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in Wissenschaft und Unterricht

LWU

Herausgeber/Editorial Board:

Rudolf Böhm, Dietrich Jäger, Horst Kruse, Peter Nicolaisen

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Walter T. Rix

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BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

Preise siehe letzte Seite

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* London/New York: Methuen, 1983, repr. 1986, 173 pp., pb.

Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986, 242 pp., pb.

There is in part III of *Gulliver's Travels*, in which Lemuel Gulliver visits the grand Academy of Lagado, famous for its absurd projects, a passage where the protagonist makes the acquaintance of "a most ingenious architect who had contrived a new method for building houses, by beginning at the roof and working downwards to the foundation, which he justified to me by the like practice of those two prudent insects, the bee and the spider". Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's book *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* is somewhat reminiscent of that undertaking.

But let us, at least, begin at the beginning. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and she has written the volume under review for Terence Hawkes' otherwise excellent Methuen *New Accents* series, which aims, among other things, at introducing the interested reader to new approaches in literary theory and new methods of literary and cultural analysis. Rimmon-Kenan, who is certainly competent in the field of narratology, as a look at her previous publications will reveal, makes it clear right at the outset that she understands her role, in accordance with the series' objective, as that of a mediator rather than a purveyor of original theory (5). Drawing upon Anglo-American New Criticism, Russian Formalism, French Structuralism, the Tel-Aviv School of Poetics, and the Phenomenology of Reading, she attempts "an integration of existing theories" of narrative fiction (5), interspersed, however, with "explicit comments on and modifications of the theories which are brought together" (5). As the avowed double purpose of her book is "to present a description of the system governing all fictional narratives" and "to indicate a way in which individual narratives can be studied as unique realizations of the general system" (4), one hopefully expects a methodologically sound and vividly illustrative presentation of the main issues in one of the most complex fields of literary study.

However, her 4-page introduction (which counts as chapter 1) strikes already the sad keynote of her procedure. In the space of just a few paragraphs Rimmon-Kenan gives us fairly rigid definitions of 'poetics', 'narrative fiction', 'event', 'story', 'text', and 'narration' (2/3), which may all be helpful in answering her initial questions: What is a narrative? What is narrative fiction? How does it differ from other kinds of narrative? What are the features that turn a given discourse into a narrative text? What are the basic aspects of narrative fiction and how do they interact with each other? How does one make sense of a specific narrative text, and how can it be described to others? (1/2). But even as "working definitions" they seem to be awkwardly out of place at such an early point. Either the gentle reader understands the given definitions in their most relevant implications — and only that could be called proper understanding —, then he need hardly read the following 130-odd pages; or he can't understand them, then they should not be sprung at him. A minor point? I do not think it is, in a book whose main object is didactic.

Three of these early definitions are highly significant for the overall organization of the book, as one can already gather from the table of contents. 'Story' is dealt with in two chapters, so is 'narration', whereas 'text' requires three entire chapters. 'Story' designates, in Rimmon-

Kenan's phrasing, "the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events" (3). 'Text', in contrast, "is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes [the telling of events]. Put more simply, the text is what we read." (3). This dichotomy, to which Rimmon-Kenan adds a third aspect, 'narration' ("the act or process of production", 3) is, of course, as the author admits in a footnote, nothing but the old binary terminology of *fabula* and *sjuzet* used by the Russian Formalists, normally rendered in English as 'story' and 'plot', with 'story' used to denote the raw material of narrative, and 'plot', in David Lodge's words, signifying "the representation of that story in an aesthetically motivated discourse, with all the gaps, elisions, rearrangements, repetitions, and emphases which invest the story with meaning." It is true that the terminological dichotomy in question has found various expressions, reformulations and extensions (histoire/discourse [Todorov]; story/discourse [Chatman]; histoire/récit/narration [Genette] etc.), but why Rimmon-Kenan cannot do with the established English practice of 'story' and 'plot' is never made clear (133, 135), and why of all possible terms she chooses 'text' to replace 'plot' (if she thinks replacement is necessary) remains a complete enigma to me. Surely, 'text' is all but an innocent term and therefore least qualified to designate an aspect so indigenous to narrative.

