

Fall 2013

Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition.

Christopher L. Hench

University of Massachusetts Amherst, chench@german.umass.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge>

Recommended Citation

Hench, Christopher L. (2013) "Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition.," *EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge/vol3/iss1/6>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

***Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition.* By David B. Suchoff.** Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 266 pp. \$65.00. Clothbound. ISBN 978-0-8122-4371-0.

Until the latter half of the Cold War period, the majority of Kafka scholarship either neglected to consider the hidden interplay of Kafka's Jewish languages, specifically Yiddish and Hebrew, and their effect on his writing, or insisted on analyzing Kafka's Jewish and German identities separately, writing off Kafka's interest in Yiddish as a "multicultural flavor at best" (13).¹ This may have been due in part to the extensive expurgating conducted by Kafka's friend and publisher Max Brod, who frequently attributed explicit evidence of Jewish language influence to *Sprachunrichtigkeiten*, or "linguistic errors," consequently making these influences invisible to the unsuspecting reader. The first major analysis of Kafka's Jewish language influences was the landmark poststructuralist work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975) by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which helped redirect interest in Kafka toward his significance as a transnational writer. In *Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition*, David B. Suchoff takes this consideration one step further by conducting an impressively in-depth investigation of the manifestations of this linguistic interplay in Kafka's writing. Suchoff's book opens with a justification for interpreting Kafka through his Jewish languages and a historical look at related Kafka criticism. Suchoff then continues with an analysis of a selection of Kafka's major works in the order in which they were written: "Das Urteil" ("The Judgment," 1913), *Der Verschollene* (*Amerika, or The Man Who Disappeared*, 1927), *Der Process* (*The Trial*, 1925), and *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*, 1926), with a chapter dedicated to each. Suchoff argues that it is precisely the interplay of German with Yiddish and Hebrew, which Kafka developed in the period between 1911 and 1924, that aided Kafka in his breakthrough and "unlocked" his literary and social imagination (3). Furthermore, the use of multiple languages transformed him into a transnational author by enabling him "to develop an account of the multiple origins of traditions and their redemptive meaning for the future" (12).

Suchoff's approach rests upon his thorough research of Kafka's personal correspondence, original manuscripts, and notes—an intricate web revealing underlying linguistic influences on Kafka's work. Kafka's breakthrough work "Das Urteil" coincided with a heightened interest in Jewish languages, which is evident through his correspondence with Felice Bauer, his love interest at the time, as well as his new friendship with the Yiddish actor Yitzhak Löwy, who was then performing in Prague. This theatrical influence of Yiddish also leads Suchoff to identify many Vaudeville elements in Kafka's writing, above all comedy. Suchoff thus considers "Das Urteil" as Kafka's breakthrough only insofar as it is a "coded but humorous grasp of Kafka's dilemma as a German and Jewish writer" (63).

While writing *Der Verschollene*, Kafka had been exploring the likes of Jewish language poets Morris Rosenfeld and Meyer Pines, whose work not only inspired Kafka to continue his study of Jewish languages, but frequently also provided thematic ideas for his writing. Suchoff

¹ With the invaluable exception of Walter Benjamin's "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," which appeared in *Die Jüdische Rundschau* in 1934, and Benjamin's later letter to Gershom Scholem in 1938, which was published in Hannah Arendt's *Illuminations*.

directly relates multiple pieces of Jewish language literature to themes and characters in Kafka's works. For example, Suchoff compares the two guards Franz and Willem in *Der Process* to Zygmund Faynman's *The Vice-King*, which Kafka saw in Prague on January 6, 1912. The meaning of words in German, Yiddish, and Hebrew, which Suchoff believes is crucial to understanding Kafka's German, is also prominent in his book. The German *tot* ("dead"), (Yiddish *toit*), which Kafka addresses in his "Rede über die jiddische Sprache," ("Introductory Lecture on the Yiddish Language," 1912) later becomes pivotal in the famed night of September 22, 1912 when Kafka wrote "Das Urteil." Suchoff questions whether the father really is sentencing the son to death, arguing that it should be interpreted in a more open-ended manner as in the Yiddish connotation of *toit*. Similarly, *Das Schloss* is considered by Suchoff to be "an endless linguistic survey," rooted in the land surveyor, or *Landvermesser*, the Hebrew for which, *mashikha*, stems from the same root which also produces "messiah" (*mashiakh*). Suchoff juxtaposes this wordplay with the renewal of the Hebrew language.

Suchoff finds the struggle of older traditional Jewish practices and theology against modern influences to also be a recurring theme in Kafka's text. This issue parallels Kafka's involvement in linguistic debates, such as the discussions at the eleventh Zionist convention in Vienna in 1913 about the language of instruction for the new Israeli university, the Technion, which at the time was planned to be built in Haifa. While many supported the Hebrew language as the traditional and still best-suited language for instruction, others, including Yiddish poet Morris Rosenfeld, disagreed. Kafka opposed any strongly nationalist approach to language, which he felt would only limit forms of expression. Suchoff states, "Instead of an *ascent*, Kafka describes the Zionist convention a year later as a healthy *descent* into the chaos of an imaginary Hebrew classroom in Palestine, where Hebrew was already being spoken amid a welter of other accents" (183).

Suchoff's book concludes with the current multinational legal battle over Kafka's manuscripts, inherited by Brod's secretary Esther Hoffe. He considers this to be a fitting representation of Kafka's actual transnational position as a writer, stating that the "'Variété' of Kafka's German as well as Jewish linguistic sources find their comic reflection in the transnational claims his writings still provoke" (208). Suchoff's focus on Kafka's Jewish language influences does cause him to overlook possible Czech influences. He briefly mentions the linguistic environment Kafka grew up and lived in, in which German, Czech, and Yiddish were all frequently spoken. However, Kafka's relationship to Czech is outside the scope of his book. Including Czech influences on Kafka may yield a more comprehensive analysis of Kafka's linguistic reality and uncover a further hidden interplay of language. Nevertheless, the book will prove to be a tremendously rich resource to those interested in Kafka's activities related to Jewish languages, specifically during his breakthrough period. Suchoff also provides an extensive section of notes for those wishing to reference his source materials.

Christopher Hench
University of Massachusetts Amherst