

REVIEW ARTICLE: *LAMBENT TRACES*

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Written in English, with all quotations given in English translation only, *Lambent Traces* is intended for a wide range of critics with an interest in Kafka. Stated in the broadest terms, the book seeks to elucidate Franz Kafka's unique religious orientation, and the manner in which it informed his work. Kafka's religious convictions have been the subject of debate (and no small amount of speculation) since Max Brod penned what would become the first of many biographies on Kafka. The reason for this is simple: first, Kafka's pronouncements on the subject are notoriously cryptic, at times even contradictory; second, Kafka cast doubt on the notion that human beings had any access to reality, or "truth," at all. For these reasons, Professor Corngold takes pains at the start of the book to lay out the limited scope of his investigation: "Kafka's 'business,' it appears, like 'our business,' according to Jean-François Lyotard, 'is not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable.' The most important word is 'allusions'" (1). Kafka's epistemology, Corngold asserts, was informed by a Gnostic sensibility that "views this world as the corrupt product not of the true god but of a demented demiurge; nevertheless, traces of the true world can be intuited by the live spirit in ecstasy. Sparks fly up. The task is purification—not personal augmentation and not reproduction" (8). For the Gnostic, spiritual enlightenment begins with the wish to die and become one with God. Kafka, Corngold explains, allowed for the possibility that such enlightenment could come in and through the act of writing, which, in turn, would supply the moral justification for a life lived here and now.

In the first chapter, Corngold offers a provocative interpretation of "The Judgment" (*Das Urteil*) that takes Kafka's normative and private Gnosticism as its starting point.

He begins by pointing out the immense importance which the story held for Kafka, who had written it in a single sitting. The manuscript grew out of Kafka's diaries, which themselves increasingly blur the boundary between diary writing and fiction. Corngold sees in this fact a conscious attempt on Kafka's part to question himself, "leading to a certain kind of self-immolation—a *dissolution* of experience—with the intent of producing 'real' writing" (16), which Corngold defines as "resistance to the dead weight of the empirical subject" (20). Real writing, in other words, only occurs with the (temporary) death of the ego. Having thusly cast off the burden of empirical existence, Kafka is able to reconcile normative Gnosticism (embodied in the wish to die) with his own belief in the ecstatic potential inherent in the act of writing. Corngold's biographical thesis, in turn, provides the basis for his reading of "The Judgment." The figure of the father, he suggests, may be said to have two sons: the future *Familienvater* Georg Bendemann and the "bachelor-friend" in Russia (35), the two of whom represent the "tormentingly doubled persona" of Franz Kafka (33).

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The father, in this wish-dream, wants his son to be the bachelor-writer and wants his first real 'offspring'—the story itself—to be born into the world. [...] Kafka foresees that with this story he will survive Georg, his dreaded antiself, exposed as a false and lying mask; and by his death, Kafka the bachelor, his father's true son, will enter the stream of literary renown. (35)

Corngold refers here to Kafka's own desire to be accepted and loved by a father who had little understanding—much less sympathy—for his son's identity as a writer. Here biography and fiction are interwoven to produce a reading that is consistent, if not altogether convincing. However, from time to time, Corngold engages in needless speculation, which ultimately weakens his argument. For instance, he cites Kafka's remark that "The Judgment" had "come out of [him] like a real birth" as evidence of the writer's supposed inability to "assume the patriarchal virility" portrayed in the short story (36). Yet writers so often compare the process of writing to the birth of a child that it is almost cliché. The metaphor is intended, of course, to convey the growth of an idea and the difficulty and complications that generally attend its expression in the form of words on a page. Is it even possible to express this notion in the form of a paternal (rather than maternal) metaphor? My point is simply this: in the absence of supporting evidence, the claim that Kafka's birth metaphor indicates a crisis of paternity appears *spitzfindig*, at best.

