Stanley Corngold

Kafka & sex

On one occasion Kafka composed a story with a sexual intensity that perhaps no other writer has ever experienced. The story is "The Judgment," which Kafka wrote in one go on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment, 1912. He described the event in his diary the next morning:

> I wrote this story "The Judgment" in a single push during the night of the 22nd-23rd, from ten o'clock until six o'clock in the morning. My legs had grown so stiff from sitting that I could just barely pull them out from under the desk. The terrible strain and joy as the story developed in front of me, as if I were advancing through a body of water. Several times during this night I carried my own weight on my back. How everything can be risked, how a great fire is ready for everything, for the strangest inspirations, and they disappear in this fire and rise up again....It is only in this context that writing can be done, only with this kind of coherence, with such a complete unfolding of the body and the soul.

The story ends with the hero's leap, with gymnastic nimbleness, from a bridge resembling the Charles Bridge into a river resembling the Moldau, obedient to his father's judgment, which sentenced him to death by drowning. The following day, Kafka read the story aloud to a company of friends and relatives and felt the passion again: "Toward the end my hand was moving uncontrollably about and actually before my face. There were tears in my eyes. The indubitableness of the story was confirmed."

How might this sort of "indubitableness" be illustrated? Kafka's friend and editor, Max Brod, remembered that "Franz himself provided three commentaries to this story, the first in conversation with me. He once said to me, as I recall, quite without provocation, 'Do you know what the concluding sentence means?'" (It reads, "At this moment the traffic going over the bridge was nothing short of infinite.") "Kafka said, 'I was thinking here of a strong ejaculation.'"

For Kafka, writing, when it went well, was fucking, but his remark to Brod ac-

Stanley Corngold is professor of German and comparative literature at Princeton University and adjunct professor of law at Columbia University Law School. His numerous publications include "The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory" (1986), "Borrowed Lives" (1991), and "Lambent Traces: Franz Kafka" (2004). He is currently at work on a volume entitled "Kafka Before the Law."

© 2007 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

tually channels more than one sexual current. In one sense, the process of writing the story is the naked metaphor of fucking: according to his remark, the process ends in an ejaculation. But in a diary entry written early the next year – the third commentary to which Brod refers – Kafka raised the stakes of the metaphor exponentially:

> February 11, 1913. After correcting proofs of "The Judgment," I shall write up all the connections that have dawned on me, as best as I still remember them. This is necessary, because the story came out of me like a regular birth, covered with filth and mucus, and only I have the hand that can penetrate to the body of it and the desire to.

The imagery of penetration persists, but the ejaculation has proved instantly fertile. In the course of a single night, Kafka has fertilized the nucleus of a story and made his words coalesce, grow, and force themselves out of him in a violent thrust. It is a feat even greater than what he had hoped for a year before:

> If I were ever able to write something large and whole, well shaped from beginning to end, then in the end the story would never be able to detach itself from me, and it would be possible for me calmly and with open eyes, as a blood relation of a healthy story, to hear it read ....

At this point, we see him resisting the more frequently heard desire to let the story be born. "Go," wrote Ezra Pound, of his "songs," in "Ité," in 1913:

> ... seek your praise from the young and from the intolerant,
> Move among the lovers of perfection alone.
> Seek ever to stand in the hard Sophoclean light
> And take your wounds from it gladly.

But Kafka, like a jealous mother, wants the pregnancy beyond term. This too, too solid story must not be born, must not break out through the skin of the paper. It would be stillborn; it must lodge where it has been conceived.

"The Judgment," then, represents a leap upward in sexual maturation. "Many emotions carried along in the writing," the entry of February 11, 1913, continues, "for example, the joy that I shall have something beautiful for Max's *Arkadia*." He presents his friend with the beautiful baby to which he's given birth.

Still, the poem as baby is a disturbing metaphor. We have Mallarmé's account of an icy, tortured, perfumed night issuing into the "Don du poème." There is Yeats, also stricken, writing in the vein of *aut libri aut liberi* ("either books or freeborn sons"):

> Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
> Although I have come close on forty-nine,
> I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
> Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

Kafka was twenty-nine in 1912. While in the following twelve years, until his early death, he would produce a few small books, he had no children and wrote often of the anguish of a death without true progeny.

Ejaculation and birth are the chief metaphors of Kafka's early writing. But another motive of great interest very likely connects the work of Yom Kippur eve with a strong ejaculation.

