

FRANZ KAFKA JUDAISM AND JEWISHNESS

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I.

Jews like Spinoza, Franz Kafka, Heinrich Heine, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Kraus, among others, have rightly been categorised as “conscious pariahs”, who earned dignity and prestige for their people through their creative abilities, by Hannah Arendt in her essay ‘The Jew as Pariah. A Hidden Tradition’ (1944). These poets and thinkers were “bold spirits” who contributed their bit to make the emancipation of the Jews “what it really should have been – an admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles, or an opportunity to play the parvenu.” According to Arendt, the conscious pariah is a hidden tradition because there are few links among these great but isolated individuals. The counterparts of conscious pariahs are the parvenus, the upstarts who for the sake of upward mobility or out of fear try to join the ranks of non-Jews. According to Arendt, the pariahs use their minds and hearts whereas the parvenus use their elbows to raise themselves above their fellow Jews into the respectable world of the gentiles.¹⁾ Hannah Arendt is too modest to count herself in the prestigious list of conscious pariahs but, taking into account the rising popularity of her books, she is certainly one in spite of her controversial relationship with her mentor, Heidegger. She initiated the publication of Kafka’s diaries in America.

This paper explores the role of Judaism and Jewishness in the writings of Kafka, one of the most famous Jews of the twentieth century. Interestingly, Kafka never tasted fame in his lifetime. At best he was known in the so called Prague Circle of intellectuals and artists. In this context it is not difficult to understand why, in one of his early diary recordings, Kafka expresses his solidarity with the extras in the theatre who do not make it to the centre-stage. In the neighbouring Germany, writers of lesser talent were in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons such as taking a politically and morally correct position or writing pedagogically. The title of the

¹⁾ HANNAH ARENDT, *The Jew as Pariah. A Hidden Tradition*, in: RON H. FELDMAN (ed.) *Hannah Arendt. The Jew as Pariah. Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, New York: Grove Press 1978, pp. 67–90.

paper begets a clarification. The intention is not to uproot Kafka from the larger context of universal writers who transcend temporal and spatial thresholds and confine him to the narrow context of Jewish writers. The aim is to explore a particular aspect of his writing and connect it to his universal and secular motifs.

The two terms, Judaism and Jewishness, are technically different, for Judaism refers to the set of fixed religious beliefs and rituals whereas Jewishness is an existential concept and is, therefore, extremely personal and difficult to define. Quoting from Kafka's own accounts, particularly ›Brief an den Vater‹, his father comes across as a hardworking, self-made man who had no time or patience for religious matters and who, it seems, believed assimilation in the dominating culture to be the key to professional success in the multiethnic, multireligious and multilingual Austro-Hungarian Empire. The family would go to synagogues on special occasions only, and that too was more of a ritual visit than a serious interaction with the Jewish tradition. The entries in Kafka's diaries reveal that Kafka was curious about the Jewish rituals and beliefs and also the Jewish mystic dimension, Cabbalah, even if he had not done any extensive reading of the Jewish scriptures and related texts. The diaries contain, for example, quotations from the Talmud and lengthy descriptions of the ceremony of circumcision of the Jewish male infants (to be specific, that of his nephew and that among the Russian Jews). The women in his life, Felice Bauer, Grete Bloch and towards the end, Dora Dymant, were Jews. Dora was, in fact, an *Ostjüdin*, a Jew from Poland, where the Jews were still, to a large extent, untouched by the Western Jewry's eagerness to assimilate. Then there is his legendary but somewhat puzzling friendship with Max Brod, a Prague Jew who was also a writer but is today famous or infamous in the context of his posthumous publication of Kafka's works. His friend, Löwy, the Polish stage actor, Martin Buber, the Zionist editor of ›Der Jude‹, who published some works of Kafka and Kurt Wolff, his publisher of the Rowohlt Press, Franz Werfel and Felix Weltsch, writers with whom he was friendly and corresponded regularly, were all of Jewish origins. Of course these relations were based on common interests that went beyond a common descent but it cannot be just a coincidence that much of his circle of acquaintances was predominantly Jewish. There are also substantial references in his letters, especially to Max Brod, that one of his plans or dreams was a trip to Palestine and eventually migrating there. Nobody can be certain that he would have actually carried out his plans had he lived longer. When he came to know that he was suffering from tuberculosis, he decided to dedicate his book under publication (›Ein Landarzt. Kleine Erzählungen‹, 1919) to his father, not in the sense of the biological father but the larger tradition that had brought him into the world. He wrote to Brod that with this gesture he would be travelling to Palestine with the finger on the map.²⁾ However, even when Kafka was

²⁾ "... Seitdem ich mich entschlossen habe, das Buch meinem Vater zu widmen, liegt mir viel daran, daß es bald erscheint. Nicht als ob ich dadurch den Vater versöhnen könnte, die Wurzeln dieser Feindschaft sind hier unausreißbar, aber ich hätte doch etwas getan, wäre, wenn schon nicht nach Palästina übersiedelt, doch mit dem Finger auf der Landkarte hingefahren." (An Max Brod, Ende März 1918, in: FRANZ KAFKA, Briefe. 1902–1924, Frankfurt/M. 1975.)

very much conscious of his collective Jewish-German-Austrian-Slavic heritage, he was deeply conscious of his lonely existence as a writer. The following entries from his diaries and letters provide an insight into his complex alienated inner being :

