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KAFKA: THE MARGINS OF ASSIMILATION

I

The more we advance into the "post-modern" age, the more Kafka's writing seems to move from the margins of our literary canon to its center. Whatever post-modernism may mean: the collapsing of categories of thought and form; heightened, articulated self-consciousness; the blurring of distinctions between subject and object, or between life and literature—Kafka is referred to as a prooftext. He has become, however paradoxically, one of the scriptural texts of post-modernism. At the same time, the historical research of the past decade has given us a firmer grasp on the writer's biography; the trend towards demystification has been enlightening.

We now begin to see Kafka's Jewishness in a new light, not as a vague allusion to the Golem legend or to the "Talmudic" intricacies of his thought patterns, but rather as the concrete context of his existence in Prague between 1883 and 1924, the years of his life. To be a young Jew in Prague at the turn of the century meant to be aware of the precarious social and political situation of the community with which you were identified. For Kafka and most of his friends, it meant to be the child of newly middle-class parents with all their anxieties. If, finally, one was not committed to a traditional religious style of life and was yet deeply interested in a variety of Jewish concerns—as Kafka was—being Jewish was a nagging identification problem. Your friends, your work, your language all implied who you were. You knew you were categorized as an "assimilated" Jew, that you lived on the margins of several societies, but at the heart of none. What that "assimilation" meant varied from person to person and was thus never clear.

Kafka dealt with all these problems, often obliquely, in his fiction, his diaries and his letters. In the fiction the specifics of the problems are usually repressed or decentered, thus hardly recognizable. Reading Kafka today we should realize that behind the non-specific text, there lies a world of very specific items and events which have been suppressed in the process of composition. While I would not argue that a knowledge of the historical context is indispensible for the understanding of any text, or the *oeuvre* as a whole, I maintain that the historical information, used

cautiously, can shed light on our interpretation. The following pages are therefore an exercise in reading Kafka in this newly historicist way.

II

As "The Explorer" prepared to leave the Penal Colony, he approached the tea house which made on him "the impression of a historic tradition of some kind", and he "felt the power of past days." Led by the soldier who had just been saved from a horrible death in the machine, he discovered covered by some tables in the tea house the grave of the Old Commandant of the Penal Colony, the man who had given it its shape and purpose. On a simple stone there was an inscription in small letters:

> Here lies the old Commandant. His adherents, who now must be nameless, have dug this grave and set up this stone. There is a prophecy that after a number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait.[1]

Kafka's narrator attributes an ambiguous, indirect reaction to the explorer who ignores the smiles of the bystanders in the tea house which might reflect his amusement at the "ridiculous" inscription.

The present inhabitants of the colony apparently scorn and ridicule the inscription, but should we, the readers—and, as such, explorers—do likewise? Are we the ones who are advised to "have faith and wait" for the old Commandant who will "rise again" and lead his adherents from the tea house to recover the colony? Are we, the readers, the adherents "who now must be nameless,"—adherents since we have experienced the powerful effect of Kafka's fiction have shared his insights and are therefore redeemable?

Cardinal among these insights is the pained realization that in the present there is no meaningful authority, no old Commandant, and consequently all commandments are meaningless, justice is meted automatically by a machine that breaks down in the process. In the days of the old Commandant, punishment, though harsh, was intelligible and inspired enlightenment; in the present, we have breakdown, boredom, and confusion. "In the Penal Colony" is a narrative dramatization of the central penal ritual, the execution of a prisoner, here a soldier, for insubordination to the rules or laws of his society. The lack of popular interest in the execution, the disintegration of the machine, the suicide of the officiating executioner who substitutes his own body for that of the prisoner in the penal contraption, are all concrete examples of the author's awareness of the chaos of his times. The old order exists only as a hollow ritual devoid of meaning or authority; acts, statements, even gestures never have one

agreed-upon interpretation; people and places are nameless; justice is indeterminate and guilt, unmotivated. This is the fictional world we properly characterize as "Kafkaesque."

Precisely because "In the Penal Colony" is so quintessentially Kafka both in theme and technique, and also firmly established as part of the canon of modern fiction—and, more specifically, of post-modern fiction —we should address the question of Kafka's canonicity at this point. Considerations of the literary canon, surely one of the cardinal preoccupations of modern critical theory, inevitably raise a host of intriguing questions. Apart from the obvious concerns related to authority: Who, for instance, has the power or the right to determine what is properly to be included in a certain literary canon or tradition? we are often troubled by the criteria for determining canonicity. The appeal to tradition is no longer enough. Once this line is broken, we are more often than not led into a vicious circle cycling back and forth between authority and the criteria for inclusion. Furthermore, whether or not we place a specific work in a certain canon may very well suggest how we should read it, since a canon implies historical contexts, linguistic and literary conventions, a world of concrete conventions and assumed values.

