

Kafka's *Letters to Milena* and the Question of the Body

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The easy possibility of writing letters — from a purely theoretical point of view— must have brought wrack and ruin to the souls of the world. Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghosts of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness.
--Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena* ¹

Abstract

This article describes how Franz Kafka's correspondence with the Czech journalist and translator Milena Jesenská, from 1920 to 1923, documents the development of his illness, his fear of physical intercourse, and his consequent reliance on writing. Writing is exploited in this epistolary affair to replace both physical presence and physical love. Simply stated, writing negates the body in this correspondence. The ensuing erasure of the body leads to a dim mode of bodily presence, a ghostly one. Kafka's *Letters to Milena* are read as a rich hunting ground for psychoanalytical and feminist interpretations of the (female) body and female sexuality. It is the mystery of femininity that Kafka tries to solve in the course of this correspondence. Sexuality and the female body are rendered in this epistolary love as a reviled "dark continent" that should be sublimated in favor of the symbolic realm of writing. Of special importance at this stage of Kafka's life as a tubercular is his conception of the diabolical nature of his writing, an issue that has received very little critical attention. A man living close to death chooses for himself a life of seclusion and introversion from human relations and withdraws into a ghostly existence. The body that deteriorates into a ghostly presence finds its counterpart in "demonic" letter writing that conjures up physical presence in Kafka's relationship with Milena. The first section of this article introduces *Letters to Milena* in context. Section two presents a reading of the letters informed by psychoanalysis and feminism, and section three focuses on the final letters and presents Kafka as a "ghostly lover."

Keywords: Franz Kafka; Letters to Milena; the Body; Psychoanalysis; Feminism; the Ghostly Lover

1. *Letters to Milena* in Context

Kafka's 1920 convalescence vacation in Meran, Austria, witnessed the beginning of an epistolary love with the Czech writer Milena Jesenská, who was living in Vienna at the time. Kafka had made Milena's acquaintance when she translated some of his short stories into Czech. Most of Kafka's letters to Milena were written during the summer of 1920. Few letters were written in 1922, and the final letters were written in 1923, several months before Kafka's death of tuberculosis in 1924. The letters were first published in their original German by Willy Haas as *Briefe an Milena* in 1952. They were then translated and published in English as *Letters to Milena* in 1953. *Letters to Milena* survived because Milena handed them over to Willy Haas before her arrest by the Germans for consorting with Jews. On the other hand, Milena's letters to Kafka were destroyed after her arrest, and Milena herself died in a Nazi concentration camp in 1944. As they are, most of *Letters to Milena* are unsigned. They have also not received as much critical attention as Kafka's stories and novels. Many critics saw *Letters to Milena*, as part of Kafka's non-fiction, an intimate private correspondence and did not group them in Kafka's literary canon. The available criticism on the letters, on the other hand, has focused on the letters' dates and order, the lovers' physical separation, the heavy exchange of letters and stamps, and the postal connections and train schedules pervading the letters.² While this article touches on relevant issues, it is mainly concerned with re-reading Kafka from a feminist stance by considering the letters' representation of the female body and female sexuality. The discussion then highlights Kafka's conception of the relationship between writing and the body.

Over the course of the correspondence, Kafka and Milena met only twice. The first meeting in Vienna, as can be deduced from the letters, was for four days in June 1920 on Kafka's way back to Prague from Meran. They met again in August of the same year in Gmünd. These meetings were viewed by Kafka as gaps in an otherwise epistolary affair. On the whole, Kafka tried to avoid meetings with Milena. His ambivalent attitude toward female sexuality made him hesitant and uncertain about such an affair. So, we find him casting Milena in different roles. Milena oscillates in the course of this correspondence between a mother figure and a hideous Medusa figure, which captures the essentially virgin/whore dichotomy of the representation of women in many male texts.

2. *Letters to Milena: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*

The passionate epistolary attachment between Kafka and Milena inevitably transcends all physical and material boundaries. Each finds in the other an alter ego and an intellectual double. The close affinity between Kafka and Milena is manifest in the intensity of their relationship. Kafka even saw in her a surrogate mother. No wonder, Kafka calls her in one letter "teacher Milena" and in another "Mother Milena" and praises her "life-giving force" (18, 79). Later in the correspondence, Kafka praises Milena's maternal "inability to make other people suffer" (133). In his mind, Kafka also sees himself as a "child" and Milena "as receptive and earnest as a mother" (172-173). This spiritual fusion finds a bodily counterpart, for Milena also suffered from poor lungs. The intensity with which she imagines Kafka's lung disease, it seems, transfers the disease to her. She develops a lung disease and blood comes from her mouth in the course of the correspondence.

In their epistolary love, Kafka and Milena dramatize, all at once, the dissolution of self into writing, the union of the ascetic with the erotic, the triumph of the textual over the sexual, and the primordial unity between the body and the mind. They enact a blurring of traditional bodily demarcations. Via letter writing, the lovers bring about dissolution of boundaries between two bodies of the sort achieved in a sexual intercourse. Writing, hence, becomes an outlet for a displaced desire. A reading of Kafka's *Letters to Milena* shows that letters can act as an extension of, or a substitute for, the body in that the letter writer can invest them with libidinous urges.