Puzzling as this choice of terminology may be, its effects are negligible in comparison with the elaboration on the introductory theme of Lagodian topsy-turvydom that is to follow: The story of a narrative is, we are all agreed, never 'given', never 'there', it is rather an *abstraction* from the text, a *construct* that is made in or after the process of reading. The implications of this are far-reaching: No reader has ever access to the story 'as such', but it is the product of *his* dealing with the text, the product of *his* reading — and extremely divergent these readings may be, if one remembers Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, for example. To think of stories as independent of the act of reading, as "isolatable" (8), is therefore patently absurd and leads to abstruse consequences. Now, Rimmon-Kenan freely acknowledges that a 'story' always presupposes an act of translation and paraphrase (which is necessarily subjective and selective), but she then dismisses those who feel that, given these conditions, the project of establishing an objective 'narrative grammar' based on story units is at least a dubious, if not a ludicrous idea, as "readers with a fanatic attitude about the 'heresy of paraphrase'" (8). No, not fanatic, just cautious. The whole process of extracting stories (let alone: *the* story) from a given text is so highly problematical and its analysis involves so many fundamental hermeneutical and epistemological questions that one can only read in wonder how Rimmon-Kenan, lacking convincing counter-arguments, does away with these reservations by taking recourse to a simple argument of *expediency*: "In this predicament, the preliminary assumption that story-structure or narrativity is isolatable must be made [!] at least as a working hypothesis." (8). Or, to paraphrase cynically: I know this is hard to defend epistemologically, but otherwise we might as well stop here. Instead, she even takes 'story' — the problematical construct, the selective abstraction, the impoverished end-product of narratological distillation — as her *point of departure* (chapters 2 and 3), before discussing 'text' (chapters 4 to 6), 'narration' (chapters 7 and 8) and the process of reading (chapter 9), thereby, to use the Swiftian analogy, beginning with the roof as foundation (and a very shaky foundation at that) and working her way down (or up) to the more basic aspects which in reality come, both logically and practically, *before* everything else. At the end of her second chapter ("Story: events", 9-28) Rimmon-Kenan quotes John M. Lipski (1976) to the effect that "Despite the variety of models, there is as yet no clear method of traversing the path from the concrete text to the abstract narrative structure, without either quantitative or qualitative gaps intervening" (28), and she surprisingly comments, "To my knowledge, the situation has not changed significantly to date." This, however, has not hindered her from giving us accounts of Propp's, Todorov's, Bremond's and Greimas's attempts to establish 'narrative grammars' of the "intangible" (13), the 'story' in fact,

as if that were a sensible thing to do. No misunderstanding: her accounts of these theories are adequate and competent, the flaws of these theories not hers — but the roof hangs in midair and the question of how it will ever be connected with a supporting wall has been brushed aside as irrelevant.

Just two remarks in passing, referring to chapter 2: As I have argued elsewhere (*Ästhetik der Ambiguität: Zu Funktion und Bedeutung von Mehrdeutigkeit in der Literatur der Moderne*, Tübingen, 1988, and “How Far Can You Go? Zum Stand der literaturwissenschaftlichen Debatte in Großbritannien”, forthcoming), the use of the terms “surface” and “deep structure” (taken over from transformational grammar) seems to me to be totally inadequate in narratology. In total contrast to linguistics, which tries to reduce various surface structures to one basic deep structure, out of which the surface manifestations can then be rededuced by transformational rules, you are, in literary studies, normally confronted with *one* surface structure — the unique literary text — and want to find out about the *various* deep structures of meaning this text may possibly hide. Again, a remarkable reversal ... Second, it is amazing to see how many narratologists still take Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Russian Folk-Tale* (1928) as a point of reference in their works. It should be clear, I think, that his scheme of narrative functions is extremely “corpus specific” (Wallace Martin, 95), because it was abstracted from a distinctly limited sample of highly specific traditional narrative texts. It remains a mystery of what use his scheme should be for the analysis of, say, 20th-century literature and why his work should be of more than just historical interest.