Contemplating Kafka's works from the point-of-view of canonicity —the general strategy of this essay—one is led directly into the problematics of interpretation which, we believe, can be given coherent direction with reference to their canonicity. While it is obvious that these stories and novels are now part of the international canon of modern literature, hence particularly attractive to the comparativist, there is no consensus regarding what national literary canon Kafka belongs to. Though he wrote exclusively in German, it is not clear if he belongs to German, Austrian, Czech, or Jewish literature. The query is relevant not only to Kafka's reader, but to Kafka himself for while he never regarded himself as a specifically Jewish writer, his repeated assertions that he and his Jewish colleagues who wrote in German were really not at home in that language were always predicated upon his being a member of the Jewish middle-class in multi-cultural cental Europe.

Often cited as the most characteristic "modernist," i.e., twentieth century writer precisely because of his universality, Kafka's specific cultural background has been well documented by such writers as Ernst Pawel, Ronald Hayman, and Marthe Robert who, in turn, rely upon volumes of Kafka scholarship, particularly that of Klaus Wagenbach and Chris Bezzel. It is the world of the middle-class Jewish community of Prague, prosperous but harried by rising exclusionary Czech and German nationalism, proud of its long history—the synagogues, the old cemetary, the legend of the Golem—but uneasy with it. For Kafka as for most of his friends in Prague, being Jewish was an ineluctable fact of existence. You could live with it; you could try to escape it; you could try to repress it.

But you could never ignore or forget it. For all his diary and letter writing, Kafka never mentioned the antisemitic riots which raged for three days in Prague in 1897 or the Polna Blood Libel leading to the Hilsner Trial of 1899-1900, events in his crucial, impressionable adolescent years, but it is inconceivable that he was indifferent to them.

For all his individuality, the cultural milieu from which Kafka sprung is familiar to anyone conversant with modern Jewish history. Prague between 1880 and 1914 was undergoing rapid urbanization and industrialization and its Jewish residents were profoundly affected by these processes. Hermann Kafka, for instance, had moved to the city from a Bohemian town in 1882, only a year before his son Franz was born. Like many Jews of his generation, he had served in the Austrian army, made his living as a peddler in the Czech-speaking country-side, and moved to the city where business opportunities were more promising. Shortly after his arrival, he met Julie Löwy, the daughter of a wealthy brewer, well-established by then in Prague. The Löwy family was much more advanced than Hermann Kafka on the road to acculturation: they had money; Julie's siblings were mostly professional men or administrators; they spoke German well.

Given the bourgeois mores of the times, it is not at all clear why the Löwys married off their daughter to Hermann Kafka who had no more in 1882 than his ambition and energy. Nevertheless, the marriage was apparently successful and lasted until their death in the 1930's. Julie Kafka, always the dutiful wife, devoted her energies to supporting Hermann's ambitions: she worked in his increasingly prosperous retail, then wholesale haberdashery business (a trade usually identified with Jews in the cities of Central Europe), and bore him six children. Of these, Franz was the eldest; the two boys born immediately after him died in childhood; the following three daughters grew up, married, and reared families. They were murdered in Nazi concentration camps together with most of Prague Jewry including many of Kafka's acquaintances, one of his fiancées, Grete Bloch, and his lover, Milena Jasenska. Kafka, himself, was saved from this fate by his death of tuberculosis in 1924, a fact usually overlooked but nonetheless crucial for any consideration of his life and works: slaughter in Theresienstadt or Auschwitz was the "final solution" of the group whose destiny he shared.

Though he travelled frequently for business, or vacations, or recuperation to a variety of places mostly in Central Europe, he lived until the last few years of his life with his parents in one of the many apartments they occupied not far from the family haberdashery shop near the Altstadtring at the center of the Old City of Prague with its medieval and baroque buildings, its Old Town Square, churches, syanagogues, town hall, and historical monuments. This was the Josephstadt, primarily a Jewish district, part of which—the old ghetto area—was razed and rebuilt

in one of the Hapsburg urban renewal programs in the 1890's. Many of the resorts where he spent his vacations were patronized primarily by Jews. Both the elementary school and the gymnasium where he spent his childhood and adolescence were populated mainly by Jews; culturally German, they catered mainly to the Jewish middle-class. Naturally, the various friendships he formed there and later in the university were with young men of the same class.

