



KAFKA'S JEWISH LANGUAGES:  
THE HIDDEN OPENNESS OF TRADITION

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*Abstract*

This essay connects Kafka's German and his Jewish linguistic sources, and explores the trans-national perspective on literary tradition they helped him create. I begin with a critique of Deleuze and Guattari's view of Kafka as a minority writer, showing how their cold war nationalism scants the positive contributions that Yiddish and Hebrew made to his work. I continue with an examination of the "twilight of containment," when this postcontemporary Kafka began to break through his cold war canonization after 1989. Other sections include: "German-Jewish Traditions: The Echoes of Yiddish," on Kafka's cultural politics; "Hebrew: Zionism in a Transnational Key"; and "Goethe's Jewish Voices," on Yiddish as a model for Kafka's new conception of national writing. I conclude by considering the Jewish and other sources of Kafka's "linguistic turn," and the general, transnational focus on tradition that Jewish languages brought to his classic texts.

As the cold war came to a close, Kafka began to appear as a figure close to his own historical situation in Prague and central to the emerging critical scene. In a speech at the Hebrew University at Jerusalem in 1990, Czech President Vaclav Havel declared that in Prague's "Kafka, I have found a large portion of my own experience in the world," speaking as the leader of a newly independent republic and a writer as well.<sup>1</sup> In an early recognition of this trend, Frederic Jameson called Kafka a writer of the "postcontemporary" in 1991, two years after the Berlin wall fell.<sup>2</sup> Spurred by these shifting national and critical definitions, postcontainment cultural criticism

<sup>1</sup> Vaclav Havel, speech at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 26 April 1990, in *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice, Speeches and Writings, 1990-1996*, trans. from the Czech by Paul Wilson et al. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 308.

began to look more closely at what Kafka called “small” literatures like Yiddish and Czech, especially in the field of postcolonial literary studies that followed in New Historicism’s wake. The limits of Deleuze and Guattari’s prophetic work of 1974—*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*—became apparent in this situation. As the first cold war theory of “minority” literatures, Deleuze and Guattari’s study became an inevitable stopping point, but a universal one, and thus quite French in a sense, viewing Kafka’s concern with Yiddish and Hebrew as multicultural flavor at best. As the door began to open to a more expansive vision of literature and the classic work, a move that would eventually contribute to the American “culture wars,” Deleuze and Guattari had pointed critics to Kafka’s early-twentieth-century modernism, which conceived of canonical writing as transnational—constructed of more than one national voice.

*Deleuze and Guattari: Small Literatures and Their Legacies*

The most influential document in this turn in Kafka studies was without doubt the work of Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari, entitled *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, published in the wake of the student protests of the late 1960s in the United States and France. As it reintroduced Kafka’s identification with Yiddish into Kafka studies, *Toward a Minor Literature* was also a manifesto of revolt: a harbinger of the emergence of postcolonial criticism, and a brief against the high-cultural and assimilation biases of cold war modernism in the Western democracies. At the same time, the events of the Prague Spring of 1968 also fostered a link with the early emergence of post-cold war nationalisms. Deleuze and Guattari’s Kafka became the bridge between the contemporary and noncontemporary: Kafka’s Bohemian, Hapsburg questions of politics and language, at least with regard to Yiddish, allowed their slim volume to make Kafka a sign of nascent nationalism throughout Europe in the midst of the cold war and beyond. Stanley Corngold was therefore correct in his 1994 assessment that “when Central and Eastern European intellectuals address questions of their own ethnic or national identity, they are thinking willy-nilly about Kafka’s now famous five-page diary entry on the literatures of small nations.” The influence of Kafka’s 25 December 1911 diary entry, popularized by Deleuze and Guattari,

sparked new interest in Kafka's Jewish languages, and their significance for the re-emergence of the national question after 1989.<sup>3</sup>

The landmark status of *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* resulted from this return of the national question to Kafka criticism: by reminding readers of Kafka's foundational attachment to Yiddish as a form of national and literary identification, Deleuze and Guattari helped to break the iron grip of cold war modernism, the context in which Kafka's canonization in Paris and New York had been framed, and in which the "background" of writers had to be contained. The vogue of "international modernism"—the literary forerunner of what later came to be called globalization—paradoxically defined writers like Kafka, Joyce, and Eliot as writers hailing from a single national language, which consecration as a modernist then allowed them to leave behind. As Pascale Casanova puts it, "Kafka's entrance into the international literary world that anointed him after 1945 as one of the founders of literary modernity" came at a literary price for his subsequent readers: "Kafka thereby lost all of his national and cultural characteristics, now obscured by the process of universalization."<sup>4</sup> In the cold war literary landscape, Jewish figures—vide Leopold Bloom—were often read as archetypes of a national identity that could be transcended, and Kafka, the signifier of a writer whose transnational—and hence multilingual—attachments were dissolved by the alchemy of high culture. In the modernism articulated by Lionel Trilling in the United States, Kafka had become a kind of safe subversive in the 1950s, whose radically disjunctive texts occupied a realm apart from questions of national culture, much less Jewish linguistic concerns.<sup>5</sup> Likewise in France: the country where

<sup>3</sup> See Stanley Corngold, "Kafka and the Dialect of Minor Literature," *College Literature* 21 (February 1994): 90–91. For the purposes of this essay, "Jewish languages" including Yiddish and Hebrew are defined as "diglottal": spoken or used along with another, that is, transnationally. See Uzzi Ornan, "Hebrew Is Not a Jewish Language," in Joshua Fishman, ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 22ff.

<sup>4</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 353.

<sup>5</sup> In Konrad Adenauer's West Germany, the situation was little different: Kafka was canonized as a universal, not a Jewish writer, alienated from the Western Enlightenment, and thus excluded from the historical and transnational questions that obsessed a Germany divided in two. On Kafka's cold war canonization, see David Suchoff, "The Liberal Imagination and its Discontents," and "New Historicism and Containment," in *Critical Theory and the Novel: Mass Society and Cultural Criticism*

Kafka first achieved canonical status was also the cultural capital in which, as Marthe Robert puts it, Kafka was consecrated as an avatar of existentialist, postreligious thought.<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, by contrast, reread Kafka as a constitutively binational writer, looked at “how a Czech Jew writes in German,” and found his expressive identity in Yiddish—a Jewish language that was not his native tongue.<sup>7</sup>

Kafka’s minor or “minority” influences—as his Yiddish was seen in cold war terms, while his fluent Hebrew went unmentioned—were thus given a new prominence in *Toward a Minor Literature’s* post-structuralist approach. The book was a reminder to cold war literary and cultural criticism that Kafka’s transnational affiliations had been both linguistic and political, though the fact that Kafka had published his work in the same venues where Theodor Herzl, S. Y. Agnon, and Y. L. Peretz had appeared in his lifetime remained an absent presence—as the saying went—in Deleuze and Guattari’s work. In the cold war period proper, Kafka’s Yiddish and Hebrew sources had already been given partial notice in Heinz Politzer’s *Franz Kafka, Parable and Paradox* (1962), and seen as the modernism of Freudian alienation in Walter Sokel’s *Kafka: Tragic und Ironie* (1976). In the post-1968 rhetoric of Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka’s concern with Yiddish became the gate through which linguistic—that is, Jewish as well as Czech and German—history entered Kafka criticism, helping to spur a re-evaluation of the nature of canonical writing in the period. The transnational emphasis of *Toward a Minor Literature* also found more traditional echoes: in the same year, Christoph Stölzl’s *Kafka’s Böses Böhmen: Zur Sozialgeschichte eines Prager Juden (Kafka’s Evil Bohemia: Toward the Social History of a Prague Jew)* (1975) advanced a German variant of what became the New Historicist Kafka criticism in the United States, arguing for Kafka as a contained subversive. As a German-Jewish writer, Stölzl’s Kafka had done little more than internalize stereotypes of Jewish languages. In both cases, Kafka was described as a canonical writer who represented suppressed national

in *Dickens, Melville, and Kafka* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 9–25; for an analysis of Kafka’s German canonization that follows this approach, see Stephen D. Dowden, “Kafka and the Cold War,” in his *Kafka’s Castle and the Critical Imagination* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 19–56.

<sup>6</sup> Marthe Robert, “Kafka en France,” in *Le siècle de Kafka* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), 15–20.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18.

languages. Meanwhile, the importance of Zionism to Kafka had been largely ignored, giving Walter Sokel's critique of *Toward a Minor Literature* a special relevance. "What Deleuze and Guattari are really concerned with in their analysis of minority literature," as Sokel prophetically put it, "is the task which a guilt-ridden majority literature faces."<sup>8</sup> The late-cold war emergence of Kafka as a transnational writer had begun.

### *The Twilight of Containment*

Jewish linguistic concerns suddenly seemed everywhere in Kafka criticism, filtered through the lens I have elsewhere called "containment," the term used by George Kennan to describe the decentered strategy of the West in the U.S.-Soviet standoff in 1947.<sup>9</sup> This paradigm shift in late-cold war criticism can likewise be described as a slow broadening of vision where Kafka was concerned. Neither *For A Minor Literature* nor Stölzl's *Kafka's Böses Böhme* were seen as markers of an emerging trend when published, and both drew on venerable critics who sensed Kafka's significance for Jewish literary tradition, both before and after World War II. Kafka's German, as Marthe Robert declared in 1979, paraphrasing Max Brod's classic appreciation, had managed to encompass "the great themes of Jewish thought and Jewish literature."<sup>10</sup> Transnational questions, in the 1970s spirit of "ethnic" recovery, made Kafka's Jewish languages a natural place to look. Evelyn Tornton Beck's groundbreaking *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater* (1971), for instance, anticipated both Stölzl and Deleuze and Guattari, and other works soon began to crack the containment perspective as well. Robert's own *Seule, comme Franz Kafka* (1979), Giuliani Baioni's *Franz Kafka: Letteratura ed ebraismo* (1984; translated into German as *Kafka: Literatur und Judentum*, 1994), Ritchie Robertson's *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (1985), and most richly Karl Erich Grözinger's *Kafka und die Kabbala: Das Jüdische im Werk und Denken von*

<sup>8</sup> Walter Sokel, "Two Views of 'Minority' Literature: Deleuze, Kafka, and the German-Jewish Enclave of Prague," *Quarterly World Report* 6 (1983): 7.

<sup>9</sup> See "Cold War Cultural Theory," in Suchoff, *Critical Theory and the Novel*, 9–10.

<sup>10</sup> Max Brod, "Der Dichter Franz Kafka," in Gustav Krojanker, ed., *Juden in der Deutschen Literatur* (Berlin: Welt-Verlag, 1922), 60; and Marthe Robert, *Seule, comme Franz Kafka* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1979); ET: *As Lonely as Franz Kafka*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 3.

*Franz Kafka* (1992) each brought Kafka's translinguistic identifications to the fore, and were themselves built on sources highlighted in Klaus Wagenbach's *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend, 1883–1912* (*Franz Kafka: A Biography of His Youth*, 1958), Hartmut Binder's works, and Max Brod's biography, the latter of which had been available since the Weimar period. As Robert suggested in 1979, critics had long sensed transnational voices, echoing within what was still perceived as the hard shell of Kafka's prose. The question, given the cold war paradigm of "ethnic" literature, was whether the strong light of Kafka's canonicity could be refracted, and what the spectrum would reveal in national and Jewish linguistic terms.

In the twilight of containment, Kafka instead came to be seen as a minority writer. The most influential readings of Kafka in the academy, as the cold war drew to a close, treated the transnational themes in his writing as a kind of shadow-discourse, particularly where Jewish linguistic themes were concerned. Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1986), for instance, argued that Kafka's writing was controlled by negative attitudes toward "the hidden language of the Jews," as the subtitle of this influential book had it, giving Stölzl's 1975 thesis a tightening of the linguistic screw. Gilman expanded this vision of linguistic containment in *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient* (1995), a work of New Historicism on German culture's distorted views of the Jewish body. Mark Anderson's *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (1992) gave Gilman and Stölzl's earlier work a late-nineteenth-century German context, seeing Kafka as a high-cultural writer in a binary, and seemingly fatal, conflict with his own Jewish voice. Through both of these writers, Kafka's Jewish sources and interest in Zionism gained new currency, just as the containment paradigm had run its course.<sup>11</sup> And while most approaches to Jewish language in Kafka would remain entrenched in bipolar conceptions of "cultural difference" or "race," the depth of Kafka's Jewish linguistic interests provided an antidote to what Frederic Jameson called the "postcontemporary malady" as the cold war came to an end.<sup>12</sup> Scott Spector's *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle* (2000), taking its terms from Deleuze and Guattari, in this respect marked a trend. In highlighting

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Mark Anderson, ed., *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics and the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 308.

Kafka's "deterritorialized" sense of national language inspired by Zionism and Czech nationalism, Spector displaced the German center of Kafka criticism, as well as the concept of self-hatred that anchored it, marking the creative role of Yiddish and Hebrew in Kafka's canon, and the growing field of German Studies. While Mark Anderson lamented the Kafka boom as part of an ominous move to displace the "canon of German literature" with writers who "often have a Jewish background," Spector worried instead that the influence of Deleuze and Guattari had been only to promote a "multi-culturalist agenda" at best.<sup>13</sup> By the year 2000, in other words, Kafka had become the measure—for good or for ill, depending on the critic—of the more transnational canon that Kafka's interest in Jewish languages had helped to create.

*Toward a Minor Literature* had thus made Kafka a necessary stopping-point in the canon wars, and Kafka's canonical place a field where the battle was to be waged. Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on Kafka's multilingual influences freed him from narrow categorization as either a German or Jewish writer, and made his concern with Jewish languages a touchstone for the debate on the nature of canonical writing as a whole. Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Though Language and Culture* (2000) was a landmark in this regard. Staunchly opposed to Deleuze and Guattari's "minor" reading of Kafka as justifying a "deterritorialized" Jewish culture, Wisse opposed their transformation of Kafka's writing into an abstract and theoretical "political weapon," correctly noting their "evaporation" of the specifics of Kafka's Jewish national and linguistic concerns. As a work committed to the notion of Kafka's ethnic containment, *The Modern Jewish Canon* argues for a Kafka largely controlled by the prestige of the German canon. With that critique in place, Wisse goes on to decenter Kafka's nationalism herself, making practical use of the transnational concept of literary traditions that Deleuze and Guattari had helped bring within view. Wisse thus reads Kafka's "Judgment" in tandem with the writings of Sholem Aleichem, seeing both Kafka and the classic Yiddish humorist as reflecting the transnational position of Jewish culture in East and West. Wisse's Kafka

<sup>13</sup> Mark Anderson, "German Intellectuals, Jewish Victims: A Politically Correct Solidarity," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48.8 (19 October 2001): B7; and Scott Spector, "From Big Daddy to Small Literature: On Taking Kafka at His Word," in *Evolving Jewish Identities in German Culture: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Linda E. Feldman and Diana Orendi (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 80.



was therefore no longer a promethean figure bound by linguistic stereotypes—pace Gilman—nor Marthe Robert’s tragic and lonely Kafka, a writer torn between competing national and linguistic worlds. Kafka was instead seen as a writer who “knowingly straddled two cultures belonging to two literary traditions,” and thus revised the notion of an author as representing the national culture of a people, which since Herder had been thought to find expression in a single linguistic voice. “Even when these cultures are as antithetical as Yiddish and German,” as Wisse observed, “the writer may find a way, as Kafka did, of telling the truth in both.”<sup>14</sup>

*The Modern Jewish Canon*’s inclusion of Kafka in both the German and Jewish national traditions explicitly recognized the transnational texture of his writing, and was thus a resolutely post-cold war work. Spurred on by increasing attention to Kafka’s actual sources in Yiddish and Hebrew, debate over the transnational themes in this linguistically German writer became inevitable, given the lens of high modernism through which his works had been seen. In Robert Alter’s *Canon and Creativity* (2000), for instance, Kafka’s canonicity becomes a kind of holding action against the full force of such transnational identification, and the contact with popular culture that it unearths. Alter’s Kafka is therefore fully vested in different national and linguistic sources, rather than being German or Jewish in any simple sense. As *Canon and Creativity* notes, the years when Kafka “produced his most compelling fiction” began in 1911, when he “began to read about Jewish history, Yiddish literature, Hasidism, and related topics in German” as well as French. Such influences produce the famed difficulty of Kafka’s writing and, for Alter, a guarantee of his high cultural pedigree.<sup>15</sup> With the new Kafka that had already emerged,

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Language and Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 86.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Alter, “Franz Kafka: Wrenching Scripture,” in *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 64. Chana Chronfeld thus faults Deleuze and Guattari for ignoring “not only [Kafka’s] works’ links to the textual practices of Hebrew and Yiddish, but also the very possibility of producing such oppositional critiques in the nonmajor languages.” See Kronfeld, “Beyond Deleuze and Guattari: Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism in the Age of Privileged Difference,” in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 268. Following Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), Alter alludes to Kafka’s Zionism and Yiddish, only to see them as part of his “wrenching scripture,” rather than as evidence of such scripture’s hidden openness to forms of the popular voice.

however, the rubicon separating Jewish languages from what were now visible as his postmodern concerns had already been crossed.<sup>16</sup> As David Damrosch argued, “universal” writers like Kafka were exemplars of a canon with local and divergent national inflections. “More and more works of world literature are now favored for displaying specific ethnic identity or cultural difference,” his book on “world literature” declared.<sup>17</sup> With the passing of the containment paradigm, Kafka’s canon could now be explored for the Jewish voices that had been part of its German from the start.

Damrosch’s “Kafka Comes Home” appeared in the series “Translation/Transnation,” and signaled a shift in critical thought. Amidst the twilight of containment, considerations of Kafka as a Jewish writer now began to identify the transnational as an explicit element of his work. At the same time, criticism remained distant from the questions raised by Jewish languages and Kafka, since most critics did not examine the traditions of Yiddish and Hebrew that Kafka actually explored. In the move away from this linguistic nationalism, Kafka became a transitional figure for postmodern critics, marking a transition from cold war cultural criticism and its unseen boundaries. Fredric Jameson’s influential *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1994), for instance, reminded readers shocked by the emergence of post-1989 Europe that the “nightmare” of Kafka’s “Austro-Hungarian Empire” was also “the first multinational and multiethnic state,” and thus an “intriguing model in our own post-national period, still riven by nationalisms,” with the transnational foundations of canonized traditions still hidden by the Cold War “consensus” in the West.<sup>18</sup> The second reason was postcolonial, in a new period that had been largely defined by decolonization, as Jacques Derrida was among the first to suggest.<sup>19</sup> Critics were prepared to grant the importance of transcultural contributions in writing that was still considered foreign in this respect, but they were less aware of how “foreign” material—as was the case in Kafka’s

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jameson, “Conclusion,” *Postmodernism*, 308; and Bloom, “Kafka: Canonical Patience and Indestructibility,” in *The Western Canon*, 449.

<sup>17</sup> See David Damrosch, “Kafka Comes Home,” in *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 189.

<sup>18</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 308.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 251.

