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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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7 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Anne Fuchs' work *A Space of Anxiety: Dislocation and Abjection in Modern German-Jewish Literature* (1999) first triggered my interest in Julia Kristeva's work, on account of its insight that identity in modern German Jewish literature emerges from an ambivalent space of enunciation, the semiotic, challenging contemporary notions of identity as defined by nation states, which excluded Jews. Using Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection as a literary tool, Fuchs explores in *A Space of Anxiety* her German Jewish writers' quest to redefine their sense of identity in that ambivalent space.

Fuchs' work sparked my interest in Kristeva's work, specifically her work on identity formation and her creation of that new space of enunciation in her theory of the semiotic. I have explored her view of that space in chapter 2 in terms of two different but interdependent registers of identity and meaning.

While studying Kristeva, I wondered how a reading of David Vogel's Hebrew *Married Life* through the lens of her notion of abjection would affect my understanding of the text, and of its dramatization of the Eastern European Jewish protagonist's subjective experience of Vienna as an *Ostjude*. Giving artistic voice to an *Ostjude's* discourse on his experience of Vienna, in a culture that despised *Ostjuden* was incidentally in itself a daring enterprise of Vogel as a writer. The more so as he wanted to translate the novel into German, and since he did not master the German language well enough, he asked a Jewish publisher during one of his trips to Berlin (at the time when Hitler rose to power) to translate *Married Life* and to subsequently publish it. Vogel's efforts failed, however. Perhaps because at the time he was unknown as a prose writer, or perhaps because Jewish publishers were afraid to publish a German novel about a Jew and an Austrian baroness in a sadomasochist relationship when Nazi sympathy was high in Berlin.

It then occurred to me that it would be interesting to do a reading of Vogel's dramatizations of identity through the lens of Kristeva's notion of abjection alongside the work of a Central European Jewish writer such as Kafka, whose novella "The Metamorphosis" I selected, as I found most interpretations of that enigmatic text unsatisfactory in the sense that they lacked a sensitivity to the unspeakable in that text. Theodor Adorno's comment on "The Metamorphosis" was an exception. His perceptive discourse on the unspeakable in "The Metamorphosis" seemed to me to anticipate Kristeva's notion of the semiotic as an invisible register of meaning, and of the text as a machinery of subjectivity by offering the reader the possibility of sublimation. This double function turned "The Metamorphosis" into an avant-garde text in the specific meaning given to that term by Kristeva.

What did my reading of the texts in this way produce in the field of identity and meaning? In the first place, both Kafka's and Vogel's texts were written at a time when there was a German Jewish identity crisis in Europe. German Jews became finally aware that assimilation had failed, and that "to be a Jew" was as impossible as "not to be a Jew". That deadlock, however, was also true for Eastern European exiled Jews such as Vogel, but in a different way, as I have shown in chapter 6. Vogel, like most Eastern European Jewish intellectuals and writers coming from orthodox backgrounds, was highly ambivalent with respect to assimilation. On the one hand, he was attracted to European high culture, art, literature and philosophy, while on the other he felt a deep loyalty to his orthodox backgrounds. Perhaps that is why in *Married Life*, Austrian Thea becomes Jewish in order to marry Gurdweill in a Jewish ceremony, and not the other way round, namely Gurdweill becoming Christian. *Married Life*, as I see it, is a sophisticated, artistic dramatization of the impossibility of assimilation, which was not uncommon among German Jewry.

That, however, is not a new approach to the novel. New is my reading of both Kafka's and Vogel's texts as connecting their Jewish audiences to what had been neglected in the symbolic order. I refer to the drive aspects of identity formation: borderline situations as in abjection between the I and its inassimilable other, as much from the point of view of literary form as from their dramatization of identity and subjectivity.

Looking back on my investigation of abjection in both texts I have focused on two issues: the universal (abjection as a psychodynamics of identity formation) and the specific (the cultural-historical) situation in which abjection appears. I have paid ample attention to the latter in chapters 3 and 5, and to the theoretical implications of abjection as a psychodynamics of identity formation in chapter 2.

Finally, I have shown that art dramatizing abjection, which Kristeva calls avant-garde art (see chapter 4), inspires the reader's experience of self. By dramatizing abjection the text enables the reader to keep it under control through sublimation, in the sense of the ancient Greeks who viewed art as catharsis, or purification.²⁸⁹ "Sublimation", writes Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*,

... is nothing else than the possibility of naming the prenominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal. In the symptom (a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster...), the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation I keep it under control.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Julia Kristeva, in an interview conducted by Nina Zivancevic, in Paris, March-April 2001. *16 Beaver*. Web. 2 March 2003.

²⁹⁰ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 11.

“Naming the pronominal” is a perfect definition of what I see as the dynamics in both Kafka’s and Vogel’s texts, as well as in Rothko’s paintings. In doing so avant-garde art (in the sense of Kristeva) enables the reader/viewer to re-constitute his or her self, or, as Slavoj Žižek formulated it in a different context, those texts “temporarily intermit the agency of the symbolic signification to which the reader is exposed, while offering him/her artistically the agency of the maternal, or semiotic.”²⁹¹ This view transforms Kafka and Vogel’s texts, as well as Rothko’s art, into technologies of subjectivity for reader/viewer and writer/artist.

At last, a few words about the social relevance of the work of Kristeva. She certainly did not aim to turn her insights about abjection into a political programme or system. And indeed, as Beardsworth rightly observed, abjection has nothing to do with politics, and is far from a recipe for political action. “Yet”, writes Kristeva, “these unconscious determinations remain a constituent part, an essential one, of social and therefore national dynamics” and

Indeed, I am convinced that, in the long run, only a thorough investigation of our remarkable relationship with both the *other*, and *strangeness within ourselves*, can lead people to give up hunting for the scapegoat outside their group, a search that allows them to withdraw in their own “sanctum”: thus purified: Is not the worship of one’s “very own” of which the national is the collective configuration, the *common denominator* that we imagine we have as “our own,” precisely, along with other “own and proper” people like us?²⁹²

Whether or not we agree with Kristeva, the fact is that in the past and present we have seen that social and legal measures against political othering, though necessary and useful, are not sufficient. My hope focuses, like Kristeva’s, on education on the instinctive aspects of othering as an integral part of all identity-formation, in addition to legal measures. In this context, education should perhaps focus on students realising that social and individual othering is difficult to deal with, as it is an integral and universal aspect of identity formation charged with deep affects. Kafka, as an artist and a Jew, realised this, as appears from his address to the German Jewish audience of the Yiddish theatre (chapter 4). He did not address the social but the affective aspects of the German Jewish audience’s fear of Yiddish: the language which they – as assimilated Jews – had been forced to see as other (not us) but which was actually part of their selves: their Jewishness.

²⁹¹ Based on Slavoj Žižek. *The Fragile Absolute, Or Why The Christian Legacy Is Worth Fighting For*. New York: Verso, 2000. 74-5.

²⁹² Julia Kristeva. *Nations without Nationalism*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. 50 -1.

