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REVIEW ESSAY:
GAINED IN TRANSLATION?

Kafka Translated:
How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka
By Michelle Woods
Bloomsbury, 2014. 283 pages.

The word *Kafkaesque* marks the cultural permeation, both real and perceived, that Kafka and his oeuvre have made into the English-speaking world; yet, it speaks nothing of what Woods calls the "network of translations" which breathe life into the construct behind the term. In *Kafka Translated: How Translators have Shaped our Reading of Kafka*, Woods interrogates not only how translators and the contexts in which they work and live inform their translations, but also how the act of translation itself is intertwined with the hermeneutics of Kafka's textual worlds and with his own writing process.

Woods analyzes several individual translators in the study's first chapter, beginning with Kafka's first translator and brief mistress, Milena Jesenská. Woods challenges conventional wisdom that Jesenska's inferior German skills led to "bad" translations into her native Czech, and offers an alternative reading of Jesenská's relationship with Kafka and his texts by painting a well-researched portrait of Jesenská's life. As with all translational examples cited in her study, Woods asserts that Jesenská's own interpretation of Kafka necessarily precluded the act of translation, and then outlines possible influences over Jesenská's translatorial choices: her destitution and familial abandonment—one not unlike

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that of *Amerika*'s Karl Rossmann—together with the Czech nation's burgeoning appetite for the avant-garde in creating its own national literary canon. Woods points to features (or hurdles) of Kafka's prose which challenge his translators: how is one to observe Kafka's stylistic deviance, manifesting for Woods in his lengthy sentences full of lexical and morphological repetition, while operating in a culture that favors textual domestication and the rich lexicon of a paradoxically invisible translator?

Woods then turns to the first translators of Kafka into English, Edwin and Willa Muir. She closely examines the contradiction between Willa's public and private views on the distribution of labor during their Kafka translations, the ambiguity of their translatorial identities between Scots and English, as well as how their financial dependency upon translation influenced domestication of Kafka's works, making them more palatable for paying publishers. Even as later translators criticize the Muirs' overly theological reading of Kafka—this criticism itself being a sort of necessary evil in the justification of a retranslation—Woods points out that such a theological reading of the Muirs' work is more influenced by Edwin's introductions to the Kafka translations than by Willa's (who privately claimed to have done most of the translations) actual work.

Some of Woods's most acute critiques surface as she examines the work of more recent Kafka translators Mark Harman and Michael Hofmann. With regards to Harman, an Irish-born Kafka scholar, Woods notes that the translator's ear, influenced by his own reading and linguistic "norms" of the day, will be inextricably tied to his translation. Whereas critics of translations seem to assume that one "correct" translation exists and then judge a given translation based upon its perceived fidelity, the critic should instead ask which elements of the original are receiving the most weight in the translation—Kafka's humor for Harman, especially when read aloud—acknowledging that no one choice fully encapsulates the original, and that *how* the source text means is equally important to *what* it states. Similar assertions surface in Woods's discussion of Hofmann, where Woods notes that his authority as a mediator of Kafka's work is, paradoxically, not questioned in his prefaces but only in his translations.

Kafka Translated is greatly enriched by Woods's assessment of translation *in* Kafka's work, which expands the traditional idea of translation as being only done *of* a work. To begin the second chapter, Woods explores how Kafka's characters themselves are often brought to translate—or comically avoid it—and

how his narrators engage in translation: they often allow characters to translate (for) themselves, while withholding narratorial judgment of what characters or situations could mean to the reader, a recurring source of Kafka's humor. His animals, too, are often charged with translating forms of communication into a language for those around them, with varying degrees of success, while his immigrant characters work to translate what they encounter in a new environment into their own interpretive schema.

Woods makes convincing cases for the (re)translations in which Kafka himself engaged while crafting his stories. Some of these include Karl Rossmann's suitcase—constantly misplaced and whose contents are continually in transit—as a reinterpretation of David Copperfield's box containing the sealed, yet ever-intact past of Dickens's character. Furthermore, by retracing how Kafka cherry-picked and tweaked various pictures and analyses, she argues that Kafka's images of America were influenced by Soukup's Czech travelogue. Even Jesenská herself, asserts Woods, finds partial retranslations in Kafka's characters.

Woods's third chapter explores how Kafka's works have been retranslated into film, often to commercial failure, for a glimpse into how the unique texture of his work is reconstructed visually. Among her examples here is Orson Welles's *The Trial*, analyzed in the context of postwar anxiety and resistance to totalitarianism, as well as Michael Haneke's made-for-TV *Das Schloß*, noted for its fragmentary visual progression and jarring narration as transpositions of how the source text imparts its contents. As with the textual translations, these and her other examples of Kafka's film adaptations offer new interpretive lenses with which to view the source texts; Woods does the auteur and/or translator a great service in not immediately assuming that they "missed something," and instead retraces how Kafka's work (and his myth) are (re)constructed by way of the interpretation that underlies his translations.

Much of the book's closing chapter is devoted to "Josefine," Kafka's final story, and Woods offers a summary of its interpretations as well as contributing her own. The reader of "Josefine" is never given a concrete picture of what the story's musical namesake character actually *does* (whistle? sing?) but instead is only left with the textual musicality of Kafka's prose, much as his monolingual (English) reader is left with a translation of something otherwise inaccessible.

Kafka Translated offers a well-researched vantage point to survey Kafka and his work as they are inextricably bound up in translation, in the broadest sense of the word. Woods's numerous and well-chosen examples float through her swift prose, while her tightly-knit analytical style never quite outpaces her reader. At its core, *Kafka Translated* does not intend to construct a "better-informed" or "new" Kafka, but to flesh out translation as it expands our scholarly understanding of his work, even as it is shown to underpin, precede and give new life to this very work. The implications of Woods's analyses border not at the edge of Kafka studies, but speak to translation at large: her study asks translation and its stakeholders to take a long look in the mirror, questioning the culture which has deemed it "a throwaway art" surrounded by "throwaway comments," and posits its inherent humanness as the strength of translation. As translators are among those closest to a text, it is a most worthwhile scholarly endeavor to trace not simply the results they put forth but also the process behind what they do, just as Kafka's process, the *how* of his storytelling, continues to capture our attention.