24 October, 1911

Yesterday it occurred to me, that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it. Jewish mother is no Mutter, to call her Mutter makes her a little comic (not to herself, because we are in Germany), we give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but forget the contradiction that sinks into the emotions so much the more heavily. Mutter is peculiarly German for the Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with the Christian splendour, Christian coldness also. The Jewish woman who is called Mutter therefore becomes not only comic but strange. Mama would be a better name if only one didn't imagine 'Mutter' behind it. I believe that it is only the memories of the Ghetto that still preserve the Jewish family, for the word Vater too is far from meaning the Jewish father.³⁾

8 January, 1914

What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.⁴⁾

25 December, 1911

A close-knit family life does not seem to be so very common among and characteristic of the Jews, especially those in Russia. Family life is also found among Christians, after all, and the fact that women are excluded from the study of the Talmud is really destructive of Jewish family life; when the man wants to discuss learned talmudic matters – the very core of his life – with guests, the women withdraw to the next room even if they need not do so – so it is even more characteristic of the Jews that they come together at every possible opportunity, whether to pray or to study or to discuss divine matters or to eat holiday meals whose daily basis is usually a religious one and at which alcohol is drunk only very moderately. They flee to one another, so to speak.⁵⁾

6 January, 1912

Yesterday Vizekönig by Faimann. My receptivity to the Jewishness in these plays deserts me because they are too monotonous and degenerate into a wailing that prides itself on isolated, violent outbreaks. When I saw the first plays it was possible for me to think that I had come upon a Judaism on which the beginnings of my own rested, a Judaism that was developing in my direction and so would enlighten and carry me farther along in my own clumsy Judaism, instead, it moves farther away from me the more I hear of it. The people remain, of course, and I hold fast to them.⁶⁾

An Brod

Mai, Juni 1921

... Eine Kleinigkeit genügt, um mich in diesen Zustand [Tür des Wahnsinns] zu bringen, es genügt, dass unter meinem Balkon mit dem mir zugekehrten Gesicht ein junger halb frommer ungarischer Jude im Liegenstuhl liegt, recht bequem gestreckt, die eine Hand über dem Kopf, die andere tief im Hosenschlitz und immer fröhlich den ganzen Tag Tempelmelodien brummt. (Was für ein Volk!)⁷⁾

³⁾ FRANZ KAFKA, *Diaries. 1910–1923*, ed. MAX BROD, Kolkata: Hermes Inc. 2001, p. 88.

⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁷⁾ KAFKA, *Briefe* (cit. fn. 2).

The first remark notwithstanding, Kafka's descriptive yet ironic comments (I have only selected a few representative ones out of many) manifest his *Außen-seitertum*, pariah status. The Other is not only the other people but also one's own people despite the use of the possessive pronoun 'my'. "my own clumsy Judaism" and other observations reflect his existential dilemma of being within yet without a people. His alienation from the Jewish orthodoxy is evident in many of his letters and diary recordings. These are somewhat sad but honest thoughts of a *Dichter*, a writer – Jewish by descent, Austrian by passport, a law graduate and a *Beamter*/bureaucrat by profession, speaking and writing in German in a Czech majority area, neither at home in his community nor in the society as such. Above all, he lived with a terminal illness for eight years (1917 to 1924), fleeing from one sanatorium or rural retreat to another. These disparate influences, however, need not be viewed as something negative or tragic, for they can also be an enriching experience. Even Nietzsche remarks (›Beyond Good and Evil‹ [›Jenseits von Gut und Böse‹, 1886], chapter 251) that the Jews know how to thrive in adversity, which actually spurs them to achieve more than a favourable milieu. Kafka, too, considered the despair of the German-Jewish writers over the lack of *Boden* (ground or footing) as their source of inspiration.⁸⁾

And now a few remarks about Kafka's relation to languages. Hebrew, the sacred language of revelation and Yiddish were already lost to much of the Prague Jewry. Even the German Kafka learnt and used in Prague was cut off from the mainstream German. Kafka once ironically described the parochial Prague German as *Zigeunerdeutsch* (Gypsy German!)⁹⁾ Apart from that was what he described as the sense of loss or "strangeness" or "contradiction that sinks into the emotions" in terms of German language as his mother tongue (refer to the first quotation above). Similar sentiments have also been expressed by other products of German-Jewish symbiosis, particularly after the Holocaust. One of them is Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor, who symbolized the German language contaminated by the Nazis as the "black milk" in his poem, ›Todesfuge‹, which generated a great deal of discussion and debate within the post-war Germany. Another one is Gerhart (later Gershom) Scholem, considered an authority on Jewish mysticism, who went on to become Prof. emeritus in the Hebrew University in Palestine. A Zionist who migrated to Palestine in 1923 (unlike his friend, Walter Benjamin, whom he was unable to con-

⁸⁾ Ibid., An Brod, Juni 1921: "... Weg von Judentum, meist mit unklarer Zustimmung der Väter (diese Unklarheit war das Empörende), wollten die meisten, die deutsch zu schreiben anfangen, sie wollten es, aber mit den Hinterbeinen klebten sie noch an Judentum des Vaters und mit den Vorderbeinen fanden sie keinen neuen Boden. Die Verzweiflung darüber war ihre Inspiration."