Though Kafka noted in his diary that he was named after his mother's grandfather, Amschel (Adam) Porias, a learned, pious Jew (whose wife committed suicide and whose son went mad), the man had died forty years before Franz' birth; Jewish learning and observance had long been a faint memory in both the Löwy and Kafka houses. Kafka's wide intellectual interests were acquired not at home but in the gymnasium, the university, and, most important, the ever-changing circles of fascinating friends one could find in Prague, almost all young Jewish men of similar backgrounds. Their dazzling intellectual passions were acquired and cultivated in conversations with other Jews, the sons of businessmen subject to the same social, political, and ethnic pressures as Hermann Kafka was. Kafka's Jewishness, then, was not traditional, learned from childhood through ritual observance and study, but situational, an amalgam of the varied responses to historical forces.

Like most contemporary Jewish intellectuals in Prague, he did not join in the efforts of the organized Jewish community to cope with the pressing needs of the times such as the outbreaks of antisemitic activities or the massive influx of Galician Jews fleeing the ravages of war on the Eastern Front in 1915. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he did not settle upon one specific option such as Zionism or Socialism or Aestheticism or religious orthodoxy. Given his complex temperament and the subtlety of his mind—both so evident in everything he wrote—it is easy to understand why none of the many suggested solutions to the problematics of Jewish existence in the modern world were acceptable to him. After 1911, when his consciousness of the richness of the Jewish past was awakened by his reading of Graetz's *History of the Jews* and his attending the performances of Itzik Löwy's travelling Yiddish theatre, concerns of the Jewish world as expressed in the Prague Zionist weekly, *Selbstwehr,* written and edited by friends and acquaintances, were always an integral part of his life.

Read against this background, "In the Penal Colony" (1914) assumes a very specific meaning. While it would be exaggerated to claim that the story is a commentary upon the predicament of the modern, secular Jew who has abandoned the traditional religious norms, but is still unsatisfied with his existence in the modern world, the central themes: the Law, the authority of the Old Commandant (Moses?), guilt, the uncanny ("unheimlich" in the Freudian sense) nature of writing, are all unmis-

takably Jewish, especially when found in juxtaposition. And yet, there is no clear reference to anything Jewish in the story, a feature of Kafka's writing which must elicit from the informed reader a peculiar response. If the referents are unmistakably Jewish but their named specifics have been erased or repressed, what is really going on in this story? And when one couples this enigmatic style to the constant shifts of consciousness in the story, not only between the characters but even within the same character, one begins to land as an explorer upon the prison colony of Kafka's consciousness there to discover a new world of thought and feeling, frightening though often funny, but always intriguing. To facilitate the exploration of this self-imposed penal colony, I shall investigate two seminal documents Kafka has left us: one, a letter to his closest friend, Max Brod; the other, the famous "Letter to His Father."

III

> Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them, and their fathers approved of this, but vaguely (this vagueness was what was outrageous to them). But with their posterior legs they were still glued to their father's Jewishness and with their waving anterior legs they found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration. (p. 289)

These almost aphoristic statements from this most quotable author are usually taken out of context and rarely properly analyzed. They are, to begin with, from a letter Kafka wrote from the Matliary sanatorium to Max Brod in Prague sometime in June, 1921. Though already advanced in his consumption, Kafka was at the peak of his creative powers: *The Castle,* for instance, was writtten during the first nine months of 1922. The appellation "most young Jews who begin to write German," refers not only to the letter writer and the addressee, a widely published novelist and music critic, but to a whole generation of intellectuals and, by extension, to the German speaking Central European Jewish society which produced them. The reference to the frustratingly vague approbation of the fathers reveals that Kafka envisages the writer's problems as integral to the society. The animal or insect imagery of the writer's grotesque posture evokes memories of Gregor Samsa in "The Metamorphosis" struggling between humanity and insecthood. Most striking, however, is the concluding insight: "The ensuing despair became their inspiration," which sums up Kafka's explanation of Jewish cultural creativity in Central Europe in his days, certainly one of the most intriguing phenomena in modern cultural history. The cultural history of Central Europe, after all, cannot be written without some attempt to comprehend the remarkable prominence of what we ordinarily call "assimilated Jews" in

the cultural life of Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, and some lesser centers. That Kafka is referring to this specific phenomenon we can easily corroborate from the first sentence of the paragraph often omitted in quotations:

> Psychoanalysis lays stress on the father-complex and many find the complex intellectually fruitful. In this case I prefer another version, where the issue revolves not around innocent fathers, but the father's Jewishness. (pp. 288-289)

"Psychoanalysis" and "the father complex" obviously refer to Freud, another Central European Jew, whose ideas Kafka had fully assimilated as early as 1912. In his diary entry describing his ecstasy at having finished his first great story, *The Judgment,* in one night, he records that during the writing he had "thoughts of Freud, of course." Here, his "other version" amounts to a rejection of Freud's universalizing for a particularized explanation: not the general father complex, i.e. the Oedipus complex, with an innocent father caught in an inescapable father-son relationship, but the Jewish father who rejects his own Jewish identity by "vaguely" approving the son's writing in German. The father sends confusing, contradictory signals since he himself is conflicted as to his identity; the son is caught between the father's desire that he abandon his Jewishness yet remain vaguely faithful to it.

