

London Review of Books

Vol. 33 No. 5 · 3 March 2011, pages 3-8

Who Owns Kafka?

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An ongoing trial in Tel Aviv is set to determine who will have stewardship of several boxes of Kafka's original writings, including primary drafts of his published works, currently stored in Zurich and Tel Aviv. As is well known, Kafka left his published and unpublished work to Max Brod, along with the explicit instruction that the work should be destroyed on Kafka's death. Indeed, Kafka had apparently already burned much of the work himself. Brod refused to honour the request, although he did not publish everything that was bequeathed to him. He published the novels *The Trial*, *The Castle* and *Amerika* between 1925 and 1927. In 1935, he published the collected works, but then put most of the rest away in suitcases, perhaps honouring Kafka's wish not to have it published, but surely refusing the wish to have it destroyed. Brod's compromise with himself turned out to be consequential, and in some ways we are now living out the consequences of the non-resolution of Kafka's bequest.

Brod fled Europe for Palestine in 1939, and though many of the manuscripts in his custody ended up at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, he held on to a substantial number of them until his death in 1968. It was to his secretary Esther Hoffe, with whom he appears to have had an amorous relationship, that Brod bequeathed the manuscripts, and she kept most of them until her own death in 2007 at the age of 101. For the most part Esther did as Max did, holding on to the various boxes, stashing them in vaults, but in 1988 she sold the manuscript of *The Trial* for \$2 million, at which point it became clear that one could turn quite a profit from Kafka. What no one could have predicted, however, is that a trial would eventually take place after Esther's death in which her daughters, Eva and Ruth, would claim that no one needs to inventory the materials and that the value of the manuscripts should be determined by their weight – quite literally, by what they weigh. As one of the attorneys representing Hoffe's estate explained: 'If we get an agreement, the material will be offered for sale as a single entity, in one package. It will be sold by weight ... They'll say: "There's a kilogram of papers here, the highest bidder will be able to approach

and see what's there." The National Library [of Israel] can get in line and make an offer, too.'

How Kafka turned into such a commodity – indeed a new gold standard – is an important question, and one to which I shall return. We are all too familiar with the way in which the value of literary and academic work is currently being established by quantitative means, but I am not sure anyone has yet proposed that we simply weigh our work on the scales. But to begin with, let us consider who the parties are to the trial and the various claims they make. First, there is the National Library of Israel, which claims that Esther Hoffe's will should be set aside, since Kafka does not belong to these women, but either to the 'public good' or else to the Jewish people, where these sometimes seem to be the same. David Blumberg, chairman of the board of directors of the National Library, puts the case this way: 'The library does not intend to give up on cultural assets belonging to the Jewish people ... Because it is not a commercial institution and the items kept there are accessible to all without cost, the library will continue its efforts to gain transfer of the manuscripts that have been found.' It is interesting to consider how Kafka's writings can at once constitute an 'asset' of the Jewish people and at the same time have nothing to do with commercial activities. Oren Weinberg, the CEO of the National Library, made a similar remark more recently: 'The library regards with concern the new position expressed by the executors, who want to mix financial considerations into the decision as to whom the estate will be given. Revealing the treasures, which have been hidden in vaults for decades, will serve the public interest, but the position of the executors is liable to undermine that measure, for reasons that will benefit neither Israel nor the world.'

So it seems we are to understand Kafka's work as an 'asset' of the Jewish people, though not a restrictively financial one. If Kafka is claimed as a primarily Jewish writer, he comes to belong primarily to the Jewish people, and his writing to the cultural assets of the Jewish people. This claim, already controversial (since it effaces other modes of belonging or, rather, non-belonging), becomes all the more so when we realise that the legal case rests on the presumption that it is the state of Israel that represents the Jewish people. This may seem a merely descriptive claim, but it carries with it extraordinary, and contradictory, consequences. First, the claim overcomes the distinction between Jews who are Zionist and Jews who are not, for example Jews in the diaspora for whom the

homeland is not a place of inevitable return or a final destination. Second, the claim that it is Israel that represents the Jewish people has domestic consequences as well. Indeed, Israel's problem of how best to achieve and maintain a demographic majority over its non-Jewish population, now estimated to constitute more than 20 per cent of the population within its existing borders, is predicated on the fact that Israel is not a restrictively Jewish state and that, if it is to represent its population fairly or equally, it must represent both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. The assertion that Israel represents the Jewish people thus denies the vast number of Jews outside Israel who are not represented by it, either legally or politically, but also the Palestinian and other non-Jewish citizens of that state. The position of the National Library relies on a conception of the nation of Israel that casts the Jewish population outside its territory as living in the Galut, in a state of exile and despondency that should be reversed, and can be reversed only through a return to Israel. The implicit understanding is that all Jews and Jewish cultural assets – whatever that might mean – outside Israel eventually and properly belong to Israel, since Israel represents not only all Jews but all significant Jewish cultural production. I will simply note that there exists a great deal of interesting commentary on this problem of the Galut by scholars such as Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, who, in his extraordinary work on exile and sovereignty, argues that the exilic is proper to Judaism and even to Jewishness, and that Zionism errs in thinking that exile must be overcome through the invocation of the Law of Return, or indeed, the popular notion of 'birthright'. Exile may in fact be a point of departure for thinking about cohabitation and for bringing diasporic values back to that region. This was also no doubt Edward Said's point when, in *Freud and the Non-European*, he called for the exilic histories of both Jews and Palestinians to serve as the basis for a new polity in Palestine.