Chapter 3 (29-42) is called “Story: characters”, but the ground continues to be shaky. Granting that the concept of ‘character’ is hardly applicable to many modern texts (which raises the question of “the death of the character”), Rimmon-Kenan turns to two differing schools of textual analysis, on the one hand those who claim that in narrative characters do not exist at all, because all we have is words and various aspects of the text (Weinsheimer: “Emma Woodhouse is not a woman or need be described as if it [!] were”), and on the other hand those who hold that literary characters are indeed modelled on people and that it makes sense to see them as such. Rimmon-Kenan likes to have it both ways — “Although these constructs are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, they are partly modelled on the reader’s conception of people and in this they are person-like”. (33) —, which is fine, but again she thereby begs the fundamental questions of how and why many literary texts are read mimetically, how and why a reader decodes a fictional text as if it were a factual account, and how and why he transforms words into coherent *Gestalten*. It is true there is a subsection entitled “How is character reconstructed from the text?” (36-40), but the answer to this requires, of course, a theory of reading, which regrettably — the Lagado phenomenon again — Rimmon-Kenan will not offer us before the penultimate chapter. So, what she has to say here is bound to be unsatisfactory for the same reason that the obvious inconsistencies in this chapter remain unreconciled, i.e. *for lack of a coherent theory of reading*. Without this, Rimmon-Kenan’s final statement on characters takes a lot of credence: “Discussion of a character’s ‘inner life’ is a far cry from referring to Emma Woodhouse as ‘it’ or treating characters as ‘actants’. The co-presence of such contrasted concepts in this chapter is not an oversight or an inconsistency, but a gesture toward the reconciliation suggested earlier” (42). One would like to know what the reconciliation here vaguely “gestured toward” might look like.

Chapter 4 (“Text: time”, 43-58) follows Gérard Genette rather closely. Apart from the relation between text-time and story-time (*Erzählzeit* und *erzählte Zeit*), which is dealt with under “duration”, we are acquainted with the aspects of “order” (“When?” in terms of first, second, last) and “frequency” (“relations between the number of times an event appears in the story and the number of times it is narrated in the text”, 46). This is done convincingly, and Rimmon-Kenan’s illustrations give some idea of the various functions that these time-related narrative techniques can have.

Chapter 5 (“Text: characterization”, 59-70) is largely based on Joseph Ewen’s publications in Hebrew and delineates the possibilities of direct definition and indirect presentation of character, e.g. through action, speech, external appearance or environment. Rimmon-Kenan adds “reinforcement by analogy” as another means by which the assembly of a character is textually prepared (analogous names, analogous landscape, analogy between characters). This chapter, as the foregoing one, makes easy reading and is unproblematical, maybe because it covers so familiar a ground that has been laboured before by traditional philology.

Under the heading of “Text: focalization” (chapter 6, 71-85), Rimmon-Kenan surveys the various aspects of ‘point of view’, to which, however, she prefers Genette’s term ‘focalization’ (albeit for reasons different from his). She argues that “speaking and seeing, narration and focalization, may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent” (72), and as an example of this she gives Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, where “the narrator is Pip, the adult, while the focalizer is Pip, the child” (73). This may be so, and in that case “the distinction between the two activities is a theoretical necessity” (72), but it doesn’t follow — does it? — that ‘point of view’ has to be substituted by ‘focalization’.

Be that as it may, her presentation of focalization, internal or external to the story, and its “degree of persistence”, i.e. whether it is fixed throughout the text or variable or even multiple, makes good sense, as does her treatment of the “facets of focalization” (perceptual, psychological, ideological) and their interrelationship.

Rimmon-Kenan knows, of course, that there are numerous other ways of segmenting and systematizing the phenomena in question. While reading *Narrative Fiction*, but especially when working through this chapter on focalization, I couldn’t help but deplore that Franz K. Stanzel’s *Theorie des Erzählens* (1979) had not been published in English before the first edition of Rimmon-Kenan’s book came out. Meanwhile, this most comprehensive and elegant theory of narration I know, which covers every imaginable aspect in combination with and relation to all others and is wonderfully effective on borderline cases, is available in a laudable translation (Cambridge University Press), and one can only hope that Stanzel’s clear, systematic and flexible theory will hitherto prove seminal in the world of Anglo-American narratology, too.

