Literaturportal Bayern presents:

"A Brother to Jackals" – Reflections on Kafka and Zionism

by Seth Rogoff

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The writer Franz Kafka spent the winter of 1917 in a tiny house his sister Ottla had rented on Prague's Alchimistengasse writing a series of prose fragments in a set of blue octavo notebooks. Later in the year, he'd submit two of these pieces for publication to the German-Jewish theologian Martin Buber's journal *Der Jude*. Kafka's close friend Max Brod convinced Buber that the works were sufficiently Jewish to justify inclusion. The pieces were titled "A Report to an Academy" and "Jackals and Arabs." "Jackals and Arabs" is unique among Kafka's collected writings for being his only story set in a Near Eastern context—perhaps in Palestine. It is also Kafka's only piece to present an Arab character. These qualities have made "Jackals and Arabs" a primary site for exploring Kafka's relationship to Zionism.

Specific geographies are rare in Kafka's fictional work, especially those Kafka saw to the end of the publication process. Stories like "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis" are set in cities, but the reader receives no specific urban information. The unpublished manuscript of *The Trial* was likewise a novel of European urban modernity. *The Castle*, in contrast, takes place in an unspecified village. It contains only generic landmarks—the Bridge Inn, the Gentlemen's Inn, the schoolhouse, the castle looming above. Even when a non-European setting is crucial to a story's logic and development, as it is in "In the Penal Colony," it avoids exact geography. The exceptions to this rule of Kafkian non-specificity are the American setting in *The Man Who Disappeared* and the ancient Chinese world of "The Great Wall of China." In these works, geographic location becomes the foundation for metaphorical and thematic layering. The same is true for "Jackals and Arabs."

Kafka never traveled to the United States, China, or Palestine. The constructions of these settings are mediated through his

research, experiences, conversations, ideas, and desires. Of these three settings, Palestine was the closest to him, the most immediate and complex. In the final decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, Palestine was the target of Jewish nationalist aspirations. For many of Kafka's contemporaries, Zionism offered solutions to a host of Central European Jewish problems. The vision of a Zionist Palestine was a quest for Jewish renewal. But renewal of what sort?

The most common goal of a Jewish Palestine was for a Jewish national homeland—a Jewish state. This political Zionism was connected to Jewishness as an ethnographic marker, but it was not foremost a religious movement. Its leaders were drawn from the post-emancipation liberal elite. The central problem men like Theodor Herzl sought to solve was what they perceived to be the limits of liberal assimilationist policies: the failures of nation-states to protect Jewish minorities from persecution and discrimination, most notoriously demonstrated in France's Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906).

Spiritual Zionism in Kafka's Prague

In Kafka's Prague, among the small circles of self-described Zionists, liberal and secular-political Zionism was not the main form of Zionism. In the first decade of the twentieth century, members of Kafka's social circle embraced Zionism out of cultural and spiritual yearnings. These desires had been sparked in large measure by the ideas of Martin Buber.

For Buber and the young members of Prague's Zionist circles, including Kafka's friends Max Brod, Hugo Bergmann, and Felix Weltsch, Zionism meant cultural and spiritual renewal. Rather than Zionism being in the first instance a political solution to a problem of legal rights, personal security, and social marginality, it was perceived as a way of addressing a deep crisis of faith that this movement saw as endemic to Central and Western European Jewry. According to Buber, modern liberal, secular, and even orthodox Jews—and especially German Jews—had turned Judaism into a form of dead religiosity, a practice of religion that emphasized superficial gestures, hollow rituals, and academic legal thinking. The way out of this spiritual crisis, for Buber and his acolytes, was to return to what was vital about the faith—its immediacy and intimacy, its rootedness in enduring and authentic traditions, and its connection to an organic community and *volkish* spirit.

