

## Chapter Two

### **The Circumcised Body**

**of**

### **Kafka's Select Letters**

I am constantly trying to communicate something *incommunicable*, to explain something *inexplicable*, to tell about something I only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones.

-Kafka, *Letters to Milena*

One is not born a Jew but becomes one. The “becomings” and “micro-becomings” in Kafka are symptomatic of a process of destabilization: his (micro)struggle against the agencies of the day. The struggle is between coming out of his Jewishness and, at the same time, to assert and maintain the Jewishness with all its differences and multiplicities. The de-stratification and fluidity of Kafka's poetics is not very uncomplicated, but its ambiguity lies in the fact that the process of becoming-Jew involves destabilizing the molar Jewish identity as well as creating a new one while

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preserving the old. If one is a Jew, then it becomes very important to maintain that Jewishness. *That* Jewishness, nevertheless, is nothing but an “empty body-without-organ” (BwO), unable to connect with other bodies, an existence inward, cut off from the rest of the world—the kind of alienation and loneliness that one finds in his oeuvre. In Kafka we find a being severing all ties with the world, a narrative becoming notes from the underground and a voice more of a victim of the hidden structures of subjectivity which one can neither escape nor understand. His epistles are not exception: his epistolary conversations with Max Brod, Felice Bauer, Milena Jesenská and Hermann Kafka become a brilliant case study of Kafka's tryst with the *enigmatic* tuberculosis; the disease retained its romantic notion even in the first half of twentieth-century. Susan Sontag points out:

To die of TB was still mysterious and (often) edifying, and remained so until practically nobody in Western Europe and North America died of it any more. Although the incidence of the disease began to decline precipitously after 1900 because of improved hygiene, the mortality rate among those who contracted it remained high; the power of the myth was dispelled only when proper treatment was finally developed, with the discovery of streptomycin in 1944 and the introduction of isoniazid in 1952.<sup>1</sup>

The shame, guilt, stigma and the concomitant alienation are results of not only his Jewishness but of his pathological condition also, to the extent that his Jewishness was never free from his illness. His subjectivity and his poetics were always already dictated by his pathology so much so that his “I am” was never really far from “I am sick”. This

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<sup>1</sup> Sontag 34

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ontico-ontology of “I am, therefore I am sick” and “I am sick therefore I am” made him to think of himself as a ‘foreign body’ cut off from the life-world. This non- human, stigmatized, diseased and fragmented body lacks any kind of agency— a body which can be ‘observed, grasped and manipulated’ at will, a body ruthlessly exposed to the other, an object, a “body-for-other” (*corps pour autrui*).

The binary between “I am” and “I am sick”, between health and illness, gets a whole new expression in the form of military images. The metaphor of battle used for any diseased body is commonplace in various pathographical accounts. The idea of conflict between a normal self and a violent pathological non-self is something that takes us away from the body itself to a world of metaphors and symbols. Even Kafka uses such expressions to communicate something which is *incommunicable* and to explain something which is *inexplicable*, as he writes to his fiancée Felice Bauer referring to this fight:

For secretly I don't believe this illness to be tuberculosis, at least not primarily tuberculosis, but rather a sign of my general bankruptcy. I had thought the war could last longer, but it can't. The blood issues not from the lung, but from a decisive stab delivered by one of the combatants.

....Simply because it is not the kind of tuberculosis that can be laid in a deck chair and nursed back to health, but a weapon that continues to be of supreme necessity as long as I remain alive. And both cannot remain alive.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Letters to Felice*

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The “general bankruptcy” of which Kafka talks about is as much socio-political as personal and considers tuberculosis a mere manifestation of that. The metaphor of war stands for his constant struggle against the status quo of the period as well his own body. He considers the latter a “major obstacle”. He considers himself as much a victim of contemporary politics as his own ill body— both brought equal amount of shame, guilt and dejection to Kafka; both objectified and corporealized Kafka in equal terms. Kafka's notion of his own body can be compared with that of someone suffering from Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) or body-image disorder, a form of obsessive self-loathing with regard to one's own body or any of its parts. In case of Kafka it was both the result of his Jewishness and illness. The *otherisation* of his own body is reflected in the following lines from a never-sent-letter to his father:

Since there was nothing at all I was certain of, since I needed to be provided at every instant with a new confirmation of my existence, since nothing was in my very own, undoubted, sole possession, determined unequivocally only by me — in sober truth a disinherited son — naturally I became unsure even of the thing nearest to me, my own body.<sup>3</sup>

A sound subject body's gaze is projected towards the other, towards the world; the other remains the centre of a gaze. But the moment the world starts to look at the self, the self becomes the centre of a gaze and starts looking inward rather than outward, reflecting on the body as an object. This objectification or corporealization captivates one's self and initiates the process of extermination of one's subjectivity. Such kind of

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<sup>3</sup> *Letters to his Father*

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reductionism is a threat to the self, its agency and its spontaneity. This event of desubjectivation, striping someone of all its vitalities, occurred at many levels for the Jewish body. The Jewish body and its nakedness were exposed in public arenas making it a site of ridicule, anger and utter abjection; it is often compared to that of the sewage system, the channel of expulsion where people could vent out their spleen. Words like “ventilating, evacuating, circulating, deodorizing, regulating, managing, draining, cleansing, privatizing” , used by Alain Corbin<sup>4</sup> while talking about modern sewage system, was also a part of anti-Semite *Weltanschauung* and was used as a linguistic detox. This was in a way very important in the process of maintaining the psychological and social hygiene of the *Volkskorper*. Kafka writes to Milena on 26 August, 1920: “I am dirty, Milena, infinitely dirty, this is why I scream so much about purity.”<sup>5</sup>

When the scrutinizing gaze of the other is internalized, the body-for-itself gives way to the body-for-other, creating a stand-still which tends to arrest body's essential “becoming” and binds it to “me-here-now”: a condition that corporealizes the pre-reflective lived-body (*leib*). The pre-reflective body and the corporeal body (*korper*) do not exist in the manner of Cartesian duality but are dialectically intertwined always. It presents itself as a way of being-in-the-world, that is, the lived-body (*leib*). In illness this pre-reflective body which was hitherto absent foregrounds itself violently disrupting the very harmony of with-the-other. The concord of existence is replaced by the discord of existence: body becomes an *obstacle* the moment it becomes dis-eased. Kafka writes in one of his diary entries this body-image disorder:

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<sup>4</sup> *The Foul and the Fragrant* 102

<sup>5</sup> *Letters to Milena*

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It is certain that a major *obstacle* to my progress is my physical condition. Nothing can be accomplished with *such a body*... My body is too long for a its weakness, it hasn't the least bit of fat to engender a blessed warmth, to preserve an inner fire, no fat on which the spirit could occasionally nourish itself beyond its daily need without *damage to the whole*. How shall the *weak heart* that lately has troubled me so often be able to pound the blood through the length of these *legs*. It would be labor enough to the *knees*, and from there it can only spill with a senile strength into the lower parts of his legs. But now it is already needed up above again, it is being waited for, while it is wasting itself below. Everything is pulled apart throughout the length of my body. What could it accomplish then, when it perhaps wouldn't have enough strength for what I want to achieve even if it were shorter and more compact.<sup>6</sup>

The body in disease entails “damage to the whole”, a breakdown not only with the world around but also with one's own body. The wholeness of existence gives way to fragmentation and alienation; and this fragmentation and alienation is not only experienced psychologically but also corporeally. All of a sudden the body parts that we were oblivious to so far resurface and call for attention in the form of “weak heart”, “knees” and “legs”. The body and its parts in illness seem uncanny and foreign, distinguished from the wholeness of the self (being-with-the-world and being-with-the-body) that health *creates*. Kafka feels that his organs are conspiring against him and his (w)holistic existence. This conspiracy of the body parts which went on without his knowledge highlights the unhome-like existence of the body in illness and, this inability of keeping the “whole intact” is one of the chief characteristics of illness. Kafka writes:

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<sup>6</sup> *The Diaries*

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You see, my brain was unable to bear the pain and anxiety with which it had been burdened. It said: "I'm giving up; but if anyone else here cares about keeping the *whole intact*, then he should share the load and things will run a little longer." Whereupon my lung volunteered, it probably didn't have much to lose anyway. These negotiations between brain and lung, which went on without my knowledge, may well have been quite terrifying.<sup>7</sup>

