

Book Review

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Brendan Moran

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Book Review

Léa Veinstein, *Les philosophes lisent Kafka: Benjamin, Arendt, Adorno, Anders* (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme: Paris, 2019).

Franz Kafka died in 1924. Most of his writing appeared posthumously. Philosophic readings accompanied Kafka's writings quite early in the posthumous reception, and—especially in recent years—there has been a steady increase of work from various philosophic perspectives on Kafka's writings. Léa Veinstein's *Les philosophes lisent Kafka: Benjamin, Arendt, Adorno, Anders* is a noteworthy addition to this burgeoning body of inquiry. Veinstein's book provides original analyses of Kafka's writings, and original readings of texts by Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Theodor W. Adorno, and Günther Anders (formerly Günther Stern), who write on Kafka amidst the political and societal turmoil they experience as German Jews in mid-twentieth-century Europe. Veinstein claims these four philosophers encounter Kafka through the experience of exile that affected all four as Jewish refugees and earlier—through inner exile—as Jews in an openly anti-Semitic environment (293).

Veinstein's exercise of "la pratique de l'histoire des idées" befits a book associated with the "Groupe de recherche sur la culture de Weimar" in Paris and appears in this group's *Série Philia* of the *Bibliothèque allemande* edited by Gérard Raullet. Veinstein is currently *chercheuse associée* at the Groupe Weimar.

In *Les philosophes lisent Kafka*, Veinstein's frequent usage of the German term *Erlebnis* could be confusing. *Erlebnis* is often translated into English as "lived experience," into French as *l'expérience vécue* or simply *le vécu*. Veinstein postulates a correlation of Franz Kafka's *Erlebnis* and the *sens profond* of Kafka's *œuvre*; she also postulates a correlation between Franz Kafka's *Erlebnis*, on the one hand, and the *Erlebnis* of, and writings on Kafka by, Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Anders, on the other (29). None of the four philosophers follow, however, Wilhelm Dilthey's claim that the key to understanding literature is the *Erlebnis* of the literary author. Benjamin and Adorno explicitly oppose it; Arendt and Anders—perhaps influenced by the mixed reception of Dilthey in early Heideggerian phenomenology—do not quite adopt it. Although Veinstein does not expressly cite the Diltheyian postulate of the primacy of *Erlebnis* for interpretation of human expression, her repeated usage of the term *Erlebnis* (29, 36–41, 44, 56, 61, 72–76, 81, 292–

294) to describe one of her foci might initially confuse readers familiar with early critical theory and Heideggerian phenomenology.

This possible confusion takes little away, however, from Veinstein's argument that examination of Kafka's writings is enhanced by taking into account his experience as a Jew in the Austro-Hungarian empire and as a German-speaking Jew in the largely Czech environment of Prague and later in the first Czechoslovak republic. Neither does the possible confusion regarding *Erlebnis* detract from her notion that there is a relevance of the experiences of Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Anders as Jews, and as refugees, to what they eventually write on Kafka's writings (36–37). For Veinstein, the relevant “Kafkan” experience is the *devenir-étranger du sujet* (37).

Veinstein contends that Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Anders share with Kafka's works *la métaphysique de l'étrangeté* (36, 60–69, 71, 295). Her usage of the term *métaphysique* could create more perplexity than does Veinstein's actual elaboration of the affinity based on *l'étrangeté*. Certain ideas of Jacques Derrida play a pivotal role in Veinstein's book (76–82, 239–246), although Derrida regards metaphysics as the opponent of deconstruction.

Veinstein's frequent invocations of *la métaphysique* do not, nonetheless, significantly diminish her main points: “le sujet découvre en lui un étranger,” and correlatively “la philosophie s'ouvre à la littérature.” Benjamin, Adorno, Arendt, and Anders confront the metamorphosis of philosophy by literature. Veinstein's principal concerns are metamorphosis in Kafka's writings, and metamorphosis in the relationship of philosophy and literature (13).