German and Jewish sources—had already decentered any singular conception of the nation and its linguistic home. Jameson's allusion to Benjamin's *Jüdische Rundschau* essay on Kafka of 1934 was in this sense also a signal to the postmodern generation of Kafka readers that ways of reading his canon were about to undergo a radical change: not through postmodern theory, but through a new look at the traditions of Jewish linguistic thought.<sup>20</sup>

Benjamin's "Franz Kafka: On The Tenth Anniversary of His Death" had been published in the United States in 1968, accompanied by "Some Reflections on Kafka," which originated as a letter sent to Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem in 1938. Appearing in the English volume entitled *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, the essay "Franz Kafka" itself, together with "The Task of the Translator" and "Some Reflections on Kafka," pointed readers to the kind of intellectual sources from which a new Kafka studies would emerge. The history of *Illuminations* was itself part of the story: during discussions in Paris with Arendt that helped produce the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin had recommended Arendt's book on German Jewry to Scholem, before she escaped to New York in 1940, where she helped to edit the Schocken editions of Kafka.<sup>21</sup> By publishing Benjamin's "Reflections," which discussed Kafka's work in terms of halakhah and haggadah, Arendt brought Jewish language to the forefront of the critical discussion of Kafka's texts. The translation-centered thought of Franz Rosenzweig that Benjamin cited also entered Kafka criticism in America, prefiguring the transnational perspective that emerged as a breakthrough at the cold war's end. Kafka's "coming home" to Jewish languages was thus a short jour-

<sup>20</sup> Jameson is quoting from the "little hunchback" section of Benjamin's Kafka essay, on "at least two current interpretations of Kafka we needed to get rid of for good." See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 308; and Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1968; New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 127.

<sup>21</sup> See Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 20 February 1939, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 244: "I suggested to Hannah Arendt that she make the manuscript of her book on Rahel Varnhagen available to you. . . . The book made a great impression on me. It swims with powerful strokes against the current of edifying and apologetic Judaic Studies," 244. On Arendt, Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, and Benjamin's philosophy of history, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 160-62.

ney indeed, since these were the future-oriented concerns that the German-Jewish tradition of reading Kafka had already explored.

*Toward a Postnational Kafka*

Walter Benjamin was the first to use Jewish linguistic terms to open up Kafka's canon, establishing a tradition that stretched to cold war Kafka criticism and beyond. While Yiddish and Hebrew are not mentioned by name in his "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," published in *Die Jüdische Rundschau* in 1934, as if complying with the dictates of linguistic containment, the essay goes on to retell a parable from the Talmud, the classic Jewish commentary on the Law, in Hebrew and Aramaic, and relates a Hasidic joke that carries a Zionist message, while breaking any national frame. Kafka's ability to use the languages of the past to sketch the shapes of an emerging future was for Benjamin perhaps the essential distinction of his writing: "what is actually, and in a very literal sense wildly incredible in Kafka," as he wrote to Gershom Scholem in 1938, "is that this most recent world of experience was conveyed to him precisely by this mystical tradition." Benjamin's letter to Scholem, thanks to its American canonization by Hannah Arendt as "Some Reflections on Kafka" in the volume *Illuminations*, brought the importance of Jewish languages in Kafka's canon to a whole new set of readers, making it impossible to see him as a "modernist" or German writer alone. Benjamin's 1934 "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death" and the "Reflections on Kafka" addressed to Scholem in 1938 set the tone for post-cold war Kafka criticism in this respect, making Benjamin's writings on Kafka Janus-faced documents: the foundational texts of modern Kafka criticism, and founding documents of postnational Kafka criticism as well.

To use Yuri Slezkine's paradigm, cold war Kafka criticism assumed that languages were "Apollonian" entities, and discounted the "Mercurian," often hidden exchanges between national languages that built traditions through forms of linguistic and social exchange. In the containment period, any description of the foreign in Kafka's writing was typically read as a sign of the spell cast by German letters on his imagination. As a result, Kafka's sometimes human, sometimes animal voices were reduced to a theme of "primeval guilt," as Beatrice Hanssen puts it, when Benjamin understood the concept in "different,

cultural/historical terms.”<sup>22</sup> Nowhere was this more true than in the question of Jewish stereotypes: “the concept of ‘self-hate,’” as Slezkhine argues, “assumes that the unrelenting worship of one’s ethnic kin is a natural human condition,” rather than a reflex of periods like the cold war, when racial or ethnic terms for literary criticism reinforced the notion of national literatures as inherently separate and unequal spheres.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Benjamin was theological and linguistic in his “Kafka,” looking past the binary approach to German and Jewish culture that characterized Theodor Lessing’s *Jewish Self-Hatred* (*Der Jüdischer Selbsthass*), which appeared that very same year. In Benjamin’s terms, Kafka’s tradition envisioned the now-forgotten translatability of one language into another, a fragment of its messianic unity that Benjamin’s linguistic theory called the “medial itself” (*Mittelbarkeit schlechthin*).<sup>24</sup> Strange figures like Kafka’s “Odradek” evoked for Benjamin the traces of this world of prenatal contact, representing “the form which things assume in oblivion.” An emblem for tradition, “Odradek” is the “container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka’s stories presses toward the light.”<sup>25</sup>

“Odradek” himself first appeared in Kafka’s story called “Cares of a Housefather” (“*Die Sorge eines Hausvaters*”), or *paterfamilias*, a piece Kafka published during his lifetime in the Prague Zionist journal *Selbstwehr*, in its Chanukah issue of 19 December 1919.<sup>26</sup> And Odradek becomes the object of the father’s concern precisely because of what Benjamin calls his “bastard” linguistic nature, with a name that suggests the Czech word for “stranger,” “apostate,” Kafka’s own family

<sup>22</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 147.

<sup>23</sup> See Yuri Slezkhine, “Isaac Babel’s First Love,” in *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 165.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Über Sprache Überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (1916), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4 vols. in 12, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 1980, 2.1: 145–46: “There is no such thing as a meaning of language; as communication, language communicates an intellectual essence, i.e., the medial itself.” Translation modified from Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” in *Walter Benjamin: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 320.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” 131–33; German original, “Franz Kafka: Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 2.2: 430, 431.

<sup>26</sup> Franz Kafka, “Die Sorge des Hausvaters,” *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, 2 vols., ed. Wolf Kittler et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1994), 2:349, 1:282–84.

history, and more.<sup>27</sup> From the point of view of the family man or “House Father” who narrates the story, the question is whether the multilingual Odradek, “son” of the tradition, will permit the continuance of the House of Israel, or *Beit Yisrael*. But tradition, despite the Hausvater’s anxieties, is strong precisely because composed of different strands. Some say the name Odradek itself “is of Slavonic origin” (*stamme aus dem Slawischen*), while others “believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by the Slavonic” (*es stamme aus dem Deutschen, vom Slawischen sei es nur beeinflusst*). Like Central European Jewry, influenced by both the Slavic (*Ostjuden*) and the German (assimilated German Jews), Odradek, despite being “broken” (*zerbrochen*), sustains his national character through all his travails. For though he is a spool (*Spule*) for these various cultural strands “of the most varied type and color” (*von verschiedenster Art und Farbe*) he has collected along his way, his center takes the shape of a *Stern* (star), and at least “one of the emanations” (*einer der Ausstrahlungen*) of that star is quite visible, as readers of a Zionist journal might expect, a reminder that Benjamin’s “Franz Kafka” also appeared in a Zionist venue. Tradition, in this collection of cultural strands, is “closed off in a certain respect,” yet open to additions, closed but open to new languages and their views. Such a porous tradition sometimes seems to have vanished: Odradek is at times not to be seen for months, and even appears to have moved, or moved himself into other national homes (*Manchmal ist er monatenlang nicht zu sehen; da ist er wohl in andere Häuser übersiedelt*). But he returns with the utmost loyalty to the people he remembers: “but he always comes irresistably back to our house again” (*doch kehrt er dann unweigerlich wieder in unser Haus zurück*). Though the cultural fathers constantly worry about his disappearance—“Can he possibly die?” (*Kann er denn Sterben?*)—he’s right there at the feet of future generations, of the House’s “children and its children’s children” in Kafka’s translation of different Hebrew prayers (*vor den Füßen meiner Kinder und Kindeskinde*), trailing his glorious and different linguistic threads behind.

The transnational import of Odradek’s tradition might have been obvious to Benjamin’s readers in *Die Jüdische Rundschau* of 1934, or even to Kafka’s in Prague’s Zionist journal, since a controversy over street signs in Prague had appeared in 1912, bearing the title “*Sorgen*

<sup>27</sup> See Hartmut Binder, *Kafka-Kommentar zu Sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1982), 232.

*der Prager Stadtväter*,” one close to the one Kafka chose.<sup>28</sup> To evoke this theme of transmissibility in a German-Jewish context, Benjamin titles this section of his essay “The Little Hunchback”: his notes list this “*bucklicht Männlein*” as a “motif,” and defines its corresponding “leitmotif” as “*Das Jüdische*” in Kafka’s work.<sup>29</sup> Benjamin’s reference is not to Kafka’s “Jewish” essence as a writer. Instead, he calls this talismanic figure “the core of the folk tradition, the German as well as the Jewish,” calling upon the reader to conceive of “tradition” as formed through transnational contact instead. The “little hunchback” makes two distinct allusions in this context, one to a fairy tale from Brentano’s folkloric collection, *Des Knabens Wunderhorns* (1805), compiled with Achim von Arnim, whose personal significance Benjamin discusses in *A Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. The second, less obvious allusion points beneath this screen memory, to a historical memory that shaped Berlin: the “little hunchback” was also the prejudicial name for Moses Mendelssohn, the philosopher and founder of the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany, and a moving force behind the rebirth of Hebrew as a modern tongue.

Heinrich Heine, noting Mendelssohn’s famous erudition, famously turned the tables on this epithet, transforming his physical appearance into a parable. Providence had given Mendelssohn his famous hunchback (*Buckel*), Heine observed, “in order to teach the rabble not to judge him by his appearance, but by his inner worth.” As Heine suggests, this physical feature had allegorical significance: the burden Mendelssohn had to bear was not his physical appearance, and the stigma ascribed to it, but the wealth of Jewish learning he brought into German literary culture, thus becoming an important source and interlocutor for Kant, Lessing, Hamann, and the European enlightenment as a whole.<sup>30</sup> Benjamin saw Mendelssohn more allegorically, as passing through a linguistic and national gate that

<sup>28</sup> See Scott Spector, “Linguistic Borders,” *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka’s Fin de Siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 74–75, 262 n. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin, “Schemata, Dispositionen, und Aufzeichnungen (bis ca. August/September 1934) zum *Kafka-Essay* von 1934,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.3:1209.

<sup>30</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*. First published in three parts as “De L’Allemagne depuis Luther,” in *Revue des deux Mondes* (March, November, December 1834); repr. in Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. Klaus Briegleb (Munich: Karl Hanser Verlag, 1968–1976), 2:583: “daß man den Menschen nicht nach seiner äußern Erscheinung, sondern nach seinem inneren Werte schätzen sollte.”

swung both ways: his encyclopedia entry “*Juden in der Deutschen Kultur*” (“Jews in German Culture”) recalls Mendelssohn’s groundbreaking translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, calling it “the gate through which Yiddish-speaking Jews entered the German linguistic realm.”<sup>31</sup> As Benjamin’s doorway suggests, Mendelssohn’s apparent opposition to Yiddish passes through unmentioned here, as if it would be prejudicial—as does the well-known story of Mendelssohn’s entry into Berlin through one of its many gates where, according to legend, he was charged entry as a piece of livestock, though Benjamin concludes with a contemporary rejoinder to this classic text: “whether it is a man or a horse is no longer so important, if only the burden is removed from the back.”<sup>32</sup>

Kafka’s diary uses Mendelssohn to theorize this dialectical process, where a national language tries to interdict what is considered an “accent” marring a more pure linguistic form. Kafka notes that Mendelssohn, while writing in German, promoting Hebrew, and opposing the Jewish vernacular, had established the movement that—in paradoxical fashion—had also helped bring Yiddish literature to life:

Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment] movement introduced by Mendelssohn at the beginning of the nineteenth century, adherents are called Maskilim, are opposed to the popular Yiddish, tend towards Hebrew and the European sciences. Before the pogroms of 1881 it was not nationalist, later strongly Zionist. Principle formulated by Gordon: “Be a Man on the street and a Jew at home.” To spread its ideas the Haskalah must use Yiddish and, much as it hates the latter, lay the foundation of its literature.<sup>33</sup>

Benjamin’s treatment of the figure of the “hunchback” is quite similar: rather than criticize the distaste for Yiddish, Kafka regards Mendelssohn and the Haskalah’s pro-Hebrew, pro-German position as a dialectical form of opposition. For while Mendelssohn argued that the state

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, “Juden in der Deutschen Kultur,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2:807.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” 140. For different versions of that legend, see Gordon Craig, “Germans and Jews,” *The Germans* (New York: Putnam, 1982), 130; and Amos Elon, *The Pity of it All: A History of Jews in Germany, 1743–1933* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2002), 1–4. On its origins, see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 764–65.

<sup>33</sup> Franz Kafka, diary entry of 26 January 1912, in *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod (1948; New York: Schocken Books, 1976); German original, Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher, 1912–1914*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 24.



should permit the use of “pure German or pure Hebrew” only in the swearing of oaths, his movement’s effort to reach the masses sparked the creation of Yiddish literature, whose language had received its creative impetus through contact between these two separate tongues.<sup>34</sup> The German and Jewish folksong Benjamin quotes in his “Franz Kafka” is in this sense a hymn of hope, and a “prayer” for the kind of “hallowed growth of languages” Benjamin envisioned in his translation essay, whose redemption the *bucklicht Männlein* represents: “my dear child, I beg of you / pray for the little hunchback too.”<sup>35</sup>

In the era of containment, these transnational meanings of Benjamin’s “little hunchback” went almost unnoticed. Cold war interpretations had largely deprived him of his “Mercurian” traits—Mercury, or Hermes, being the patron of messengers, traders, and thieves, and hence Kafka’s boundary-crossing themes. “Jews and other nomads,” as Slezkhine points out, performed vital but often forgotten functions. Jewish languages in Europe—especially Yiddish, but also Hebrew, whose biblical translations helped build the European canons—had, despite helping to build the surrounding “Apollonian” nations, been seen as the languages of a “gypsy literature which had stolen the German child out of the cradle,” as Kafka called German-Jewish literature in 1921.<sup>36</sup> Like the Jews, the “gypsies” or Roma had performed crucial exchange functions, suffered stigma, and then been written out of modernity’s “sacred” scriptures—that is, national canons and cultures—which their own linguistic traditions helped to raise. As Moritz Goldstein declared of the German Jews and their literary traditions in 1912, just as Kafka’s canon was about to unfold: “We Jews are administering the spiritual property of a nation that denies us the capability of doing so.” In quoting Goldstein’s passage in her 1968 introduction to *Illuminations*, Arendt gave this “hidden tradition,” as Scholem described it, a public yet still hermetic name:

<sup>34</sup> See Dan Miron, “Language as Caliban,” in *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 43–44.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” in *Illuminations*, 134.

<sup>36</sup> See Yuri Slezkhine, “Mercury’s Sandals: The Jews and Other Nomads,” in *The Jewish Century*, 4–39; and Franz Kafka, letter to Max Brod, June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 289; German original, Franz Kafka, *Briefe, 1902–1904*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), 338.

“The Hunchback,” in all its German-Jewish significance, was the title with which her introduction to Benjamin began.<sup>37</sup>

Arendt’s “Introduction” to *Illuminations* made no bones about Kafka’s stature as a canonical writer: at the same time, Arendt refused to make any apology for Kafka’s love for the particularity of the Jewish voice, and its importance to his stature in German literature as a whole. “Such a demonstration,” she wrote, “apart from being in bad taste, would also be superfluous,” thus putting the question in forthright terms. Post-Holocaust considerations about Jews and Germans, such as Gershom Scholem’s famous reservations two years before, were irrelevant to Arendt in the Kafka context. The point was to break through the implicit taboo on conceiving Kafka’s canon as influenced by Jewish languages, and hence transnationally:<sup>38</sup>

Kafka himself was so very aware of it: “If I indiscriminately write down a sentence,” as he once noted in his *Diaries*, “it is already perfect”—just as he was the only one to know that “*Mauscheln*” (speaking a Yiddishized German), though despised by all German-speaking people, Jews or non-Jews, did have a legitimate place in the German language, being nothing else but one of the numerous German dialects . . . since he rightly thought that “within the German language, only the dialects, and besides them, the most personal High German are really alive.”

Here, Kafka is seen as the writer who understood that Yiddish’s historical contact with German was a normal process, that its Jewish accent was no different than *Alemmannisch*, and that only a language that accepted its hidden dialects and transnational contacts could hope to continue its canonical life. In this postcontainment perspective, Kafka was the canonical writer who “knew” that negotiations between different dialects had always shaped German, like all

<sup>37</sup> See Moritz Goldstein, “Deutsch-jüdischer Parnaß,” *Der Kunstwart* 25 (1912): 281–94; and Hannah Arendt, “I: The Hunchback,” in “Walter Benjamin, 1892–1940,” her introduction to Benjamin, in *Illuminations*, 1. For Arendt on Goldstein, see *ibid.*, 30. For Scholem’s remark, see Gershom Scholem, “Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala” (repr. in David Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary,” *Modern Judaism* 5:1 [February 1985]: 67–93, at 71), Satz 1: “Echte Tradition bleibt verborgen; erst die verfallende Tradition verfällt auf einen Gegenstand und wird im Verfall erst in ihrer Grösse sichtbar.”

<sup>38</sup> See Gershom Scholem, “Jews and Germans,” a lecture delivered at the World Jewish Congress, 2 August 1966, and published as “Juden und Deutsche” in Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Bibliothek Suhrkamp, 1970), 20–46. Arendt would have encountered the English translation by Werner J. Dannhauser in *Commentary* (November 1966), a journal to which she contributed.

canonical languages: “*mauscheln*—in itself is even beautiful (*schön*),” he wrote, while taking the phenomenon “in its broadest sense.” As a Jewish émigré from Germany, Arendt had time to consider such accents in all their social and literary heft: discussions with Benjamin and Scholem in Paris, before she escaped to New York, helped secure Kafka’s transnational traditions as a nexus for each writer’s thought.<sup>39</sup>

It was in Paris, during World War II, in the winter of 1939–1940, that Arendt held long discussions with Benjamin on Kafka, and on the manuscript of Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, which Scholem had sent in manuscript form to Benjamin from Palestine.<sup>40</sup> Both Scholem and Arendt had shared a similar Zionism in this period—aptly named “counter-nationalism” by David Biale—that predisposed them to view Kafka similarly, despite their later break. Scholem, for instance, had been involved with the “non-nationalist nationalism” of Brit Shalom Zionism in Mandatory Palestine in the 1920s, a “cause Arendt passionately embraced a decade later,” as Raluca Eddon notes.<sup>41</sup> Kafka’s commitment to Jewish languages may well have influenced Arendt’s own effort at cultural redemption: from 1946 through 1948, Arendt published “A Tentative List of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Axis Occupied Countries” in the journal *Jewish Social Studies*, while working for the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. The list itself contains works written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, German, and a host of other national languages. During these same years Arendt worked for Schocken Books, producing the first English edition of Kafka’s

<sup>39</sup> “Das Mauseheln an sich ist sogar schön,” Kafka wrote, and should be “im weitesten Sinne genommen.” Franz Kafka, letter to Max Brod, June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, 289; German original, *Briefe*, 336–37; and Hannah Arendt, “Introduction,” in *Illuminations*, 32. On these connections, see David Suchoff, “Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and the Scandal of Jewish Particularity,” *The Germanic Review* 72 (1997): 56–76. Arendt’s 1968 “Introduction” reprints sentences from her earlier appreciation of Kafka published in *Partisan Review* 11 (1944) 412–22, while adding her appraisal of *Mauseheln* as a central, Jewish linguistic dimension of Kafka’s “perfection” as a writer. See Hannah Arendt, “Kafka: A Reevaluation: On the Twentieth Anniversary of His Death,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 80.