⁹⁾ The so-called Prague German was somewhat underdeveloped and limited in vocabulary because of its isolated regional location. At times it was also grammatically incorrect. It is indeed a paradox that the poverty of this „papierenen Sprache“ (Fritz Mauthner; 'paper-like, wooden or unnatural language') seemed to be a basic condition for Kafka to create his intense poetic language (cf. GILLES DELEUZE and FÉLIX GUATTARI, Kafka. Für eine kleine Literatur. Aus dem FRANZ. von BURKHART KROEBER, Frankfurt/M. 2002).

vince of the necessity to migrate), Scholem described German language as “cold” in contrast to the “warm” Yiddish. Kafka often went to the Yiddish theatre, more out of a sense of solidarity with his people than a desire to see good theatre. He is also known to have delivered a lecture on the Yiddish language in which he appealed to the westernised educated Jewry to take pride in Yiddish and own it up instead of pretending that it had nothing to do with it. Kafka described Yiddish, which draws much of its vocabulary from Hebrew and German as a restless language, in a constant flux. In the last years of his life he made, despite or because of his terminal illness, an extraordinary effort to learn Hebrew.

Above all is the existential predicament of pan-Judaism, for how could a Jew feel the same degree of reverence for and emotional attachment to any language other than the divine language, Hebrew? This is as much true of the German Jews as of the French or the Polish Jews or any other Jews elsewhere in the world. Does not a Muslim anywhere in the world have the same sentiments for Arabic irrespective of his mother tongue? It is, however, a different matter that the Germans mistook this existential predicament of the German Jews for lack of loyalty to Germany or Austria.

There are umpteen references to the Jewish people and their concerns in Kafka's letters and diaries, but when it comes to his fictional writing, he is discreet. His stories are conspicuous by the absence of a single Jew or even a remote derivative of the word, Jew. One explanation for this marked difference is clear. In contrast to the fictional writing, the letters and diaries were not written for public consumption. The only exceptions are the ›Animal in the Synagogue‹ and ›Jackals and Arabs‹ (›Schakale und Araber‹, 1917) where Jewish motifs can be located in the titles itself but even these texts are subtle and dense. Let us explore Kafka's ›Animal in the Synagogue‹ and ›Before the Law‹ in terms of this discussion. The former is hardly known whereas the latter is one of Kafka's most popular works.

II.

›Animal in the Synagogue‹

In stark contrast to ›Before the Law‹ (›Vor dem Gesetz‹, first printed in: *Selbstwehr. Unabhängige jüdische Wochenschrift* [Prag], 9. 1915, No. 34; thereafter in: ›Der Prozeß‹ [1925], chapter 9), ›Animal in the Synagogue‹, 1920 a fragment text of Kafka (in original without a title), is almost unknown. For some inexplicable reason it was never included in the anthologies of Kafka's works. Could its fragmentary character be the reason? Hardly, because so many other texts of Kafka, including his novels, are fragments. Only very recently some Kafka critics have discovered this interesting narrative and somehow it has gained the title ›Animal in the Synagogue‹ (in German also cited as ›In unserer Synagoge‹). After searching in many anthologies, I finally found it in ›Das Ehepaar und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlaß‹¹⁰).

¹⁰) FRANZ KAFKA, *Das Ehepaar und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlaß*, Frankfurt/M. 1994, pp. 34–38.

The protagonist in the narrative is an animal that lives in a synagogue, hence the title. Let us first study the attributes of this animal.

It is almost as if an engraved image of a mythical creature has come alive, for it resembles no known creature. It has a terrifying appearance – long neck, triangular face, lidless eyes, upper teeth jutting out and apparently stiff hair on the upper lip. However the creature, the size of a marten, does not really terrify anyone as it appears to be extremely shy and harmless. This shy animal (shyer than even a forest animal) can be observed by the visitors to the temple from a minimum distance of two metres. If one tries to take a closer look, it runs away. So no one has ever held it, forget about touching it. It is the only one of its kind in the synagogue, without any colony. In fact it is the only creature in the synagogue. Its blue green colour, a shade lighter than the wall paint, functions as a camouflage. But this colour is probably only its “apparent colour” (*sichtbare Farbe*) since the dirt and the dust on its fur cover its “real colour” (*wirkliche Farbe*). It shows a distinct lack of respect for the prayers in the synagogue that it appears to consider as “noise”. Its restlessness during the prayers signifies that it perceives this noise, which is at its peak on festival days, as a threat to its being. It would prefer to see the synagogue converted into a granary so that few people come and startle it. According to the narrator of the text, this is a distinct possibility because the community of the hill town is becoming smaller from year to year and it is becoming difficult even to bear the maintenance costs of the synagogue. Of course there is no way of communicating this to the creature which would certainly draw some comfort from this bit of information. It is quite obvious that it is not interested in the prayers of the pious. During the prayer time, it indulges in naughty pranks like peeping into the women’s section from the meshes of the window grills. This seems to have become a fetish with it. The temple servant tries to shoo him away from the grills of the window under the pretext that it scares women but it keeps coming back to what appears to be its favourite haunt.

