

**At first glance any connection between Kafka's *The Hebrew Notebook* currently being performed in Tel Aviv by the Ruth Kanner Theater Group and the exhibition "The Whole Trial" on display in the German literary archives in the city of Marbach in Baden-Württemberg is wholly coincidental. A second look reveals that both make Kafka's writings the object of a performance that does not demonstrate anything but rather exposes the interim states of language and text.**

As is known, Franz Kafka's characters cannot be seen. One could, of course, draw them, present them, put them on the stage and make them act, or make a movie about them, but what we'd see would no longer be Kafka's characters. A Kafka character becomes what it is also thanks to its refusal to be seen. In other words, Kafka's characters are wholly dependent on their ability to slide away and elude the realm of the visible. Therefore a theater that accepts this challenge – to present something of Kafka's writings (for Kafka left us just that: scattered, fragmented writings) – is taking a huge risk. It stops being a theater in the common meaning of the word; it stops "presenting." Instead, such a theater must open itself up to new possibilities of presence.

In epic terms, a Kafka theater must give up drama, plot and heroes. Instead, it must assume states of being, gestures and trials. And, above all, it will have to devote itself to scenes and states of attentiveness. In this theater (the theater of speech), we must focus on the voices, just as with Kafka's writings one must primarily listen. But how do we listen, and what do we listen to? We must hear the grinding of teeth, the compression of lips, mutters, mumbles, chirps and whistles. Kafka's readers know that the main plots of his stories depend on interim situations of language, atypical syntax and the collapse of the sentence from which and in which his protagonists, such as Gregor Samsa and Josephine, are made. But this thesis should be expanded also to include the category of the novels: indeed, the crux of Kafka's oeuvre is a sentence of no end.

This introduction is a necessary preamble before discussing two matters that, at first glance, are only coincidentally related: the first, the theatrical work based on Kafka's *The Hebrew Notebook*, currently being performed in Tel Aviv by the Ruth Kanner Theater Group, and the second, an exhibition entitled "The Whole Trial" on view in the German literary archives in the city of Marbach in Baden-Württemberg. In both cases, Kafka's writings become the object of a performance that doesn't really denote anything but rather exposes interim states of language and text. But the theatrical work *The Hebrew Notebook* poses another challenge as it is a dramatization or performance of a list of Hebrew words from Kafka's blue Hebrew exercise book kept in the archives of the National Library in Jerusalem.

Space does not allow an extended discussion of Kafka's Hebrew studies here except to say that modern Hebrew intrigued Kafka. Evidence of this may be found in Kafka's early letters to Felicia Bauer dated to 1912, in which he proposed a plan for a joint trip to Palestine and in which he mentioned his amazement at her Hebrew studies. He started studying Hebrew only in 1917, a few months before he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. At first, his studies were based on a popular Hebrew textbook written by Moses Rath. Later on, together with Felix Weltsch and Irma Zinger, Kafka took lessons with Jiří Langer, and at the end of 1918 he studied privately with Friedrich Thieberger, a young, newly minted PhD in German literature who specialized in Biblical Hebrew.

Kafka renewed his Hebrew lessons in 1923, learning with Puah Ben-Tovim, a young student from Jerusalem who, on the advice of Hugo Bergmann, had come to Prague for advanced studies in mathematics. Kafka studied with Ben-Tovim just a few months (she left to move to Berlin), and he documented his lessons with her in his sixth octavo notebook (now found in the Oxford archive). This was the same notebook Kafka had initially set aside for literary writing, but in 1923 he took the notebook again, turned it upside down, and started filling it with lists of words in Hebrew and German.

Just as he did in the blue notebook, Kafka arranged long columns of Hebrew words opposite their German equivalents to form a personal lexicon constructed with Ben-Tovim's help. Some of the words may be classified as "practical words," while others have ethical or theological implications. On the pages of the sixth octavo notebook we find words as diverse as **קרבן** *korban* ("sacrifice") for *Opfer* and **המיה** *hemiya* ("murmuring") for *Rauschen*, but of special interest is the Hebrew word **צמצום** *tzimtzum*, which earned no fewer than five equivalents in German – "thin," "precise," "narrowing," "frugality" and "concentration." Isn't this a fine example of the power of a single (Kabbalistic) word to encompass meanings?

In his last year, when Kafka stayed for a time in Berlin in the company of Dora Diamant, his last love, he was still working on his Hebrew. He also attended lectures on the Talmud and even spent some time trying – without great success – to read Yosef Haim Brenner's Hebrew novel *Breakdown and Bereavement*.

In a late 1922 diary entry, Kafka indeed mentioned his Hebrew studies alongside his violin lessons, as one of his failures, but it seems that he attained greater Hebrew proficiency than he was willing to acknowledge.

What, then, can *The Hebrew Notebook* hope to be able to present? The members of the Ruth Kanner Theater Group understood very well that Kafka's words are not for presenting but for performing, since these words are formed as gestures. In a Kafka theater there is no representation (as words representing an entity in the world) but rather reading (a raising of the voice), not speech (dialogue) but rather appeal. Every word on the stage is formed as a turning-to-in-speech, an outburst, a cry. The words erupting from the Hebrew notebook bring us back to hearing the voices before they became words, while they were still screams, howls, shrieks, broken sounds and fractured syllables.

These words – originating in the Hebrew notebook – must therefore preserve their strangeness. As noted, they had come from far away. And that is the theater's restorative power: to restore the power of the word to sound as if it is coming from a distance. In the theater, we pay attention to alliteration,

reverberation, pronunciation of fragmented words. The theater brings us back to the point where we can sense the materiality of the words. The actors give back to the words a heartbeat, a body heat, a circulation of blood: it is not the meaning (as in: what are they saying, or what did Kafka mean to say?) that matters, but rather their articulated reality – sibilant, fricative, plosive enunciations.

