FRANZ KAFKA IN CONTEXT

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CHAPTER 23

Judaism and Zionism

Katja Garloff

Franz Kafka belonged to a generation of Prague Jews who questioned the bourgeois-liberal model of assimilation to which their parents had subscribed more or less uncritically. For the parent generation, assimilation to German culture had not been entirely a matter of choice – the Habsburg rulers had tried to homogenize the diverse populations in the empire, for instance, by requiring Jews to adopt German surnames and use the German language in Jewish schools – but it had created new social and economic opportunities that many welcomed. Kafka's generation was more aware of the precarious in-between position in which assimilated Prague Jews found themselves. On the one hand, most ethnic Germans never fully accepted them, but rather perpetuated antisemitic prejudice that, after the rise of political and racial antisemitism during the second half of the nineteenth century, changed in character but not in strength. On the other hand, their strong identification with German culture rendered the Jews suspicious in the eyes of many Czechs, who since the beginning of the Habsburg rule in the seventeenth century had developed their own nationalist movement and fought for greater political and cultural autonomy.

Kafka's 'Brief an den Vater' ('Letter to his Father', 1919) offers a socio-psychological portrayal of this generation of Jews who were suspended between different ethnicities, cultures and religions. Kafka suggests that his father was unable to transform his vaguely felt attachment to Judaism into a meaningful heritage or any other form of empowerment, which is one of the reasons why the child Kafka could experience religion only as empty ritual and rote learning. Hermann Kafka's ambivalent relationship to Judaism caused him to react strongly negatively when his adult son eventually became interested in things Jewish:

> Because I was the mediator, Judaism became abominable to you, Judaic scriptures unreadable; they 'disgusted you' . . . your 'disgust' . . . could only mean that unconsciously you acknowledged the weakness of your Judaism

> and of my Jewish upbringing, had absolutely no wish to be reminded of it, and responded to any reminder with open hatred. (*M* 126/*NSI* 191)

Throughout his adult life, Kafka went through phases of intense interest in things Jewish and developed alternatives to the bourgeois-liberal model of assimilation while nonetheless retaining a sense of critical distance from this tradition.

Yiddish Culture

The first surge of interest in Jewish culture Kafka experienced coincided with what is often described as the beginning of his 'mature' writings. In the autumn and winter of 1911–12, just a few months before he wrote 'Das Urteil' ('The Judgement', 1912), Kafka attended a number of Yiddish theatre performances staged by a Galician Jewish troupe in the Café Savoy in Prague. He befriended the actors, especially the lead actor, Jizchak Löwy (1887–1942), and recorded detailed impressions of the performances in his diary. He was mesmerized by the expressive physicality, lively gestures, intense emotions and familial warmth he found on the stage. He describes how the first performance he visited inspired in him a sense of Jewish communality, to which he reacted with nervous excitement: 'Some songs, the expression "yiddische kinderlach", some of this woman's acting (who, on the stage, because she is a Jew, draws us listeners to her because we are Jews, without any longing for or curiosity about Christians) made my cheeks tremble' (5 October 1911; *D* 65/*TB* 59). For Kafka, Yiddish theatre promised first and foremost the possibility of cultural authenticity and a sense of community for deracinated Western Jews. He also took note of aspects he considered less attractive – and at times seemed repulsed by the poverty, crowdedness and dirt he saw – but he interpreted those as further signs of the authenticity of Yiddish theatre and the Eastern European Jewish world from which it hailed.

Dan Miron has argued that Kafka misconstrued much of what he saw and heard. According to Miron, Kafka did not recognize the modernity of Yiddish theatre, which is both a product and a vehicle of secular humanism and in many ways departs from the *halakha*, that is the body of religious laws that traditionally governed most aspects of Jewish life. Rather than acknowledge the secular character of Yiddish theatre, Kafka 'insisted on seeing [it] as a direct continuation of the traditional ghetto culture'.[1] This was certainly true for the first few performances, which led Kafka to idealize Yiddish theatre as a point of origin and a source of his own sense of

Jewish identity. However, Kafka also began to perceive Yiddish language and culture as a centrifugal and potentially destabilizing force.