He considers this *wholeness* as a form of deception because in health one is never aware of the daily drama of the body. The awareness comes with illness only. Health is a state of complete harmony so much so that it hinges on the level of ignorance when one is pre-reflectively involved with the world. It is often conceived as enigmatic and illusive in nature. The breakdown at the time of illness can in a way become an opportunity of reflection and awareness. It can pull us out of ignorance by bracketing our natural attitude(s) out. For Kafka, ignorance was never bliss:

This state of health is also deceptive, it deceives even me; at any moment I am liable to be assailed by the most detailed and precise imaginings and invariably on the most inconvenient occasions.<sup>8</sup>

The fear of existence of uncanny body parts and the kind of relationship amongst them create a picture of Kafkaesque body which is no different from the Kafkaesque reality— a world of shame, guilt, fear and abhorrence. Kafka's attitude towards diseased body is that of fear and abhorrence also . He himself detests sitting beside someone suffering from larynx. He writes to Max Brod on 11 March 1921:

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<sup>7</sup> *Letters to Milena*

<sup>8</sup> *Letters to Felice*

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I am firmly convinced, now that I have been living here among consumptives, that healthy people run no danger of infection. Here, however, the healthy are only the wood cutters in the forest and the girls in the kitchen (who will simply pick uneaten food from the plates of patients and eat it—patients whom I *shrink* from sitting opposite) but not a single person from our town circles. But how *loathsome* it is to sit opposite a larynx patient, for instance (blood brother of a consumptive but far sadder), who sits across from you so friendly and harmless, looking at you with the transfigured eyes of the consumptive and at the same time coughing into your face through his spread fingers drops of purulent phlegm from his tubercular ulcer. At home I would be sitting that way, though not quite in so *dire* a state, as ‘good uncle’ among the children.<sup>9</sup>

His experience of living in a sanatorium amongst tubercular patients, as Kafka himself points out, is both *dire* and *loathsome*. He fails to establish any meaningful relationship with the inhabitants— his being cut-off from the other and from the world equidistantly. The dis-ease maintains the distance between the suffering being and the world, leading into a form of not only ghettoization but also of self-ghettoization; this means that in disease alienation is not always externally imposed: the sufferer alienates himself from the world also creating a ghetto of his own. The diseased body ‘shrinks’ as much as the diseased body ‘shrinks itself’. The ‘ecstatic’ involvement in health, existing ‘out of’ its corporeality *shrinks* not only when one is ill but also when one suddenly encounters the ‘other’ in the form of any diseased and abjected body. It is simply based on such ideas that discourses, especially medical discourses were generated to re-produce the Jewish

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<sup>9</sup> *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*

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body alongwith the bodies of the gypsies and homosexuals as abnormal, diseased and deviant—the abjected ‘other’.

Kafka's “anxiety of becoming what one is condemned to become”<sup>10</sup> is quite evident when he writes, “Without going into all the medical details, the outcome is that I have tuberculosis in both lungs. That I should suddenly develop some disease did not surprise me...” and goes onto locate the corporeal disease in his prevalent psychological state. He continues, “...for years my insomnia and headaches have invited a serious illness”. Tuberculosis, the disease he was suffering from, was as much physical as psychological, as he points in one of his letters, “I am mentally handicapped, the lung disease is none other than an overflow of the mental disease”<sup>11</sup>. Kafka here, though unwittingly, emphasizes the psychosomatic aspect of illness, any disease whether mental or corporeal is not exclusive either to the mind or the body. Susan Sontag points out the contemporary discourse built upon the analogies between tuberculosis and mental insanity:

The fancies associated with tuberculosis and insanity have many parallels. With both illnesses, there is confinement. Sufferers are sent to a "sanatorium" (the common word for a clinic for tuberculars and the most common euphemism for an insane asylum). Once put away, the patient enters a duplicate world with special rules. Like TB, insanity is a kind of exile. The metaphor of the psychic voyage is an extension of the romantic idea of travel that was associated with tuberculosis. To be cured, the patient has to be taken out of his or her daily routine. It is not an accident that the most common metaphor for an extreme psychological experience viewed positively—whether produced by drugs or by becoming psychotic—is a trip.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gilman 8

