Kafka Revisited: Autobiography, Writing, and the Body in Some Selected Works

by

Shadi Saleh A. Neimneh

BA English Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, 1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Literature and Criticism) in the Department of English Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan.

Approved by:

Dr. Ibrahim Dawood ................(Chairman)
Dr. Fadia Suyoufi.......................(Member)
Prof. Nasser Athamneh ......................(Member)
Prof. Tawfiq Yousef.................(Member)

May 2003
Kafka Revisited: Autobiography, Writing, and the Body in Some Selected Works

Abstract

Shadi Saleh Neimneh
Supervisor: Dr. Ibrahim Dawood

This thesis aims at investigating Franz Kafka’s (1883-1924) autobiographical conception of writing and the body. It examines Kafka’s evolving conception of writing and the body against different phases of his aggravating tubercular condition. Central to the discussion is the interplay between the textual and the human, their convergence, and their divergence in the works under consideration. The thesis utilizes the textual and the biographical approaches, along with diverse feminist, psychological, and post-structuralist critical paradigms. Some of Kafka’s letters and diaries, other than those studied in this thesis, are also relevant.

The Introduction introduces Kafka, sheds light on his fictional world and literary status, and shows the autobiographical slant of his works. It then concludes with the rationale behind this thesis. Chapter One focuses on a letter Kafka wrote in 1919, two years after the diagnosis of his tuberculosis. Kafka’s Brief an den Vater (1952; Eng. tr., Letter to His Father, 1953) is read as a text that exposes the writer’s neurotic and tubercular personality and his resort to writing as a response to his father, illness, and disrupted marriage plans. The first phase of Kafka’s tubercular life revealed in this letter captures his essentially ambivalent attitude towards writing and the body and the precarious triumph of writing over a sick body.
Chapter One then focuses on Kafka’s correspondence with the Czech writer Milena Jesenská from 1920 to 1922 and published as Briefe an Milena (1952; Eng. tr., Letters to Milena, 1953). Kafka’s Letters to Milena are read as representing another phase of his tubercular life wherein writing replaces the body in an epistolary love affair. Once replaced by written letters, it is argued, the body is relegated to a ghostly presence.

Chapter Two explores Kafka’s resort to writing as a refuge from his deteriorating body through an examination of a novel Kafka wrote in 1922, Das Schloss (1926; Eng. tr., The Castle, 1953). The affinities between Kafka and his fictional hero, K., are explored. Kafka’s immersion in writing as a response to his shattering experiences and his disgust with sexuality are discussed in the light of the novel’s widespread correspondence between the Castle officials and what they consider as the subsidiary issue of female sexuality. This is viewed as a continuation of the major themes of Chapter One and a new move towards the relegation of the body to an inferior status.

Chapter Three examines Kafka’s late autobiographical short stories to show how Kafka, in the final phase of his tubercular life, from 1922 to 1924, views the total repudiation of a dying body as necessary for a redemptive artistic vision. Kafka’s protagonists in the stories cited are allotted various vocations, such as fasting, singing, and philosophical reflection, that make them view the body as an artistic medium and an impediment to perfection. Accordingly, they seek to denigrate the body in order to free the soul. The conclusion sums up the discussion and establishes bodily inscription as the only mode of writing which Kafka approved of.