

Looking at Kafka

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Alongside his interest in history and philosophy, Beerman was a great lover of literature and a voracious reader. The demands of the rabbinate—administering, officiating, counseling, and preaching—did not prevent him from pursuing his manifold intellectual passions. In this sermon, Beerman shared with his audience his interest in the tragic figure of Franz Kafka, the great author from Prague, through the sharp lens of Philip Roth. Roth wrote a counterfactual essay on Kafka in 1973 in which the writer did not die of tuberculosis in 1924, but survived the disease—and escaped the scourge of Nazism by making his way to the United States in 1938. Roth conjures up an unlikely image of Kafka as a Hebrew teacher in Newark, the site of much of the action in Roth's earlier writings. In this rendering, Kafka is no less tragic than the actual figure who died in Prague. The fictional Kafka is alone in the world, a misfit for his new vocation, and involved in a liaison that may have gone awry because of his behavior. Perhaps most significantly, Kafka left behind none of his writings. Beerman, for his part, raised the unsettling proposition that had the real Kafka not died prematurely, perhaps the author would have followed through on his desire to burn his literary corpus in toto. Beerman frequently returned to Kafka throughout his career. Whereas other rabbis drew inspiration from biblical or rabbinic characters, Beerman found something consoling in Kafka, and, to a great extent, Roth, who understand well and represent the deep tensions that define the modern Jewish and human conditions.

In his earliest stories, written when he was in his twenties, Philip Roth attempted to transform into fiction something of the small world in which he had spent the earliest years of his life in Newark, N.J. Roth drew from the experience of his

highly self-conscious Jewish neighborhood, a neighborhood squeezed like some embattled little nation in among ethnic rivals and antagonists, groups of people proud, ambitious, xenophobic, and baffled about being fused into a melting pot. It was here—this little Israel in Newark, so much like a volatile Middle East—to which Roth turned for the material of his beginning writing career. Out of such experience came the highly acclaimed *Goodbye Columbus*, and, ten years later, when he returned to the same neighborhood of desire and confusion, his controversial *Portnoy's Complaint*.

In some of these stories, the earlier ones, Roth departed from the customary stories of Jewish life on which he and many readers like ourselves had been raised. Instead of telling of a Jew who is persecuted by a Gentile because he is a Jew—a subject treated in such books as a *Gentleman's Agreement* by Laura Hobson, in *Focus* by Arthur Miller and in some of the works of Bellow and Malamud—in [his] stories [Roth] told about a Jew persecuted for being a Jew by another Jew. In so doing he turned the subject of anti-Semitism somewhat on its head, so that in writing of the harassment of a Jew by a Jew rather than Jew by Gentile he was pressing Jewish readers to alter an entire system of responses to so-called “Jewish fiction.” Small wonder that Roth was accused of anti-Semitism and self-hatred. It was almost too much to expect that only fourteen years after Buchenwald and Auschwitz, with a great many people still frozen with horror by the Nazi slaughter of European Jewry simply too much to ask people to consider, with ironic detachment or comic amusement, the internal politics of Jewish life. It was indeed, in most instances, asking for the impossible.

Such was the demand placed upon readers by Roth's story “Defender of the Faith” when it appeared in 1959, a story told by Nathan Marx, an army sergeant just rotated back to Missouri from combat duty in Germany. There, in Missouri, he is made first sergeant in a training company and immediately is latched on to by a young recruit who tries to use his attachment to the sergeant to receive kindness and favors. The young recruit, Sheldon Grossbart, comes to demand not mere considerations but privileges to which the sergeant doesn't think he is entitled.

Portnoy's Complaint was a great hit and a great scandal. Going wild in public—that's what Portnoy did—was the last thing in the world that a Jew was expected to do by himself, by his family, by his fellow Jews and by the larger community of non-Jews. Jews were simply not expected to make a spectacle of themselves. Portnoy was seen by many Jewish critics as the crudest and most venerable stereotype of anti-Semitic love, displaying, said another, a fanaticism in the hatred of things Jewish.

Four years after *Portnoy*, in the year 1973, Roth published in *American Review*, volume 17, an essay on Franz Kafka, written with much sympathy and appreciation, written as he looked at a photograph of Kafka at the age of forty in 1924, the year Kafka died. Kafka's face in the photo is sharp and skeletal, pronounced cheekbones, a familiar Jewish flare in the bridge of his nose, and on his face a gaze

of startled composure, full of fear, full of control. "Skulls, chiseled like this one," Roth wrote, "were shoveled by the thousands from the ovens; had he [Kafka] lived, his would have been among them, along with the skulls of his three younger sisters." Kafka died too soon for the holocaust. Had he lived, perhaps he would have escaped with his good friend Max Brod who found refuge in Palestine. Had he lived, perhaps his books would never have been published, for he had ordered his friend Brod to dispose of them at his death—Kafka may have destroyed them himself. But had he lived, had he come to America in 1938, he would have been a frail bookish fifty-five-year-old bachelor, formerly a lawyer for a government insurance firm in Prague, retired on a pension in Berlin—the author of a few obscure stories, stories no one in America had ever heard of and only a handful in Europe had ever read.

A year before he died, in 1923, Kafka finally finds the resolve to leave Prague and his father's home for good. Never before had he succeeded in living apart, independent of his mother, his sisters, his father, nor had he been a writer other than in the few hours when he was not working in the legal department of the Workers Accident Insurance Office in Prague; he was a dutiful, scrupulous employee, though he found the working tedious, enervating. But having been pensioned from his job because of illness, he meets a young Jewish girl of nineteen, Dora Dymant, at a seaside resort in Germany. Dora has left her Orthodox Polish Jewish family. She and Kafka—she is half his age—fall in love.