The correspondents, in a way, form the androgynous ideal Virginia Woolf attributes to the creative mind in *A Room of One's Own*. The conjoining together of masculinity and femininity in an androgynous ideal makes us question the very boundaries of the body in the correspondence. Kafka is Milena, and Milena is Kafka in that each finds the realization of his/her self in the other. The correspondence, in this light, is a move away from sexual polarization, or imprisonment within the body. In so far as each exists as the missing half of the other, and in their physical separation, the lovers are "ghosts."

The merging together of both lovers is effected at the cost of their personal identities. The "I" of the letter writer can hardly be distinguished from the "you" of his correspondent. The correspondents exchange positions; the "I" becomes "you," and the "you" becomes "I" in a shifting manner challenging the limits of identity. The two correspondents merge defying bodily limitations and bringing about a blurring of corporeal limits in a Kristevan semiotic fusion where Kafka narcissistically merges with the mother Milena. In this dyadic relationship, the lovers' identities disappear behind the different "transmutations" of their bodies. Telling Milena about one of his dreams, Kafka writes:

I hardly remember the details, just that we kept on merging into one another, *I was you, you were me*. Finally you somehow caught fire; I remembered that fire can be smothered with cloth, took an old coat and beat you with it. But then the metamorphoses resumed and went so far that that you were no longer even there; instead I was the one on fire and I was also the one who was beating the fire with the coat. (my emphasis, 203)

From a Freudian viewpoint, the loss of the lovers' identities is a narcissistic form of ego idealization in love. Kristeva points this out when she argues: "It is essential for the lover to maintain the existence of that ideal other and to be able to imagine himself similar, merging with him and even indistinguishable from him" ("Freud and Love" 250). As Kafka's "ideal other," Milena should repudiate her sexuality and exist as a psychic double so that the correspondence can proceed, for the threat of physical merging together is the fragmentation evoked in the burning fire the lovers catch in the dream. In the writer's unconscious, Milena's maternal body becomes the site of an archaic state of fusion where the boundaries between subject and object are erased. However, and at the conscious level, Kafka distances Milena in favor of the integrity of his "I" and enacts Kristeva's notion that "the maternal body is the place of a splitting" (*Desire in Language* 238).

The merging of the lover's identities can also be understood as a sexual act effecting what Elizabeth Boa calls "a terrifying loss of identity and bodily integrity," whereby the male loses "that separateness necessary to agency" and becomes "interchangeable with the object in a shameful feminization" (95). Kafka, we may assume, was venting his unconscious fears of female sexuality in this dream he narrates. To complicate things further by adding a Kafkaesque twist, Kafka's dream of merging into Milena symbolizes an unconscious wish to regress to a state of childish dependency on a mother figure whose body acts as what Kristeva calls a "receptacle and guarantor of demands" and a site for "all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications" ("The Semiotic" 42).

Ambivalently, what Kafka once called "Mother Milena," should also be denigrated and repudiated as a maternal abject body because of the threat this merging of bodies poses to the writer's sense of identity (79). Kristeva points out, in *Powers of Horror*, that abjection is what "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). This abject maternal body should be expelled and denied corporeality, for the fire that Kafka associates with Milena is the maternal/phallic abyss that will devour the writer's ego or castrate him as Freud would have it. Kafka repudiates Milena's corporeality by reducing her to his psychic anima or to an abject (m)other. He will also deny her corporeality by keeping this affair at the epistolary level. Kafka tells Milena in one letter "I don't want ... to come to Vienna, because I can't stand the mental stress. I am spiritually ill, my lung disease is nothing but an overflowing of my spiritual disease" (22); he also tells her in another letter "I will definitely not come, however if I should—it won't happen— find myself in Vienna after all ... then I won't need either a breakfast or dinner, but more likely a stretcher where I can lie down for a while" (24).

Kafka's love is narcissistic in so far as he repudiates Milena as a love object in favor of the coherence of his identity and, at the same time, yearns for an a state of autoerotism whose site is Milena's maternal body. Kafka assumes in this correspondence an active introvert personality which, according to Jung, functions by "turning inwards of the LIBIDO" and seeks "a certain seclusion in the face of the object" (*Basic Writings* 262). Milena, on the other hand, by insisting on Kafka's physical presence, acts as an extravert personality with "an outgoing transference of interest from the subject to the object" (*Basic Writings* 248). While the former personality type needs a disembodied love, the latter demands a reciprocal relation where subject and object exchange roles.

The dream-like atmosphere of the letters hinges on Kafka's ability to bring things to a borderline state where everything is susceptible to fragmentation. Since Kafka and Milena met infrequently, Kafka finds it difficult to remember the details of Milena's face: "It occurs to me that I really can't remember your face in any precise detail. Only the way you walked away through the tables in the café, your figure, your dress, that I still see" (4). She assumes for Kafka a ghostly presence with her indistinct physiognomy. Her face exists as faintly written signs on paper. It appears, in the words of Mark Anderson, as "marks on a page, as written images" (248). This is only one phase among multiple transmutations. Milena's face is transmuted into a ball of fire, and then into the Medusa head of the Greek legend. Kafka feels he sees her when writing a letter, yet when he tries to raise his eyes to her face, "fire breaks out," and he sees "nothing but fire" (14). Milena's letters are also associated with fire; Kafka complains: "It's strange how your letters blind me, Milena" (132). The flames of female sexuality deform and erase boundaries; a blinding fire also castrates its viewer, for blindness has always been a symbol of castration in psychoanalysis. Milena's body should thus be rejected for the writer to control the correspondence, i.e. the symbolic realm of language. Significantly, this symbolic realm is a patriarchal one—"the name of the father"—in Lacan's rereading of Freud (67). Its essence is separation from a pre-oedipal phallic mother caused by castration anxiety, a necessary step for the subject's entry into Lacan's paternal metaphor.