<sup>40</sup> Scholem had already delivered the work as a series of lectures in New York in 1938.

<sup>41</sup> Raluca Eddon, “Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, and the Paradox of ‘Non-National’ Nationalism,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12 (2003): 55–68; and David Biale, “Scholem und der moderne Nationalismus,” in *Gershom Scholem zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Gary Smith (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 259.

*Diaries*, which would appear in New York.<sup>42</sup> When Theodor Adorno edited and published the first postwar edition of Benjamin's *Schriften*, which appeared in Frankfurt in 1955, Arendt had already been a conduit for Benjamin's reading of Kafka as "aggada"; Scholem had sent Kafka's unpublished "Letter on Kafka" of 12 June 1938 from Jerusalem to Arendt, who included it as "Some Reflections on Kafka" in the *Illuminations* she edited and introduced, published by Schocken in New York in 1968, at the height of both the student revolt and the cold war.<sup>43</sup>

Arendt's major role, however, flew under the cold war radar. Her mercurian Kafka went against the grain of the "liberal imagination," as well as the containment criticism that would follow in its wake, a discontent signaled by Robert Alter in "Jewish Dreams, Jewish Nightmares," a landmark essay published in that same annus mirabilis of 1968. In retrospect, Alter's intervention reads like a holding action against the post-national Kafka, discounting any "Talmudic" influence on Kafka—a point raised by Leslie Fiedler—despite Max Brod's description of Kafka's study of that subject at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, as well as Kafka's reading of Fromer's *Organismus des Judentums* (1909), which reprints Talmudic tractates in German translation.<sup>44</sup> Arendt's "Introduction," by bringing this transnational context to the forefront, swam in powerful strokes against the consensus that treated Kafka's Jewish concerns as the "the onerous question of the writer's background" instead.<sup>45</sup> As

<sup>42</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 161, 187, 189.

<sup>43</sup> Gershom Scholem, letter to Hannah Arendt, 16 December 1945: "I'm . . . sending you a friendly gift in today's mail . . . it consists of Walter's works [*Arbeiten*]: the piece on Hölderlin's poems "Dichtermut" and "Blödigkeit," and the one on Franz Kafka"; the letter refers to "unpublished" works of Benjamin, and thus not the 1934 *Jüdische Rundschau* essay. Elsewhere, Scholem explains that the letter was meant to be a preview of future work: hence his interest in forwarding it as such to Arendt, who was in the United States and had already published on Kafka in *Partisan Review* in 1944. See *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 328; and Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 214.

<sup>44</sup> Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, 2d ed., trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (1960; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 202 and n. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Alter, "Jewish Dreams and Nightmares," *Commentary* 45:1 (January 1968): 48. On Scholem's experience with Kafka while both studied at the *Hochschule*, see Michael Brenner, "German Jews' Encounter with Hebrew and Yiddish Culture," in *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 187–88.

a result, Arendt had almost no influence on Kafka studies in the period. Ritchie Robertson's compendious *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (1985), a solid work of intellectual history, contains not a single reference to Arendt's interpretation of Kafka, an accurate reflection of her apparent influence as the "new," Jewish Kafka came home. Because the concept of Kafka's canon she advanced was post-national, Arendt had become postcontemporary where the reception of Jewish languages was concerned.

The contrast with Lionel Trilling was both stark and courageous, given his enormous influence in American cultural criticism at the time. In that same year of 1968, Trilling set the parameters of debate for the liberal and New Historical Kafka that followed him, suggesting that an "imagination so boldly autonomous" as Kafka's was not only independent of any national canon, but *Beyond Culture*, as the title of his volume put it, and thus without any relation to Yiddish and Hebrew, their Jewish accents, or their transnational effects. The position of Jewish intellectuals in Cold War America may certainly have been a factor: Trilling's breakthrough in the American academy had occurred in the leftist era of the 1930s and later the Rosenberg Trial, which encouraged a downplaying of such "ethnic" themes. Arendt, by contrast, had through Benjamin discovered a hidden tradition in Kafka: as a canonical writer of "the purest German prose of the century," Arendt's Kafka was fully aware of German literature's creative exchanges with other voices, in which Jewish languages had a share.<sup>46</sup> As a Zionist, Arendt had advocated a binational form of political sovereignty that mirrored this linguistic thought on the political level, while looking beyond the cold war consensus, and back to the critical past.

#### *German-Jewish Traditions: The Echoes of Yiddish*

One year after composing his "On Language as Such," Benjamin received a present from Scholem that would point him in this direc-

<sup>46</sup> See Lionel Trilling, "Hawthorne in Our Time," in *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 201; Arendt, "Introduction," in *Illuminations*, 32; and David Suchoff, "The Rosenberg Case and the New York Intellectuals," in *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case and the McCarthy Era*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1995), 155-69.

tion: the birthday gift was a book by a police chief of Lübeck in the nineteenth century, Christian Benedict Ave-Lallement, entitled *Das Deutsche Gaunerthum in seiner social-politischen, literarischen und linguistischen Ausbildung in seinem heutigen Bestande* (*The German Underworld in its Social-political, Literary, and Linguistic Development into its Modern Form, 1858–1862*). As Scholem describes it, the book “contained an extensive discussion of the Jewish underworld in relation to the German one,” and the more important principle it laid bare was the transnational: the linguistic connections between the Yiddish-German underworld made the book a model of the kind of “folk tradition” Benjamin saw in Kafka’s work.<sup>47</sup> *The German Brotherhood of Thieves*, as the title could be translated, was, on the one hand, an account of the Dickensian world in which *gonifs*—the Yiddish word for thief—would use a foreign *mélange* of code words to keep their underground activities hidden from the police. In a larger sense, this *Gaunersprache* or “thieves cant” referred to the cross-linguistic, slang exchanges that were both German and Jewish in essence, resembling the hidden “function of language,” allowing them to exchange and combine features, as a standard history of German explains:

Below *Umgangssprache* lies the language known as *Rotwelsch*—perhaps better called *Ganovensprache* or *Gaunersprache*—with a long history and a variety of forms composed of many different elements, including soldiers’ and students’ slang and elements of Hebrew/Yiddish. *Gaunersprache* (= English ‘thieves cant’) also applies best to a function of language rather than any particular form: it is used by the anti- or asocial criminal fraternity as a secret language and changes rapidly to preserve its cryptic nature. In this respect it is like certain types of children’s language.<sup>48</sup>

Scholem’s gift thus pointed Benjamin’s idea of tradition toward the silent history of language change: the story of contact between German and Jewish speakers that is far more difficult to perceive once the “adult” version of standard language has been defined. In the phenomenon that linguists call lexical borrowing, this darkness becomes visible: the hidden importation of foreign lexical items into a national language that is actually a type of thievery between nations which takes many forms. These forms range from the extreme of identifiable

<sup>47</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 85.

<sup>48</sup> C. J. Wells, *German: A Linguistic History to 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 369.

“foreign words”—like *cul de sac* in English—to less noticeable foreign contributions, like the word *Keller* in German, that made its way from the Latin *cellarium*, with a slight change of accent that enabled it to receive its German “citizenship” (*Bürgerrecht*), as Friedrich Kluge, the founder of German etymology, points out.<sup>49</sup> The most silent form is loan translation or loan creations, where the foreign origin of a word remains imperceptible to the native tongue. In this case, a “completely new word [is] created to render [a] foreign word, e.g. *correspondence/Briefwechsel*,” in a process of bringing new concepts or vocabulary items into the language that can be undertaken intentionally either in the *Hochsprache* or “high language,” or, as the other German expression has it, in the *Volksmaul* or “people’s mouth.”<sup>50</sup>

In his “Lecture on the Yiddish Language,” Kafka’s mention of *Gaunersprache* was thus both historical and rhetorically provocative. By connecting Yiddish to thieves cant, Kafka reminded his audience of the transnational process of language creation, and the literal and figurative childhood that different languages can share. In studying children in Hawaii, for instance, twentieth-century linguists have been able to watch such contact create language in almost real time, when the multitude of different immigrant groups made communication in a single language impossible. When children were thrown together, they began to merge linguistic forms in what is known as a “pidgin.” The process observed, however, was discovered to be similar to the cross-linguistic additions, simplifications, and combinations of elements through which more recognizable “standard” languages have been formed.<sup>51</sup> “Pidgin” languages are typically held in low esteem, and Kafka’s diary entry on “small” literatures explains why. Such developing tongues expose the process of theft and agrammatical transformation that formed most canonical languages: from the gradual acceptance of a form like “can’t” in standard English usage, to the ubiquitous and now mandatory high German form of *kein*, born of speakers running together the two separate words of *nicht* and *ein*.

<sup>49</sup> Friedrich Kluge, *Unser Deutsch: Einführung in die Muttersprache* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1910), 26. Translations from this text are my own.

<sup>50</sup> For a chart of the different types of foreign borrowing in German, see Wells, *German: A Linguistic History*, 276. Eric Blackall’s *The Emergence of German as a Literary Language, 1700–1775*, 2d ed. (1959; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) is the classic demonstration of German’s literary dependence on such developmental help, especially in the famous example of French.

<sup>51</sup> See Derek Bickerton, *Roots of Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma, 1981), 1–42.

These examples come from the colloquial pronunciation of standard English and German forms, where contraction produces a new and acceptable word, with the pidgin stage soon forgotten, just as the origins of foreign words—once given their “citizenship” as standard grammar in standard language—is no longer apparent in standard usage at all. “What in great literature goes on down below,” constituting a “not indispensable cellar of the structure” in Kafka’s distinction between “large” and “small” languages, “here takes place in the full light of day.”<sup>52</sup>

Yiddish, as Kafka reminded his Prague audience, was “after all, for a long time a despised language,” because it shed light on Auerbach’s *Keller* of German linguistic history.<sup>53</sup> According to Kluge, Hebrew and *Judendeutsch*, the term he shared with Goethe, together with “gypsy” (*Zigeunerisch*) were to be distinguished from “actual *Rotwelsch*” as having made their contributions to canonical German in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Together, these echoes of German contact with Jewish and other voices went back to Luther’s *Liber Vagatorum* (1512) or *Book of Thieves*, which conceived of Yiddish and Hebrew as part of a transnational underworld of vernacular cross-fertilization, living beneath the tip of the monkish, high German tongue. *Gaunersprache* or “thieves cant,” as Kafka used the term, suggests the historic irony of these charges. Luther launched his attack on thieves from the Jewish underworld at the very same period in which his translation from the Hebrew was bringing new idioms from the Jewish literary tradition into the German language’s first canonical form. Hence the danger Kluge perceived in the world of linguistic exchange:

The *Rotwelsch* that is just as old is no harmless literary amusement meant for literary entertainment, but a bitterly serious matter, and a great danger to public life. It is a spoken language: it spreads like a plant from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation (*Geschlecht zu Geschlecht*). Parchment and paper have nothing to do with its spread. In olden times, *Rotwelsch* was the secret language of people who did not know how to read or write.” (80)

<sup>52</sup> Kafka, diary entry 25 December 1911, *Tagebücher, 1912–1914*, 250.

<sup>53</sup> Kafka, “Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” Jewish Town Hall, Prague, 18 February 1912, in *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 385; German original, “Rede über die Jiddische Sprache” (1912), in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prose aus dem Nachlaß*, vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Brod (1948–1949; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1976), 308.



Canonization meant putting a stop to these cross-border transfers, or at least stabilizing their grammar in a national or religious form: instructing the people who “did not know how to read or write” in the acceptable limits of their national language, and putting a stop to the loose talk that constantly takes in forms from abroad. The “normal function of language” that is *Rotwelsch* or Kafka’s *Gaunersprache* is therefore described as the tendency of every language to interact with foreign speakers and to change. The new dialects that develop can even lead to claims of a separate linguistic and national identity, just as Portuguese speakers acquired autonomy from the rule of Spain. To the nationalistically minded, *Gaunersprache* thus had to be forgotten: it could suggest a nation within the nation which, should it ever surface, might demand linguistic autonomy of its own. Though underground, this vision of tradition was radically open: the national language, or *Unser Deutsch*, as Kluge’s tract was called, faced a language that knew no *Gesetzgebung*, or legislation, flourishing through what Kafka called a “linguistic structure of capriciousness and law” (*Sprachgebilde von Willkür und Gesetz*).<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin’s interest in this “subterranean life of the German language,” as Irving Wohlfarth has called it, explains his affinity for Kafka’s vision of tradition, if not the sources from which it was derived.<sup>55</sup> In the textbook by which Kafka was taught in Prague, the rigid enforcement of such a standard language—*Gemeinsprache*—is called “an arbitrary rule”: the effect was a version of what Benjamin would call the illusory continuity of tradition, since it tries to “bring linguistic movement to a standstill” (*Stillstand*), when the entry of dialectal material and a “mixture of languages” is going on all the time.<sup>56</sup> *Gaunersprache* was an example of such hidden linguistic movement, with its use by Kafka coming close to what Benjamin meant

<sup>54</sup> Wilhelm Grimm, “Bericht über das Deutsche Wörterbuch” (Verhandlungen der Germanisten zu Frankfurt am 24, 25, und 26 September, 1846), in *Die Werke Wilhelm Grimms, Kleinere Schriften I*, vol. 31 of Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Werke*, ed. Ludwig Erich Schmitt (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1992), 511; and Kafka, “Rede über die jiddische Sprache,” *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, 307.

<sup>55</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, “Männer aus der Fremde: Walter Benjamin and the German-Jewish Parnassus,” *New German Critique* 70:3 (1997): 3–85, at 27.

<sup>56</sup> Hermann Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, Studienausgabe der 8. Auflage (1880; Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1970), 404–5: “Gemeinsprache . . . ist nicht als eine starre Regel, welche die Sprachbewegung zum Stillstand bringen würde”; the previous chapter is titled “Sprachmischung.” On Kafka’s introduction to this text, see “Schulzeit,” in Hartmut Binder, ed., *Kafka Handbuch*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1979), 2:199.

by the “dialectical image”: a picture of the foreign exchanges that shape linguistic form, and which flashes up before a more classic understanding of the national inheritance forces it to disappear. The term itself was a case in point: derived from the Hebrew infinitive *l'ganav* (to steal), the word came into German through the intermediary of the Yiddish infinitive *ganeven*, which in turn acquired its *-en* infinitive ending via importation of the German form.<sup>57</sup> At the literary level, the formation of the *Hochsprache* was no different. German had imported expressions like *Zeichen und Wunder* (signs and wonders) directly from the Hebrew Bible via Luther's translation of Exodus; Kafka uses this particular phrase to describe the spell cast on greenhorn Karl Rossman by the streets of New York.<sup>58</sup> *Gaunersprache* was in this sense the tip of a linguistic iceberg, with the larger tradition of contacts between German and Jewish languages destined to remain unseen. “The crooks as God's chosen people, that would be a movement,” was Scholem's quip to Benjamin at the time.<sup>59</sup>

Benjamin had connected his idea of tradition with the foreign from his earliest reflections. In “On Language and Such and the Language of Man” (1916), in conjunction with Scholem, Benjamin began to develop his theory of a creative *Ursprache*, or “God's language,” accessible in fragments like a lost vernacular accent beneath the secular power of the canonical form. Benjamin's key perception

<sup>57</sup> This language mixture in the formation of Yiddish verbs includes common words like *leyenen*, “to read,” which hails from a pre-French form. On *Gauner*, see Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Straßburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1899), 135–36; on the cross-linguistic fusion of the German infinitive suffix with Hebrew and other roots, see Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 33; for Kafka's use of *Gaunersprache*, see “Rede über die Jiddische Sprache,” *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, 306.

<sup>58</sup> *Luther Bibel*, Exodus 7:2; Kafka, *Amerika*, in vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Brod, 28. Kafka worries in his “Lecture on the Yiddish Language” that the delicate “ties” between Yiddish and the German language might be “torn to shreds” by the latter's prestige if Yiddish were translated into German; but it is equally fair to say that turning German back into Yiddish would allow the visibility of this hidden substratum of German to be lost.

<sup>59</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 85. The quip had canonical significance, since Ave-Lallemant's work has become a standard reference for both German and Yiddish historical linguistics. Kluge's German etymological dictionary, for instance, still uses Ave-Lallemant as a source, just as the recent introduction to Harkavy's groundbreaking *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary* of 1925 notes that *Das Deutsche Gaunertum* retains its “permanent value to Yiddish scholarship.” See Dovid Katz, “Alexander Harkavy and His Trilingual Dictionary,” in Alexander Harkavy, *Yidish-English-Hebreyisher Verterbukh, Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1928; New York: Schocken Books, 1988), xiii.

in this and the “Translation” essay was that all language did not reflect the world as much as try to give its own translation of a more powerfully creative, original voice: the most original human speech was therefore translingual from the start in having to imitate a pre-existing, linguistically defined world. In radical fashion, Benjamin posited the idea that even physical reality was a translation of a previous code, bringing us into contact with “the unspoken nameless language of things.”<sup>60</sup> Viewed from a sociological perspective, Benjamin’s linguistic theory is itself a positive translation of the prejudicial notion that “medial” figures like Hermes must be shifty practitioners of exchange who fit the transnational stereotypes of “devious, greedy, pushy, and crude.” In canonical German culture, these charges had encrusted themselves on Jewish languages with a peculiar fixity: Hebrew had been declared prematurely “dead,” as Rosenzweig noted in “Modern Hebrew?” (1925), and the Yiddish that was so intimately related to German in the recent linguistic past seemed as if it “did not fit the existing ‘families’” of language, however they were defined.<sup>61</sup>

Benjamin’s linguistic theory is thus both a redemptive and rescuing gesture: the copying of one language by another is redeemed of the charge that the foreign is a lesser, inferior version of a more prestigious canonical voice. For Benjamin, translation resembles vernacular voices in contact—resulting in the “the hallowed growth of languages”—and makes human language a shadow of divine creation, in its need for the foreign in order to grow. As Rosenzweig puts this position in his “Preface” to his German translation of the medieval Hebrew poems of Yehuda Ha-levi, “the translator makes himself into a speech organ of a foreign voice, which he makes audible over the chasm of space or time. When this foreign voice has something to say, then the language has to look different afterward

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, “On Language as Such,” 325; German original, *Gesammelte Werke* 2.1:151, “die stumme, namenslose Sprache der Dinge.” Compare Franz Rosenzweig, “Scripture and Luther,” in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Laurence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 47, where the similar postulate that “all speaking is translating” is discussed.

