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

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Aim of this Study

In this study I explore literary structures of identity-formation in the works of assimilated/acculturated Jewish writers: Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis" ("Die Verwandlung", 1912) and David Vogel's Hebrew novel *Married Life (חיי נישואים, 1929)*.[3]

These authors wrote their works when the failure of Jewish assimilation began to dawn on assimilated/acculturated European Jewry, and an upsurge of hatred of Jews made it, as someone put it: "as impossible *to be*, as *not* to *be* a Jew (by assimilation/acculturation)".

What I aim to show is that during that deadlock of Jewish identity, new structures of identity began to emerge in the literary works of Jews. Works demonstrating the power not to represent the world of located subjects but to imagine, create and vary affects, that were not already given: not already tied down to communication and signification in the social order. That is what Deleuze and Guattari call minor literature, namely literature that does not add a work to the great tradition but disrupts and dislocates that tradition. Minor literature represents nothing but the power to be different. All great literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is minor in this sense: it is the vehicle for the creation rather than the expression of identity.[4]

1.2 Research Perspective and Methodology

This relation between identity and affect (instinct/drive) in literature guided me to the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva. Her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) theorizes precisely that association from a psychoanalytical

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[3] See the introductions to chapters 4 and 6 for bibliographical information on Kafka and Vogel.

[4] This paragraph is based on:
- Ronald Bogue. *Deleuze and Guattari*. London: Routledge, 1989. 102-23.
- Claire Colebrook. *Gilles Deleuze*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005. 102-22.
- Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 3-27.
For the idea of Kafka and other German Jewish writers as writers of minor literature in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari, see also Vivian Liska, *When Kafka Says We: Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 1-11).

perspective.[5] *Abjection* in the title of Kristeva's work has nothing to do with its everyday meanings such as the state or condition of being cast down, brought low, humiliation, degradation, dispiritedness or despondency. Rather it is a complex, drive-oriented and thus ambivalent psycho-dynamics of identity-formation offering possibilities for identity/ subjectivity not yet tied down to communication and signification in the social order. In chapter 2 I shall go into the notion of abjection in more detail.

In this study I investigate through the lens of Kristeva's notion of abjection how the works of the Jewish writers under consideration in this study can be viewed as vehicles for the creation, rather than the expression or representation of a Jewish identity.

Associating affect with identity-formation was not new in psychoanalysis. In 1912, Freud wrote an anthropological study, *Totem and Taboo,* in which he points to invisible, drive-oriented psychological forces operative in the formation of identities in primitive tribes.[6] He postulates in *Totem and Taboo* that the social exclusion of others not only binds the identity of a clan, but is also the source of highly ambivalent, drive-oriented emotions which are equally the source of the pleasure of identification (this is what we are) and of barbaric persecution (this is what we are *not*), and must therefore be hunted down, massacred. What he describes is a perception of a self-other group's identification process that was, much later, extended to the individual.

1.3 Identity: Historical Perspectives from Group to Individual, and from Essence to Language

In the second half of the twentieth-century, two tendencies in postmodern philosophies expanded on the perception of identity and its relation to the instinctual. First, the modernist prominence on subjectivity extended the Freudian group's conceptualisation of that relation to the sphere of individual identity-processing, manifest in the claim that any self – a group's as well as an individual's – needs

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[5] Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Quotations in English and references to page numbers refer to this edition as *Powers of Horror.*

[6] Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. 1912. Trans. James Strachey. London: Routledge Classics, 2001. *Totem and Taboo* consists of four essays originally published in the periodical *Imago* (Vienna): the first and second essay in Vol. 1 (1912), and the third and fourth in Vol. 2 (1913). A Hebrew translation from 1939 contains a most interesting foreword by Freud in which he confirms his identity as a Jew by elucidating his allegiance to the Jewish people despite the fact that he was not religious and did not know Hebrew (the language in which his work was then being published).

