

A character sketch of the literature of small peoples.

Good results in both cases.

Here the results in individual instances are even better.

1. Liveliness:
 - a. Conflict.
 - b. Schools.
 - c. Magazines.
2. Less constraint:
 - a. Absence of principles.
 - b. Minor themes.
 - c. Easy formation of symbols.
 - d. Throwing off of the untalented.
3. Popularity:
 - a. Connexion with politics.
 - b. Literary history.
 - c. Faith in literature, can make up their own laws.

It is difficult to readjust when one has felt this useful, happy life in all one's being.

[. . .]

Goethe probably retards the development of the German language by the force of his writing. Even though prose style has often traveled away from him in the interim, still, in the end, as at present, it returns to him with strengthened yearning and even adopts obsolete idioms found in Goethe but otherwise without any particular connexion with him, in order to rejoice in the completeness of its unlimited dependence.

[. . .]

AN INTRODUCTORY TALK ON THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE*

(Franz Kafka, 1912)

BEFORE we come to the first poems by our Eastern Jewish poets, I should like, ladies and gentlemen, just to say something about how much more Yiddish you understand than you think.

I am not really worried about the experience this evening holds in store for each of you, but I should like it to be universally comprehensible, if it merits it. Yet this cannot be the case so long as many of you are so frightened of Yiddish that one can almost see it in your faces. Of those who take an arrogant attitude to Yiddish I do not even speak. But dread of Yiddish, dread mingled with a certain fundamental distaste, is, after all, understandable, if one has the good will to understand it.

Our Western European conditions, if we glance at them only in a deliberately superficial way, appear so well ordered; everything takes its quiet course. We live in positively cheerful concord, understanding each other whenever necessary, getting along without each other whenever it suits us and understanding each other even then. From

* A speech given by Kafka as introduction to an evening of dramatic readings in Yiddish by the actor Yitzhak Löwy at the Jewish Town Hall in Prague on February 18, 1912.

within such an order of things who could possibly understand the tangle of Yiddish—indeed, who would even care to do so?

Yiddish is the youngest European language, only four hundred years old and actually a good deal younger even than that. It has not yet developed any linguistic forms of a lucidity such as we need. Its idiom is brief and rapid.

No grammars of the language exist. Devotees of the language try to write grammars, but Yiddish remains a spoken language that is in continuous flux. The people will not leave it to the grammarians.

It consists solely of foreign words. But these words are not firmly rooted in it, they retain the speed and liveliness with which they were adopted. Great migrations move through Yiddish, from one end to the other. All this German, Hebrew, French, English, Slavonic, Dutch, Rumanian, and even Latin, is seized with curiosity and frivolity once it is contained within Yiddish, and it takes a good deal of strength to hold all these languages together in this state. And this, too, is why no sensible person thinks of making Yiddish into an international language, obvious though the idea might seem. It is only thieves' cant that is in the habit of borrowing from it, because it needs linguistic complexes less than single words, and then too, because Yiddish was, after all, for a long time a despised language.

In this whirl of language there are, however, certain fragments of recognized linguistic laws which dominate it. For instance, Yiddish originated in the period when Middle High German was undergoing transition into Modern High German. At that time there was a choice of forms, and Middle High German took one course and Yiddish the other. Or Yiddish developed Middle High German forms more logically than even Modern High German did. For instance, the Yiddish *mir zeinen* (we are) is a more natural development from the Middle High German *sîn* than is the Modern German *wir sind*. Or Yiddish keeps to Middle High German forms in spite of Modern High German. Whatever once entered the ghetto had come to stay. And so we still find forms like *kerzlach*, *blümlach*, *liedlach*.

And now the dialects enter into this linguistic medley of whim and law. Indeed, Yiddish as a whole consists only of dialect, even the written language; though agreement has been largely reached as to its spelling.

With all this I think I have for the present convinced most of you, ladies and gentlemen, that you will not understand a word of Yiddish.

Do not expect any help from the explanation of the poems. If you happen to be unable to understand Yiddish, no explanation on the spur of the moment can be of any help to you. At best you will understand the explanation and become aware that something difficult is about to follow. That will be all. I can, for instance, tell you:

Herr Löwy will now—and this is indeed the case—recite three poems. First, "Die Grine" by Rosenfeld. *Grine* are the green ones, the greenhorns, the new arrivals in America. In this poem a little group of such Jewish immigrants are walking along a street in New York, carrying their seedy luggage. A crowd, of course, gathers, stares at them, follows them, and laughs. The poet, his emotion at this sight transcending the limits of his own personality, speaks across these street scenes to Jewry and to mankind. One has the feeling that the group of immigrants comes to a stop while the poet is speaking, in spite of the fact that they are far away and cannot hear him.

