**David Lockwood, *Uneasy Dreams: Kafka’s Influence on British and Irish Fiction***

**Aims and rationale**

The academic ‘Kafka industry’ is huge, but I am not attempting to add yet another evaluation or interpretation of Kafka’s work to the thousands of books and papers already written. Instead I focus on British and Irish writers considered to have been significantly influenced by Kafka. I offer detailed accounts of Kafkan elements in novels by Rex Warner, Anna Kavan, Samuel Beckett, James Kelman, Kazuo Ishiguro and W G Sebald, together with shorter studies of other writers, including William Sansom, Grahame Greene, Henry Green, Iris Murdoch, J G Ballard and China Miéville.

Although I have a background in contemporary literary theory, I do not employ a heavily theoretical approach. I am an empiricist, and employ close reading and comparisons rather than try to adapt my discussions to a predetermined theory.

**Summary**

Since their first publication in England in the 1930s Kafka’s novels and short stories have had a significant impact on English-language writers. The work of at least 50 British authors has at one time or another been linked to that of Kafka, authors ranging from Graham Greene to China Miéville. South African, Australian and numerous American writers have acknowledged their indebtedness. There have been many film, TV and stage adaptations of Kafka’s work by, amongst others, Harold Pinter, David Hare and Steven Berkoff. The notion of the ‘Kafkaesque’ (used, typically, to signify a nightmarish world in which a faceless bureaucracy destroys the lives of individuals through its seemingly purposeless actions) has entered popular culture. It is discernible in films such as Martin Scorsese’s *After Hours* and Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* and TV shows such as *The Prisoner*.

The prodigious output of the ‘Kafka industry’ has long been commented upon. Nevertheless, other than a few papers examining the relationship between Kafka and the American novel (Roth, Auster, Pynchon), or parallels between Kafka and Pinter or Beckett, there has been comparatively little written about Kafka’s impact specifically on English and Irish writers. The two most significant monographs on Kafka’s influence are Shimon Sandbank’s *After Kafka* and Daniel Medin’s *Three Sons*. Sandbank covers the period only up to 1989 and focusses on European writers (Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Ionesco). Medin discusses Coetzee, Roth, and Sebald: only the last of whom is relevant to my investigation. There is, then, ample scope for a fresh discussion of the subject. To avoid the risk of vague and unhelpful generalisations inherent to a broad survey, I focus on a limited number of texts for detailed analysis and comparison.

My primary aim is to examine various ways in which British novelists and dramatists have responded to Kafka. My primary motive is that identifying and analysing what writers borrow from a predecessor, and what they fail to borrow, might help us to understand what is most distinctive about their source. Along the way, I attempt to answer several questions. First, why has Kafka been influential in England? The metaphysical novel or novel of ideas is seen as the product of a characteristically European sensibility, and has (supposedly) never been popular among the pragmatic English, who are said to prefer novels examining individual psychology and social mores. One hypothesis, then, is that Kafka provided a model for writers who wanted to explore philosophical themes. This model is largely lacking in English writing other than in science fiction, fantasy and a small but influential native tradition of fable and allegory (Bunyan, Swift, Chesterton, Garnett, the Powys brothers).

Secondly, *what* did English writers borrow from Kafka; and *why* and *how* did they adapt Kafkan tropes and techniques to their purposes? Take, for example, Kafka’s spatio-temporal dislocations and anomalies. In *The Wild Goose Chase* Rex Warner introduced similar anomalies to indicate a totalitarian government’s wish to manipulate reality; in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* they reveal the protagonist’s mental disintegration; and in W G Sebald’s *Austerlitz* they suggest the interwovenness of past and present.

Thirdly, how does the work of the writers discussed differ from Kafka’s? It is widely held that Kafka offers seemingly meaningful narratives that allude to no underlying doctrine or belief. Since plausible overarching interpretations of most of his successors’ works are available, if we assume them to be attempting to *emulate* Kafka they must inevitable produce misreadings of his work. In that case, with the exception of Beckett, hardly any of the writers considered are ‘deeply’ Kafkan. On the other hand, they may simply be borrowing or adapting from Kafka for their own purposes, and can hardly be criticised for failure to achieve something they did not seek.