an internal/external other (alter) to define itself. The prominence in that so-called alterity philosophy was on the socio-cultural rather than the psychological interpretation of alterity. Today, as Silke Horstkotte and Esther Peeren formulated it in *The Shock of the Other* (2007), alterity, or the relation between the self and its other, has become a cliché. However:

> what has remained elusive is a situated, specific account of their intersection, the precise politics that arise at the points where the self's desire for unity and self-sameness is crossed by its inevitable, multiple and various encounters with otherness. These encounters take place internally – within the self – as well as externally, and may involve either concrete other subjects, or more general [ideological] principles of otherness, configured in terms of class, gender, sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, and so on.[7]

A merit of Julia Kristeva's work on abjection is that it theorises precisely what according to Horstkotte and Peeren "has remained elusive … the precise politics that arise at the points where the self's desire for unity and self-sameness is crossed by its inevitable, multiple and various encounters with otherness". I will examine Kristeva's theoretical implications of these precise politics when dealing with her work in chapter 2, while applying her notion of abjection to my reading of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" in chapter 4, and to my reading of Vogel's novel *Married Life* in chapter 6.

1.4 Literature Creating Identity: The Case of Jakob Wassermann

The instinctual group psychodynamics that Freud describes in *Totem and Taboo* has been hinted at as operative in the relation Nazi-Jew. Cynics have observed that there would not even have been a Europe without the exclusion and murder of the Jews. But what has hardly been explored psychologically is how acculturated modern Jewish artists/writers have experienced abjection when exposed to the Jew-hater and turned that experience into art, thus creating a new artistic Jewish identity "by the word", to use Vogel's phrase, and outside the grip of anti-Semitism and Nazism. Let me illustrate this with an example. In an episode from the diary (1921) of the German/Jewish writer Jakob Wassermann (1873-1934), he recounts his first direct confrontation with anti-Semitism as the social exclusion of Jews, when he enlisted in the German army. As soon as his fellow would-be soldiers noticed that he was a Jew they gave him just *a gaze*, but one of sheer hatred and resentment, setting him apart and excluding him as the other, the unwanted Jew. Wassermann writes:

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[7] Silke Horstkotte and Esther Peeren, eds., *The Shock of the Other: Situating Alterities*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 9.

> For the first time I encountered that dull, rigid, almost inarticulate hatred that has permeated our national organism. The word anti-Semitism does not suffice to describe it, for the term reveals neither the nature, nor the source, neither the depth, not the aim, of that hatred. It contains elements of superstition and voluntary delusion, of fanatical terror, of priestly callousness, of the rancour of the wronged and betrayed, of ignorance, of falsehood, of lack of conscience, of justifiable self-defence, and of religious bigotry. Greed and curiosity play their part here, bloodlust, and the fear of being lured and being seduced, the love of mystery and deficient self-esteem. In its constituents and background, it is a peculiarly German phenomenon. It is a German hatred.[8]

Initially I read the preceding episode almost automatically as yet another account of anti-Semitism. Now, from the perspective of the exclusion/renewal machinery of abjection, a quite different meaning presented itself. Exposed to the destructive gaze of the other (the Jew-Hater), excluding the Jew Wassermann from the social order (in this case the army), Wassermann the artist instinctively excludes the gaze (not me) by turning it into literature and, by that very act of exclusion, creates himself artistically, a Jewish self outside the gaze.

1.5 Abjection: A Psychodynamics of Exclusion and Renewal

Obviously, reading abjection in Jewish writers' texts creates new meanings. How that works literary-technically, and how it affects meaning formation in the text are the questions that inform my attempts to make abjection visible in chapters 4 to 6 on the texts of my choice. Within the context of this introduction, it suffices to say that in the works of Jews living in the anti-Semitic context of Central Europe, when read through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, the drive-ambivalence of abjection manifests itself in a most idiosyncratic way. It appears as a universal psychodynamics of exclusion and renewal in the sense that it excludes hatred of Jews (not me) by turning it into art and, through that very act of exclusion, renews Jewishness (this is what I am) in ways not already fixed in the contemporary cultural discourses on Jews excluding Jews. Kristeva generalises this productive ambivalence to a universal principle of all identity-formation (both for the individual and for the group) that appears whenever the borders of identity are uncertain.