Yiddish literature is one of the examples of what Kafka called, in a famous diary entry, a 'minor literature'. Because of its minority status and adherent sense of its own precarious position, a minor literature is subject to constant change, comparable to the 'keeping of a diary by a nation' (25 December 1911; *D* 148/*TB* 313). Kafka's 'Introductory Speech on the Yiddish Language', which he delivered in 1912 during an evening of poetry readings by Jizchak Löwy, further develops this idea. In his speech, Kafka depicts Yiddish as a quintessentially diasporic language that continuously absorbs words from other languages without ever creating a stable semantic or grammatical system. The rhetoric of the speech is intended to have both centripetal and centrifugal effects on its audience. On the one hand, it is a performance meant to draw Kafka's audience – assimilated, German-speaking Jews whom he could not expect to understand or appreciate Yiddish – into the kind of community he believed to have found among Eastern European Jews. On the other hand, Kafka imparts to his listeners a contradictory message: he first tells them that they *can* understand Yiddish (because it derives from Middle High German) and then that they *cannot* understand Yiddish (because it resists translation into German). Ironically, Kafka attempts to draw his listeners into a community by highlighting the psychological split within them – a split between a sense of familiarity as well as distance towards the Yiddish tradition.[2] Indeed, the speech dramatizes and interrogates Jewish communality in a way that is also characteristic of Kafka's literary works.

Prague Zionism

One place to look for answers to the fraught question of Jewish collective identity is Zionism, in which Kafka showed a lifelong interest. He never formally joined a Zionist organization but followed the debates about Jewish national identity and participated in them in many ways. In 1910, introduced by his friend and former schoolmate Hugo Bergmann (1883–1975), he began to attend the events of the *Bar Kochba*, the Zionist association of Jewish students in Prague. From 1911 until his death, Kafka regularly read the Prague Zionist journal *Selbstwehr* (*Self-Defence*), which reviewed or published several of his short prose texts. He also read Martin Buber's (1878–1965) journal *Der Jude* (*The Jew*) from its first appearance in 1916, and in 1917 contributed two pieces, 'Schakale und Araber' ('Jackals and Arabs', 1917) and 'Ein Bericht für eine Akademie' ('A Report to an Academy', 1917).

His enthusiastic reading of such books as Heinrich Graetz's *Volkstümliche Geschichte der Juden* (*History of the Jews*, 1888) and Simon Dubnow's *Neueste Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes* (*The Newest History of the Jewish People*, 1920) round out the picture of his deep interest in the collective experience of the Jews. During the First World War, he showed interest in the practical programmes of Zionism, including charitable work with Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. From 1917 onwards, he intermittently took Hebrew lessons and contemplated moving to Palestine – in particular towards the end of his life, in 1923, though the rapid progression of his tuberculosis made this plan impossible. All of these activities have led friends of Kafka such as Max Brod (1884–1968) and Felix Weltsch (1884–1964) to regard and describe him as a fellow Zionist, though this label has been contested by others and indeed by Kafka himself.

Prague Zionism did not promote a monolithic ideology or endorse a clear agenda but is best characterized as a cultural or spiritual Zionism. Originally formulated by the Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am (1856–1927), cultural Zionism aimed at the establishment of a Jewish spiritual centre in Palestine. The goal was not necessarily the founding of a political state but the revitalization of Jewish culture, which would then propagate from Palestine to the diaspora. These ideas found their way to Prague via Martin Buber, who between 1909 and 1911 delivered his famous 'Three Speeches on Judaism' for the Bar Kochba organization. The speeches, which electrified the young Zionists of Prague, rely on highly metaphorical language. In the first speech, Buber appeals to the modern Jew to reconnect to the 'community of his blood'.[3] Blood is here a metaphor for Jewish interiority, spirituality and continuity rather than a racial concept – and it is up to the individual Jew to make a choice and embrace this common ground. In his impassioned call for a Jewish cultural renaissance, Buber never defines the basis of Jewish collectivity much further than this. Another sign of the non-dogmatic character of Prague Zionism is the relatively harmonious coexistence of different factions, for instance, the respective supporters of Yiddish and Hebrew as the main Jewish language. Whereas political Zionists such as Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) and Max Nordau (1849–1923) disdained Yiddish as a stunted ghetto language, the Bar Kochba promoted the study of Hebrew and also sponsored presentations on and of Yiddish literature – such as the one introduced by Franz Kafka in 1912.