Behind Kafka's remarks lies an awareness of the three generational pattern so common, with its variants, to Jews of his period: the still pious ancestors who lived in small market-towns, the oft-cited shtetlach of Central and Eastern Europe; the fathers who moved to the city, succeeded in business, and abandoned most of the religious practices of their fathers; the sons who found the bourgeois ethic of their fathers unfulfilling. In their desperation and frustration, the sons sought expression in politics, science, or the arts. Though Kafka could formulate in his diaries (12.25.1911) an interesting portrait of his maternal ancestors going back to his pious grandfather, Amschel, after whom he was named, he usually concentrates on the generations of his father who named him Franz, after the emperor Franz Joseph. Compounding the confusion in identity was the problem of national affiliation manifested most sharply in language. Kafka, like many of his friends, lived in a bilingual world: the Jewish middle-class usually spoke German and sent their sons to German schools, but the majority of the population spoke Czech. Hermann Kafka, his father, spoke Czech better than German while his mother, Julie Löwy, spoke German better. Both parents worked in the family business on the Altstaedter Square where most of the hired help and customers spoke Czech as did Franz' Jewish governess. By the beginning of this century over half the Jews registered their language as Czech. Consider the writer's name: Franz, German; Kafka, Czech (meaning either "jackdaw" or some diminutive of Yankev); his Jewish name, Amschel, standard

Yiddish. In the highly politicized atmosphere of Kafka's Prague, language was both the most obvious and most profound token of identification—hence the preoccupatiom with the writer's choice of language.

The remarks concerning the inter-generational conflict cited above, actually follow two paragraphs which discuss what Kafka remembered of Karl Kraus' provocative book, *Literatur* (Vienna, 1921), a polemic against Franz Werfel who had attacked Kraus in his "magic trilogy", *Spiegelmensch* (Munich, 1920). The polemic naturally interested both Kafka and Brod, not only because Werfel was a boyhood friend, but because Kraus, whom both had met in Prague, satirized with his bitter, perceptive wit, the speech and writing patterns of German-speaking Jews—what is called "mauscheln", a derogatory term with antisemitic overtones derived, apparently, from Moshe (Moses), implying "to speak like Moses, the Jewish peddler." Kafka asserts that Kraus, the antisemitic Jew, is, in the world of German-Jewish letters, the "dominant" figure—or that the principle represented by him is the dominant principle. Ironically, Kraus' acerbic wit consists of "mauscheln": ". . . no one can *mauscheln* like Kraus, although in the German-Jewish world hardly anyone can do anything else." Sander Gilman in his study, *Jewish Self Hatred,* subtitled *The Secret Language of the Jews,*[3] demonstrates how the term "mauscheln" is so central to the vocabulary of modern antisemitism and, in that assimilated Jews accepted as true the accusations of antisemites, to the vocabulary of these marginal Jews. Kafka, too, accepts Kraus' stricture that all Jews "mauscheln", that "'mauscheln' . . . consists in a bumptious, tacit, or self-pitying appropriation of someone else's property, something not earned but stolen by means of a relatively casual gesture. Yet it remains someone else's property, even though there is no evidence of a single solecism."

Though Kafka seems to accept the Krausian definition of "mauscheln," he actually uses Kraus as a foil by arguing for the positive value of "mauscheln," i.e. the concrete contribution of Jews to German literature:

> This is not to say anything against mauscheln—in itself it is fine: it is an organic compound of bookish German and pantomime. . . . What we have here is the product of a sensitive feeling for language which has recognized that in German only the dialects are really alive, and, except for them, only the most individual High German, while all the rest, the linguistic middle ground, is nothing but embers which can only be brought to a semblance of life when excessively lively Jewish hands rummage through them. (p. 288)

Struck with the startling impression this might make on Brod, Kafka hastens to conclude this paragraph with:

> That is a fact, funny or terrible as you like. (p. 288)

Kafka develops the argument by stating that Jews are irresistibly drawn to German because ". . . there is a relationship between all this and

Jewishness, or more precisely between young Jews and their Jewishness, with all the frightful inner predicament of these generations." In the light of this argument which connects the usage of German with the predicament of the assimilated Jew of central Europe, the passage from the letter which we first quoted assumes a new sense. Writing in German becomes an expression of the Jewish predicament with all its desperation which is the source of the writer's inspiration.