<sup>61</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “Modern Hebrew?” (1925), in *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, 3d ed., ed. Nahum Glatzer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 276: “[Hebrew] endures because it cannot, will not, and may not die”; German original, Franz Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937), 223: “es ist nicht Nichtsterbenkönnen, Nichtsterbenwollen, Nichtsterbendürfen”; and Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 19.

than it did before.”<sup>62</sup> As Rosenzweig suggests, translation can be likened to the healthy process of a national language speaking with the voice of a foreigner, giving itself over to new forms, a different “heritage,” and even new linguistic constructions that deepen its linguistic reserves. The foreign voice figuratively gives language the breath of life, in this formulation, because the limited “native” tongue—rooted in the earth, as it were—is given a chance to move and grow: the translator “will become a creator of language,” as Rosenzweig observes. The creative potential unleashed by bringing a foreign voice to a national language—as experienced in mercurian migrations—is only intensified in the formal act of translation, in which an entire body of foreign material is given a new linguistic home:

The language will experience rejuvenation, just as if a new speaker had arisen from within it. And more than this: for the foreign poet not only calls into the new language what he himself has to say, but he brings the heritage of the general spirit of his own language along with him to the new language, so that the rejuvenation that occurs here occurs not merely through a foreign individual, but through the general spirit of that foreign individual as well.<sup>63</sup>

Benjamin similarly views translation as a form of creation—in keeping with Scholem’s linguistic theory, as David Biale concludes.<sup>64</sup> The canonical growth that occurs through translanguistic contact likewise short-circuits any nationalist claim to native origins, or the once-and-for-all purity of a native speaker’s access to the mother tongue. “If nature could speak,” as Benjamin puts it in his essay on language, “her voice would be the voice of lament,” since even the most “natural” language available would be a translation of a more messianic voice. Nationalism for Benjamin is therefore nothing but a shadow-language, over-naming a more original speech of translingual contact, producing not only a melancholy patriotism—longing for its lost origin—but also a more pleasurable, sometimes humorous quest

<sup>62</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevy*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), xlv; German original, “Nachwort zu den Hymnen und Gedichten des Jehuda Halevi, 1922/3,” in *Kleinere Schriften*, 202: “Wenn die fremde Stimme etwas zu sagen hat, dann muß die Sprache nacher anders aussehn als vorher.”

<sup>63</sup> Rosenzweig, *Ninety-Two Poems*, xlv; *Kleinere Schriften*, 202.

<sup>64</sup> See “Theology, Language, History,” in David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 140–41.

for a national language enriched by its translations from more than one foreign voice.<sup>65</sup>

The *Urwelt* or underworld Benjamin saw breathing through the crevices of Kafka's fiction conveyed this insight: Kafka metaphorically evoked this forgotten world of translation and thievery, in the literal sense of *über-tragen*—transference or carrying-over of foreign content—that typified this underground process of canonical creation. “The mimetic gift, which was once the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language,” as Benjamin wrote in 1933, the year before “Franz Kafka” appeared in *Die Jüdische Rundschau*, helped produced “the archive of non-sensuous [*nicht sinnlich*] similarity” that language became. The “canon of language,” as Benjamin suggested in “The Mimetic Faculty,” was full of similarities between the radically different elements that constitute it, “occult” connections that the “rapidity of writing and reading” allow to “flit past.”<sup>66</sup> Here, Benjamin was invoking Herder's *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Litteratur* (1766), which argued that the earliest stage of human language was *sinnlich*, and accompanied by “mime and gesture.” Kafka's “swamp world” allowed this prenatal level of language creation to bubble to the surface, showing how these primitive depths and writing in its classic form were intertwined. German romanticism had been an attempt to exploit such foreignness and disguise its resources in the national canon. According to Benjamin, it would be this hidden “conquest” on which the birth of a forgetful German classicism would depend. “Next to the translation of Shakespeare,” he wrote in his doctoral dissertation, “the permanent poetic achievement of Romanticism was the appropriation of Romance art forms for German poetry. In full consciousness, Romanticism strove toward the conquest [*Eroberung*], cultivation [*Ausbildung*], and purification [*Reinigung*] of these forms.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “The Peoples and the Land of Their Homeland,” in *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 318–19: “For this reason, the tribal legend of the eternal people begins otherwise than with indigenoussness. . . . Israel's ancestor immigrated,” p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Reflections*, 335; German original, “Über das mimetische Vermögen,” *Gesammelte Werke* 2.1:213: “Dergestalt wäre die Sprache die höchste Stufe des mimetischen Verhaltens und das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit”; Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” 130ff.

<sup>67</sup> See Blackall, *The Emergence of German as a Literary Language*, 45–32; Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols. to date, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA:

Kafka, by contrast, was Benjamin's way of revising Herder: his stories exposed the "intermediate world," that transnational space which German and other national literatures had "cultivated," or "built out" as his metaphor of 1919 suggests.<sup>68</sup> Looking back to Herder's *Deutsche Litteratur*, "Franz Kafka" evoked a canonical writing that emerged from an invisible force field, created in the space between repelling nationalistic poles. In Benjamin's essay, physical and often animal gestures, which he called the "gestus," provided an involuntary memory of this translinguistic territory. "Because the most forgotten alien land is one's body in Kafka," the body became political ground, whose language allowed the forgotten contact between domestic and foreign voices to be perceived. Benjamin's allusion here was to Wilhelm Grimm, whose *Report on the German Dictionary* (1846) characterized the "in-mixture of the foreign" into the German language with a similar gesture: "open the first book that comes to hand, I say, not even a poor one, and a countless number of such vermin [*Ungeziefer*] scatter [*schwirrt*] before our eyes. *Ungeziefer* was the once unusual German word now famous from the first line of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"; Benjamin uses it to highlight the transnational territory that Kafka's animal and human gestures bring to light. In Kafka, as Benjamin observes, "it can happen that a man awakes, and is transformed into a vermin [*Ungeziefer*];" the gestures of that "insect" become Kafka's exploration of the primitive and alien sources that are asleep in everyday speech.<sup>69</sup> Kafka's "gestures" were an attempt to slow down the movement—or "transformation"—of foreign content into the linguistic material of standard language—a "counter-metamorphosis," or *carrying over*, as Stanley Corngold suggests.<sup>70</sup>

Kafka's "gestures" gave new voice to those alien voices of tradition, waiting for creative release from their figurative enclosure beneath

Harvard University Press, 1996- ), 1:158; German original, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" (1919), in *Gesammelte Werke*, 1.1:76.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Illuminations*, 131.

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin, "Jakob Grimm an Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann," Berlin, 14 April 1858, *Deutsche Menschen*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 4.1:218–19; idem, "Franz Kafka," in *Illuminations*, 120, 126; German original, "Kafka," *Gesammelte Werke*, 2.2:424; Wilhelm Grimm, "Bericht über das Deutsche Wörterbuch," 518–19; Franz Kafka, letter to Felice Bauer, 7 October 1916, *Briefe an Felice, und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (Tübingen: S. Fischer Verlag, 1967), 720.

<sup>70</sup> Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51, 55.

the cover of Grimm's dusty German book. In an era of German nationalism, according to Benjamin, those sources remained largely secret. These were nonetheless the echoes of Yiddish, as Kafka told his Prague audience in 1912, that touched every German-Jewish speaker, a reminder of the transnational contact from which the modern language of German had emerged. "It is, to say the least of it," as Kafka began,

not so very long ago that the familiar colloquial [*Verkehrssprache*] language of German Jews according to whether they lived in town or in the country, more in the East or in the West, seemed to be a remoter or closer approximation to Yiddish, and many nuances remain to this day. For this reason the historical development of Yiddish could have been followed just as well on the surface of the present day as in the depths of history.<sup>71</sup>

Despite—or rather because—of this intimate linguistic kinship, once Jews spoke in public on such "matters of German concern," as Benjamin observed, indirection and secrecy became an inevitable part of their voice. For German nationalism had taken "circumscribed national characteristics" (*begrenzte Volkstümer*), as Benjamin called them, and turned the process of creative exchange between them into something illicit instead. "Jews today," as he put it, "endanger even the best matters of German concern (*Deutsche Sache*) on which they take a *public stand*, because their public German expression is necessarily venal (*käuflich*) (in the deeper sense)."<sup>72</sup> *Käuflich* here means "up for sale" or "venal," envisioning German Jews as pawns in a fight to the finish of nationalistic stereotypes, but in the "deeper sense" to which Benjamin refers, the word was *redemptive* in the German (as well as English) sense in which "redeem" means to re-purchase or to exchange. Such was the larger goal of Benjamin's

<sup>71</sup> Kafka, "Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language," *Dearest Father*, 385; German original, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prose aus dem Nachlaß*, 308.

<sup>72</sup> Walter Benjamin, letter to Florens Christian Rang, 18 November 1923, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 215; German original: Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, 2 vols., ed. Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 1:310: "Hier, wenn irgendwo, sind wir im Kern der gegenwärtigen Judenfrage: daß der Jude heute auch die beste deutsche Sache für die er sich *öffentlich* einsetzt, preisgibt, weil seine öffentliche deutsche Äußerung notwendig käuflich (im tieferen Sinn) ist."

*Jüdische Rundschau* essay of 1934 and its view of German-Jewish history, looking forward to his “Reflections on Kafka” of 1938: to redeem the debased ideological coinage in which such traditions were imagined, a project in which Kafka and Hebrew would play a major role.

*Zionism: Hebrew in a Transnational Key*

The “Reflections on Kafka” that Benjamin addressed to Gershom Scholem in 1938 did not so much bring Hebrew back with a vengeance into Kafka criticism as it anticipated its later disappearance in the continuum of Kafka’s critical history, showing later readers where to brush his reception against the grain. Benjamin’s letter satirized the then-current theological criticism of Kafka for this very reason—its implicit extension of religious reverence to the concept of the nation—a form of idolatry, as he wrote in challenge to Max Brod, which “must be suspect to a Zionist before anyone else.” The reference to Zionism reminds us that Benjamin was defining his relation to modern Hebrew in this period, as part of his rethinking of the nature of canonical works.<sup>73</sup> Nationalism in Europe had meant that every people “transformed their mother tongues into Hebrew”—that is, translated the Bible, and awarded a version of its spoken language the laurel of national speech. For Benjamin as for Kafka, Hebrew was not part of an impulse toward political nationalism, but a means of opening up a transnational perspective, as in Benjamin’s image of the “interlinear version of the Scriptures” as the “prototype or ideal” of all translation.<sup>74</sup> The fact that the Bible had been translated so widely refuted the quasi-sacred claims of national languages: whether in the King James Version or Luther’s production of the first canonical German version, nations had always expanded their mother tongues with what Rosenzweig called the “alien” (*fremd*)

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 12 June 1938, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, 221; German original, *Briefe*, 2:758. For a short summary of Benjamin’s unfulfilled plans to learn Hebrew in Jerusalem in the years 1927–1932, see “Unlocking the Gates,” in *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*, 92–93. The full story of Benjamin’s encounter with modern Hebrew remains to be written.

<sup>74</sup> Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 45; and Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, 82.



resources of a different national voice.<sup>75</sup> “Translation,” Benjamin declared in 1924, testing the idea of “transmissibility” (*Tradierbarkeit*) he would discover in Kafka’s writing ten years later, “ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationships between languages,” not the deification of a single people’s canon, in whatever linguistic or national form it might be conceived.<sup>76</sup>

“This is true to the highest degree of sacred writings,” according to Benjamin, and it was in this transnational spirit that Franz Rosenzweig compared Kafka to the Hebrew Bible as well. “The people who wrote the Bible indeed thought like Kafka,” he wrote to Gertrude Oppenheim in 1927: “I have never read a book that reminded me as powerfully of the Bible as his novel, *The Castle*.”<sup>77</sup> Rosenzweig’s comment, made while translating the Hebrew Bible into German with Martin Buber, was hardly traditional in the conventional sense, as its reference to the multiple authors of the Bible attests. “Revelation has only this function: to make the world unreligious again,” Rosenzweig wrote in his diary, and was more than a translation into the sphere of the profane.<sup>78</sup> The “original” Hebrew was thus a reminder of the secular character of all canons, and a critique of the idolatry of national origins that both he and Kafka shared. *The Star of Redemption*, which Benjamin cites, conveys this critique of origin in its powerful image of Abraham as the first Hebrew of the canon: “the tribal father of Israel,” as he puts it, “had immigrated [*ist zugewandert*]: his story begins, as the Holy Books recount it, with the divine command to go forth from the land of his birth.”<sup>79</sup> In Kafka’s similar version of the biblical Abraham, the

<sup>75</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “Scripture and Luther,” in *Scripture and Translation*, 49: Luther was “altogether conscious,” Rosenzweig writes, “of the movement of the German reader in the direction of the alien original, the genius of the alien language”; German original, *Kleinere Schriften*, 143: “Dennoch war er sich auch der anderen Seite seines Werks, der Bewegung des deutschen Lesers hin zu dem fremden Original, dem fremden Sprachgeist, voll bewußt.”

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin, “Some Reflections on Kafka,” in *Illuminations*, 144; idem, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, 72; German original, *Gesammelte Werke* 4.1: “So ist die Übersetzung zuletzt zweckmäßig für den Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisse der Sprachen zueinander.”

<sup>77</sup> My translation. Franz Rosenzweig, letter to Gertrude Oppenheim, 25 May 1927, in Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe*, ed. Edith Rosenzweig with Ernst Simon (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), 596.

<sup>78</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, pt. 1, vol.2: *Briefe und Tagebücher, 1918–1929* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 768.

<sup>79</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 319.

patriarch is “prepared to satisfy the demand for sacrifice immediately, with the promptness of a waiter,” but heroic in his failure to destroy the remnants that remained of his foreign origins: “having something to fall back on [*Rückhalt*], he could not leave—this the Bible also realized, for it says: ‘he tended to his house.’”<sup>80</sup>

Where Kafka portrays the canonical origins of the Bible himself, he does so through the theme of “Friendship,” in order to separate Hebrew from the worship that would make its texts the foundation of an original culture, in a simple Zionist or any other nationalist sense. Kafka composed this text in 1917, just a few months after beginning his serious acquisition of modern Hebrew: the “Five Friends” of this parable, as Hillel Barzel more accurately titles it, easily stand for the “Five Books of Moses.”<sup>81</sup> Rather than portray the Hebrew Bible as a source of national authority, Kafka envisions the process of canon formation itself as a series of departures, or the settings-forth from a commonly occupied house:

We are five friends, one day we came out of a house one after the other, first one came and placed himself beside the gate, then the second came, or rather he glided through the gate like a little ball of quicksilver glides, and placed himself near the first one, then came the third, then the fourth, then the fifth. Finally we all stood in a row. People began to notice us, they pointed at us, and said, “These five just came out of that house.”<sup>82</sup>

The “five” who represent the “house,” or figurative nation, do not become “these five,” as Kafka suggests, until they have already *left behind* their origin: that is, they have departed from the illusion of native grounding that any home, national or otherwise, can suggest. Hebrew is therefore not the “original” language behind this parable, but the silent figure for the more foundational departure of their own. For these “friends” to form the nascent identity of a nation—“people began to notice us”—they must depart from that origin,

<sup>80</sup> Franz Kafka, *Parables in German and English* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 39.

<sup>81</sup> Hillel Barzel, *Khazon v'Khizyon: Franz Kafka, Gershon Shofman, Haim Hazaz, Natan Alterman, Aharon Appelfeld, A. B. Yehoshua* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Ykhidav, 1987), 26–27. It is not necessary, however, to envision the “new friend” as the New Testament, and the Five Friends as the “Old,” since what is at stake in the parable is the issue that arises with any enlargement of an already established canon, or literary language.

<sup>82</sup> Franz Kafka, “Fellowship,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 435–36; German original, *Gesammelte Werke*, 6:227: “Wir sind fünf Freunde, wir sind einmal hintereinander aus einem Haus gekommen.”

whatever its linguistic name, in order to discover who they are. These “people” (*Leute*) are therefore not a *Volk*, a “people” or “nation,” but a group whose identity is a journey underway. New “friends” who wish to enter are treated like a foreign intrusion, evidence that the *arrivistes* who formed the original group have never fully arrived: “it would be a peaceful, if a sixth one continually trying to interfere. . . . Why does he push his way in where he is not wanted?” As they stand by the “gate” from which they themselves emerged, these Abrahams have forgotten the original departures from the “House” which allowed their canonical group of five to be formed.

Rosenzweig likewise saw the Hebrew Bible as a departure from the logic of European nationalism, envisioning a tradition of open boundaries instead. His idea of the “blood community,” as Leora Batnitsky points out, “is a philosophic idea, not meant literally or racially”; by arguing that a people’s “eternity” was the “blood flowing in its veins,” Rosenzweig revamps the old canard about Jewish bloodthirst, using “blood” to signify a national identity created through healthy contact with other nations, rather than secured through idolatry of a particular territory or land.<sup>83</sup> “Blood community” (*Blutgemeinschaft*) in this way was Rosenzweig’s critique of “homeland” or *Heimat* in German and Jewish forms of nationalism: the “nations of the world” (*Völker der Welt*), as he put it, spilled the “blood of their sons” to protect the ground of the nation, running the risk of loving “the soil of the homeland [*den Boden der Heimat*] more than its own life.”<sup>84</sup> Martin Buber, for instance, lectured in Prague in 1909–1911 under the auspices of Bar Kochba, the same Zionist group in whose journal Kafka would publish, that the Jews were indeed a *Blutgemeinschaft*, but required a fulfilling devotion to the land. In a letter of 1913, Kafka told Felice Bauer that this doctrine left him cold: “no matter what he says,” he wrote Felice Bauer, “something is missing.”<sup>85</sup> Politically, Buber would eventually fill that gap with his binational Zionism. Before that shift in Buber’s thought, Rosenzweig

<sup>83</sup> Leora Batnitsky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>84</sup> Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 318; German original, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), 332.

<sup>85</sup> Kafka, letter to Felice Bauer, 16 January 1913, in *Briefe an Felice*, 252: “er macht auf mich einen öden Eindruck. Allem, was er sagt, fehlt etwas.”

argued that language could found a lasting nation, but only by treating its voice and that of the stranger as what Dana Hollander calls “two kinds of foreignness,” brought into productive contact by translation: “the Jewish people never identifies itself entirely with the language it speaks.”<sup>86</sup>

Two years after Kafka's death in 1924, Walter Benjamin reflected on this creative potential of Hebrew in a letter to Scholem. Noting Siegfried Kracauer's hostility to the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible, with its German imitation of the sound-patterns of the ancient Hebrew text, Benjamin observed the archaic cast this quest for authenticity gave their German, and the “*völkisch*” tone that seemed to carry a fervent nationalism over to the Zionist cultural sphere. As Benjamin admits to Scholem, neither he nor Kracauer knew Hebrew. Rather than accept what he called the “decisive” judgment of Kracauer uncritically, Benjamin uses the occasion to define the transnational context that made this translation a political event.<sup>87</sup> Hebrew and German, he observed, occupied precisely opposite historical positions, with German “stuck on the obsolete idioms found in Goethe,” as Kafka observed in his diary, and Hebrew undergoing renewal in its recreation as a modern tongue.<sup>88</sup>

I have no idea what might be involved in, or who in the world could be legitimately concerned about, a translation of the Bible into German at this time. Now of all times—when the potential of Hebrew is being newly realized; when German, for its part, is at a highly problematic stage [*Stadium*]; when above all, a productive relationship between the two seem possible only secretly [*latent*] if at all—won't this translation

<sup>86</sup> See Dana Hollander, “Franz Rosenzweig on Nation, Translation, and Judaism,” *Philosophy Today*, 38 (1994): 384; and Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 320. By 1926, Rosenzweig's critical paradigm for national identity is a language open to foreign contributions, paralleling the “move toward Zionism” in his thinking that Stéphane Moses detects. See “From 1917 to 1925,” in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), esp. 93 n. 11; and Stéphane Moses, “Franz Rosenzweig in Perspective: Reflections on His Last Diaries,” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988), 191–95.