And in Kafka's notebook, words have something in common with raw, ancient, primeval matter. The writing of the words reflects a difficult process of transcription, rote memorization, stubborn repetition. In Kafka's notebooks, the Hebrew word is formed with a hesitant, childlike hand. The words are still incomplete, yet they contain promise. However, this promise was not destined to be realized but rather fated to remain in suspension (like that promised journey to Palestine, like those Kafka's "hanging-in-the-air" vowels and sentence structures).

In this sense, Kafka's Hebrew word is written as a fragment, alone occupying the line as a broken piece, quotation, remnant, without meaning (and that is perhaps the first translation of the Hebrew word פֶּשֶׁר *peshet* Kafka wrote in his notebook; something similar emerges with the word מוֹסָג *musag*, rendered as *Begriff* in German, or "term" or "concept" or even "that which is graspable" in English, which ironically reveals the ungraspable and the immanent gaps between the languages). Thus, every word is also a short story (isn't that implicit in words such as "plague" or "responsibility/Verantwortung" with their power to suggest long, intricate plots?). That is precisely the secret of the word Kafka copies into his octavo notebook – the word צְמִצּוּם *tzimzum*.

The performance of *The Hebrew Notebook* brings Hebrew back to its proto-linguistic domain, the domain of creature-like tongue materials. Something primary, primordial, physical, is engraved also in the stories of the strange communities in "An Old Manuscript" and "Jackals and Arabs," two stories the theatrical work presents alongside the notebook words. In these stories, telling the tales of peoples and nomads, creatures and slaughtered beasts, we are returning at once to the wild side of "Before the Law," to zones of violent life, merciless, bleeding, guts spilled, in which man and beast dwell together in terrible proximity. This is the life of הערלה *ha'orla*, *Vorhaut*, "the foreskin," i.e., life before the covenant, a word Kafka also copied into his blue Hebrew notebook and which echoes in words like ערלה *orla* ("foreskin"), ערלת-לב *orlat-lev* ("the imperviousness of the heart"), ערל *arel* ("uncircumcised") and even שְׂמַד *sh'mad*, *Taufen* – ("baptism and conversion to Christianity"). The reading out of the Hebrew words returns us finally to the realm of the ritual. The new Hebrew words once again become sacred, words whose written form cannot be casually discarded: something in them, perhaps a remnant of the magic, sounds meaningless yet valid. Is this prayer?

This is the first meaning of a sentence of no end: a sentence in its textual sense, a sentence whose parts are flawed, gaping and spilled, and whose structure is breached and open, and whose words teem with life and validity but still lack meaning. This is the sentence Kafka also copies into his literary works and aphoristic writings: the sentence constructed as a series of gestures, lopped-off motions, states of stillness and reverberations. The sentence attests to an awareness of dearth and flaws but also of life's irrational abundance.

But Kafka's "sentence" (*Satz*) also carries a second meaning, that of the "Doctrine of the Law" (*Gesetz*). And here, too – evinced by the exhibition "The Whole Trial" in Marbach, which tells the story of Kafka's unfinished novel – these are conscious chasms of absence and disruption. Kafka worked on *The Trial* from August 1914 until January 1915, the first months of the Great War. During the same time, he also wrote the last chapters of *Amerika* and the short story "The Penal Colony."

Kafka wrote *The Trial* in ten quarto notebooks in which he included drafts for various chapters of the novels as well as diary entries and other literary notations. The novel's manuscript is therefore scattered, redundant, not unified, unfolding itself in fragments. An examination of the handwriting shows that Kafka first wrote the novel's first and last chapters, and only then worked on the middle sections, though in those, too, his writing lacked continuity: Kafka worked on various parts of the novel almost regardless of their placement in the "plot".

In the writing of *The Trial* there is no chronological order. There may have been no novel writing at all in the common sense of the term, but rather a text with superfluous, multiple limbs, growths and satellites, created as segments, unraveled, unfinished chapters, which indicate not only Kafka's "writing difficulties" or the collapse of the novel form and its dispersal as fragments: the writing of *The Trial* also reflects the breach and retreat taking place in the most fundamental concepts of being – the concepts of time and space.

Similar to the manuscript of *The Trial*, the world in which Josef K. lives and is being sentenced lacks linear logic, and beginning and end are reversed. What we call the story of a life is challenged from the ground up, failing to attain continuity, coherence or conclusion. The law spoken of so often refuses to show itself (Kafka's protagonists are destroyed "on the brink" before the law), and emerges from filthy offices populated by deformed, corrupt father figures. The manuscript of *The Trial* thus heralds the disintegration occurring in the legal field, so that the law has been transformed into a riddle, a new type of arcana. Is that not the case of *der Prozess* – the legal procedure – or the fate of Josef K. called to the procedure whose nature is never clear? The trial has no meaning, and that is its only meaning: *The Trial* marks the possibility of destructive procedures occurring for no reason and in impossible-to-fathom contexts. Is this not the very world from which Kafka's protagonists seek to escape, to no avail?

The manuscript of *The Trial* and its 161 pages ripped from quarto notebooks, its fragments, letters, ink stains, copy marks and erasures signify the materials of writing and literature. We again discern a sentence of no end, the marks of a breached, ceaseless consciousness of the world. But what is laid out in his various writings – be they lists of Hebrew words or parts of a German novel refusing to be written to its end, in octavo or quarto notebook – may point to the powerful recognition Kafka formulated toward the end of his life: "writing as a form of prayer," an irrational, insistent request, written on the brink, welling up between languages.