Life is not easy for this creature. It lives on a “narrow” ledge barely two fingers wide. Underscored is its precarious existence. The ledge is built on three sides of the temple. So at the end of the path it has no option but to turn back. Its about-turn is a sight worth seeing. Despite its age and the danger of falling, it does not hesitate to leap in the air like an acrobat for an about-turn in the air itself. Does this fantastic jump fail him? Never. It runs back on the same narrow path. Its survival on this narrow path is indeed a wonder. This seemingly ageless creature has lived in the temple for a long, long time. Chances are that it was there even before the temple came into being. Now it is as if it were the pet of the temple. The community does not take a serious note of it. The women are still a little interested whereas the men are more or less indifferent. But the animal does not take any chances and is still cautious. It is never seen on the floor of the temple and seems to prefer heights where it would be safe from a sudden attack. It is almost as if it has, at some point of time in its ageless existence, faced persecution and expulsion. It is said that once in the history of the temple, the reverend rabbis discussed the presence of the creature on the

temple premises. They consulted the sacred law books. The opinions were divided but the majority came to the conclusion that the creature had no place in the God's house. Hence the decision to expel it. However the creature was too smart for them. But this does not mean that its expulsion is impossible. The creature is aware of the lurking dangers to its existence or does it perhaps have a premonition of the events to come? At this point the narrative breaks off.

Let us try to arrive at the signification of these complex sets of signifiers which are dominated by the uneasy relationship between the creature and the worshippers. All the attributes of the creature – its unkempt and dishevelled appearance, mobility, seclusion, mysterious nature, camouflage, disregard for rituals, lack of respect for the prayers and the sanctity of the temple and acts of defiance point towards the relation and the opposition between the spiritual and the codified religion, the esoteric and the exoteric and, the liberal and the dogmatic. The tussle between the liberal and the orthodox elements is a hallmark of every religion, even in modern times. The phantasmic creature becomes a metaphor for the pacifist, liberal and mystical dimension of the religion. Mysticism is not settled or stationary, i. e. it is not codified but is always in the process of becoming. It is not collective but individual. Further it is considered unclean vis-à-vis the purity of the strict code of conduct of the orthodoxy within the community. It is spirituality *per se* the essence of religion that cannot be defined but can be experienced. It is allusive, unknown and unknowable. Emphasised is hence the opposition between apparent and real (*sichtbar und wirklich*), and narrow and enormous (*schmal und ungeheuer*). Important is the essence and not the external beauty. In the context of this narrative it would be relevant to mention an interesting anthropological detail – the ancient synagogues did have representations of animals depicting the metaphorical and metaphysical universe of their religion. In later Judaism, the rabbis condemned them as pagan and the tradition was discontinued. Kafka plays with these mythological details and creates a fictional text. Emphasised is also the threat to spirituality not from outside but from the orthodox elements within the parameters of the same religion. The orthodoxy ignores the spirit of the religion or even tries to crush or banish what it perceives as a challenge to its authority. At times the creature incurs the wrath of the religious authorities who declare it repugnant and heretical. The lonely and the restless creature thus becomes a metaphor for the precarious and vulnerable nature of spirituality. At the same time it manages to survive despite all the hostility and even manages, now and then, to mock at the religious law.

At the level of metaphor, multiple readings of the narrative are possible. The narrative could also be understood as the tussle between the liberal and the orthodox Jews. The animal, in this interpretation, signifies a liberal Jew who has a relation, albeit an uneasy one with the (ultra) orthodox jewry. The animal then becomes Kafka himself and the likes of Kafka who are not comfortable with the orthodoxy and view it with unease from a distance. The narrative becomes a kind of introspection for Kafka. It is significant that the animal does not leave the synagogue despite threats to its existence for it seems to prefer this uneasy relation to no relation at all.

The community does not succeed in driving it away from the synagogue nor does the animal succeed in scaring them into retreat. The hide and seek continues for all the times. In the wider context of this interpretation the animal could represent any thinking being having problems with the fixed codes of their own traditions which they seek for intellectual enquiry. Two good illustrations would be Spinoza excommunicated by the Amsterdam rabbis and Abélard incessantly persecuted by the medieval church in France; both were condemned for their ideas by their own peoples.

The two interpretations cited above are not radically different from each other and they intersect, in fact.

III.

Before the Law

The legend or parable is immensely popular. That is why it has been analysed by several commentators without, however, exhausting it. Here is another attempt. First we undertake a Close Reading of this legend ›Before the Law‹ in which a man from the countryside seeks entry into the Law. Although most readers of Kafka would be familiar with this legend, it is important methodically to go step by step. This marvellous legend has no clear-cut corresponding myth but it draws bits and pieces from the mythology of ancient Israel, rabbinical as well as mystical. At the same time it must be emphasized again that the word ‘Jew’ or any of its derivatives does not appear anywhere in the text or for that matter in any other story of Kafka.