<sup>87</sup> For an account of this dispute, see Martin Jay, “Politics of Translation: Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible,” in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 198–215.

<sup>88</sup> Kafka, diary entry of 25 December 1911, in *Tagebücher, 1909–1912*, 247.

result in a dubious display of things that, once displayed, will immediately disavow themselves in light of this German itself?<sup>89</sup>

The “actualization”—the becoming contemporary—of Hebrew had, as Benjamin suggests, shown by sheer force of contrast what was ailing a canonical German, whose linguistic and cultural boundaries had been almost completely closed. While Hebrew was acquiring a modern vocabulary—borrowing words from Arabic, translating European words, and restoring to use ancient biblical terms, the “problematic stage” of German nationalism had deprived it of the “fruitful relations” that allowed it to blossom in the past.<sup>90</sup> In high style of his own, Benjamin called German’s wish to “disavow” its contact with Hebrew its historical *Stadium*, a Greek word that can signify a “period of development,” but also the site where a healthy, competitive *agon* between nations can occur. Like Benjamin, Kafka noticed how “a literature rich in talents like German” had become a victim of its own national narcissism, “where the worst writers limit their imitation to what they find at home [*an das Inland halten*].”<sup>91</sup>

Kafka’s interest in Hebrew literature, by contrast, was deep and translinguistic, connected him not only to the Jewish past—his *Inland*, both personal and national—but the emergent national centers of his period, where decentered forms of literary modernism were being shaped. The modern Hebrew influence on Kafka was transnational, refusing the nationalist bravado that Scholem called “demonic propaganda,” prompting him to search for a literary rejuvenation of German through cross-border contact instead.<sup>92</sup> Unlike the style of *Melitsah*, which created linguistic depth through allusions to traditional sources, Kafka, as Chana Kronfeld observes, turned to the trans-European resources of Hebrew modernism, where a precedent for his austere and minimal style can be found:

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin, letter to Scholem, 18 September 1926, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 305, translation slightly modified; German original, Benjamin, *Briefe*, 1:432.

<sup>90</sup> Benjamin here prefigures Scholem’s sense that a national language can only be renewed in secret: public avowal leads to the counterreaction of a nationalism that “disavows” its cross-border nourishment, producing a “demonic propaganda” instead. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 173. Only a “mad egotism,” as Rosenzweig observed (“The Scripture and Luther,” 48), could be “mad enough to imagine itself satisfied with its own personal or national being, and to long for an empty desert all around.”

<sup>91</sup> Kafka, diary entry of 25 December 1911, in *Tagebücher, 1909–1912*, 244.

<sup>92</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 173.

Even if Kafka, like many of the Hebrew and Yiddish modernists of his time, did choose to resist the ornate allusive pastiche of biblical and liturgical phrases, to reject the “oneiric,” symbolic mode of pre-modernist engagement with Jewish literary sources, this should not be mistaken for a total rejection of Hebrew as a literary and cultural affiliation. On the contrary: this move might be precisely what draws Kafka so much closer to the minimalist project in the Hebrew and Yiddish modernisms that emerge in Vienna and Berlin (but also in the Moscow, Warsaw, Kiev, Tel Aviv, and New York) of Kafka’s time.<sup>93</sup>

Kafka therefore observes in 1911 that a literature “poor in component parts” like modern Hebrew—lacking words for “telephone” or “tractor”—could both “create a literary history of the record of its dead writers”—a tradition of Haskala Hebrew to which Kronfeld refers—turning away from *das Inland* to renew the language by acquiring lexical components from abroad. Kafka’s sixty-four pages of handwritten Hebrew vocabulary, for instance, lists the word *meltzar*—modern Hebrew for “waiter,” a new usage for a word first encountered by Daniel in Babylonia—and a humorous entry given Kafka’s conception of Abraham as a “waiter,” or servant to the orders of a foreign voice.<sup>94</sup> When “dead writers” were not enough, and modern Hebrew could not “actualize its contents,” to borrow Benjamin’s phrase, the linguistic doors to other languages were indeed thrown wide open: when Kafka spoke Hebrew in an elevator in Prague, as Jiri Langer reports, his fellow passengers were astonished that the language was alive, but more surprised that a word such as *matosim* (airplanes), from the biblical verb “to fly,” had entered the Hebrew of the twentieth century, and already become part of its fluent, vernacular form.<sup>95</sup>

“Modern Hebrew?” (1925), Rosenzweig’s review of Klatzkin’s Hebrew translation of Spinoza, depicts the language in this same

<sup>93</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel 1:16; see Kafka, manuscript of Oktavo Notebook D. Next to the Hebrew word *meltzar*, Kafka supplies the German definition *Kellner* (waiter). On the etymology of *meltzar*, see Ernest David Klein, *Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 351; and Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 170, who states that *meltzar* most likely derives from an Akkadian noun.

<sup>95</sup> Kafka, diary entry of 25 December 1911, in *Tagebücher 1909–1912*, 244: “verstorbene Schriftsteller literaturgeschichtlich zu registrieren”; Mordechai Georg Langer, “Mashehu Al Kafka” [A Kafka Anecdote], *Me’At Tsa’ri* [Hebrew], ed. Miriam Dror (Tel Aviv, 1984), 133.

spirit of Kafkaesque life. This case of linguistic “rebirth” was therefore not described as a dead language coming back to life, but the opposite: like Kafka’s “Hunter Gracchus,” Hebrew for Rosenzweig had never been “dead,” because it had never ceased being alive. The relative disappearance of liturgical Hebrew as a spoken language over the centuries had in this case been a blessing in disguise: without national authorities like the *Académie Française* to purge its vernacular form of foreign influences, the language had been able to avoid what Rosenzweig calls the “catastrophic self-purification” (*katastrophale Selbstreinigung*) which the “experimental laboratories of European nationalism” had tried.<sup>96</sup> Hebrew had “stayed alive,” according to Rosenzweig, because it had borrowed so freely from languages of other nations. While spoken Spanish and Arabic were flourishing over the ages, ancient Hebrew became a language into which the foreign works that blossomed from them were translated. As a result, the “holy language” of the Jews had never “stiffened into something rigid and monumental,” and through this linguistic back door, as it were, had “always drawn strength for renewal from the spoken language, from the spoken languages of man.” In this vision, modern Hebrew was not a sleeping beauty who had awakened, but a living garment, undergoing constant alteration, as “numerous tongues contributed . . . to the fabric” of its voice.<sup>97</sup> Rosenzweig here parallels Bialik’s “Halakha and Aggada,” where Hebrew is described as sustained by translations, from “the four captives bringing the Talmud to Spain” to “Rambam’s [Maimonides’] work,” all the way back to “the family of translators, the Tibbonites, in haste to translate books of great value to the people from the foreign languages into the Hebrew tongue.”<sup>98</sup>

Walter Benjamin became the first canonical critic of Kafka to compare his narrative to this form of Hebrew: specifically, the form of canonical exempla known as “aggada.” In terms that have become a classic of Kafka criticism, Benjamin argued that Kafka’s writing

<sup>96</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “Neuhebräisch?” [Modern Hebrew?], in *Kleinere Schriften*, 221, 223; a partial translation can be found in Glatzer, ed., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, 263–71. On the Arabic borrowings of the Tibbonides and their contributions, see William Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 174ff.

<sup>97</sup> Rosenzweig, “Neuhebräisch?,” 222–23.

<sup>98</sup> H. N. Byalik [Bialik], *Law and Legend or Halaka and Aggada*, trans. Julius L. Siegel (New York: Bloch, 1923), 14.

could be read as if they were aggadic animals, or the narrative sections of the Talmud that were supposedly supine before the canonical Law. These apparently docile voices suddenly rise up in Kafka's texts, as Benjamin evoked them, and comically unseat the canonical standard with a different gesture and sound. "Aggada" means legend or parable in its traditional sense, but Benjamin extends the notion in Kafka to encompass a transnational folk tradition which—unlike the idea of a national essence—refuses to lie down before any idolatrous, singular "truth" and its vision of the Law:

Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its aggadic element. Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery, and their beauty that they had to become *more* than parables. They do not lie modestly at the feet of the Law, as the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halakha. Though apparently reduced to submission, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it.<sup>99</sup>

Benjamin's introduction of Hebrew to Kafka criticism here parallels his Leskov essay, where the beauty of the Russian writer is imagined as deceptively passive as well: "the storyteller is the man who would let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story."<sup>100</sup> The fire of this tradition of beauty is, for Benjamin, one that crosses boundaries and begs to be translated, like a story that cannot live in a single folklore, or be stolen for the benefit of a single national "treasury" alone. This "Hebrew" concept of tradition in Kafka was thus also an echo of Moses Mendelssohn, whose translation of the Hebrew Bible, as Benjamin represented it, had been a doorway between German and Jewish linguistic forms. "True perfection," as Mendelssohn had written, is expansive in precisely this metaphorical sense: "a living flame, constantly fanning out and becoming stronger and stronger the more it is able to do so."<sup>101</sup> According to Benjamin, it was this dynamic of the "transmissibility"

<sup>99</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," in *Illuminations*, 133–34; and idem, letter to Gershom Scholem, 12 June 1938, in *Briefe*, 2:763.

<sup>100</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, 108–9.

<sup>101</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 152. I am indebted to Willi Goetschel for this connection. See "From the Margins of Philosophy: Mendelssohn's Aesthetic Theory of Mixed Sentiments," in Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 85–99, esp. 96.



of canonical truth—through elements foreign to the tradition—that the “paw” of Kafka’s texts brought into view.

Derived from Bialik’s same “Halakha and Aggada,” Benjamin took his terms from Scholem’s translation from the Hebrew, which appeared in *Der Jude* in 1919, where Kafka had published his “Two Animal Stories” two years before.<sup>102</sup> According to Bialik’s essay, the idea of a determining “Law” could never be separated from “aggada,” or narrative exempla and legends, making the Halakha itself a source of Jewish literature. Bialik emphasizes the well-crossed boundary between Law and Legend by pointing to the presence of non-Hebrew languages in that figurative Temple, the House of Study. His example is a classic debate on which texts should be saved from the Temple on the Sabbath, when the Synagogue begins to burn:

Yet if often happens that one Halakic detail reveals to us a world of Aggada that is hidden within it . . . [as in] the following Halakha. “All books of the Holy Scriptures may be rescued from the fire on the Sabbath; if they are written Aramaic, or any other language—Coptic, Median, or Greek—they may also be rescued; Rabbi Jose says they may not be rescued.”<sup>103</sup>

Bialik here complies with the definition of Jewish comedy that a contemporary philosopher has proposed. Jewish humor, writes Ted Cohen, “(1) . . . is the humor of outsiders [and] (2) . . . exploits a deep and lasting concern and fascination with logic and language.”<sup>104</sup> The debate Bialik cites is quietly humorous because both of these conditions are met: the Talmud exposes the fact that “outsiders,” in the form of non-Jewish languages, are *already present* in the Temple, and have become what Kafka would later call the “animal in the Synagogue.” The Halakha itself, Bialik points out, exposes the comic presence of other languages in the canon, leading to a strikingly modern form of debate. Bialik’s Jewish humor is a kind of Candid Camera in this passage, catching “aggadah” where it’s least expected, at the center of “the teaching” (*Lehre*) as Benjamin calls it, and offers a snapshot of its central question: how important is the foreign to the logic of the canon as a whole?

<sup>102</sup> Chaim Nachman Bialik, “Halacha und Aggada,” *Der Jude* 4 (1919–1920): 61–72.

<sup>103</sup> Bialik, *Law and Legend or Halakha and Aggada*, 10–11.

<sup>104</sup> Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 60.

Bialik's Zionism answers the question of the transnational with another set of questions, which expose the hidden openness of the canon that is so much like Kafka's own. The doctrine of the Talmud, Bialik points out, does more than hide secret parables in its "judgments," to use Kafka's own term for the paternalistic self-image of the Law: those parables themselves are parables of the transnational conflicts that have already formed the tradition, and from which the apparent fixity and authoring permanence of the canon has been formed. Rather than declaim this form of hidden tradition apodictically, Bialik's Hebrew text exposes this transnational and secular formation of religious tradition, by posing a humorous, rhetorically Yiddish question within a question about the "petty, insignificant detail" of this buried, transnational debate:

A petty detail of Halakha this, an unimportant detail, is it not so? Yet who will fail to recognize at once that this unimportant Halakha presents, in extreme concision but potential fullness, a complete artistic formulation of the historical and psychological relations of the various national groups to two of the most important of the people's possessions—its language and its literature? Who does not see that the difference of opinion in this Mishna is again the well-known "Sprachenfrage" which has continued with us from the remotest past to the present day? (10–11).

The question-form in which Bialik connects "national groups" to the canonical nature of "language and literature" is just as important as his citation in German of the *Sprachenfrage*, or language question, in the middle of his Hebrew essay. Bialik's Hebrew term was "Riv ha-Leshonot," or the "Language War," a reference to what the national language should be in Palestine—a question Kafka was reading about in 1912 himself—but also an acknowledgement of the multilingual capacities of Jews throughout the ages.<sup>105</sup> Both references allude to transnational voices of the tradition, connecting them to the presence of a hidden "legend" inscribed in canonical writing, and thus explain why Benjamin took such care to name such "aggada" as the

<sup>105</sup> When meeting Felice Bauer on 13 August 1912, Kafka was carrying with him a copy of *Palästina: Monatschrift für die Erschliessung Palästinas* 9, no. 7/8 (1912), containing an essay by Ahad Ha-am translated into German, entitled "Die Lehre der Tatsachen," in which the "halbe Herrschaft" of the Hebrew language is discussed, as well as the struggle surrounding "die hebräischen Schulen in Jaffa und Jerusalem." See also n. 117, below; and Jürgen Born, *Kafka's Bibliothek: Ein beschreibendes Verzeichnis* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1990), 163, no. 277.

distinguishing stylistic feature of Kafka's own texts. Style is an important messenger in this respect: like a "typical Yiddish speaker"—which he was to a large extent—Bialik "asks questions about asking questions, and shifts the questioning to the central existential question: 'Who am I? Who are We?'" It should therefore come as no surprise that the description of his style I have just quoted comes not from Bialik criticism, but from Kafka criticism, as Benjamin Harshav exemplifies the semiotics of Yiddish communication in this questioning mode with citations from a late Kafka text.<sup>106</sup>

As Benjamin's "paw" of aggada suggests, Kafka's style manages a systematic exposure of canonical sources that are deemed primitive, performing a kind of "déjà vu all over again," to borrow Yogi Berra's phrase. The foreign dialogues that help create a national language can be exposed in the Law, as Bialik suggests, but also brought to life by such vernacular speakers, who—not having learned to mask them—bring the unnoticed riches of the national language to light. "Before the Law" performs a parable of such transnational influence, first in the figure of its "man from the country"—translated from *am-ha-aretz* in Kafka's source, and meaning a rustic unfamiliar with the ritual practices of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem; in the Yiddish Kafka used in his diary, it meant an ignoramus or fool.<sup>107</sup> This transnational effect is also signaled in the figure of the doorkeeper, who guards the entrance to the canonical Law while wearing a "tartar beard." Here, the doorway to Kafka's canon is *not* the tragic, money-changing Temple of Christianity, but a mockery of the textual ignorance behind such a charge.<sup>108</sup> Engaging in Talmudic dialectic or *pilpul* in a cathedral, the Priest speaks with a symbolically

<sup>106</sup> Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, 115.

<sup>107</sup> Hence the deadpan quip Kafka offers: "From the Talmud: when a scholar goes to meet his bride, he should take an *amhorez* [country bumpkin] along, he is too sunk in his scholarliness, he would not observe what should be observed [*das Notwendige*]." Kafka, diary entry of 29 November 1911, *The Diaries: 1910–1923*, 129; German original, *Tagebücher, 1909–1912*, 214: "Aus dem Talmud: Geht ein Gelehrter auf Brautschau, so soll er sich einen amhorez mitnehmen, da er zu sehr in seine Gelehrsamkeit versenkt das Notwendige nicht merken würde." Kafka's source for the Hebrew meaning of *am ha-aretz*, before he translated it as "Mann vom Lande," was Jakob Fromer, *Organismus des Judentums* (1909), which gives the Talmudic passage from *Sota* 22a in German. Kafka reports reading Fromer on 24 January 1912.

<sup>108</sup> As Iris Bruce notes, the Priest in *The Trial's* version of this text is mocked for precisely such learned ignorance. See Bruce, "Kafka and Jewish Folklore," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 155.

Jewish accent, of which he remains blissfully unaware. Kafka's doorway is in this way the boundary-zone of commentary—an "allegory of textual production," as Henry Sussman calls the parable—where one language comes into contact with another. Like the "Tatar" invaders whom St. Louis of France vowed to send to "Tartarus" in 1270, Kafka's gatekeeper is a reminder of the outsiders who came "before the Law," and were incorporated into the Western tradition under different names.<sup>109</sup>

Kafka's Zionist circle in Prague reflected this same transnational perspective: "Before the Law" was first published in *Selbstwehr*, the Zionist weekly in Prague edited by his friends, many of whom would go on to found the Brit Shalom movement in Palestine. Supported by the active journalistic work of Gershom Scholem, Brit Shalom was a Zionist movement in existence until 1933 that argued for a "non-nationalist nationalism" and for a binational state in Palestine. Walter Benjamin considered its positions the only "waterproof corner of Zionism," as he wrote Scholem in 1931.<sup>110</sup> The movement was supported by Hugo Bergmann, Kafka's close friend from Prague and a founder of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and by Hans Kohn, his gymnasium classmate, as well. The political program Brit Shalom was also cultural—"carrying the banner of Ahad Ha-Am," as Scholem wrote Benjamin—and came to represent the Zionist movement's extreme left wing. Brit Shalom argued for coexistence in Palestine, and regarded "Jewish-Arab cooperation as an alternative to the European model of national sovereignty."<sup>111</sup> As a result, the

<sup>109</sup> Henry Sussman, *The Task of the Critic: Poetics, Philosophy, Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 150. On the origins of "Tartar," see Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*; Ernest Weekley, *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London: J. Murray, 1921); *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1988); Kluge, Friedrich, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*, 24th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002); John Ayto, *Twentieth Century Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Robert L. Chapman, *New Dictionary of American Slang* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>110</sup> See Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, 3 November 1930, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, 369–70: "I read your observations on the end of the Balfour policy with considerable care. They have intensified my long-standing supposition, which was only strengthened by Escha's reports: namely, the suspicion that you have taken up residence in the only corner of Zionism that is permanently sheltered."

