THE JEWISH ESSENCE OF FRANZ KAFKA

Author(s): Harriet L. Parmet

Source: *Shofar*, Winter 1995, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 28-43

Published by: Purdue University Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/42942097

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Shofar*

This content downloaded from 132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

THE JEWISH ESSENCE OF FRANZ KAFKA

by

Harriet L. Parmet

Harriet L. Parmet, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures, has taught Hebrew at Lehigh University since 1976. She specializes in modern Israeli literature in translation, particularly the work of women writers. She co-authored a study of feminist religious views on reproductive technologies and a major article on Haviva Reik, a heroine of the Holocaust. Co-founder of Lehigh University's Jewish Studies program and founder of the Jewish Colloquia series, Parmet was responsible for Lehigh's Judaic library acquisitions. She has published in *Midstream, Feminist Teacher, Journal for Feminist Studies in Religion, Jewish Spectator, NEMLA (Modern Language Studies), Studies in American Jewish Literature, Shofar, Visions International*, and *Delos* (forthcoming). Parmet has coordinated an archaeological dig a Tel Akko, Israel for the Lehigh valley Association of Independent Colleges. She has served on the Executive Board of the Hillel Society and the Academic Board of Associates (Berman Center at Lehigh) and has received fellowships for research in Israel.

Had Franz Kafka not been born and reared a Jew, he would not have been Kafka, any more then James Joyce reared among the Zulus could have written *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Although the point seems rather obvious, its significance has often been missed, distorted, or ignored. Kafka has been hailed as a crypto-Christian and simultaneously unveiled as a pseudo-Marxist: the absence of explicitly Jewish references in the available texts has justified the dismissal by literary critics of Kafka's religion as only an incidental biographical detail. In this regard one must understand the prevailing atmosphere of Jewish learning and writing until

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the social and political turmoil of the collapsing Austrian Empire ended its traditional character. The medieval myth of the *golem* ('clay' in Hebrew), layered with the cultural impulses superimposed upon it, pervades the world of Franz Kafka.

To grow up as a Jew in Kafka's Prague was a matter not of choice but of destiny. What Kafka made of that destiny at different points in his life, the manner in which collective fate shaped his individual vision, constitutes the larger story beyond the scope of this paper; moreover, his attitude toward Judaism—and far more is involved here than religion as such—underwent significant changes over the years. Yet who he was cannot possibly be understood without realizing that his being Jewish—not faith, to begin with, not observance, but the fact of being Jewish in turn-of-the-century Prague—was as vital a component of his identity as his dark hair and deeply brooding eyes.

Hermann and Julie Kafka, Franz's parents, belonged to the first generation of assimilated Jews. Though no longer observant in any meaningful sense, they retained a tenuous and largely sentimental attachment to the tradition in which they were raised, at the same time striving to become Austrian citizens of the Mosaic faith, that would assure their full acceptance as equals in the social strata to which they aspired.[1]

Into this defensively ambivalent attitude toward Judaism, the child Franz's self-awareness as a Jew could scarcely have made for a happy discovery. Among the writings of Kafka, the primary document detailing his relation to the family is the *Letter to His Father*,[2] written November 1919, five years before his death, which was never delivered. In this *Letter* Kafka analyzes the Jewish aspect of his development with a critical detachment that, despite its polemical tone, conveys a vivid sense of the home situation:

> As a child I reproached myself in accord with you, for not going to the synagogue often enough, for not attending services often enough, for not fasting, and so on. It was you whom I thought I had wronged, rather than myself, and I felt crushed by the ever-present burden of guilt (76).

Kafka continues reproaching the father for the farcical nature of Judaism that was his brand of religious experience: the four times a year

[1]Ernest Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Kafka* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), pp. 54, 55.

[2]Franz Kafka, *Letter to His Father*, bilingual edition tr. Ernest Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in the synagogue, the formality of prayer without spirituality, young Kafka's boredom, the comedic nature of their family Seder, and the lack of Judaic inheritance passed on to young Franz.