In a diary entry in late 1911, the day after Yom Kippur of the year before he wrote "The Judgment," Kafka caricatured the Kol Nidre evening service that ushers in the ceremony. "The Altneu Synagogue yesterday. Kol Nidre. Suppressed murmur of the stock market. In the entry, boxes with the inscription:

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

'Merciful gifts secretly left assuage the wrath of the bereft.'" And then he mentions recognizing among the members of the congregation "the family of a brothel owner." The brothel is the well-known Salon Suha, the house probably in question when he wrote the year before, "I passed by the brothel as though past the house of a beloved." It was indubitably the house he more than passed by the very night before Kol Nidre 1912; his diary says that he spent his evening there.

So, here, if it were necessary, is further proof that with Kafka nothing sexual is simple (in the sense of being unentangled with its opposite). There are no true opposites in this domain, certainly not sex with women and sex with literature. "My antipathy to antitheses is certain," Kafka noted in his journal that same year; and as if he were besotted with this very antithesis of sex with women and sex with literature, he wrote of antitheses in an eye-catching way:

> Admittedly, [antitheses] generate thoroughness, fullness, completeness, but only like a figure on the "wheel of life" [a toy with a revolving wheel]; we have chased our little idea around the circle. As different as they can be, they also lack nuance; they grow under one's hand as if bloated by water, beginning with a prospect onto boundlessness and always ending up the same medium size. They curl up, cannot be straightened, they offer no leads....

Whatever agent of antithesis could Kafka have had in mind? And what house was Kafka thinking of when he wrote in an early story, in the voice of a hero resembling his own:

> Certainly I stood here obstinately in front of the house but just as obstinately I hesitated to go up....I want to leave, want to mount the steps, if necessary, by turning somersaults. From that company I promise myself everything that I lack, the organization of my powers, above all, for which the sort of intensification that is the only possibility for this bachelor on the street is insufficient.

Not all of Kafka's sexuality was sublimated in literature, but a great deal was – and the sublimation was an intense affair. As a young writer Kafka took Flaubert for his master in matters of style; afterward, he followed stylistic paths of his own, like the animal fable and the fivefold allegory, which led him past his master and to greater effect. But Kafka also took Flaubert as a model of one who 'became' literature. Kafka's German nonce word for this state of being is *Schriftstellersein*: the condition of being [nothing but] a writer.

In the end, he again went past his master in the inventiveness and extremity of his claims to be nothing but literature. Evoking the intensity with which he cared for writing, he wrote to his fiancée Felice Bauer, "Not a bent for writing, my dearest Felice, not a bent, but my entire self. A bent can be uprooted and crushed. But this is what I am." In acquainting her father with his qualities as a future son-in-law, he wrote, "My whole being is directed towards literature; I have followed this direction unswervingly until my thirtieth year, and the moment I abandon it I cease to live. ...Literature is not one of my interests, I am literature." He enjoined himself to "live as ascetically as possible, more ascetically than a bachelor, that is the only possible way for me to endure marriage," before adding the good question, "But she?" Kafka heard the answer elliptically in Flaubert's cry to Louise Colet: "I tried to love you and do love you in a way that isn't the way of lovers." Kafka loved Felice, if that is the word, as an

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

erotic hitching post of sorts. If he could attach his active sexuality to her as his fiancée, the woman with whom he would one day share a bed, then that much of his drive could be cathected, stilled, apportioned. The rest would be free for the literature that he *was*.

But what would the reality of domestic sex be like? Kafka warns Felice elegantly by praising to her the poem "In the Dead of the Night," by Yüan Tzu-tsai (1716 – 1797), not incidentally quoting a biographical comment by Yüan's editor: "Very talented and precocious, had a brilliant career in the civil service. He was uncommonly versatile both as man and artist."

> Bent over my book in the cold night
> I forgot to go to bed in time.
> The perfumes of my gold-embroidered quilt
> have already evaporated, the fireplace is extinct.
> My beautiful mistress, who hitherto has struggled
> to control her wrath, snatches away the lamp,
> And asks: Do you know how late it is?

The poem made a strong impression on Kafka, and he analyzed it relentlessly in the course of their correspondence. Meanwhile, it says very plainly all that needs to be said about his unmarriageableness, the undomesticable character of the writing he sought to do.

So this oxymoronic process works as follows: For Kafka, writing excluded regulated heterosexual sex. He feared marriage because he could not spend his nights in bed; he needed at least his nights for another sort of "nightwork," as he put it. But then again – the oxymoron advances – this writing thing is peculiarly like lust, and it does take place in bed, beginning with a dream: "What will be my fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all matters into the background . . . . "

Kafka is gripped by his writing-lust, even as the devil in it decides it must exclude another's body. Is it sex? There is no better analogy for this pleasure than

> the reward for service to the devil – this descent to the dark powers, this unshackling of spirits bound by nature, these dubious embraces and whatever else may go on below, of which one no longer knows anything above ground when one writes one's stories in the sunshine.

