Patrick O'Neill. *Transforming Kafka: Translation Effects.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2014. 222 pp.

For those of us who spend our careers pondering the connotations of the words "ungeheueres Ungeziefer," Patrick O'Neill's *Transforming Kafka* serves as a salutary reminder that most of Franz Kafka's global readership of *The Metamorphosis* encounter Gregor Samsa as "a giant bug," "une vermine formidable" or "un monstruoso insecto." By drawing attention to the hundreds of translations of Kafka's works in more than forty languages, O'Neill has identified an often overlooked aspect of the Kafkan oeuvre. However, perhaps inevitably for a work that purports to break new ground adjacent to the wide and well-plowed field of Kafka studies, *Transforming Kafka* raises more questions than it can answer.

In assessing the panoply of Kafka translations, O'Neill adopts two critical approaches of his own devising: the macrotextual, which considers the totality of the original texts and their translations as "a worldwide Kafka *system*" (8, O'Neill's emphasis) and the transtextual, which "attempts to read comparatively at least some aspects of that macrotext across the individual translations and individual languages involved" (9). The first chapter offers a historical overview of the Kafkan macrotext in English, French, Spanish, Italian, and what are referred to as "other" languages, while an appendix attempts to limn the "macrotextual contours" of the corpus of translations by listing these texts to date (179-87). However, the vast bulk of the book is devoted to the transtexual approach, i.e. to granular, comparative readings of specific sentences and even individual phrases across several languages and over the nine decades since they first appeared. Mindful of the overwhelming volume of material, O'Neill judiciously elects in chapters 2-6 to focus on five key works: the short stories *The Judgment* (1911) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915), and the three incomplete novels: *Amerika* (1927), *The Trial* (1925), and *The Castle* (1926). Chapters 7 and 8 explore Kafka's use of titles for, and of proper names in, his novels and stories, and a brief conclusion indicates the value of these macrotextual and transtextual approaches.

Since O'Neill does not draw on any other theories of translation, the reader must rely on the author's notions of the macro- and transtextual. Here I confess that I find the concept of the macrotextual frustratingly vague. I am not convinced that the ever-growing corpus of translations of Kafka's works constitutes a "system," given that the process of rendering these texts in other languages does not proceed in an organized manner, but rather according to the haphazard ambitions of various publishing houses, and that no reader, however polyglot, could really comprehend the hundreds of translations scattered across forty odd languages as a unified whole. Although the author undertakes useful

bibliographical work in enumerating the translations of Kafka, he himself concedes that this project "was not conceived as a tool of practical criticism" (177). It strikes me that *Transforming Kafka* would benefit from expanding the concept of the macrotextual to include works of criticism written in dialogue with particular translations. For example, on at least two different occasions O'Neill makes the salient point that for many decades in the English-speaking world Edwin and Willa Muir's translation of Kafka *was* Kafka (127, 176). But what did this mean for the Anglophone readers' understanding of these texts? Did the plethora of new English translations from the critical edition of Kafka's works in the eighties and nineties alter readers' perceptions of the oeuvre, or was the Muirs' first impression on readers and critics alike indelible? Conversely, to what extent can we see the influence of Max Brod's literary criticism on the Muirs' work, particularly his vision of his friend as a religious writer? For O'Neill's notion of the macrotextual to become a useful critical tool, it needs to acknowledge the role of criticism itself in informing and evaluating these translations.

O'Neill's concept of transtexuality also remains somewhat amorphous, but in this regard the reader can at least see it more clearly in practice, with five of the eight chapters devoted to comparative readings of passages across languages. This approach yields the most insights in the area of narratology. For example, O'Neill's discussion of Kafka's famous first line of *The Trial* ("Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben" 'Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K.') points out that while the use of the simple past tense in the original German suggests a narrative perspective focalized through the character, the temporal indeterminacy of the English verb "must" leaves the question open as to whether this is the narrator or Josef K.'s perspective (101-2). However, elsewhere this transtextual approach leads to confusion, ironically enough in the area of indeterminacy itself. Consider for example how O'Neill claims that the fact that the Muirs' mistranslation of a phrase from the story *The Judgment* is repeated in Dutch and Spanish versions "lends it a not inconsiderable significance in our context as illustrating in exemplary form the transtexual extension of Kafkan indeterminacy" (56). Here it is vital to distinguish between the accidental confusion arising from the mistranslation of a single phrase and the sustained air of indeterminacy generated by Kafka's texts that has fascinated readers for a century. Furthermore, *Transforming Kafka* would benefit from a more rigorously critical attitude towards translators' errors, rather than merely regarding all translations, good, or bad, as an extension of the Kafkan macrotext (176). Thus I would argue that the Muirs' mistranslation of *Die Verwandlung* ('The Transformation') as *The Metamorphosis* not only endows the text with a mythological resonance à la Ovid, as O'Neill points out (142), but also introduces the inappropriate connotation of a natural transformation, such as that of a

caterpillar to a butterfly, which is wholly at odds with Gregor Samsa's unnatural and inexplicable transmogrification.

In conclusion, *Transforming Kafka* highlights the often neglected role of translation in elevating the author to worldwide fame and the subtle variations in meaning created by each new rendering, while also indicating the further work needed for Kafkan criticism to understand fully this phenomenon.

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