

UC Berkeley

TRANSIT

Title

BOOK REVIEW: *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing* by John Zilcosky

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/45539222>

Journal

TRANSIT, 2(1)

Author

Gerhardt, Christina

Publication Date

2005

DOI

10.5070/T721009704

Peer reviewed

John Zilcosky. *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic of Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Pp. xvi, 289. Cloth \$79.95. Paper \$26.95.

As much a meditation on the relationship among Franz Kafka's writing, travel and travel writing, and concomitant subject matters – such as fin de siècle exoticism, colonialism and imperialism, as well as railroad expansions, travel guides and adventure books – Zilcosky's well-researched volume *Kafka's Travels* also considers the arrival and role of technologies as varied as photography, film, telephones, and telegrams vis-à-vis Kafkas' writings. Kafka, as Zilcosky tells us on the opening page of his book, “never moved from Prague until the final year of his life and, yes, his travels were limited to short trips throughout Europe.” Why then a study of Kafka's Travels? Because not only was Kafka an avid reader of books about travel, such as colonial travel stories, but he also avidly traveled, as Zilcosky convincingly argues, through his texts, both the ones he read and the ones he wrote.

Zilcosky analyzes the well-known novels *America*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*, and short stories, such as *The Metamorphosis*, “In the Penal Colony,” and “The Hunter Gracchus.” He also sheds new light on Kafka's *Letters to Milena*. Additionally, Zilcosky brings the reader's attention to little known writings of Kafka. For example, he devotes the first chapter to the early and unfinished travel novel *Richard and Samuel: A Short Journey through Central European Regions*, which Kafka and Max Brod began co-authoring during their 1911 trip through central and western Europe.

While most of Kafka's travels were limited to early trips in Bohemia (1905, 1907) and in Switzerland, Italy, and Paris (1909-1912), Zilcosky argues that “travel is, for Kafka, ... A metaphor for the internal process of writing itself.” He presents the travel writings Kafka avidly read by Goethe, Hebbel, Fontane, and Flaubert, as well as the travel memoirs about North and South America, Africa, and what was then Palestine.

Moving beyond the bifurcated camps of what Zilcosky terms “formalist / metaphorical” and “biographical / historical methodologies” (14), Zilcosky reads text and context together. (Rightly so, he critiques Kafka critics for tending “to position themselves on one side or the other of this ‘text / context’ divide.”) Bringing together information about the historical context, while closely heeding the text that the context is intended to inform, Zilcosky sheds new light on an under-examined aspect of Kafka's writing. No prior study has systematically examined the role that travel plays in Kafka's work. Through his theoretical approach, Zilcosky also poses a methodological challenge to Kafka criticism specifically and to literary criticism more generally.

Zilcosky's study is laid out as follows. In chapter one, he demonstrates how the co-authored travelogue *Richard and Samuel* offers a counter-model to the fin de siècle travel discourse. This predominant discourse, encouraged by imperialist governments and the growing tourist industry, tended to encourage exotic fantasies and longing for travel to faraway places. Brod and Kafka's novel challenged this discourse by depicting areas geographically close to home, in central and western Europe. Additionally, the novel challenges travel writings contemporary to it by locating the foreign not in an external location but in the self. In these ways, the autobiographical travel novel attempts “to transcend fin de siècle exoticism by turning it inward – toward the structures of home and self” (23). It achieves the latter by transforming “foreignness from a mappable geographical space into a structure of the mind” (24). Zilcosky deems this little analyzed early novel a literary breakthrough that allowed Kafka to write *Amerika*

(*Der Verschollene*) and *The Metamorphosis* the following year. And it foreshadows themes that were to reappear in these works, namely, the ability “to render internal spaces strange” (38).

In chapter two, Zilcosky argues that Kafka’s *The Man Who Disappeared* (*Der Verschollene*) not only offers a counterpoint to Bildungsromane, which Kafka scholarship has noted, but also exotic literature, which also relies on a narrative of personal development. Unlike the narratives in which the main character “finds himself,” Karl Rossmann becomes increasingly lost in *Amerika* (42). As Zilcosky puts it, “*Der Verschollene* recounts the disappearance – or, as I will argue, the loss – of the traveling ‘I’” (42). Hence also Zilcosky’s insistence on using the title Kafka intended for the novel, *Der Verschollene*, rather than Brod’s *Amerika*, which it is published under. Carefully reading the narrative’s structure of lost and found together with travel writings by Goethe (*Italienische Reise*) and Flaubert (*Voyage en Orient*) that Kafka read around the time that he began writing *Der Verschollene*, which Zilcosky refers to as “Kafka’s 1911-1914 travel novel,” Zilcosky demonstrates how Kafka offers a different kind of travelogue. For example, Kafka’s novel does not offer what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the “monarch of all I survey view,” that is, the view from above, featured in Goethe and Flaubert’s travelogues. As Zilcosky tells us, “this view – recurring in travel texts from Goethe to Flaubert to Hesse – [...] allows him [the traveler] to delineate the exotic lands’ borders, and [...] to bolster the singularity of his perspective” (27). As Zilcosky argues, when Rossmann cannot see out of the ship bringing him to “America” or again, when he cannot see very far out of the window at his uncle’s residence in New York City, Kafka challenges the perspectival vantage-point of travel writing and of travelers in fin de siècle Europe.

Subsequently, in chapter three, focusing on *The Trial*, Zilcosky examines more closely the foreign or the alienation that is located close to him, which had been foreshadowed by the early co-authored travel narrative *Richard and Samuel*. Reading *The Trial* as a travel novel because K. is constantly in motion, Zilcosky argues that it is at once a historical-political allegory and a meditation on constant linguistic slippage. For example, he discusses how Kafka’s use of language engages the crisis of language expressed by his contemporaries, such as Fritz Mauthner and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. Zilcosky, here, and throughout his study, focuses particular and sometimes new attention on details: for example, the meaning of words that have multiple and important meanings for the story in which they appear, such as “Verfahren” (legal proceedings), “sich ver-fahren,” (taking wrong turns).

Zilcosky reads travel narratives and travel culture together with Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” and *The Castle* in chapters four and five respectively. Zilcosky challenges Kafka scholarship that would read “In the Penal Colony” as either a post-colonial critique of colonization or a narrative about sadism, arguing instead that the story’s geographic context and sadism need to be read together. In Zilcosky’s estimation, “the problem with such postcolonial readings is that they fail to address the promise of sado-masochistic pleasure that is so central to the story’s effect. Just as the earlier psychoanalytical interpretations repressed politics, these political readings repress desire” (105). Here, as at other moments of his well-researched volume, Zilcosky points out something that scholarship may have noticed in passing but not focused on enough: Peter F. Neumeyer’s investigation – “ignored” as Zilcosky puts it “by thirty years of subsequent scholarship” – lays out Kafka’s passion for this series, particularly one volume, *The Sugar Baron* (1914), of which Kafka says “I feel it is about myself, or as if it were the book of rules [Vorschrift] for my life” (106). While scholarship has acknowledged that Octave Mirabeau’s *Torture Garden* (1899) influences “In the Penal Colony,” the importance of the popular

adventure series Schaffstein's *Little Green Books* has been overlooked. (Throughout Zilcosky's study he delineates the influence of this series on Kafka and his writings.)

In chapter five, Zilcosky turns to the correlations between Schaffstein's *Little Green Books* and Kafka's *The Castle*. Zilcosky focuses on the profession of the protagonist, K., who, in this novel, is a surveyor. K. is a "Vermesser," he measures, but this word, Zilcosky reminds us, is also closely related to the verb "sich vermessen," that is, making a mistake while measuring (124). Zilcosky does not merely read the surveyor figuratively; he also looks for the literal source for the figure, drawing the reader's attention to newer evidence that reveals the source can be found in Schaffstein's volumes. Additionally, he draws on the geo-political significance of land surveying, bringing in previous studies undertaken by Wilhelm Emrich. But *The Castle*'s main character does not attain any of the positions typical of surveyors represented either in fictitious or historical accounts. Returning to Pratt's discussion of the "monarch of all I survey" view, Zilcosky presents numerous Schaffstein volumes, in which the heroes gradually attain visual, psychological, and economic ground. By contrast, K. is "a caricature of this surveyor [...] K. slithers in the village mud" (138). Since K. never attains higher ground, he cannot carry out his task as surveyor, to view and map the area. Additionally, unlike the heroes of Schaffstein's travel narratives, who assert themselves as subjects by subjugating the area that they oversee to their reading of it, K. remains mired "in the field he attempts to survey [...] he is both subject and object at once" (138). In a very subtle reading of the novel's stylistics, Zilcosky underscores how Kafka's writing lacked descriptive content particularly when contrasted to Schaffstein's modifier heavy narratives. Kafka's linguistic sparseness creates what Zilcosky calls a "negative topos," stylistically inviting the reader to mimic the gaze and ascriptive tendencies of colonial travelers. In this way, "Kafka shifts the political question of colonialism onto the act of reading" (150).

In chapter six, Zilcosky's discusses Kafka's *Letter to Milena* Zilcosky reads the correspondence, which consistently discussed and deferred travel, together with fin de siècle technological developments that allowed new forms of communication, such as telegrams and telephones, and of travel, such as the increased network of railroads.

The closing chapter discusses how Kafka's late story "The Hunter Gracchus" engages travel and death, focusing particular attention on Gracchus' irritation about an image on his wall of a "bushman, who is aiming his spear at me" (179). Zilcosky tells us, "this is Gracchus' only punishment, but it is a significant one: his sole visual stimulation reminds him every day of the preposterousness of his primitivist fantasy. He is caught in a hopeless cliché" (182). Zilcosky argues that Gracchus tells the story of Kafka, who at once cannot let go of a fantasy of living high above fields of sugar cane but who is also critical of this desire. Zilcosky argues that Kafka's examinations of this fantasy remain "dialectical throughout" (184). "This continually dialectical desire for and against exotic nostalgia defines much as of what we still understand as Kafkaesque" (184), Zilcosky argues, continuing on, "He cannot discard 'home' just as he cannot discard homelessness" (184).

In addition to bringing to our attention previously lesser known writings of Kafka's, such as *Richard and Samuel* and writings that Kafka read, such as Schaffstein's *Little Green Books*; providing the reader with nuanced readings of Kafka's writings; and weaving in vital background about the historical and political context, the volume also includes photographs of Kafka on trips, maps from Baedeker's, notes from his correspondence with Milena and reproductions of pages from Schaffstein's adventure travel novels. Drawing on previous Kafka scholarship, well-known and overlooked, Zilcosky provides a new angle on Kafka by reading his writing with a focus on

their relationship to fin de siècle imperialism, colonization, exoticism, and travel writing. An invaluable contribution to Kafka scholarship and postcolonial studies, Zilcosky's study is an engaging read.

CHRISTINA GERHARDT, *University of California at Berkeley*