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard. One day a man from the countryside seeks to gain admittance to the Law. He waits outside the open door of the Law, as the doorkeeper refuses to grant him permission to enter at that moment. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. “It is possible,” says the doorkeeper, “but not at the moment.” The man tries to look through the door. The doorkeeper laughs, reminding the man of his power and warning him of terrible consequences in case of disobedience. He also mentions other, more terrifying and powerful doorkeepers inside. The man decides to be on the safe side and he waits. The doorkeeper even gives him a stool to sit by the side of the door. There he waits day after day and years. All this while he makes many attempts to gain permission to enter, but in vain. Sometimes they talk but the doorkeeper maintains his position of strength. He always rejects the pleas of the man for admittance with the remark that he cannot be let in yet. Neither does requesting help nor bribing. Gradually the man even familiarises himself with the fleas in the doorkeeper’s fur collar and begs them to help so that the doorkeeper changes his mind. He sacrifices all he has, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts everything, but always adds: “I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have omitted anything.” At the same time the door is always open. With passing years the man from the countryside gets old and childish. He curses his bad luck. Finally, when he is dying and his eyesight grows dim, he perceives a radiance that streams from the door of the Law. Before he dies, he beckons to the doorkeeper as he can no longer raise his body. The doorkeeper bends over him, the difference in height between them all the more pronounced and says: “What do you want to know now? You are insatiable.” The man asks him,

“Everyone strives to reach the Law. So how is it that in all these years no one but me has asked to enter?” Realising that the man is about to die, the doorkeeper, in order to penetrate his growing deafness, bellows into his ear: “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it.”

After *telling* the legend in its syntagmatic order let us make an attempt at *understanding* it by criss-crossing through the paradigmatic relations. The lack of structural unity of the myth makes the task of breaking it into constituent units difficult. However, it is clear that Kafka's legend draws on many theological concepts, some common to all religions, but some specifically Jewish¹¹). The allusions to the heavenly courts, the doorkeepers and the cosmic light at the end of the legend are too obvious to be missed. ‘Waiting’, as we all know, is a typical Jewish belief. The reference to the Law is also explicit. It is well known that in Judaism the ‘Law’ is fundamental to the religious system. Moses brought the Written Law from the Mount of Sinai for the children of Israel. Some scholars like Politzer, a Jewish migrant in America with knowledge of Hebrew, have pointed out certain interesting Jewish and linguistic sources that Kafka draws on. According to the Jewish Law, there are people who know the Law and people who do not know it. The second category of the ‘uncultured man’ or the heretic is called in Hebrew *Am-ba'araz* and in Yiddish, the language of many East European Jews, *Ambhorez*, i. e. Man from the Land or Countryside, with the obvious allusion to a straightforward, somewhat naïve or

¹¹) The Written Law or the *Torah* and the Oral Law or the *Talmud* build together a legal and ethical system which is meant to be a guide for the entire community. The Talmud comprises of commentaries, deliberations, disputations and discourses of the rabbinian scholars on the Bible. It is a Jewish reading of the Old Testament distinguished from the Christian readings as well as the scientific readings of the historians and the anthropologists. Interestingly it continues to be called Oral Law despite being in book form mainly for two reasons: in order to differentiate it from the Written Law, the *Torah*, but more importantly because the Talmud was originally a part of the oral narrative tradition. The Written Law of Moses was supplemented by oral explanations right from the onset. For a long time it remained an oral supplement with a mosaic of elements like spiritual reflections and discussions, interpretations of verses, rules governing the recitation of prayers, observation of Sabbath, circumcision, dietary disciplines, legal opinions and folklore. Finally it was penned down out of fear of forgetting as the persecution of Jews intensified and the community had to flee and disperse so many times that it gave rise to the metaphor of the ‘wandering Jew’. Many generations from 2 BCE to 2 CE, i. e. four centuries of Jews participated in the recording of the Babylonian Talmud which is considered a mine of folklore. Then there is also the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud (4 CE). Even in written form, however, the Talmud preserves its style of oral narration and oral teaching. It recreates the live atmosphere provided by a master addressing eager disciples who listen to him attentively and ask questions. It reproduces the clash of opinions and their diversity, the agreements and disagreements between scholars. The folklore of the Talmud reflects a high degree of creativity where parallels are drawn between divine institutions and riddles of human existence. The rituals in Jewish daily routine, the personal religious practices and the synagogue procedures are also largely derived from the Talmud. So it can be said that the entire narrative of the Written Law is expanded upon, clarified and enumerated through the Talmud. Both the Written Law and the Oral Law are equally sacred to the Jews although only the Written Law is considered divine in origin. Kabbalah is the Jewish mysticism, the esoteric Jewish tradition. (Cf. MORRIS ADLER, *The World of the Talmud*, New York 1906; – C. PEARL and R. S. BROOKES, *A Guide to Jewish Knowledge*, London 1965.)

ignorant person. The first doorkeeper even has the stereotypical physical features of an East European Jew – *eine grosse Spitznase, den langen, dünnen, schwarzen tatarischen Bart* i. e. a big sharp nose and a long, thin and black orthodox beard of Tartars¹²). Here the orthodoxy of the Semitic religions is asserted.