Benjamin's Kafka essay of 1934 and his earlier and later texts on Kafka present the relevant metamorphosis as a “déformation [in Benjamin's German, *Entstellung*]” of space and time (100–112). This distortion or deformation results from the intrusion of the *Vorwelt*. Veinstein translates the German term *die Vorwelt* with the French *le monde primitif* or simply *le primitif* (102–7, 124). *La préhistoire* or *le prémonde* might be more accurate translations, but Veinstein uses terminology that is given in the French translation by Maurice de Gandillac as revised by Pierre Rusch. (In one instance, moreover, Benjamin's German does—as Veinstein notes on page 105—refer to how the totem poles of so-called *Primitiven* lead to consideration of ancestors, including animals.) For Benjamin, the *Vorwelt* precedes any humanly constituted world; it is the ineradicable and intractable intrusion that distorts, and thereby somehow calls into question, any conventional experience of space and time. The *carrefour* of the political and the mystical (Veinstein calls the latter the religious or the theological) is in Benjamin's reading “bien constitué par l'idée de déformation (*Entstellung*) ou de métamorphose (*Verwandlung*), qui contamine le temps, l'espace, le sens, l'écriture, et la transcendance” (125). The political in this distortion is its freeing of time,

space, sense, and writing from presumed transcendence by those who would command.

Benjamin demonstrates the metamorphosis of philosophy by literature not only by letting Kafka's writings impact philosophy, but also by supplementing his account of Kafka's writings with a Talmudic legend, an absurd Jewish joke, and a cryptic recounting of a Russian legend (through Alexander Pushkin), all of which contribute to the *literary* character of Benjamin's writing on Kafka's literature (212–221).

Like Benjamin, Adorno—notably in his well-known essay of 1953 and in some letters to Benjamin—finds in Kafka some help for conceiving modernity as “*métamorphose de l'espace-temps*” (128, Veinstein's italics). Yet Adorno rejects Benjamin's emphasis on a preponderant *Vorwelt*: “Adorno rejette l'idée d'une présence du 'primitif' ou d'un 'passé ancestral' chez Kafka” (128). Adorno prefers more dialectic in the reading of Kafka, a dialectic that he thinks would remove the risk of a reactionary archaism (129). Like Benjamin, Adorno is fascinated by Kafka's “fuite vers l'inhumain en passant par l'homme,” but he sees in this flight a regression. For Adorno, there is in Kafka “une regression de l'homme, qui se trouve déshumanisé, et du sujet qui se trouve dénué de tout rapport à son intériorité . . . et de tout rapport à l'extérieur” (141, see too 146). Kafka highlights this human alienation (169). The metamorphosis in Kafka is societal: “Kafka était au fait des mutations profondes de la société, y compris des mutations économiques” (147). Adorno's Kafka reading is, moreover, “plus frontalement 'théorique', moins littéraire” (131) than Benjamin's reading, not least because Adorno's reading does not follow Kafka's own writings as much (132–133): “Adorno theorise ce que Benjamin met en pratique (la métamorphose de la philosophie)” (135).

In the 1940s, Arendt writes on Kafka. She also briefly discusses Kafka in later works. Veinstein notes that Arendt is concerned with the prospect of living as a human being with human beings whereby peoples also live as peoples with other peoples (176). In this light, she even treats Kafka's “In the Penal Colony” as anticipatory of the gas chambers (174). Above all, she concentrates on “l'homme de bonne volonté,” who is K. in both *The Trial* and *The Castle* (156–165). The predicaments of K. convey to us that “notre humanité s'était perdue” but thereby pose for us the hope “de redevenir humain” (164, Veinstein's italics). Kafka “révèle quelque chose de l'absurdité du monde réel” (174) and “dévoile des structures qui ont rendu possible la disparition de l'humanité” (175). The theme of deformation is evident in Arendt's demonstration that “chez Kafka, les personnages cherchent à redevenir des hommes” (165). They have lost the possibility of world-opening; there is “la privation du monde,” and yet there is “la figure de la 'bonne volonté' qui s'ancre dans un désir de reconquérir l'humanité” (169). Registering “un désir de retrouver le monde et de redevenir humain” (176), the metamorphosis in Kafka's writing enacts loss and hope; in Kafka, loss metamorphosizes as hope (177–179).