It is no surprise that Kafka didn't embrace the Jewish secular nationalism of political Zionism. Though he'd grown up in the political domain of the Habsburg Empire, which contained numerous ethnic factions, the idea that a Jewish polity in Palestine would resolve dilemmas of ethnic tension

most likely struck Kafka as unrealistic. The cultural Zionists in Prague were under no such illusions. They foresaw with tragic accuracy that political Zionism in Palestine would not end interethnic conflict but rather would trade one set of conflicts for another. Both Bergman and Brod, for example, attempting to escape these seemingly intractable dynamics, embraced the idea of bi-nationalism—or Arab and Jewish coexistence in a single post-Ottoman state.

What is more surprising than Kafka's lack of enthusiasm for political Zionism is that he didn't follow his closest friends into an embrace of Buber's type of Jewish existentialism. If there is anything consistent and relatively unambiguous in Kafka's writings, it is that the Central European middle class and elite—men, in other words, like his father Hermann Kafka—had severed ties with the more authentic Judaism of their origins by constructing a liberal and secular version of Jewish life, thus depriving the next generation, Kafka's generation, of fertile soil to plant sturdy roots of faith and community. The previous and more authentic Jewish existence might have been economically poorer and even quite a bit harder, it might have been more exposed to violence, but it contained, Kafka thought, greater vitality. When Kafka's thoughts turned to Judaism, in other words, they did not dwell on politics. They were concerned about the possibilities for Jewish life, Jewish existence—Jewish being—in the world Hermann Kafka had made.

Kafka's most sustained engagement with Jewish culture, at least in the years before WWI, came through his connections to the Yiddish theater. It was in the context of the Yiddish theater and its actors that Kafka learned about Jewish life "in the east," in a semi-mythologized "Russia." Buber, too, sought renewal through eastern traditions and folk practices. For Kafka, I am guessing, Buber's appropriation of these mystical traditions emptied out what was most important about them—the rawness, the quotidian realities—and replaced these elements with Romanticized longing. It was through the embodied presence of the Jewish actors—their intonation, the Yiddish language, their storytelling, and foremost their gestural communication—that presented for Kafka the first plausible yet tenuous link to a more authentic and rooted Jewish life.

An anti-mythic thinker and writer

Divorcing spirit from body, traditions from the full scope of contemporary life, was an impossibility in Kafka's mind. The subject remained anchored to the now, bound to the all-too-human body. As Walter Benjamin points out in his "Franz Kafka," everything in Kafka that might seem to have the potential to rise above the mundane becomes

mired in the utterly earthly, mired in dirt and filth. This is as true regarding the rites of circumcision Kafka describes in grotesque detail in his diaries as it is the figure of the father in "The Judgment." It is as true regarding the setting for the proceedings of the authorities in *The Trial* as it is the primary village residence of castle officials in *The Castle*—the Gentlemen's Inn. Elements in Kafka that point to possible transcendence are at the same time disgusting and degraded. Kafka's writings contain no conclusive reason for his refusal to walk the path of spiritual Zionism together with his friends. From the diaries and letters, we learn that Buber's ideas left Kafka cold, though we don't know precisely why. My speculation is that Buber's language had too much in common with strains of chauvinistic, mythic nationalism then current in both Germany and Austria. Kafka is an anti-mythic thinker and writer, and therefore it makes sense that he would not have been a zealous supporter of political or cultural Zionism, both of which are profoundly mythic.

This is not to say that Kafka rejected Zionism completely. There is little—positive or negative—that inspired in Kafka an unequivocal position. His closest positive associations with Zionism and Palestine came through his relationships with women, primarily those with Felice Bauer and Dora Diamant. It could be that Palestine was inseparable from thoughts of marriage, domesticity, familial (and general) stability, and potential fatherhood. In his first letter to Felice Bauer after their meeting at Max Brod's house in Prague, Kafka brought up the idea of accompanying her on a trip to Palestine. At the beginning of what would be five years of intense postal contact, the suggestion of the journey is made and ultimately retracted on the grounds that Kafka's vacation is too short to accommodate a trip of such length. The proposed and unactualized Palestine journey is an apt metaphor for Kafka's relationship with Felice. There was a goal (marriage/Palestine) but not the resolve to truly embark toward it, let alone hope of arrival. Palestine was an impossible destination, one of many places—Paris, Berlin, Spain, etc.—Kafka imagined he might find refuge from his psychologically burdensome existence in Prague.

