Kafka and Arabs

Jens Hanssen

“It appears to me that you are still struggling with your father’s encounter.” I was taken aback, who spoke? “I think I know you but where we have met?” The bronze statue smiled: “I am sorry, I have not introduced myself; My name is Franz Kafka.” I stopped, perplexed. I did not believe what the statue said. . . . True, that was Kafka, or someone who looks a lot like him and has assumed his personality. I protested: “But Kafka has been dead for sixty five years; moreover, Kafka does not know Arabic.” The Kafka statue smiled back. “Forgive me, please, I ask you not to speak of death. As for the Arabic in which I addressed you, I learned it recently and I was forced to learn it because, in their feverish fight against Zionism, some Arab critics accused me of being a Zionist and a writer who serves Zionist ideology. I had to learn Arabic so that I could tell them that my position is the opposite of what they think. I don’t deny that I believe in Judaism that I am Jewish even though my relationship to religion and god was never compatible. As for the accusation of Zionism, it is utterly false.1

In October 1917 Martin Buber published an animal story by Franz Kafka in his monthly review Der Jude.2 Kafka’s friend and literary executor, Max Brod, recommended it, assuring Buber that Kafka’s work was among the most Jewish documents of our time.3 Kafka wrote “Jackals and Arabs” during the war-induced hiatus in Jewish immigration to Palestine, only

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Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
1. Nayrouz Malek, Zuhur Kafka (Aleppo, 2000), pp. 106–7; hereafter abbreviated Z. Most German Jewish newspapers consulted in this study are accessible on www.compactmemory.de
half a year before the Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917 committed the British government to support a Jewish national home in Palestine. The polyvalent story and its multilayered context crystallize Kafka’s relationship to Zionism and Palestine as well as his German, Jewish, and Arab scholarly reception. The current revolutionary moment in the Arab world allows us to rethink Kafka and Arabs and, at the same time, the Palestine conflict. As such, this essay contains an intellectual affinity with the revision of Kafka scholarship offered in *Critical Inquiry* following the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as Achmat Dangor’s haunting postapartheid novel *Kafka’s Curse.*

The current attempt of the Israeli state to claim ownership over Kafka’s literary estate on the grounds that “the rightful place of the Kafka papers is in the National Library of Israel,” as its director has put it, offers additional timeliness to this essay. Israeli newspapers have launched a campaign supporting the repatriation of Kafka. This appropriation of Kafka worries Judith Butler and other Jewish critics who condemn the way the Israeli state works to determine cultural “assets” for the Jewish people while criminalizing those who criticize its practices as “liabilities” on universal grounds. This applies in particular to the many dissident Jewish voices that assert that Israel does not speak in their name because the apartheid


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system inside Israel and in the Occupied Territories discriminates against Palestinians.

To this day, “Jackals and Arabs” represents a rare European account—fictional or nonfictional—in which the violent nature of Zionism’s designs on Palestine is countered by an Arab protagonist whose narrative of resistance, I will argue, Kafka renders empathetically. In what follows, I treat “Jackals and Arabs” as a contrapuntal illumination of the historical moment in which Zionism turns from a movement of national liberation in Europe to a settler-colonial enterprise in Palestine. My argument is literary, historical, and political, and it proceeds in three steps. First, I review the history of Kafka’s Arab reception using Atef Botros’s innovative recent literary study on the topic. Pushing Botros’s analysis further, I then compare “Jackals and Arabs” to other Kafka texts that interweave Jewish and colonial narratives. These stories, diaries, and letters reveal Kafka’s exceptionally irreverent and satirical treatment of Zionism. Finally, I revisit Kafka’s Prague circle of friends and associates as they gradually abandon the project of Jewish emancipation in Europe and embrace the practice of colonization in Palestine. Based on his letters and diaries, I argue that Kafka’s ambiguity towards Zionism has to do less with his general indecision than with his disapproval of Zionism’s colonial turn. Finding this turn in Kafka’s lifetime challenges the view, commonly held by critics of Zionism, that Zionism is originally or inherently a colonial idea. This turn did have its roots in ideas of a Jewish plantation economy and the social engineering that emerged in late nineteenth-century Europe. But Jewish settlement in Palestine remained a side project for many Prague Zionists until the Balfour Declaration and the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine in 1920.

To be sure, early Zionist settler-colonialism was not the same as it is in today’s Israel and Palestine. The current aggressive settlement expansions have their origins in the 1967 war in which Israel conquered and occupied the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Under Ottoman and British rule in Palestine, Zionists were not in a position to

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9. See Atef Botros, Kafka: Ein jüdischer Schriftsteller aus arabischer Sicht (Wiesbaden, 2009); hereafter abbreviated K.

ethnically cleanse Palestinians, the opportunity for which only came in the 1947–48 war; nor could they consider apartheid laws that the Israeli state passed in the early 1950s, most notoriously the Law of Return, the Law of Absentee Property, and the Law of Citizenship. Yet, as Gershon Shafir has convincingly argued, Israeli colonialism after 1967 has its roots in pre-1948 Zionist settlement projects and practices. Colonialism, of course, is not a label for brutal intentions or behavior of individuals or groups. Rather, it designates often high-minded discourses and practices of cultural erasure or material appropriation. The idea of return to ancestral land is common enough in colonialism. The Zionists may have had greater historical claim to the biblical land than the French had in Algeria to a Roman past or the French Levant to the crusaders. But all cases required massive population transfers in order to change the reality to fit the idea. It matters little to displaced natives whether settler-colonialism emerged out of a penal colony of metropolitan undesirables as in Australia or French Guiana or out of mass emigration of refugees from metropolitan Europe, as in Palestine before and after the Holocaust.

Over six decades, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has rendered the history of both societies so inseparable that a critical mass of Jewish and Arab thinkers have rediscovered binationalism—that is, the idea that the land of Palestine be shared through integration not separation of populations. As I will show, this idea was first formulated in 1920s Palestine by Kafka’s circle of friends in the Brith Shalom movement. Regardless of whether binationalism is tied to a one- or two-state solution, at the heart of their arguments is that the relationship between Palestinians, Jews, and Arab Jews ought to be based on the recognition of their equality and affinity.

**Contrapuntal Illuminations: Kafka and the Non-European**

This article rests on three methodological elaborations. They address Kafka’s marginal position, his work’s allegorical complexity, and contrapuntal strategies of illuminating colonial residues, or shadows, of European literature. My entry point is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s influential essay “What Is a Minor Literature?” which was inspired by

13. These include—to invoke only those thinkers who are footnoted in this essay—Hannah Arendt, Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Judith Butler, Gabriel Piterberg, Muhammad Ali Khalidi, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Gil Hochberg. For the most authoritative monograph of the binationalist group, see Shalom Ratzabi, *Between Zionism and Judaism: The Radical Circle in Brith Shalom, 1925–1933* (Leiden, 2002).
Klaus Wagenbach’s interpretation of Kafka’s musings on writing in a language in which he never felt quite at home. They argue that the key to understanding Kafka is his subversive relationship to the dominant German culture in fin-de-siècle Prague. They lament that scholars have insisted on transcendental meanings and parabolic interpretations that have no relation to the writer’s positionalities. Moreover, they argue that many scholars—starting with Brod—have appropriated Kafka in “a desperate attempt at symbolic reterritorialization, based in archetypes, Kabbala, and alchemy, that accentuates its break from the people and will find its result only in Zionism and in such things as the ‘dream of Zion.’” The tension between the universal and the particular endows minority literature like Kafka’s with the status of world literature. The great contribution of Deleuze and Guattari was to challenge both the transcendentalizing and reterritorializing interpretations by linking Kafka’s solitude to Prague’s politics of language. Jewish writers experienced a double discrimination by the German-speaking imperial elite, in whose language they wrote, and by their Czech milieu because of their literary (“paper”) language. Deleuze and Guattari understood Kafka’s struggle in this exceptional context as representative of all people who endure alienating environments.

