Franz Kafka's Jewish Question

For his centennial, July 3, 1883 — June 3, 1924

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As Lonely as Franz Kafka, by Marthe Robert, tr. from the French by Ralph Manheim. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, N.Y., 1982, 251 pages, indexed, $14.95.

FEW WRITERS are as multiple as is Franz Kafka: critics have invented Kafka the religious writer, Kafka the political seer, Kafka the writer's writer. Marthe Robert, in her study, *As Lonely as Franz Kafka*, reminds us that "Kafka was not for one moment an artificially cut-out silhouette, but a man forced to struggle to find air he could breathe, a corner to lodge in, concrete ground to set foot on," and that in order to understand Kafka we must set out from the point that he himself considered central to his existence: Franz Kafka the Prague Jew.

In pursuing her goal, Robert has chosen the bulk of her material from his diaries and correspondence. The information gleaned from these sources is then applied to his fiction. Her conclusions leave little room for doubt: Kafka's writing was the conscious and self-conscious projection of a particularly Jewish *geist*.

The position of Prague's Jews during his lifetime was a far more tenuous one than they themselves cared to admit. Being largely German-speaking in a country in the throes of a rebirth of Czech nationalism would, on a symbolic as well as a practical level, have sufficed to alienate them from their neighboring Czechs; their position in the marketplace (Kafka's father, like many Jews, was a merchant — one who was particularly abusive of his employees, his "paid enemies," as Kafka termed them, which resulted in the son's life-long sympathy for the oppressed) as well as popular anti-Semitism, fanned by the nationalist Young Czech movement, served only to aggravate the precariousness of their position.

Jewish attempts at assimilation, in any event difficult, were rendered fruitless by their linguistic choice. By speaking German and sending their children to German-language schools, they sought assimilation not into the surrounding Czech culture but into the distant Austro-German culture. As Robert points out, "rather than being assimilated in the Berlin or Vienna sense of the word, Kafka was Germanized; that is, his language was his only substitute for everything of which destiny had deprived him: a native soil, a fatherland, a present and a past." Consequently, Kafka's very being was shaken when, as a result of his first contact with the Yiddish theatre in 1911, he was led to doubt his right to the German language. He wrote in a letter to his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, that the use of Ger-

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man is "a self-pitying appropriation of someone else's property, something not earned, but stolen by means of a relatively casual gesture. Yet it remains someone else's property."

Indeed, it was Kafka's discovery of the Yiddish theatre and the Yiddish language that was to constitute the turning point in his life and work. The marks these discoveries were to leave form a cornerstone of Robert's analysis.

Kafka found his way to Yiddish not through the reading of Yiddish literature, nor through contact with any of the leading lights of the Yiddish cultural world; rather it was the raggedy theatre company of one Isaak Löwy, which performed not in one of Prague's great halls but in the rundown Cafe Savoy, which so impressed and moved him.

One should not underestimate the provocativeness of Kafka's love of Yiddish, for in his milieu it was despised as a miserable patois, an awful reminder of the long-forgotten shtetl from which the Jews had only recently departed. Kafka's love for the language and its speakers inspired the wrath of his father, whose disparaging remarks about Löwy were to result in Kafka's profoundly self-analytical letter, posthumously published under the title *Letter To His Father*. Also as a result of his love of Yiddish, Kafka gave a public speech as an introduction to an evening of Yiddish poetry, in which he told his auditors to forget their prejudices against the language, to allow themselves to be taken hold of and moved by it — "then you will come to feel the true unity of Yiddish, and so strongly that it will frighten you, yet it will no longer be fear of Yiddish but of yourselves."

Relying on research done by Evelyn Tornton Beck [editor of *Nice Jewish Girls* — see our review in the June issue — Ed.] and published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1971 as *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on His Work*, Robert demonstrates how the Yiddish theater, in the pitiful form in which Kafka knew it (with actors forgetting their lines, cheap sets and costumes, and a general lack of professionalism), was to have tremendous influence upon his writing. Two clownish characters in Joseph Lateiner's *Der Meshumed* (The Convert) were to be the basis for similar (yet vastly different) pairs in *Amerika*, *The Trial* and *The Castle*; the moment in Kafka's story, "The Verdict," in which the son takes his father in his arms and puts him to bed, mirrors a scene in Jacob Gordin's *Gott, Mentsh un Taivel* (God, Man and the Devil); and the central event in Kafka's masterpiece, "The Metamorphosis," that of a man turning into an enormous insect, is an echo of Gordin's *Der Wilder Mensch* (The Wild Man), in which an idiot is gradually reduced to an animal, walking on all four in the room in which his family has locked him up.

It must be added that Robert reproaches Evelyn Beck for "attributing certain stories to an outside influence, disregard(ing) the core — that is, the psychic 'superdetermination' which . . . governed the organization of his images." It was this depth of feeling stirred up by Yiddish, and the concomitant strengthening of his feelings as a Jew, which led to the thoughts on German cited above in his letter to Brod. According to Robert this could not have failed to affect Kafka's prose style: feeling himself ineligible to consider German entirely his in private life, he considered himself to have a right only to the German of the public sphere, most particularly as used in the course of his work as a functionary of the Worker's Insurance Fund. In German Kafka was "to fashion an im-

personal and anonymous literary work — it, too, in the image of the expropriation to which he was obliged to accomodate himself."