The second poem is by Frug and is called "Sand and Stars."

It is a bitter commentary on a promise in the Bible that we shall be as the sand which is upon the seashore and as the stars of the heaven. Well, we are trodden down like the sand. When will it come true that we are as the stars?

The third poem is by Frischmann and is called "The Night Is Still."

In the night two lovers meet with a devout and learned man who is going to the synagogue. They are startled, afraid of having given themselves away, but later they reassure each other.

Now you see, such explanations are quite useless.

Strait-jacketed in these explanations, when you hear the poems you will try to make out what you know already, and you will miss what is really there. Fortunately, however, everyone who speaks the German language is also capable of understanding Yiddish. For, seen from a distance, though of course only from a great distance, the superficial comprehensibility of Yiddish is a product of the German language; this is an advantage it has over all the other languages in the world. To make up for that, it is only fair that it should also have a disadvantage in comparison with all others. The fact is, Yiddish cannot be translated into German. The links between Yiddish and

German are too delicate and significant not to be torn to shreds the instant Yiddish is transformed back into German, that is to say, it is no longer Yiddish that is transformed, but something that has utterly lost its essential character. If it is translated into French, for instance, Yiddish can be conveyed to the French, but if it is translated into German it is destroyed. *Toit*, for instance, is not the same thing as *tot* (dead), and *blüt* is far from being *blut* (blood).

But it is not only at this distance from the German language that you yourselves speak, ladies and gentlemen, that you can understand Yiddish; you are even allowed to come a step closer. It is, to say the least of it, not so very long ago that the familiar colloquial language of German Jews, according to whether they lived in town or in the country, more in the East or in the West, seemed to be a remoter or a closer approximation to Yiddish, and many nuances remain to this day. For this reason the historical development of Yiddish could have been followed just as well on the surface of the present day as in the depths of history.

You begin to come quite close to Yiddish if you bear in mind that apart from what you know there are active in yourselves forces and associations with forces that enable you to understand Yiddish intuitively. It is only here that the interpreter can help, reassuring you, so that you no longer feel shut out from something and also that you may realize that you must cease to complain that you do not understand Yiddish. This is the most important point, for with every complaint understanding diminishes. But if you relax, you suddenly find yourselves in the midst of Yiddish. But once Yiddish has taken hold of you and moved you—and Yiddish is everything, the words, the Chasidic melody, and the essential character of this East European Jewish actor himself—you will have forgotten your former reserve. Then you will come to feel the true unity of Yiddish, and so strongly that it will frighten you, yet it will no longer be fear of Yiddish but of yourselves. You would not be capable of bearing this fear on its own, but Yiddish instantly gives you, besides, a self-confidence that can stand up to this fear and is even stronger than it is. Enjoy this self-confidence as much as you can! but then, when it fades out, tomorrow and later—for how could it last, fed only on the memory of a single evening's recitations!—then my wish for you is that you may also have forgotten the fear. For we did not set out to punish you.

NOTES

ANDERSON: Introduction

¹Letter to Gershom Scholem of June 12, 1938.

²From Kafka's early prose piece in *Meditation*, "On the Tram."

³"I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live, an age that is, of course, very close to me, which I have no right ever to fight against, but as it were a right to represent" (DF 99).

⁴Hence the religious, allegorical interpretations of Kafka's first readers, including Max Brod, Margarete Susman, Kurt Tucholsky, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Herbert Kraft and (in a different notion of allegory), Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Theodor Adorno. The French Surrealists, who saw in Kafka's writings the objectification of an archetypal dreamworld, merely shifted this allegorical reading into the realm of the unconscious.

⁵See the early writings of Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Walter Emrich, Herbert Tauber, Heinz Politzer, and especially Günther Anders, whose *Kafka Pro and Contra* (Munich: Beck, 1951; English translation, New York: Hillary House, 1960) was conceived in exile in Paris and reworked into book form immediately after the war.

⁶Kafka: *Letteratura ed ebraismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), pp. 3–6.

⁷*Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend* (Bern: Francke, 1958).

⁸Among the most important are Marthe Robert's *As Lonely as Franz Kafka* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), Ritchie Robertson's *Kafka: Judaism, Literature and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); cf. also Giuliano Baioni's *Kafka: Letteratura ed ebraismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), and Hartmut Binder's numerous studies (note 15).

⁹A devoted reader of Buber's journal *Der Jude* ("The Jew"), Kafka published a number of his stories there in 1917 and 1918.