However, Deleuze and Guattari’s celebration of Kafka’s universal solitude, and the nomadic condition of humans and texts more generally, does not fully capture Kafka’s own metaphor of the nomad as a figure experiencing dislocation, as in his novel Amerika, or as a force of invasion, as in his Chinese writings. Moreover, their valorization of Kafka’s prophecies of Europe’s totalitarian future deters them from working through the “intensity” —their term—of the competing German, Austrian, Czech, and Jewish national questions as well as the emerging question of Palestine, all of which were competing in late imperial Prague.

Hannah Arendt’s World War II essays help us to better contextualize Kafka’s work as a literary prism onto the particular political atmosphere in early twentieth-century continental Europe. In her “The Jew as Pariah: A

Hidden Tradition,” she defined French Jewish intellectual Bernard Lazare as the epitome of the “conscious pariah.”

For Arendt, Lazare’s intervention in the Dreyfus affair represented a universal act of resistance against oppression everywhere. By contrast, the privileged Jewish “parvenu”—including the founder of Zionism and the self-fashioned “Moses of the fin de siècle,” Theodor Herzl—particularized Jewish emancipation and thereby chose not to challenge fundamentally deeper structures of oppression.

Arendt argues that unlike the heroic Lazare, Kafka’s pariah is a tragic figure who is cursed by the futility of attempting an ordinary life and the pursuit of universals in oppressive structures. Theodor Adorno shared Arendt’s contrarian assessment: “in its striving not for symbol but allegory, Kafka’s prose sides with the outcasts, the protest of his friend notwithstanding.”

My article aims to recuperate and redeem allegory from Brod’s romantic symbolism as a means of meaningful literary expression and a method of interpreting the world. Here, I return to Walter Benjamin’s cultural criticism in general and his foundational essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” in particular. Benjamin insists on the multiple narrative layers of an allegory whose shadowed imagery is neither merely added by interpretation nor necessarily the conscious intention of an author who had, after all, instructed Brod to burn his manuscripts. “Kafka had a rare capacity for creating parables for himself” (“F,” p. 124), yet, as Benjamin explains, “in their misery and their beauty . . . they had to become more than parables.” The Kafka stories examined in this article, then, are not interpreted as wisdom tales with a linear, unified moral. Rather, reading “Jackals and Arabs” and related texts allegorically means that they may consist of fractured, paradoxical, or—following Edward Said—contrapuntal narratives.

The question of the place of Jewish identity in Kafka’s work and the


23. Following Benjamin, Adorno argues, “the artist is not obliged to understand his own art, and there is particular reason to doubt whether Kafka was capable of such understanding” (“N,” p. 97).

growing appeal of Zionism in the intellectual milieu of the late Habsburg empire has emerged as a central theme in literary and historical scholarship. There is also a lively scholarly debate in Israel about the nuances and varieties of Zionism that influenced Kafka and his relationship with Brod. However, nowhere has there been any consideration of Kafka writing back at Europe as a critic of colonialism in general or of settler-Zionism in Palestine in particular. The Jewish context is indispensable in Kafka’s work, but proprietorial interpretations are no less ahistorical than postmodern impulses of deterritorialization. Instead, this article draws on Said’s contrapuntal method in order to illuminate the dialectic in “Jackals and Arabs” and affiliated texts between Jewish and non-European meanings.

Said first brought contrapuntal readings to bear on Victorian novelists like Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad in order to “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented.” In his lecture “Freud and the Non-European,” Said significantly refines this approach and offers a provocative rereading of Sigmund Freud’s 1937 Moses and Monotheism. What strikes Said about Freud’s interrogation of Moses’ Jewish identity is that, even as he was attempting to come to terms with anti-Semitism all around him, it was couched in nonidentitarian, antinomian terms.

In an oft-quoted soliloquy, Kafka once asked himself “What do I have in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself.” Adorno has observed that “in Freud as in Kafka the validity of the soul is excluded” (“N,” p. 101). Thus, in a few late diary entries, Kafka saw Moses less as the embodiment of settled Jewish identity than as an exemplary community organizer and lawgiver for a land he never entered. Kafka perceived this irony of “non-arrival”—the term is Butler’s—not as a loss or a failure but as part of “the fated task of Jewry to absorb the strengths of

26. See, for example, Kafka, Zionism, and Beyond, ed. Mark H. Gelber (Tübingen, 2004).
30. Arendt had to work to convince the influential Jewish publisher Salman Schocken, who “was only interested in the ‘eternal values’ of Judaism,” to publish Kafka’s and Benjamin’s “borderline” texts in America (Arendt, “Hannah Arendt an Gershom Scholem, 22 September 1945,” in Arendt und Benjamin: Texte, Briefe, Dokumente, ed. Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla [Frankfurt, 2006], p. 162).
humankind.” For this legacy, “Moses is still a current reality.” However, Kafka was bitterly aware that the pursuit of universals was threatened by “the dark depths of the zoological doctrine of race . . . [that] strike the Jew and murder the human being.”

Freud insisted on the Egyptian origins of Moses, monotheism, and the Jewish people as a way to expose the constructedness and the false premise of European persecution of Jews. For Said, Moses and Monotheism also illuminates dialectical narratives and hyphenated identities that are buried beneath the absolutes of alterity and enmity in the Abrahamic tradition and that are suppressed in the Arab-Israeli struggle for Palestine. Said’s musical metaphor of contrapuntalism, then, is fundamentally at odds with “counterhistory,” which has recently been discredited as a polemical method that “consists of the systematic exploitation of the adversary’s most trusted sources against their grain . . . [for] the distortion of the adversary’s self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory.” Rather, as Said already recognized during the Arab-Israeli war of 1973: “Neither people can develop without the other there, harassing, taunting, fighting. . . . The more intense these modern struggles for identity become, the more attention is paid by the Arab or the Jew to his chosen opponent, or partner.”

Contrapuntal illuminations plant the seeds—“in all sorts of unforeseen proleptic ways”—for often deliberately antithetical, postcolonial explorations of those texts within the Western canon “which brush up unstintingly against historical constraints.” Said’s interpretative method, then, promises a more subtle understanding of Kafka’s relationship to the non-European than Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of homeless texts can provide. The very fact that generations of Arab writers have drawn meaning from Kafka in unexpected ways is a testimony to the allegorical force of his work.

33. See Goldstein, Reinscribing Moses, pp. 96–97, and Jan Assmann, Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).
35. Amos Funkenstein, Perceptions of Jewish History (Berkeley, 1993), p. 36. To the extent that contrapuntalism is a mnemonic strategy, the concept of multidirectional memory is more useful in this context; see Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Stanford, Calif., 2009).
Reading Kafka in the Middle East: From Admiration to Rejection to Inspiration

The history of Kafka’s reception in the Arab world, which Botros has recently reconstructed, surprises both for its early beginnings and its diversity. The first Arab to grapple with Kafka was the Egyptian Georges Henein (1913–1973), who was exposed to Kafka’s *The Castle* and *The Trial* during his studies at the Sorbonne. A Copt who was married to the niece of Ahmad Shawki, the foremost neo-classicist poet of his age, Henein arrived in Paris in 1934, the year Benjamin published his influential interpretation of Kafka. Henein moved in the surrealist circles of André Breton, who considered him “a great mediator between the West and the East” (*K*, p. 63). Around the time that Arendt carried Kafka’s and Benjamin’s legacies to America, Henein took Kafka eastwards to Egypt, where he shaped critiques of bourgeois and religious conventions. As a committed antifascist—and, after Hiroshima, an opponent of nuclear armament—Henein and his group of Cairene surrealists stood for a form of art that postulated the kind of unconditional human freedom that was so powerfully expressed during the recent uprising in Egypt.

The second Egyptian admirer of Kafka, Taha Husayn (1889–1973), was considerably more influential in the Arab world. Blind from early childhood and temporarily an intellectual pariah because of his critique of the early Islamic canon, he saw in Kafka a means of coming to terms with “the impossibility of a connection between man and God” (*K*, p. 33). Paradoxically, Kafka’s “sinister literature” helped him to translate his pessimism into active life, much like Kafka himself, through the autonomy of thinking and the act of writing (*K*, p. 32). Husayn compared Kafka with his intellectual idol, the ascetic and skeptic Abu ‘Alaa al-Ma‘arri, a translation of whose poetry was, in fact, on Kafka’s shelf. 38 Both writers would likely have enjoyed the Abbasid philosopher’s oft-quoted lamentation that:

- They all err—Moslem, Christian, Jew, and Magian,
- Two make Humanity’s universal sect;
- One man intelligent without religion,
- And one religious without intellect. 39

The leading Iranian modernist Sadeq Hedeyat undertook a similar journey with Kafka in the 1940s. Husayn and Hedeyat interpreted Kafka’s skepticism towards Jewish tradition as evidence of his rebellious secularism. The question of Kafka’s theology and secularism has divided Jewish

scholarship since Benjamin and Scholem’s public exchange. In the Muslim context, Kafka helped Husayn and Hedeyat build a bridge to European culture and simultaneously to valorize the pre-Islamic period. Both Middle Eastern authors could identify with the conditions of entrapment in which Kafka’s protagonists found themselves. While Husayn drew life-affirming conclusions, Hedeyat committed suicide shortly after the publication of his landmark study, *Kafka’s Message*, in 1951 (see K, pp. 34–44).

Since the 1950s, Kafka, together with Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, and Albert Camus, were dominant influences on vanguardist and absurdist Arabic literature. For example, Gamal Ghitani, one of today’s leading Arab novelists, attested that “in the sixties Kafka was treated as a sacred figure who fascinated us” (*K*, p. 107). Numerous translations, increasingly from the German original, granted Kafka’s work a broader public in the Arab world. From the late 1960s, Arab authors like Sunallah Ibrahim began to draw on Kafka’s themes and style to engage in literary critiques of authoritarian, postwelfare states (see *K*, pp. 99–123). Moreover, the Arabic short story, which was the medium of choice of such political and social engagement, owed much to Kafka’s literary form. Throughout, it was his character Joseph K. from *The Trial*—not primarily Kafka himself—who became the embodiment in Arabic literature and popular culture of the Arab’s sense of entrapment.

After the devastating military defeat by Israel in 1967, a more defensive and biographical Kafka reception emerged. Literary critics in Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut engaged in a war of interpretation over the question of whether or not Kafka was a Zionist. The Arab engagement with Kafka became part of the symbolic battle over the root causes of the loss of Palestine. It came to be located in the intellectual elite’s failure to realize that uncritical adoption of Western culture opened the gates to cultural alienation. The camp that claimed Kafka was a Zionist and that his work pointed at his desire to emigrate to Palestine also warned that his musings about the biblical land of Canaan and his “Workers without Possession” of 1918 were affirmations of the socialist settlements of kibbutzim. The opposing camp turned the theological appropriation of Kafka as the last

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prophet of Israel on its head and argued that the use of Kafka for Zionist purposes should not be confused with the work itself. To acquiesce to this interpretation would be to play into the hands of Israel’s cultural imperialism. Some of them saw in Kafka’s work, particularly in “Jackals and Arabs,” evidence that he was an anti-Zionist who exposed the rotten roots of Zionism.

Lively debates in leading Arabic-language journals like *al-Hilal*, *al-Aqlam*, *al-Ma’rifa*, and *al-Adab* focused on Kafka’s “Jackals and Arabs.” Botros shows that the Arab reception was divided over the question of whether Kafka’s story approved or castigated the colonization of Palestine. In his meticulous reconstruction of anti-Zionist interpretations, Botros reveals misquotations following the notorious work of the Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy and mistakes in Arabic translations of the story, which contained “tendentious semantic shifts” to religious vocabulary, as well as its erroneous dating to after the Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917 (K, p. 199). Botros found it graver still that all too often the Arab reception of Kafka was ignorant of the history of European Jewry. Arab critics have disregarded the specificity of modern anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism the way Kafka experienced it was animated by race theories and, as Hannah Arendt has argued, differed from medieval Christian hatred of Jews. Yet, Arab reviewers considered Zionism a movement of biblical salvation and not one of national struggle against violent ethnic nationalisms in Europe (see K, pp. 172–226).

Botros offers important critiques of the shortcomings of dominant trends in Kafka’s reception in the Arab world. However, his book gives the misleading impression that the obsession with Kafka’s Zionism after 1967 diminished his literary appeal. One prominent Syrian novelist who addresses this obsession is Nayrouz Malek. *Kafka’s Flowers* is a daring work of regime criticism published during the brief Damascus Spring of 2000. The story takes place in a mental asylum in an Arab country and among an opposition group of exiles in Paris. The inmate-protagonist, Jamal al-Halabi, was sent to France to prevent a marriage his wealthy politician father deemed below his status. There he keeps a diary, which chronicles his immersion in Kafka’s works, and writes short stories. The more his family pressures him to return home, the more he “felt as though [Kafka] wrote about my own life” (Z, p. 21). One day Kafka starts communicating with him. Once the Kafka statue disavows Zionism during their first en-

45. Botros’s own misdating of the declaration to 9 November 1917 is a minor infelicity in comparison.
counter—as quoted at the top of this essay—he admits to Kafka: “I found myself in your writings. I felt like you were living inside of me” (Z, p. 109). Kafka becomes the protagonist’s regular interlocutor and mentor as he tries to work through his writer’s block, his relationship to his father, and, more generally, the burden of humanity in the face of violence. In the end, the protagonist is forced to return home but escapes from his family’s control by checking into the mental asylum where he goes by the name Kafka.

The correspondence between two of the most important poets of the Palestinian resistance in the mid-1980s is another example. During their widely publicized exchange, Samih al-Qasim invoked Kafka to assuage Mahmud Darwish’s painful sense of the futility of poetry in exile after the Israeli siege of West Beirut, the massacres of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila, and the hypocrisy of Arab regimes. Al-Qasim reminded Darwish of Kafka’s “ravaging” power as a fellow pariah by way of an allegory in which Kafka gives a “terrifying speech” on the podium of the United Nations. Oblivious to the applause from the General Assembly, Kafka is turned inwards, “contemplating that human beetle helpless on its back.” Al-Qasim explained to Darwish, “this beetle is you and me and us and them.” Before the imaginary Kafka leaves the “hypocritical lectern” and returns to his absolute human solitude, he gasps “didn’t I tell you so?” as if to say that for all their professions of support the family of nations considers Palestinians as a burden, long condemned by their deformation during the nakba of 1948. The al-ju‘al al-bashri (human beetle) is a direct allusion to Metamorphosis, Kafka’s harrowing tale of the fate of the breadwinning son who wakes up one morning in his bedroom as an ugly beetle and who, nevertheless, is constantly worried about being a burden to his family. But, al-Qasim intoned, “Kafka saw. We saw, and we rebelled; we believed and rebelled, too. . . . And despite everything, we write poetry. . . . This human beetle, turned on its back unjustly, treacherously, and aggressively, will get back up and give birth to a normal human being despite all the civilized beasts turning against us.”47

Al-Qasim’s moving plea to Darwish to keep writing also referred to another Kafka work, The Burrow. The story’s narrator is a badger- or mole-like creature who exhausts himself in building a maze of underground tunnels and chambers in search of protection from a hostile world above. But the more intricate the tunnel gets the more paranoid the mole becomes that there is a beast outside that audibly pursues him. Al-Qasim

47. Samih al-Qasim, “Lan yaflit ahad min shahwatna,” in Mahmud Darwish and al-Qasim, al-Rasa‘il (Beirut, 1990), p. 68. I thank Hicham Safieddine for pointing me to this passage.
appealed to Darwish to break out of this kafkaesque paradox through steadfastness: “This burrow must end—we just have to walk, crawl, believe and say, say and believe, reclaim our strength seed by seed and rise up step by step. . . . We have no choice but to see that distinct flicker of light at the end of the dark tunnel.”  

This literary exchange is an evocative instance of the appeal Kafka and his work have for outcasts and victims of history like these two Palestinian poets. Kafka offers an allegorical vocabulary with which to express resistance to one’s plight. It also suggests that the stakes of reading Kafka in the contemporary Arab world are higher than Botros’s book allows for. Kafka’s work is part of the Arab political lexicon precisely because many Arabs feel they have experienced his fiction as reality.

“Jackals and Arabs”: A Postcolonial Allegory?

In “Jackals and Arabs,” the European narrator passes through an oasis where a pack of obtrusive jackals haunt him. They ingratiate themselves by calling him the long-awaited savior from their submission to the Arabs. Through tirades, lamentations, and flatteries, they try to incite the ensnared traveler to cut the Arabs’ throats with a rusty pair of scissors. This would, so claims the head jackal, “cleanse” the kin, “end the quarrel that divides the world,” and give “us peace from the Arabs, breathable air, a view across the horizon cleansed from them.” In the final third of the story, the Arab leader of the caravan cracks his whip and “laughs as cheerfully as his clan’s modesty permitted,” demanding that the jackals give him “the scissors and have done with it.” He explains to the surprised visitor that it is “well-known” that these “fools” offer these scissors to every European “as long as there are Arabs.” And still, insists the Arab, “we love them for that.” And when he brings the cadaver of a camel, the blood-thirsty jackals return and pursue “their profession.” The story ends with the enigmatic comment by the Arab: “Wonderful animals, aren’t they? And how they hate us.”

A study of the text and context of “Jackals and Arabs” highlights the general pitfalls of reducing literature to autobiographical or political manifestos on the one hand or to transcendental truths on the other. Text-immanent readings have concocted commonplaces such as the incommensurability between matter and spirit or the dialectic structure of human existence. The great German expert of Kafka’s literature, Walter Sokel, categorized “Jackals and Arabs”—along with “Investigations of a Dog”—as one of his ironic sto-

48. Ibid.
ries. He distinguishes them from the better-known tragedies *The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, or *The Castle*. Yet, he also determined, less convincingly, that the story is a parable in which the jackals represented Kafka’s unease about his own personality and the relationship with his father.⁵⁰ The reluctance of most Kafka scholars to acknowledge that “Jackals and Arabs” is about the question of Palestine is bewildering. Even the few analyses that acknowledge the centrality of Zionism read it as a deterritorialized parable, misplacing Kafka’s Arabs as a European *Wirtsvolk* (host-nation).⁵¹ More recently, Sander Gilman saw in the animal story a parody of Jewish stereotypes. He also considered it indicative of both Kafka’s Jewish self-hatred and his projection of European anti-Semitism onto his Arab protagonist.⁵²

Kafka loathed abstractions and fought his publisher tooth and nail over the title of “Jackals and Arabs.” Thus, he insisted on calling it an “animal story” and not—as Buber suggested—a parable (see K, p. 90).⁵³ As Kafka cautioned in “On Parables,” “all these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.”⁵⁴ Kafka’s rejection of the category of parable for his first two stories with animal protagonists suggests that he did really care about animals as animals—not just as masks of his own character traits, as Sokel has argued.⁵⁵ On the contrary, Kafka once looked at some fish in a Berlin aquarium shortly after he had become a vegetarian, and if we accept Brod’s account, spoke to them: “Now I can already look at you calmly, I do not eat you anymore.”⁵⁶ As Benjamin has pointed out, “When one encounters the name of the creatures—monkey, dog, mole—one looks up in fright and

⁵³ Martin Buber, “Franz Kafka an Martin Buber,” *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, ed. Grete Schaeder, 3 vols. (Heidelberg, 1972–75), 1:494. It is important to note that Kafka chose not to use the technical term *Fabel*. The literal term *animal story* appears to avoid the moralist baggage of fables.
realizes that one is already far away from the continent of man” (“F,” p. 122). And in a formulation reminiscent of Freud’s late style, he adds that animals are “the receptacles of the forgotten . . . [who have] the greatest opportunity for reflection” in Kafka’s work (“F,” p. 132). As creatures prone to reflect on a recessive past, Kafka’s animals command reader identification, and they ordinarily speak for circumscribed constituencies.

Attributing remarkable timing and uncanny prescience to “Jackals and Arabs” is not an excuse to burden Kafka with a clairvoyance of subsequent events. Rather it invites a recuperation of the original context, as well as a place-sensitive and race-conscious “constructive destruction”—aufbauende Zerstörung is Kafka’s original methodological term—that makes productive use of the violent geohistorical, Abrahamic space in which Kafka decided to set this particular story.

Such analytical recuperations from within the Western literary canon have been the hallmark of postcolonial critique ever since Octave Mannoni and Aimé Césaire reinterpreted Shakespeare’s The Tempest as a complex and gripping tale of colonial conquest and Caribbean resilience. Avengers of the Western canon, like Harold Bloom, may have felt threatened by postcolonial approaches and disqualified them as bespoilers of great literature. But contrapuntal reinterpretations have recently arrived in Kafka scholarship, too, and have come to conceive of the down-home Kafka as an avid literary traveler.

For example, “In the Penal Colony,” written at the outbreak of World War I and published in 1919, evokes a morally empty and self-destructive colonialism. In it a colonial officer extols the virtues of his justice and

57. On Kafka as an animal-liberation writer, see Kafka’s Creatures.
58. In a Kierkegaard-inflected aphorism about religion and historical evolution, Kafka mocks Abraham’s flight into eternity for mistaking his own “spiritual poverty” for earthly monotony. In this context, Kafka’s constructive destruction promises to reconstitute the “notoriously and uncommonly manifold” world we inhabit, and, as such, the method assumes neither total religious submission to the biblical ur-father nor total interpretative control over his historical legacy (Kafka, entry for 26 Feb. 1918, The Blue Octavo Notebooks, ed. Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins [Cambridge, 1991], p. 55). Benjamin and Adorno realized early on that Kafka’s approach offered a dialectic renewal of venerable traditions through negation, and there are traces of aufbauende Zerstörung in Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History and Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment. The concept is also not dissimilar to the deconstructionism associated with Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.
describes the horrific torture to which a waiting prisoner is going to be subjected. After the traveler-narrator casts doubts on the method of punishment, the colonial officer straps himself onto the torture machine. Having acted as prosecutor, judge, and executioner, the officer is moved to self-punishment in an attempt to validate the logic of justice to the disbelieving but agonizingly passive European traveler-narrator. In the process, the worn-out torture apparatus breaks down and mangles the officer to death.

The setting of the story in the tropics of the French empire has evoked Devil’s Island, where Captain Alfred Dreyfus was incarcerated following the infamous anti-Semitic travesty of justice. The African facial features of the condemned military servant also suggest that Kafka was thinking of colonial violence, both physical and discursive. As the officer relays the case—“simple like all of them”—the condemned was accused of dereliction of duty. Moreover, the prisoner displayed cannibalist instincts—or what Frantz Fanon has identified as the classic French racist stereotype of black bestiality—as he threatens his colonial master: “Throw away that whip or I’ll eat you up.”

This dual evocation of anti-Semitic and colonialist injustice is also present in “A Report to an Academy,” the animal story that Buber picked for publication along with “Jackals and Arabs.” Here the narrator of the report, a chimpanzee who is captured on the Gold Coast, is invited by Hamburg’s liberal scientific establishment to give a public lecture on his former life. Instead of providing the expected ethnographic account of his life back in Africa, he reports, sardonically, on the brutality of captivity and the dehumanizing process of becoming like humans. The ape turns survival strategies into great stage performances of imitation, reaching such levels of perfection that his trainers suffered mental breakdowns. The ape takes no joy from his growing fame as he realizes that he belongs neither in imperial Germany nor anymore in his Gold Coast home. This postcolonial reading of the ape’s fate is supported by Kafka’s diary entry of 17 December 1917, in which he imagines how the alienated African performers at world exhibitions must have been affected by their return home.

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63. See, for example, Gilman, Franz Kafka, pp. 68–88.
65. Kafka, In der Strafkolonie, pp. 18–19.
66. See Kafka, The Blue Octavo Notebooks, p. 32.
tion is not to negate the Jewish referentiality of the story or deny the significance that it originally appeared in Der Jude. Rather, the point is that colonial mimicry can illuminate the Jewish condition in Europe and vice versa.

Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China” (1918) has undergone a similar contrapuntal reassessment from the perspective of Chinese history. The short story has been viewed as the first in which Kafka dealt with the history of the Jewish people. But, as Benjamin reminded us, the Chinese are also “among Kafka’s ancestors,” and Kafka avoided the European stereotype of the “characterless, that is standardized” Chinese (“K,” pp. 117, 120). In this story, which Kafka wrote in the weeks after completing “Jackals and Arabs,” a Chinese scholar—Kafka’s only non-European human narrator—reflects on a crumbling empire and dispels the Chinese imperial myth of eternal, nomadic enemies to the north. Instead, the narrator avers that the construction of the Great Wall was a mere ruse to cement social cohesion where all emperors had failed. The story is also interlaced with critiques of Orientalism and European appropriation of China at the time. In a 1925 essay entitled “The Lessons of China,” a contemporary of Benjamin’s and literary critic of the Frankfurt school linked colonial China and Palestine. Leo Löwenthal compared Zionist policies in Palestine to the conditions that led to the outbreak of the Chinese Revolution in 1925 and warned “that Arab youths today are studying at European universities and working to prepare for the hour that has now struck in China. Here, too, a national majority is screaming for justice.”

Whatever their other disagreements, generally Arab commentators have concurred that “Jackals and Arabs” is set in Palestine and that the Arabs are really Arabs (fig. 1). Some have lamented that they are cast in the stereotypical role of a camel driver and that the story is set in the desert, when, in fact, Palestine was remarkably urbanized in the late Ottoman period. The Orientalist imagination was, indeed, key to the Zionist mantra to “make the desert bloom” out of which later the slogan “a land without a people for a people without a land” emerged. But those Arab commentators who have claimed that Kafka was a Zionist author who openly despised Arabs in “Jackals and Arabs” and see in it a British-Zionist conspiracy have misread the text. For one, the depictions of Arabs in the

70. On late Ottoman Palestine, see Beshara Doumani, Rediscovering Palestine, Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900 (Berkeley, 1995).
71. See, for example, Subhi Sa’id in the Damascene journal al-Ma’arifa, quoted in K, p. 134.
story—which resemble Theodor Herzl’s descriptions of Palestinians in his utopian novel *Altneuland* (1902) as a “dirty,” poor, and “sick people” (see *K*, p. 219)—come out of the mouth of the head jackal. They are one of the reasons the traveler-narrator is ultimately turned off by the jackals’ murderous scheme.

The relationship between the European traveler and the jackals is hardly harmonious, and it would be anachronistic to infer that it reflected British-Zionist connivance. The first-person narrator and the ensuing triangular observer-tormentor-tormented plot of the story are significant in other ways. As in “In the Penal Colony,” the traveler-narrator in “Jackals and Arabs” is drawn into an unfolding, violent situation. Neither is omniscient or beyond reproach. Similar to some of Kafka’s major stories, like *The Castle* or *The Trial*, they are not the masters of the narrative. Rather, both traveler-narrators are part of the crisis. They oscillate between sympathy and embarrassment as the French officer and the head jackal try to convince them of the justness of their inhumane causes. In “In the Penal Colony” the prisoner is silent—or inarticulate—throughout, and when at the end the narrator climbs into his boat to flee the scene he gestures to prevent the condemned from boarding to safety. In “Jackals and Arabs” the native—absent in the penal colony—who talks back to the jackals is actually the one exerting corporal violence in self-defence against the jackals’ threat of murder, what would today be considered ethnic cleansing. Kafka’s Arab stands—problematically “high and white”—in the literary centre of a leading Zionist journal. Although the Arabs are haughty tormentors of the jackals, their right to exist is not questioned. On the con-


trary, despite everything, Kafka’s Arab protagonist is characterized by a certain generosity and a good deal of kafkaesque gallows humor.74

Kafka’s original, hand-written draft of the story sheds new light on its subtlety. The first three sentences contain two significant strike-outs: “We were camping in the oasis Gemalja. The companions slept. A Bedouin An Arab, high and white, came by me, he had fed the camel.”75 “Gemalja” is unlikely to connote an actual “beautiful” oasis (jamaliyya in English-Arabic transliteration). Rather, eliminating a place name for the oasis—whether consciously fictitious or possibly real—blocks potential biblical-Babylonian readings.76 The second correction is what makes the text so political. It suggests to Kafka that the terms Bedouin and Arab were not interchangeable. Even if both connoted desert dwelling in Orientalist literature, Kafka’s change of heart to insert the ethnonym, instead of the nomadic figure, introduces a new specific vocabulary among multiple registers for stereotyping and essentializing Arabs. But it does root the narrative presence of the people of the oasis. Some settler-Zionists at the time considered Bedouins as lost Jewish tribes.77 Bedouins were not treated as obstacles to the colonization of Palestine on account of their vagrant (and therefore “unproductive”) presence.78 Kafka’s non-Bedouin Arab, however, evoked a sense of land entitlement that the label “Bedouin” would have denied.

Arabs in Palestine emerged as a problem and as “the hidden question” in the Zionist literature of the day.79 When Kafka’s Arab protagonist explains the situation in the last third of the story, he sees through the jackals’ attempt to instrumentalize the European in order to cleanse Arabs from the land. The Arab’s perspicacity stands in marked contrast to the head jackal’s defamation of his people. Though far from a sympathetic characterization, Kafka’s Arab enjoys a level of agency not even accorded to the

76. Robert Alter notes Kafka’s tendency elsewhere to subvert biblical texts, “including one called ‘The Pit of Babel’” (Alter, Necessary Angels, p. 74).
handful of binational Zionists who went to Palestine in order to overcome
the ethnic-majority logic they endured in Central Europe.  

Kafka’s Arab feels, thinks, hesitates, and convinces. The complexity
of his Arab character stands in stark contrast to the way Zionists in and out-
side Palestine treated its native inhabitants. Herzl had inserted Reschid
Bey into Altneuland merely to validate Zionist colonization. As Piterberg
has pointed out recently, “the disappearance of the Arabs in the novel, with
very few exceptions such as the Orientalist portrayal of the token Arab,
Reschid Bey, is a pivotal point that exposes the literary and political ima-
gination of the fin de siècle sovereign settler.” By comparison, the literary
output of skeptical settlers like Hebrew writers Moshe Smilansky and the
gifted Yosef Haim Brenner range from fascination with the assumed purity
of the nomadic Bedouin to envy and fear of the rootedness of Arab life in
Palestine. But, in their tales, male and female Arab figures are tragically
stuck in timeless honor codes and obey their alleged cultural laws of pre-
destination. Arabs invariably lack the will to autoemancipation that ren-
dered Zionism superior to them.

Smilansky early insisted that coexistence must be based on a “bination-
alism of strength”; it had to serve the goal of increasing Jewish settlement
to levels on par with the native Arab population. Brenner’s approach was
more pessimistic. He caused a stir in 1909 when he challenged the domi-
nation of the diasporic Jews over “the new free Jews.” In Palestine, he
argued, “the question of our Jewish life . . . is not the question of Jewish
religion . . . [nor even] the survival of Judaism.” This affair was a first
manifestation of settler-Zionism turning the negation of exile against its
diasporic leadership. But Brenner also had few good things to say about the
native population. His fiction was structured by cycles of fear and violence,
which the author recognized as the necessary result of two peoples strug-
gling over one land. The solution Brenner and his generation of socialist
immigrants from Eastern Europe envisaged was complete separation between

80. See Yfaat Weiss, “Central European Ethnonationalism and Zionist Binationalsim,”
Jewish Social Studies 11 (Fall 2004): 93–117.
13–21, 35–44.
84. Ibid., p. 21.
85. Quoted in Arieh Bruce Saposnik, Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National
86. Late in life, Kafka strained to read Brenner’s 1920 Breakdown and Bereavement in the
Hebrew original. He admitted on 25 October 1923 that “as a novel I do not enjoy the book very
much. I have always been awestruck by Brenner, I don’t know why, hear-say and fantasies were
settler and native populations, effectively building—in Geshon Shafir’s typology—a Zionist variant of a pure settlement colony in Palestine.\textsuperscript{87}

What makes Kafka’s story so extraordinary is that the Arab who faces the jackals is in a narrative position to pass final judgment on their project and its leaders. Indeed, the Arab treats the disoriented European traveler to a smug comparison: “They are our dogs; finer than any of yours.” The jackals’ refusal to submit to the Arabs may come at their expense, but it distinguishes the jackals from their more docile, canine counterparts in Europe. The Arab’s explanation of the jackals’ behavior also hints at the ironic paradox that the struggle for freedom should occur outside of Europe. In the end, the European traveler-narrator intervenes by raising his hand, in a gesture reminiscent of the European’s in “In the Penal Colony,” in order to protect the jackal from the Arab’s whip.

The animal figure of the jackal invokes the objectionable dog metaphor in European anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{88} But in Kafka the allusion contained neither the common German, Austrian, and Czech anti-Semitism nor that of dogmatic Zionists who felt that the Eastern Jews were parasites—“Luftmenschen,” airy, rootless people, in Max Nordau’s taxonomy—who needed to be civilized.\textsuperscript{89} On the contrary, in a speech on the Yiddish language that Kafka delivered in Prague in 1912 in honor of a group of actors from Poland he admired, he urged the paying audience of assimilated and Zionist Jews to overcome their stereotypes against Yiddish culture. He even had the chutzpa to argue that Western Jews needed Eastern Jews’ Yiddish culture much more for their cultural regeneration than the other way round.\textsuperscript{90} In this extraordinary public lecture, Kafka anticipates eloquent critiques of secularist Zionists’ Orientalism.\textsuperscript{91}

\textbf{Prague Zionism and Kafka’s Exceptionalism}

From the perspective of the victims of Zionism, the events in Palestine that followed the publication of “Jackals and Arabs” have rendered the

\begin{itemize}
\item See Kenneth Stow, \textit{Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters, Continuity in the Catholic-Jewish Encounter} (Stanford, Calif., 2006). See also Andrew Benjamin, \textit{Of Jews and Animals} (Edinburgh, 2010).
\item Steven E. Aschheim, \textit{Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923} (Madison, Wisc., 1982), p. 87.
\item See Anderson, \textit{Reading Kafka}, pp. 263–66.
\end{itemize}
animal story prescient. The Balfour Declaration inaugurated precisely what the jackals failed to do in Kafka’s fiction: remove the Arabs from their land with the backing of Europeans. But the value of Kafka’s story lies less in its alleged anticipation of things to come than in the degree to which Kafka stood outside the Zionist frenzy for Palestine, even as he was caught up in the Zionists’ taxonomy of Jewish life in Central Europe at the fin de siècle.  

By all accounts, Jewish intellectuals in fin-de-siècle Prague had little time for the dominant Zionist ideologues, whether the chauvinism of the gentlemanly Herzl and the social Darwinism of the “muscular Jew” Nordau or the racist anthropology of Zionist organizers in Palestine such as Arthur Ruppin and Elias Auerbach. When the founding fathers of political Zionism staged the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, they decided that a national home for the Jews in Palestine was to be the solution for “the Jewish question.” Their plans for colonizing Palestine were an escape from European anti-Semitism, Western Jews’ assimilation, as well as the “backwardness” of “Ostjuden.” Like many cosmopolitan Jews, Herzl was disgusted by Yiddish culture, which he held responsible for the Jewish plight in Europe and whose language he considered “the clandestine language of captives.” In Altneuland, he painted a rosy picture of Zionist settlement in Palestine, even though the fact-finding mission that the Basel Congress dispatched to the Holy Land had determined that “the bride is beautiful but she is married to another man.”

Kafka was initially socialized into Jewish intellectual currents in 1909–10 when he started attending meetings of the Bar Kochba student group in Prague. Named after the heroic Jewish rebel against Roman occupation in 132–35 CE, this Zionist association was run by his school friends Hugo Bergmann, Robert and Felix Weltsch, and Hans Kohn. At the time, the group advocated Jewish emancipation in Europe in Selbstwehr, an influential newspaper that Kafka recognized as “the Zionist voice in Czechoslovakia.” It also organized talks by prominent Jewish thinkers from across Central Europe who popular-

92. See Michael Stanislawski, Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinski (Berkeley, 2001).
95. Quoted in Robertson, Kafka, p. 20.
97. Quoted in Bruce, Kafka and Cultural Zionism, p. 11.
ized the spiritual approach to Zionism and Palestine as a Jewish homeland, advocated by Ahad Ha’am, an eminent Haskalah critic, Hebrew journalist, and early critic of settler-Zionism. But three lectures by Buber on Hassidic folklore had the most lasting effect on the group in general and on Kafka in particular. Buber shaped the way Ha’am’s approach metamorphosed into Prague’s particular cultural form of Zionism. He also connected the group’s work to the wider developments of Zionism, as well as to opposing currents of Jewish antiestablishment thought in Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, Frankfurt, and Paris.

Brod’s 1917 essay “The Third Phase of Zionism,” which celebrated the proliferation of a diverse and contradictory Zionist literature, was very much a position paper on how the Prague circle inserted itself into the Zionist movement before the Balfour Declaration. Comparing Ha’am’s recently republished 1895 essay, “At the Crossroads,” with Buber’s The Jewish Movement of 1916, Brod discerned the general shift from theory to practice as a sign of the strength of the movement. Like Bergmann but unlike Kafka, Brod saw in Zionist action the potential of Jews to return to history and atone for “2,000 years of Jewish passivity.” He argued that Herzl’s diplomacy and the mantra of “no colonization without sovereignty” dominated the first phase. Herzl’s Old-Newland, Brod admonished, was a place for Jews, but it was conceived in “European, not Jewish culture.” He worried that creating a European state for Jews in Palestine would abandon the Jews who chose to remain in Europe to the fate of assimilation.

The second phase, from 1908 to “the most recent time,” unleashed the “practical piecemeal colonization” that Buber and especially Ha’am considered soulless and therefore also objectionable (“Z,” p. 2). Brod acknowledged that for all his spiritualism Ha’am’s critique could not be dismissed as fanciful, as it was based on repeated travels to Palestine and on what he saw with his own eyes. For Ha’am, Brod confirmed, “Palestine can never be a homeland for the entire Jewish people, only a place of healing for the Jewish spirit. . . . It will never alleviate the economic and social plight of the Jewish masses.” The third phase, which was taking shape as he wrote this tract, provided a Hegelian

101. For Ha’am’s 1891 report on Arab aspirations in Palestine, see Alan Dowty, Ahad Ha’am, and Asher Ginzberg, “Much Ado about Little: Ahad Ha’am’s ‘Truth from Eretz Yisrael,’” Zionism, and the Arabs,” Israel Studies 5 (Fall 2000): 154–81.
solution by way of synthesis: “Jewish cultural work [Volksarbeit] in exile [galut]” fuses with colonization in Palestine (“Z,” pp. 3, 4, 7). Through his sublimation of the second phase, Brod conveniently circumvented Ha’am’s paradox of how settler-Zionism could claim to be faithful to authentic Judaism when it was merely transplanting a European ethos of colonial land development to Palestine.

The unexpected success of political Zionism on 2 November 1917 rendered Brod’s synthesis out of date before the ink had dried on his Die Zukunft essay. But Brod’s essay captured the sense of purpose in his Prague circle, in which “Der Jude . . . [had] become the most significant gathering point for . . . the third Phase of Zionism” (“Z,” p. 11). Indeed, when Buber launched Der Jude in Berlin and Vienna, the Bar Kochba group quickly became its “editorial subgroup.” Since its inaugural issue in 1916, Der Jude presented a host of articles that checked political Zionists’ euphoria. Their sense of reality demanded a more scientific calculation of the facts on the ground in order to achieve a “Maximal Programme” of the “Systematic Colonization of Palestine.” Soil quality, land use, irrigation problems, and nutritional quotas entailed totally underestimated challenges for Herzl’s settlement scheme in Palestine and required comprehensive statistical research.

One of the very few who acknowledged that “Palestine is no empty land and bears the character of its dominant population” before the Balfour Declaration was Kafka’s school friend Hugo Bergmann. Bergmann later became a settler and the first director of the National Library, a cofounder of the binationalist group Brith Shalom, and rector of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But even his recognition of signs of national aspirations among the Arabs of Palestine following his visit in 1910 stopped neither him nor any other Zionist in Prague from organizing the colonization of Palestine. His concern was to improve Zionism and to prevent the growing Jew-hatred among Arabs “at least as long as [Jews] were a small minority in Palestine” (see K, pp. 221–24). It was inconceivable for him to question

102. On the complexity of the concept of galut and the foundational myths of Israel, see Piterberg, The Returns of Zionism, pp. 93–123.


the justness of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine or to recognize the Arabs on their own terms as Kafka’s “Jackals and Arabs” had done.

Bergmann has been cast as the embodiment of the good conscience of Prague’s exceptionally humanist Zionism.\(^{107}\) His intellectual journey from Prague to Palestine represents the nuances at work in Kafka’s circle and marks him as the hero of Brod’s third phase. Bergmann was the first convert to Zionism around 1900 and also the first to suffer Kafka’s taunting for it. In an early exchange in 1902, Bergmann complained to his friend: “Of course, your letter does not lack the obligatory derision of my Zionism. . . . I see you smile.”\(^{108}\) Kafka’s smile haunted Bergmann throughout his life as he was trying to justify Zionism as the force that facilitated his intellectual creativity and sense of purpose and solidarity.\(^{109}\) Bergmann’s own critique of colonial Zionism was informed less by any concern for the native Arab population than by his worry that settlement in Palestine jeopardized Jewish emancipation in Europe. Until the Balfour Declaration, he was committed to what was known as “Greater Zionism”: national emancipation in Europe and colonial settlement in Palestine.\(^{110}\)

Bergmann also rejected Herzl’s European model of the sovereign settler in *Yavneh and Jerusalem*, a collection of his essays published in 1919. Like Brod, he did not want to wait for an international charter before launching the colonization of Palestine. He invoked the concept of transvaluation—after Nietzsche, the precondition of the will to power—in order to mold Ha’am’s spiritual Zionism into a new Jewish philosophy of actuality. Inspired by the vitalist theories of Ukranian-born Jewish thinker Mica Joseph Berdyczewski, Bergmann outlined his principles of cultural Zionism. After millennia of stateless spirituality, cultural Zionism stood for a return to history through Jewish statehood, which, in turn, would invigorate the totality of Jewish life.\(^{111}\)

Upon his arrival in Palestine in 1910, Bergmann encountered firsthand what Yitzhak Epstein, the lone Zionist voice from Palestine, had defined as “The Hidden Question” at the seventh Zionist Congress in 1905: the native population of Arabs was numerous and thriving. Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in considerable harmony while the Ottoman government was already busy settling Bedouins to raise agricultural productivity and


\(^{110}\) See Bergmann, “Grösserer Zionismus (1911),” *Jawne und Jerusalem: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Berlin, 1919), pp. 7–11. “Greater Zionism” is not to be confused with the territorial maximalism of the revisionists around Vladimir Jabotinski.

\(^{111}\) See Bergmann, “Jawne und Jerusalem (1914),” *Jawne und Jerusalem*, pp. 34–42.
state control beyond the urban centers. But the reality on the ground did not discourage him. Palestine was a land brimming with Zionist promise, despite the cynicism of settlers like the Hebrew novelist Brenner. In his essay “The Pessimist,” Bergmann took issue with Brenner’s fatalism regarding the colonization of Palestine. Brenner’s 1911 novel, From Here and There, irked Bergmann because it exposed the contradictions of cultural Zionism’s relationship to Palestine. Brenner held that “the exile [galut] is in Palestine, too . . . Palestine does not wait for settlers and its inhabitants have neither the desire nor the reason to let go of their property.” Brenner distrusted Zionists whose presence spread “the poison of Jew-hatred,” and he rejected both maximal colonization and Ha’am’s idealistic detachment. Bergmann conceded that Brenner had a point. But instead of unequivocally defending his own conviction that the galut is part of Judaism, he came to accept the Zionist mantra of the negation of exile as he urged his readers to intensify Jewish immigration and to improve Zionist colonization efforts. Kafka could not embrace a movement of emancipation at home, which he suspected to be a settler-colonial movement abroad.

Kafka’s knowledge of the debates around cultural Zionism and Palestine was largely mediated through Bergmann and Brod. Unlike his friends, he did not abandon the reality of the galut for the promise of Palestine, effectively negating—to appropriate Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin’s apt reformulation—the Zionist negation of exile. Before he became interested in Zionist literature around 1911, he had participated in gatherings and demonstrations in Prague whose intellectual inspirations were Gustav Landauer and Pyotr Kropotkin. In 1916, he disavowed Jewish ideology apologetically in a letter to his fiancé Felice Bauer: “I am not a Zionist.” And in 1918 he still “had not caught onto the last fleeing tip of the Jewish prayer coat like the Zionists.” Even so, shortly after writing “Jackals and Arabs,” he read and recommended Brod’s Zionism essay.

Kafka’s library also contained Richard Lichtheim’s Das Programm des Zionismus (1913), Adolf Böhm’s Zionistische Palästinaarbeit (1909), Max

112. See Bergmann, Tagebücher, pp. 29–36.
113. See Bergmann, “Ein Schwarzer (1912),” in Jawne und Jerusalem, pp. 64, 66.
114. See Raz-Krakotzkin, “Jewish Memory between Exile and History,” Jewish Quarterly Review 97 (Fall 2007): 539–43.
Mandelstamm’s *Eine Ghettostimme über den Zionismus* (1901), as well as a 1902 monograph on what Islam adopted from Judaism.\(^{119}\) Kafka studied Hebrew and periodically flirted with the idea of going to Palestine—as a waiter, artisan, or bookbinder. However, immigration criteria would have disqualified him from entering the promised land after his case of tuberculosis in the summer of 1917, as Arthur Ruppin, who directed the Palestine Office for Jewish immigration, proposed strict health, occupation, and racial criteria for the selection of the fittest and the most desirable.\(^{120}\) As it was, Kafka considered many Palästinafahrer, or Palestine journeymen, as he called the settler-Zionists in allusion to “Kreuzfahrer” (Crusaders), chauvinists who “constantly mouthed about emulating the Maccabees.”\(^{121}\)

Kafka was a junkie for news from Prague to Palestine, the Americas to China. He subscribed to *Palästina*, a copy of which he carried with him when he first met Felice Bauer, and regularly read Selbstwehr and the central organ of the Zionist movement, *Die Welt*. Incongruously, his friends even considered him briefly for the position of editor of *Der Jude*, to replace Buber, in 1922.\(^{122}\) Kafka followed closely how other German-Jewish authors positioned themselves.\(^{123}\) He was well placed to do so, since he was at the centre of Jewish intellectual life, Bohemian journalism, Yiddish theatre, and Zionist cinema. Prague was a hub of Jewish information and experimentation. But, generally, Kafka perceived the Zionist congresses as “sorry affairs”\(^ {124}\) and the lectures which he attended in 1913 by icons like Solokov, Ussishkin, and Ruppin as unbearably clamorous.\(^ {125}\) Even the performances and texts by Buber, whom he liked on a personal level, were “dreary” where “something is missing.”\(^ {126}\)

In October 1921, he watched the Zionist propaganda film *Shivat Zion* (*Return to Zion*) in Prague, which showed images of Palestine. It attracted a vociferous anti-Semitic crowd outside the cinema and a rapturous audience inside that burst into applause at the sights of Winston Churchill, British High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, and the cosmopolitan-

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121. Kafka, *Tagebücher*, p. 437. Kafka may well have been aware of “the Maccabian type” in the racial taxonomy of Zionist immigration engineers. According to Piterberg, Ruppin considered this the ideal type of the virile new Jewish settler; see Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism*, p. 84.
122. See Bruce, *Dates in Palestine*, p. 170.
125. See Bruce, *Dates in Palestine*, p. 75.
turned-violent-Zionist Jabotinski. But Kafka noted the experience in his diary with characteristic indifference: “Afternoon, Palestine film.” His approach to organized settler-Zionism was generally dismissive, and he spent the end of his short life in Berlin, his declared “ersatz Palestine” (ersatz Palästina), which may well have been a pun on eretz Israel.

His sharpest yet highly encoded indictment of the Zionism of the Palästinafahrer came after the Balfour Declaration, in his “Investigations of a Dog.” Many commentators considered this 1922 allegory about Jewish culture particularly tasteless, as it was written amid increasingly violent outbursts of anti-Semitism on the streets of Prague. In the story, the canine narrator mocks the much vaunted scientific dogs and defends the maligned speech, dance, and musical community of soaring dogs, or Lufthunde, in a mocking revision of Nordau’s trope of ignominious “Ostjudische Luftmenschen.” The interpretation by Kafka’s school friend Bergmann that the story was “full of allusions to the Zionist dream of Jewish life” is common. However, this reception forecloses the possibility that Kafka also ridiculed the way this dream was being realized in Palestine. Textual insinuations of the way the new dogs obsessively sprinkle the soil suggest that Kafka compared the settler-Zionism of the Palästinafahrer with the way dogs mark their territory.

Conclusion: The Subversive Legacy of a Champion of Underdogs

Kafka was neither a committed Zionist nor an outspoken anti-Zionist. As Elif Batumen reminded us recently, he confided to his diary at the end of his life that he failed in both regards. But his skepticism, which had so irritated Bergmann in 1902, stayed. He had enough common sense and humanity not to get swept up in Zionist euphoria for the colonization of Palestine. Some agnostic Zionists in fin-de-siècle Prague, like Albert Einstein, who taught at Charles University from 1910 to 1912 and was a lifelong friend of Bergmann, later became outspoken critics of Israel. Bergmann

131. See Bruce, “‘Aggadah Raises Its Paw against Halakha.’”
132. See Batuman, “Kafka’s Last Trial.”
and others came to champion a binational, one-state solution in the course of the British Mandate. Some left the Zionist movement altogether; Hans Kohn, influential scholar of nationalism, erstwhile member of Kafka’s Bar Kochba circle and prominent Palästinafahrer, was so upset about the Zionists’ brutal response to Palestinian protests against Jewish mass immigration in 1929 that he wrote to his close friend Buber that “Zionism as it is today . . . is unacceptable.” Löwenthal had come to the same disen-chanted conclusion about Zionism five years earlier when he described Zionist practices in Palestine as “a colonial European policy toward the Arabs.” Later, Isaac Deutscher shared these sentiments when he warned that “the state of Israel has had explosives—the grievances of hundreds of thousands of displaced Arabs—built into its very foundations.”

Ari Folman’s recent, award-winning animated documentary Waltz with Bashir, which comes to terms with the atrocities committed by the Israeli army in Lebanon during the summer of 1982, opens with jackal-like dogs scampering through the nocturnal streets of Tel Aviv (fig. 2). In this nightmare that had haunted the narrator for years, they are the resurrected cadavers of his military service in the Lebanon war. The condition of Palestinians has now reached highbrow literature. Margaret Atwood concluded in a recent

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135. Quoted in Löwy, Redemption and Utopia, p. 69.
op-ed piece in *Haaretz* that their maltreatment is a “shadow over Is-
rael.” Kafka was one of the first who illuminated this Palestinian 
“shadow” in his literature. Unlike many artists today, he did so with-
out any sense of moral superiority over Arabs.

Israeli attempts to claim the last untapped manuscripts of this prod-
igy of modernism are bound to gloss over the distinction between 
settler-Zionism and precolonial Zionism’s emancipatory contribu-
tions to Jewish consciousness in Europe. As the binationalist solu-
tion to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is beginning to gain ground 
again internationally—while it is being criminalized in Israel in the 
recently passed “nakba law”—Kafka’s allegorical illuminations are 
important reminders that the roots of binationalism, also, need to be 
decolonized. This process will involve not demolishing but recupera-
ting and redeeming the past in order to reconstitute—following 
Benjamin, Freud, and Said—a dystopian present. Cultural-turned-binational Zionists have often served as a fig leaf for liberal Israelis who congratulate themselves on Zionism’s tolerance of difference. But the examples of Brod, Bergmann, and Smilansky suggest that this discourse of toleration has worked to marginalize Arabs. Rereading “Jackals and Arabs” can direct us to where this process of decolonization may need to begin: in the recognition of the other as equal and constitutive of the self.

In the Arab world, as people are struggling to step out of the protracted, collective nightmare of a Kafka story, the old friend-or-foe readings of the 1970s and 1980s are too parochial and paranoid. Invocations of Joseph K.

and Franz Kafka have been ubiquitous in Arab media and arts recently, from Morocco’s popular blogs by Ibn Kafka and Kafka stage productions in Lebanon to Iraqi prison literature (fig. 3). The revolutionary moment that has swept the Middle East in 2011 may have a cathartic effect on exposing the hollow structure of many authoritarian regimes. As Darwish and al-Qasim have asserted, Kafka is only the beginning.