<sup>111</sup> One of its leaders was Judah Magnes, the American rabbi who helped found the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and who, with Scholem, tried to convince Benjamin to accept a professorship there. See *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters*, 92–93;

group drew the fire of mainstream Zionists, and in the hurly-burly of Palestinian politics, Scholem's circle had been subjected to definitions "in accordance with which we would, strictly speaking, automatically no longer appear as 'Zionists'" at all. "We are reproaching them with reactionary policy toward the Arabs," as Scholem wrote to Benjamin. The result most feared by Scholem in 1931 was that an increasingly strident Zionism would destroy the "legitimate concealment" in which transnational contact takes place, and thus the space where the "procreation" of a national culture occurs.<sup>112</sup>

Kafka was—aside from his plans to go to Palestine—a Zionist *avant la lettre* in these terms. "There can be no doubt," as Ritchie Robertson puts it, "that by 1916 Kafka had developed powerful Zionist sympathies, though his attitude toward the movement was an unorthodox and individualistic one," an accurate description of the figures in Brit Shalom in all but name.<sup>113</sup> Scholem therefore referred to Kafka as a "Zionist" in his 1931 letter to Benjamin, a reference whose full political and cultural ramifications are better understood if Brit Shalom is recalled as a forerunner of the later Israeli movement, Peace Now. As a theorist of open tradition, Scholem told Benjamin that "Kafka's position was not in the continuum of German literature," in a gesture intended to rescue Kafka from the rising tide of German nationalism of 1938, but also to distinguish his definition from the more doctrinaire versions of Zionism that surged in response. Scholem had thus deemed Kafka a Zionist in the same intellectual spirit in which he "regarded Jewish history as an organic process of confrontation between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds."<sup>114</sup> Brit Shalom's program of co-sovereignty with the Arabic-speaking population, however, had put it at the left-wing fringe of the Zionist movement, making "Kafka's linguistic world" decisive for Scholem, for it represented a tradition in fiction that

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and Eddon, "Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, and the Paradox of 'Non-National' Nationalism," 56.

<sup>112</sup> The quotations are from Scholem's letter to Benjamin, 1 August 1931, reprinted in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 169–74.

<sup>113</sup> Ritchie Robertson, "'Antizionismus, Zionismus:' Kafka's Responses to Jewish Nationalism," in J. P. Stern and J. J. White, *Paths and Labyrinths: Nine Papers Read at the Franz Kafka Symposium Held at the Institute of Germanic Studies on 20 and 21 October 1983* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1985), 28.

<sup>114</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 169–74; and idem, "The Science of Judaism: Then and Now," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays in Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 310.

could no longer be achieved in the political realm.<sup>115</sup> Kafka thus became his emblem of the Zionism that had “triumphed in Berlin,” where Kafka died in 1924, when it could “no longer be victorious in Jerusalem,” where by 1938, only hostile “propaganda” prevailed.

Kafka's letters of 1913 express an awareness of the Brit Shalom position yet to come, especially where such transnational contact was concerned. After attending the eleventh Zionist convention in Vienna in 1913, Kafka wrote to Felice Bauer of the “German speeches without any result,” and the “much Hebrew” that was spoken.<sup>116</sup> The issue discussed that day was what the language of instruction would be at the new university, the Technion, then being planned for Haifa. Kafka's attention is immediately drawn to the “former director of the Gymnasium in Jaffa,” as he tells Felice: the Herzeliya Gymnazium, where the question of the proper national language for instruction was first debated in what came to be known as the “Language War” in Palestine. The convention turned on this question of language: for Kafka, the most relevant content emerged from the Ahad-Ha-amist or cultural Zionist position, especially his support for Hebrew as the language of instruction in the Jaffa schools that the convention discussed. When he met Felice Bauer in 1912, Kafka had been carrying a copy of Ahad Ha-am's “Die Lehre der Tatsachen” in his volume of *Palästina*, where the issue had been defined. The opposite position was represented by Morris Rosenfeld, the “sweatshop poet” from New York, whose poetry Kafka introduced in his lecture on Yiddish delivered in Prague in February 1912.<sup>117</sup> Between these

<sup>115</sup> For fuller context in this regard, see David Biale, “Scholem und der Moderne Nationalismus,” in *Gershom Scholem: Zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Gary Smith (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 259.

<sup>116</sup> Franz Kafka, letter to Felice Bauer, 8 September 1913, in Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Felice und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1967), 465: “Ergebnislose Deutsche Reden, viel hebräisch . . . Lise W. wirft Papierkügelchen in den Saal, trostlos.”

<sup>117</sup> The issue was *Palästina: Monatsschrift für die Erschliessung Palästinas*, 9, no. 7/8 (1912). In his essay entitled “Die Lehre der Tatsachen,” his report of a visit to the Jewish schools in Palestine, Ahad Ha-Am wrote: “The Hebrew language is no longer an ideal in Palestine, but the essence of life, a natural phenomenon” and a “valid model for the sons of our people in all lands” (183; “Und die hebräischen Schulen in Jaffa und Jerusalem . . . ‘Hebräischer Erziehung’ in ‘Hebraischer Sprache’ ist kein Ideal mehr in Palästina, sondern Lebenswesen, natürliche Erscheinung . . . mustergültig . . . für die Söhne unseres Volkes in allen Ländern”). See Jürgen Born, *Kafka's Bibliothek*, 165, 215. For an account of Rosenfeld's speech and its effect on the convention, see Michael Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 74–75. Many of the

Hebrew and Yiddish poles, Kafka's comments to Felice show his discontent with linguistic nationalism: "I sat in the Zionist Congress as if it were an event totally alien to me, felt myself cramped and distracted by much that went on."<sup>118</sup> These comments well reflect Kafka's politics and linguistics at once: the word Kafka uses for "cramped" is *beengt*, or "made too narrow," as if the positions of both the pro and anti-Hebrew factions were too confining for the reality of the transnational forms of expression that enlivened the hall.

This Jewish comedy appears in Kafka's letter, which mentions spitballs being shot from the balcony: a more subtle laughter emerges when delegate Stapolsky identifies multilingual European Jewry as a barrier that the nation in Palestine had to overcome: "We find this sad phenomenon [*Erscheinung*] in many Palestinian schools as well: a Babel-like confusion of languages [*babylonische Sprachenverwirrung*], in which our young charges [*Zöglinge*] don't understand each other at all."<sup>119</sup> Such serious arguments immediately undercut their own linguistic nationalism in the form in which they had to be advanced, since all speeches at the convention required translation from the opening gavel. The convention thus began in German, with a motion by the Palestinian delegation that all speeches should be immediately translated into Hebrew. The idea was immediately challenged with a combative counter-motion that "all speech also be translated into Yiddish as well," a proposal that was met with "unrest," and

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languages that concerned Kafka's national politics were present in Rosenfeld's speech: English, the fictional language of *Amerika*; Yiddish, the language in which Rosenfeld wrote his poetry; and Hebrew, the exclusive national language that was the subject of Rosenfeld's ire.

<sup>118</sup> Franz Kafka, letter to Max Brod, 16 September 1913, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, 100; German original, *Briefe, 1902-1924*, 120.

<sup>119</sup> *Stenographisches Protokoll der Verhandlungen des XI. Zionisten-Kongresses in Wien*, 8 September 1913, 288: "Die Juden, welche nach Palästina kamen, bringen den Golus-Schmutz mit, ohne zu überlegen, daß durch die Sprachzersplitterung die Erlösung der Kultur in eine weite Ferne gerückt wird. Statt einer einzigen, zentralisierten Nationalkraft haben wir dort Splitter, unzusammenhängend, ja sich gegenseitig bekämpfend. Diese trauerige Erscheinung finden wir auch bei den vielen palästinensischen Schulen: eine babylonische Sprachenverwirrung—die Kinder, die Zöglinge, verstehen einander nicht" ("The Jews who came to Palestine brought the filth of the diaspora with them, without considering that this splintering into different languages pushed their redemption through culture far into the distance. Instead of a single, centralized national power, we have splinter groups, disconnected, even fighting against one another. We find this sad phenomenon in many Palestinian schools as well: a Babel-like confusion of languages, in which our young charges don't understand each other at all").

“intermittent cries” (*Zwischenrufe*).<sup>120</sup> In this situation, linguistic nationalism became the straight man: the punchline came with the mention of the “Babylonian confusion” that filled the hall. As in Kafka’s later aphorism—“We are digging the pit of Babel”—the curse that Hebrew nationalism saw in European languages had been reversed.<sup>121</sup> In the unintentional comedy of the convention, Zionism exposed Kafka to transnational contact as a mine of the nation’s literary wealth, preparing him for reflection on its lively traces in German’s most prestigious literary voice, Goethe.

*Canonical Accents: Goethe’s Jewish Voices*

I am beginning to write the lecture [on Yiddish] for Löwy’s performance. It is on Sunday the 18th. . . . I read sentences of Goethe’s as though my whole body were running down the stresses.

Kafka, diary entry, 13 February 1912

Zionism provided Kafka with one of the keys he needed to unlock the hidden openness of canonical writing in his own terms, and so to define the place of a German-Jewish writer like himself within the German canon. Thus, when Kafka wrote to Max Brod in 1921 that what German-Jewish writers like himself had produced was “not really German literature,” and was the product of their “despair,” he did not mean that Jewish writers were not German, but the opposite, driving Jewish writers like Moritz Goldstein and Jakob Wasserman *meshugge*, as Kafka used the word in the unsent letter to his father, or “crazy”: the administrators of the German canon had a hard time ever admitting the debt of their language to the Yiddish, Hebrew and other national traditions that gave Goethe’s language a hidden force.<sup>122</sup> German-Jewish writing thus became what Kafka called a

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 3 September 1913, 53.

<sup>121</sup> Kafka, “Wir graben den Schacht von Babel,” in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, 280.

<sup>122</sup> Kafka, “Letter to his Father,” in *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, 145: “Your opinion was correct, every other was mad, wild, *meshugge*, not normal.” On the self-denial of German’s transnational legacy, see Moritz Goldstein, “Deutsch-jüdischer Parnass,” *Kunstwart* 25 (1912): 281–94; and Steven Aschheim’s excellent account of the furor the essay raised: “1912: The Publication of Moritz Goldstein’s ‘The German Jewish Parnassus’ Sparks a Debate over Assimilation, German Culture, and the Jewish Spirit,” in *The Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German*



“literature impossible in all respects,” when viewed with a fixation on the national present in mind. The great achievement of German-Jewish writers, by contrast, was for Kafka their ability to remind canonical German of its co-formation by other national traditions, by recalling its hidden “foreign” accent, as it were. To Brod, Kafka symbolizes this restorative dimension as the critical, “gypsy” function that the best writing of German-Jewish authors could produce:

A literature impossible in all respects, gypsy literature which had stolen the German child out of its cradle and in great haste put it through some kind of training, for someone has to dance on the tightrope. (But it wasn't even a German child, it was nothing; people merely said that somebody was dancing) [BREAKS OFF].<sup>123</sup>

German-Jewish writing for Kafka denationalizes German linguistic identity—“it wasn't even a German child, it was nothing”—by pointing out the relational “essence” of identity itself. The “German” child is symbolically taught that writing is a tightrope performance, dependent on the resources of many different “people” (*Leute*), as in the Hebrew parable of “Five Friends,” and not a single *Volk*. The “German” language is being figurative “re-trained” in this passage, not to “look down,” as it were, from its tightrope: the German Jewish writer's task, for Kafka, was to take the “German child” from the false cradle of his singular national *Heimat*, and allow it to explore the transnational depths in which it was formed. “Each piece of my story,” he writes in 1911, “runs about without a homeland [*Heimatlos*], and drives me in an opposed direction: I can be happy, if this formulation is correct.”<sup>124</sup>

Kafka's obsessive reading of Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* during the composition of his “Talk on the Yiddish Language” is thus no accident: in Yiddish, Kafka found a canonical language in formation—without as yet any regularized spelling or pronunciation—where the construction of a national boundary modeled on a standard author

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*Culture, 1096–1996*, ed. Sander Gilman and Jack Zipes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 299–305. Kafka refers to Jakob Wasserman in the diary entry that interprets his own text, “The Judgment” (1912), and expands this list. See Kafka, diary entry of 23 September 1912, in *Tagebücher, 1912–1914*, 100; translation in *Diaries*, 213.

<sup>123</sup> Kafka, letter to Brod, June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, 286–89; German original, *Briefe*, 334–38.

<sup>124</sup> Kafka, diary entry, 5 November 1911, in *Diaries*, 105; German original, *Tagebücher, 1909–1912*, 177.

was still very much in process. As a result, Yiddish still breathed with the openness of the transnational vocabularies and syntax that had formed it, an openness that was not yet hidden by the canonical shame at foreign origins that becomes the bane of high culture. Sholem Aleichem, for instance, had argued in 1888 for a limited kind of Jewish incorporation of the “foreign” words Yiddish needed from languages of established, high cultural status. “We believe that it is not superfluous to introduce *foreign* words into Yiddish, but only such words which are indispensable for the literature, e.g. ‘poezye,’ ‘kritik,’ ‘yubileum,’ ‘beletristic,’ ‘ortografye,’ ‘fanatizm,’ ‘komizm,’ etc. Never mind, we may not be ashamed of it: nicer languages have more than hundreds and thousands of foreign words in their vocabularies.”<sup>125</sup> We do not know if Kafka was aware of this passage, though his diary does link Sholem Aleichem’s name with the practice of feting the anniversaries of famous writers in Yiddish culture, and uses the word *Jubiläum* that Aleichem himself helped bring into the Yiddish tongue.<sup>126</sup> The normal situation of such assimilation of a foreign word, of course, is a kind of forgetting of its origin in a different language, as in the English word “restaurant,” for instance, which—much to the disadvantage of many English-speaking cultures—no longer carries any cultural memory of French cuisine.

In Yiddish, this process of assimilating words from different languages was still unhidden by the canonical wet blanket of a standard grammar or lexicon. For Kafka, the only difference between Yiddish and other European languages was that Yiddish words retained a flavorful, “zaftig” memory of the national borders they had crossed in order to enter the emerging language of its own:

It consists solely of foreign words [*Fremdwörter*]. But these words do not do not remain at rest within it [*ruhen in ihm nicht*], they retain the speed and liveliness with which they were adopted. Great Migrations move through Yiddish, from one end to the other. All this German, Hebrew, French, English, Slavonic, Dutch, Rumanian, and even Latin, is seized with curiosity and frivolity once it is contained within Yiddish, and it takes a good deal of strength to hold all of these languages together in this state.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, 67.

<sup>126</sup> Kafka, diary entry, 26 January 1912, *Diaries*, 175: “S. Rabinowitz (Sholom Aleichem), né 1859. Custom of great jubilee celebrations in Yiddish literature”; German original, *Tagebücher, 1912–1914*, 26.

<sup>127</sup> Kafka, “An Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” in *Dearest Father*:

Every word was “foreign” in Yiddish, in other words, because no written standard had yet been established that could separate the Yiddish from the external implant, a period of formation that Kafka admired as a healthy state of development: “It has no grammars,” as he puts it: “Devotees try to write them, but Yiddish [Jargon] remains a spoken language in continuous flux [er kommt nicht zur Ruhe]. Yiddish’s *Kraft*, or power, was symbolized by this lack of consensus: the absence of an official, standardized form of Yiddish, comparable in some way to “new High German,” created a flexible boundary zone of linguistic innovation, where popular usage, marked by regional variation and personal taste, could create a dialogue between an emerging, official standard and the multilingual experience of Yiddish speakers, who were almost by definition speakers of other languages as well. “The people,” as he put it, “will not leave it to the grammarians.”<sup>128</sup>

Yiddish helped Kafka reconceive the canonized Goethe, whom he loved, as a false boundary-construction that impoverished the German language of its own transnational origins. Kafka’s planned essay of January 1912, entitled “*Goethes entsetzliches Wesen*,” or “Goethe’s Repulsive Essence,” was most likely an attack on the idea of an organic national language. An older “German” tradition of Hebrew and Yiddish provided Kafka with one example: on his bookshelf stood the volume entitled *Der junge Goethe*, which not only contained the young Goethe’s handwritten Hebrew exercises, but also his version of a Yiddish “sermon,” a comic performance piece from his Leipzig days known as the *Judenpredigt*.<sup>129</sup> Likewise, the *Dichtung und Wahrheit* Kafka read so carefully recounts Goethe’s trips to the *Judengasse*, his Yiddish lessons, and Goethe’s composition, now lost, of a Yiddish section in a five-language epistolary novel he wrote as a child. Hence Kafka’s pointed reference to Goethe’s *entsetzliches* (horrible) essence: the establishment of a canonical writer, the “essence” of his people, as Goethe was called early on, necessarily requires a *repulsion*—more literally, the attempt “to set” or *setzen* one part of one’s linguistic “essence” against the other—rather than enjoyment

*Stories and Other Writings*, 382, translation slightly modified; German original, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prose aus dem Nachlaß*, 306.

<sup>128</sup> Kafka, “Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” 382.

<sup>129</sup> See Jürgen Born, *Kafka’s Bibliothek*, 38; and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Der junge Goethe: Neue Ausgabe*, 6 vols., ed. Max Morris (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1909), 1:249. I am grateful to the Bowdoin Library for making this edition available to me.

of the transnational voices that formed the canonical style. Thus when Kafka interprets Goethe's silhouette, during the composition of his talk on the Yiddish Theater, he discovers a kind of shadow-figure, "put together" (*zusammengesetzt*) with a "side impression of something repulsive" (*Nebeneindruck des Widerlichen*). The silhouette of a bewigged Goethe is *repulsive* for Kafka in his diary in both the literal and figurative senses of the word: a canonical shadow-figure that overwrites the writer's German-Jewish voice, formed in his other Yiddish compositions, Yiddish and Hebrew lessons, and frequent trips to the *Judengasse* in Frankfurt as a boy. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Kafka read Goethe's description of himself as seeking out chances to converse with the Jewish residents, though he was at other times carrying out errands for his Uncle Textor, who had business of his own in the Yiddish-speaking streets.<sup>130</sup>

In his 1846 lecture on the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Wilhelm Grimm recalls Goethe describing the "animal" sound of his own accent: "the growl of the bear always keeps the sound of the lair where he was born" (*der Bär brummt nach der Höhle, in der er geboren ist*).<sup>131</sup> Grimm's anecdote was itself an overwriting of Heinrich Heine's *Ludwig Börne* (1840), which described Goethe's Frankfurt German as *Mauscheln*, or speaking German with "a remnant of Jewish idioms and Jewish intonations," as Max Weinreich defines the term.<sup>132</sup> In an example of Walter Benjamin's insight that tradition is always discontinuous, the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* uses Heine's description of Goethe's Frankfurt accent as a proof-text, but edits the passage in a way that leaves Goethe's name out. Kafka, unlike many German Jews of his generation, loved Heine—enough, in fact, to read his poems at work with the door closed with his *Direktor*, while those with the "most urgent affairs" waited outside.<sup>133</sup> If he did peruse the entry on *mauscheln* in

<sup>130</sup> Kafka, diary entry, 5 February 1912, in *Diaries*, 178; German original, *Tagebücher, 1912–1914*, 32. On the circumstances of Goethe's study of Yiddish, his compositions in the language, both comic and serious, his family's business dealings in the Frankfurt *Judengasse*, and the definitive provenance of the *Judenpredigt*, see Mark Waldman, *Goethe and the Jews* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1934), 55–61; and Jürgen Stenzel, "'No was sogt ehr dozu': Jüdisches im Werk des jungen Goethe," in *Außerdem waren sie ja auch Menschen: Goethes Begegnung mit Juden und Judentum*, ed. Annette Weber (Berlin: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), 99–115.