Kafka's rigorous prose style, free of the linguistic liberty of his early prose and of modernism in general, was thus a product of his self-imposed distance from his language, and resulted in works in which "he composes judiciary chronicles, reports, affidavits with the same glacial indifference, the same inhumanity but, it goes without saying, with infinitely more humor than the world bureaucracy shows to its clients."

Although Kafka's encounter with his Jewishness forced a crisis in his life and led him to reevaluate his entire literary endeavor, his relation to Jews, Jewishness and Judaism was in no way simple. Robert underlines the fact that none of the cataclysmic events which occurred during Kafka's childhood — anti-Semitic riots, blood libel charges — are reflected in his correspondence. It would seem that his extremely problematic relationship with his father led him to an almost inevitable case of "Jewish self-hatred," while his experience of Judaism in his youth could hardly have been inspiring, with his family's meaningless observance of holidays and his strictly formal attendance at the synagogue on the High Holy Days — "preliminary studies arranged by hell to prepare for life in the office," as he was to write.

Although the Jewish question had dominated his life since 1911, we find in his diaries for 1914 an anguished Kafka asking: "What have I in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe." Yet we find him writing, at approximately the same time, after visiting a hall where Russian Jewish refugees were being housed: "If I'd be given the choice to be what I wanted, then I'd have chosen to be a small Eastern Jewish boy in the corner of the room." Kafka's Jewishness was varied; as Robert says, "assimilated Jew, anti-Jewish Jew, anti-Zionist, Zionist, believer, atheist — Kafka was indeed all of these at different times in his development, sometimes all at once."

There can be no doubt that Kafka hated the sterile Jewishness with which he was raised, which sought — dishonestly, he felt — to melt into its surroundings and was possessed, as he wrote, of a "small, dirty, lukewarm, squinting spirit." But he also felt that this Jewishness was not the sole Jewishness in the world. With his discovery of the Yiddish theatre came an intense admiration for the Jews of Eastern Europe. These Jews were, in his eyes, authentic, grounded entirely in their shtetls, their traditions and their language. "Humble and proud," Robert says, "endowed with an exuberant life that did not contaminate his purity, the Eastern Jew . . . was everything the Western Jew lost by trying to become civilized."

Kafka praised them in his journals and letters, read about them, spoke about them, but all of this only sharpened his sense of desolation: he was a Western Jew and could never become one with those of the East. Robert writes: "In consigning himself to the category of condemned Jew he forfeited all hope of salvation — to the end of his days, as he saw it, he would be useless, incomplete, socially and spiritually sterile." This whirlpool of feelings produced guilt in the author of the kind that was to victimize his characters (like Joseph K. in *The Trial*), for just as Kafka felt "guilty toward non-Jews . . . he also sinned gravely against Judaism, which he betrayed at every moment by neglecting to profess it though lacking the cour

age to break with it altogether. This twofold fault was the direct source of the guilt *without a crime* that led Joseph K. to destruction *without judgment*."

The dialectic of rejection/acceptance of Judaism, of its Law, according to Robert, was to torment Kafka's life and work, "for to his mind the commandment was not nullified by the disappearance of the commander . . . Having wholly become emancipated from the divine order," Kafka found "it became more constrictive than ever and so tyrannical that there was neither measure nor limit to its demands."

This rejected yet active law, Robert continues, appeared in Kafka's bizarre eating habits (he was at various points in his life a vegetarian, always a finicky eater, and even went through a period in which he chewed each mouthful 30 times), which became a twisted form of alimentary segregation, a *kashruth* gone haywire. Kafka also seemed to take literally a line from the Talmud, which he heard at the Yiddish theatre, that "a man without a woman is not a human creature"; this exaggerated importance overwhelmed him, rendered marriage impossible for him to accomplish, as he was engaged to be wed three times, twice to the same woman, and was able to live happily with a woman only when his tuberculosis had made any future impossible.

No analysis, however just, can account for all facets of an *oeuvre* as fecund as that of Kafka, and though Robert occasionally lashes out at rival interpretations, especially the metaphysical, the acceptance of her viewpoint does not necessarily exclude others; indeed, it tends to illuminate rather than obliterate various other interpretations. For example, Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti's view of Kafka as the voice of the refusal of power dovetails perfectly with a Judeo-centric analysis, the Jew being the perfect archetype of the powerless victim. And Robert's study, in its examination of the depths from which Kafka's work sprang, ignores certain *surface* elements that, however distant from the focus of her analysis, must be mentioned. For not only did his inflated notions of marriage springing from Judaism affect his life; this part of his life in turn formed the warp of *The Trial*, which, as Canetti shows in *Kafka's Other Trial*, is a reflection of his failed engagement to Felice Bauer. On the question of marriage, moreover, whatever part Judaism might have played in his attitude, the true source of his anguish (of which he spoke in his letter to his father) was that he viewed marriage as part of the paternal sphere from which his entire life and work was an attempt at escape. Finally, however impressed we might be by Robert's discovery of the roots of Kafka's mature literary style in his Jewish alienation from German, the effect of his life as a bureaucrat, not only on his form but his content as well, is too obvious to be passed over.

These criticisms are minor, however. *As Lonely as Franz Kafka* is a study entirely worthy of its subject. ■

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