The Galut is thus not a fallen realm in need of redemption, even though it is precisely what state and cultural forms of Zionism seek to overcome through extending rights of return to all those born of Jewish mothers – and now through claiming significant works by those who happen to be Jews as Jewish cultural capital that, as such, rightly belongs to the Israeli state. Indeed, if the argument of the National Library were successful, then the representative claim of the state of Israel would be greatly expanded. As Antony Lerman put it in the *Guardian*, if

the National Library claims the legacy of Kafka for the Jewish state, it, and institutions like it in Israel, can lay claim to practically any pre-Holocaust synagogue, artwork, manuscript or valuable ritual object extant in Europe. But neither Israel as a state, nor any state or public institution, has such a right. (And while it's true that Kafka is a key figure of the Jewish cultural past, as one of the world's most significant authors whose themes find echoes in many countries and cultures, Israel's proprietary attitude is surely misplaced.)

Although Lerman laments the 'implied subservience of European Jewish communities to Israel', the problem has broader global implications: if the diaspora is conceived as a fallen realm, unredeemed, then all cultural production by those who are arguably Jewish according to the rabbinic laws governing the Law of Return will be subject to posthumous legal appropriation, provided that the work is regarded as an 'asset'. And this brings me to my third point, namely, that where there are assets, there are also liabilities. So it is not enough for a person or a work to be Jewish; they have to be Jewish in a way that can be capitalised on by the Israeli state as it currently fights on many fronts against cultural delegitimation. An asset, one imagines, is something that enhances Israel's world reputation, which many would allow is in need of repair: the wager is that the world reputation of Kafka will become the world reputation of Israel. But a liability, and a Jewish one, is someone whose person or work, arguably Jewish, constitutes a deficit of some kind; consider, for instance, the recent efforts to prosecute Israeli human rights organisations, such as B'tselem, for publicly documenting the number of civilian casualties in the war against Gaza. Perhaps Kafka might be instrumentalised to overcome the loss of standing that Israel has suffered by virtue of its ongoing illegal occupation of Palestinian land. It matters that Israel comes to own the work, but also that the work is housed within the established territory of the state, so that anyone who seeks to see and study that work must cross Israel's border and engage with its cultural institutions. And this is also problematic, not only because citizens from several countries and non-citizens within the Occupied Territories are not allowed to cross that border, but also because many artists, performers and intellectuals are currently honouring the cultural and academic boycott, refusing to appear in Israel unless their host institutions voice a strong and sustained opposition to the occupation. The Kafka trial not only takes place against this political backdrop, but actively intervenes in its reconfiguration: if the National Library

in Jerusalem wins its case, to have access to the unpublished and unseen materials of Franz Kafka one will have to defy the boycott and will have implicitly to acknowledge the Israeli state's right to appropriate cultural goods whose high value is assumed to convert contagiously into the high value of Israel itself. Can poor Kafka shoulder such a burden? Can he really help the Israeli state overcome the bad press of the occupation?

It is strange that Israel might be relying on the fragile remains of Franz Kafka to establish its cultural claim to work that is produced by that class of persons we might call 'arguably Jewish'. And it probably also matters that the adversaries here are the daughters of the one-time mistress of Max Brod, a committed Zionist, whose own political interests seem to be vastly overshadowed by the prospect of financial gain. Their pursuit of a profitable outcome seems to know no national boundaries and to honour no particular claims of national belonging – like capitalism itself. In fact, the German Literature Archive would probably be in a better position to pay the sums imagined by these sisters. In a desperate move, the Israeli counsel for the National Library sought to debunk the ownership claims of the sisters by producing a letter by Brod accusing his paramour of disrespecting him, and insisting that he would prefer to leave these materials to someone who regarded him as a person of significance. Since the letter names no such people, it might be hard to sustain the claim that it overrides the explicit stipulation of the will. We shall see whether this document of a lover's quarrel holds up in court.

The National Library's most powerful adversary is the German Literature Archive in Marbach, which, interestingly, has retained Israeli lawyers for the purposes of the trial. Presumably, with Israeli counsel, this does not have the appearance of a German-Jewish fight, and so does not recall that other trial – Eichmann's in 1961 – in which the judge suddenly broke out of Hebrew and into German to address Eichmann directly. That moment caused a controversy over the question of what language belongs in an Israeli court of law, and of whether Eichmann should have been accorded such a courtesy. Several German scholars and newspapers have recently argued that Marbach is the proper home for Kafka's newly discovered writings. Marbach, they point out, already owns the largest collection of Kafka manuscripts in the world, including the manuscript of *The Trial*, which it bought for 3.5 million German marks at Sotheby's in 1988. These scholars argue against further fragmentation of the oeuvre, and point to

the superior capacity of the Marbach facility to conserve such materials. There seems to be a sense that Germany might be, all in all, a more secure location. But of course another part of the argument is that Kafka belongs to German literature and, specifically, to the German language. And though there is no attempt to say that he belongs to Germany as one of its past or virtual citizens, it seems that Germanness here transcends the history of citizenship and pivots on the question of linguistic competence and accomplishment. The argument of the German Literature Archive effaces the importance of multilingualism for Kafka's formation and for his writing. (Indeed, would we have the Babel parables without the presumption of multilingualism, and would communication falter so insistently in his works without that backdrop of Czech, Yiddish and German converging in Kafka's world?)