> Also, a child hyper-actively observant out of sheer anxiety should not possibly be made to understand that the few insipid gestures you performed in the name of Judaism had some higher meaning. For you, they had their meaning as token reminders of an earlier time; that was why you wanted to pass them on to me. But since even for your self they no longer held any intrinsic value of their own, you could do so only by threats or persuasion (*Letter*, 81).

To what extent does this letter reflect the general condition of the Jewish bourgeois family in the Austro-Hungarian empire at this time? Hermann Kafka, on the evidence of the 20,000 words of the *Letter*, was an overbearing bully, a vulgar monster of egotism, and a sadist. Fortunately, none of these attributes can be referred to as the sociology of the Jewish family. Kafka himself, however, does touch on certain notes of social generalization in the *Letter*, and these demonstrate how the fateful peculiarities of individual character may be significantly reinforced by certain elements of shared cultural experience.

The senior Kafka, as part of the vast immigration from shtetl (Jewish village) to city that took place in Central Europe, was a self-made man, and intrinsic to the self-assertion of this successful new member of the urban mercantile class was his penchant for domination within the family: "You had worked your way so far up by your own energies alone, and as a result you had unbounded confidence in your opinion." Hermann Kafka had jettisoned the pious practice of the world of his childhood, retaining a quasi-nostalgia for it. His only son sensed the emptiness of this vestigial reflex of observance, and in the *Letter* he imagines that had the religious situation been different, "we might have found each other in Judaism" (*Letter*, 75).

Kafka himself stresses the typicality of the predicament: "The whole thing is, of course, no isolated phenomenon. It was much the same with a large section of this transitional generation of Jews, which had migrated from the still comparatively devout country side to the cities." (*Letter*, 81).

The fact that he could thus put his father's Judaism into some historical perspective did not help young Kafka find meaning in these scraps of his father's past. To justify this weakness in his own life, the father was inclined to say that "he had too much work and too many other worries to be able to bother with such things as well" (*Letter*, 83). In the light of his father's overall negative attitude toward Judaism, Franz

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

wondered how he could have been expected to "do anything better with that material then get rid of it as fast as possible" (*Letter*, 79).

Franz began to appreciate the vitality of Judaism only when he was exposed to something more and other than his father's concepts. While for many young Jews of his own generation this experience came in the army in World War I, when they met Polish Jews, for Franz it occurred when he came into contact with a Yiddish theater group. The Yiddish theater in Prague held a fascination for Kafka out of all proportion to the artistic merit of the plays it presented, because he saw in it the living manifestation of an uninhibited, self-sufficient faith culture, unlike anything he had known personally. Evelyn Thornton Beck[3] asserts that "the seminal scene of *The Trial*,[4] (1914, 1915), Joseph K's arrest, corresponds to a brief but important sequence in one of the Yiddish plays, the arrest of Don Sebastian in Faynman's *The Vice King* . . . Stripped of its particularity (i.e., the Inquisition and the Secret Jews), Don Sebastian's arrest is a model for that of Joseph K. The wording and the pace of the dialogue in the two scenes is remarkably similar. In *The Vice King*, the deputy announces, 'I have been sent . . . to arrest you,' in *The Trial* the warder informs Joseph K., 'you can't go out, you are arrested' (*The Trial*, 3)."

The mere idea of Yiddish literature attracted him because, with its obvious stress on "an uninterrupted tradition of national struggle that determined every work," he envisioned it as an alluring antithesis to that anguished exploration of a private world that writing was for him. He once called writing a form of prayer. From the time of his encounters with these Yiddishists in 1910, he became increasingly interested in Jewish history, and in 1918 he began to study Hebrew intensively. Toward the end of his life Zionism filled the spiritual void within him.

In the *Letter* Kafka wrote that he expected that his new involvement with Judaism would bring father and son closer together. Yet his father was "nauseated" by the Jewish writing that Franz brought home, and, in the end, the son believed that "through my intervention Judaism became abhorrent to you" (*Letter*, 85). Franz saw these exaggerated reactions as Hermann's acknowledgment of the "weakness" of both his own Judaism and of Franz's religious upbringing.