I don't want to suggest that Zionism was irrelevant to Kafka, or that he dismissed it unconditionally. Throughout many years, Zionism was present in his thoughts and represented a way of addressing serious problems facing European Jewry. The chief problem was antisemitism, and this came in many forms in from many directions. The two main strands of early twentieth century antisemitism were, first, conservative and reactionary, which includes the enflaming of populist resentments among rural populations, and second, radical and

nationalist. Often, antisemitism was a blend of multiple strands such that the viability of the protective apparatuses of the modern state was totally undermined. Jewish people, especially Jewish intellectuals, Kafka among them, saw their social, cultural, and political status becoming increasingly precarious. This feeling intensified during the First World War and its chaotic aftermath.

The Root of the Conflict

"Jackals and Arabs," though short, is a complex piece of prose set in what seems like an imagined Palestine—at the very least a Near Eastern context. In my estimation, it is Kafka's most sustained literary reflection on Zionism. The story's narrator is a European, who is traveling though the desert with a larger party and has set up camp with his companions at an oasis. Among his companions is an Arab man, who tends to the group's camels and seems to act as a guide. It's nighttime. The narrator is unable to sleep and sits awake on the grass, listening to jackals howling in the distance.

Unseen, a pack of jackals closes in on the narrator, and suddenly he is surrounded by them. An elder jackal approaches the narrator and tells him that the jackals have been awaiting his arrival for generations. "We know that you have come from the North," the old jackal states, "that is just what we have our hopes on." The hope is that the European traveler will assist the jackals in their fight against the Arabs. The root of the conflict between jackals and Arabs, according to the elder jackal, has to do with notions of ritual purity surrounding eating practices. The jackals eat only carrion; they do not believe in killing their food. That the Arabs eat what they kill is anathema to the jackals, a violation of fundamental laws. In the jackals' eyes, this seemingly insignificant or even nonsensical difference (why is eating carrion purer than killing and eating animal flesh?) is unbridgeable.

The narrator responds to the jackals' discussion of their conflict with the Arabs, "It seems to me a very old quarrel; I suppose it's in the blood, and perhaps will only end with it."

The jackals produce a pair of rusty scissors in a kind of ritualized presentation and ask the narrator to use it to cut the Arabs' throats. It is worth quoting this scene at some length, as it is the epicenter of the story and, as often in Kafka's texts, the most inscrutable moment: "Sir," the elder jackal tells the narrator, "we want you to end this quarrel that divides the world." The jackal expands:

> You are exactly the man whom our ancestors foretold as born to do it. We want to be troubled no more by Arabs; room to breathe; a skyline cleansed of them; no more bleating of sheep knifed by an Arab; every

> beast to die a natural death; no interference until we have drained the carcass empty and picked its bones clean. Cleanliness, nothing but cleanliness is what we want… Filth is their white; filth is their black; their beards are a horror; the sight of their eye sockets makes one want to spit; and when they lift an arm, the murk of hell yawns in the armpit. And so, sir, and so, dear sir, by means of your all-powerful hands slit their throats through with these scissors.

At this point, the Arab caravan leader intrudes into the scene, scattering the jackals. He divulges to the narrator that the jackals have made the same request to every European—a kind of eternal, albeit pathetic, plea for salvation. He then decides to have some fun with the jackals. A camel has died in the night, and the Arab has the carcass thrown to the pack. As the jackals descend upon the dead flesh, the Arab brandishes his whip. Though the jackals suffer the Arab's blows, they are unable to tear themselves away from the carcass—the lure of the meat is more powerful than the threat of pain. The Arab's sadistic performance continues until the narrator has had enough and reaches out to still his hand. The Arab responds, "You are right, sir… we'll leave them to their business; besides, it's time to break up camp. Well, you've seen them. Marvelous creatures, aren't they? And how they hate us!"