In focusing on just how perfectly German his language is, the archive joins in a long and curious tradition of praise for Kafka's 'pure' German. George Steiner lauded 'the translucency of Kafka's German, its stainless quiet', remarking that his 'vocabulary and syntax are those of utmost abstention from waste'. John Updike referred to 'the stirring purity' of Kafka's prose. Hannah Arendt, as well, wrote that his work 'speaks the purest German prose of the century'. So although Kafka was certainly Czech, it seems that fact is superseded by his written German, which is apparently the most pure – or, shall we say, purified? Given the history of the valuation of 'purity' within German nationalism, including National Socialism, it is curious that Kafka should be made to stand for this rigorous and exclusionary norm. In what ways must Kafka's multilingualism and his Czech origins be 'purified' in order to have him stand for a pure German? Is what is most remarkable or admirable about him that he seems to have purified himself, exemplifying the self-purifying capacities of the *Ausländer*?

It is interesting that these arguments about Kafka's German are recirculating now, just as Angela Merkel has announced the failure of multiculturalism in Germany and marshalled as evidence the further claim that new immigrants, and indeed their 'children and grandchildren', fail to speak German correctly. She has publicly admonished such communities to rid themselves of every accent and to 'integrate' into the norms of the German linguistic community (a complaint quickly countered by Jürgen Habermas). Surely, Kafka could be a model of the successful immigrant, though he lived only briefly in Berlin, and

clearly did not identify even with the German Jews. If Kafka's new works are recruited to the Marbach archive, then Germany will be fortified in its effort to shift its nationalism to the level of language; the inclusion of Kafka takes place for the very same reason that less well-spoken immigrations are denounced and resisted. Is it possible that fragile Kafka could become a norm of European integration?

We find in Kafka's correspondence with his lover Felice Bauer, who was from Berlin, that she is constantly correcting his German, suggesting that he is not fully at home in this second language. And his later lover, Milena Jesenská, who was also the translator of his works into Czech, is constantly teaching him Czech phrases he neither knows how to spell nor to pronounce, suggesting that Czech, too, is also something of a second language. In 1911, he is going to the Yiddish theatre and understanding what is said, but Yiddish is not a language he encounters very often in his family or his daily life; it remains an import from the east that is compelling and strange. So is there a first language here? And can it be argued that even the formal German in which Kafka writes – what Arendt called 'purest' German – bears the signs of someone entering the language from its outside? This was the argument in Deleuze and Guattari's essay 'Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature'.

Indeed, this quarrel seems to be an old one, one that Kafka himself invokes in a letter to Felice in October 1916 with reference to Max Brod's essay on Jewish writers, 'Our Writers and the Community', published in *Der Jude*.

And incidentally, won't you tell me what I really am; in the last *Neue Rundschau*, 'Metamorphosis' is mentioned and rejected on sensible grounds, and then the writer says: 'There is something fundamentally German about K's narrative art.' In Max's article on the other hand: 'K's stories are among the most typically Jewish documents of our time.'

'A difficult case,' Kafka writes. 'Am I a circus rider on two horses? Alas, I am no rider, but lie prostrate on the ground.'

Let us consider some more of Kafka's writings – his letters, some diary entries, two parables and a story – in order to cast light on the question of his belonging, his views on Zionism and his more general ways of thinking about reaching (and

failing to reach) a destination. So far as we're concerned with assessing the rights of ownership claimed in the trial, it probably doesn't matter whether or not Kafka was a Zionist or whether he planned seriously to move to Palestine. The fact is that Brod was a Zionist and brought Kafka's work along, even though Kafka himself never went, and never really planned to. He understood Palestine as a destination, but referred to the plan to go there as 'dreams'. It was not simply that he lacked the will, but that he had a stopping ambivalence about the entire project. What I hope to show is that a poetics of non-arrival pervades this work and affects, if not afflicts, his love letters, his parables about journeys, and his explicit reflections on both Zionism and on the German language. I can understand that one might want to look specifically at what Kafka wrote about trials to see what light might be shed on the contemporary trial by his writings, but there are some differences that need to be remarked. This current trial is about ownership and rests in part on claims of national and linguistic belonging, but most of the trials and procedures that Kafka writes about involve unfounded allegations and nameless guilt. Now Kafka has himself become property, if not chattel (literally, an item of tangible movable or immovable property not attached to land), and the debate over his final destination is taking place, ironically, in family court. The very question of where Kafka belongs is already something of a scandal given the fact that the writing charts the vicissitudes of non-belonging, or of belonging too much. Remember: he broke every engagement he ever had, he never owned an apartment, and he asked his literary executor to destroy his papers, after which that contractual relation was to have ended. So arrangements outlived their original purposes and their intended timespan. Even though Kafka's job was to adjudicate administrative insurance claims and binding contracts, his personal life was curiously void of them, except for an occasional contract to publish. Of course, I am prepared to accept that the legal management of his papers requires a decision regarding their stewardship, and that this problem of legal ownership has to be solved so the papers can be inventoried and made accessible. But if we turn to his writing to help us sort through this mess, we may well find that his writing is instead most pertinent in helping us to think through the limits of cultural belonging, as well as the traps of certain nationalist trajectories that have specific territorial destinations as their goal.

