"Leaping Lizards Max": Kafka Asks Brod Asks Kraus Asks Heine a Jewish Question – And It's Not Judith Butler's

By Jay Geller

I would like to devote our time together today to discussing a single line (not sure if I can call it a sentence since it has no end-marking period) written by Franz Kafka in the second of his thrice-started-but-never-completed critiques of his close friend and confidant Max Brod's then-latest novel *Die Jüdinnen*.

> So freut uns auch auf einem Fußweg in Italien das Aufzucken der Eidechsen vor unsern Schritten ungemein immerfort möchten wir uns bücken, sehn wir sie aber bei einem Händler zu Hunderten in den großen Flaschen durcheinanderkriechen in denen man sonst Gurken einzulegen pflegt so wissen wir uns nicht einzurichten[1]

He wrote it in black ink in the second of his surviving journal notebooks, according to the editors of Kafka's *Kritische Ausgabe* some time between 28 March and 27 May 1911.[2] The entry was first published 25 years after Kafka's death in 1924 from esophageal tuberculosis (1949) in Brod's edition of his late friend's *Tagebücher*. In Brod's edition, it is placed under the date-rubric "26. März" (1911) and follows the diarist's brief notes about having earlier attended lectures by the esoteric philosopher Rudolf Steiner, the architect Adolf Loos, and the critic Karl Kraus. When I first encountered this passage, my attention was drawn to the specificity of Kafka's analogy: it's not just any lizard, but one encountered on a footpath in Italy.

What was this delightful Italian lizard doing leaping from a notebook in Prague in the middle of a discussion of narrative perspective, Jewish representation, and flawed prose by a recent attendee of Kraus's famous denunciation of Heinrich Heine and the alleged effects of his prose style on modern

journalism? Could this lizard be an allusion to another lizard that another Germanophone, Jewish-identified writer had encountered while hiking in Italy: specifically the meeting Heine recounts in the opening chapters of the fourth of his *Reisebilder*, *Die Stadt Lucca*?

By now you are beginning to get restless. Is this yet another endless voyage into text critical arcana, piloted by yet another scholar suffering from OCD, the aim of which is to win a pissing contest about some obscure Kafkaesque reference in an even more obscure philological journal and its minuscule (and similarly obsessive) readership? And you may be thinking: if it is bad form to make my way to the nearest exit, perhaps I can discreetly switch on my smart phone or pretend to be taking notes on my laptop.

Well, in fact, I may be obsessive and I will be engaging in some form of text criticism today, but my aim is different. This little survivor of the Kafka-desired bonfire of his vanities, which his executor Max Brod extinguished, has recently gotten itself caught up in the Kafkaesque maelstrom of Middle East cultural politics. It was invoked – albeit somewhat inexactly – in a major lecture by the philosopher, hate-speech analyst, and self-identified Jew Judith Butler that was sponsored by the *London Review of Books* and then reprinted in the journal's 3 March issue.[3] The title of her performance was "Who Owns Kafka?" and it was occasioned by a trial about to be held in an Israeli court over rival claims to several boxes of Kafka's *Nachlaß* that had been retained by Brod and, upon his death in 1968, bequeathed to his private secretary Esther Hoffe, and, upon her death in 2007, left in the possession of her two daughters, who now wish to put the stash up for sale.

There are two major claimants to Kafka's legacy: the German Literature Archive in Marbach, which views itself as entrusted with conserving the German literary and linguistic heritage –

> *In (then) late-breaking Kafka news a separate* Konvolut *of Kafka's correspondence with his sister Ottla has just been purchased for a half-million Euros by that self-same Marbach Archive, with a little help from the Baden-Württemberg government and a lot of help (some 50%) from Oxford University.* –

and the National Library of Israel, which, Butler notes, has inferior archival facilities.

And in later breaking news: perhaps not coincidentally, the National Library received a major Israeli government grant last month to upgrade its facilities to world-class standards.

Marbach's competitor views itself as entrusted with conserving the cultural "assets" of the Jewish people (and, as unmentioned by Butler, apparently entrusted by Brod in writing to be the ultimate archive of this material).[4] Butler questions the notions of Germanness and Jewishness (both in general and with regard to Kafka) respectively employed by these pretenders to the name and finds them both problematic. Most of her onus, however, falls upon what she calls Israel's intended instrumentalization of the Kafka brand and its associated products. She suggests that not only does Israel seek to reinforce its reputation as a life-affirming *Kulturnation*, but it also seeks, most insidiously, to break up the movement by a number of non-Israeli academics and cultural figures (including Judith Butler) to boycott all cultural exchanges with Israel until its policy toward and treatment of Palestinians are changed. Butler suspects that Israel desires to possess the Kafka originals in order to place Kafka scholars in a double bind: either observe the boycott and deny themselves access to this material or abandon the boycott and enter the archive. Of course, neither the appropriateness nor even the efficacy of the boycott is ever questioned in her disquisition.

