

Nekula, Marek. *Franz Kafkas Sprachen. "... in einem Stockwerk des innern babylonischen Turmes ...."* Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003. 397 pp. €98.00 paperback.

One of the glaring sociological features of turn-of-the-century Prague was the intense communication gap—both linguistic and social—between the city’s German- and Czech-speaking populations. Kafka scholarship routinely refers to this circumstance under the rubric of the “ghetto without walls,” locating Prague’s German-speaking Jews precisely within this communication gap as the target of a double antagonism. Yet Kafka scholarship itself has only rarely crossed this linguistic divide: the historical antagonisms of Kafka’s Prague have all too often served as an excuse to read Kafka’s prose through the referential coordinates of a monolingual *Germanistik*. The present book will make it much harder to do so in the future. Painstakingly mapping the contours of Kafka’s knowledge and use of different languages and literary traditions (with an emphasis on German and Czech), Marek Nekula’s study should become required reading for anyone seriously engaged with Kafka biography or philology.

Right at the outset Nekula provides an unsettling example of how linguistic barriers have allowed conflicting myths about Kafka and his relation to the Czech language to propagate unchallenged. Crucial documents in this context are the Czech-language letters Kafka wrote to his brother-in-law Josef David. Yet, as Nekula demonstrates, the picture one gets of Kafka’s linguistic competence in Czech varies wildly depending on which edition one examines. Whereas the edition released in

Czechoslovakia silently corrects practically all of Kafka's grammatical errors, thereby suggesting that Kafka was completely bilingual, the German edition not only preserves Kafka's errors but introduces a range of further errors so serious in nature that one would have to doubt whether Kafka had even basic competence in Czech. That the correspondence of one of the most canonical German-language writers could have endured such "creative" editing shows that the linguistic issues Nekula raises have heretofore been taken inexcusably laxly (or else with a seriousness that trumped scholarly honesty).

Nekula thoroughly combs through the socio-linguistic tangles of Kafka's biography, laying to rest many longstanding inaccuracies and uncertainties. The book begins with an examination of the complex social shifts that Bohemian Jews had to negotiate in the period between the Josephine reforms and Kafka's day. Emancipation, assimilation, and Germanization created a new and uncertain terrain that Nekula uses as the background for a detailed examination of the linguistic profiles of Kafka's parents. The account then turns to Franz Kafka himself, with chapters analyzing the specificities of Kafka's German (polemicizing instructively with the stereotype of a "sterile" or "impoverished" Prague German dialect), Kafka's contact with different languages and literary traditions in secondary school, the changing linguistic politics within the Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt, the evidence of Kafka's spoken and written Czech, and Kafka's contacts with contemporary Czech literary figures and currents. The value of these chapters lies in the fascinating details they uncover. The discussion of Kafka's interactions with Czech intellectuals, for example, at times reads like literary-historical detective work

in the grand tradition and—a minor miracle for Kafka historiography—uncovers qualitatively new information.

The main drawback of the book is, paradoxically, inseparable from its strength: the rigor and thoroughness of Nekula's investigations present the reader with speed bumps at times. The extraordinarily detailed analyses of Kafka's Czech and German, especially towards the end of the book, will be difficult reading for a non-linguist—and yet are both groundbreaking and central to the book's topic. Other readers may have difficulties with, say, the exhaustive discussion of bureaucratic politics within the Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt—but social historians will be delighted. As the author himself points out, this book addresses different audiences in different sections. Readers are of course free to skim, but would risk missing some of the intriguing details that Nekula uncovers even in apparently technical material.

In his discussion of Kafka's linguistic identity, towards the end of the book, Nekula states his overriding concern, which is the “[...] monokulturelle, sprich deutsch-zentrische Interpretation dieses Autors in Frage [zu] stellen” (303). Not that Kafka was a “half-Czech” or even (as Kafka himself once wrote) a “Halbdeutscher” writer; rather Nekula invites us to see Kafka's life, like his writing, as resistant to reductive labeling. The light this important book sheds on Kafka's linguistic and artistic identity thus reveals not a clearer, but a messier picture. And that is how it should be.

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