Chapter 7 (“Narration: levels and voices”, 86-105) begins with a model of the “narrative communication situation”, which is a truncated version of Chatman’s, who can discern six different “participants” (real author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, real reader), whereas Rimmon-Kenan holds that in narrative only four of them are relevant, leaving implied author and implied reader outside the scheme. Although this does not have a bearing on the following subsections in which she deals with (1) the relations between narration and story and (2) the typology of narrators (here again, Stanzel has coherently systematized what Rimmon-Kenan presents as an informal “and then, and then, and then”), I find this hard to accept, especially when I am asked to believe in a “covert narratee”, i.e. a silent addressee (104) — how can you tell he’s there at all? —, who has, on behalf of Rimmon-Kenan, ousted the implied reader, but seems to have pretty much the same function.

The short chapter 8 (“Narration: speech representation”, 106-116) with its discussion of diegesis and mimesis (telling and showing), of types of speech representation and an excellent sketch of free indirect discourse (*erlebte Rede, style indirect libre*), is probably the strongest of the book. Why? Here more than anywhere else, Rimmon-Kenan points out the *effects and functions* of the narrative devices she identifies. Here — but regrettably far too seldom in the other parts of her book — she demonstrates that it is not enough to pinpoint and name a textual phenomenon without showing how it behaves, *how it works* in different contexts. As there is no such thing as *the* effect of a given literary device, but rather a *spectrum of possibilities* out of which one is realized according to concrete circumstances, naive conceptions of static and fixed entities should be systematically discouraged and undermined, even — perhaps: especially — in introductory studies.

After this, Rimmon-Kenan, at long last, reaches the foundations: "The text and its reading" (chapter 9, 117-129). She here mentions Eco and Iser, Ingarden and Culler, and has something to say on the dynamics of reading (or what I would call the dialectics of text and reader), on gaps and delays, and on "how the reader makes sense of the text" (123). One should expect that a thorough examination of these hermeneutical problems would lead her to put many of the concepts used earlier on in inverted commas, would bring her to put question marks behind all pseudo-objective approaches in narratology. Far from it. She proves unreformed: "[...] the focus of the chapter [...] will remain the text. Thus the analysis will modify a few structuralist assumptions, but will not represent the more far-reaching 'revisionism' of some reader-oriented studies, because that is often at odds with the very project of narrative poetics" (118, italics mine, CB). I find this astounding, to say the least. What sort of logic is this? We're not going to deal with these radical objections to concepts of textual objectivity, because they threaten what we've been doing all along and are determined to continue? Since when is the truth-value of statements subordinated to expediency? Why is the "project of narrative poetics" more important than the question whether what it says matches the facts? What a singular kind of scholarly topsy-turvydom!

It now becomes apparent why Rimmon-Kenan was unwilling to build her house from basement to roof and preferred it the other way round. Knowing that theories of reading provide a shaky (but nevertheless necessary) foundation for theories of narrative, she was presumably afraid that, if she proceeded in the logical order, she might well never get to the roof at all. Working downwards from the top, she has already established all she wanted to say by the time she comes down to the nitty-gritty. And what a shift in perspective, what a *Gestaltumprung* this allows her: Now it is not the project of narrative poetics that is at odds with reader-oriented studies (which give the intricacies of reading their due), but it looks exactly the other way round: *these studies* are at odds with the project of narrative poetics! It's the ground's fault if the suspended house doesn't touch it. Voilà!

Has this book been an introduction to or an obituary of the poetics of narrative fiction? This is not my cynical summary, but the first sentence of Rimmon-Kenan's Conclusion (130-132) in view of the assorted threats of post-structuralism. It is neither nor, I should think. It is, for all its defects, still a reasonable introduction to narratology, and most of the inconsistencies I marked will not trouble the uninformed reader who will find what he is looking for — plus a fine, copious, partly annotated bibliography (144-159). As in Lagado, the necessary parts are all there, if only in strange assembly and peculiar construction.

Wallace Martin's *Recent Theories of Narrative* can be treated more summarily. It is a remarkable scholarly book — not only because it can do without a single footnote (the impressive annotated bibliography, which runs to some 25 pages, is subdivided into 40 sections which correspond to the 40 subsections of the text so that titles and authors mentioned there can easily be looked up).