The last of the four paragraphs of this discourse on writing—in a sense, Kafka's *Ars Poetica*—develops the central notion of literature born of despair. While this inspiration is credited with being as honorable as any other, the literature produced could not be German literature—but something else. That the writers of this literature of "otherness" had to be what they were, Kafka proves by his oft-quoted theory of impossibilities. German-Jewish writers, he asserts:

> existed among three impossibilities. It is simplest to call them that. But they may also be called something entirely different. These are: the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might 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). (p. 289)

In presenting these impossibilities, Kafka is indulging in one of his characteristic verbal constructs: by spinning a series of fine distinctions, he entraps himself or his hero in a tight web from which any escape is impossible. The weaving of the trap is as Kafkaesque as is the preoccupation with suicide. Suicide, furthermore, is not a one-time act as it is in "The Judgment" (1912), but rather "an expedient that may well last a whole life" as it is in "The Metamorphosis" (1912) or *The Trial* (1914), the two latter being suicides integral to the hero's character. The suicide theme or posture is subtly continued in the last gambit of this passage, a typically Kafkaesque statement of self effacement:

> . . . thus what resulted was a literature impossible in all respects, a gypsy literature which had stolen the German child out of its cradle and in haste put it through some kind of training, for someone has to dance on the tightrope. (p. 289)

The two standard motifs evoked here: the gypsy who steals a child from its cradle and the dancing on a tight-rope are particularly revelatory since the first refers to spurious parentage and the second, to the precariousness of artistic creativity, two of Kafka's life-long obsessions. The link between them is, of course, language, in this case, German as used by Jews.

In his biography of Kafka, tellingly titled *The Nightmare of Reason,*[4] Ernst Pawel deftly portrays what it meant to be a Jew in Kafka's Prague. He derides those who would hail Kafka the writer as a crypto-Christian or a pseudo-Marxist and faults literary scholars for lack of imagination:

> . . . the absence of explicity Jewish references in the surviving texts has made literary pedants feel justified in dismissing his 'religion' as an incidental biographical detail. . . . Yet who he was, and what he did cannot possibly be understood without a clear realization that his being Jewish—not faith, to begin with, not observance, but the mere fact of being Jewish in turn-of-the-century Prague—was at least as vital a component of his identity as his face or his voice. (p. 45)

Pursuing Pawel's argument further, if we take Kafka's reflections on literature written by Jews in German as a meaningful myth for Franz Kafka the writer—and it is at least precisely that—what he and his colleagues were writing was not German, but Jewish literature, an elegant type of "mauscheln." However he might repress references to Jewish matters in his fictions—and there are almost no readily identifiable references of this sort—his language, taken in the context of his times, was, as far as he was concerned, not quite German, perhaps not quite Jewish, but somewhere in the margins of both.

Kafka's sense of his marginality developed slowly throughout his youth and young adulthood, and seems to have found its focus under the pressures of the events of 1911-12: his struggle with his father over his obligations to assist in the family asbestos factory; the intense preoccupation with things Jewish: the Yiddish theatre, the Beilis Affair, his reading of Graetz' *History of the Jews*; his meeting with Felice Bauer, later to become his fiancée. It is significant that he found the proper metaphor for embracing all the tensions wracking his consciousness in the father-son relationship so pronounced in the works of late 1912. In a similar vein, almost at the mid-point between these early stories and the letter to Brod discussed above, he wrote the moving "Letter to His Father"[5] (1917), a reading of which enriches our argument.

IV

> Marrying, founding a family, accepting all the children that come, supporting them in this insecure world and perhaps guiding them a little, is, I am convinced, the utmost a human being can succeed in doing at all. (p. 99)

> My writing was all about you. (p. 87)

Neither the first nor the greatest of Kafka's works, the "Letter to his Father" ("Brief an den Vater"), offers the reader an opening to the laby-

rinth of Kafka's writing—an opening but not necessarily a thread through it. Written in November, 1919, when Kafka was already tuberculoid and suffering from a worsening in his relations with his father—the result, perhaps, of his engagement to Julie Wohryczek—the letter purports to be an answer to Hermann Kafka's question: "Why are you afraid of me?" What the son produced was much more than an answer to the father's question: the "letter" is a passionate accusation and confession, subtly articulated and carefully crafted, more an attempt at self-definition than a communication to an addressee. We know that Hermann Kafka never received this letter and we doubt that he would have understood the intricacy of the argument had he received it. And while we have no proof that the son's formulation of the father's role in the shaping of his character and entire world-view is as accurate as it is devastating, the rhetorical force of Kafka's sentiments and beliefs is unquestionable. The strategies of exposition are shrewdly designed to depict a complex, dynamic situation which will both justify his behavior and shed light upon his writing. The reader cannot escape the characteristic Kafkan mixture of painful self-awareness and confident, even triumphal verbal command. In this linguistic duel between the "Ich" and the "Du", between the dazzlingly agile son and the caricatured father who is even assigned a final repartee by the son and in the son's voice, there is no question who wins. This document, and the verdict of history have assigned all the points to Franz, not to Hermann Kafka, precisely as the son knew it would.