As I said, Butler seeks to undermine the Israeli claim that what makes Kafka's work "Kafka's work" is its Jewishness, and it is in pursuit of this goal that she calls upon the "lizards" (*sic*!).[5] She draws upon the authority of others, as well, "in order to cast light on [Kafka's own] question of his belonging" to the Jewish people. She cites Hannah Arendt's citation of Kafka's quip (from his 13 October 1917 letter to Brod), which is generally assumed to be about the Jewish people, "My people, provided that I have one."[6] Then Butler quotes from Louis Begley's use (in his "quite candid biographical essay" on Kafka) of an 8 January 1914 diary entry of Kafka's: "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe." Then Butler adds: "Sometimes [Kafka's] own remarks on Jews were harsh, if not violent, when, for instance, he calls the Jewish people 'lizards.'"

With the enunciation of these lines, Butler has provided us with an example of the performance of Jewish identification that Dr. Hödl has so astutely addressed in his recent work.[7] Butler thereby is able to invoke in her auditors and readers a what-else-could-it-be assumption about Kafka's opinion of the Jewish people and, here leaving the source unmentioned, to engender

fantasies about the scene of its utterance. Her audiences may now be led to wonder whether Kafka would have allowed himself to be appropriated as an exclusively – or even a principally – "Jewish cultural asset."

We can – since we have the original text before us, unlike the vast majority of her readers and auditors – fend off her rhetorical excess because we can recognize that she is inaccurately presenting an indirect analogy as an identification.[8] We can also question her authority to make any claims about Franz Kafka after she here betrays the shallowness of her familiarity with the author's work with this embarrassing admission and insinuating quip: "Apparently, on 25 February 1912, Kafka delivered a lecture on Yiddish, though I have not been able to find a copy. Perhaps it is stuffed in a box in Tel Aviv awaiting legal adjudication." In fact, the transcript of Kafka's **18 February** 1912 lecture has been available in English since at least 1954 – incidentally from the same volume in which Kafka's famous "Letter to his Father," that Butler frequently invokes, was published for the first time.[9] Yet, one need not follow Judith Butler's example and engage in *ad hominem* ploys in order to generate doubt about her implied interpretation in her exploitation of Kafka's diary entry.

Philology too can play a role in understanding Kafka's use of bestial figures, such as "Eidechsen," that were also employed throughout Germanophone Central Europe to denigrate *Judentum* and naturalize that denigration by identifying all Jews with abject animality. Kafka's written work and lived world need first be examined before we suggest that he was either acting out or working through a self-identification, on the one hand, and/or engaging in an ongoing subversion of the endemic Jewish identifications, on the other. In any case, we should forestall any rush to judgment of Kafka as, to employ an oft-used but extremely problematic label, a self-hating Jew.

My initial analysis, however, of this specific passage has focused on Brod's staging of the scene in his edition of the *Tagebücher*[10] and the possible role of literary politics – heavily laden with anti-Jewish insinuations – of the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and now the early twenty-first can be added). So today, I would like to summarize some of my stops on my philological quest for the source of Kafka's Italian lizards and then initiate a discussion of what could be going on when a Jewish-identified author employs the same animal figures that have been used to identify and slur Jews.

1. First I explored whether Kafka and Brod had ever encountered lizards in Italy prior to March 1911? (An assumption I made because of Kafka's use of the first person plural.) And indeed they had: in his 1937 Kafka biography Brod recalls revisiting Riva after

World War I and lamenting the absence of lizards then in contrast to saurian plenitude during their joint 1909 vacation there. This reiterated (mentioning but leaving unnamed his travel companion] what Brod had written in two separate newspaper articles, the first written two months after his best friend's death.