<sup>131</sup> Wilhelm Grimm, "Bericht über das deutsche Wörterbuch," 512.

<sup>132</sup> Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble with Joshua A. Fishman (1973; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 282.

<sup>133</sup> Kafka, letter to Felice Bauer, 18 November 1912, *Briefe an Felice*, 103.

the Grimm *Dictionary*, Kafka was well positioned to appreciate the comedy behind the “repulsive” cult that declared Goethe to be the “blossom and fruit of the German essence [*Wesen*]” in the year of his death, creating what Benjamin called “the canon that corresponds to the life of a demigod,” albeit one who knew how to turn a Jewish phrase.<sup>134</sup>

The sound of Yiddish that Goethe called the “*Akzent einer unerfreulichen Sprache*” in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* was a precursor to Kafka’s own analysis of *mauscheln*, which he offered in a letter on German-Jewish writing to Max Brod.<sup>135</sup> Kafka’s subject was a play by Karl Kraus, but his comment that follows answers equally well to Goethe’s *Judenpredigt*, whose jaunty refrain asks the question in a Jewish accent: “*Nu*, so what do you think about *that*?” (*No was sogt ehr dozu?*):

This is not to say anything against *mauscheln*—in itself it is even beautiful [*schön*]. It is an organic compound of bookish German with pantomime—(How expressive this is: “So he’s got talent? Who says?” Or this, jerking the arm out of its socket and tossing up the chin: *You* think so? Or this, scraping the knees together: “He writes? Who about?”). 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.<sup>136</sup>

The real humor of this passage extends beyond Kraus, whose German Kafka admires, and even beyond Yiddish, whose intonations Kraus has comically brought into theatrical performance: here, Kafka refers to the saturation of standard language by dialect, foreign material, and gesture as the hidden secret that enlivens the most canonical prose. *Literature, or, We’ll Have to See About That* (1921), the title of the Kraus play in question, in this way questions the distinction of literary language, to which Kafka’s letter to Brod is the reply. “Only the most individual High German [*Hochsprache*] is alive,” Kafka responds, when it learns to embody and enjoy the “dialectical” expressivity

<sup>134</sup> See Willi Jasper, “Die Entstehung eines nationalen Goethe-Bildes im 19. Jahrhundert und seine Rolle in anti-semitischen Ausgrenzungsstrategien,” in “*Außerdem waren sie ja auch Menschen*”: *Goethes Begegnung mit Juden und Judentum*, ed. Annette Weber (Berlin: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), 133; and Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 1:323; German original, Benjamin, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1.1:158.

<sup>135</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, vol. 10 of *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe, und Gespräche*, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1949), 166.

<sup>136</sup> Goethe, *Der junge Goethe*, 249; Kafka, letter to Max Brod, June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, 288; German original, *Briefe*, 336–37.

and the gestures of other nations, on which a less fluent *High* German looks down. As Goethe put it in his “*Deutsche Sprache*,” an essay that explains Kafka’s appreciation of *mauscheln* well, “it follows from the previous, that the German remains true to himself, and that, only when he speaks with foreign tongues.”<sup>137</sup>

Kafka had worked out this transnational theory of canonical language much earlier: his “Talk on the Yiddish Language” of 1912 gives examples of the ties between German and Yiddish that challenged his audience’s notion of language as a self-contained national affair. Kafka uses material liberally from Charles Andler’s preface to Meyer Pines’s recently published history of the Yiddish language and its literature. We know of Kafka’s excitement at having discovered such a source, since he recorded it in his diary just before writing his lecture: “read, and indeed, greedily, Pines’s *Histoire de la littérature Judéo-Allemande*, 500 pages, with such thoroughness, haste, and joy as I have never yet shown in the case of similar books,” a comment that suggests Kafka’s knowledge of the other sources.<sup>138</sup> The word *Hochsprache* Kafka used, for instance, had been “coined by German philologists,” and was a term for the standard form of a language that signified its accepted, grammatical form in writing as well as speech: “not only the written language but also the spoken, everyday language of the educated classes.”<sup>139</sup> From Andler’s discussion of Morris Rosenfeld, Kafka learned that standard German and Yiddish had once shared the same linguistic forms. His examples in the preface to *Histoire de la Littérature Judéo-Allemande* allowed Kafka to open up this concept of the *Hochsprache*, and to rethink the isolated self-understanding in transnational terms:

One is surprised to find in Rosenfeld diminutives such as *Lippelach*, *Ægelach*, *Vægelach*, *Bæumlach*, *Bettlach*, *Bettlach*, *Wolkenlach*. And in the ghettos of the Alsace, one hears forms such as *Knäpflisch*, *Genslich*, *Tüchlich*. More than one German speaks derisively of these word forms. He believes he has defined them sufficiently by detesting them as a *Mauscheln* that is detestable and vulgar as well.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Deutsche Sprache” (1817), in *Schriften zur Literatur*, vol. 14 of *Gedenkausgabe der Werke Briefe, und Gespräche*, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1949), 266.

<sup>138</sup> Kafka, diary entry, 24 January 1912; German original, *Tagebücher, 1912–1914*, 22.

<sup>139</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 249.

<sup>140</sup> M. Pines, *Histoire de la Littérature Judéo-Allemande*, preface by Charles Andler (Paris: Jouve et Cis, 1911), iv. My translation.

Andler's vision of standard German uses *Mauscheln* as a kind of involuntary form of linguistic memory, underlying Kafka's own sense of the term. In hearing phonetic forms that German and Yiddish shared, the German speaker is figuratively transported back in time to the boundary-zone of historical linguistics, when Middle High German included what would later be seen as either Jewish or German linguistic forms.<sup>141</sup> Both German and Yiddish had emerged from this same linguistic space, and had shared the same "foreign" accent, which Yiddish still preserved in its contemporary vernacular form.<sup>142</sup> Kafka's 1921 account is therefore not making fun of the Jewish voice in German—though Karl Kraus can be hilarious—but at the snobbery that views such mutual exchange as a tragedy, rather than the activity that keeps the *Hochsprache* fresh and expressive: "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. That is a fact, funny or terrible as you like."<sup>143</sup>

According to Kafka, this *Mauscheln*, when "taken in the broadest sense [*in weitesten Sinne*]"—and that is the only sense in which it should be taken—represents the tradeoffs between German and Jewish voices that make a mockery of stale and overly monumental prose. In German as in other standard languages, "only the dialects are really alive" for Kafka, because the standard form of the language has become afraid of the "other" within the linguistic self, and ceased to import new material from other national tongues. The background text to Kafka's theory of healthy literary language is thus the full passage from Heine, quoted partially in the Grimm dictionary entry, where the exchange between German and Jewish traders in the

<sup>141</sup> The presence of such a "mosaic" accent—one of the definitions of *mauscheln* in German dictionaries being to speak "like Moses," or "Moische" in Yiddish—figuratively describes the scene of language creation as the space between nations, despite the slur that is usually intended: between the figurative Egypt of slavery to a foreign language and the promised land of a national language of one's own. See Weinreich, *History*, 282ff.

<sup>142</sup> "It was not yesterday," as Andler puts it in his preface to Pines's *Histoire de la Littérature Judéo-Allemande* (v), that Jacob Grimm had remarked similar "mosaic" or "*mauscheln*" forms in middle High German, in writers as canonical as Berthold von Regensburg and Hartmann von Aue.

<sup>143</sup> Kafka, letter to Brod, June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, 288; German original, *Briefe*, 337.

Frankfurt marketplace becomes an extended metaphor for the treasure of Goethe's literary voice:

[H]ere the noble class of businessmen assembles, and engaging in wheeling and dealing [*schacheri*] with its mosaic [*mauscheln*] accent. What those of us from Northern Germany actually call *Mauscheln* is nothing other than the actual spoken language of the Frankfurt region, and it is spoken splendidly by the uncircumcised and circumcised alike. Börne spoke this jargon rather poorly, although he, like Goethe, could never fully disown this native dialect. I have noticed that people from Frankfurt who have kept their distance from any sort of business concerns [*Handelsinteressen*], were in the end able to unlearn this Frankfurt accent that we in Northern Germany, as I've said, call *Mauscheln*.<sup>144</sup>

The multifaceted pleasures of this passage work by shifting levels of linguistic identification, enacting the exchange of Jewish and German language that the Frankfurt market so richly represents. The "dialect" that Goethe can "never fully disown" is thus both more and less than Yiddish: far less than a fluent mastery of the language, and far more than any denunciation of Jewish language, as *Mauscheln* here represents the fact that "only the dialects are really alive," as Kafka says of German, in any form of the national voice. In this sense, "trade" in Heine's passage affects "the circumcised and uncircumcised portion of the population alike," in the broadest sense, *robbing*, as it were, Goethe's classical voice of false distinctions, since "languages have constantly been adopting words, sounds and sentence structures from neighboring dialects of other languages," as the linguist John McWhorter notes.<sup>145</sup> The liberating humor conveyed by circumcision in Heine likewise suggests that Goethe, like any writer who sets the national standard, is more or less *marked* by such linguistic *hondel*—the Yiddish word for bargaining and negotiation—whether that acumen echoes in the standard pronunciation or not.

Kafka's letter to Brod defines more and less pronounced versions of this transnational exchange. In the "broadest sense," as he writes, "*Mauscheln* consists of 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

<sup>144</sup> My translation. See Heinrich Heine, *Ludwig Börne: Eine Denkschrift*, vol. 4. of *Sämtlichen Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb (Munich: Karl Hanser Verlag, 1971), 24.

<sup>145</sup> John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 93–94.



property, even though there is no evidence of a single solecism.” Kafka thus describes the most audible form of accented German as open borrowing, which leads to a specific kind of shoplifting of the literary voice. Here, we can recognize the “Comedia della Arte” style that imitates different national accents—a process of “stealing someone else’s property” that the young Goethe saw as part of his hope for the German language. In his *Urmeister*, for instance, the draft for *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* that was discovered in 1910, and advertised in a volume in Kafka’s library, Goethe describes a theatrical style that would now be called “ethnic humor,” in which the actors are indeed “bumptious” in their use of “gesture” to capture national inflections, and “self-pitying” in the romance style they effect:

[I]t occurred to them to imitate the characters of various types and everyone picked out something special for himself. The one presented an inebriate, the second, a Pomeranian nobleman, one a Lower Saxon boatman, the other a Jew, and when Wilhelm and Mme. Melina could find nothing for themselves because they were not very practiced in imitation, Mme. De Retti said in jest, “You can simply play enamored lovers, for this is surely a universal talent.” . . . [The] lovers were to speak high German, and to come from upper Saxony.<sup>146</sup>

“What German writer,” the directress of this theater declares, “has thanked us for our efforts to this very day,” since the accents of every “homeland and language [*Heimat und Sprache*]” found their way into the German literary treasury through similar forms of exchange. In this particular *mis en scène*, the postal carriage is symbolic of national language as a traveling discourse, creating an ensemble of different social accents voiced through imitative theft. In Kafka’s terms, this formative theater trades in a German that is “something not earned, but stolen, by means of a casual gesture,” with their accents present even when “not the slightest linguistic error can be noticed,” as the “high German” (*Hochdeutsch*) of Goethe’s lovers has already announced. The German of Goethe’s *Urmeister* appears in its original form as what Kafka’s letter to Brod would describe as a “stolen,” or at least imitated set of accents, raised to the level of an art.

<sup>146</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Calling*, trans. John R. Russell (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 104; German original, Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung*, vol. 8 of *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe, und Gespräche*, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1949), 668–72.

Kafka's humor about Goethe revises this high-cultural ideal of art as embodying a nation's essence, especially the implicit one in which he had been schooled. As a student, "On the Essence of Fairy Tales" ("Über das Wesen der Märchen," 1819) had been given special attention in Kafka's Gymnasium class.<sup>147</sup> There, the Brothers Grimm define their folkloric collection as follows: "it knows neither [place] names or specific regions, nor any particular homeland [*Heimat*], but rather the common possession of the Fatherland as a whole."<sup>148</sup> Confronting this idea that literature expresses the inheritance of a single nation or people allowed Kafka to take his place in what Ruth Wisse accurately calls the "Jewish Canon," not by turning his back on German literature, but by grasping the boundary zone of transnational contact, where the most eloquent forms of canonical writing are formed. Kafka thus writes to Oskar Pollak in 1902 that the adjective "national," when applied to Goethe, is not so much tasteless as deeply ironic:

[W]hat you write about the Goethe National Museum seems to me totally twisted and wrong. You went there filled with conceits and schoolboy ideas, and began right off by griping about the name. Now I think the name "museum" is good, but "national" seems to me even better, not at all tasteless or sacrilegious or anything of the sort, as you write, but the subtlest, most marvelously subtle irony. For what you write about the study, your holy of holies, is again nothing more than a conceit and a schoolboy idea [*Schuldgedanke*] with a dash of German lit. [*Germanistik*]<sup>149</sup>—may it roast in hell.

The idea of Goethe's study and desk as a monument to Goethe in a "national museum" should be funny, Kafka suggests, given the "marvelous irony" of Goethe's Yiddish compositions, outlined in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and thus in the most canonical sense. Like accents, such humor is often hidden by the worship that turns the

<sup>147</sup> See "Schulzeit: 1889–1901," in Binder, ed., *Kafka Handbuch*, 1:196.

<sup>148</sup> Wilhelm Grimm, "Einleitung: Über das Wesen der Märchen," in *Die Werke Wilhelm Grimms, Kleinere Schriften I*, 334: "Darum kennt es weder Namen und Orte, noch eine bestimmte Heimath, und es ist etwas dem ganzen Vaterlande Gemeinsames."

<sup>149</sup> See Ruth Wisse, *The Jewish Canon*, 65–66: Unfortunately, Max Brod expurgated the next part of this letter of 1902, which he tells us contained an attack on August Sauer, the nationalist professor of Germanistik at the University of Prague whose lectures had Kafka attended with Pollak the year before. Kafka, letter to Oskar Pollak, 24 August 1902, in *Letters to Friends*, 3–4; German original, *Briefe*, 11–12.

author into a national shrine. For a comically inclined Kafka, the better Goethe “monument” would be the “footprints of his solitary walks through the countryside,” since crossing the landscape for Goethe also meant engaging in the vaudeville or “Cabaret” imitations of different national accents he enjoyed on his jaunts.<sup>150</sup> This is the “vortrefflicher Witz” (excellent joke), Kafka tells Pollak, that makes “the Lord God cry with bitterness, and Hell itself laugh until its sides bursts: that we can never have the holy of holies of a foreigner [*eines Fremden*], only the one that is our own.”

*The Hidden Openness of Tradition: Kafka's Linguistic Turn*

The Jewish mother is no “Mutter”; to call her “Mutter” makes her a little comic, but not to herself (because we are in *Deutschland*).

Kafka

Kafka's Austrian concept of “greater Germany” is therefore best described as a refusal or inability to laugh, and a failure of what we could call Jewish humor, given his later definition of Yiddish as a language with “great migrations” moving through it: the ability to enjoy the foreign as a living presence in one's mother tongue.<sup>151</sup> This silent humor in Kafka is part of the translingual effect of his fiction: its ability to expose other languages as present within the apparently solemn reverence of a German that seems, to most readers, to speak without any regional or national accent at all. Kafka's “Prague German,” as it has come to be known, was a language in which was stored the translingual richness of the “Three Peoples” and their languages who had populated the city since the Middle Ages.<sup>152</sup> That verbal richness had been driven beneath the surface: the most famous metaphor used by Kafka's contemporary, the language philosopher Fritz Mauthner, was that of speaking a language without a *Muttersprache*, or mother tongue, as he called it: “my linguistic conscience, my lin-

<sup>150</sup> See Jürgen Stenzel, “‘No was sogt ehr dozu’: Jüdisches im Werk des jungen Goethe,” in *Außerdem waren sie ja auch Menschen: Goethes Begegnung mit Juden und Judentum*, ed. Annette Weber (Berlin: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000), 114–15.

<sup>151</sup> Franz Kafka, “An Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, 382.

<sup>152</sup> Hans Tramer, “Prague—City of Three Peoples,” *Leo Baeck Society Year Book* 9 (1964): 305–39.

guistic critique was sharpened," as he put it, "that I could regard not only German, but also Czech and Hebrew as the language of 'forefathers,' and that I had the corpses of these three languages to carry around with me in the words that I used."<sup>153</sup> Mauthner's notion of a German inhabited by the linguistic living dead of other nations suggests that Prague German was impoverished, though it would be more accurate to say that it was far too *serious* in the way that the nationalism of the ruling German minority—exercised against the Czech and Jewish linguistic communities—silenced the comic and liberating influences of other languages on the High German tongue. In Mauthner's terms, the German of Prague was rich with other accents that were symbolically buried, though they had not perished. Kafka's Prague German was full of foreign elements that were dead metaphors, as it were, and it waited for a comic revival of its transnational voice.

In keeping with Mauthner's black humor, the theories of Prague German that derive from it oscillate between two comically estranged alternatives. At one extreme, the German of Kafka's Prague was conceived as a chatty, bastardized mixture of languages, in which *Kucheldeutsch* (kitchen German) was mixed by a Czech-speaking servant class, together with Yiddish, into German, and thus into a kind of Mrs. Malaprop speech of transnational dimensions.<sup>154</sup> The opposite extreme considered Prague German a *tote Sprache* (dead language), a concept that Mauthner helped bring into Kafka criticism: here, the same German was seen to be an official language—an *Amtsdeutsch* or the official German of the Austrian Empire—isolated from surrounding dialects and languages in its attempt to sustain a national purity. Hence Mauthner's feeling that he had grown up without a *Mundart* or vernacular voice. Prague German was either felt to be a *Sprachinsel* (language island) of a dry, "paper German"—a phrase that Mauthner made current—or a mixture of Czech, German, and the

<sup>153</sup> Fritz Mauthner, *Erinnerungen I: Prager Jugendjahre* (München: Georg Müller, 1918), 51–53.

<sup>154</sup> A short and clear account of these various positions can be found in "Das Prager Deutsch," in *Kafka Handbuch*, 1:83–85. Important sources include Pavel Trost, "Das späte Prager Deutsch," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica 2: Germanistica Pragensia II* (1962); idem, "Franz Kafka und das Prager Deutsch," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica 1: Germanistica Pragensia III* (1964), 29–37; and Emil Skala, "Das Prager Deutsch," in *Weltfreunde: Konferenz über die Prager Deutsche Literatur*, ed. E. Goldstücker (Prague: Academia, 1967), 119–25. For a still helpful framing of the issue, see Peter Demetz, "Noch einmal: Prager Deutsch," *Literatur und Kritik* 1.6 (1966): 58–59.

inheritance of Yiddish that was present at home. The study of German literature that Kafka undertook at the University of Prague, in turn, promoted a “greater Germany” sense of nationalism as preached by August Sauer, whose “intellectualized racism” must have seemed humorous to the Kafka who wrote Oskar Pollak that such *Germanistik* should “roast in hell.”