There is no doubt that Kafka's Jewishness was important, but this in no way implied any sustained view on Zionism. He was immersed in Jewishness, but also sought to survive its sometimes pressing social demands. In 1911 he went to the Yiddish theatre nearly every week and described in detail what he saw there. In the subsequent years he read – 'greedily' as he puts it – *L'Histoire de la littérature Judéo-Allemande* by Meyer Pines, which was full of Hasidic tales, followed by Fromer's *Organismus des Judentums*, which details rabbinic Talmudic traditions. He attended musical events at the Bar Kokhba Society, read portions of Kaballah and discussed them in his diaries, studied Moses Mendelssohn and Sholem Aleichem, read several Jewish magazines, attended lectures on Zionism and plays in Yiddish, and listened to Hebrew stories in translation. Apparently, on 25 February 1912, Kafka delivered a lecture on Yiddish, though I have not been able to find a copy. Perhaps it is stuffed in a box in Tel Aviv awaiting legal adjudication.

Alongside this impressive immersion in Jewish things – perhaps we could call it a mode of being enveloped – Kafka also voiced scepticism about that mode of social belonging. Hannah Arendt, whose own sense of belonging was similarly vexed (and became a subject of dispute with Gershom Scholem), made famous one of Kafka's quips about the Jewish people: 'My people, provided that I have one.' As Louis Begley has recently made clear in a quite candid biographical essay, Kafka remained not only in two minds about Jewishness, but sometimes quite clearly torn apart. 'What have I in common with Jews?' he wrote in a diary entry in 1914. 'I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.' Sometimes his own remarks on Jews were harsh, if not violent, when, for instance, he calls the Jewish people 'lizards'. In a letter to Milena, a non-Jew, he crosses over into a genocidal and suicidal fantasy in which no one can finally breathe any more:

I could rather reproach you for having much too good an opinion of the Jews whom you know (including myself) – there are others! – sometimes I'd like to cram them all as Jews (including myself) into the drawer of the laundry chest, then wait, then open the drawer a little, to see whether all have already suffocated, if not, to close the drawer again and go on like this to the end.

Jewishness is linked up, time and again, with the possibility of breathing. What have I in common with the Jews? I am lucky that I can breathe at all. So is it the

Jews who make it difficult for him to breathe, or is it Kafka who imagines depriving the Jews of breath?

Kafka's suffocation fantasy reiterates a phantasmatic vacillation of size that we also find, for instance, in *The Judgment*. In the fantasy, Kafka is impossibly large, larger than all the Jews he imagines putting into the drawer. And yet, he is also in the drawer, which makes him unbearably small. In *The Judgment*, the father is by turns huge and tiny: at one moment the son, Georg, remarks that when erect, he is so tall that his hand lightly touches the ceiling, but in a previous moment, the father is reduced to the size of a child and Georg carries him to bed. The son towers over the father only to be sentenced to death by the force of the latter's words. Where is Kafka located in that fantasy of suffocation, and where is Georg? They are subject to a perpetual vacillation in which no one finally is sustained in a manageable scale. In the suffocation fantasy, Kafka is both agent and victim. But this persistent duality goes unrecognised by those who have used the letter to call him a self-hating Jew. Such a conclusion is no more warranted by the vacillations in his text than is the triumphant claim that Kafka's occasionally admiring remarks about Zionism make him a Zionist. (He is, after all, flirting in some of those instances.) The suffocation fantasy, written in 1920, is perhaps most usefully understood in relation to a letter to Felice written four years earlier, after reading Arnold Zweig's play *Ritual Murder in Hungary* (1916). The play enacts a drama from 1897 based on the blood libel against the Jews. Jews in a Hungarian village are accused of using a butcher's knife to kill Christians and then using their blood to make unleavened bread. In the play, the accused are brought to court, where the charges are dismissed. An anti-Jewish riot breaks out on the streets and violence is directed against Jewish businesses and religious institutions. After reading Zweig's play, Kafka wrote to Felice: 'At one point I had to stop reading, sit down on the sofa, and weep. It's years since I wept.' The butcher's knife, or knives like it, then reappear in his diaries and letters, and even several times in the published fiction: in *The Trial*, for instance, and again, most vividly, in 'A Country Doctor'. The play gives us some sense of the limits of law, even the strange way that the law gives way to a lawlessness it cannot control.