Anders's early written and published views on Kafka influenced Arendt, but his book on Kafka, *Kafka: Pro und Contra* (1951), is quite unusual (153, 181); his "façon" of relating philosophy and literature "est tout à fait singulière" (182). According to Veinstein, Anders finds in Kafka "la matière d'un profond renversement métaphysique" whereby the human is no longer Heidegger's world opener but is rather without world (184). It may be questionable to propose that Heidegger has a metaphysics to be reversed. More central to Veinstein's discussion is, however, the notion that Anders's anti-fascism impels his repugnance for what he considers Kafka's servility, assimilation, obedience, submission, undecidability, conformity, and dependence (189, 192, 198, 200). Anders even claims that the idolizing of Kafka is an effacement of the assassination of millions (191), and asserts that it would be impossible to read Kafka while one is forced to live in a Kafkaesque manner (192): in other words, reading Kafka is a luxury of those who do not have to live the way Kafka depicts.

Veinstein objects that, in some respects, Anders's "analyse" of Kafka "semble très éloignée de son objet d'étude" (190), although she recognizes that Anders provides an innovative take on the "'déformation' (*Entstellung*)" in Kafka's literature (194). Anders notes that deformation in Kafka may entail a *hybridité* of philosophy and literature, but—in Anders's view—this kind of literary distortion makes "Kafka un auteur 'philosophiquement inutilisable'" (202). Detecting in Kafka "l'absence de toute vérité univoque," Anders separates philosophy and literature, exercising what Veinstein calls *une condamnation de la fiction*. Anders's disdain for Kafka's *ambiguïté indécidable* is such that Anders seems to reproach Kafka for being an *écrivain*: "Il y aurait chez Kafka un *déficit de vérité*, en somme, qui ferait de la fiction un barrage contra la possibilité même de la philosophie" (203). According to Veinstein, Anders does not quite understand that Kafka provides "une métamorphose de l'idée même de vérité, donc de la philosophie" (203, see too 297).

For Veinstein, "la vérité est pensée *en son indécidabilité*; et c'est en cela que Kafka rend possible l'articulation entre fiction et philosophie" (204). Precisely the tension between philosophy and literature makes their rapport philosophically important (228). This tension arises in the resistance of literature to the demand of philosophy for sense or meaning (264).

Of principal interest to Veinstein is the "[m]étamorphose de la philosophie qui se construit . . . à partir de sa confrontation à la littérature" (85). In choosing the word [*m*]étamorphose, Veinstein of course borrows the title of one of Kafka's best-known stories ("Die Verwandlung"); she characterizes the philosophic impetus in much of Kafka's writing, and the effect of Kafka's writing on philosophy, as "métamorphose" (87–88).

In Veinstein's view, Benjamin, Arendt, Adorno, and Anders "lisent Kafka en brouillant souvent les frontières entre philosophie et littérature." Among the four philosophers, Benjamin undertakes philosophy in its rapport with

literature to a point at which Benjamin himself is transformed into an *écrivain*, whereas Anders goes furthest in suggesting that Kafka remains too literary to become a philosopher (211).