At the same time it would be naive to take the identification of Jewish elements in ›Before the Law‹ or in some other narratives like ›Animal in the Synagogue‹, ›Investigations of a Dog‹ (›Forschungen eines Hundes‹, posthumous 1931) and ›Jackals and Arabs‹ at their face value. As Lévi-Strauss explains, if there is a meaning to be found in narratives, it cannot reside in isolated elements or signifiers which enter into its composition, but only in the way those signifiers are combined, i. e. in the “bundle of relations”. The combination leads to a *bricolage*, a new conceptual construct. So it is not the presence of isolated signifiers that lend meaning to the narrative but the metonymic and metaphorical relations in the text that ultimately make the difference. In the structure of Kafka’s narratives, the “bundle of relations” similarly generates a new structural whole. Kafka inverts the basic premise of the ancient and sacred Jewish signs and symbols generating thereby an altogether new discursive formation. According to the Jewish belief, the way to the God is to knock at the doors of the Law to seek entry into it. God is the Father who dispenses justice. However in Kafka’s legend, the man from the countryside is eager to enter, but he has to deal with corrupt doorkeepers and so he ends up remaining forever outside the Law. Kafka plays with the terms ‘Law’ and ‘Waiting’, giving them a distinctly ironic, and modern, one can say a Kafkaesque twist. The transformation of Biblical and classical motifs, legends and parables is typical of Kafka’s narrative strategies. One has only to refer to other works of Kafka like ›Metamorphosis‹ (›Die Verwandlung‹, 1915), ›The Silence of the Sirens‹ (›Das Schweigen der Sirenen‹, posthumous 1931) ›The Great Wall of China‹ (›Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer‹, posthumous 1931), ›Homecoming‹ (›Heimkehr‹ posthumous works), to name but a few. Kafka makes use of sacred symbols, myths and other such motifs and reconstitutes them to suit his universe of discourse. This sophisticated mode of presentation wherein one makes an asset of Europe’s common inheritance, ancient Jewish and ancient Greek, at the same time transcending it, requires genius as well as broadmindedness.

Let us return to the legend. Now the question arises how one understands this legend, this riddle, which makes many a reader feel as if he were himself the helpless ‘man from the countryside’ standing outside the door of this fascinating but confusing legend, seeking an entry into its labyrinth? The core of the legend raises the nagging question or the problematic: Did the doorkeeper deceive the man? Is the man innocent? Is the doorkeeper responsible for the failure of the man to achieve his goal? To be fair to the doorkeeper, he is friendly, respectful to his superiors and non-bribeable with a stern regard for duty, for he does not even once leave his post

¹²) Tartars are people in the interiors of Russia, present day Kazakstan and the Tartan mountains of former Czechoslovakia, who have, as their ancestors, the ancient and the remote nomadic tribes of the Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan.

in all those years. Besides he belongs to the Law, so it is perhaps beyond the human beings to judge him. Doubting his integrity is doubting the Law itself. Then there is the naive man from the countryside. In his absolute innocence, he actually believes that the moment will come, when the doorkeeper himself will let him in and so he wastes his life waiting. Also, the doorkeeper instils fear in his mind. It is the fear of disobeying the instructions and the fear of the unknown that keeps the man from entering through the otherwise open door and therein lies his existential impasse. This man, who represents pure faith, is simply unable to understand the mechanisms of the system. Should he have entered the open door without asking? Towards the end the doorkeeper reveals that the door he guarded all these years was meant for this man only. This bit of information he keeps to himself till the man from the countryside is on his deathbed.

Some modern interpretations of the legend, and I tend to agree to them, suggest that the legend, in the context of ›The Trial‹ (›Der Prozeß‹, posthumous 1925) is an allegory of the tedious judicial system, the Kangaroo courts and the mechanisms that move or paralyze them. In this legend the celestial tribunal is transformed into an analogy for the corrupt earthly tribunal. The hierarchy of (good) angels who ultimately lead to God is transformed into the hierarchy of (corrupt) doorkeepers who stand between the seeker and the justice. Hope is transformed into hopelessness and the wait for the Messiah into the unending wait for justice. In the novel, ›The Trial‹, the artist Titorelli recounts three possibilities of acquittal, namely definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal and indefinite postponement. The first option exists only theoretically. The second option is no good, for it gives the accused a false sense of security. The third also does not suit the client, for it means the persistence of his trauma. No wonder the typical figure of justice with bandage over the eyes and scales is transformed by Kafka into the Goddess of Victory and eventually Goddess of Hunt, for the figure has wings and is in a flying posture accompanied by hunting dogs just like the Goddess of Hunt in full cry! Similarly the symbol of freedom in America, the Statue of Liberty, is described in Kafka's first novel, ›The Lost One‹ (›Der Verschollene‹, posthumous 1927), holding not the torch of freedom but a sword of all things! Independent of the novel, the interpretation can be taken further to refer to the mechanisms that underline bureaucracy, be it of any system. The doorkeeper epitomises the modern-day bureaucracy, anonymous in character, which has forgotten the original purpose of its service. The doorkeeper represents a typical clerk or official in any society, in any system working in an impersonal bureaucratic style. The servant ends up becoming the master, and at the same time, he too suffers the same fate. Günter Grass attempts to imitate Kafka's technique of the interplay of the Real and the Surreal in his works, specially in ›The Tin Drum‹ (›Die Blechtrommel‹, 1959). In his essay, ›Kafka und seine Vollstrecker‹ (Kafka and his Executors)¹³, Grass shows that Kafka's world does not subscribe to any

¹³) GÜNTER GRASS, *Kafka und seine Vollstrecker*, in: G. G., *Aufsätze zur Literatur 1980*, Darmstadt und Neuwied 1978, pp. 99–121.

particular society or system; rather there is something Kafkaesque about all systems of the world, of the right or the left. Perhaps it would not be entirely irrelevant to mention that Kafka had a degree in Law and later in life he worked in an insurance office where workers would bring him their insurance claims and as supplicants wait patiently and innocently like the man from the countryside for what was rightfully theirs. The naivety, the child-like innocence of the man from the countryside, like Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, is from my point of view the most remarkable and perplexing aspect in this surrealist and esoteric legend. The sheer gullibility, the absolute faith that makes one look like an idiot bind most, if not all, of Kafkan characters.