Moreover, Milena has in these letters "the magnificent head of Medusa, the snakes of terror are quivering about your head so wildly, while the snakes of fear quiver even more wildly about my own" (45). In archetypal feminism, the snakes on the Medusa head stand for the instinctual unconscious or the feminine principle, for they are the attribute of the earth mother archetype. Hence, Milena's former image as a loving mother is blurred by her image as a monstrous Medusa, a pre-oedipal castrated mother. Medusa cannot be looked at directly. In the Greek myth, Perseus sees her image in his shield and cuts off her head without being turned into a stone. The shield functions as a mirror that effects separation/castration. Lacan describes the formation of the infant's "I" in the "mirror stage" as "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (2). The mirror image gives the infant a sense of a unified identity and guarantees separation from the mother's body. Milena as Medusa comes to stand for a mother defined by her lack/castration. Denying identification with the mother's body in the mirror stage is necessary for the Lacanian Symbolic order. Kafka avoids Milena's castrating gaze by distancing himself and looking at her through the medium of letters/mirrors. Letters become the Symbolic and, simultaneously, the means of a transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The maternal body, it follows, is the origin of subjectivity and the dissociation between Milena as flesh and letters as words. However, the separation from the mother's body is not without a price, for the division is the castration evoked in Medusa's head.

Milena, as Medusa of the Greek legend, with snakes for hair turning the viewer to stone, or making him "stiff" with fear, is like the legendary Circe who turns Odysseus's men into swine. Explicitly, Milena has a castrating influence on her correspondent, for the phallic connotations of the snakes are evident. Moreover, the decapitated Medusa head, Freud argues, indicates fear of castration that occurs when one "catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother" ("Medusa's Head" 272). Freud also comments that "a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration" ("Medusa's Head" 272). Hence, "the snakes of terror" around Milena's head signify her castrated state as a female or a mother and assure Kafka that "he is still in possession of a penis," as "becoming stiff means an erection" ("Medusa's Head" 272). This, however, is undermined by the fact that "the snakes of fear" around Kafka's head also signify his castration or his impotence in the face of Milena's phallic power (45). Their multiplicity renders Kafka impotent and threatens the coherence of his identity. As a result, we find Kafka's signature dwindling — Franz K., F. Kafka, Kafka, F, Thine and, finally, nothing. Kafka is aware of this and tells Milena in a postscript to a Tuesday letter "now I'm even losing my name—it was getting shorter and shorter all the time and is now: Yours" (50). Both lovers, it turns out, are castrated in one way or another, and Kafka may be projecting his own castration on Milena. Gane Gallop makes this state of mutual castration clear when she remarks:

So the man is 'castrated' by not being total, just as the woman is 'castrated' by not being a man. Whatever relation of lack man feels, lack of wholeness, lack in/of being, is projected onto woman's lack of phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of phallic 'lack'; she is a hole. (22)

Seen from another perspective, Medusa's decapitated head, with its threat of castration, forces Kafka to resort to narcissistic writing to protect his masculine identity. To draw on Kristeva again, it is the "discovery of castration" that "detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother" ("The Semiotic" 42). However, the lovers' mutual castration signifies, in Lacan's terms, their inability to possess the phallus as a "the signifier of the desire of the Other" that neither the man nor the woman has (290). Milena becomes the phallus in so far as, Lacan argues, "the man finds satisfaction for his demand for love in the relation with the woman, in as much as the signifier of the phallus constitutes her as giving in love what she does not have" (290). The epistolary love becomes, then, a means of appropriating the phallus of the paternal order of language inaccessible to women.

Broadly, Milena's transmutations between a mother figure and a hideous Medusa enhance the loose corporeality typical of this epistolary affair and conform to the unconscious—and sometimes misogynistic—Jungian anima projections whereby woman is ambivalently viewed with attraction and aversion. This interpretation should work out because the anima functions ambivalently as a mother archetype. Among the ambivalent attributes of the mother archetype Jung samples in his *Four Archetypes* are “the loving mother and the terrible mother,” which captures Milena's image in this correspondence as a maternal figure and a Medusa head (16).