The fact that Kafka wept at the story of false accusations – indeed, that few accounts made him weep as this one did – may strike us as surprising. The tone of the *The Trial* is, after all, one in which a false or obscure accusation against K.

is relayed in the most neutral terms, without resonating affect. It seems that the grief avowed in the letters is precisely what is put out of play in the writing; and yet the writing conveys precisely a set of events that are bound together neither through probable cause nor logical induction. So the writing effectively opens up the disjunction between clarity – we might even say a certain lucidity and purity of prose – and the horror that is normalised precisely as a consequence of that lucidity. No one can fault the grammar and syntax of Kafka's writing, and no one has ever found emotional excess in his tone; but precisely because of this apparently objective and rigorous mode of writing, a certain horror opens up in the midst of the quotidian, perhaps also an unspeakable grief. Syntax and theme are effectively at war, which means that we might think twice about praising Kafka only for his lucidity. After all, the lucid works as style only insofar as it betrays its own claim to self-sufficiency. Something obscure, if not unspeakable, opens up within the perfect syntax. Indeed, if we consider that recurrent and libellous accusations lurk in the background of his many trials, we can read the narrative voice as a neutralisation of outrage, a linguistic packing away of sorrow that paradoxically brings it to the fore. So Jews are his family, his small world, and he is already in some sense hemmed in by that small apartment, that relentless community, and in that sense suffocated. And yet, he was mindful of the stories and present dangers of anti-semitism, ones that he experienced directly in a riot that took place in 1918 in which he found himself amid a crowd 'swimming in Jew-hatred'. Did he then look to Zionism as a way out of this profound ambivalence: the need to flee the constraints of family and community coupled with the need to find a place imagined as free of anti-semitism?

Consider the very first letter Kafka wrote to Felice in September 1912. In the opening line, he asks her to picture him together with her in Palestine:

In the likelihood that you no longer have even the remotest recollection of me, I am introducing myself once more: my name is Franz Kafka, and I am the person who greeted you for the first time that evening at Director Brod's in Prague, the one who subsequently handed you across the table, one by one, photographs of a Thalia trip, and who finally, with the very hand now striking the keys, held your hand, the one which confirmed a promise to accompany him next year to Palestine.

As the correspondence unfolds over the next few years, Kafka lets her know time and again that he will really not be able to accompany her, not on this trip or on another, and certainly not to Palestine, at least not in this life as the person that he is: the hand that strikes the keys will not be holding her hand. Moreover, he has his doubts about Zionism and about ever arriving at that destination. He subsequently calls it a 'dream', and chides her a few years later for entertaining Zionism so seriously: 'You flirted with it,' he wrote. But actually, he was the one who introduced Palestine as the structure of flirtation: come with me, take my hand to the beyond. Indeed, as the relationship founders and breaks over the next few years, he makes clear that he has no intention of going, and that he thinks those who do go are pursuing an illusion. Palestine is a figural elsewhere where lovers go, an open future, the name of an unknown destination.

In *Kafka Goes to the Movies*, Hanns Zischler makes the case that filmic images provided Kafka with a primary means of access to the space of Palestine, and that Palestine was a film image for him, a projected field of fantasy. Zischler writes that Kafka saw the beloved land in film, as film. Indeed, Palestine was imagined as unpopulated, which has been ably confirmed by Ilan Pappé's work on early Zionist photography, in which Palestinian dwellings are quickly renamed as part of the natural landscape. Zischler's is an interesting thesis, but is probably not quite true, since the first of those films were not seen until 1921 according to the records we have, and Kafka was avidly attending meetings and reading journals, gaining a sense of Palestine as much from stories written and told as from public debates. In the course of those debates and reports, Kafka understood that there were conflicts emerging in the region. Indeed, his short story 'Jackals and Arabs', published in *Der Jude* in 1917, registers an impasse at the heart of Zionism. In that story, the narrator, who has wandered unknowingly into the desert, is greeted by the Jackals (*die Schakale*) a thinly disguised reference to the Jews. After treating him as a Messianic figure for whom they have been waiting for generations, they explain that his task is to kill the Arabs with a pair of scissors (perhaps a joke about how Jewish tailors from Eastern Europe are ill equipped for conflict). They don't want to do it themselves, since it would not be 'clean', but the Messiah is himself apparently unbound by kosher constraints. The narrator then speaks with the Arab leader, who explains that 'it's common knowledge; so long as Arabs exist, that pair of scissors goes wandering through the desert and will wander with us to the end

of our days. Every European is offered it for the great work; every European is just the Man that Fate has chosen for them.'