The second chapter consists of an interpretation of the novel fragment *The Trial* (*Der Proceß*). As in the first chapter, this reading is based on the events of Kafka's life. Kafka, Corngold observes, was generally inclined to assume the role of guilty party, and insofar as Kafka located his identity in his writing, that pervasive sense of guilt was compounded: "His writing can only aggravate, it cannot repair, his

fault. If he writes, he is guilty of failing to live; if he does not write, he has sinned against the spirit" (38). Citing Joseph K.'s erotic attachment to various female figures, Corngold asks: "What [...] has K's sex-besotted manner of conducting a trial to do with Kafka's behavior as a writer?" He locates this nexus in the "autoeroticism of the writing 'intensity' for Kafka" (40). The pleasure that comes from writing "is the sex of the ascetic and hence part of an economy of guilt" (41). Here Corngold posits a link between the sexual nature of K.'s offense and Kafka's behavior as a writer, rather than asking whether such a link exists at all, which would be the more productive line of inquiry. The identification of the act of writing with sex is far from obvious and could benefit from more elaboration. At the conclusion of the chapter, Corngold returns to his original thesis by asserting that Kafka's writing of *The Trial*, like "The Judgment," grew out of Kafka's desire to annihilate himself "as the bearer of a life situation that he could barely endure—that of the writer who does not write or does not write well enough—at the same time that, as a writer [...] he means to survive" (43).

In the first of two segues included in the book, Corngold makes a number of valuable observations concerning Kafka's fascination with "modern medial [media?] technology" (45). The signs which constitute media are, on the one hand, the means by which power is distributed and maintained; on the other hand, the technologies upon which modern media depend often undermine the very purpose they were intended to serve. The telephone operators' workroom in Kafka's *Amerika* (*Der Verschollene*) comes to mind, where an operation which is intended to facilitate communication between individuals appears to do just the opposite. In the present era, text messaging—while convenient—often limits the meanings one can convey to a relatively short list of abbreviations, arguably reducing—rather than expanding—the potential for communication among people. Corngold explains that the internet age itself presents an obstacle to modern readers of Kafka, who run the risk of missing his commentary on the irony of modern media precisely because so much of what Kafka points out is now taken for granted. Corngold also provides useful observations on the symbolism contained in "In a Penal Colony" (*In der Strafkolonie*), paying particular attention to the insight gained by the condemned man at the moment the machine which inscribes the law upon his body breaks down. The segue ends with an exegesis on the notion of cultural immortality in the Information Age.

In Chapter 3, Corngold comments on the many levels of performance contained in *The Trial*, a work he describes as being "a play within a narrative" (51), with Joseph K. assuming the role of actor, "trapped in the niche of the prisoner of the panopticon" (52). As the title of Kafka's best-known novel fragment suggests, the protagonist is aware from the beginning that his fate rests upon the manner in which his actions are perceived, and it is perhaps the ultimate irony of *The Trial* that despite said awareness, K.'s actions seem only to propel him to his fate. Corngold asks what reasons may have informed Kafka's decision to "kill" his protagonist at the outset (Kafka wrote the first and final chapters of the book at more or less the same time). He suggests that Kafka initially intended to maintain an emotional detachment from K., but as he

continued writing the novel became ever “less capable of imagining his superiority to K, and [less capable] of functioning as an officer of the Old Law” (63). Corngold further points out that Kafka wrote “In a Penal Colony” while still in the middle of *The Trial*. In that short story, it is not the condemned, but rather the machine that breaks down, an event which appears to support K.’s contention that it is the bureaucracy rather than the individual that is culpable (“It’s the organization that is to blame”). This fact reflects, yet again, Kafka’s own inability to identify with the law that sentences his protagonist to a violent and premature death. In all, Corngold succeeds admirably in shedding light on a very relevant and complex topic.

Corngold devotes the fourth chapter to “allotria” and “excreta” and the way in which each element reinforces the other in “In a Penal Colony.” There are, he points out, actions depicted in the story which appear playful or out-of-place, actions whose meaning or function appear impossible for the reader to decipher. On one such occasion the officer laughs as he is preparing the condemned for execution; the condemned, for his part, quite literally plays along, amusing himself and his executioner during what amount to the last moments of his life. Corngold asks what purpose is served by such apparent frivolity. He suggests that “allotria works distractingly, and its plain function is the way it gives relief from horror” (71). But does it really? Does allotria not serve instead to *intensify* the sense of horror felt by the reader? As Albert Camus once observed in an essay on Kafka:

Merely to announce to us that uncommon fate is scarcely horrible, because it is improbable. But if its necessity is demonstrated to us in the framework of everyday life, society, state, familiar emotion, then the horror is hallowed. In that revolt that shakes man and makes him say: “That is not possible,” there is an element of desperate certainty that ‘that’ can be. (Camus 95)

What Corngold calls “allotria” is really that element in Kafka that lends his writing its profoundly absurd, uniquely surreal quality, one that evokes a horror in the reader at the same time it induces a feeling of disgust. Criticism recognizes Kafka, in fact, as a modern writer in large part due to this fact: he draws the reader’s attention to the horror of the bureaucratic machine, a machine that is, ironically, of humanity’s own construction. To explain away Kafka’s technique, then, as merely the author’s way of *relieving* the reader from horror does, in my view, injustice to the potentiality of Kafka’s work.