<sup>11</sup> *Letters to Milena*

<sup>12</sup> Sontag 35-36

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Locating mental illness in body and corporeal illness in mind are common practices even till today. The “condemned” body of a Jew, thus, was never far from his mental disposition and vice-versa. This *fin-de-siecle* medicalization and territorialization of Jewish body, even years after Robert Koch’s discovery, add complexities to the entire discourse paving the way for the construction and dissemination of the Jewish “imagined body”. The “condemned” body of the Jew was thus seen from a reductionist point of view, a bare body, pathological body to be dissected and incarcerated “like a patient etherized on a table”.

But life is never bare, as Maurice Blanchot points out; what remains is “the naked relation to naked life”<sup>13</sup>. A man can be destroyed but what remains indestructible is his relation with alterity—the naked relation with the Other. Similarly, a body can never be bare completely for a long time. A subject—diseased, crippled and bare—almost at the threshold of collapse witnesses a flight of its subjectivity towards inter-subjectivity: an ethical, phenomenological and psychological “escape” from enrootedness to a more collective relationality. This “extreme exposure and sensitivity of one’s subjectivity to another”<sup>14</sup> transcends the limits of human existence and vulnerability of a body-subject towards a more ethical inter-Being. The vulnerable body ceases to limit itself in its *Dasein* and becomes the site of Transcendence. What trigger this Transcendence are illness, shame and pain. Such kind of negation (*Nichtung*) of the subjectivity is also a mode of self-consciousness.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Infinite Conversation* 133

<sup>14</sup> Levinas

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Existence “otherwise than being” is despite oneself in the midst of vulnerability. In pain life is “despite life”. This “risky unconverging” of the self is painful and yet very sensible. It is this sensibility amidst vulnerability “that is an opening to others, a nearness, the one-for-the-other, precisely vulnerability to others”<sup>15</sup>. This pain which call into question our very existence is what cuts through our finite skin exposing us to the scorching sun of the Infinite. Such inescapable relationship, *a relation without a relation*, with the infinite is what sustains life despite oneself: “Life is life despite life”.

In illness, one is reduced to its corporeal existence which is nothing more than a lump of flesh. But this existential reduction also provides a way by which we can reflect both on our body and also the world around us. In health we tend to forget that our bodies are like anchors— anchoring us to the world; illness, on the other hand, makes us aware of our anchorages, spatio-temporal existence, our being being-in-the-world. The latter brings us to the simple fact that we *exist*. Illness enables us to reflect and take notice of the things which were hitherto absent. Actually painful and non-volitional, it can still provide a new meaning to our existence. Kafka shares the same opinion and writes:

All these alleged diseases, sad as they seem, are matters of faith, anchorages in some maternal ground for souls in distress.... those anchorages which are firmly fixed in real ground aren't merely isolated, interchangeable possessions— they are preformed in man's being, and they continue to form and re-form his being (as well as his body) along the same lines.

He realizes that illnesses and diseases are integral parts of one's existence. They are not antithetical to life rather they are “preformed in man's being, and they continue to form

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<sup>15</sup> Benaroyo, 2007

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and re-form his being". Illness then, becomes essential to not only one's being but also one's *becoming*.

Kafka and his bleeding body: the body with all its flesh and blood and its embodiedness anticipates the condition of the Jewish body during the time of *Shoah*. The racialization and over-medicalization turned the Jewish body into a grotesque body— a body “that defies clear definitions and borders and that occupies the middle ground between life and death, between subject and object, between one and many”<sup>16</sup>; this kind of fluidity that Kafka “deciphers it with his wound”<sup>17</sup> and can be traced all over his oeuvre. The “unfinished” and “ambiguous” body of Kafka, suffering from bodily feebleness, somatic otherness, neurasthenia and tuberculosis, signify, as Sander Gilman points out, his existence as a Jewish body. Not only tuberculosis but the very pain and *angst* of living within the confinements of or rather beyond the boundaries of the societal arrangement lead to the creation of an alien and uncanny self-body. His was not a body that can be what Sartre calls “passed-over-in-silence”, an inexperiential “unaware awareness” but fleshly and corporeal, that can be a body put on trial, stigmatized and objectified and finally, destroyed. But it was also the same body with all its fleshliness and corporeality that enabled him and those like him into a non-closed, open and inter-corporeal subjectivity connected to others in the form of an ethical relationship— the “ever unfinished, ever creating body”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Shabot