The story was written and published in 1917, the year Kafka's relationship with Felice came to an end. That same year, he clarifies to her in a letter: 'I am not a Zionist.' Slightly earlier he writes of himself to Grete Bloch that by temperament, he is a man 'excluded from every soul-sustaining community on account of his non-Zionist (I admire Zionism and am nauseated by it), non-practising Judaism'. After attending a meeting of Zionists in March 1915 with Max Brod, at which Jews from Eastern and Western Europe came together to sort out their differences, he describes the various characters, one with his 'shabby little jacket', and notes the 'diabolically unpleasant smile' of a little fellow described as 'a walking argument' with a 'canary voice'. This visual sequence finally includes himself: 'I, as if made of wood, a clothes-rack pushed into the middle of the room. And yet hope.'

From where precisely does this hope emerge? Here as elsewhere, the problem of destination touches on the question of emigrating to Palestine, but also on the problem, more generally, of whether messages can arrive and commands be rightly understood. Non-arrival describes the linguistic predicament of writing in a multilingual context, exploiting the syntactical rules of formal German to produce an uncanny effect, but also writing in a contemporary Babel where the misfires of language come to characterise the everyday situation of speech, whether amorous or political. The question that re-emerges in parables like 'An Imperial Message' is whether a message can be sent from here to there, or whether someone can travel from here to there, or indeed 'over there' – whether an expected arrival is really possible.

I would like to consider briefly two parables that touch on this problem of non-arrival, even the strange form of hope that can emerge from the broken sociality and counter-messianic impasse that characterise the parable form. 'My Destination' begins with the problem of a command that is not understood: 'I gave orders for my horse to be brought round from the stable. The servant did not understand me.' The command is perhaps given in a language that the servant does not understand, or else some presumptive hierarchy is no longer working as it is supposed to. More cognitive confusion ensues as the first-person narrator continues: 'In the distance I heard a bugle call, I asked him what this

meant.’ This time, it appears the servant understands the question, but the narrator is still not living in a common world of sound: ‘He knew nothing and had heard nothing.’ Apparently the servant only gave signs to indicate as much, though in the next line, he establishes his linguistic competence: ‘At the gate he stopped me, asking, “Where are you riding to, master?”’, which is followed by an immediate reply: “I don’t know.” I said only “away from here [*weg-von-hier*], away from here.” And then a third time: ‘Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination.’ The servant, who apparently did not understand the first command, or did not understand himself as addressed by it, now seems anxious to verify what the master actually knows about his goal (*das Ziel*). But the master’s answer is confounding: ‘Yes,’ he replies, ‘didn’t I say so?’ and then offers a place name, the hyphenated place ‘away-from-here’ (which becomes a term by which Deleuze links Kafka with a project of deterritorialisation). And yet, what does it mean to say ‘away-from-here’ is ‘my destination’? Any place that is not here can be away from here, but any place that becomes a ‘here’ will not be away from here, but only another here. Is there really any way away from here, or does ‘here’ follow us wherever we go? What would it mean to be freed of the spatio-temporal conditions of the ‘here’? We would not only have to be elsewhere, but that very elsewhere would have to transcend the spatio-temporal conditions of any existing place. So wherever he means to go, it will not be a place as we know a place to be. Is this a theological parable, one that figures an ineffable beyond? Is it a parable about Palestine, the place that in the imagination of the European, according to Kafka, is not a populated place, not a place that can be populated by any one?

In fact, he appears to be going somewhere where the sustenance of the human body will prove unnecessary. The servant remarks: ‘You have no provision [*Eßvorrat*] with you.’ “I need none,” I said. “The Journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I don’t get anything on the way. No provisions can save me [*Kein Eßvorrat kann mich retten*].’ And then comes the strange concluding sentence: ‘For it is, fortunately, a truly immense journey.’ In the German, it is ‘luckily’ (*zum Glück eine wahrhaft ungeheure Reise*). That word *ungeheure* means ‘uncanny’, ‘monstrous’, even ‘unfathomable’. So we might well ask what is this monstrous and unfathomable journey for which no food will be necessary. No food can save him from this lucky venture into the uncanny zone. Luckily, it seems the journey will not only require his starvation but will fail to save him, to

keep him in a place that is a place. He is going to a place that is no place and where no food will be necessary. If that place beyond place is itself a salvation, which is not precisely said, then it will be of a different kind from the one that food supplies to a living creature. We might call this a death drive toward Palestine, but we might also read it as an opening onto an infinite journey, or a journey into the infinite, that will gesture towards another world. I say 'gesture' because it is the term that Benjamin and Adorno use to talk about these stilled moments, these utterances that are not quite actions, that freeze or congeal in their thwarted and incomplete condition. And that seems to be what happens here: a gesture opens up a horizon as a goal, but there is no actual departure and there is surely no actual arrival.