It is not easy to sum up Kafka's attitude towards Zionism. In his letters and diaries, he makes contradictory statements, expressing sympathy for the Zionist movement yet rejecting the label 'Zionist' (as he would challenge all such labels). Moreover, his literary texts are resistant to Zionist

interpretations because they contain virtually no explicit references to Jews and Judaism – in stark contrast to the preoccupation with such matters in his diaries and letters. If anything, Kafka engages with Zionist concerns in an indirect and parabolic manner that gives his literary texts an irreducible multivalence and multidirectionality. The two stories he published in Buber's *Der Jude* are a case in point. 'A Report to an Academy', in which an African ape claims to have found a 'way out' of captivity by imitating his human captors, has frequently been read as a Zionist critique of Western Jewish assimilation. However, the ape's transformation can equally well allude to other adaptive processes, including evolution, civilization, colonialism – and even to the Zionist attempt to turn the Jews into a nation like all other nations. 'Jackals and Arabs', which evokes Jewish religious ideas and practices such as messianic hope, ritual bathing and kosher butchering, can be read as a Zionist critique of Orthodox Judaism. But since the story is set in a country populated by Arabs, it may also satirize the quasi-messianic aspirations of Zionists in Palestine.

Kafka's most incisive contributions to the Zionist debates are, perhaps, the more general questions his texts raise about the nature of communal belonging. Many of his short prose texts depict communities in a state of disarray. The animal peoples in Kafka's late stories, including the pack of dogs in 'Forschungen eines Hundes' ('Investigations of a Dog') and the mouse folk in 'Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse' ('Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People'), evoke the Jewish diaspora. These animals live in isolation and are faced with outside forces – foreign precepts and faceless enemies – and it becomes increasingly unclear what kind of bond exists between them, and whether practices such as music, memory or the search for knowledge can create a communal consciousness and enable collective action. In 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer' ('At the Building of the Great Wall of China', 1917), social fragmentation and communication gaps in the vast empire prevent the completion of the wall, the great national project. Indeed, in many of Kafka's stories communities are held together either by external threats or by a pervasive *uncertainty* about the institutions that supposedly govern them. Some texts, such as 'Gemeinschaft' ('Community', 1920) and 'Eine Gemeinschaft von Schurken' ('A Community of Scoundrels', 1917), depict more cohesive communities but at the same time expose the mechanisms that bring about social cohesion as arbitrary and potentially violent. As Vivian Liska sums up, Kafka remains torn between a longing for and an apprehension of communal identity: 'More intensely even than in solitude, Kafka lived in the difficult situation of one who recognizes the temptations and the terrors of saying "we"'.[4]

Tradition and Modernity

Kafka's relationship to Judaism has been subject to intense debate. Literary scholars have traced central motives, including the law, the court, the gatekeeper and the imperial message, back to Judaic texts and traditions. Although his Jewish education was by his own estimate scanty, Kafka was familiar with these traditions, and in particular their mystical strands, through his reading of Jewish folk tales. During the last years of his life, his intermittent study of Hebrew and the Talmud further exposed him to Jewish religious traditions.

The serious inquiry into Kafka's relationship to Judaism began with an epistolary debate between Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), both of whom rejected Max Brod's allegorical-theological readings of Kafka and instead focused on the relationship between revelation, text and commentary in his work. According to Benjamin, Kafka both evokes and suspends the Judaic tradition of commentary. He effectively emancipates the *aggadah* – the compilation of legends, anecdotes and practical advice in rabbinic literature – from the *halakha* – the legal materials in that same body of literature. Whereas traditional *aggadic* stories remain tethered to the *halakhic* laws they illustrate, Kafka's parables are severed from the search for truth and lacking in instruction: 'Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility, to its *aggadic* element.'[5] Rather than on the content of truth, Kafka focuses on the process of transmission, the mechanisms by which experience is relayed through parables, stories and novels.