What we are dealing with, then, is a less than harmless sublimation of the sexual drive. Kafka is a great retheorist of sublimation: there is nothing clearly 'sublime' about it. How could there be? The implications of this metamorphosis are not innocent. Certainly they are not innocent as soon as the body is involved. For the body of this man, who was always young – he complained that his face did not age, and in actual fact he was never older than forty-one, when he died – is, not exceptionally, a furnace of sexual energies. What happens when this furnace is made to produce script? What sort of script comes out of such unnatural fire, "a fire in which everything is consumed and everything rises up again"? We can expect that that fire will be in some sense banked or angled. The technical word for this event is 'perversion.' But this term is only a cipher for what remains to be observed in Kafka and his work.

If sex is a drive, then the drive must be figured as originally simple. In such a state it is called an instinct, on a par with the instinct of self-preservation. Of course, such an origin, in the human infant, is only a gleam in a metaphysician's (no reader's) eye. But following

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

the point that Jean Laplanche has notably elaborated, the infant's instinct to take milk from the breast is exceeded from the start by the sexual pleasure it gets from the play of its mouth and fingers with the breast. Thereafter, both aims are commingled, and infantile sexuality is anaclitic, a drive shored up by an instinct. Neither of these pulsions takes its way again in separation from the other: 'feeding' on the other's body in taking pleasure from it is no mere metaphor.

As we see even in Kafka's sublimated – read, scriptive – account of these relations, the sexuality of writing is anaclitic on feeding as well. Consider his fervid desire "to write all my anxiety entirely out of me, write it into the depths of the paper just as it comes out of the depths of me, or write it down in such a way that I could incorporate what I had written into me completely."

The dramatist Kleist, whom Kafka adored, is famous for rhyming, in his *Penthesilea*, the word *Küsse* (kisses) with *Bisse* (bites), as his Amazon queen, madly in love with Achilles, proceeds literally to tear him into bite-size pieces:

> I did not kiss, but tore him? . . .
> So it was a mistake. Kisses, bites,
> They sound alike, and those who deeply love
> Can reach for one as well as for the other
> . . . .

In its voraciousness, the writing intensity might very well be correlated with love at its highest pitch: "early-stage intense romantic love." To the celebrated essay "Reward, Motivation, and Emotion Systems Associated with Early-Stage Intense Romantic Love,"[1] Helen Fisher, a coauthor, commented: "When you're in the throes of this romantic love, it's overwhelming, you're out of control, you're irrational."[2] Now consider the reflections of Kafka's *frère semblable*, the dog who contemplates the history of his 'researches': his visions "show at least how far we can get when we are completely out of our senses (*bei völligem Außer-sich-sein*)."

"When rejected," continues Fisher, "some people contemplate . . . suicide. This drive for romantic love can be stronger than the will to live."[3] Kafka's diaries speak often of the suicidal despair that followed on his being "thrown out" of writing.

"A growing body of literature," remarks the neurophysiologist Hans Breiter, "puts this intellectual construct of love directly onto the same axis as homeostatic rewards such as food, warmth, craving for drugs."[4] The mortal antagonists in "The Burrow," one of whom is an architect-builder, confront one another "with a new and different sort of hunger."

In Kafka's case, we can concede a second-order sublimation of the sexual drive that substitutes the word, the script, the corpus of the letter for the other's body. It is not only the schizophrenic who plays with language. Kafka's play is visible at the level of his topics – his stories, which invariably advert to the writing passion, are sex-besotted

1 Arthur Aron et al., "Reward, Motivation, and Emotion Systems Associated with Early-Stage Intense Romantic Love," *The Journal of Neurophysiology* (2005) 94: 327 – 337.

2 Comment cited in Benedict Carey, "Watching New Love as It Sears the Brain," *New York Times*, May 31, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/31/health/psychology/31love.html?ex=1154577600&en=45b436a5284b877b&ei=5070.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

– and at the level of the letter. The torture scene in "In the Penal Colony," in which the naked prisoner, lying on his belly, is punctuated by rows of needles, then by a "graver," then by a spike driven into his head, includes the incision into his body of unending "ornaments" – tropes or perversions. "So the genuine script has to be surrounded by many, many ornaments," explains the officer; "the real script encircles the body only in a narrow belt; the rest of the body is meant for adornments." In the course of the punishment, the mortal body of the victim is literally abraded by the incised letters – and they are "ornaments," they are beautiful.