The poetics of non-arrival can be found again in Kafka's parable 'The Coming of the Messiah', where we learn from an apparently authoritative voice that the Messiah 'will come ... when there is no one to destroy this possibility and no one to suffer its destruction'. The parable refers to an 'unbridled individualism of faith' that must first become possible; the German for 'unbridled' (*zügellos*) is closer to 'let loose' – an individualism let loose on the world, even out of control. Apparently, no one will make this come about, and it seems as if the Messiah will not take anthropomorphic form: the Messiah will come only when there is 'no one' to destroy the possibility or to suffer the destruction, which means that the Messiah will not come when there is one, only when there is no one, and that means as well that the Messiah will not be anyone, will not be an individual. This must be the result of a certain individualism that destroys each and every individual. Following the Book of Matthew, the parable claims that 'the graves will open themselves' and so, again, we are given to understand that they will not be opened by any human agency. When the narrator then claims that this is 'Christian doctrine too', he retroactively marks the opening of the parable as a Jewish one, but in fact there is a Babel of religions already in place: Judaism, Christianity, individualism, and then, after a garbled explanation, it seems that there are bits of Hegel in the description as well – indeed, the most unreadable bits. In fact, it seems that no coherent description is possible, and we are brought up against the limits of what can be thought. 'The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary. He will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last.' It would seem that the Messiah comes precisely when there is no one there to suffer the

destruction of the world as we know it, when there is no one left who can destroy his coming. That Messiah arrives not as an individual, and surely not within any temporal sequence that we take to organise the world of living beings. If he comes on the very last day, but not the last, he comes on a 'day' – now hyperfigurative – that is beyond any calendar of days, and beyond chronology itself. The parable posits a temporality in which no one will survive. Arrival is a concept that belongs to the calendar of days, but coming (*das Kommen*) apparently not. It does not happen at a moment in time, but only after the sequence of all moments is completed.

Departure and arrival were constant issues for European Jews who were considering leaving Europe for Palestine, but also for other sites of emigration. In 'My Destination', we were left with the question of how can one go away from here without moving from one here to another? Does such a departure and arrival not assume a distinct temporal trajectory across a spatial continuum? The amalgam 'Weg-von-hier' appears to be a place name only to confound our very notion of place. Indeed, although 'Weg-von-Hier' is a place name – it holds the name of the place within a recognisable grammatical form – it turns out that grammar not only diverges from clear referentiality in this instance, but can, clearly, operate at odds with any intelligible reality. There seems to be no clear way of moving from point to point within the scheme offered in this parable, and this confounds our ideas of temporal progression and spatial continuity. It even makes it difficult to follow the lines on the page, to start the parable and end it. If Kafka's parable in some ways charts the departure from a common notion of place for a notion of perpetual non-arrival, then it does not lead towards a common goal or the progressive realisation of a social goal within a specific place.

Something else is opened up, the monstrous and infinite distance between departure and arrival and outside the temporal order in which those terms make sense. In 'The Coming of the Messiah', Kafka's view of non-arrival departs from Jewish sources, starts from there and leaves it there. What becomes clear is that whatever temporality is marked by the Messianic is not realisable within space and time. It is a counter-Kantian moment, perhaps, or a way of interrogating Judaism at the limits of a Kantian notion of appearance and over and against a progressive notion of history whose aim is to be realised in a populated territory.

Kafka also reflects on forms of non-arrival in a diary entry written in 1922, less than two years before he died of tuberculosis:

I have not shown the faintest firmness of resolve in the conduct of my life. It was as if I, like everyone else, had been given a point from which to prolong the radius of a circle, and had then, like everyone else, to describe my perfect circle round this point. Instead, I was forever starting my radius only constantly to be forced at once to break it off. (Examples: piano, violin, languages, Germanics, anti-Zionism, Zionism, Hebrew, gardening, carpentering, writing, marriage attempts, an apartment of my own.)

It sounds lamentable, but then he adds: 'If I sometimes prolonged the radius a little further than usual, in the case of my law studies, say, or engagements, everything was made worse rather than better just because of this little extra distance.' So does this mean that something was made better by breaking off the radius of a circle, resisting that particular closure? Kafka makes the political implications of his oblique theology clear, or almost clear, when he writes in January 1922 of the 'wild pursuit' that is his writing. Perhaps not a pursuit, he conjectures; maybe his writing is an 'assault on the last earthly frontier' like 'all such writing'. He then remarks: 'If Zionism had not intervened, it might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah. There are intimations of this.'

I have tried to suggest that in Kafka's parables and other writings we find brief meditations on the question of going somewhere, of going over, of the impossibility of arrival and the unrealisability of a goal. I want to suggest that many of these parables seem to allegorise a way of checking the desire to emigrate to Palestine, opening instead an infinite distance between the one place and the other – and so constitute a non-Zionist theological gesture.

We might, finally, consider this poetics of non-arrival as it pertains to Kafka's own final bequest. As should be clear by now, many of Kafka's works are about messages written and sent where the arrival is uncertain or impossible, about commands given and misunderstood and so obeyed in the breach or not obeyed at all. 'An Imperial Message' charts the travels of a messenger through several layers of architecture, as he finds himself caught up in a dense and infinite grid of people: an infinite barrier emerges between the message and its destination.

So what do we say about the request that Kafka made of Brod before he died? 'Dearest Max, My last request: Everything I leave behind me ... to be burned unread.' Kafka's will is a message sent, to be sure, but it does not become Brod's will; indeed Brod's will, figuratively and literally, obeys and refuses Kafka's will (some of the work will remain unread, but none of it will be burned, at least not by Brod).