<sup>17</sup> *The Penal Colony* 204

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin 26

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“This excessive body which constantly outgrows itself and escapes from its own skin, constitutes a body that cannot be framed”<sup>19</sup>. It, though ambiguous and open, never dissolves into an inauthentic and undifferentiated oblivion but maintains its singularity and differentiation at all risk. The ethics and poetics, “overlapping and limit” of such bodies are always functional at the same time<sup>20</sup>. This is how the “grotesque”, hyper- or de-politicized Jewish bodies and its “shared flesh”, calls for a crisis in civilization by being ‘unrepresentable’ or ‘unknowable’. “It comprises *singularity, heterogeneity* and *difference*”<sup>21</sup>.

The will to power over the other, to limit its embodied intersubjectivity, lead to an ethical closure transforming the other into an Other— an opaque body which can be fixed but never assimilated. These ‘unassimilated’ bodies— excesses of body and bodies of excess, can either be feared or despised, either be worshiped or exterminated depending upon the need of the hour. In those situations cruelties are justified; and radical medicalization is just another process of justification for maintaining social equilibrium (read, health). Those bodies, unclean and “unfinished”, become the site of politics of *excess* and *equilibrium* so much so that it becomes, what Luc-Nancy calls, “the desire for murder, for an increase of cruelty and horror... it is mutilation, carving up, relentlessness, meticulous execution, the joy of agony”<sup>22</sup>. The politics of excess and equilibrium, thus, give rise to the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’.

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<sup>19</sup> Shabot

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty 142

<sup>21</sup> Shabot

<sup>22</sup> *Being Singular Plural* 21

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The birth of pathology entailed the death of body and what remained was a body entangled in the politics of sign and signification, an objectified body subject to examination and/or extermination. But Nancy has argued that “there has never been any body in philosophy”<sup>23</sup> and, what you have in place is a series of metaphors trying earnestly to get hold of the body and undoubtedly, the body in pain; the guilt from which not only the western metaphysics but also our language is suffering. He explains, “from the body-cave to the glorious body, signs have become inverted, just as they have been turned around and displaced over and over again, in hylomorphism, in the sinner-body, in the body-machine or in the “body proper” of phenomenology. But the philosophical-theological corpus of bodies is still supported by the spine of mimesis, of representation, and of the sign”<sup>24</sup>. The Jewish body— the body in ‘pain’ (derived from the Greek word *poin* and Latin word *poena* both meaning punishment, torture and penalty), in a similar vein remained the unknown and unrepresentable body down the ages till efforts were launched in the twentieth-century to expose it completely and examine it to be the pathological, parasitic and punishable body. Kafka in a letter to Max Brod writes: “And there is a relationship between all this and Jewishness, or more precisely between young Jews and their Jewishness, with the fearful inner predicament of these generations.”<sup>25</sup>

The *presence* of the Jewish body “embedded in the material world characterized by its spatial, tangible relations”<sup>26</sup>— its lived (embodied) experience of history and politics, the ‘being in touch’, helped its movement away from complete biological reductionism or

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<sup>23</sup> *Corpus* 193

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* 192

<sup>25</sup> *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*

<sup>26</sup> Gumbrecht 318

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constructivism and medicalization or racialization of being (*ousia*). The profession of medicine, as Long<sup>27</sup> points out, sought to objectify the body while the profession of history sought to objectify the past— the circumcised history of the circumcised body. In this 'somatic turn', Kafka then emerges as a brilliant study of the history of the flesh and the history in the flesh, a perfect paradigm of how crises of representation lead to a crises in civilization in twentieth-century.

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<sup>27</sup> *Rehabilitating Bodies* 2004

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