2. Next I examined whether Kafka ever refers to *Eidechsen* anywhere else. And indeed he had: Kafka and Brod note lizards in their journals of a Fall 1911 trip to Lake Logano in northeast Italy; local lizards also show up in letters to Milena and Brod when Kafka first arrives at the Italian spa town of Meran in April 1920; and the young idealists encountered in the fragment 'Der Bau einer Stadt' (also from 1920) - and who, Brod later argued in his edition of the fragment, figure idealistic Zionists - clamber up the rocks like lizards.
3. I then turned to the diary entry itself where I noticed a number of discrepancies between where it (and the two other variants) appeared in Kafka's notebooks and where Brod placed it in his edition - and tried to make sense of Brod's decision to ignore the apparent chronology and ordering of Kafka's actual entries.
4. Since I was familiar with some of Heine's extraordinary encounters with lizards, which I argue are Jewish-coded,[11] I explored a possible relation between the reference to the Kraus lecture, that is, to his diatribe against Heine, and either Kafka or Brod. Did Kraus's lecture mention Heine's lizards? The answer is no; however, several of Kraus's Heine examples are contiguous with Heine's lizardry.
5. And Brod? This took me to Brod's 1934 biography of Heine, where he characterized Kafka's "Josefine die Sangerin" and her relation to the *Volk* as the best Heine biography he knew - an insight ignored by all since it came from Brod - and where he makes all but no mention of Kraus. Which is odd given that Kraus's Heine critique was the most notorious to date.
6. So what is going on between Brod and Kraus? I turned to Brod's own post-World War II autobiography, *Streitbares Leben*. During the Spring of 1911 Brod was caught up in a major skirmish between Kraus's journal *Fackel* and it's rival, Franz Pfemfert's *Aktion*, over Kraus's *ad hominem* attack on the Jewish- and Heine-identified critic Alfred Kerr. Brod joined many fellow literati in their homages to Kerr that appeared in *Aktion*. Brod was the only one responding to *Aktion*'s *Rundfrage* to mention Kraus by name and paid for it by being facetiously and humiliatingly dismissed in *Fackel*.

7. I could go on – there are many other players in these exchanges – most notably, Kafka and Brod's younger literary colleague Franz Werfel in the twentieth century, the poet August Graf von Platen who had ridiculed Heine with debasing anti-Jewish innuendo in the nineteenth century, and Goethe's own accounts of his Italian Journey in the eighteenth century (he also noted lizards), which served as a foil for both Kafka's and Heine's own Italian Journals.

But now back to the matter at hand:

These lizards are part of a bestiary of animal figures that traverse Kafka's writing and which often seem to feed on negative Jewish stereotypes: aping apes (*nachäffende Affen*) and mauscheling mice (*mauschelnde Mäuse*). By unleashing this menagerie of cognates, has Kafka the Jew mimetically represented his fellow Jews according to the debasing image of the dominant, oppressive culture? Has he thereby denied his people – and himself – any self-determined identification? Kafka's narrative ploys (like those of several other Jewish-identified writers, such as Heinrich Heine and Felix Salten, the author of *Bambi*) engage in a dangerous business: they are vulnerable both to legitimating the dehumanizing views of the oppressors and to yielding to so-called self-hatred. (Or as in their use by Judith Butler, other forms of instrumentalization that bear little, if any, relationship to their use by Kafka.)

I would like to argue, instead, that when Kafka creates characters such as the ape Rotpeter, or the singer Josephine and her *Volk* –

> I am reluctant to identify the *Volk* as mice, since they are ever assumed to be but, aside from the implication of the *Oder-Satz* ("oder das Volk der Mäuse") added to the title after its initial publication, are never referred to as mice. Indeed the only time "**MAUS**" appears is in the phrase *mäuschenstil*, which is used to characterize behavior that is most unlike the *Volk* –

we can read Kafka as engaged in a writing practice consonant with his own prescription for a literature that helps an ethnic minority like the Jews forge a national identity and a communal memory and that supports such a group "gegenüber der feindlichen Umwelt."[12] One trait of this "kleiner Litteratur" is "die Darbietung der nationalen Fehler in einer zwar besonders schmerzlichen, aber verzeihungswürdigen und befreienden Weise." And those ascribed faults are represented in or projected on his depiction of the beasties' behavior (none is a saint) – given the stereotypical assumptions associated with these

animals. Therefore, Kafka's animals can be viewed both as an attempt to historicize those images – these characters are written not in the genes but in ink (that is, they were created at a particular time and place) – and as an attempt to reappropriate the cudgels that have been used against him and others identified as Jews.

In the hostile environment of post-Emancipation Europe, the Jews may not be completely self-determining, but neither are they totally at the mercy of their enemy's power to define and represent. "Nahezu fünf Jahre trennen mich vom Affentum", after which Rotpeter tells his esteemed audience,

> offen gesprochen: Ihr Affentum, meine Herren, soferne Sie etwas Derartiges hinter sich haben, kann Ihnen nicht ferner sein als mir das meine. An der Ferse aber kitzelt es jeden, der hier auf Erden geht: den kleinen Schimpansen wie den großen Achilles.

And in the story of Rotpeter's development that follows, he portrays those models of Gentile human behavior, whom he calls "vortrefflichen Menschen" and his "Lehrer", as the bestial tormentors they were.

Not only do Kafka's creations indict a dominant culture that both requires and denies the Jews' move toward (Gentile) European bourgeois humanity. His work also grants insight both into the complex forms, institutions, and practices of identification – including their contemporary instantiations – and into endeavors to undermine their authority by uncannily rendering the purported Jewish referent of these identifications indefinite – as both human and nonhuman animal and neither, as both Jew and Gentile and neither.

