PREFACE

This book has followed a long and circuitous path to its present state. It probably would have seen print much sooner if the theoretical introduction had not grown beyond all bounds and threatened to overwhelm the entire project. Finally, I realized that I had to write another book first, an independent theoretical study, before I could start the work on Kafka. The other book, *Inventions of Reading*, still represents in a certain sense the introduction to *Kafka's Rhetoric*.

Inasmuch as it would be unreasonable to expect readers of this book to read the other one first, I have summarized below in Chapter 1 the principal theoretical points of *Inventions of Reading* and have even reprinted a few paragraphs that deal explicitly with Kafka. Readers of the earlier book may therefore find the opening pages of this one more than slightly familiar, and I can only hope that they will understand my reason for repeating myself. Because *Kafka's Rhetoric* is addressed to a group by and large different from the intended readers of the previous volume, probably very few people will notice the overlap, and they are likely to be already unusually well disposed to my work. I extend to them my gratitude in advance.

I must also alert the reader to a feature of this book that may seem peculiar in view of the history of Kafka scholarship. Books devoted principally to the analysis of Kafka's fiction, as this one is, normally expend major portions of the text discussing the novel fragments *The Missing Person (Amerika)*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*. The present book does not do so. Although I do treat aspects of these three texts at

various points, they receive relatively less attention than do much shorter writings.

There are several reasons for my unorthodox distribution of critical scrutiny. The first and by far most important is, of course, that my topic is not "Everything There Is to Know about Kafka" or even "A Study of Kafka's Fiction" but indeed Kafka's *rhetoric*. As it happens, material pertinent to this topic is not proportional to the length of the work containing it, and therefore occasionally a very short story (such as "The Silence of the Sirens") offers roughly as much insight into Kafka's rhetorical construction as a very long one (such as *The Castle*). Sometimes the shortest texts of all, whether stories or letters or diary entries, provide the richest material, and the length of my analysis reflects this richness.

A second reason is that Kafka's novel fragments present philological problems that enormously complicate the process of interpreting them as artistic wholes. Kafka abandoned all of them before completion, leaving two (*The Missing Person* and *The Castle*) with no ending and the other (*The Trial*) without clearly indicating how the material should be arranged. These difficulties have not deterred scholars in the past, nor should they now, but they have caused me to think twice before attempting the kind of full-scale interpretation I offer for, say, "In the Penal Colony." Now that the texts of *Der Verschollene* and *Das Schloß* are available in a reliable critical edition, some of my hesitation has been eliminated, but I still feel a certain reluctance.

My third and most personal justification for privileging the shorter texts is that I believe Kafka displays in them his greatest strengths as a writer. In the short form he found his true calling, as he seems to have realized himself when he said, regarding the composition of "The Judgment," completed in one sitting, "only in this way can writing be done" (*DI* 276). The novel fragments are great unfinished edifices, whereas the miniature parables such as "Give It Up!" and "On Parables" are polished little gems. The stories of intermediate length, such as "The Metamorphosis," "In the Penal Colony," and "A Country Doctor," are some of the finest that the German language has to offer and indeed some of the best in the whole European tradition. As a novelist Kafka cannot fairly be compared even to contemporaries such as Mann and Musil, but as a writer of short stories he stands comparison with anyone who has ever attempted to write in the genre.

My final preliminary duty is to recite my critical genealogy, so that the reader will know what sort of book to expect. I was trained, like

most members of my generation, in New Critical “close reading,” and in a fundamental sense I have never strayed far from that training. It will be clear, however, that more recent developments in literary theory have profoundly influenced the sort of close reading in which I engage. I have learned much from the deconstructive practice of Paul de Man and from Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the major tropes of the Western philosophical tradition. I will not be surprised if many readers find this book basically poststructuralist in approach. But I have also learned from sources unconnected to poststructuralism, from J. L. Austin’s version of speech-act theory, from semiotics, and of course from classical rhetoric. I might add that my attempts to understand Kafka, which began when I was an undergraduate barely able to decipher German, considerably predate my knowledge of literary theory. I must entertain the possibility that my interest in Kafka had a decisive influence on the theoretical position I have subsequently taken.

I am grateful to the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago for the flexibility in scheduling courses, meetings, lectures, and other daily obligations that gave me the time to write. The Kafka Society of America offered me a welcome opportunity to present some of the material published here in the form of talks at its annual meetings, and I profited from the responses I received. Other material in the book found its first public exposure in lectures at Purdue University, New York University, the American Semiotic Society, the Midwest Modern Language Association, and the University of Chicago. I am grateful to members of my audiences for their useful comments and criticisms.

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Stanley Corngold's support, advice, and encouragement have been especially important to me in seeing this project through to completion. The intellectual debt I owe him is clearly evident throughout the book, and especially in the first chapter, but no number of footnotes or bibliographic citations can fully acknowledge it. I owe a special debt of thanks to the scores of students at three different universities who have participated in the seminars on Kafka I have offered over the past fifteen years. To say that I learned from them at least as much as they from me is a tired cliché, but in the rhetorical spirit of this enterprise, I offer it up once again.

My son, Jan, to whom the book is dedicated, perhaps suffered more than anyone else while the work was going on, obliged as he was to play by himself while his father labored in his study (as, for example, I do now). I thank him for his patience. Bernhard Kendler and Kay Scheuer, along with the rest of the staff at Cornell University Press, have once again displayed their good judgment and goodwill in the often frustrating process of seeing the manuscript through editing and production. Two anonymous readers for the Press deserve thanks for numerous suggestions directed toward improving the book.

I can say little here about my debt to Susan Noakes. She remains for me the resource *sine qua non*.

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