The criteria for inclusion in this study are either that the author himself/herself has acknowledged a significant debt to Kafka, or has been frequently compared with Kafka by reviewers and academics.

**SYNOPSIS**

**INTRODUCTION**

Scope and translations. Influence and intertextuality. Distinction between *the Kafkaesque* and *the Kafkan*. Kafka’s Reception in the UK. Why has Kafka been so influential? Bloom on misreading. Distinction between ‘superficial’ and ‘deep’ markers of Kafka’s influence. Superficial markers include readily imitable narratorial/stylistic devices and motifs, such as spatio-temporal incongruities and doubles. Deep markers comprise resistance to interpretation and the enactment of principal themes. (For example, Kafka’s ‘double thought’ and recursive narrative structures enact epistemic and metaphysical scepticism.)

**PART I: MARKERS OF THE KAFKAN**

**PART I: KAFKA**

**Chapter One**: Interpreting Kafka. ‘Global’ and ‘local’ interpretability. Political and religious readings.

**Chapter Two**: Narrative Form: hallucination, mono-perspectivism and cognitive realism.

**Chapter Three**:Style and Structure. Scepticism, hovering and double thought

**Chapter Four:** Unknowing and the uncanny. Fragmentation of the self, distorted space and time.

**Chapter Five:** Themes and motifs. Bureaucracy and the archive. Art and Music. Kafka’s animals. Conclusion.

**PART II: KAFKA IN BRITAIN FROM THE 1930s TO THE 1960s**

**Chapter Six:** **Kafka and Political Writers of the 1930s and 1940s**

Edward Upward (*Journey to the Border*), Graham Greene(*The Confidential Agent* and *The Ministry of Fear*), Ruthven Todd (*Over the Mountain, The Lost Traveller*).

**Chapter Seven:** **Rex Warner’s ‘Anti-Fascist Fairy Tales’**: *The Wild Goose Chase* and *The Aerodrome*. In brief: *The Professor*

**Chapter Eight: Other Writers from the 1930s to the 1960s**

Henry Green (*Party Going*), William Sansom (*Fireman Flower* and ‘The Equilibriad’). In brief: Jocelyn Brooke (*Image of a Drawn Sword*), Nigel Dennis (*A House in Order*).

**Chapter Nine: Anna Kavan**

*Asylum Piece*, *I am Lazarus*, *Sleep Has His House*, *Eagle’s Nest*, *Ice*

**PART III: KAFKA IN IRELAND**

**Chapter Ten: Samuel Beckett**

*Watt* and *Molloy*

**Chapter Eleven: O’Brien and Banville**

Flann O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*

John Banville, *The Book of Evidence*

**PART IV: KAFKA IN SCOTLAND**

**Chapter Twelve: Alasdair Gray and Iain Banks**

Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*

Iain Banks, *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge*.

**Chapter Thirteen: James Kelman**: *A Disaffection* and *How Late it was, How Late*. Short Stories from *Lean Tales, The Burn, Greyhound for Breakfast*

**PART V: KAFKA IN BRITAIN FROM THE 1960s TO THE PRESENT DAY:**

**Chapter Fourteen: Kazuo Ishiguro:** *The Unconsoled*. In brief: Short Stories, *When We were Orphans*

**Chapter Fifteen: W G Sebald:** *Vertigo* and *Austerlitz*

**Chapter Sixteen: ‘New Wave’ Science Fiction and the ‘New Weird’**

J G Ballard (*Concrete Island* and Short Stories)

China Miéville (*The City and the City*, *This Census-Taker*)

In brief: M John Harrison (Short Stories, *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again***)**

**Chapter Seventeen: Diverse Writers 1960-2020**

Iris Murdoch (*The Unicorn, The Time of The Angels*)

John Fowles (*The Magus*)

David Wheldon (*The Viaduct*, *The Course of Instruction*)

Magnus Mills (*The Restraint of Beasts*, *All Quiet on the Orient Express*)

Ian McEwan (Short Stories, *Saturday*, *The Cockroach*)

**Appendix:** Comprehensive annotated list of English-language writers influenced by Kafka, including writers for theatre, TV and film.

**Bibliography**

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