In the absence of authoritative tradition, the assertive father became an absolute arbitrary authority with all the force of the most punitive aspects of the God of tradition. Kafka writes about his upbringing: "But for

---

[3]Quoted in Pawel, *Nightmare of Reason*, p. 242.

[4]Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

me as a child every thing you called out at me was positively a heavenly commandment" (*Letter*, 41). The child and the man-child after him is forever at the foot of a towering Mt. Sinai, hearing the words hurled down at him in thunder. But the words frequently change, attach themselves to absurd or trivial objects, and are flagrantly violated by the very person who pronounces them.

The *Letter*, intended as a gesture of reconciliation and, in a most peculiar way, as an expression of frustrated filial love, is one of the most terrible indictments imaginable of a father by his son. The son repeatedly confesses his own impotence, his sense of guilt, but through anecdote and analysis he makes painfully clear how the father is responsible for the catastrophe of his son's character. It was a lifelong contest between hopeless unequals: "we were so different and in our differences so dangerous to each other that if anyone had tried to calculate in advance how I, the slowly developing child and you the full grown man, would stand to each other, he could have assumed you would simply trample me underfoot, so that nothing was left under me." This infantile perception of the father never seems to have been altered by the growth of little Franz into adult proportions: "Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that either are not covered by you or are not within your reach." This account of the inner crippling of the son helps us to understand how the materials of life are transformed when they are metamorphosed into fiction. In Kafka's fiction, these very same materials are directed into haunting narrative explanations of the dynamics of familial living, of living under political and social constraints, and of living under the pressure of eternally elusive moral imperatives. What Kafka's record of our dark times does is to effect a reconfiguration of the family, the author using his own experience of the post-traditional Jewish family matrix as the means of representing existence under a strictly lawlike, albeit lawless, authority.

The fate of filiation and strong guilt feelings possibly resulting from his rejection of religious Judaism are to be found in the stark short story "The Judgment."[5] The power of the story derives precisely from the fact that all of reality has been stripped down to the relation between the father and his son, Georg Bendermann. The only scene for action outside the dark rooms where the two Bendermanns live is the bridge from which

[5]In Franz Kafka, *Selected Stories*, tr. Willa and Edwin Muir (Nw York: Modern Library, 1952).

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

George will fling himself at the end. There are only two other human figures, both of whom exist at the periphery of this world. One is a friend in Russia, who is variously a figment of Georg Bendermann's imagination, an alter ego, a bone of contention between father and son, and an alternative image of a son for Bendermann senior. The other figure in the background in Georg's fiancée.

One of the recurrent topics of the *Letter to His Father* is Franz's Kafka's inability to marry, which he attributes to his sense of devastating weakness vis-à-vis the powerful father-figure role he cannot hope to emulate, whose place he does not dare usurp. In the *Letter*, this notion has the status of a symptom and the tonality of a whine. Translated into "The Judgment," the idea picks up archetypal force: the conflict between the two Bendermanns becomes the immoral conflict between father and son in which every attempt of the son to take a sexual partner is construed as a betrayal, a thinly veiled project to displace the father and possess a surrogate of the mother. "'Because . . . the nasty creature,'" thunders Bendermann the father, referring to the fiancée, "'lifted her skirts . . . you made up to her, and in order to make free with her undisturbed you have disgraced your mother's memory, betrayed your friend and struck your father in bed so he can't move'" ("The Judgment," 82).

The invented detail in this reconfiguration is uncanny: the thigh wound laid bare by the father suggestive of threatened castration, past prowess in battle, and the ancestral Jacob's confrontation with the angel of the Lord; the fact that the father through the strength of his claimed insights into the son's motives suddenly grows "radiant" and is able to rise powerfully from bed. The final stroke of the story, a paternal death-sentence that the son finds irresistible, is at once the most fantastic and the most resonant moment of the tale: it carries us back far beyond the Jewish bourgeois familial setting of the Kafkas of Prague into an archaic shadow world of absolute patriarchal authority where the self-assertive impulse of the young is crushed with savage force. Georg swings over the protective railing, hangs for a moment, calls, 'Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same,' and lets himself drop ("The Judgment," 88).

