Book Review: Franz Kafka, subversive dreamer, by Michael Löwy, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2016, 140 pp., £27.49, ISBN 9780472053094

Michael Löwy's short, provocative and politicized reading of Kafka is a fruitful, if at times frustrating addition to studies in Kafka. Franz Kafka: rêveur insoumis first appeared in French in 2004, and has been translated into Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek and Turkish. This new translation by Inez Hedges faithfully replicates the original, adding a brief introduction and some notes, making accessible to an Anglophone audience a new argument for the antiauthoritarian Kafka.

Löwy has written on Kafka over his career, and the present study's aim is to identify "the incredibly critical and subversive dimension of Kafka's oeuvre" (4), not through any explicit affiliations or utterances but within a profoundly antiauthoritarian spirit or "inner landscape" (9). Over seven chapters Löwy identifies, with varying successes, the features of this landscape. In Chapter 1, Löwy wades into the old controversy of the young Kafka's affinities with anarchist circles in Prague but repeats a flawed reliance on the contradictory and unreliable testimonies of Michal Mareš and Gustave Janouch. While his argument is methodologically weak, he makes a persuasive enough case for an internal "antiauthoritarian sensibility" (27), marked by a critical irony and humour, that is then explored in the development of his writings.

Although such arguments have been made before, the strength of Löwy's reading, steeped in critical theory, is its fluency in Kafka, marshalling a wide range of textual material and perceptive commentary. In Chapter 2 he identifies a trajectory of anti-authoritarianism, from a personal reaction to patriarchal authority in "The Judgement," Metamorphosis, and "Letter to my Father" that later develops into a transcendent, universal, abstract and bureaucratic representation of power in "The Penal Colony" and later novels. Kafka is recast as a rebel, anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial, whose thought sympathizes with the powerless.

Löwy is rightly keen to challenge a hermeneutic tradition since Max Brod of a pessimistic fatalism and resignation in Kafka, often linked to his Jewish identity. In Chapter 3, Löwy challenges Arendt's claim of Josef K.'s fundamental Jewishness in The Trial, presenting him as a "pariah-rebel" of a universal sort (51). Chapter 4 observes a "religion of liberty" in "Before the Law": an antiauthoritarian ethos of individual self-determination and resistance against arbitrary power. Chapter 5 explores The Castle as offering a new thinking of resistance to the "voluntary servitude" of submitting "like a dog," the Trial's last line, embodied in the defiance of the Land-surveyor (and, above all, Amalia) who most explicitly realize the later "antiauthoritarian individualism of the author" (96). The final two chapters are brief, addressing Kafka's "realism" and the "Kafkaesque," but add little to the book's argument, and the work would have benefitted from a more extensive introduction, and conclusion. In attempting to draw an anarchistic politics of resistance out of Kafka, Löwy sometimes neglects the dark humour, absurdity and ambiguities of power and freedom in his writings, which more often voice the stumbling confusions faced by individuals confronting the limits of an autonomy to which Löwy is sympathetic. While not everyone will find Löwy's subversive Kafka persuasive, the work is a rich and challenging contribution to Kafka studies.

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