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Exclusion and renewal: identity and Jewishness in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and David Vogel's Married Life

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Exclusion and Renewal

Identity and Jewishness

in

Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"

and

David Vogel's *Married Life*

FRANCINA CORNELIA VALK

Exclusion and Renewal
Identity and Jewishness in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and
David Vogel's *Married Life*

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Exclusion and Renewal

**Identity and Jewishness in Franz Kafka's
“The Metamorphosis” and David Vogel's *Married Life***

PROEFSCHRIFT

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de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden
op gezag van Rector Magnificus Prof. mr. C.J.J.M. Stolker,
volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties
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Francina Cornelia Valk
geboren te 's-Gravenhage, Nederland
in 1932

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In poetical discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state of mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence.

(Heidegger, *Being and Time*)

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FOREWORD

Every scholarly or scientific preoccupation with research has a strictly personal component which, along with intellectual curiosity and talent, inspires the researcher to explore precisely a specific research field to the exclusion of possible other ones. It is that personal drive which helps the scholar through the emotions of production. In my case it was recognising a particular type of inner condition communicated by David Vogel's *Married Life* that set the ball of my research rolling. I call it an inner condition of exile, which I had seen as a very young child in my Jewish father without realising what it was at the time. This condition is a state of consciousness, an awareness of displacement and of the radical instability of existence that goes with migration. Migration is a Jewish experience inspired in biblical times by God's command and in medieval and modern times by anti-Jewishness, which is of all ages: it caused Maimonides in the twelfth century to migrate from the south of Spain to the north of Africa in much the same way as it caused Vogel's wanderings through Europe between 1912 and 1944 and his eventual death in Auschwitz.¹

The inner condition I try to describe is that of marginality, of being on the border of things: a sediment of an endlessly repeated experience indelibly imprinted on the brain (or on the soul?) of Jews by generations of persecution and migration since biblical times, through the Middle Ages until today. It pervades the subject matter of *Married Life*, but even more so in that indefinable aspect of literature which is style, and which David Vogel himself refers to as the "colour of the writer's soul". It is that quality of *Married Life* that eluded all critical comments on his novel, and propelled me back to my childhood, to the beginnings of the Second World War, waking up from dormancy the memory of that same - never verbally articulated - inner condition of exile in my Jewish father, despite the fact that he and his Jewish forebears had lived peacefully in the Netherlands for generations. It was that inner condition that I sensed before the fact that my

¹ Maimonides, Moses. 1135-1204. Rabbinic authority, codifier, philosopher and royal physician. The most illustrious figure in the post-Talmudic era, and one of the greatest of all times. As a result of the fall of Cordoba in May or June 1148, just after his thirteenth birthday, and of the ensuing religious persecution, Maimonides was forced to leave Cordoba with his family. Any trace of them in the following eight or nine years has been lost, whilst they wandered through Spain and the Provence until arriving in Africa. Maimonides himself described those years as a period that had laid, "while my mind was troubled. and amid divinely ordained exiles, on journeys by land and tossed on the tempests of seas", the strong foundations of his vast and varied learning and the beginnings of his literary work. From: *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Eds. Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder. Vol. 11. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1994. 16 vols. 754-81.

father was Jewish, which had been hidden from me for safety reasons. Yet, it was transmitted to me without words.

Only much later did I realise that it was this same inner condition of exile that had shaped the freedom of Jewish scientists and scholars to tread new ground and to defy, as Freud put it, “the prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect: as a Jew I was prepared to go into the opposition and to renounce agreement with the compact majority”.² It was that freedom that I sensed in Vogel’s idiosyncratic constructions of consciousness and masochism, and the same freedom which Hebrew scholars have found in his equally idiosyncratic use of the Hebrew language. Critics have viewed *Married Life* as a modernist novel for many valid literary reasons; to me, as a Jewish daughter, not as a scholar, what associates *Married Life* with the fleeting cultural sensibility of modernity is its communication of that continuing inner Jewish sense of displacement that defies definition, even the definitions of marginality. It is the artistic freedom facilitated by this sensibility which - as a scholar - I have tried to trace back in the beyond of language whose curious eloquence I remembered from my youth, and which Julia Kristeva’s work has academically made accessible to me through her notions of the symbolic and the semiotic as categories of identity and meaning. This inspired me to explore in this study the writings of Vogel and Kafka as writings on the border between the speakable and the unspeakable, as formulated by Julia Kristeva; a dynamics I remembered from my father’s (spoken) discourses as I have noted before. The unspeakable, albeit not producing meaning itself, seems to add to and even alter the meanings in the speakable, which opened up a layer of meanings as unexpected as they were revealing to me.

² Sigmund Freud. “Address to the Society of B’nai B’rith” (1926). *Psychological Writings and Letters*. Ed. Sander L. Gilman. New York: Continuum, 1995.

Sigmund Freud writes about marginality and the readiness to open up to perspectives challenging the prevailing discourses: “Because I was a Jew I felt free of many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect: as a Jew I was prepared to go into the opposition and to renounce agreement with the ‘compact majority’”. (“Weil ich Jude war fand ich mich frei von vielen Vorurteilen die andere in Gebrauch ihres Intellectes beschränkten, als Jude war ich dafür vorbereitet, in die Opposition zu gehen und auf das Einvernehmen mit der ‘kompakten Majorität’ zu verzichten”).