Kafka noted in his diaries, "I wrote [this story] at one sitting during the night of September 22 and 23 from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning." In 1912 Yom Kippur commenced at sundown of September 21 and concluded at sundown of September 22. Kafka, consciously or not, seemed to be motivated to expiate his own guilt toward the God of his ancestors.

Written immediately after the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the sentence to death by drowning echoes very closely the liturgy of the Yom Kippur

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

service descriptive of God's inscriptions in the Book of Life: "who shall live and who shall die; . . . who shall perish by water. . . ." And Georg's acceptance of the validity of the sentence and his carrying it out in all probability indicate Kafka's own sense of guilt toward God. His avowal that 'I have always loved you all the same' would seem to be an expression of either repentance or an underlying acceptance of God despite the conscious denial. Kafka, as a member of the Jewish community of Prague thoroughly immersed in cultural Judaism, could not have failed to know of the occurrence of Yom Kippur or of the day's solemn significance. The convergence of three major problems in Kafka's life (the vacillation over marriage; anger at his father's insistence that he had to work at the factory; and guilt about his rejection of God, brought to a crisis by Yom Kippur) may account for the explosive manner in which the story was written and for its savagery.

Whatever the relative importance of these problems, it seems most plausible, however, that Kafka's continued denial of his God and the occurrence of Yom Kippur are intrinsic to the meaning of "The Judgment" and that, despite the few overt signs that Kafka felt guilty about that denial, his actual guilt-feelings were strong enough to explode into a short story. Either because he did not recite the Yom Kippur petitions for forgiveness as a result of failure to attend services (The *Diaries*[6] make no mention of his synagogue attendance that year) or because the prayers simply were not effective for him, they did not relieve his anxiety. One might even argue that the literary explosion was more effective. Even so, Kafka may have thought he had rejected the religion of his ancestors without suffering any apparent after-effects. In fact he enjoyed no such escape. "The Judgment" was Kafka's first important work; in many of his later works Kafka was very much concerned with man's relationship to God.

In "The Metamorphosis,"[7] written at intervals between November 17 and December 7, 1912, the stroke of fantasy occurs at the very beginning in the famous first sentence that announces Gregor Samsa's transformation into a gigantic insect. "The Metamorphosis," like "The Judgment," was an eruption—triggered by a brief bout of depression over a trivial misunderstanding with Felice, to whom he was engaged twice—in the best of times, it took very little to shatter his brittle euphoria and to set off a blast of anxiety. Kafka, puzzled, appeared to be better able to give shape and

---

[6]Max Brod, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, tr. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), vol. I, pp. 202-203.

[7]In *Selected Stories*.

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

structure to his anguish in what may well be the most "Kafkaesque" of his shorter works.

What it says about him, with chilling detachment and in prose of hallucinatory precision, is devastating in its intimacy, Hell's antechamber inventoried by a claims assessor: the evolution of Homo Sapiens from child to clerk to vermin. The sense of unworthiness, of rejection, that Kafka articulates in *The Letter to His Father* is startlingly objectified by this conversion of man into a dung beetle—a pariah within the family, an object of embarrassment and loathing—an insuperable obstacle to normal family existence.

The family as institution is the central focus of this story. Although the trappings of contemporary urban life—the cramped apartment, the economic endeavors of Gregor and his father—are in evidence, this does not finally seem a representation of the early twentieth-century bourgeois family but rather a narrative study of the delicate hydraulic system of the nuclear family as such. Here, too, we have the rivalry between father and son, in which as the son becomes weaker (wounded by an apple embedded in his carapace, he is like an "old invalid"), the father grows in strength. But that relationship is complicated by the criss-crossing lines of connection among all four familial members. The crippled son futilely seeks refuge from the hostility of the father in the possibility of maternal solicitude (even as Kafka did); for a while he imagines that his sister, who is the one given the task of nurturing him, is his secret ally, but this proves delusional, for Gregor Samsa cannot make a human sound; rotting remnants of human food are brought by his sister into his room, and this not even every day. And Gregor Samsa walks along the walls of the claustrophobic small space or naps while clinging to the ceiling in his room, which is devoid of all furnishings. The family on the other side of the wall speak in hushed tones and eat human food. In the end, it dawns on him that the only way he can serve the family is through his death on the stairs, in the darkness, alone. The living remain on the other side.