With Dora to love him, Kafka at forty is at last delivered from self-doubt and self-loathing. Kafka consents to the publication of a volume of four of his stories. With Dora's help he resumes the study of Hebrew (his Hebrew teacher a woman, now living in Israel, wrote recently a memoir about Kafka as her student). He studies Hebrew; despite his illness he travels to the Berlin Academy of Jewish Studies to attend lectures on the Talmud. He is transformed into a writer, a Jew, a lover, something of a father.

Was it Dora Dymant, or was it the approach of death that made all this possible? Whatever, the prospect of Dora, of a wife, a home, and children, was no longer the terrifying, bewildering prospect it would once have been. Yes, there is ease and happiness with a woman, with this young adoring companion. Kafka, who had tried unsuccessfully to marry twice before, is determined to marry Dora; he writes to her Orthodox father for his daughter's hand. The request of a dying man, a man dying of tuberculosis is denied. Dora's father consults with the man he admired most, the Gerer Rebbe. The Rebbe put the letter to one side and said nothing more than the single syllable, "No." A healthy young girl should not be given in matrimony to a sickly man who spit up blood, a man twice her age, yet.

Still he has Dora with him. In those final months of his life he studies, he writes. That last winter in Berlin he wrote a story called "The Burrow," the story of an animal with a keen sense of peril, whose life is organized around the principle of defense, whose deepest longings are for security and serenity. The ending of

this story is unfortunately lost. The burrower has constructed an elaborate and intricate system of underground chambers and corridors designed to afford some peace of mind, until he begins to hear some subterranean noises—could it be a great Beast itself burrowing in [his] direction?

On June 3, 1924, a month before his forty-first birthday, Kafka died of tuberculosis of the lung and the larynx.

Then suddenly Roth's essay on Kafka returns to Newark N.J. in 1942. Roth is nine. He has a Hebrew teacher whose name is Dr. Kafka. Dr. Kafka is fifty-nine. Kafka would have been fifty-nine in 1942, had he lived. To the little boys who attended Dr. Kafka's class from four to five every afternoon he is known as Dr. Kishka. Two boys vented their resentment on him, their resentment of having to learn Hebrew at the very hour when they could have been screaming their heads off on the ball field.

How the boys in the Hebrew class liked to imitate him with his precise professorial finicky manner, his German accent, his cough, his depressed look. Doctor Franz, Doctor Franz, Dr. Franz Kishka. Who was always giving assignments, like the one to make up an alphabet of their own, out of straight lines and curved lines and dots. "That's all an alphabet is," Dr. Kafka had explained to them. That's all Hebrew is; that's all English is, straight lines and curved lines and dots.

Dr. Kafka lived in a room, not an apartment, a room. The Roth family invites him to dinner one Shabbos, and with him Aunt Rhoda. For years Roth's parents had been introducing his mother's baby sister to Jewish bachelors and widowers of north Jersey, but at forty Aunt Rhoda had still not been successfully matched.

Before long Rhoda and Dr. Kafka are seeing each other regularly. Dr. Kafka encourages her to renew her interest in acting by reading her the famous Chekhov play, read it to her from the opening line to the final curtain, all the parts, and actually left her in tears.

Rhoda becomes a changed person. Kafka sits in the back of the theatre watching in his hat and coat, all of her rehearsals.

But one weekend they go off together to Atlantic City. Something untoward occurs, never clear, but Rhoda comes back crying, inconsolably; she refuses to see Dr. Kafka again. The nine-year-old Philip Roth is confused by it all; begs to know the reason. His older brother, the Boy Scout, with a leer and a sneer on his face explains it all with one word, "Sex."

Years later, a junior at Harvard, Roth receives an envelope from home containing Dr. Kafka's obituary, clipped from *The Jewish News*. "Dr. Franz Kafka, a Hebrew teacher at the Talmud Torah of the Schley St. Synagogue from 1939 to 1948, died on June 3 at Deborah Heart and Lung Center in Browns Mills, N.J. Dr. Kafka had been a patient there since 1950. He was seventy years old. Dr. Kafka was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia . . . and was a refugee from the Nazis. He leaves no survivors."

He also leaves no books; no *Trial*, no *Castle*, no *Diaries*. The dead man's papers are claimed by no one, and they disappear.

No, this Kafka, who leaves nothing, could not ever become “The Kafka”—why, that would be stranger even than a man turning into an insect. No one would believe it.

Kafka remains the poet of the ungraspable and the unresolved, to use Roth’s words, the poet whose belief in the immovable barrier separating the wish from its realization is at the heart of his excruciating visions of defeat. Yes, Kafka’s writing refutes every easy, touching, humanish daydream of salvation and justice and fulfillment with densely imagined counter dreams that mock all solutions and escapes.

COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR SAUL FRIEDLANDER

Leonard Beerman loved Franz Kafka’s writing. He quoted him; he even published a short essay about him. Let me add a few lines about this common interest and briefly reflect on Kafka’s attempts to define the meaning of Jewishness for him. For the generation of Hermann Kafka, Franz’s father, keeping a Jewish identity devoid of any particular content sufficed. For Franz’s generation—more precisely for the young Prague intellectuals of that cohort—such meaninglessness seemed unacceptable and often led to a search for very diverse alternatives: a return to religion (mainly reformed Judaism), as in the case of Kafka’s friends the philosopher Hugo Bergmann and the writer Max Brod (in an extreme form in the case of another Kafka friend, Georg Langer, who became an ultra-Orthodox follower of the Hasidic Belzer Rebbe); fervent adherence to the new established Zionist movement (Bergmann, Brod, and the philosopher Felix Weltsch), socialist political activism, diverse esoteric quests, or, as happened with one of Franz’s uncles, Rudolph, conversion to Catholicism.