The uniqueness of the Jewish writers under investigation in this study is that – in the Jewish deadlock of identity through the failure of assimilation – they fell back on the ancient Jewish tradition of creating identity through the word (as Vogel puts it in his diary), that is, through their literature.

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[8] Jakob Wassermann. *My Life as German and Jew*. London, G. Allen & Unwin ltd. Tr. S.N.Brainin, 1934, 53.

1.6 The Organisation of this Study

Keeping in mind Kristeva's dictum that the visibility of abjection takes different forms in different cultures and for different peoples, I will explore the historical moment of the cultures and peoples in Central and Eastern Europe in which the Jewish writers' texts under investigation came into being. A word of caution is called for regarding my use of cultural history in this study. Kristeva's dictum about the visibility of abjection implies a specific view of history, namely in relation to the experience of abjection. That is, Kristeva views abjection as a universal psychodynamics of identity-formation, and cultural/history only the specific ambiance in which abjection appears.

That "only" does by no means belittle the role of cultural history in her research. There is however no causal relation between abjection and the historical context in which it appears. On the contrary, abjection, as a universal phenomenon, appears in any context in which the subject feels the borders of the self threatened.

Yet, precisely because of this universality it becomes the more pressing to investigate abjection alongside the specific historical particularity in which it emerges. This is why I have devoted a relatively long chapter to the historical specificity for Jews (chapter 3) in fin-de-siècle and interbellum Central Europe, in which abjection appears in the works of the Jewish authors of my choice. The more so as that ambiance, especially that of Vogel's Eastern Europe and Russia, is not in the forefront of the European mind.

In accordance with Kristeva's dictum (chapter 2), I will look into the cultural-historical specificity in which abjection appears in the work of Kafka as an East-Central European German-Jewish writer, and in the work of Vogel as a Russian-Jewish exiled writer in Europe. It does hardly need explaining that my historical overview cannot be but incomplete, as the subject matter is complex, but it serves as a framework for the cultural/historical contexts in which abjection plays a role in the works of the writers under investigation in this study.

Chapter 2 is a theoretical exploration into the complexity of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, intended as an introduction to my actual analysis of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and Vogel's *Married Life,* through the lens of that concept. Chapters 4 to 6 included contain the actual analyses of the preceding works, and in the final chapter 7, I formulate, by way of conclusion, what the methodology that I have outlined here has yielded in terms of new understandings of my chosen texts. To conclude, I focus in this study on abjection as a psychodynamics of identity-formation in Jewish literature and from the perspective of Jews. What I aim to show is what eludes historical discourses modelled on the victim/perpetrator axis: how Jewish writers – such as Wassermann – tried to create, in and through their art, identities as Jews outside the anti-Semitic craze of the day.

From the preceding it follows that psychoanalytical, rather than philological, interests have in the first instance informed my choice of Kafka and Vogel. Vogel's writing in Hebrew is itself an act of identification marking him a European, Hebrew modernist, as I will show in chapter 6. By now it may be clear that I am interested in the logics of abjection that I read in the works of my chosen writers, as I did in my example from Wassermann's diary. I am particularly interested in the ways in which those logics create unexpected meanings of identity in their works. In chapter 7, Concluding Observations, I evaluate this methodology.

Finally, my research has confronted me with the ambivalence of the drive as both a destructive and a creative force. The former is manifest in the persecution of the Jews, the latter in the Jews' incredible artistic power to draw out from their art the identities that were denied them in social reality, only different ones. The ambivalence of the drive, however, is not only the subject matter of my research but also a continuing intellectual dilemma.