The interpretation can be taken further to cover the human predicament of the crossing of the threshold that separates as well as connects. It involves crucial decision-making in the face of the unknown. The metaphysical and abstract universe of law and justice discourages man to cross the threshold. This unknown and unknowable world almost becomes surreal when one fails to gather enough courage to go through an open door.

In ›*The Trial*‹, this legend is narrated by a Christian priest, who appears to be a clever dialectician. He argues “the right perception of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other.” Further he adds “It is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary.” To this kind of reasoning the main protagonist of the novel, Josef K., replies “A melancholy conclusion. It turns lying into a universal principle.” In ›*Prometheus*‹ (posthumous 1931), the last remark is: “The legend attempts at explaining the inexplicable. Since its origin lies in truth, it must again end in the inexplicable.” These remarks can be interpreted as a subtle explanation of legends and also as a justification of the apparent contradictions in the legends. One thing that is, however, certain is the ambiguity and the esoteric nature of all signifiers. The signification of the Kafkan paradoxes cannot be fixed, it multiplies infinitely. However much one interprets, there is always a nagging feeling that there is more to it. The meaning remains allusive and therein lies the secret of the long life of a legend or a myth for it defies simple solutions or answers.

An interesting comparative study between Kafka and Marc Chagall (1887–1985) has been made by Iris Bruce¹⁴). Kafka's use of mythological and folkloristic motifs has been compared to Chagall's anthropomorphic paintings, which also draw heavily on mythology and folktales. The comparison becomes all the more significant, as both the artists belong to overlapping generations and are Jews from Eastern Europe. Chagall was a Russian Jew who migrated, 1923, to France. But as Iris Bruce himself admits, Chagall's images, despite some surrealist features, are much more concrete, vivid and colourful than Kafka's tortured souls.

Kafka's mock theological disputation and specially the caricature of an orthodox Jew or for that matter a Moslem (actually there is no difference between religions

¹⁴) In: JULIAN PREECE (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, Cambridge: University Press 2002, p. 150–168.

when it comes to orthodoxy) as the corrupt doorkeeper and the narration of the legend in ›The Trial‹ by a catholic priest (it works as a camouflage over camouflage), shows that he was aware of the pitfalls of the Zionist movement.

IV.

›Before the Law‹ and Poe's ›Purloined Letter‹

Kafka's legend reminds me of Edgar Allan Poe's ›The Purloined Letter‹ (1844/45)¹⁵). In this famous tale, a queen has a love letter (the exact contents of the letter are not disclosed to the readers even till the end) stolen right under her nose by a daring minister who wants to take political advantage of it. The queen is unable to prevent the theft owing to the King's presence in the room. This 'purloined letter' must be recovered at all costs. The Queen's secret police, equipped with magnifying glasses and other sophisticated paraphernalia, search the minister's place several times – his cupboards, desk, bed, arms and legs of the chairs, etc but they fail to locate the letter. Then the Queen sends for Dupin, who enjoys a Sherlock-like reputation, with this assignment. His alert mind discovers the precious letter openly displayed in a card-rack. He steals it and restores it to the queen. These seemingly different stories have one thing in common and that is the 'open' signifier which is so obvious that the other party misses its signification. In ›Before the Law‹, the man from the countryside sees the open door for many years but fails to grasp its significance, for he is too taken in by the watchman. In ›Purloined Letter‹ it is the police which is fooled by the obvious. They are trained to find what is hidden. Their training fails them when the object of search is not concealed but is openly and almost casually albeit deliberately displayed. The open display of the dangerous and important letter becomes its camouflage. The inversion of the obvious gives to both the stories a twist and makes them popular narratives. In Kafka's legend the watchman dupes the man from the countryside; in Poe's story Dupin ultimately dupes (note the pun in the name!) the minister who had duped first the queen and then the entire Parisian secret police. In both narratives the object of desire is within reach. One only has to extend one's hand and seize it. The two texts illustrate the dense textual layers and the complex nature of literary texts that explore some aspects of the complex human vagaries.

V.

Conclusion

One question may bother the readers of this paper. Why tinker with Kafka's Jewish background when he was himself discreet about it? This is where psychoanalysis comes handy. One tries to forget or bury certain events, encounters and

¹⁵) Lacan has done an excellent analysis of ›The Purloined Letter‹. Cf. JACQUES LACAN, *Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature*, New York 2001.

confrontations but they continue to inhabit the inner layers of the unconscious. They become a part of his psychic component. According to Lacan, man forgets his signifiers but the signifiers never forget him. The hidden signifiers are restructured and they manifest themselves in dreams, jokes or slips of the pen or the tongue. In case of a writer, they would invariably merge in his writing even if he tries his level best to cover them. They emerge with or without the conscious permission of the referent. It is the task of a literary critic to decipher this re-structuration in a writer without losing sight of the specificities of a literary discourse.