Kafka, at once, hails and fears the arrival of Milena's letters. Her ghost seems to pursue him once a letter is open. Kafka distinguishes between a real Milena delivering her ghostly body via letters, and a very real Milena existing in Vienna. He has access only to the immaterial Milena of his dreams and postal connections. Telling Milena about how he receives her letters, he says:

... Milena, I literally start to shake as if under an alarm bell...I look for a piece of furniture to crawl under; trembling, totally unaware of the world, I pray you might fly back out of the window the way you came storming in inside your letter. After all, I can't keep a storm in my room. (45)

In one dream, Milena cannot be seen exactly. She is just “something bluish-white, flowing, ghostlike” and in another dream she is treated as “a mute woman” (48, 50). Thus, Milena becomes a natural force, a storm, a ghost, and then a dumb woman. In another dream, Kafka is in Vienna and forgets Milena's address, “not only the street but also the city, everything” (41). This dream-distortion of Milena is symbolic. For the Jungian critic, these negative dream images of Milena represent the anima in her negative aspects. For Freudians, these phallogocentric images of the female body are also inherently negative because dreams vent the writer's repressed unconscious. Such dreams betray a kind of projective thinking whereby “the man strives to rid himself of his dread of women by objectifying it” (Horney 153). While Freud's work on dreams is replete with references to dreams as wish-fulfillments and the distinction between manifest dream content and latent dream content, it is important to note that Freud traces most of the dreams of adults back to what he calls “repressed erotic wishes” (*On Dreams* 106). If we are to understand Kafka's frequent dreams of Milena in the light of Freud's foregoing argument, we should not fail to notice that such unconscious “erotic wishes” deform Milena on the one hand, but betray on the other hand the dreamer's inability to come to terms with a normal sexual relationship with the object of his dreams.

Milena's spectral presence is not always welcome. Though it exempts Kafka from the possibility of a normal physical relation, the astral spirit of Milena has an insatiable appetite for words and letters. It is for this reason that Kafka tells her “[t]his crisscrossing of letters has got to stop, Milena, it's driving us crazy...” (43). The Milena/Medusa is also an alluring siren attracting Kafka to a watery grave. Her letters that Kafka reads are akin to what Kafka calls “the seductive voices of the night” we encounter in Kafka's “The Sirens” (*Parables* 93). In her spectral existence, Milena conforms to the archetypal representation of some female characters in literature as vampires or seductive Amazons preying on men, and thus need to be feared. Kafka's fear is apparent when he tells Milena that in reading her letters he constantly hears “one single word, one word which is, moreover, my very essence: fear” (43).

In so far as her body is concerned, Milena evokes in Kafka the associations of the fleshly female body with Dionysian darkness, fertility and spontaneity. Milena devours Kafka's letters and is ready, in Kafka's view, to drain his body if he allows her physical contact. This makes her an oral-sadistic, all-devouring female. Freud was partly responsible for the debasement of the female body that repels the male by its otherness, lack, and mystery. For example, Freud acknowledges, in his paper on “Femininity,” that “psychology too is unable to solve the riddle of femininity” and he speaks of what men call “the enigma of women” (42, 49). This negative view on women engenders ambivalent attitudes toward the female body and makes it an object of “fear and loathing,” for it is “beautiful but unclean, alluring but dangerous” (Suleiman 1). To support this view on the female, we might quote Milena's letter to Kafka's friend, Max Brod, translated in the same letter collection, where she speaks of Kafka's “fear” of physicality: “This fear doesn't just apply to me; it relates to everything that is shamelessly alive, also to the flesh, for example. Flesh is too uncovered; he can't stand the sight of it” (248). This implies that Milena as a woman is defined by Kafka in terms of her physicality. Milena's corporeal existence makes her a source of contamination and impurity for Kafka. It evokes in him male disgust and fear of the female body. A sexualized female body would threaten the cleanliness Kafka often sought. Describing a former repelling sexual experience, Kafka tells Milena that he knew and cannot forget that “deep down, this disgust and filth were a necessary part of the whole” (147). Milena's body is saturated with sexuality and desire and has to be subdued, or else it would threaten to disrupt the correspondence by its incessant demands.

Kafka's fear of Milena's physicality makes us view female sexuality as a dark realm of corrupt flesh. This neurotic fear of female sexuality can be seen as a negative form of Oedipus complex. Freud observes in his essay on “Female Sexuality” that “one thing that is left over in men from the influence of Oedipus complex is a certain amount of disparagement in their attitude towards women, whom they regard as being castrated” (326). It is this unconscious “disparagement” that makes Kafka see Milena in his dreams as a castrated Medusa head.

That female sexuality is associated with death, and is therefore a source of fear, is not uncommon in literature. However, female sexuality is ambivalently a source of death and a reminder of the bliss of the womb, and hence it incorporates the wish to die. The fear of physical love forces Kafka to keep his relation with Milena at the level of correspondence. Trying to evade Milena's corporeal presence, Kafka renders her as what Carl Jung would call “the anima” and himself as her correlative masculine “animus.” The anima for Jung is “the feminine quality of the soul” or “the imago of woman” in a man (*Basic Writings* 158, 159). The animus, on the other hand, is the contrasexual aspect of the soul in a woman. The fact that both are psychic aspects of the soul denies them corporeal embodiment and restricts

them to unconscious femininity or masculinity. As Kafka's unconscious femininity—his anima—Milena becomes, in the words of Jung, “a jealous mistress who tries to alienate the man from his family” (*Basic Writings* 170). Milena's love is possessive, intense, and devouring. Kafka complains: “Recently I asked you not to write me every day; this was sincere—I was afraid of your letters” (176). Kafka's fear of Milena's ceaseless letters and Milena's constant demands for more letters by Kafka cast her in what Kristeva calls “the archaic mother” that scares by “her generative power” (*Powers of Horror* 77).