As Robert Alter has argued, Benjamin and Scholem were the first to identify the peculiar 'textualisation of truth' that explains Kafka's affinity to the Hebrew tradition: 'The distinctive strength as well as the drastic limitation of the Hebrew orientation, with a belief in revelation as its point of departure, was its commitment to deriving everything from the text rather than from the circumambient world.'[6] Kafka's texts tend towards auto-exegesis, combining narration with a contemplation of the multiple meanings thus produced, most famously in the discussion of the parable told by the priest in *Der Process* (*The Trial*, 1914–15). In their ability to elicit a seemingly endless number of interpretations, these texts evoke the Judaic tradition of commentary, which is meant to unfold the infinite potential of meaning inherent in a sacred text. The status of this primordial text, however, is a point of dispute between Scholem and Benjamin. Benjamin argues that Kafka's figures have lost the Holy Writ; Scholem that they cannot decipher it. Benjamin holds that revelation is absent from Kafka's world;

Scholem that it is merely unfulfillable. Scholem explains what he means by this 'nothingness of revelation':

> I understand by it a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has *validity* but *no significance*. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak.[7]

As Alter points out, the idea of a 'nothingness of revelation' allows Scholem to read Kafka as a continuation of one strand of Jewish mysticism – the at times nihilist and heretical messianic movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – whereas Benjamin puts more emphasis on the disconnection between Jewish tradition and Kafka's secular modernity.

A brief look at two texts from the collection *Ein Landarzt* (*A Country Doctor*, 1920) suggests that Kafka can indeed be read in both of these ways, and that he ultimately rethinks tradition as such. On the one hand, 'Der neue Advokat' ('The New Advocate', 1917) lends support to Scholem's thesis that Kafka's figures are confronted with ancient texts they cannot decipher. Bucephalus, the warhorse of Alexander the Great, has turned from heroic deeds to the study of the law: 'Free, flanks unconfined by the rider's thighs, in the quiet of the lamplight, far from the tumult of Alexander's battle, he reads and turns the pages of our ancient tomes' (*HA* 12/*DL* 252). While Bucephalus has access to the law books as the carriers of tradition, the rather grotesque image of the hoofed reader leafing through the ancient books inspires little confidence that he will be able to make sense of them. On the other hand, 'Eine kaiserliche Botschaft' ('A Message from the Emperor', 1917) illustrates Benjamin's point that the message cannot even reach its recipient – here, because of vast expanses stretching out in front of the imperial messenger. Yet even in this text it is noteworthy that the subject – 'you' – is not absolutely disconnected from the emperor and his message. The concluding sentence reads: 'You, though, will sit at your window and conjure [that message] up for yourself in your dreams, as evening falls' (*HA* 28/*DL* 282). If the imperial message is irretrievably lost in the act of transmission, this in turn inspires a process of innovation and invention. Rather than simply condemning the failure to pass on Jewish tradition – as he appears to do in 'Letter to his Father' – Kafka here redefines tradition as intrinsically dynamic and dialogical. Like Benjamin, Scholem and other post-assimilatory German Jewish thinkers, Kafka promotes a new understanding of tradition as a vehicle of change and ongoing reflection rather than a guarantor of stability.

NOTES

1 D. Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 341.
2 For a longer interpretation of the speech, see K. Garloff, 'Kafka's Racial Melancholy' in S. Corngold and R. V. Gross (eds.), *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), pp. 89–104.
3 M. Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1996), pp. 17 and 19.
4 V. Liska, *When Kafka Says We: Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature* (Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 25.
5 *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, 1932–40, ed. G. Scholem, trans. G. Smith and A. Lefevre (New York: Schocken, 1989), p. 225.
6 R. Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 72.
7 *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, p. 142. Emphases by Scholem.