The letter posits as an axiomatic given the adversary relationship between the father and the son, a relationship structured linguistically by the repeated, variegated opposition of "Ich" and "Du" throughout the first ten pages of this 45 page manuscript. (Though Buber's *Ich und Du* was published later, Kafka was familiar with Buber's emerging ideas and might very well be playing with them here.) And while the writer expressedly exonerates his father as being "guiltless" ("schuldlos"), the entire, lengthy disquisition on the father's methods of educating his son is an irrefutable accusation. It is no accident that much attention is devoted to education, to "Bildung," since the frame of reference throughout this "letter" is that of the bourgeois family and the bourgeois novel, with their ideals of family, education, economic security, diligence, and respectability—in sum, the formation of character and capital. The bourgeoisie that the writer repeatedly invokes in this document is very specific and epitomized in his mind by his father: it is the circumscribed society of Jewish businessmen in Prague, often relatively recent arrivals in the city who had earned an enviable though precarious position for themselves by dint of hard work and enterprise. Kafka admires his father's energy, his appetites, his economic achievement, his devotion to his wife; he deplores his vulgarity, his callousness, his desire for respectability, his tyrranical rule over his subordinates—especially his son.

The general social situation, though not detailed here, is fully acknowledged: the son realizes that the father has struggled to rise from the penury of the newcomer from the countryside to the provincial capital. It explains the father's indifference to the Jewish religious heritage, a central topic in the letter, and the dominance of social scruples over religious ones. Kafka typifies his father's complaints as those of middle-class fathers regarding their sons: they are ungrateful, rebellious, alienated. What the son cannot condone is the father's unwillingness to concede that his overbearing nature has not built, but actually destroyed his son's character.

Kafka's analysis of the effect of his father's domineering personality is closely argued and graphically detailed, a classic depiction of bourgeois guilt formation. Looking back upon his childhood from a distance of some thirty years, he describes his father as a tyrannical giant, brimming with confidence and energy, always judging, sitting regally at the head of his dinner table, uttering statements which were taken as divine commandments. In his presence, the young Franz was crushed by a pervasive sense of inadequacy that engendered inescapable guilt.

Accepting his father's estimation of him as vermin (*Ungeziefer*), he could not act independently and was often reduced to stammering or silence. The father's threats and warnings of failure became inevitable realities; punishment was meted out before the deed was committed; and since there was no proportion between any deed and paternal anger, the world became incomprehensible. Though threats of punishment were rarely executed, they were paralyzing since release was granted only through the father's grace. The only weapons the child—and even the mature Franz—could resort to were sulking, furtive ridicule, and escape plots all doomed to fail.

Three avenues of escape from this unbearable emotional maze are mentioned: Judaism, marriage, and writing. The participation of father and son in a common ancestral heritage is suggested as a possible meeting ground, but rejected after lengthy discussion since it was clear that Hermann Kafka was not interested in Jewish religious practice. When Franz was a boy, synagogue or home observance of Jewish customs or laws bored him; when he matured and began to develop an abiding passion for Jewish history and current Jewish affairs, his father resented this rekindled interest and called it "nauseating" ("Ekel"). The very fact that Kafka could imagine that Judaism might have been an area of reconciliation is in itself a reflection of his sharing in the renewal of Judaism in certain circles of Jewish intellectuals in Central Europe during that period. On the other hand, he utilizes the notion of orbits of shared interests to explain why writing was, indeed, a viable avenue of escape from his father: Hermann Kafka harbored a deep aversion towards writing and this encouraged Franz to consider it an area of independent activity. The writer of this letter is by no means naive or contrite.

Moving systematically from general considerations of the father-son relationship, to techniques of education, the other members of the family, Judaism, writing, and the choice of a career, Kafka reaches his designated climax when his comes to the issue of his inability to marry, apparently the proximate cause of the friction with his father in 1919. The inability to marry, even though he considered marriage and founding a family a consummate achievement, engendered profound anxiety and reams of explanations, particularly to his twice-betrothed Felice. This was the ultimate test of his energy and determination and here he failed repeatedly involving not only his self-esteem, but his fiancée and the two families. Here, too, the burden of blame is placed on his father who prepared him badly for marriage. It is evident that the need to offer some explanation for this disastrous failure inspired the letter; it is precisely at this point that he comments on the excruciating effort to explain something so intimate and intricate with little hope of it being understood:

> I am afraid that, because in this sphere everything I try is a failure, I shall also fail to make these attempts to marry comprehensible to you. And yet the success of this whole letter depends on it, for in these attempts there was, on the one hand, concentrated everything I had at my disposal in the way of positive forces, and, on the other hand, there also accumulated, and with downright fury, all the negative forces that I have described as being the result in part of your method of upbringing, that is to say, the weakness, the lack of self-confidence, the sense of guilt, and they positively drew a cordon between myself and marriage. The explanation will be hard for me also because I have spent so many days and nights thinking and burrowing through the whole thing over and over again that now even I myself am bewildered by the mere sight of it. The only thing that makes the explanation easier for me is your—in my opinion—complete misunderstanding of the matter; slightly to correct so complete a misunderstanding does not seem excessively difficult. (p. 97)

Characteristic of the entire letter, this passage is a model of rhetorical control. While confessing weakness and anticipating failure to make himself understood, Kafka writes from an intellectual and morally superior position. He has worked out the explanation in agonized nights of thinking through and burrowing ("ich . . . durchdacht und durchgrabe habe") and finds it crucial to correct his father's misunderstanding on the matter—at least partially. All the negative forces result from the father's method of upbringing ("Erziehung"), especially the three traits we find repeated throughout the letter: weakness ("die Schwäche"), the lack of self-confidence ("der Mangel an Selbstvertrauen"), and, of course, the sense of guilt ("das Schuldbewusstein"). By this time the reader certainly is aware that the sense of guilt derives from the lack of self-confidence, and both are the result of the father's overpowering presence in the

dialogue of "Ich" and "Du" here, the "Du", the father, is trapped in the tight rhetorical web spun by the "Ich", the son.

Kafka demonstrates the father's pernicious education of his son by telling, in a disarmingly peculiar way, an incident which took place when he was out for a walk with his parents when he was about sixteen years old. He began to discuss sex with them in what he describes as "a stupidly boastful, superior, proud, detached (that was spurious), cold (that was genuine), and stammering manner" reproaching them for having left him "uninstructed." He admits, at length, that he probably acted so despicably to avenge himself on the two of them. Nevertheless, he proceeds to berate his father for answering that he "could give [him] advice about how [he] could go in for these things without danger," an answer which, given the relationship between the two, the son found staggering since it induced the son to consider himself as filth in opposition to the father's—and the family's—purity.

The impassioned reasoning here strains the reader's credulity: while admitting he was arrogantly embarrassing his father—and his mother—the writer asserts that the father's reply (so typical of the period) was so monstrous that it precluded the son's development of a healthy attitude towards sex. Repeatedly, he resorts to the argument that given the unequal relationship between the two, any response would have had a negative effect just as the granting of freedom to choose a career was interpreted as no freedom at all since the crippling relationship had rendered any concept of freedom meaningless. His summary argument explaining his inability to marry is a courtroom tour-de-force designed to shift the blame from the (self) accused to the putative accusor.

> The most important obstacle to marriage, however, is the no longer eradicable conviction that what is essential to the support of the family and especially to its guidance, is what I have recognized in you; and indeed everything rolled into one, good and bad, as it is organically combined in you—strength, and scorn of others, health, and a certain immoderation, eloquence and inadequacy, self-confidence and dissatisfaction with everyone else, a worldly wisdom and tyranny, knowledge of human nature and mistrust of most people; then also good qualities without any drawback, such as industry, endurance, presence of mind, and fearlessness. By comparison I had almost nothing or very little of all this; and it was on this basis that I wanted to risk marrying, when I could see for myself that even you had to fight hard in marriage and, where the children were concerned, had even failed?

The rhetorical virtuosity which characterizes the letter after the introduction of the marriage theme, is climaxed by the writer's construction of a hypothetical rejoinder by the father, Hermann Kafka, to his son Franz in reply to the lengthy letter of accusations, "the reasons I offer for the fear I have of you." The "Ich" and "Du" relationship which marked the first

pages of the letter is deliberately inverted here. The ventriloquist's voice selected here is revelatory. The writer could have parodied the father's voice, but didn't; he has the father speak in the son's voice with its unmistakeably psychological perceptivity and formidable persuasive powers. He has literally swallowed his father and eliminated him as an independent individual. His reshaping of the father in accordance with his image of him is complete. When he has Hermann Kafka accuse him of fighting not like the knight, but like the vermin (again "Ungeziefer") which "sucks your blood in order to sustain their own life," he has employed an apt image. The opening passage of the father's hypothetical rejoinder speaks volumes.

