

ON KAFKA

By Annika Kennedy

“What did alarm him as he pulled the wagon into the corridor was the dirt there, although he'd been expecting it too. It wasn't, when he looked at it more closely, any tangible sort of dirt. The stone flags in the passage had been swept almost clean, the whitewash on the walls wasn't old, the artificial palms only slightly dusty, and yet everything was greasy and repulsive, it was as if everything had been somehow misused, and no cleaning on earth could ever make it better.” – Franz Kafka: Amerika

Franz Kafka is among the more enigmatic writers of history. While his writing has been scrutinized by philosophers like Deleuze and Derrida, there is a lack of material exposing the strange relationship he had with Otto Gross: the disavowed disciple of Sigmund Freud. Kafka's characters find themselves in maze-like scenarios: the nightmarish situation of a world where the main characters are alienated, where the whole world and the people in it are misused, where the walls are covered in the filth of human exploitation so no amount of cleaning can ever make it better. The passage quoted above was written around the same time as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. At first it seems as though there is no basis for this way of thinking. The want to explain what motivates Kafka's thinking drives Kafka scholarship. May I remark that much of Kafka's writings remain private, and so the legions of Kafka scholars and interpreters speculate without end, because the gaps in their knowledge of history constitute a perpetual unknown? It's easy to create a school which invites students to imagine an endless void: the number of Kafka biographies I've found that mention Otto Gross was Kafka's professor is zero. Stranger too is much of Gross's writings are untranslated and unavailable (even Carl Jung called Gross his “twin” — a comment like this may attest to the rhetorical force of the man). I must humbly suggest that Gross's mentorship played a key part in shaping Kafka's mind. Gross writes:

“Thus, this stage of our development, through which we have to go, is set. It is the same stage which has brought crisis and catastrophe to every culture. Never before has the fateful challenge of this moment been sufficiently met: the challenge to create and realize in a productive way something completely new, a new institution and new values, values that this time will be more faithful to the human psyche and will help solve the still remaining and very important problem the problem of giving women the economic capability of taking on the tasks of motherhood. This alone is the true social and ethical question, the first and most pressing question for society. If this question is posed with conviction and understanding in this decisive time, then the answer can be postulated automatically: it is society's obligation to protect mothers financially and to provide for the upbringing of children.”

(I filched this quote here, <https://ottogross.org/english/works/34.html> from the so-called International Otto Gross Society.)

Not only was Gross per his father's instruction abducted in a manner which surely formed the basis of Kafka's writing *The Trial*, Gross (who, like Kafka, also has daddy issues, you'll soon see), like Nietzsche, wants a society where collusive madness is not the norm, where the

unsolved problem of parenting everyone fairly is solved in a manner which is entirely against the will to power and patriarchy. Feminist scholars ought to be very interested in learning everything about anyone deploying the word “patriarchy” and yet, despite Gross’s use of the term and even his history with his father (who said: “immediately following my death my son, Dr. Otto Gross, should be declared insane and institutionalized” (cited by Emanuel Hurwitz, 1988, p. 218), there doesn’t seem to be much excitement in the academic world to rip the walls off the houses that contain the untranslated copies of Kafka’s or Gross’s manuscripts.

What are the implications of this philosophy? If society cannot assist women with the tasks of motherhood, because to do so would create a school to raise monsters without release, then Gross’s desire for “a revolution for the mother-right” would constitute an endless task. You see, an upbringing that’s an endless upbringing is not an upbringing but a prison. Nietzsche’s early lecture “On the Future of Our Educational Institutions” also presents a similar parenting problem that can never be solved: the inability for humans to create institutions for learning due to our dependency on speech: the limits of (classroom) space and (classroom) time. Our claim to want to spread learning is negated (and, therefore, our claim to be interested in universal knowledge becomes suspect) by our perpetual renunciation of that claim to the services of the state, Nietzsche says, who writes later in life: “I am no man.” But here is not the place to question if Nietzsche was not a man (Hellen Zimmern seemed to, when she made this remark on her friend: “To tell a story against oneself — what woman has ever been able to do this? And what man?”), I only want to show how the human condition of being a speech-dependent animal that creates hierarchies by the act of obedience makes completely fulfilling society’s aims (social inequality or the notion that technology can enhance us) impossibly hard.

But there is no shortage of people who say such things are possible, despite the deleterious effect of agreement to that cause. Humans are not helped by computers, the word “help” is declared by a spokesperson (this is dialectical materialism) for rhetorical effect, they only control them, so computers cannot help us, because nothing helps us.

It is my suggestion that the impossibility of fulfilling this demand forms the core of Kafka’s despair, making the whole sum of human effort a nightmarish scenario from which we cannot escape. At the political level, there is not a good way to be a good mother for all. Hence Kafka’s silence at the communist meetings is explained. I am a transgender female myself, and for a while I questioned if Kafka might be transgender and a tortured intelligence. Kafka interviewed a sniffing theosophist, and I’m personally guilty of drowning out my desire to transition by listening to Alan Watts (a theosophist, for a time) assure me that I was just bored and would eventually transition back to being God. I was projecting. I thought Kafka was trans. But what were my clues? Aside from the more obvious story, waking up in a body that’s repulsive, the English translation of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” curiously does not contain the English word “cock” despite the fact that Kafka also wrote the book *Amerika* around the same time, yet it is assumed by many that the bug the main character becomes is none other than the hated cockroach (my theory, if true, would mean Kafka is writing in full consciousness of American slang). And even if the trans-interested person acquires a vagina, like “The Castle,” it cannot be compared to the

original: it's sensations cannot be felt. For Kafka, I thought, having a cock is just the beginning of the problem of motherhood, because an ethic that is "good for all" cannot be written out, which is a criteria Gross and Nietzsche's philosophy wants to satisfy.

If we rewrite the law we react to the law, which is an inequality-constituting event that qualifies as bad motherhood (see Kafka's parable "Before the Law"). I'll say, for a while I bracketed what I called a "cringy hunch" that much of Kafka's writing and thinking is the transphobic anticipating of the potential fulfillment of his feminine desires, until I learned that Kafka may have had access to the writings or sayings of Ebing or Hirschfeld, circulating in Germany at the time. These were voices spreading statements about a "metamorphosis sexualis paranoica" or "sexual metamorphosis" which a trans-interested Kafka would certainly be fascinated by.

My ideas fit together, it seemed. Kafka's preference for tight clothes, the way he thinks he's ugly when he's not at all ugly, the thousand-yard stare failing to envisage a future that's good for all, to fulfill a maternal desire to be a good mom. But Kafka's not aggressive, but decidedly against the will to power. Kafka and Gross were to publish a "journal" together, entitled: "Journal Against the Will to Power" I noted to myself, as I triangulated Kafka and Gross neatly between psychoanalysis (Gross), literature (Kafka), and philosophy (Nietzsche). Journals are uniquely passive generally: journals keep to themselves: they are not a will to power. For whatever reason, this is not a fact that has been exposed effectively, as far as I know. Not only were the writings of Kafka blacklisted by the Nazis as "harmful and undesirable" so were the writings of other queer voices, like Woolf and Hirschfeld. As a transgender individual, I find this alarming because the lack of material on why these authors were targeted suggests we may have not learned from history, since all the biographies on Kafka neglect to comment on the existence of this failed project which never saw the light of day. Also the silence surrounding Kafka's relationship is just as lacking as the material on Gross, which, sadly, is still largely unavailable. There are still writings by Kafka that remain unseen, and I definitely do feel that here my reader may gain an idea as to what could be revealed in advance. However, I have no evidence, so whatever I write on Kafka is liable to change whenever the "unreleased" writings are free.