Through all the letters and stories Kafka sent to his fiancée Felice Bauer, he is at work offering her a verbal body in place of his actual, unavailable body. It is like the *clothed body* the hero Raban in the story "Wedding Preparations in the Country" sends out to get married in, in lieu of his own body, which remains in bed in the form of "a beautiful beetle." But the verbal body is not opaque – it is transparent to a meaning; in this sense, Kafka sublimates his empirical body to a nakedness of breath and light. Writing to erase the text of desire, Kafka grows beautiful. In an early diary entry, he speaks of this "I":

> Already, what protected me seemed to dissolve here in the city. I was beautiful in the early days, for this dissolution takes place as an apotheosis, in which everything that holds us to life flies away, but even in flying away illumines us for the last time with its human light.

Readers of Kafka's masterpiece *The Castle* have always been taken aback by the scene of K.'s brutal intercourse with Frieda.

> There [on the floor with Frieda, in a puddle of beer] hours passed, hours of breathing together, of hearts beating together, hours in which K. again and again had the feeling that he was going astray or so deep in a foreign place as no man ever before him, a foreign place [or a foreign woman] in which even the air had no ingredient of the air of home, in which one must suffocate on foreignness and in whose absurd allurements one could still do nothing more than go further, go further astray.

A remarkable feature of this passage is the reference to "the foreign element" (*die Fremde*), which evokes 'Frieda' nominally, and hence is this woman: the outlandish foreignness that K. registers is his swoon into the spaces of the woman's body. Here, his skills as land surveyor (*Vermesser*) fail him; all that survives is his insolence (*Vermessenheit*). The woman in this novel is an adjacent plot but is connected by quite visible threads to the main topic of the all-encompassing ministry. How?

Everything of importance relates to the connection to Klamm that K. seeks and thence to the castle. (The word for 'connection,' which abounds in *The Castle*, is *Verbindung*, which, in certain cognates, also refers to a marriage-engagement.) We know that K. conceives of Frieda as the connector to this higher connector. That association comes about when Frieda is summoned to Klamm by letter, the medial form of the summons that castle authorities issue to girls whom they mean to rape. Frieda, then, as the chosen recipient of a letter from Klamm, is the metonymy of that empowering letter, K.'s summons: when Frieda receives K., he receives, as it were, a letter from Klamm.

We will, of course, be immediately reminded of Kafka's struggle to remain connected, and engaged, to Felice Bauer

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

(Frieda Brandenfeld of "The Judgment") – who existed for him chiefly as the recipient of his letters. And, of course, the entire project of becoming engaged to Felice was conceived under the plan of furthering his writing, a goal represented in this novel as 'entering' the castle – the house of writerly being – *Schriftsteller-sein*. Kafka was not the least bit innocent of the notion that the letter to a woman might keep her engaged: "If it were true," he wrote to Max Brod, as early as July 1912, "that one could hold (also: become engaged to) girls by means of writing script?" The mingling of script with the woman's body comes allusively to the fore in the idiom of the castle-world: "Official decisions are shy like young girls." The castle is a single entanglement of visible sex with women and sex as script.

Is such script, with its 'adornments,' a kind of music? In an extraordinary diary entry, Kafka speaks of his ability "to ring simple, or contrapuntal, or a whole orchestration of changes on my theme." Here, we have the association of writing, music, and sex, but what have these categories to do with one another?

In a famous passage from the diaries, these terms are connected at the outset, with music and sex in interesting league against writing: "When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music."[5] Knowing that Kafka is proof against antithesis, we will rightly assume that these joys were not unknown to him, but they had to be set into rhetorical opposition with literature.

Toward the end of his life, in letters to his lover Milena Jesenská, Kafka discussed his exceptional relation to music. On June 14, 1920, he speaks of his being "completely unmusical," indeed, of being "unmusical with a completeness that I have never before encountered in the whole of my experience." A second letter, written a month later, links his unmusicality to his writing: "I have a certain strength, and if one wanted to designate it briefly and vaguely, it is my being unmusical." The renunciation of music is complete; being unmusical is the condition of becoming literature, a point beautifully confirmed by the context of this last-named letter to Milena. Kafka has been imagining Milena's tormented eyes from a photograph of her he has seen, and he is filled with grief. Of this strength (for literature) that lies in his being unmusical, he promptly adds: "But it is not so great that I at any rate now can continue writing....A sort of flood of suffering and love takes me and carries me away from writing." This brings music closer to a type of bodily consciousness – an involuntary, emotion-laden consciousness that murmurs through us every day, the perpetual swash of sentiment and *ressentiment,* with its occasional peaks of longing and falls of dread. We are brought closer to that sense of music as a sort of "emotional state like excitement or affection" that Kafka feared.