Martin's aim is to "review theories of literary narration proposed by critics during the past two decades, with occasional reference to earlier theories and other disciplines" (8). This, strictly taken, he does not do, and in this respect the title of the book is a bit of a misnomer. I would guess that about a third of the theories reviewed by him are of an earlier date — but it does the study only good.

"Even this circumscribed area", says Martin, "is difficult to summarize in a single book" (8). But he manages surprisingly well — not least because he does not try to harmonize his heterogeneous matter, but rather lets the reader partake in the open discussion of unsolved problems and competing theories. Already the captions of his chapters indicate that he surveys a field in motion: "From Novel to Narrative" (chapter 2, 31-56), "From Realism to Convention" (chapter 3, 57-80), "Narrative Structure: Preliminary Problems" (chapter 4, 81-106), "Narrative Structure: A Comparison of Methods" (chapter 5, 107-129), "Points of View

on Point of View" (chapter 6, 130-151), "From Writer to Reader: Communication and Interpretation" (chapter 7, 152-172), "Frames of Reference: Metafiction, Fiction and Narrative" (chapter 8, 173-190).

It is true that the chronology of his Introduction (15-30) seems to be, at first glance, awfully jumbled: He sets out with "Theories of the Novel, 1945-1960", then jumps back to "Theories of the Novel in the Early Twentieth Century", then forward again to the fifties and sixties ("Theories of Narrative: Frye, Booth, and French Structuralism"), which includes a flashback to the twenties with Bakhtin, Šklovskij and Propp, before he ends with "Recent Theories". If this is never disorienting to the reader it is because here as elsewhere in the book, Martin makes ample use of diagrams, figures and tables that illustrate, highlight and summarize what has been developed in the text (why not more of this in the Rimmon-Kenan *New Accents* volume?), and because he always keeps an eye on his story-line, so to speak. His procedure is never arbitrary, but always motivated and deliberate — and therefore never confusing.

It is impossible to comment upon all the interesting points he makes or to do justice to his numerous intelligent observations. What they have in common and what is, I think, the basis of his achievement, is that he never shirks a problem, but tackles it head-on — pursuing and exploiting inconsistencies, contradictions, aporias for the sake of the reader, even if that means exploding many cherished considerations and naïve assumptions.

This, for example, is what he has to say on the structural analysis of narrative: "[It] would ideally be able to show how a single surface structure (sequence of events) could be related to as many deep structures as there are interpretations of the tale. [But] narrative analysts have tended to overlook surface ambiguities and to assign one structural description to stories that have more than one meaning" (103/104). Nicely put! Here, his final views on the quest for a rigorous theory of narrative, which, he holds, must end without closure: "Some argue that it should never have been undertaken because the quarry doesn't exist: narrative is not based on, nor can it ever be reduced to, theoretical structures. Others keep on searching. Their task would be easier if they knew exactly what the quarry in question will look like when they find it. But of course that will depend entirely on how they imagine it in the first place. If there is a moral to be drawn from this inconclusive tale, it is that theories are as revealing, misleading, reductive, or constructive as the people who create and use them" (106). Much to ponder about, I presume.

Although there is the odd weak passage — for example, I don't think he is particularly strong in defending concepts of realism and has much more fun in refuting them —, he is generally admirably clear and unequivocal in accepting the consequences of thinking — even should they be disturbing (an attitude, alas!, that does not go without saying ...). He has no difficulty at all in accepting that "narrative techniques are, after all, not ends in themselves but a means of achieving certain effects. We cannot know what narrative is except in relation to what it does, and while the purposes of readers and writers vary, they are inseparable from questions of value and meaning" (152). So he embraces what Rimmon-Kenan chooses to ignore: the *pragmatical foundation* theories of narrative find in hermeneutical processes. This of course means that there is no self-privileged vantage-point from which the theorist can "objectively" muster textual evidence irrespective of his own engagement in it. To accept this epistemological loop does not mean to accept defeat, to ignore it is no sign of strength; rather, to recognize this basic condition of human understanding is to open up an enormous vista of precious insights (and new problems, of course), to refuse to see it is no loop-hole, but a gigantic self-deception. Or, in Wallace Martin's words: "[...] something of importance may be revealed by the very failure of the attempt to determine the extent to which reader and text, as separate entities, contribute to interpretive diversity. Any such effort presupposes that the theorist can step outside the field, escaping the conditions of narrativity and reading, in order to identify