Reading Milena's letters causes Kafka mental suffering and bad moods, the kind of impact Jung would attribute to the anima (*Basic Writings* 177). Kafka then develops the habit of reading them in snatches to avoid or lessen their debilitating effect. The pain he feels in the temples when he reads her letters or answers them adds to his insomnia and consumptive symptoms. The exchange of letters, then, becomes a form of torture, a sado-masochistic one. Kafka tells Milena: “You know whenever I want to write something like the following the swords immediately begin to approach, slowly, their points forming a wreath around me—the most perfect torture” (159). The phallic “swords” of letter writing hint at the way the body is feminized or subdued by writing. This contradicts the joy with which Kafka received and answered Milena's letters towards the beginning of the correspondence. If their epistolary love is a source of torture, the interplay between the body and writing can be worked out. Letters were formerly viewed as a nourishing drink that one drank to the last drop; as fetish objects that Kafka's hands caress; as a substitute for Milena's corporeal presence. For example, Kafka describes the joy with which he received one of Milena's letters: “And then it arrived after all, right before dinner, I was able to take it along, remove it from my pocket, lay it on the table, put it back in my pocket, just the way hands play with letters” (32). Formerly, he had a ravenous appetite to read Milena's letters. Her letters were viewed as a relief from headaches, insomnia, and fever. However, things are different now because Kafka feels that Milena's letters are lashing him mercilessly on the face, which hints at their grotesque bodily presence.

An important aspect of Milena's ghostly presence and the distortion to which the female body is subjected is Kafka's association of Milena with fire. He sees Milena sometimes as a blinding, consuming fire. We should not fail to notice Freud's account of the erotic nature of the flames of fire shooting upwards.³ They need to be extinguished in Kafka's case, for they threaten with castration. Milena is also seen as a phallic knife threatening Kafka with castration. Kafka tells her “you are the knife I turn inside myself, this is love” (195). This leads us to speculate on Kafka's physical disappearance and his attempts at self-effacement by consciously keeping this affair at an epistolary level. He tries to conjure up the physical presence that Milena increasingly demands via letters.

The fluctuation of Kafka's health documented in his early letters to Milena and its deterioration by the time he wrote the final letters led him to experiment with the traditional bodily contours by means of written letters. The early letters show that writing does Kafka good; he grows calmer through the cathartic function of writing. His commitment to writing is apparent in his sense of total paralysis when he writes. He feels pinned to his chair and forgets himself over Milena's letters. His dedication to letter writing is motivated by the letters' ability to give him the energy necessary to pursue life. He invests these letters with supreme importance; they provide him with the longed for nourishment for the sickly body. They need, thus, to be drained to the last drop:

What do you think? Can I still get a letter by Sunday? It should be possible. But this passion for letters is senseless. Isn't one letter enough, isn't one knowing enough? Of course it is, but nevertheless I am tilting my head way back, drinking the letters, aware only that I don't want to stop drinking. (18)

We are constantly reminded of the way writing letters and reading them relates to bodily functions. Kafka reiterates the association of letters with “consumption.” This metaphoric consumption of letters echoes both human consumption of food and the consumption of the body in tuberculosis, Kafka's lung disease. Kafka takes letters along, pulls them out of his pocket, lays them on the table, puts them back in his pocket, and plays with them in an “erotic” manner, as fetish objects. Then he starts reading carefully, surveying the letters as if caressing a body in sexual foreplay and reminding us of Barthes' theory of textual pleasure and the erotics of reading where the text is eroticized and fetishized. If the fetishist, according to Freud, gains satisfaction from “a piece of clothing, a shoe, a piece of underclothing,” Kafka gains such a perverse form of satisfaction from Milena's letters (“The Sexual Life” 305). He tries in brief to bury himself among Milena's letters, to forget the fateful end awaiting him. Frederick Karl does rightly observe that Kafka was trying, in his relation with Milena, “to define what life was, how it could be lived, how death could be postponed, even if only temporarily” (630). Kafka chose, therefore, to live life intensely to its depths, to make up for the few remaining years of his life. As a result, we find him reshaping and recreating Milena for himself and reshaping himself for her. Both are subject to multiple transformations and metamorphoses.

A mortally ill man is certainly, if not impotent, anti-instinctual. His drifting naked self seeks spiritual rather than physical fulfillment. Physical love would drain his energies and divert him from the higher claims of writing. Kafka is aware of this when he tells Milena: “I still can't say whether I'm coming to Vienna, but I don't think I am. If I had many reasons against it before, today I have just one, namely that it would tax my spiritual strength” (42). The female body, in Freudian terms, gets in the way of man's higher claims. As Freud remarks in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

Women represent the interests of family and of sexual life. The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable. Since a man does not have unlimited quantities of psychical energy at his disposal, he has to accomplish his tasks by making an expedient distribution of his libido. What he employs for cultural aims he to a great extent withdraws from women and sexual life. (50-51)

As a sick man, Kafka seems aware of a need to maintain his ego-libido by reclaiming it from a love object. It is for this reason that we find Kafka at pains to keep his relation with Milena at the epistolary level. He tries to catch Milena in his system of signification by writing her into his letters. The physically abnegative Kafka endeavors to make Milena understand his critical medical condition: "Yesterday I saw my doctor, he found me in much the same shape as I had been before Meran: the three months passed by my lung hardly leaving a trace, in the top of the left lung the disease is as fresh as ever....He also thinks I didn't put on any weight" (85). He says this by way of exempting himself from the physical demands Milena imposes on him. Kafka starts then to monitor the progress of their correspondence towards literary interests. He makes use of the fact that Milena was an accomplished translator and writer of stories and fashion articles, and discusses with her many famous writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Grillparzer, Ernst Weiss, among others.