This is a personal fairy tale about the magic of hate and the power of hypocrisy, a surreal *Bildungsroman* charting the transmogrification of a lost soul into a dead bug—Kafka's claustrophobic horror of life with father as the model of man's life with his gods. Gregor's death has some kind of redemptive force. With the giant bug at last out of the way, the father, mother, and the suddenly blooming daughter can leave the oppressive atmosphere of their apartment-prison, walk out into the fresh air of spring, think again of action, renewal, and a clean fresh place to live. Thus the cramped psychic space of life in the family of Hermann Kafka has been transformed into a scapegoat story—where the well-being of the whole is

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

achieved at the cost of the unassailable individual. Personal, trenchant, pathetic, but what an indictment against what happens to those in our society who dare to be different, who stand in opposition to an oppressive, stifling regime or whose religious orientation marks them as alien. Here the biblical parallel of the Jewish New Year Torah reading cries out.

The protagonists of "The Judgment" and "Metamorphosis" have the Hungarian names Georg and Gregor (an ethnic variant) respectively. Franz's younger brother Georg was born September 1885 and died of measles in the spring of 1887. Kafka in writing to his fiancée Felice Bauer, as late as December 1912 mentions that he was the oldest of six children. "Two brothers, some-what younger, died in infancy through the fault of the doctors."

Kafka was well aware of the Ashkenazic (German, Eastern European Jewish) tradition of naming children after deceased members of the family. His choice of names in the stories cited is curiously significant as both Georg and Gregor commit suicide. Was this a "Kafkaesque" perversion of conferring literary immortality upon a younger male sibling? Yet we do know that Kafka had asked Max Brod to destroy all of his manuscripts. Fame during Kafka's life-time was as fleeting and ephemeral as his own span of years. It is not certain how familiar Hermann Kafka was with his son's stories. What is certain however, is that the father despised the son's obsession with writing, literature, and all intellectual endeavors. In any case, Hermann would not have appreciated Franz's selection of names, let alone their characters' demises. Thus we are confronted with yet another indecipherable enigma as to Kafka's intent and can only speculate upon its meaning.

In chronicling Joseph K.'s struggle to discover the nature of his guilt in *The Trial*, the letter of the law (what could be more Jewish than these concerns), identity of his judges, and his stubborn efforts to put reason and common sense against the flawless logic of a sentence based upon a verdict beyond rational comprehension, Kafka demolished the solid certitudes of nineteenth century realism with its black-and white contrasts and sharply defined outlines, and dissolved the familiar world of solid objects in a space-and-time continuum governed by forces of terrifying potential.

In fact, he all but destroyed the structures of the novel itself as he pursued guilt into the realm of the universal without ever losing sight of the specific, of the most minute detail of gesture or appearance, until the evidence in the proceedings against Joseph K. sufficed to justify any verdict twice over, not only against the accused but, with at least equal force, against his judges. We have seen time and time again this dynamic

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ambiguity, the outgrowth of authentic and profound ambivalence rather than rationalization that opens the novel to multiple interpretations, at the same time foreclosing any claim to one definitive reading. We are confronted with a dazzling interplay of multifaceted meanings whose unraveling becomes a first step along a path that is without end in human experience, as Kafka himself was forced to recognize when he finally had to abandon both Joseph K. and his novel to their fate. Pursuing the trial all the way to the court of the last instance is beyond the strength and limits of any human life.

The injustice of the court is undeniable but its law is established in Joseph K.'s innermost self. Joseph K. is caught in the living mystery of concrete existence; he doesn't stand there weighing modern relative ideas against ancient absolute ones. It is almost impossible for men to live without a trust in ultimate justice ("something indestructible"), and at the same time ultimate justice is impossible in a world where one must not accept as true what the law says is true. "One must only accept it as necessary," says the priest as his last comment to Joseph K. in the parable "Before the Law." To the prophetic injunction "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue," Kafka's hollow response seems to be a true one.