them. But any essay or book that treats this subject is itself another reading, another interpretation, another narrative. If the failure of this theoretical effort leads to a realization that we cannot separate ourselves from those activities when we analyze them, then reading, interpretation, and narration would appear to be necessary aspects of understanding, not just concepts that are useful in discussing fiction" (171/172).

Characteristically, Martin ends where Rimmon-Kenan began: "What then is narrative? Having reached the point at which a genuinely interesting book on narrative would begin [how deep the irony for the reviewer!], I can only say that I would never have undertaken a discussion of recent theories if I had known how to answer the question. An understanding of narrative is a project for the future — and not only the future of literary study. [...] While waiting for the essays and books that give us the theory we are waiting for, we might best read narratives, for they will be the source of anything of value we might contribute to the subject" (190). A finer declaration of intellectual honesty I have not read for a long time. And so much has the reader — in spite of (?) this modesty — learnt from Martin's account! Maybe, after all, good scholarship is, more than anything else, having a good tale to tell. But that would be a different story altogether.

Kiel

Christoph Bode

Maria Luise Caputo-Mayr und Julius M. Herz, **Franz Kafka: Eine kommentierte Bibliographie der Sekundärliteratur (1955-1980, mit einem Nachtrag 1985)**. Bern und Stuttgart: Francke Verlag, 1987, 692 S., geb.

Die nunmehr vorliegende kommentierte Kafka-Bibliographie ist das Resultat von über zehn Jahren Sammel- und Bewertungstätigkeit zweier amerikanischer Germanisten und Komparatisten an der Temple University in Philadelphia. Im gleichen Verlag erschien von den Autoren im Jahre 1982 bereits *Franz Kafkas Werke: Eine Bibliographie der Primärliteratur 1908-1980*.

Diese neue Bibliographie umfaßt die weltweite Kafka-Rezeption der letzten dreißig Jahre und ist wie kein anderes heute erhältliches Werk geeignet, dem Leser und Forscher zu schneller und genauer Orientierung über den Forschungsstand bis 1980 (bzw. 1985 ohne Kommentare) zu verhelfen. Die Einteilung erfolgt in fünf alphabetisch nach Autoren angelegten Unterkapiteln: Bibliographien und ähnliches; Sammelbände; Dissertationen; Artikel und kleinere Beiträge; Bücher. Es folgen noch: Addenda (Bücher, Bibliographien, Sammelbände; Dissertationen; Artikel, Buchkapitel und ähnliches) bis 1985 sowie ein Werkregister und Sach- und Namenregister. Stichwortartige und dennoch ausführliche Kommentare, die sich bei wichtigeren Beiträgen auf Seitenlänge ausdehnen und im Detail auf bedeutende Forschungsrichtungen (z.B. Strukturalismus) eingehen, belegen das Bemühen der Autoren, das Material wertend zu erfassen. Etwa dreißig verschiedene Sprachen wurden bearbeitet, und viele ausländische Titel — russische, japanische, hebräische, usf. — wurden zum Teil transkribiert und/oder übersetzt. Die Kommentare wurden zwar in deutscher Sprache abgefaßt, doch enthält die Bibliographie auch die Titel der Übersetzungen vieler Bücher und Aufsätze sowie vorhandene Dissertations- und Artikelzusammenfassungen in englischer Sprache. Auch eine gewisse Anzahl von Rezensionen wurde aufgenommen.

Allerdings gilt die bereits beim Erscheinen der ersten Bibliographie erwähnte Einschränkung, daß Vollständigkeit zwar ein wünschenswertes Ziel, doch letztlich unerreichbar ist, denn einige Werke waren den Autoren nicht zugänglich.

Zuweilen ergeben sich bei einem Durchblättern dieser Bibliographie auch für langjährige Kafka-Forscher noch Überraschungen. So weist die Anführung der Übersetzungen auf das in