“I was positively living,” as Kafka described his university German studies, “in an intellectual sense, on sawdust, which had, moreover, already been chewed for me in thousands of other people’s mouths.”<sup>155</sup> The linguistics of Jacob Grimm had downplayed the foreign contributions that had enlivened German, and turned them into a predigested literary screen. In this sense, Karl Kraus’s ironic comment that “origin is the goal” well describes Grimm’s search for an original German essence that would suppress the reality of transnational linguistic exchange. In describing the emergence of German from the welter of European linguistic contact, Grimm classically imagined the sound of the language not only as replacing the Roman Empire in the linguistic register, but also as paralleling its political advance across Europe:

The Roman Empire had decisively lost its strength after the end of the first century . . . and the invincible German race [*Volk*] was becoming ever more vividly aware of its unstoppable advance into all parts of Europe . . . how could such a forceful mobilization of the race [*Volk*] have failed to stir up its language at the same time, jolting it out of its traditional rut and exalting it? Does there not lie a certain courage and pride in the strengthening of the voiceless stop and voiceless stop in fricative?<sup>156</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Kafka, “Letter to his Father,” in *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, 181. As Ernst Pawel notes, August Sauer’s nationalist lectures were likely Kafka’s first impetus to rethink the assumptions of canonical German literature as a whole. See *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 115.

<sup>156</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1848), 1:437: “Seit dem schluz des ersten jh. hatte sich die ohnmacht des römischen reichs, wenn auch seine flamme einmal noch aufleuchtete, entschieden, und in den unbesiegbaren Germanen war das gefühl ihres unaufhalt-samen vorrückens in alle theile von Europa immer wacher geworden . . . wie sollte es anders sein, als dasz ein so heftiger aufbruch des volks nicht auch seine sprache erregt hätte, sie zugleichaus hergebrachter fuge rückend und erhöhend? Liegt nicht ein gewisser mut und stolz darin, media in tenuis, tenuis in aspirate zu verstärken?” For this translation plus a discussion of the passage, see Geoffrey Samson, *Schools of Linguistics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 30ff.

Kafka's linguistic training was opposed to this dour protonationalism, projected back onto the Germanic tribes. In the textbook of Hermann Paul that Kafka studied in his gymnasium years, the *Volk* or race was more than such a humorless abstraction: it was a bar to understanding how the individual speaker was already saturated by transnational influences in his everyday exchanges, especially in the periods of colonial advance Grimm describes here. Such linguistic mixture occurred in the contact between the different idiolects carried by every single speaker, as well as the dialects and languages supported by larger linguistic groups. "If we start by assuming that individual languages are the only ones which have any real existence," as Paul puts it in his chapter entitled "On Mixture in Language" (*Sprachmischung*), in perhaps the most neglected source in Kafka studies as a whole, "we are justified in asserting that as soon as any two individuals converse, a mixture in language is the result."<sup>157</sup>

Kafka's humorous claim to Brod that "in German, only the dialects are really alive" is thus more than a throwaway remark. It implies a comic theory of canonical language that takes an accurate measure of language mixture and individual idiolect and extends them into the domain of literary and cultural criticism as a whole. Kafka's "Jewish hands" who find life in German's canonical "embers" are "dialectal" thinkers and comedians in just this sense: comic rediscoverers of the *Sprachmischung* or linguistic mixture which, though often hidden, always results from speakers who transit between different dialectal and national forms. Kafka saw German-Jewish writers as performers existentially aware of this phenomenon, as his portrait of the artist as a family animal suggests:

Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Judaism [*Judentum*] behind them, and their fathers approved of this, but vaguely (this vagueness was what was outrageous to them). But with their little back legs they were still glued to their fathers' Judaism, and with their front legs they found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration.<sup>158</sup>

This incomplete leap from the "Judaism of the fathers" to standard German, reached for with the paws of assimilation, is funnier than Benjamin's "criticism of the concept of progress," though equally

<sup>157</sup> Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, 404–5; English translation, *Principles of the History of Language*, 457.

<sup>158</sup> Kafka, letter to Brod, June 1921, in *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, 286–89.

committed to the alien content of the past.<sup>159</sup> The jump *away* from origins, this mini-parable suggests, is at the same time an unsuccessful leap *into* forgetfulness, and the Jewish writer's tiger-spring is in this sense only a version of the elegant self-image that every standard language constructs. The "despair" of these Jewish vaudeville performers is to not be recognized as canonical culture, and thus denied any "new ground": their glory, as Kafka suggests, is the "inspiration" with which writers of his generation held onto that medial territory—between "Judaism" and the German language—while preserving their own familiar, "animal" voice.

Kafka's beautiful image portrays these stretched-out, silently comic performers as anchored in, but reaching beyond the Jewish family, a vision to be more fully depicted in "Researches of a Dog," Kafka's investigation of his own German style. In *The Meaning of Yiddish* Benjamin Harshav rightfully calls this story a "cleverly veiled allegory of the Jewish condition."<sup>160</sup> In it, a researcher-artist figure discovers a group of "music-dogs" who conjure their performance out of thin air, much like the German-Jewish vaudeville dogs-cum-writers of Kafka's letter to Brod:

They did not speak, they did not sing, they remained generally silent, almost determinedly silent: but from the empty air they conjured music. Everything was music: the lifting and setting down of their feet, certain turns of the head, their running and their standing still, the positions they took in relation to one another, the symmetrical patterns which they produced by one dog setting his front paws on the back of another of the other six and the rest following suit until the first bore the weight of the other six. . . . I was profoundly confused by the sounds that accompanied them, yet they were dogs nevertheless, dogs like you and me.<sup>161</sup>

The hilarious description of these animals "like us" is an excellent example of how Kafka's linguistics, with its Jewish theological substrate, comes together in the "animal vigor" beneath the surface of canonical speech. The "music" these primitive animals produce acts out the process of creation in bodily language, given life by performers who number seven, and whose production is also a kind of rest: a gesture is taken by one animal, given support—and thus a

<sup>159</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (XIII, XIV), in *Illuminations*, 260–61.

<sup>160</sup> Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, 115.

<sup>161</sup> Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog," in *The Complete Stories*, 281.

symbolically different inflection—by another, and so becomes part of the communal “act.” Hence the accurate critical perception that these music-dogs represent Kafka’s encounter with the Yiddish theater: Yiddish was not only Kafka’s window on the process of a language in creation, but also the stimulus for his theorization of canonical language’s hidden, transnational “sounds.” After starving himself as a hunger-artist, Kafka’s narrator experiences the canine music of the story as a creative process which, comically enough, takes place in the “air” before him, independent of any essential, single homeland or ground.

We can see this humor at work in Kafka’s otherwise puzzling comment to Milena Jenskova, his Czech translator and lover, that Max Brod “had no homeland [*Heimat*].” “Yes, you too don’t understand me,” Kafka writes her on 12 June 1920: “the ‘Jewish question’ was just a dumb joke.”<sup>162</sup> Kafka makes fun of the *German* expression here, and sheds light on some of his harsh statements toward his own people in some of these letters. Kafka’s technique, as he explains it to Milena here, has been misunderstood. Rather than condemning the Jews, he has been making fun of the *Judenfrage* that places *Jews* beyond the pale of German language and literature, or even a nation of their own. The real stupidity for Kafka belongs to the refusal to grasp a nation’s transnational sources, and thus to disavow the witty dialects and humorous voices of which it is composed. This is what Kafka means about Milena having a *Heimat* in the Czech nationalism she supports: “You have your homeland,” he writes her with a biting humor, “and thus you can give it up; perhaps that’s the best thing one can do with a homeland, especially since one can never really give up the part of the homeland that cannot be done without.” Kafka’s longing ironically plays on Nietzsche’s verse on Germany, with its well-known image of crows, the meaning of *Kafka* in Czech—“woe to him who has no homeland [*Heimat*]”<sup>163</sup>—by redefining the

<sup>162</sup> Kafka, letter to Milena Jenskova, 12 June 1920: “Ja du verstehst mich doch auch nicht Milena, die ‘Judenfrage’ war doch nur dummer Spaß,” in *Briefe an Milena*, ed. Jürgen Born and Michael Müller (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1983), 59; and *ibid.*, letter to Milena Jenskova, 31 July 1920.

<sup>163</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Vereinsamt” (1884), in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 15 vols., ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 11:329: “Die Krähen schreien / und ziehen schwirren Flugs zur Stadt: / bald wird es schnein, weh dem, der keine Heimat hat!” Daß Gott erbarm! / *Der* meint, ich sehnte mich zurück / In’s deutsche Warm. / In’s dumpfe deutsche Stuben Glück! /



notion of homeland itself. What is to be “done without” is this very “German” notion of national and linguistic exclusivity that denies the different dialects and nations of which “home” is actually composed. What should be given up, Kafka wittily notes, is not the concept of *Heimat*—and its indispensable feeling of belonging—but the concept of homeland as a national and linguistic entity whose borders have been irrevocably closed.

Kafka’s comic definition of the *Heimat* or linguistic homeland was in this way very much like the distinction between language and dialect given by the most famous Yiddish linguist of the twentieth century, Max Weinreich: “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy” (*A shprakh iz a diyalekt mit an armey un a flot*).<sup>164</sup> In Kafka’s similar paradigm, a language began to feel “dead” precisely when it acquired this national status *as* language, as an entity capable of policing its linguistic boundaries, and preventing the open-immigration policy of a language like Yiddish, which is enlivened by opening its doors. “It is comprised,” Kafka declared of Yiddish in 1912, using exaggeration before his German-Jewish audience to make his point stronger, “only of foreign words [*Fremdwörter*].”<sup>165</sup> Kafka’s “Talk” was at this point only anticipating the insight of later twentieth-century linguistics: that the standard form of a language is simply a dialect elevated to an authoritative status over the other dialect-forms spoken within a geographic area, some of which may be comprehensible and some far less so to speakers of the “standard” tongue. There is, for instance, only a gradual shift in German dialects as one moves from the German *Heimat* to Holland, for example. At some indistinguishable point, the dialects of German shade off into more Dutch-sounding expressions: only the national boundary, and the imposition—often by force—of a particular dialect as the “national” standard keeps the endless linguistic traffic or “*unendlicher Verkehr*,” as the final two words of “The Judgment” call it, from coming through.<sup>166</sup>

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Mein Freund, was hier / Mich hemmt und und hält, ist *dein* Verstand, / Mitleid mit *dir!* / Mitleid mit deutschem Quer-Verstand!”

<sup>164</sup> Max Weinreich, “YIVO and the Problems of Our Time,” *YIVO-Bleter* 25.1 (1945): 13.

<sup>165</sup> Kafka, “Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” in Kafka, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, 380.

<sup>166</sup> As Hermann Paul put it, “the common language . . . is rather a foreign idiom to which the dialect is sacrificed” (*Principles of the History of Language*, 35; German original, *Prinzipien*, 48).

Kafka developed this notion of canonical language as a boundary-zone in his February 1912 lecture, reminding his audience that Yiddish was “the youngest European language.” It would be the mid-1920s when YIVO, the Yiddish equivalent of the *Académie Française*, would be founded simultaneously in Vilna and Berlin, and undertake the task of giving Yiddish a standardized written form. The Yiddish language was then in the period of perfecting the art of linguistic incorporation that German had already performed with Latin and French: acquiring a scientific as well as a larger cultural vocabulary from more established and widespread European tongues. Kafka’s comment to his audience that “*der Jargon*,” as contemporaries called it, had “not yet developed any linguistic forms of a lucidity [*Deutlichkeit*] such as we need,” was his recognition of the process by which a growing language is quick to borrow what it needs, especially conceptual terms from other literatures: “its mode of expression is quick and rash.” The quickness of Yiddish speech was a sign of its health, as it played linguistic catch-up after centuries of Jewish exclusion. Where other languages had already assumed what linguists call high-level literacy functions, Yiddish in 1912 was wide open to new idioms and conceptual terms, in a process that resembled a kind of linguistic shoplifting. “Whatever happened to enter the ghetto,” as Kafka puts it with deadpan humor, “was not so quick to leave.” The fact that Yiddish was not Kafka’s “mother tongue” was more than ironic, freeing him from the native speaker’s tendency to push the foreign origins of many of its words beneath the surface of conscious speech.

Hence the presence of so many figures in Kafka’s fiction who live underground—like the “Giant Mole,” or *Maulwurf*, whom his “Village Schoolteacher” discovers emerging to the surface, despite scholarly disbelief. As a figure that appears in two of Kafka’s sources—in Bin Gorion’s *Saying of the Jews*, translated from Yiddish, Aramaic, and Hebrew, as well as in the dialect poet Johann Peter Hebbel’s German story—the “Giant Mole” is supposed to remain under the threshold of awareness, like the ninety-nine percent of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* that were “taken from other languages.”<sup>167</sup> Comically

<sup>167</sup> See *Die Sagen der Juden*, ed. Micha Josef bin Gorion (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1962), 29–30; and *Kafka Handbuch* 1:195, where we learn that Hebbel’s poem “Der Maulwurf,” from his *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreunds*, was on the curriculum that Kafka studied in school. On English’s foreign sources, see McWhorter, *The Power of Babel*, 94–95.

enough, no one believes the “village schoolteacher” when he discovers the “giant mole” of language’s transnational underground, and the linguistic authority of the country, like the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, who worked as a schoolteacher in rural Austria, eventually comes to doubt his own truth. Much of the humor of the story turns on the way that the discoverer of the “giant mole,” and the village schoolteacher who published on the topic before him, are influenced by the equivalent of literary nationalism: though both have seen the “giant mole” with their own eyes, both eventually deny the presence of this huge, underground foreign presence, like linguists who restrict their vision to the surface of “native” creations, missing the foreign creatures that tunnel beneath the surface of standard linguistic forms. In the *Sayings of the Jews* on Kafka’s shelf, no “being [*Wesen*]” is said to be able to continue to exist (*bestehen*), once the *Maulwurf* sees the “light of day.”<sup>168</sup>

In the “Preface” (*Vorwort*) to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, the Grimms describe “foreign words” as lending just such a powerful presence to their language. Among their examples is *Maulwurf*, the word for “mole,” an “authentic German” expression, but one that shares in same process of acquired citizenship (*Einbürgerung*) that foreign words undergo:

As soon as a foreign word falls into the spring of a language, it is swirled about in its currents, until it takes on a different color, and despite its foreign manner, looks like a native to the naked eye. This phenomenon finds excellent illustration in a great number of place-names, but also in other vocabulary items: *abenteuer* [adventure], *arm-brust* [cross-bowman], and *eichhorn* [squirrel] sound completely German [*vollkommen Deutsch*], although they have nothing whatever to do with the concepts “precious evening” [*abend-teuer*], “arm breast” [*arm-brust*], and “oak-horn” [*eich-horn*]. These literal compounds never occur to us as the meaning of these words: everyone knows what they actually express, and our own language’s normal sound patterns are not disturbed by them at all. Even authentic German [*echtdeutsche*] expressions such as *Maulwurf*, which have become obscure, must participate in a similar process, though losing some of their sense, just as *Moltwurf*, once misunderstood, was made into *Maulwurf*.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>168</sup> Bin Gorion, *Die Sagen der Juden*, 29–30. On the presence of this book in Kafka’s library, see Jürgen Born, *Kafka’s Bibliothek*, 84.

<sup>169</sup> Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “Vorwort: Fremde Wörter,” in *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 16 vols. (Leipzig: S Hirzel, 1854), 1:xxvii, xxvi. My translation.

Kafka's narrator in "The Giant Mole" has likewise discovered a form of those forgotten linguistic creatures, whose meanings enrich every language, and whose own *Klänge* or sounds flow beneath the surface of the new pronunciation they have acquired. In nationalist fashion, the schoolteacher of the story eventually turns against his own insight, just as the Brothers Grimm emphasize what is "*vollkommen Deutsch*," and soon pass over the foreign and subterranean creatures that enrich its native ground. As in Kafka's neglected "The Tombwatcher" ("*Der Gruftwächter*"), the guardian of canonical history is supposed to guard the *Gruft* or crypt of the "blessed ancestors" (*seligen Vorfahren*) located in the "Castle" and its tomb: he fights them with the "power of his breath" (*Atemkraft*), as if proper pronunciation were a weapon of its own. "Moles [*Maulwürfe*] like him," however, as the Chamberlain says, "build long passages before they emerge."<sup>170</sup> The name of the "Warden [*Wächter*] of the Tomb" thus suggests *wachen*, or the ability to *awaken* lost, underground voices as a powerful effect of Kafka's larger work.

Kafka expresses the liberating effect of this linguistic turn in one of his later "Fragments," as Max Brod called them: here, a voice that lives in the past, present, and future in all its forms becomes the narrator—yet it is laid claim to by the authority of the state. The voice of Kafka's poem feels as if it has been prematurely laid in its "coffin" by the its guardians, who erect their watch-house on "the street," where vernacular language allows different forms of language, some arriving from other nations, to engage in their different forms of exchange. Like Benjamin's "aggada" or legend, that "rises up" to level a "mighty blow" at the "Halakha," or Law, so Kafka's speaker has the power to rise up and break down the national, and ultimately temporal boundaries that limit the full range of human expression:

My longing was for the ancient times,  
 my longing was for the present,  
 my longing was for the future,  
 and with all this I am dying in a watchman's hut  
 at the edge of the street,

<sup>170</sup> Kafka, "The Warden of the Tomb," in *Complete Stories*, 208, 213, 218; German original, "Der Gruftwächter," *Beschreibung eines Kampfes: Novellen, Skizzen, Aphorismen aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969), 225, 230, 234.

an upright coffin that has always been  
 a piece of State property.  
 I have spent my life  
 restraining myself from smashing it to pieces.  
 I have spent my life resisting the desire to end it.

*Aufrecht* has the same connotation in German that “upright” does in English: the moral sense of *standard* goes along, in Kafka’s canonical vision, with the idea of a living funeral. The “upright coffin” is in this regard the canonical style, sanctioned by the “State,” that prematurely buries those dialectal, transnational contents that give language its broadest and most expressive style. In so far as the writer wishes to renew the canonical standard as it has been inherited, the desire to “smash” it in Kafka’s late parable must be resisted, in favor of lying down with the popular legends and voices “at the edge of the street,” for these inhabit its past and present, and will nurture the state of the language in its future forms. Kafka here imagines the task of the writer as assisting in this *Prozess* of bringing those vibrant, “dialectical” voices prematurely buried in the tomb of high cultural writing back to canonical life. By making Kafka aware of the forgotten, thus, Jewish languages helped him rediscover these now distant, foreign sounds, awaken their hidden meanings, and so create his own—that is, Kafkesque—idiom of the Jewish literary voice. “Climbing. *Senait*. It was a squirrel,” Kafka wrote in a late aphorism, using the Hebrew word for the wandering creature: “her bushy tail was famous in the woods.” Or as Kafka described the messianic accent of his writing in a more famous formulation: “I am a memory come alive.”<sup>171</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Kafka, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, 303, 214; German original, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, 176, 245; and diary entry, 15 October 1921, in *Diaries*, 392.