The Trial can be used as a depressingly realistic if sadly understated description of life in many parts of the world, nowhere more so than in Prague where Kafka is seen as a hero and his flat in Alchemist's Lane behind the towering Headchin Castle is an attraction for those in search of the traces of Kafka. An analysis at this superficial level of *The Trial* casts a spell that suggests the ineffable beneath the opaque surface of language.

Kafka's novel finally is language, and language has been a matter of life and death among Jews ever since the wandering desert tribe smashed its idols and enshrined instead the word as its God. To live and die as a member of the tribe meant strict observance of the word of God become law. Transgressors died a lonely death in the desert.

Obedience to the spirit of the law presupposed knowledge of its letter; interpretation becomes the task of a lifetime, an unending process to which each generation contributed its share, expanding and refining the interpretation of the prior ones, heaping comment upon commentary, a specialized way and direction by which reason seeks to justify faith.

This very transition between faith and reason, the dynamics of the precarious balance between irreconcilable opposites, is at the heart of the Jewish tradition and a source of its vitality. The struggle of Joseph K., incapable of compromise like his creator, to reason his way to faith owes its inspiration far more to that heritage than it does to neurosis, literature, or politics. For Kafka that heritage also manifests itself in the hidden alleys

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and sinister attics of *The Trial.* These dark places incorporate the maddening impersonality and inscrutability of modern bureaucracy in images of an insecure medieval community derived from a ghetto which Kafka remembered and obsessively possessed.

The respective influences of Kafka's relationship to his father and to his own Jewishness are quite profound in *The Castle* (1922).[8] The modern Jew's feeling of being an unwelcome stranger is searingly portrayed. The author's pictorial representation of the Jew's estrangement from other peoples is recognizable, despite the fact that the noun "Jew" does not appear in the book. Although the hero, "K.," believes that he has been hired to do some work in a small village, he finds himself a stranger and an alien intruder wherever he goes.

The Castle is an elaborately autobiographical work, replete with references not only to the crisis in Kafka's own life that inspired it but also to the passions and pathologies of those on whom he drew as models for his supporting cast, including family, friends, teachers, colleagues, and superiors. His initial impulse has been to tell the story in the first person; the later substitution of the transparently pseudonymous "K." forced him to revise the first two chapters but adds no measurable distance to that between himself and his protagonist, the surveyor in spite of himself, denied admission to a territory whose nature and boundaries resist surveying.[9] (It is interesting to note that in the film "Kafka," released by Miramax, the insurance clerk and amateur writer caught in a web of deceit enters the Castle surreptitiously via Rabbi Lowe's [creator of the Golem] grave in the medieval Jewish cemetery.)

A conception of religion as the attempt to reach a distant supernatural goal is suggested by the image of the Castle, though ironically qualified by references to the Castle's dilapidation and the bureaucratic activity and sexual rapacity of its functionaries. One also has to look at "K.'s" love affair with Frieda. This too has religious implications, since it tells how an isolated individual attempts unsuccessfully to find a place in a community through a marriage.

At this time (1915) Kafka was exposed to Hasidism (Jewish pietism) with its concept of *Tzaddikim* (Holy men). These encounters with Eastern Jews impacted greatly on Kafka. His diary entry and a letter to Max Brod gave testimony to this. Also, in the summer of 1923, Kafka read Hebrew together with Dora Dyamant, the young woman of East European Hasidic

[8]Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

[9]Pawel, *Nightmare of Reason*, p. 421.

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

background who was his last love. In *The Castle* the Castle officials are actually called 'Sekretare,' like the *Gabbaim* (synagogue functionaries).

There are several ways in which Kafka's letter about the Belzer Rabbi can be seen as entering his last novel. First, both the letter and the novel use dry matter-of-fact style to describe what appears to be absurd behavior. Thus Kafka tells how one of the Rabbi's attendants runs about frantically to fetch water from one of the Marienbad springs and refuses, despite obvious evidence, to believe that the springs are already closed to the public. This anticipates the eagerness of "K."'s two assistants to help him, which they demonstrate, for instance, by reading his letter from Klamm over his shoulder and waving their lanterns to celebrate the good news they think it contains. In both texts Kafka apparently seems to be engaging in sheer comedy. However, the affinity between these texts is that triviality can mask spiritual truth. Kafka prefaces his account of the Rabbi by saying that his actions must embody spiritual truth, precisely because they are so commonplace.