But what more does music have to do with sex? Let us ask the question in a provocative modality – sex with men. In one instance, Kafka accuses himself, through the mask called "He," of "bursting [with his writing] the chain of the

5 Recent scholarship would favor a revision of this translation in light of an illegitimately editorially inserted comma in the manuscript. The text now reads, at the close: "...foremost toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, and the philosophical reflection [performed by] music."

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

generations, breaking off for the first time down into all its depths the music of the world . . . ." According to learned authority – I speak of Günter Mecke, whose *Franz Kafkas offenbares Geheimnis* (*Franz Kafka's Open Secret*) is something of a revelation – being "unmusical" belongs to the argot of gay sex at the turn of the century, meaning "incapable of heterosexual relations."[6]

Kafka's fiction is saturated with homoerotic images, and Mecke is intent on arguing for more than Kafka's literary homoeroticism – his homosexuality, his painfully suppressed homosexuality, with the attendant view that his entire corpus is a coded elaboration of this predicament. This can sound like the thesis of a crank – some of its elaborations are far-fetched – but as a working hypothesis it is no less fertile in finding the solutions to particular cruxes than other totalizing hypotheses, such as Kafka's Judaism or socialism or Oedipal neurosis.

Consider Kafka's story "A Fratricide," in which a figure by the odd name of Schmar waits to surprise another, presumably his brother of some sort, with a knife into the belly:

> "Wese!" screams Schmar, standing on tiptoe, his arm thrust upward, his knife sharply lowered, "Wese! Julia waits in vain!" And into the throat from the right, and into the throat from the left, and a third thrust deep into the belly, Schmar sticks his knife. Water rats, slit open, produce a sound like Wese's.

This is dreadful, and it is dreadful as well because it is so hard to understand 'Schmar' and 'Wese.' These are not ordinary names. Here, Mecke has a suggestion difficult to resist. 'Schmar' would be the short form of *Schmarotzer*, which means 'parasite.' The word abounds in Kafka's early writings. But *Schmarotzer* has a code meaning as well in the gay argot of Prague German at the *fin de siècle*. It means 'gay,' with a veneer of the nastiness that can mask humorous familiarity when exchanged between members of an ostracized group.

So there is 'Schmar' as gay – and 'Wese'? His name may very well be the curt form of *Gewesener* – 'one who has been [one].' One what? 'A warm *brother*,' which in the jargon then and now means a gay man – in this instance, one who has been gay and now pretends not to be and has married Julia. So, with a sort of knife, a knife with a hot, glowing 'shaft,' one warm brother stabs another who has been, in former times, an 'old beer buddy,' and who now for his betrayal of his kind, according to a certain mad logic, asks to be raped and killed.

I know no other reading of this story that makes so much sense. It picks out its code, although this code must by no means refer to the behavior of the empirical person, the writer Kafka. For the gay code, while striking, is one of *many* cultural allegories that Kafka inscribes in this story. 'Schmar' also points to the word *Schmarre*, a dueling slash, and hence to the tension between German and Jew in the dueling fraternities of the Prague universities. Or, again, 'Wese' is the root of German words that signify 'rot' and 'decay' and points ahead to the dilapidated castle in the novel of that name – a castle belonging to the departed Count Westwest. The story mimics the rapidity and violence of the new Expressionist film, and so it is a medial allusion. The homosexual code belongs to a repertoire of cultural codes that fill each of Kafka's stories and novels.

The repertoire is vast: Kafka covers the codes of his time with uncanny com-

6 Günter Mecke, *Franz Kafkas offenbares Geheimnis. Eine Psychopathographie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1982), 76.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

prehensiveness; he embraces them and plays with them, though with a certain wildness and exhilaration, knowing they are meant to be consumed for his pleasure. While writing the finale of the "The Judgment" – thinking, as Brod reported, "of a strong ejaculation" – Kafka noted, "How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again." Benno Wagner characterizes this process with quieter words, finding in it a feeling for "the risk of the journey, the importance of small differences, oftentimes with laughter."[7] Kafka was aware of his dilettantism, hyperconscious of the pleasure in the word and in the deed. Writing, for him, was bliss, and because he was a great theorist of writing, he was also a great theorist of sexual pleasure.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/136/2/79/1829294/daed.2007.136.2.79.pdf by guest on 28 May 2023

7 "'No One Indicates The Direction': The Question of Leadership in Kafka's Later Stories," *Kafka's Selected Stories*, ed. and trans. Stanley Corngold (New York: Norton, 2007), 320.