The second segue in the book, entitled “Death and the Medium,” returns explicitly to the connection between Kafka’s Gnostic views on the meaning of mortality and the act of writing. There is, again, the ecstasy of death and the ecstasy of writing, and Corngold posits here that Kafka’s work may be considered an attempt to reconcile the two modes, for on one hand “[w]hat writes, when one writes well, is not oneself, but another” (92). On the other hand, “[t]o strive to become what one writes as that which has been written on one is to be enthralled by a monstrosity, so that to write fully—and hence to be fully written upon—is to be overwritten, it is to die” (93). Corngold

regards “In a Penal Colony” as the writer’s “master narrative” largely for its portrayal of an empirical man who becomes a textual sign he cannot decipher until—possibly—the moment of death (86).

The fifth chapter, “Nietzsche, Kafka and Literary Paternity,” assumes a Nietzschean influence on Kafka that is perhaps best described as overly subtle. Kafka, after all, does not mention Nietzsche once in any of his writings. Yet the reader is supposed to believe that while “Kafka was not ostentatiously engaged by Nietzsche” (95), Nietzsche is nonetheless present in Kafka if the reader looks hard enough: “With the customary route of influence blocked, the relations of the two must be an affair of the critic’s induction, of hermeneutic speculation” (96). *Must* it really? After all, is it not conceivable that Nietzsche’s influence on Kafka was instead negligible? Corngold never makes room for such a possibility: “[T]here are no irrefragably hard data connecting him to Nietzsche’s works. This state of affairs has led to the consensus that, like Thomas Mann in *Doctor Faustus*, Kafka did not have to mention Nietzsche by name since he is everywhere in his work, like salt in seawater” (96). If any such consensus exists, I am not aware of it, nor does the author provide any evidence in support of this claim, other than a footnote citing two short articles that take a similarly speculative approach in support of what is, in my view, a problematic assertion. After all, Thomas Mann may not mention Nietzsche in *Faustus* (a work of *fiction*), but Nietzsche is the subject of one of Mann’s most famous essays. The comparison Corngold draws between Mann and Kafka is, therefore, misleadingly imprecise. The unstable foundation that underlies the author’s thesis leads, ineluctably, to convoluted leaps of reasoning that are difficult for even trained Germanists to follow. Sentences such as “Nietzsche kept on fathering his father whose task it was to father him” threaten to confuse a lack of clarity with profundity (102).

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Chapter 6 reflects on a common thread in Kafka’s late stories, all of which “exhibit the tension of a Gnostic world view, in which the created world consists of debased images of a transcendent source that has nonetheless left lambent traces in the mind” (112). With abundant reference to Kafka’s diaries, Corngold shows how the writer “experiment[s] with the rule of metaphysical division, the line dividing the physical from the metaphysical world” (118). Kafka’s later stories, he explains, are born of a kind of moral imperative which requires the individual, who possesses knowledge of good and evil, to act “in the name of the good” (116). Mere contemplation is not enough. Accordingly, the later stories follow a certain pattern consisting of, “first, the setting into a play of chiasmic reversals; second, a contemplative, willless attending on the event; finally, the emergence of this recognition with the force of an event” (124). In this way, Kafka “writes [recursiveness] into being—and acknowledging its necessity, achieves a power that has something to do with the *truth*” (125). In all, the chapter makes a compelling case for a Gnostic reading of Kafka’s *Spätwerk*.

The unique nature of Kafka’s skepticism forms the basis of inquiry in the seventh chapter. Here Corngold advances an internally complex yet coherent thesis whose essence can be stated thusly: Kafka could be counted as a skeptic in many areas,

though he cannot rightly be described as “a skeptic in moral matters” (141), as his writing always leaves room for the possibility of striving for the moral good. Kafka’s style exhibits, nonetheless, what Corngold calls “an *aesthetics* of skepticism” (130; my italics). This skepticism, in Kafka, emerges quite ironically as the last bastion of modern belief. For just as uncompromising doubt penetrates and saps each thing of its substance, preserving this doubt may have been, for Kafka, the only way nihilism (an apathy toward moral affairs) could be avoided and the potential of life affirmed.

The eighth and ninth chapters take aim at what Corngold believes to be two common misperceptions in Kafka criticism. The first holds that Kafka “wrote in a dialect called ‘Prague German’ and by doing so intended “to contribute to the construction of a ‘minor literature’ rebelliously aimed at a ‘major’ or master literature” (142). Corngold easily refutes this claim by casting doubt on existence of a “Prague German” altogether and pointing out that the German Kafka “presumably *spoke* was only a faintly dialectical coloration of High German” (143). He also notes that Kafka
 450 included Yiddish and Czech among the minor literatures of his native land, but certainly not German nor any (alleged) dialect thereof. The second misperception, according to Corngold, regards Kafka’s work as “a cryptogram of a decaying capitalist social order” (162), a view he dismisses as a “profane fable” (162). Unsurprisingly, he accuses Adorno of ideological rigidity, charging that “there is really no consistency to Adorno’s procedure of matching elements from Kafka to his vast fable of social and economic history” (163). Corngold attributes the prevalence of both readings (particularly in postcolonial studies) to the desire to enlist Kafka “as a local revolutionary [...]. What was at first a backlash against Soviet-Communist domination is now a backlash against American-spurred globalization” (145).

In the tenth chapter, Corngold applies his considerable talent as a translator to errors of translation from German to English, and to the problems that such inaccuracies engender. Here Corngold makes a number of enlightening observations, although, as elsewhere in the book, he tends to overreach. One glaring example involves Edwin and Willa Muir, perhaps the most widely-read translators of Kafka into English. Corngold makes the breathtaking charge that the Muirs’ translation mistakes “appear to show a motive for their commission” (182), namely that they sought to take some of the dark edge off of Kafka. This is an extraordinary claim requiring extraordinary evidence, but Corngold does not supply it. Instead, he offers two examples that are easily attributable to human fallibility: in one passage that depicts Karl Rossman sitting at a piano, the Muirs translate suffering (*Leid*) as song (*Lied*); in the other, Georg Bendemann eating at the same time (*gleichzeitig*) as his father in a restaurant is translated to mean he eats *together* with his father in a restaurant. These examples hardly amount to a pattern, much less a conspiracy. Of course, one also must ask why the Muirs would set out to translate Kafka in the first place if they found the tone or mood of his writing to be excessively dark.

The final chapter laments the approach Cultural Studies has taken to the interpretation of Kafka works. The problem with “so-called cultural studies,” Corngold

states, is that it “reads the specificity of these texts through the generalities of political coercions and cultural stereotypes” (194). He points to Elizabeth Boa and Sander Gilman as two representatives of this school, and suggests that each critic’s reading is informed by a highly subjective political agenda. Corngold ascribes the prevalence of cultural studies today to “the social mood of *ressentiment*. Because literature, it is supposed, has never been explicit enough in arraigning the crimes of men and women, it will not satisfy the scandalized ethical man or woman who wants to see these crimes arraigned, especially against his or her own people. [...] For Boa, Kafka is antifeminist; for Gilman, he is not anti-Semitic enough” (200). Cultural studies is particularly ill-suited to Kafka criticism, he argues, because the writer himself lacked a coherent identity and, “[i]n the absence of self, [...] is at work constituting one, wide and general enough to contain even the elucidated empirical tensions of his time” (195). One can debate whether it is actually possible for an individual to so thoroughly transcend the era in which he or she lives. Nevertheless, Corngold’s more general point is well taken: namely, that no single literary theory can or should function as a straightjacket.

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In sum, *Lambent Traces* can best be described as an uneven work of scholarship that nonetheless sheds light on the way in which Gnosticism informed Kafka’s views on any number of subjects, not the least of which being the unique sort of enlightenment he sought to attain through the act of writing. To this extent, the book contains valuable insights for specialists and non-specialists alike.

WORK CITED

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O’Brien. New York: Vintage, 1955. Print.