Endnotes

* Originally presented at the Centrum für Jüdische Studien, Universität-Graz, 4 April 2011. Although some additional material and bibliographic apparatus have been added, the lecture format has been preserved.

1 *Heft* 2 of Kafka's *Tagebücher*. This and all subsequent German citations of Kafka are drawn from Mauro Nervi's "The Kafka Project" (www.kafka.org/index.php?project).

2 *Tagebücher*, eds. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller und Malcolm Pasley, 3 vols. (Frankfurt/M: S. Fischer, 1990), 3:93–94.

3 "Who Owns Kafka", *London Review of Books* 33, 5 (3 March 2011): 3–8. She delivered the lecture at the British Museum on 7 February 2011. Citations of the essay are drawn from the online version (www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n05/judith-butler/who-owns-kafka).

4 See Elif Batuman's widely discussed and cited (if not by Butler) essay, "Kafka's Last Trial", that appeared in the *New York Times*, 22 September 2010.

5 Grammatically the German genitive original, *Eidechsen*, could literally be translated as "lizards"; however, as all English translations attest, the sense of the phrase dictates the use of the singular in English. Most likely, Butler is paraphrasing Iris Bruce: "Kafka's unflattering analogy ... likens the Jews to lizards"; *Kafka and Cultural Zionism. Dates in Palestine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 32.

6 Drawn from a 13 October 1917 letter to Brod – although usually cited, by Begley for instance, from Hannah Arendt's citation of it in her introduction to her 1968 edition of the Harry Zohn English translation of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* – the identity of the *Volk* is not explicitly indicated. After declaring that the task Brod has assigned for him – to make himself well – is utopian, Kafka suggests that it would more likely be accomplished by "ein Engel über dem Ehebett meiner Eltern ... oder noch besser: über dem Ehebett meines Volkes, vorausgesetzt, daß ich eines habe."

7 See, e.g., Klaus Hödl, "Looking Beyond Borders: Performative Approaches to Jewish Historiography", *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1 (2008) 51–66.

8 The audience had the texts that preceded and followed Kafka's invocation of *Eidechsen*:
Wir sind jetzt fast gewöhnt, in westeuropäischen Erzählungen, sobald sie nur einige Gruppen von Juden umfassen wollen, unter oder über der Darstellung gleich auch die Lösung der Judenfrage zu suchen und zu finden. In den Jüdinnen nun wird eine solche Lösung nicht gezeigt ja nicht einmal vermuthet, denn gerade jene Personen, die sich mit solchen Fragen beschäftigen stehen in der Erzählung weiter vom Mittelpunkt ab, dort wo die Ereignisse sich schon rascher drehn, so daß wir sie zwar noch genau beobachten können, aber keine Gelegenheit mehr finden, um von ihnen eine ruhige Auskunft über ihre Bestrebungen zu erhalten. Kurz entschlossen erkennen wir darin einen Mangel der Erzählung und fühlen uns zu einer solchen Ausstellung umso mehr berechtigt, als heute seit dem Dasein des Zionismus die Lösungsmöglichkeiten so klar um das jüdische Problem herum angeordnet sind, daß der Schriftsteller schließlich nur einige Schritte hätte machen müssen, um die seiner Erzählung gemäße Lösungsmöglichkeit zu finden.
Dieser Mangel entspringt aber noch einem andern. Den Jüdinnen fehlen die nichtjüdischen Zuschauer, die angesehenen gegensätzlichen Menschen, die in andern Erzählungen das Jüdische herauslocken, daß es gegen sie vordringt, in Verwunderung, Zweifel, Neid Schrecken und endlich, endlich in Selbstvertrauen versetzt wird, jedenfalls sich aber erst ihnen gegenüber in seiner ganzen Länge aufrichten kann. Das eben verlangen wir, eine andere Auflösung von Judenmassen erkennen wir nicht an. Auch berufen wir uns auf dieses Gefühl nicht nur in diesem Fall, es ist in einer Richtung wenigstens allgemein ... .
Beide Mängel vereinigen sich zu einem dritten. Die „Jüdinnen" können jenen vordersten Jüngling entbehren, der sonst innerhalb seiner Erzählung die besten zu sich reißt und in schöner radialer Richtung an die Grenzen des jüdischen Kreises führt. Das eben will uns nicht eingehn, daß diesen Jüngling die Erzählung entbehren kann, hier ahnen wir einen Fehler mehr, als daß wir ihn sehn.

9 Kafka, *Dearest Father. Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1954).

10 Kafka, *Tagebücher 1910–1924*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, *c.* 1949).

11 Geller, "*Eidola* or *Eidechsen*? Kafka Asks Brod Asks Kraus Asks Heine a Jewish Question", *Journal of the Kafka Society of America* (forthcoming).

12 In *Heft* 4 of Kafka's *Tagebücher* (25 Dezember 1911).