Colonial Position

Kafka's portrait of the Near East is layered. The Arab is coded like a European—"tall and white." He is a symbol of civilization. At the same time, he is tyrannical and cruel, and this cruelty is unacceptable to the European narrator. It is only after witnessing the Arab's unrelenting cruelty as sport that the narrator can no longer remain a mere observer and is compelled to raise his hand in defense of the jackals. The Arab views the jackals from a paternalistic perspective, one based on a long history of cohabitation in the desert and its oases. This paternalistic view elevates the position of the jackals—and thus from the Arab perspective the jackals acquire status not through intercession of law or the state but from the organic and historical relations between the two groups. "They are our dogs," the Arab tells the narrator, "finer dogs than any of yours."

Like the Arab, the narrator is deeply ambiguous. He is in the desert region for an unclear purpose, signaling a kind of colonial position. Despite his appeal to his own innocence, despite his seeming meekness, his presence among the jackals and Arabs is disruptive of the prevailing balance of the power, though he refuses to take responsibility for it, preferring, as does the

explorer in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," to maintain his passivity and objectivity until the last possible moment. In the colonial context, definitions matter, and it is the narrator who defines the jackal-Arab conflict as age-old, and postulates that such an enduring, historic conflict can only be settled through violence: "It seems to me a very old quarrel; I suppose it's in the blood, and perhaps will only end with it." Both assumptions are not based on knowledge of the actual dynamics of the context; they are lazy and tendentious conclusions, which the narrator asserts as fact.

The jackals are the strangest characters in the story. They are oppressed and abused by the Arabs, which invites a certain amount of sympathy from the reader (and the narrator), but they are also atavistic in their appetite for carrion, delusional in their belief in the scissors as a transformational weapon, and bloodthirsty in their desire for revenge. The jackals dream of murdering the Arabs, but they are too weak to attempt the act themselves, cowardly calling on the European narrator to do the bloody deed for them. The jackals see themselves as pure and unspoiled, but they are outcasts from civilized life. Their final act of devouring the camel meat under the blows from the whip is gruesome.

It seems clear that the jackals in the story are meant to be jackals and to be symbolic of Jews. Why did Kafka choose the jackal? The jackal has a consistent meaning across the prophetic books and writings of the Hebrew Bible. The jackal is a creature of the desert, of wilderness spaces between islands of settled life. These are spaces beyond the grace of God, and those who dwell there are in exile from God's favor and goodness. When Ezekiel castigates Israel's prophets, he quotes the Lord, "Woe to the degenerate prophets, who follow their own fancy, without having had a vision! Your prophets, O Israel, have been like jackals among ruins." Isaiah prophesizes the destruction of Babylon by saying, "The houses be filled with owls; there shall ostriches make their home, and there shall satyrs dance, and jackals shall abide in its castles, and dragons in the palaces of pleasure." Jeremiah in 9:11, quoting the Lord: "I will turn Jerusalem into rubble, into a den of jackals; and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitants." In the Book of Job, after God allows his accuser (Satan) to destroy Job's life, the suffering man cries out, "I have become a brother to jackals…"

Kafka's jackals combine two seemingly irreconcilable statuses. On the one hand, they represent the outcast, wilderness, untamed and untamable nature. They exist in the space beyond the camp, in the distance, symbolically away from the fire, the realm of humans, the realm of God. In the Bible, the jackals are grouped with other beings of chaos—the owl, the ostrich, with monsters

and dragons, ungodly creatures, God's antagonists. At the same time, in Kafka's story the jackals possess a preserved or holy tradition. Jackal society revolves around ideals of purity and rituals of sacred cleanliness—around sacred law—however horrifying these specific ideals are to the Arabs and the European narrator.