Kafka succeeds in his attempts at physical effacement and the lovers do meet very infrequently. His next step towards his narcissistic quest for psychic wholeness is to manipulate Milena's letters; they become his other lung. If he stops reading her letters, he stops breathing and feels faint. In so far as she writes to him from Vienna he feels fine. What matters for him is that he should stay away from Vienna, and Milena be distant from Meran or Prague. Kafka says: "But you shouldn't write about my traveling to Vienna; I'm not going, but every time you mention it you hold a little fire up to my bare skin..." (119).

Now that the lovers are distant, the surrealistic atmosphere of the letters manifests itself in the way Kafka treats Milena's letters. After reading her letters Kafka is drunk, for the process of reading gives him a peculiar sensation and he feels intoxicated. When the letters are drunk to the last drop, they are emptied of meaning and the paper is "blank." The letters themselves tell of dreams, nightmares, and sleepless nights. Kafka himself merges into Milena's letters and becomes indistinct. We feel that he is transformed into a text, an ornately ornamented script like that inscribed on the bodies of the victims in Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony." If his body is a text, it becomes indistinguishable from letters. It merges into Milena's letters and haunts them; it merges into his own letters and reaches Vienna via postal connections. The real Kafka, the letter writer, becomes anonymous gradually in a manner corresponding to the metaphorical "disintegration, febrilization, dematerialization" of the body effected by tuberculosis (Sontag 13).

It is useful here to consider the distinction between *speech*, on the one hand, as a sign of immediacy, presence, life, stability, and vigor and *writing*, on the other hand, as a sign of absence, waste, incoherence, and death. In this common critical distinction often associated with Plato, Aristotle and Derrida, writing\absence is usually associated with "the corpse of words" because it is viewed as a supplement to speech\presence (Ellmann 211). Kafka certainly oscillates between writing\absence and speech\presence, yet prefers the former. He chooses letter writing over physical presence, for writing presents the traces of physical presence, i.e. a ghostly one. Writing defers the promised presence of speech and maintains the split existing between the lovers. Thus, Kafka does not want the correspondence to be interrupted by rendezvous with Milena. If writing is not a means of physical presence, it is a means of a ghostly one. The body conjured up via letters is a ghostly body, a disembodied one. It is a body lacking interiority and existing as an empty sign. Thus, Kafka's tubercular body, consumed as it is from within by hemorrhage, is doubly empty when it is devoid of its physicality in an epistolary affair.

Kafka's self-effacement manifest in this prolonged letter exchange echoes a rejection of the feminine semiotic of Kristeva in favor of the phallogocentric symbolic order of Lacan. Moreover, Kafka invokes poststructuralist themes in his deferred physical presence. He seems a forerunner of Derrida's concept of *différance* in that he makes us feel that we find our real identities in words and language, for the correspondence becomes writing about writing in the absence of the body. Conversely, Kafka embodies Derrida's theory of writing as a "trace," as "the erasure of selfhood, of one's own presence" (230). He presents himself to Milena as a man made of words, surrounded by linguistic signs. In a letter to Felice, dated 14 August 1913, Kafka says: "I have no literary interests, but am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else" (341). He thus tries to exist as a work of art, as a written text. Once the body is consumed by illness, it is etherealized and aestheticized as a literary text. If the body is not the ultimate reality, we are left with Derrida's famous pronouncement that there is nothing outside the text.

Kafka's voracious appetite for letters forces him to decipher Milena and make her body signify. Milena becomes something like a Freudian hysteric female patient whose body is a text to be deciphered by her Freudian analyst Kafka. He treats her absent body as a site of interpretations and a locus of truth. A feminist like Jane Gallop similarly speaks of "an eternal reading of the 'body' as an authorless text, full of tempting, persuasive significance, but lacking a final guarantee of intended meaning" (qtd. in Downing 79). Kafka's first attempt in this direction is to interpret Milena's lung defect:

So it's the lung. I've been turning it over in my mind all day long, unable to think of anything else. Not that it alarms me; probably and hopefully...you have a mild case, and even full-fledged pulmonary disease (half of western Europe has more or less deficient lungs) (5)

We feel that Kafka needs, yet fears, the nourishment of Milena's presence. The milk he drinks for his delicate lungs, he thinks, is not enough. He yearns, he tells Milena, "to lay my head in your lap, feel your hand on my head, and stay that way through all eternity" (102). Again, this casts Milena in a maternal role. We are entitled to assume that Kafka's yearning for the quiet Milena offers links her with the residual image of the Anima—a variation on the mother image. In fact, we can interpret Kafka's attachment to Milena and his emotional reliance on her in terms of Jung's assertion that

"the anima, in the form of the mother imago, is transferred to the wife" (*Basic Writings* 168). Thus, Milena's image as an anima shaped by Kafka's mother blurs her image as a potential wife or mistress. This might explain why Kafka is unconsciously distancing himself from Milena's physical proximity. In a similar Freudian vein, Nancy Chodorow argues that "men become impotent with women who are like, or who represent psychically, their mothers" (22).

