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow" only merits a single passing mention.

The ten essays in this volume break out relatively unevenly into a larger bulk guided by Phelan's theory of narrative as rhetorical act, and a minority that rupture this frame and, perhaps for that reason, offer more stimulating conclusions. Phelan opens the volume with an examination of "Progression, Speed, and Judgment" in Kafka's "The Judgment," which discusses narrative pacing in relation to the gap in the story's narrative trajectory. Phelan's aim is directed more toward revising his own theory of how "surprise" endings work than describing the rhetorical structures of Kafka's story. Anniken Greve's so-called "face-value approach" (42) to "The Metamorphosis" tries to elaborate the body/soul dichotomy of Kafka's protagonist in terms of Cartesian dualism. "Face-value" apparently means a restricted focus on events and characters in the fictional world, for this essay hardly extends beyond this superficial level of reading. J. Hillis Miller treats the tragedy of *The Castle* as depicting a world of isolated human monads who have no access to each others' thoughts or motivations; he thereby largely reiterates Beißner's narratological position. Beatrice Sandberg analyzes the problematic of Kafka's narrative beginnings by showing how his tales begin in the middle, but she hardly passes beyond the similar position represented long ago by James Rolleston. Her analysis, moreover, remains muddled due to its avoidance of simple narratological distinctions such as that between story and plot. Jakob Lothe reiterates this interest in Kafka's narrative beginnings in an examination of "In the Penal Colony." Unfortunately, his reliance on Phelan's account of four varieties of narrative beginnings (exposition, launch, initiation, and entrance) blind him to the single unique feature of this story's beginning: it starts, exceptionally for Kafka, with the quoted speech of a character, the Officer of the penal colony. Ronald Speirs, finally, concludes the volume with an essay that promises to investigate issues of narrative dynamics in Kafka's early stories, but that in fact deals more with questions of social and physical movement in the fictional world evoked by these tales.

Sandwiched in among these rather insubstantial contributions to narrative problems in Kafka's work are three essays that stand out for the brilliance of their engagement with Kafka's writing and the originality of their insights. Benno Wagner examines how the propaganda of the Great War resonates in Kafka's Chinese wall narratives of 1917. Jumping off from Karl Heinz Bohrer's attempt to cleanly segregate literary artistry from more banal forms of cultural expression, Wagner demonstrates through detailed analysis how Kafka's text is informed on the level of its very telling by ideological wartime discourses, on the one hand,

and the narrative stance Kafka assumed in the protocols he composed as an accident insurance agent, on the other. Gerhard Neumann attempts to draw general conclusions about Kafka's metanarratives—embedded stories that self-reflexively comment on processes at work in the larger narrative—by analyzing the story “The Stoker” (simultaneously the first chapter of the novel *The Man Who Disappeared [Amerika]*). He shows that what distinguishes these embedded narrative acts is their function as transnarratives, that is, as alien retellings of one character's experiences by another figure (e.g. the stoker's by Karl Roßmann; Karl's by his Uncle Jakob). This displacement of self-narration to narration-through-an-other might be taken as prototypical for Kafka's narrative approach in general. In what is surely the most complex and challenging essay of this collection, Stanley Corngold, finally, traces how Kafka's late story “Investigations of a Dog” turns on a fundamental narrative deviation from an investigation into musical canines into one about problems of nourishment. He ultimately reads this deviation as a commentary on how Kafka himself needed to suppress musicality in order to arrive at his own form of pure writing. These three essays constitute what is of durable scholarly value in this otherwise rather spotty collection.

Richard T. Gray
University of Washington