In *The Castle*, Kafka appears to be drawing on Hasidic doctrine that sanctity can best be demonstrated in ordinary, everyday actions and conceals spiritual significance in incidents like the bath in Lasemann's house and even in the antics of the assistants. In neither the letter nor the novel is it necessary that spiritual authority should be demonstrated by profound utterances. The two notes that "K." receives from Klamm seem to be ordinary business communications. Although it is possible to telephone the Castle, the answers one receives are usually misleading, and the most rewarding thing one can hear is the sound resembling children's voices that is produced by the constant telephoning that goes on within the Castle. Like the Barnabas family, "K." squanders his energies on trying to extort a message from the Castle, instead of devoting himself to domestic life with Frieda.

The misbehavior, especially the sexual promiscuity ascribed to Klamm and Sortine (castle officials), need not reflect on the authority they serve. It may be that, as with the Hasidic concept, the constant proximity to the source of goodness and wisdom has been too much for them to bear and has had a corrupting effect. By a paradox entirely characteristic of Kafka, their misconduct would then prove, not disprove, that they are closely associated with a spiritual authority inaccessible to ordinary mortals.

Additional influences of Hasidism on Kafka's thinking may be seen in that shabbiness, dirt, corruption, and downright evil are no longer simply obstacles to the apprehension of the good: they are signs of the proximity of the good. The dialectical relation between evil and good was a central

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

principle of the Baal Shem Tov (Master of a Good Name, founder of Hasidism), who declared that evil was only the lowest level of the good.

Biblical echoes from Job (Kafka knew the Hebrew Bible well) abound in *The Castle.*[10] Like Job, "K." contends. "'I am here to fight,'" he says. "'No absolutely,'" he says to the Mayor's question of whether it will be agreeable to him if the latter sends for him in case the Castle reaches a decision or needs to interrogate him further. "'I don't want any act of favor from the Castle, but my rights'" (*The Castle*, 96). Like Job, "K." dares what other men do not and is condemned by the upholders of tradition as proud and presumptuous. "'Oh, Lord—Surveyor, who are you, after all, that you dare to ask such things?'" cries the landlady (*The Castle*, 64). "K." wants to compel Klamm to see him and to hear him, as Job wanted some answering word from the God who had become distant from him. "'The most important thing for me is to be confronted with him,' says "K.". The desire "to confront the authorities face to face" does not mean that "K." is unaware of the enormous difference in strength between them and himself. But this difference in strength does not intimidate him anymore than it did Job, who knew that he was contending not with a man like himself but with a reality utterly beyond his comprehension. "K." made demands, without having the slightest backing, comments Pepi. His dignity, his involvement as a person, the fact that he is fighting for his existence itself give him enough ground to stand on without the social position and favor that Pepi and the landlady assume are the prerequisite for firmness and strength. Although "K." submits to the humiliation of working for the teacher, he holds his own before him and never once meets him as anything less than a real person in his own right. Although "he had arrived yesterday, and the Castle had been here since ancient times," he demands what Job demands and what every human has the right to demand—the opportunity to confront the Castle directly and with the whole of his being.

Robert Alter[11] differs with the identification of Jewish themes proposed by Kafka critics, suggesting that what Kafka sought to do "was to convert the distinctive quandaries of Jewish existence into images of the existential dilemmas of mankind" "überhaupt," "as such." Perhaps he sensed that the way for him to overcome the danger, as a writer who felt

[10]I am indebted to my colleague Professor Donald M. Kartiganer for sharing his article "Job and Joseph K.: Myth in Kafka's Trial," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Spring 1962). I found the Jobian analogy very possible in *The Castle.*

[11]*Necessary Angels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Universtiy Press, 1991), p. 53.