After the heavy correspondence of 1920, Kafka ceases to write for about fifteen months losing himself in his introversion. He writes again in late March 1922 and grows more death-oriented. After several interrupted letters, he writes to Milena his final postcard on 25 December 1923. The final letters show a man acutely aware of the distinction between the sick and the healthy. As his condition aggravates, Kafka comes to the realization that "[t]he healthy forsake the sick, but the sick also forsake the healthy" (140). He sees the body now as an object of decay and seeks to surpass it in an act of self-transcendence. In this light, the body, whether male or female, is an alien, defiled object to be discarded. Sexuality itself, as Kafka tells Milena about a former sexual experience with a shopgirl, is related to "disgust" and "filth" though it gives a release to an "eternally grieving body" (147).

Kafka's very late letters to Milena proceed with an interest in torture of the sort one would encounter in his diaries. Torture for Kafka is the pain exacted from the body that writes well. Kafka's diary entry for 23 September 1912 includes the following pronouncement: "Only *in this way* can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul" (emphasis original, 213). He wrote this after eight hours of nocturnal writing during which he wrote his short story "The Judgment." His legs, as the diary entry relates, were "stiff from sitting," and he had to heave his weight on his back several times. Kafka's consolation, however, was the way "the story developed before [him]" (212). This makes it clear that good writing depends on denying the body, punishing it, and "opening" it up, and that stories assume a corporeal form before their writers. To write is to wound the body. The body that writes should be silenced; it should live as a written icon, an aesthetic construct deprived of its interiority and clothed by tuberculosis.

In so far as writing in Kafka is associated with bodily abnegation, the death drive, and loss of self, it is figuratively related to eroticism. Writing is close to orgasmic jouissance, as French feminists put it. In an attempt to transcend Milena's body, Kafka finds in writing the locus of an erotic discharge. The correlation between eroticism and writing is evident if we consider the fact that Kafka once told Max Brod that having written "The Judgment," he thought of a powerful sexual ejaculation.⁴ Moreover, we should not fail to notice the Freudian associations of the pen with the penis.⁵ The pen is a metaphorical penis in that both have that generative power. The white virgin page is violated by the pen and blotched with ink. Its gestation is its pregnancy with meaning. Hence, Kafka swoons over Milena's letters, physically spent after hours of nocturnal writing. He exerts his bodily and mental energies on the text he writes, or reads, in a perverse copulative act with the body of the text terminating in orgasm.

The orgasmic jouissance of writing is not exclusively sexual. Writing is capable of spiritual or mental jouissance. Both somatic and spiritual ecstatic pleasures are present in Kafka's correspondence with Milena. Spiritual jouissance stems from his understanding of the nature of his relationship with women and the primacy of writing for a dying man. This is the very conception of Kafka the writer where Kafka's "corpus" outlives his "corpse." Sexual jouissance relates symbolically to the phallic power of the pen that gives birth to the text/letter. Writing is erotically seductive. It allures the sickly Kafka to write more and more letters to maintain the ongoing exchange of letters with Milena; it is thus menacing or destructive because it relates to the death drive and the economy of loss. The letter writer submits to texts, whether read or written. That readers and writers react erotically to texts can be seen in Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*⁶ and is hardly new. Like the body, the text is eroticized. The blurring of boundaries between body and text emerges if we consider the loss of identity on which Kafka's writing is founded and the merging of the lovers' identities in the course of the correspondence.

The close affinities between the body and writing can be made clearer if we consider the fact that Kafka's writing was mostly done in secret. It was also nocturnal and spasmodic, and hence akin to masturbation.⁷ The autoerotic act of writing makes it a means of self-sufficiency. The lovers in this correspondence, as I mentioned earlier, met only few times. Kafka was submerged in his perverted sexual ritual in Milena's absence with textuality as its site. It is for this reason that he describes letter writing to Milena as "an intercourse with ghosts" (223). This should take us into the final phase of this correspondence; the phase in which Kafka relates writing to ghosts as he began listening to a terrible voice from within telling him about the eternal demonic night of death.

3. Ghostly Lovers: An Epilogue

Kafka drew more and more on letters as a substitute for bodies as his ability to travel grew limited by tuberculosis. Kafka's physical effacement can be best understood in the light of Freud's contention in his paper "On Narcissism: An Introduction" that "the sick man withdraws his libidinal cathexes back upon his own ego, and sends them forth again when he recovers" (64). In this regard, Kafka's narcissism evident in this epistolary affair seems justifiable. Implementing Freud's theory of libido economics, Kafka directs his energies to the spiritual realm of writing and reduces Milena to a bodily mode of existence, which at once brings to the fore a kind of patriarchal oppression in which man is allied with the mind while woman is allied with the body. The letter writer has played with written words over the course of the correspondence and made Milena do the same. His seductive letters to Milena cast him in the role of her animus. Emma Jung describes this aspect of the animus, but in relation to the spoken word:

The animus, too, possesses the magic power of words, and therefore men who have the gift of oratory can exert a compulsive power on women in both a good and an evil sense. Am I going too far when I say that the

magic of the word, the art of speaking, is the thing in a man through which a woman is most unfailingly caught and most frequently deluded? (qtd. in Wehr 35)

Kafka's magical play with written words, however, backfires and he becomes incapable of exorcising what he conceived as the ghosts erupting as a result of so long a postal connection and a life besieged with the ghost of death. The magic of early letters no longer works by the end of the correspondence. Letters become "pure anguish, *they are caused by incurable anguish and they cause incurable anguish*" (emphasis original, 222). Moreover, the pleasure of letter writing and reading is questioned when letters are seen as demonic. The ghosts he complains of act, probably, as an indication of the approaching end of the correspondence—and by extension Kafka's end—and his inability to maintain his grip on the correspondence.

