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English 3000

23 April 2013

Précis of Nabokov, Eggenschwiler, and Corngold

In his lecture on Franz Kafka's short story, "The Metamorphosis," Vladimir Nabokov offers his interpretation of Gregor Samsa's plight and Franz Kafka's intentions. Nabokov dismisses two prominent interpretations of Kafka's writing almost immediately. He dismisses entirely the opinion of Kafka's friend Max Brod: that one can only understand Kafka's writings if you consider him a preternaturally gifted writer and a saint with a unique spiritual point of view. The second interpretation that Nabokov dismisses is the Freudian view that interprets Kafka's writings in light of his relationship with his father. According to Nabokov, any Freudian reading of "The Metamorphosis" would be wildly inaccurate because, in his opinion, Kafka did not believe in psychoanalysis. In giving his own interpretation of "The Metamorphosis," Nabokov points out that, "Kafka liked to draw his terms from the language of law and science, giving them a kind of ironic precision, with no intrusion of the author's private sentiments" (256). The demarcation between artist and art is a sharp one for Nabokov. The most prominent argument Nabokov puts forth is that, "Gregor is a human being in an insect's disguise; his family are insects disguised as people" (280). This interpretation colors all of the inferences that Nabokov draws from the rest of the work. He focuses on the clarity of Kafka's style, his precision and his formality, which are juxtaposed with the "nightmare subject matter" (280) For Nabokov, "Contrast and unity, style and matter, manner and plot" are the most important

inverses that the reader must consider in order to arrive at a sound analysis of Kafka's story (280).

In his critical essay, "The Metamorphosis, Freud, and the Chains of Odysseus," David Eggenchwiler takes the polar opposite view of Nabokov. For Eggenchwiler, the Freudian interpretation of "The Metamorphosis" is the only method of comprehending the most genuine intention of Kafka's writing. Eggenchwiler sets out to discredit those who would claim that Kafka did not believe in psychoanalysis or would not use Freudian themes in his fiction. In acknowledging erroneous Freudian interpretations of the work that either barely scratched the surface or overanalyzed every line, Eggenchwiler attempts to position himself securely in the middle ground. He argues that opponents of psychoanalytic criticism too readily seize on Kafka's brief outbursts in his diary decrying Freud's theories and that they neglect to notice Kafka's "more balanced and at times brilliant, view of contemporary psychology" (200). Eggenchwiler postulates three main points in his essay. The first is that "the metamorphosis signifies guilt and the desire for punishment for having usurped the father's role" (203). Secondly, that "Kafka has made use of Gregor's verminous body to suggest and to undercut psychoanalytic themes...he plays the literal against the symbolic to arrive at a distorted metaphor that is neither entirely figurative nor entirely literal" (207). For Eggenchwiler, Kafka's occasional ironic view of psychoanalysis in "The Metamorphosis" only serves to contrast those instances where he uses it to the greatest symbolic effect. Finally, Eggenchwiler argues that Kafka implies that psychology may specify what people fear or desire within their minds but that the "inner life cannot be entirely known, entirely fenced in by anthropomorphic theories" (208). Throughout his arguments, Eggenchwiler makes heavy use of Oedipal themes to explain Gregor's behavior toward his father and further still, to infer Kafka's views of his own father.

Stanley Corngold in “The Commentator’s Despair: The Interpretation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*” approaches the short story from a number of different directions. Before he begins his analysis, Corngold strongly denounces the current state of Kafka criticism. He laments, “For too long critics have disregarded the perspective they could gain from standing on the shoulders of their predecessors” (1). Corngold’s main goal in providing his basic interpretation is to lend the reader a starting point to make the best use of the extensive bibliography of Kafka criticism that he has assembled and the abstracts to these works, which he has written. The ultimate claim that Corngold makes is, “The distortion of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* is inspired by a radical aesthetic intention, which proceeds by destruction and results in creation of a monster, virtually nameless, existing as an opaque sign” (9). This “opaque sign” is Kafka’s highest artistic goal in writing “*The Metamorphosis*,” according to Corngold. Kafka attempts to make the metaphor of a man being a vermin into a factual reality, thus creating a monster. However, this is an “incomplete literalization” (10). Kafka distorts the metaphor incompletely, causing Gregor to retain his human consciousness while in the body of a “vermin” (10). Given this interpretation, metaphor is the most powerful lens to understanding Kafka, Corngold claims. He suggests that Kafka wrote most brilliantly at the beginning of his stories and declined as he reached the end. With this perspective in mind, Corngold claims that, “much of the action of “*The Metamorphosis*” consists of Kafka’s attempts to come to terms with its beginning” (3). The most powerful line in the entire story is the first sentence. Ultimately, the reader must simply comprehend the fact that Gregor had undergone a metamorphosis in the first place.

Works Cited

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