Interestingly, Kafka does not ask for all the writings back so that he can continue to destroy them himself. On the contrary, he leaves Brod with the conundrum. His letter to Brod is a way of giving all the work to Brod, and asking Brod to be the one responsible for its destruction. There is an insurmountable paradox here, since the letter becomes part of the writing, and so part of the very corpus or work, like so many of Kafka's letters that have been meticulously preserved over the years. And yet the letter makes a demand to destroy the writing, which would logically entail the nullification of the letter itself, and so nullify even the command that it delivers. So is this command a clear directive, or is it a gesture in the sense that Benjamin and Adorno described? Does he expect his message to reach its destination, or does he write the request knowing that messages and commands fail to reach those to whom they are addressed, knowing that they will be subject to the same non-arrival about which he wrote? Remember it was Kafka who wrote:

How on earth did anyone get the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter! Of a distant person one can think, and of a person who is near one can catch hold – all else goes beyond human strength. Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don't reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts. It is on this ample nourishment that they multiply so enormously. Humanity senses this and fights against it and in order to eliminate as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, the peace of souls, it has invented the railway, the motor car, the aeroplane. But it's no longer any good, these are evidently inventions being made at the moment of crashing. The opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal service it has invented the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph. The ghosts won't starve, but we will perish.

Had the works been destroyed, perhaps the ghosts would not be fed – though Kafka could not have anticipated how limitlessly parasitic the forces of nationalism and profit would be, even as he knew those spectral forces were waiting. So in the act of dying, Kafka writes that he wants the work destroyed after his death. Is this to say that the writing is tied to his living, and that with his own demise, so too should come the demise of his work? As I die, so too should my work cease to exist. A fantasy, to be sure, that it will not outlive him, something that he finds too painful. It reminds me of the parable ‘The Cares of a Family Man’, which claimed the attention of Adorno for its ‘salvational’ promise. There is Odradek, some creature, a spool, a star, whose laugh sounds like the rustling of leaves, hovering in or beneath or near the stairwell of a house. Perhaps he is a son, or the remnant of a son; in any case, he is part object and part echo of a human presence. It is only at the end of the parable that it seems the rigorously neutral voice who describes this Odradek has a generational relation to him. This Odradek does not quite live in time, since he is described as falling down the steps perpetually, that is, in perpetuity. Thus the narrator who seems to be in the position of a father remarks: ‘It almost pains me to think that he might outlive me.’ Can we read this as an allegory not just for Kafka in his father’s house, but for Kafka’s writing, the rustling pages, the ways in which Kafka himself became part human and part object, without progeny, or rather with a literary progeny he found nearly too painful to imagine surviving him? The great value of Odradek for Adorno was that he was absolutely useless in a capitalist world that sought to instrumentalise all objects for its gain. It was however not just the spectres of technology that would eagerly feed on Kafka’s work, but those forms of profit-making that exploit even the most anti-instrumental forms of art, and those forms of nationalism that seek to appropriate even the modes of writing that most rigorously resist them. An irony then, to be sure, that Kafka’s writings finally became someone else’s stuff, packed into a closet or a vault, transmogrified into exchange value, awaiting their afterlife as an icon of national belonging or, quite simply, as money.

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Letters

Vol. 33 No. 6 · 17 March 2011

From Martin Jenkins

The juxtaposition of Judith Butler's article and Jim Holt's review of *The Shallows* suggests one possible solution to the problem of Kafka's legacy ([LRB, 3 March](#)). Assuming it were in his or her power, a presiding judge could make it a condition of ownership that the entire archive, every last scrap of it, be digitised and made freely available in suitable downloadable format over the internet. Anyone, anywhere could then construct a personalised version of the archive, organised in any way they saw fit. The physical location of the original material would become a matter of little importance, of interest only to paper fetishists and the odd forensic scientist, for goodness knows what arcane research project. More properly, the papers themselves would be destroyed once digitisation were complete, finally honouring Kafka's wishes, and leaving the work itself truly *weg von hier*, for if anywhere meets the conditions of a destination that, as Judith Butler puts it, is not a place as we know a place to be, it is surely cyberspace, or whatever we choose to call it these days.

Martin Jenkins

London W1

From Tillman Schreibinger

A small but not uninteresting fact for non-German speakers: *weg* means 'away' but it also means 'path' – they are pronounced quite differently.

Tillman Schreibinger

Berlin

From Rex Winsbury

Judith Butler says: 'I am not sure anyone has yet proposed that we simply weigh our work on the scales.' That isn't quite so. In Aristophanes' play *The Frogs* of 405 BC, Dionysus goes down to Hades to bring back Euripides and is roped into a poetry contest between Euripides and Aeschylus. A large pair of scales is produced. Dionysus protests that this is 'weighing the art of poets like a cheesemonger' but nevertheless orders each of the rivals to take hold of one pan on the scales and speak a few lines of their verse into it. Aeschylus wins – his verses refer to the 'heavier' objects – so Dionysus takes him back instead, leaving Euripides bitterly complaining at being left for dead.

Rex Winsbury

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Delicious