When Kafka writes to Milena again in late March 1922, after the heavy letters of 1920, he is completely changed. He is not the Kafka writing to Milena from Meran. Tuberculosis was running its fatal course; he could not travel in sleepers; he could not walk for long distances. The growing seclusion of a man living in the dark transforms him into a ghost living among ghosts. Kafka's attitudes towards letter writing now change drastically. After a long letterless period, Kafka denounces letters as deceptive, time-wasting play. The mortally wounded Kafka no longer sees letters as lovable objects. The former associations of letters with bodily processes—devouring, drinking, and orgasm—return now, but not in relation to the lovers. The vampirish ghosts, an emblem of Kafka's demonic compulsion to write, are manipulating letters and letter writers by drying the letters out and preying on the bodies of their writers. Kafka complains of this: "Writing letters, on the other hand, means exposing oneself to the ghosts, who are greedily awaiting precisely for that" (223).

The ghosts besieging Kafka's writing table "are waiting and lusting" with insatiable throats for the traffic of letters between the correspondents (225). As a result, Kafka's letters grow shorter and shorter till they cease. He starts entreating Milena to stop her mad passion for letters. He tells her: "The evil magic of letter writing is setting in and destroying my nights, even more than they are already destroying themselves. I have to stop, I can no longer write... Please let's not write anymore" (234). This is the conviction of a man belonging to the spirit or ghost world and luring Milena away from reality into union with him. Having ceased to write to her and asked her to do the same, Kafka exists as "a memory" with no objective existence. He attempts to live psychologically within her and then make her his lover-victim. He preys on her body without being physically present. He is able to achieve this through the living influence of a "ghostly lover" on his beloved. In her essay "The Ghostly Lover," Esther Harding comments on the living impact of the ghostly lover as a negative animus:

This influence which affects the woman as though it came from the action or desire of a man, when the truth is he is inactive or perhaps dead or may never have existed as an objective reality, must be a subjective effect within the woman's psyche—hence the term, *Ghostly Lover*. (emphasis original, 177)

The ghostly lover functions like the sirens of Kafka's parables. The sirens lure men by their music to seek their arms in watery graves. Similarly, Kafka as a ghostly lover has lured Milena away from normal relationships and enticed her to embrace him in letters and keep the memory of that embrace. Unable to possess her as a body, Kafka haunted her as a spirit in a heavy exchange of letters. Kafka's pen now loses its strength as the correspondence approaches its end, and as tuberculosis tightens its grip on Kafka; the pen faints like the writer that holds it and Kafka finds it difficult to continue the letter he writes. "Everything takes effort, every stroke of the pen, everything I put on paper," Kafka complains in his last postcard to Milena dated December 1923, a few months before his death, "seems to me too grandiose, out of proportion to my strength..." (237). Kafka's words lose their vitality, and he wonders whether they still have the power to reach Vienna for being choked, like their author who cannot take enough air into his faulty lungs.

All in all, *Letters to Milena* should not be viewed as a personal correspondence of a great writer of Kafka's stature. Rather, they should be valued by feminists and psychoanalysts alike for the insights they offer into the representation of the body, gender, the relations between the sexes, and the structure of language. Consequently, a return to Freud, Jung, and Lacan would add new perspectives to Kafka's scholarship. The peculiarities of Kafka's oscillating relationship with Milena may also pave the way for a feminist reevaluation of Kafka's texts in terms of the way they reflect or challenge the dominant ideology of Kafka's times, a time in which Freud's psychoanalytic theories about the female were prevalent.⁸

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Notes

¹ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Schocken, 1990) 223. All subsequent quotations will be parenthetically cited within the text.

² See for example Mark Anderson "Unsigned Letters to Milena Jesenská" 241-256, Elizabeth Boa "An Intercourse of Ghosts: Kafka's Letters to Milena Jesenská" 78-106, Margarete Buber-Neumann 56-73, and John Zilcosky "The Traffic of Writing: Technologies of Intercourse in the *Letters to Milena*" 153-173.

³ See Freud's account of the erotic nature of flames in *Civilization and Its Discontents* 37.

⁴ See Heller 37-38.

⁵ For such associations, see Gilbert and Gubar 3.

⁶ See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes in this book draws a distinction between texts of pleasure and texts of bliss in terms of their effect on the reading subject. Texts of bliss (jouissance) are associated with orgasm. They are the avant-garde polysemic texts as opposed to the realistic texts of pleasure.

⁷ For example, Kafka's diary entry for 23 September 1912 shows that he wrote "The Judgment" during a bout of nocturnal activity that lasted for eight hours. The ecstatic joy and the physical weariness Kafka felt at the completion of the story relate writing to orgasmic jouissance.

⁸ During Kafka's life span, 1883-1924, Freud, was active and publishing many of his psychoanalytic theories. Freud's works were the vogue in the Vienna literary scene with which Kafka was familiar.