A Way of Understanding the World

Instability haunts Kafka's texts, and perhaps none more so than "Jackals and Arabs." All subject positions in the text—jackal, Arab, narrator—are paradoxical, all interpretive assertions onto the text, dubious. There is a general hopelessness in the text, a sense of inevitability, of history stretching into the far horizon of the future. And yet, the text contains glimmers of hope. There is barbarism in the text, and sadistic cruelty, but there is also humanism and perhaps even love. Rituals, beliefs, and ideals are mocked, but they still contain something noble—even the grotesque and absurdist ritual of jackals preying (praying?) on carrion.

The layering of ambiguities in the story is daunting, but it is also an invitation—and a generous one—to the reader to explore the text deeply and creatively. Each element of the story, upon close analysis, reveals itself as symbolic while at the same time remaining material. The Arab might be all Arabs, but he is also a single human in charge of a particular caravan. The jackals might be symbolic of Jewish settlers in Palestine or the Jewish people in general, but they are also nothing more than a pack of wild desert canines. The European narrator might be symbolic of European intervention in the Near East, of Occidental "reason" and modernity, but he is also a specific traveler moving through the desert landscape with his own thoughts and emotions. Nothing in the story can be reduced to the mere symbolic, as nothing in the story can be entirely divorced from symbolic meaning. Kafka's adamant refusal of Buber's definition of the stories as "parables" and his insistence that they were "two animal stories" points to his commitment to materiality.

The hovering of the story between materialism and symbolism is of more than stylistic importance—it points to a way of reading and ultimately to a way of understanding the world. On the level of reading, each interpretive assertion on one level is complexified or undermined on the other. The jackals, Arab, and narrator can be viewed abstractly, but these symbolic abstractions fail to hold up to scrutiny on the material level. Time and again, the material element asserts itself. The need to reduce situations to abstractions is the narrator's worldview, and it is this mode of thinking that leads him to understand the relationship between the jackals and the Arabs as fundamental and transhistorical rather than

as immediate and contingent. Immediacy returns in the narrator's emotional reaction to violence when he stays the Arab's hand. The symbolic and abstract view of the world calls for violence; immediacy and materiality mobilize against it.

Zionism, like nationalism, is an abstraction; it is an idea, a philosophy, a philosophy of history. Kafka was interested in these ideas, but by nature refused to separate them from their rootedness in physical life—and thus the "purity" or loftiness of Zionism or any philosophical, theological, or political ideal was impossible to maintain. When Kafka attended a Zionist conference in Vienna in 1913 his attention was drawn to a girl throwing spitballs at the delegates rather than to the speeches and discussions. When Kafka met the renowned Hasidic rabbi of Belz in Marienbad in 1916, his focus was on the man's degraded hygiene and repulsive eating habits, which formed a stark contrast to his spiritual agenda. When Kafka met with Rudolph Steiner, his concluding observation was how the founder of anthroposophy worked "his handkerchief deep into his nose" to staunch the flow of mucus.

What does "Jackals and Arabs" tell us about Kafka's relationship to Zionism, about Kafka's worldview? "Jackals and Arabs" forces the reader to evaluate the Palestinian context and the relationships between jackals, Arabs, and Europeans from numerous perspectives. Each perspective has historical, symbolic, and material dimensions. No single interpretive agenda can accommodate every aspect of these relationships. Kafka asks the reader to struggle with the situation's contradictions, its messiness, and its absurdities. He compels the reader to suspend easy judgment and to absorb complexity. Such complexity pushes back against the dehumanization that comes with ideology and against the reduction of material life to the mere symbol. The endpoint of a purely ideological or purely symbolic worldview is often catastrophic violence—an ending in blood, as the narrator says. A different choice, the one Kafka makes in his writing, is to preserve and probe generative tensions. These tensions compel deeper contemplation, a recognition of the complexity of subjectivity, and a transcendence of narrow ideological boundaries. Kafka's work blazes this alternative path for us. We would be wise to walk it. ■

The German translation of the essay can be found on the website of Literaturportal Bayern:

Nachdenken über Kafka und den Zionismus, Teil I

Nachdenken über Kafka und den Zionismus, Teil II