> You maintain I make things easy for myself by explaining my relation to you simply as being your fault, but I believe that despite your outward effort, you do not make things more difficult for yourself, but much more profitable. At first you repudiate all guilt and responsibility; in this our methods are the same. But whereas I then attribute the sole guilt to you as frankly as I mean it, you want to be 'overly clever' and 'overly affectionate' at the same time and acquit me also of all guilt. Of course, in the latter you only seem to succeed (and more you do not even want), and what appears between the lines, in spite of all the 'turns of phrase' about character and nature and antagonism and helplessness, is that actually I have been the aggressor while everything you were up to was self-defense.

The "letter-writer" here displays the same obsession with the disparity between avowed or assumed human motivation and true motivation, i.e. that perceived by a relentlessly omniscient narrator which we find in the mature fiction of Franz Kafka.

The letter therefore not only sums up the problematic relationship between the son and the father that is structurally so central in both the life and writings of Franz Kafka; it introduces us to Kafka's nuclear topoi and rhetorical devices; and, no less important, it forces us to consider what the writer has deleted or distorted. Without denying the pained reality of the letter for Kafka, we should not abandon our critical judgment, as most readers have, and accept this rendition of the "truth" as the only possible version of the relationship. We have not heard from Hermann or Julie Kafka, the parents, and we have next to nothing from the sisters.

A sober contemplation of the letter should prepare us for a cautious reading of all of Kafka's works, those we ordinarily call "fiction," on the one hand, and the letters and diaries (which we group together for convenience), on the other. We are dealing with an artist no less controlled and deliberate than Flaubert, Kleist, and Goethe, the three writers he admires most frequently. And yet, despite Kafka's suppression of specific realistic detail in his fictions, we have abundant information about the

community in which he travelled: middle-class Prague Jewry at the turn of the twentieth century, and can enrich our reading by observing what he did with the specifics of the community which nourished him spiritually even as it suffocated him.

The accepted notion that human relations in Kafka's fiction, on the one hand, and his diaries and letters, on the other, are usually adversarial appears, upon reflection, to be simplistic. The "Ich"-"Du" relationship is less adversarial than dialectic, strictly speaking: Franz's negation of Hermann's efforts to educate him—in the broader sense of 'Bildung'—finds its synthesis in Franz Kafka's texts (though not in his life) and energizes them with their peculiar, intriguing interweaving of accusation and confession. Without the one, the other is ordinary, even stereotypical. Franz has so internalized Hermann that he acts the role of both Franz and Hermann at the same time, hence the constant presentation of multiple points of view, often overlapping, so evocative as they merge and dissolve. Franz was not entirely accurate in his assertion "my writing was all about you"; by assimilating Hermann so totally and painfully, he is not writing 'about' him—perhaps 'through' him, but not 'about' him. He is writing Franz's recreation of the world, including Hermann's central role in it, as Franz envisages it.

While one could argue that all writers ultimately do precisely this, in Kafka's case, the self conscious obsession with the wavering problematic relationship between consciousness and being was so acute that the traditional authorial process is essentially doubled. The narrator's repeated ambivalencies, shifts in point-of-view, and rhetorical dexterity are so complex yet controlled that the reader senses the author is conscious of another author who engages him in a continuous dialogue about his writing and perhaps contributes to it. The reader is therefore forced to comprehend a multi-voiced, subtly nuanced conversation of personae, observing and speculating about perplexed or anxious human beings.

V

However reactive, this world of fluid consciousness, of consciousness of consciousness, has its own solid existence which is ultimately the literary articulation of one complex writer to a complex existential situation. The literary *oeuvre* of this Prague Jewish writer, Franz Kafka, raises endless questions of interpretation, many inspired by the puzzling fact that the diaries and letters are replete with specific references to places and people in Prague, not the least to Jewish Prague, while the fiction is almost free of such references. Clearly a sustained process of repression is going on here.

Whatever the final, and larger, analysis of these complex matters, the example provided by Kafka's life and work should force us to re-examine the notions of assimilation and marginality which we have inherited from classical nineteenth century nationalism. More often than not, our notions are shaped by two parameters: religious observance and affiliation with some activist Jewish group. For Kafka, though so bedevilled by the problematics of Jewish existence, neither of these parameters presented a meaningful option. Logic would dictate that the time has come to consider assimilation and marginality as central—not marginal—phenomena in modern Jewish history.

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NOTES

1. *Franz Kafka. The Complete Stories,* (ed.) Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1971), p. 167.

2. *Kafka: Lettters to Friends, Family and Editors,* translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1977), pp. 286-289. Since all subsequent quotes from this remarkable letter are from the same source, I do not cite them by page.

3. Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self Hatred* (Baltimore, 1986).

4. Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason* (New York, 1985).

5. *Kafka: Letter to his Father,* translated by Ernst Kaiser and Eithine Wilkins (New York, 1953).