Veinstein herself is closest to Benjamin. Benjamin treats Kafka as “un ‘narrateur’ *hybride*, à la fois philosophe et écrivain” (212, Veinstein’s italics, see also 213–218). Veinstein claims the movement of philosophy towards literature, and the “dissolution de la parole du philosophe dans celle de l’écrivain . . . ne sont aussi sensibles que dans l’interprétation de Benjamin” (219, see too 297). With regard to the metamorphosis involved, Veinstein remarks: “le philosophe, en métamorphosant la philosophie, s’identifie tellement à l’écrivain qu’il en épouse la fonction. Le philosophe est pris dans un devenir-écrivain” (219). Although “plus ‘métathéorique’” than Benjamin, Adorno “s’autorise quelques ‘percées littéraires’ en forme d’hommage à Benjamin.” Like Anders, Arendt writes in clear commentary and literary analysis that connects with a “réflexion philosophico-politique” (204). Anders, however, most adamantly separates philosophy and literature (204–205), thus demonstrating a disregard for the intractable particularity of any expression, including philosophic expression. This particularity is brought to the fore in literature; that is how literature metamorphizes philosophy. Anders shows “l’absence de réflexion sur son propre geste, c’est-à-dire sur la possibilité et les conditions de *l’interprétation philosophique d’une œuvre littéraire*” (228, Veinstein’s italics, see too 297).

Veinstein emphasizes, moreover, that Benjamin is especially interested in “une autre dimension de la métamorphose, qui définit la littérature comme l’expérience d’un devenir-animal” (255). She would like him, however, to go further. She notes that difficulties *nos quatre philosophes* have with the Kafka ambiguity regarding human/animal distinctions correlate with the difficulty philosophy often has with literature: “si nos quatre philosophes demeurent devant la littéralité du devenir-animal . . . c’est parce qu’ils se trouvent pris dans l’histoire de la philosophie, dont l’animalité (ou le fait de devenir un animal) est l’un des *impensés* fondamentaux” (240–241, Veinstein’s italics). With the term *littéralité*, Veinstein refers not only to the quality of being literature but also to the way in which some of Kafka’s stories have animals *literally* speak to us, and thereby give animality, as well as literature, a special importance (298–299).

According to Veinstein, all four of the discussed philosophers to some extent balk not only at greater interaction of philosophy and literature but also, and correlatively, before animality. “Lorsque ces lecteurs sont philosophes, lorsqu’ils tentent de lire Kafka *depuis la philosophie*, cette tension semble atteindre un point plus vif encore: car la philosophie est ici attirée par la recherche du sens, et interdite par la présence de tout ce qui, par nature, lui est étranger ou impropre: la fiction, littéralité, l’animal” (291, Veinstein’s italics).

Veinstein traces Kafka's development of a literature that challenges philosophy in two of its ostensible fundamentals: the principle of noncontradiction and, correlatively, the distinction of the human from the nonhuman animal (229–234). The metamorphoses enacted by Kafka's writings—such as figures alternating between human and nonhuman characteristics—draw philosophy into dilemmas it often tends to overlook (235–239). To formulate the ensuing possibility of a metamorphosis of philosophy, Veinstein turns to Derrida's *L'animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006): "Derrida travaille en miroir deux distinctions: celle entre l'homme et l'animal, et celle entre la philosophie et la littérature" (241). The Kafkan becoming-animal involves a metamorphosis of philosophy by literature to the point at which philosophy has difficulty ignoring the ambiguity created for its distinctions of human and animal (245–246). Veinstein traces ways in which Kafka's literature moves philosophy to open to animality as something especially inaccessible to conceptualization (299). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975) also facilitates Veinstein's analyses in this regard (247–251, 257), but Derrida is especially helpful in associating questions of human and animal with questions of philosophy and literature, and in presenting literature as something that renders distinctions of human and animal, and correlatively of philosophy and literature, ambiguous (299, 251).

Léa Veinstein is known for her contributions to French radio, her essays, and a fascinating book in which she explores her sense of Jewish heritage while piecing together a story about her paternal great grandfather, who officiated at the synagogue in Neuilly-sur-Seine during the German occupation (*Isaac* [Paris: Grasset, 2019]). She has, furthermore, edited an interesting collection of essays on philosophy and Kafka, also with the title *Les philosophes lisent Kafka* (in *Les cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg*, no. 33, 2013). In the book under review, she provides thoughtful reflection on Kafka's writings, on philosophic readings of Kafka, and on the rapport of philosophy and literature.

Brendan Moran

University of Calgary