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

himself in one crucial respect to be an outsider to German culture, of a "tacit . . . appropriation of someone else's property" was to make his own property German, and universally human as well. Kafka himself perceiving this dilemma writes to Max Brod about their generation of German-speaking Jews, of how their despair over their confused identities became their inspiration, and proceeds to outline a number of "linguistic impossibilities."

> The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might also add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility of writing (since the despair could not be assuaged by writing, was hostile to both life and writing; writing is only an expedient as for someone who is writing his will shortly before he hangs himself—an expedient that may well last a whole life.)[12]

Paradoxically Kafka in his diary entry concerning writing as an "assault on the last earthly frontier" articulated a yearning for a literature that "might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah." Nonetheless, his stories and novels cited herein are repeatedly and variously concerned with eternally Jewish question of exile, assimilation, revelation, commentary, law, tradition, and commandment.

Two outstanding German Jewish intellectuals, Gershon Scholem and Walter Benjamin, held long combative discussions over Kafka's work, its place in literary canon, and the Judaic aspect of his writing. In a letter to Zalman Schocken, Scholem speaks of Kafka as one who "walked the fine line between religion and nihilism." It was this condition in Kafka "which as a secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka's writings in the halo of the canonical." For Scholem, as for Benjamin, there is no question that Kafka is a canonical figure: but what effect does Kafka's borderline state between religion and nihilism have upon the modern understanding of the canonical? Benjamin's commentary on Kafka remains paradigmatic for Jewish intellectuals who cannot or are unwilling to accept the old ways":

> The gate to justice is learning. And yet Kafka does not dare attach to this learning the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah. His assistants are sectors who have lost their house of prayers, his students are pupils who have lost the Holy Writ. Now there is nothing to

[12]Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editor*, tr. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 282.

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

support them in "their untrammeled, happy journey."[13]

This position as observed by Anson Rabinbach; in his "Introduction" to *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershon Scholem*" is bound up with an irreparable condition of exile which is the (German-Jewish) tradition of modernity. Scholem, however disagrees: "Those pupils of whom you speak (at the end of Benjamin's essay on Kafka) are not so much those who have lost the scripture . . . but rather those students who cannot decipher it." Robinbach expounds upon this side of the argument as well: "The cosmic exile of the Jews is also an exile from the meaning of the Law, but not from the Law itself." Scholem lovingly referred to Kafka as "the pious atheist," for whom nothing remained of God but the void—in Kafka's sense, to be sure, the void of God.

Franz Kafka, in sum, addressed the broadest questions of human nature and spiritual existence, working with images, actions, and situations that were by design universal in character, but his self-awareness as a Jew and his consciousness of Jewish history impelled his imagination in a particular direction and imparted an intensity to much of what he wrote, where the abstractness of the parable is strangely wedded to the most concrete sense of actual experience felt and recollected. For "I am as old as Jewry, as the wandering Jew" (*Diaries* and in conversation). Kafka could envision the ultimate ambiguities of human life because he had experienced them in poignant particularity as a Jew. Out of the stuff of Jewish experience that he himself thought of as marginal—"what have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner content that I can breathe" (*Diaries*)—he was able to create fiction at once universal and hauntingly Jewish. The son's relationship to his father and especially to the father's Judaism, bound to Franz Kafka's personal judaically socialized environment, became the foundations upon which he presented his works of art to the world.

[13]Gershon Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershon Sholem: 1932-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. xxii.

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ADDITIONAL READING

Alter, Robert. "Jewish Dreams and Nightmares." *Commentary*, Vol. 45 (January 1968), pp. 48–54.

Finkelstein, Norman. *The Ritual of New Creation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Freidman, Maurice. "The Modern Job on Melville, Dostoievski and Kafka." *Judaism*, Vol. 12 (Fall 1963), pp. 451–55.

Kulka, Eric, ed. *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*, Vol. 1. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986.

Pinsker, Sanford. "Roth and Kafka—Two Jews," in Morton P. Levitt, ed., *Critical Essays on Philip Roth* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1982), pp. 245–55.

This content downloaded from
132.174.248.217 on Sun, 14 Jul 2024 13:47:54 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms