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"LIKE THE TAIL OF A RAT": A PROVERBIAL READING OF FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE NEIGHBOR* AND ITS SUBTEXTUAL ANTISEMITISM*

Kafka's technique of tampering or playing with idioms and colloquial expressions is well known. His 1917 story, *Der Nachbar* (*The Neighbor*), is an excellent example of language turned on its head. Yet, Hartmut Binder's important study, "Common Sayings and Expressions in Kafka," does not mention it.[1] In general, Kafka's coded writing, known as *Verschlüsselung* in German, leaves his work open to multiple interpretations. This has resulted in widely varied readings of his texts constituting an immense body of scholarship. *The Neighbor* is included in many German readers in North American universities, probably often for its shortness of only two pages. But, critics have largely neglected it. This stream-of-consciousness inner monologue, narrated from the perspective of a young small-business owner, reveals his fixated preoccupation with his new neighbor, Harras.[2] The few existing interpretations range from Harras as the man next door representing God, to the homoerotic *Doppelgänger* in Siegfried Hajek's analysis. Ruth Gross views the businessman/narrator psychologically as suffering from extreme paranoia.[3]

Is there a different way of reading this academically popular tale? I wish to offer a socio-cultural consideration in line with other Kafka texts. This approach will illuminate the narrative's presence of a multi-layered subtext. To this end, I shall highlight the author's use of language, particularly his suggested but at times unarticulated or reversed idioms and proverbs. I will demonstrate also that Kafka employs the concepts of neighbor and name contrary to their common usage and meaning. I will focus on the scripture, as well as the semantic network of etymologies, ellipses, and allusions coalescing around the neighbor figure called Harras.

The word "neighbor" in the work's title evokes readers' expectation based on its normally positive connotation of people's

interaction of helping and caring. It also resonates with the biblical and proverbial command, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19, verse 18), whose purpose is to direct us towards constructive societal contact, particularly with those close to us but outside family, friendship, or love. Thus, as Steven Galt Crowell suggests, "[neighbor] should come to designate the genuinely human form of the social bond, the ethical face of intersubjectivity itself."[4] But in this story, Kafka uses the concept "neighbor" ironically. By turning this positive idea into its opposite, he lays bare his narrating character's suspicions towards the newcomer next door. This may alert us to adverse behavior patterns as being part of human nature. It also echoes Hermann Cohen's words, written during Kafka's time, "Love of thy neighbor is the behavior [expressing] the attitude towards your fellow man and not, per chance, the prudence, protection, and defense against damage that one expects from him."[5]

In Kafka's story, the narrator/businessman perceives his new neighbor, Harras, as an intruder from the outset and then suspects him of conducting a similar business, that is, of being a serious competitor. Although he admits that he does not know what Harras actually does in his office, he does not allow clarification to impede his mounting suspicion and speculation. In other words, instead of speaking with the newcomer in order to find answers to his burning questions, he relies on vague secondhand information about him: "I have informed myself about him" (*Ich habe Erkundigungen eingezogen* 62). By both rejecting and resenting him, he is acting against the scripture's injunction of "neighborly love" (*Nächstenliebe*), of treating the stranger among us with fairness.

His first negative reaction is resentment of Harras for having rented the adjacent office space. Kafka uses the adverbial "just like that" (*frischweg*) to express his character's annoyance with the ease of this move, since he now regrets not having leased the available office himself (62). This negative attitude underlies all of the narrator/businessman's thoughts and decisions. In addition, his precarious state of affairs, which is alluded to in Kafka's text, can be viewed as the main cause of his initial hostility toward the new neighbor. His professional shortcomings, his possible insecurity, ignorance, and foul temperament may add to a psychological state that puts blame on the Other exclusively. Not all of

these assertions are explicitly expressed in the narrative, but they emerge upon the examination of the narrator's speculative assessment and unreasonable dread of his new neighbor.

Kafka's very short and condensed story demonstrates, almost in fast motion, the negative development of such thinking and conduct in human relationships. He shows the absence of communication through speech, for it is only the mind of the person who rejects the Other that he presents to us. We have to listen carefully to the narrator's inner words in order to grasp his train of thought. Then his over-emphasis on the easy management of his "entire work mechanism" (*mein ganzer Arbeitsapparat*) becomes suspect. This is in spite of the fact that he assures the reader in the beginning that business is good and everything "runs like clockwork." Kafka does not use this colloquial expression ("*Alles klappt wie am Schnürchen*") but creates his own image: "so simple to overview, so easy to manage. I am very young and *business is rolling*." But the businessman also divulges, in a slightly changed proverbial expression, that his business rests entirely "on his shoulder" (*Mein Geschäft ruht ganz auf meinen Schultern*).[6] With this he provides some information about himself, and also sees the need to immediately emphasize, "I don't complain, I don't complain." [7] The doubling of the phrase, however, suggests exactly the opposite. In fact, the tale is replete with complaint and, consequently, his speculation about the neighbor. The only assertion of fact about the latter is the nameplate on the door, "Harras, *Bureau*," which the narrator is compelled to read over and over again. He states, "I am standing again in front of the plate ... which I have read far more often than it deserves."[8] The German (*Tür)schild*, (door) plate, also alludes to the old expression "to plot something against someone" (*gegen jemanden etwas im Schilde führen*), of which he suspects his neighbor.

Yet, he is not interested in taking concrete steps to solve the problem, for example, by relocating his office. Neither does he "mind his own business," expressed in the German proverb "*Ein jeder kehre vor seiner Tür*" ("Everyone should sweep in front of his own door"). Instead, in his mind he penetrates the new neighbor's door and builds up an unreasonable fear with each glimpse, sound, or imagined action of him. His suspicion mounts, leading to a point where it seriously interferes with his

work. His nervousness and anxiety are dramatized with restless and exaggerated movements. Kafka also emphasizes linguistically and grammatically the businessman's agitation. Although the story is short, we discern a change in the narrator's style and sentence structure towards a more complex participial and adverbial construction, parenthesis, and run-on phrase. It is easy to visualize the following scene that contains, within the narrator's self-description, almost choreographic stage directions for his bizarre "dance:" "Sometimes I dance, tiptoeing around the telephone, the receiver at my ear, pricked by uneasiness, and knowing that I still cannot prevent my secrets from being released [to the neighbor through the thin wall]."[9]

What follows is his accusation that Harras is making him uncertain in his business decisions, so that his voice trembles when he is on the phone with clients. Consequently, he fears that he reveals and conveys his incompetence to them. Here Kafka's fictional character shows that no moral (or religious) code of conduct and no inner voice of conscience slows the downward spiral of negative thinking that finally makes him perceive Harras as dangerous and damaging competition to his business. The story ends with the penultimate fantasy: the neighbor is stealing his customers by first eavesdropping on him to hear their names and then by rushing out to them to snatch them away and, consequently—but this lies beyond the story told—ruining him.

This lack of "reality check" or reflection in the Kafka's protagonist is also noticeable in some of his other figures. Stanley Corngold comments: "They do not reflect; and, moreover, there is, it would appear, no author in these stories to reflect for them. What survives is chiefly the figural perspective, the optic without reflection…which produces mood of restriction, uncertainty, shortcoming…."[10] In *The Neighbor*, this lack of reflection is tied to a lack of communication with others, an absence of speech or dialogue. Hence, we look from the outside at the narrow, restricted, and subjective vision of the obsessed narrator and realize that we are dealing with a biased voice that cannot be trusted. We also observe that by painting his neighbor as villain, the narrator reveals *himself* to be culpable, if at first only of prejudgment.

When we try to decode additional underlying messages in this intense and dense text the German proverb, "The listener at

the wall hears his own shortcomings" ("*Der Horcher an der Wand hört seine eigene Schand"*), comes to mind. Kafka's protagonist complains about "[t]hese abysmally thin walls which betray the honest working man, but hide the one who is dishonest."[11] But contrary to the homily, which points a finger at the listener, it is his contention that the neighbor, i.e. the Other, is the "dishonest man" (*der Unehrliche* 63). With this, Kafka has given the saying a double twist: Instead of the narrator's listening through the wall and hearing bad things about himself, he considers himself as being victimized and listened to by the imagined opponent next door. Thus, the proverb is used here to the eavesdropper's advantage and to discredit his new neighbor. In a reversal of the original meaning, the businessman/narrator sees himself as "the honest man."

Despite the fact that this judgment comes from an unreliable, subjective source, some critics have accepted at face value this damning opinion of the Other. For instance, Binder calls Harras the "impenetrable *hostile* partner" (the emphasis is mine), and in this way is agreeing uncritically with the biased perspective of the narrator.[12] Kafka, however, returns an ironic literalness to the saying and, at the same time, leads us to yet another common proverb (also in German), namely, "the walls have ears" ("*Die Wände haben Ohren*"). It is the businessman who feels he is being overheard by Harras next door, that the latter "pricks up his ears" (*spitzt die Ohren*).

Kafka's narrative contains, as stated earlier, also a reversed application of the concept of the "neighbor." This becomes clear when we see the story in the light of the Tenth Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house ... nor any thing that is thy neighbor's" (Exodus, 20, verse 14-17). It is the businessman who is inferring that his neighbor, Harras, is coveting what is not his, namely the clients. What makes the situation truly "Kafkaesque" is that the businessman establishes the neighbor's guilt with silent accusations and, to emphasize it again, without reflection or proof. He gives no valid explanations for his conclusions. Although he is aware of and admits to his exaggerations, he immediately justifies them with the excuse of the need to "gain clarity." Hence, from our detached point of view, he does *not* see the situation clearly.

Kafka provides little factual, unmediated information in the story. Apart from the description of the physical operation and set-up of the businessman's office in the beginning, there is only the neighbor's nameplate, "Harras: *Bureau*," as a tangible reality. In fact he is the only person in the narrative who is named by the author. This makes him identifiable as an individual, although his complete name is not given. The word "Harras" is mentioned seven times in this two-page story, twice in reference to the nameplate. This points both to its importance and, within the framework of the narrative, to the preoccupation of the businessman with this person named Harras. Further, the affixed plate is a sign in public view and is thus verifiable as well as both personal and professional information provided by Harras himself. Everything else in the story is perception of or speculation in the mind of the businessman/narrator. The fact that he remains nameless throughout the story gives room for interpretation. It may point to the often amorphous, faceless individuals who make up society.

Critics, including Binder, look upon Kafka's general naming of his characters as codification (*Namensverschlüsselung*) and often (ironic) distancing (*Verfremdung*).[13] The abbreviation K. of the main character in *The Trial*, for example, seems to refer to the name "Kafka" but we cannot be certain. Josefine, in the story with the same title, could well be someone from Josefov, the Jewish Quarter in Prague, since she refers to "our people" (*unser Geschlecht, unser Volk*). [14] The interpretation (and perhaps speculation) is left to the reader.

We may find the key to further understanding of the theme in *The Neighbor* in Kafka's choice of the name Harras. A playful interpretation by Ruth Gross links it to the English "harassed;" her other suggestion is an "uninteresting name, similar to the word for a latticed packing crate, or the Czech word for fish...."[15] If we continue Gross' imaginative association we can link "fish" with the German proverbial comparison "*Wie ein Fisch im Wasser*" because, according to the narrator, Harras is at home in the business world like "a fish in water," to the point of taking customers away from him. Harras then would be responsible for the future destruction of that man's work and consequently his livelihood. But Kafka's story permits a subtextual, more pointed reference than this perhaps somewhat farfetched reversal of an-

other idiom. It is the aforementioned connection of etymologies and lexical allusions coalescing around the figure and name of Harras.

A semantic linkage can be found between "Harras" and the three Hebrew root letters, hey-resh-sameh (h-r-s), contained in the verb or noun meaning, "to ruin" or "destruction." This, then, would underscore the narrator's view of Harras as someone trying to destroy him as a businessman and the fact that this person may be Jewish. This perhaps surprising association gains credence when we consider that Kafka, during his Zionist phase, learned Hebrew, and thus could have used this word as the major code in his text.[16] The question then arises as to why he would allude to such a negative Jewish type as taking shape in the narrator's mind.

Before continuing with this hypothesis, it is useful to consult the authoritative German Grimm dictionary for further information on "Harras." The entry there explains that it was a fabric in the late Middle Ages, mentioning clothing "trimmed with Hebraic *harras*."[17] It was a woollen material, woven according to the prescribed regulations of *shatnas*, and worn by Jews. This etymology is significant, since it not only helps to reinforce the neighbor's identity as being Jewish, but also links him to the textile trade, which was a major source of traditional employment for Jews in Europe. Therefore, if Harras is Jewish or perceived as such by the narrator, he has also become the foil for the familiar antisemitic accusation of Jews being associated with dishonesty in business. Taking into consideration a socio-cultural subtext, i.e., Kafka's situation as a German speaking Jew in an often hostile Czech environment, and in turn being stigmatized as a Jew by many Germans, he was aware of and sensitive to society's racist rhetoric.[18] It does not surprise this reader, therefore, that he would take the substance of autobiography and embed it in his story.

But the antisemitic stereotyping encoded here, one that was part and parcel of society at the time, can be taken further. In addition to the semantic assertion of the neighbor's Jewishness and the typecasting of the Jew as a possible swindler, there are overt and recognizable elements of a more insidious antisemitic discourse, one that equated Jews with vermin. To be sure, on the more immediate or first level, the story focuses on the mindset of

the businessman. We can see him at the various stages of creating a scapegoat: First there is suspicion of a newcomer, then a fear of him, and finally the conviction that the neighbor intends to do him harm. On the other level, however, we become witness to the emergence of an enemy who is entirely imagined as well as endowed with repugnant rat-like traits and manifesting objectionable and ultimately threatening behavior. This is expressed lexically with the use of verbs such as "listening" (*horchen*), “hurrying” (*eilen*), "flitting" (*huschen*), and “slipping” (*gleiten*) to characterize Harras. When we read that the businessman imagines Harras listening to through the wall, the German adjective *mäuschenstill* (quiet like a little mouse) comes to mind. But the comparison “like the tail of a rat he slips inside [his office]” (“*Wie der Schwanz einer Ratte ist er hineingeglitten*” 63) is most revealing. Kafka may have well shrouded another proverbial expression, in the same manner as he did with others, by changing its wording slightly and using it as a proverbial comparison. He maintained the original meaning of the German “to be the tail of a rat of something” (“*ein Rattenschwanz von etwas sein*”) in the sense of “to be the result of connected causes, problems.”[19] Certainly, in the story, Harras represents this “tail of a rat” for the businessman since the latter sees his neighbor as the cause of his problems. To those familiar with another vile antisemitc allegation, “*Schwanz*” (tail) of a rat resonates metonymically with sexual connotations associated with long-standing Christian views of Jewish males as being lascivious and seducing Christian women.

Pursuing the motif of rodent-like characters, we find support for this interpretation in other Kafka texts. For example, the two well-known works, *The Metamorphosis* and *Report on an Academy*, have been understood in some circles of Kafka criticism as allowing for the depiction of Jewishness as an animal trait.[20] Taking into account the extra-textual, cultural factors of Kafka's contemporary era in these and other writings, he has labeled as ugly and inferior that which is viewed by non-Jews as "typically Jewish" and has depicted it as physically visible in his narratives. These types are noticeably marked as burdensome intruders and are displayed as revolting and deviating from the accepted Gentile norm.

Seen in this light, the depiction of Harras in "The Neighbor" suggests to the reader subtextually this infamous image of Jews as vermin, as seen through the eyes of his, yes, antisemitic narrator. In his mind, the young man next door is transformed into a man-vermin and with this becomes an antisemitic stereotype with a definite "trademark." The businessman/narrator expresses this by referring to the neighbor's alleged repeated movements of "flitting *as is his way*" (the emphasis is mine), like a rat.[21] A further example of the association of Jews and rodents may be gleaned from the earlier mentioned Kafka story, in which the main character is a mouse and therefore refers to "the pitiful existence of our people in the middle of the turbulence of the hostile world."[22] It echoes Kafka's words about the Jewish quarter of his city in reference to "the ancient shreds of misery."[23]

Sander L. Gilman's analysis of Kafka in view of the critical discourse of antisemitism sees the part human, part animal figures in Kafka's texts analogous to the *Mischlinge* (mixed blood/race). He describes them as the integrated Jews who, according to the Gentile community, could neither hide nor deny their Jewish origin because it was deemed inherent and allegedly part of their "race." Its manifestations were paralleled with animal attributes, normally those of rodents. Gilman cites the turn of the century's rhetoric of political, racial antisemitism in which Jews were likened to "[g]olden rats and red mice," as he quotes from the arch-antisemite Wilhelm Marr.[24] Wolfgang Mieder draws attention to a German collection of antisemitic proverbs among which one finds those that link Jews with vermin. Thus we read under the heading "Vermin of Mankind": "Jews in the house are worse than bedbug and louse" with an explanation that refers to "the Jew as the embodiment of vermin in human form for the non-Jewish world."[25] This longstanding societal antisemitism, which intensified already during Kafka's time, reflects that these "invisible" Jews were perceived as threatening the equilibrium of mainstream European society. This view disinterred and reinforced the belief in the Jewish plot against all Christians and indeed against the rest of the world. It had many names, one of them was *Weltpest*, pestilence of the world.

Even this deep-seated prejudice lies concealed in Kafka's "Neighbor," albeit in the form of a microcosm and in the mind of only one seemingly paranoid individual. This attitude can be in-

terpreted as manifest in the narrator's perception of Harras as being rat-like, sneaky, dishonest, plotting, and dangerous--in short, read "Jewish." As referred to earlier, it establishes the nameless narrator as everyman and as representative of the general population, specifically Gentile society. With his wild imagination and willful ignorance about Harras he becomes a parable of universal hatred of the Other as Jew. Such common types, as exemplified in Kafka's narrator, helped to perpetuate the vicious circle of antisemitic rhetoric and beliefs that was encompassing modern Europe. In addition, and following normative thinking and reaction of the time, as seen earlier with the reversal of the German adage, such individuals ironically imagine themselves to be the victims of, e.g., cunning in business widely associated with Jewish men.

The question remains how and why the character in Kafka's story becomes so obsessed with the neighbor's possible, and not explicitly stated, Jewishness. The answer can be found once more in the name Harras. It signals the beginning of negative, here antisemitic, thinking. We recall the compulsive reading: "I am standing again in front of the plate ... which I have read far more often than it deserves" (63). The repeated verbalization of the name as inscribed on the nameplate, which serves as a symbol, comes to suggest a near mystical force of a spell.[26] With this assumption, we move once more into the sphere of culturally and religiously transmitted antisemitic beliefs, this time with regard to Jews' alleged centuries-old involvement with sorcery to the detriment of Christians. The nameplate in the story, in addition to unleashing "the paranoid response in the narrator," as Gross, for different reasons, suggests, seems to act as a sign that triggers the businessman's antisemitism. Gross correctly draws attention to "the insertion of the foreign spelling in the sign ['*Bureau'*], and the appearance of the 'outsider' in the narrator's world" (154).[27] I wish to argue that it is the name Harras itself that suggests the Otherness, to be precise, the Jewishness. It may be reinforced by the un-German spelling of *Bureau* because that could allude to viewing the Jews negatively as cosmopolitan, and thus as at home everywhere, but perceived as strangers in their "host" country.

We may stretch the interpretation so far as to suggest that the written name even transmits the message of the encoded inscrip-

tion of the (male) Jew's body by functioning as the visualization of circumcision. Although this physical sign that marks the Jewish male as different is either not obvious or non-existent in many assimilated Jews in the view of Christian society, the "inner sign of circumcision remains and can be spontaneously written upon the body through the somatic inheritance of acquired characteristics," as Gilman observes. It is "[t]he inscription of the body [that] sets the Jews apart in the Diaspora." [28] Therefore, the nameplate can be regarded as Kafka's subtextual cryptic code of that difference, which initiates the narrator's attributing antisemitic traits to Harras and, by so doing, transforming him into a man-vermin. With the verbalization of these traits, albeit internal, Kafka illustrates the beginning of a psychological process of dehumanization that takes place in the mind of his narrator. The logical outcome would be his (mental) conversion of Harras into a destructive rat, followed by the conclusion that it/he needs to be exterminated.

Given the text's general indeterminacy, such and all other interpretations have to remain on the verge of speculation. However, Kafka, like in most of his writings, could have well anchored *The Neighbor* in his own historical reality by presenting anxiety and fear in Christian society in the voice of one individual, here the businessman. Textual evidence shows that the insidious discourse of antisemitism permeating society may indeed be deciphered in the narrative subtext. Its possible narrative function has eluded critical attention for decades because of, on the one hand, Kafka's art of encoded writing, and the other, because critics blocking off these significations.

Germany's subsequent Third Reich legacy lends urgency to this reading because, ironically and tragically, the discrimination concealed in the subtext of Kafka's story became overt and state-sanctioned antisemitism.[29] What his hostile, antisemitic character might have wished vis-à-vis his, possibly Jewish, neighbor became law as Jews were first excluded from German economic life and ultimately were persecuted under Nazi law and finally murdered. Due to a continuously reinforced antisemitic race education and propaganda, the Jews themselves became a *simulacrum* for vermin and with it an imagined threat to German blood and country. This facilitated ordinary people's, e.g. Ger-

mans', becoming complacent when observing acts fuelled by prejudices and hatred, and condoning them.

Of course, Kafka's text was written long before the Nazis came to power. But the public discourse of his time already contained the crucial elements included in Nazi ideology, like the well known antisemitic stance of the populace and, not to forget, the often commonly accepted and open hateful language directed against Jews. In hindsight, the very analogy of Jews with vermin in Kafka's almost prophetic tale can be seen as a metaphor that the Hitler regime would take literally and carry to an extreme that was far beyond the literary imagination. The virulent Nazi propaganda is proof of the devaluation of Jews as people, leading finally not only to their equation with vermin but to the plan and realization of their destruction as if they had been vermin.

Although the "extreme antisemite lives in his own fantasy world," interpreting the hostile position of the nameless individual in *The Neighbor* merely as one person's pathology would exempt people in general from social liability.[30] We know that "[i]ndividuals ... are the carriers of prejudicial attitudes. They are responsible for harboring prejudice and must be held accountable for actions that stem from prejudice."[31] They have to be viewed as the collective. Similarly to the nameless narrator in Kafka's story, Germans during the Third Reich regime would turn Jews and others into scapegoats and enemies, *Volksfeinde*, of the German state. Consequently, and on a more individual and immediate level, many Germans witnessed in silence when their Jewish neighbors were led away (to concentration camps).

Due to the fact that this particular story by Kafka continues to appear in many German readers, we might think of linking such literature to a specific history, in addition to thinking and behavior patterns of people in general. We may wish to draw attention to the result of a selective disregard of a moral code and absence of critical evaluation. Then *The Neighbor's* pedagogical value, by way of a negative example, can alert us to the dangers of our imagination's fabrications and damaging typecasting. It can further demonstrate that those responsible for victimizing others often wear the cloak of victim themselves in order to hide or justify their damning beliefs.

Whether we consider Kafka's text as a mirror of its specific time or as a timeless, universal (didactic) tale, it illustrates the

mental process that can lead to victimization if it is not impeded by ethical considerations. These would be "discerned only through a command that restricts … freedom and asserts itself as the impossibility [in the extreme case] of killing the Other". Kafka's portrayal of the opposite of the "ethical vocation of neighborly nearness" (Crowell 212), as expressed in the biblical commands, may well serve as a parable of the severed bond of individual *Nächstenliebe*.[32] It certainly demonstrates the thinking in society that leads to viewing Others not as the same human beings we are.

As the earlier mentioned interpretations show, Kafka's story can be discussed using explanations other than the ones I offer. The crucial point is not that my reading *is* correct, but that it *can* be correct, given the textual or sub-textual evidence. *The Neighbor* may demonstrate, by way of example of one individual, a society moving towards the breakdown of its moral fiber. Contextualized historically, Kafka's narrative may also serve to retrace the first steps of identifying and condemning Jews that, in the end, led to permitting genocide in Europe. This would illuminate and explain the narrative function of the underlying antisemitism in the text, rather than merely commenting on its possible presence.

Text:

Der Nachbar by Franz Kafka

Mein Geschäft ruht ganz auf meinen Schultern. Zwei Fräulein mit Schreibmaschinen und Geschäftsbüchern im Vorzimmer, mein Zimmer mit Schreibtisch, Kasse, Beratungstisch, Klubsessel und Telephon, das ist mein ganzer Arbeitsapparat. So einfach zu überblicken, so leicht zu führen. Ich bin ganz jung und die Geschäfte rollen vor mir her. Ich klage nicht, ich klage nicht.

Seit Neujahr hat ein junger Mann die kleine, leerstehende Nebenwohnung, die ich ungeschickterweise so lange zu mieten gezögert habe, frischweg gemietet. Auch ein Zimmer mit Vorzimmer, außerdem aber noch eine Küche. Zimmer mit Vorzim-

mer hätte ich wohl brauchen können—meine zwei Fräulein fühlen sich schon manchmal überlastet--, aber wozu hätte mir die Küche gedient? Dieses kleinliche Bedenken war daran schuld, daß ich mir die Wohnung habe nehmen lassen. Nun sitzt dort dieser Mann. Harras heißt er. Was er dort eigentlich macht, weiß ich nicht. Auf der Tür steht: Harras, Bureau. Ich habe Erkundigungen eingezogen, man hat mir mitgeteilt, es sei ein Geschäft ähnlich dem meinigen. Vor Kreditgewährung könne man nicht geradezu warnen, denn es handle sich doch um einen jungen, aufstrebenden Mann, dessen Sache vielleicht Zukunft habe, doch könne man zum Kredit nicht geradezu raten, denn gegenwärtig sei allem Anschein nach kein Vermögen vorhanden. Die übliche Auskunft, die man gibt, wenn man nichts weiß.

Manchmal treffe ich Harras auf der Treppe, er muß es immer außerordentlich eilig haben, er huscht förmlich an mir vorüber. Genau gesehen habe ich ihn noch gar nicht, den Büroschlüssel hat er schon vorbereitet in der Hand. Im Augenblick hat er die Tür geöffnet. Wie der Schwanz einer Ratte ist er hineingeglitten und ich stehe wieder vor der Tafel „Harras, Bureau," die ich schon viel öfter gelesen habe, als sie es verdient.

Die elend dünnen Wände, die den ehrlich tätigen Mann verraten, den Unehrlichen aber decken. Mein Telephon ist an der Zimmerwand angebracht, die mich von meinem Nachbar trennt. Doch hebe ich das bloß als besonders ironische Tatsache hervor. Selbst wenn es an der entgegengesetzten Wand hinge, würde man in der Nebenwohnung alles hören. Ich habe mir abgewöhnt, den Namen der Kunden beim Telephon zu nennen. Aber es gehört natürlich nicht viel Schlauheit dazu, aus charakteristischen, aber unvermeidlichen Wendungen des Gesprächs die Namen zu erraten.—Manchmal umtanze ich, die Hörmuschel am Ohr, von Unruhe gestachelt, auf den Fußspitzen den Apparat und kann es doch nicht verhüten, daß Geheimnisse preisgegeben werden.

Natürlich werden dadurch meine geschäftlichen Entscheidungen unsicher, meine Stimme zittrig. Was macht Harras, während ich telephoniere? Wollte ich sehr übertreiben—aber das muß man oft, um sich Klarheit zu verschaffen--, so könnte ich sagen: Harras braucht kein Telephon, er benutzt meines, er hat

sein Kanapee an die Wand gerückt und horcht, ich dagegen muß, wenn geläutet wird, zum Telephon laufen, die Wünsche des Kunden entgegennehmen, schwerwiegende Entschlüsse fassen, großangelegte Überredungen ausführen—vor allem aber während des Ganzen unwillkürlich durch die Zimmerwand Harras Bericht erstatten.

Vielleicht wartet er gar nicht das Ende des Gespräches ab, sondern erhebt sich nach der Gesprächsstelle, die ihn über den Fall genügend aufgeklärt hat, huscht nach seiner Gewohnheit durch die Stadt und, ehe ich die Hörmuschel aufgehängt habe, ist er vielleicht schon daran, mir entgegenzuarbeiten.

***The Neighbor* trans. Karin Doerr**

My business rests entirely on my shoulders. Two office girls with typewriters and account books at the reception, my room with desk, cash, conference table, armchair and phone—that is my entire work apparatus. So easy to oversee, so simple to manage. I am very young and business is rolling. I don't complain, I don't complain.

Since the New Year, a young man has rented, just like that, the small, empty flat next door, which I unfortunately hesitated to rent myself for a long time. Also one room with reception and also an additional kitchen. Reception and office room I could have used—my two office girls feel sometimes overburdened—but what would I have done with the kitchen? This petty concern was the cause for my having permitted someone else to take the flat. I don't really know what he does. On his door is written, Harras, Bureau. I have made inquiries; I was told it is a business similar to mine. But one could not actually issue a warning to grant credit, for one is dealing with a young, ambitious man whose business has future, but one could not advise to grant credit either, for it seems that there are no means.

Sometimes I meet Harras on the steps; he always seems to be in a great hurry, he literally flits past me. I have actually not yet seen him properly; he always has the office key ready in his hand. Within seconds, he has opened his door. Like the tail of a rat he slips inside, and I stand again in front of the sign, "Harras,

Bureau," which I have read more often that it deserves to be read.

The abysmally thin walls that betray the honestly working man, but hide the one who is dishonest. My phone is mounted on the wall that separates me from my neighbor. By the way, I stress this only as an ironic fact. Even if it were on the opposite wall one could hear everything in the flat next door. I have gotten into the habit of not using the names of my clients on the phone. But one does not have to be too clever to guess their names from unavoidable phrases in the conversation. Sometimes I dance, tiptoeing around the telephone, the receiver at my ear, pricked by uneasiness, and knowing that I still cannot prevent my secrets from being released.

Of course because of that, my business decisions become uncertain, my voice trembles. What does Harras do while I am on the phone? If I wanted to exaggerate—and one has to do that often in order to gain clarity—I could say: Harras does not need a phone, he is using mine, he has moved his desk against the wall and listens; I, by contrast, have to run to the phone when it rings, have to take down the wishes of the client, have to make serious decisions, have to do tricky persuasions—but above all, I have to involuntarily report to Harras throughout this whole procedure.

Perhaps he does not even wait for the end of the conversation but gets up after that part in the conversation that has informed him sufficiently about the case, flits, as is his way, through the city and before I have put down the receiver, is perhaps already busy working against me.

Notes:

[*] A first version of this article was presented as "An Emerging Stereotype in Franz Kafka's Story *The Neighbour"* at the international conference *Breaking Barriers: Literature and Emerging Issues* at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, 10-11 October, 1997. I wish to thank Gary Evans, Dorota Glowacki, and Indira Prahst for their suggestions upon reading the manuscript.

[1] *TTR, Traduction, Termninologie, Rédaction: Études sur le texte et ses transformations*, V, no. 2 (2nd semester 1992):41-105.

[2] In Isabelle Salaün, *Weiter! Lesen, Reden und Schreiben* (New York: Wiley, 1994) 61-63. All German quotes are from this edition, and the translations into English are my own.

[3] See Siegfried Hajek, "Die moderne Kurzgeschichte im Unterricht: Franz Kafka: *Der Nachbar*, in *Der Deutschunterricht* 7, No. 1 (1955) 5-12; and Ruth Gross, "The Paranoid Reader and His Neighbor: Subversion in the Text of Kafka," *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance*, ed. Alan Udoff (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987) 150-57.

[4] See "Neighbors in Death," in *Other Openings: Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, 22 (Spring 1997) 209.

[5] "Die Nächstenliebe ist das Verhalten der Gesinnung zum Mitmenschen, nicht aber etwa die Vorsicht, der Schutz und die Abwehr gegen die Schädigung, die man von ihm erwartet." Hermann Cohen, "Gesinnung," 1910; repr. In *Der Nächste* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935) 8.

[6] "alles auf seinen eigenen Schultern haben" ("to have everything on one's own shoulders"). See Lutz Röhrich, *Das große Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, 3 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1991-1002) vol. 2, 1228.

[7] "So einfach zu überblicken, so leicht zu führen. Ich bin ganz jung und die Geschäfte rollen vor mir her. Ich klage nicht, ich klage nicht" (62).

[8] "Ich stehe wieder vor der Tafel 'Harras, Bureau,' die ich schon viel öfter gelesen habe, als sie es verdient" (63).

[9] "Manchmal umtanze ich, die Hörmuschel am Ohr, von Unruhe gestachelt, auf den Fußspitzen den Apparat und kann es doch nicht verhüten, daß Geheimnisse preisgegeben werden" (63).

[10] "Kafka's Other Metamorphosis," in *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance*, ed. Alan Udoff (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987) 51.

[11] "Die elend dünnen Wände, die den ehrlich tätigen Mann verraten, den Unehrlichen aber decken" (63).

[12] "... der undurchdringlich-feindliche Partner." See Binder, *Kafka-Kommentar zu sämtlichen Erzählungen* (Munich: Winkler, 1982) 217.

[13] *Kafka in neuer Sicht: Mimik, Gestik und Personengefüge als Darstellungsformen des Autobiographischen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976) 606-07.

[14] "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse," in Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Max Brod (New York: S. Fischer, 1967) 268-91). Translations from the German are my own.

[15] Ruth Gross, 154.

[16] "... Scholem and Kafka began to teach themselves Hebrew before and during World War I ...." See Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996) 188.

[17] "... mit hebraischem harras verbremet," see Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1965) 492. Elizabeth M. Rajec consulted the same source and highlights the French city of Arras where the fabric originated. Hence she links the name to the meaning of „horse" and sees in „Harras" a „horse phobia" of Kafka. See *Namen und ihre Bedeutungen im Werke Franz Kafkas: Ein interpretatorischer Versuch* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1977) 78.

[18] See Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984).

[19] See Röhrich, *Das große Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, vol. 3, 1416. I owe this reference to Wolfgang Mieder.

[20] See Sander L. Gilman, *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[21] "… [er] huscht nach seiner Gewohnheit …." (63).

[22] "die armselige Existenz unseres Volkes mitten im Tumult der feindlichen Welt" ("Josefine" 278).

[23] Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (New York: New Directions, 1971).

[24] Gilman, 32.

[25] Ernst Hiemer, *Der Jude im Sprichwort der Völker* (Nuremberg: Der Stürmer Buchverlag, 1942) 34. See also Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* (Oxford: UP, 1993).

[26] We can compare it with the mysterious Hebrew inscription that functioned as a spell in Annette von Droste Hülshoff's *Judenbuche* ("The Jews Beech Tree"). See also Karin Doerr, "The Specter of Anti-Semitism in and around Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's *Judenbuche*," in *German Studies Review* XVII, no. 3 (Oct. 1994) 447-471.

[27] Gross, 152 and 154.

[28] Sander L. Gilman, *Jews in Today's German Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995) 82, 9.

[29] For in-depth studies on antisemitism in Hitler's Germany, see e.g. John Weiss, *Ideology of Death: Why the Holocaust Happened in Germany* (Chicago: Ivan R.Dee, 1996); and Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

[30] Albert S. Lindemann, Internet, H-ANTISEMITISM@H-NET.MSU.EDU (18 May, 1997).

[31] Jean Leonard Elliott and Augie Fleras, *Unequal Relations: An Introduction to Race, Ethnic and Aboriginal Dynamics in Canada* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall, 1996) 67.

[32] Crowell 216 and 212.

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