

An intriguing century of Franz Kafka

by **Lutful Kabir Khan**

Dr. Hiebel is a professor at the University of Graz, Austria. He has written, among others, two books of criticism on Kafka. He was invited by the Department of Germanic Languages to deliver a series of lectures on Franz Kafka.

Q. Why did you become interested in Kafka?

Hiebel: To me Franz Kafka is the most interesting and intriguing of all German writers. His depth of writing amazes me.

Q. What have you done that is different from what other critics have done?

Dr. Pausch of the Dept. of Germanic Languages volunteered an answer.

Pausch: Among Kafka criticisms, there is a spectrum of interpretations for existential phenomena — structural and psychoanalytical interpretations. Dr. Hiebel has actually searched into these interpretations and developed a method which has not added another interpretation but has combined them into a new way of seeing Kafka's work.

Hiebel: It is in Kafka — this ambiguity — which many other interpreters did not see. They just wanted to pin down one meaning — an expression of neurotic constituency — or an attack against Capitalist society. We are all interested in Kafka because he had this extraordinary ability to construct the intriguing Rorschach tests, he was able to construct something which did not point to a certain meaning... but to a whole spectrum of meanings.

Q. What is the main distinguishing feature of Kafka's writings?

Hiebel: Literature of the nineteenth century tied the signifier with the signified very closely. Kafka cut the signifier away from the signified and developed something like gliding metaphors, gliding paradoxes... which leave behind this close tie between signifier and signified. This is the main invention of Kafka.

Q. Can you please explain the terms 'gliding metaphor' and 'gliding paradoxes'?

Hiebel: When a signifier glides over several signifieds we have a gliding metaphor.

The signifiers — the Burrow, the Trial, the Castle, the Tree — in every paragraph they are changing meanings — the signifieds — to create gliding metaphors. Similarly, if a paradox is a contradiction of the same paradox which branches out into many paradoxes — we have gliding paradox. Examples would be the swimmer — who after all could not swim, or the cage looking for a bird.

Q. So it seems that Kafka has used these two techniques extensively.

Hiebel: In Kafka, the signifier is eternally put away... there is a continuous gap between signified and signifier. This is the characteristic of Kafka, this is what distinguishes Kafka from the 19th century writers. This also contributes to the difficulty of pinning down a particular meaning to Kafka's work.

Q. There was a writer who said, 'My stories start with a name... a sufficiently interesting name... then I think how to justify the name and I write a line... then I write another line since I wrote the first line, I go on and on and when I stop — usually my paper runs out — or the ink — I have a story'. Do you think Kafka was in any way similar?

Hiebel: Of course Kafka did not start with a name — he usually started with an idea — an image... like the animal in the burrow. In his diaries we often get a single sentence, an image. Sometimes he would go on and develop the image into a complete story. Many of his stories are really sketches picked from his diaries by Max Brod, Kafka's lifelong friend — after his death.

These are not really complete stories, but rather elements in the continuous flood of writing. Kafka has no scheme, no aim, no theoretical aim. Once he said 'I am writing like going into a dark tunnel'. It is very similar to the writer you talked about.

Q. Then are there no 'methods' or 'ways' which Kafka followed?

Hiebel: His writings can be compared to Rorschach tests. The person who originally created the test definitely had some interpretations in mind, but the test is open — there must be ambiguity. In writing, Kafka must have some plans... we find slight indica-

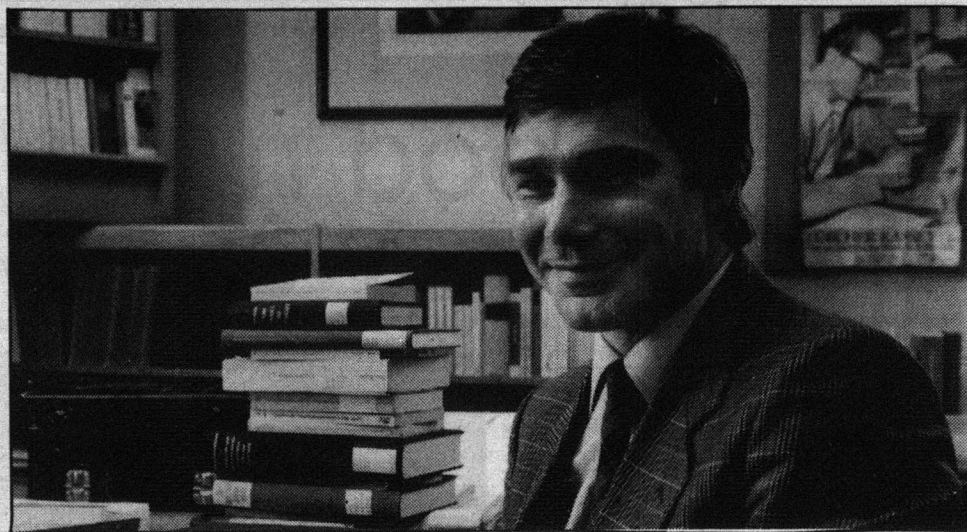


Photo Lutful Kabir Khan

Dr. Hiebel from the University of Graz presently lecturing on Franz Kafka.

tions... but he had no intention to express them.

Many surrealist writers write by just association of images, but it is not that they have no plans. On the contrary, all what goes on in conscious and subconscious thinking comes into the associations.

Kafka's experience as a Jew, as a member of late bourgeoisie society, all must have contributed to his writings.

Q. Critics have said Kafka is depressing, neurotic, sadistic and masochistic... why then

does he still appeal to people all over the world?

"Self-punishment, I suppose," Dr. Pausch joked.

Hiebel: Yes, there is some sadism and masochism in stories like 'The Vulture', 'The Penal Colony', but there is a great deal of humour and a depth of experience in Kafka's writing that is unparalleled.

His writings were a real break between 19th and 20th century literature.

All this appealed to people universally.



Franz Kafka was born in Prague on July 3, 1883, in a German-speaking Jewish merchant-family. After graduating from the University of Prague with a Doctorate in Law he worked for an insurance company. But Kafka's sole real interest was literature.

Only a very small part of his work was published during Kafka's life. Most of his manuscripts remained unpublished and were intended by Kafka to be destroyed after his death. Max Brod, Kafka's closest friend and untiring mentor, disregarded this plan and published the entire oeuvre left behind by the poet. It included three novels, "Der Prozeß" (The Trial), "Das Schloß" (The Castle), and "Amerika" (America) and several stories, e.g. "Das Urteil" (The Verdict), "In der Strafkolonie" (In the Penal Colony), and "Die Verwandlung" (The Metamorphosis). An important part of Kafka's writings are his diaries and his letters, especially to his fiancée Felice Bauer and to Milena Jesenska.

In his last years, Kafka suffered from tuberculosis and spent long periods in sanatoriums. He died on June 3, 1924, in Kierling near Vienna, practically unknown. His work achieved world-fame only after World War II. Many poets won recognition only posthumously, but very seldom the discrepancy between the impact in lifetime and the effect after death is as striking as in the case of Franz Kafka.

NOTICE

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Albums

1. Colour Me Psycho — Mr. Invisible (et al) (demo)
2. Euthanasia — Pro-Life (demo)
3. Bamf — Pony Hips (demo)
4. Radwaste — Cooking and Nothingness (Happy Squid (US))
5. Screamin' Jay Hawkins & The Fuzztones — Live (Midnight (US))
6. Gordie Uranus — South Beach (SEED (Canada))
7. 39 Steps — 39 Steps (Line Records (Canada))
8. Peter Murphy — The Final Solution (Vertigo/Polygram)
9. The Colour Field — self-titled (Chrysalis/MCA)
10. Langham Wheel — Again (demo)

Singles, EP's and Tapes

1. Mocca Normal — self-titled (Smarten UP! (Canada))
2. Peter Nardini — Is There Anybody Out There? (Temple/Celtic)
3. Rhythm Pigs — self-titled (Mordam (US))
4. Shaun Davey — Granuaile (Tara/Celtic)
5. Various Artists: Deep Six — (C/Z Records (US))
6. Asexuals — Contemporary World (Psyche Industries (Canada))
7. Various Artists — Restless Variations (Restless Enigma (US))
8. Philip Glass — Songs from Liquid Days (CBS)
9. Stan Ridgeway — The Big Heat (IRS/MCA)
10. Denny Christenson Big Band — Doomsday Machine (Justin Time (Canada))