Kafka's stories explore an astonishing variety of motifs. His fictional works can be broadly categorised into those that draw on his office work, his family life, his existence as a writer and his religious heritage. Texts like ›The Trial‹ and ›The Castle‹ (Das Schloß, posthumous 1926) or smaller prose writings like ›Poseidon‹ (posthumous 1936) explore the modern bureaucratic phenomenon; ›Metamorphosis‹ and ›Judgement‹ (›Das Urteil‹, 1913), are woven around the family; ›A Report for an Academy‹ (›Ein Bericht für eine Akademie‹, 1917) and ›The Hungry Artist‹ (›Der Hungerkünstler‹, 1922) explore the role of art and the artist; ›Jackals and Arabs‹, ›Animal in the Synagogue‹, ›Investigations of a Dog‹ and some other narratives explore the tussle between the liberal and orthodox elements within a religion and the aphorisms and ›Mediations‹ (›Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg‹, posthumous 1931) are reflections on a variety of themes like modernity and life as such. Some works are, of course, difficult to place in any of these well-defined slots.

In my view, Kafka was articulating basically, what may be called 'intertextuality'. He interprets the intertexts of cosmology, mythology and fiction, and the end result is a highly charged political discourse. On the one hand, his writing is atemporal, their truth is valid for all times, all cultures and all systems. Kafka's indifference to the real time can be gauged from a remark in his diary dated 24 January, 1915 that his watch had been an hour and a half ahead for three months till one day his fiancée finally set it right to the minute.¹⁶ Kafka's observation is a quiet disapproval of his fiancée's interference. At the manifest level, he was least interested in politics. There are two interesting, metonymically related remarks of Kafka in his diary, recorded on the same day. First he writes that Germany has declared war on Russia and in the next line he writes in a rather detached manner, that he is going for a swim.

2 August, 1914

Germany has declared war on Russia – Swimming in the afternoon.¹⁷)

On the other hand, despite this distance from the political events of his day, which are conspicuously absent from his writings, his works were banned twice after his death – first by the Nazis in Germany and then by the communists in Eastern Europe. Obviously his writing is provocative and it has ruffled many feathers despite all the camouflage of fables, myths and legends.

¹⁶) KAFKA, *Diaries* (cit. fn. 3), p. 328.

¹⁷) *Ibid.*, p. 301.

Benjamin's analyses of Kafka's writing in his essay, ›Potemkin‹, on the tenth death anniversary of Kafka¹⁸) and in a letter to Scholem¹⁹), dated 1938, from Paris, where he had been hiding from the Nazis, are worthy of reference here. Unlike other German Marxists of his time, like Lukács and Brecht, who rejected Kafka outright, Benjamin was one of the first critics to realise Kafka's worth (or was it the Jew in Benjamin, who was unconsciously attracted to a writer with Jewish roots?). In the last two years before he took his life, Benjamin had been reading a lot of Kafka. Whatever the reason, his analysis is an important contribution to the studies on Kafka that takes into account Kafka's Jewishness without glorifying it. His interpretation is shorn of the ideological blinkers of socialist realism or the straightforward theological ones led by none other than Kafka's life-long friend, Brod (which is why I call their friendship a puzzle):

[Kafka's writings] do not modestly lie at the feet of doctrine, as aggadah [legends, anecdotes] lies at the feet of halakha [law]. When they have crouched down, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it.²⁰)

Kafka was certainly a Jew, but he would not be a creative writer, a great storyteller, if he took the Jewish elements literally. The dense and rich literary signifiers of Kafka cannot be confined to religious or racial aspects alone, even if the Jews in Israel insist *a priori* on doing so. Many critics, particularly those of Jewish origin (Max Brod to start with, then the migrant Jews in America like Wagenbach, Sokel and even Hannah Arendt with her interpretation of ›Das Schloss‹, Scholem in Israel) have made this error. The pain and the sorrow of exile and the Holocaust perhaps inadvertently influenced their interpretation. As a Jew, Kafka was certainly a member of that group but as a creative artist he did not dissolve in that group. It would not be inappropriate to describe Kafka's Jewishness in terms of the Self and the Other Self. One cannot deny or abandon what one inherits in terms of religion, language, history and culture but to remain confined to it would also be disastrous. This kind of confinement has paralysed many communities that were once upon a time vibrant and creative. The same also applies to the contemporary Jewish state of Israel. Kafka engages dialectically with the Jewish tradition and also with other concepts and ideologies of his times but those elements enter new combinations, and in the process lose all the earlier *a priori* cosmological and theological significance. He generates his own specific literary discourse, which is radically different from the sources from which it draws inspiration. It is indeed a new formal and conceptual construct and must be understood as such.

¹⁸) WALTER BENJAMIN, Franz Kafka. Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages, in: Aufsätze. Essays. Vorträge. Gesammelte Schriften, Frankfurt/M. 1991, Bd. II.2, pp. 409–438.

¹⁹) WALTER BENJAMIN, Briefe, hrsg. von GERSHOM SCHOLEM und THEODOR W. ADORNO, Frankfurt/M. 1993.

²⁰) *Ibid.*, p. 763 (Transl. R. S.). In German: "Sie [Kafkas Dichtungen] legen sich der Lehre nicht schlicht zu Füßen wie sich die Hagada der Halacha zu Füßen legt. Wenn sie sich gekuschelt haben, heben sie unversehens eine gewichtige Pranke gegen sie."