LIBRO RESEÑADO
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Kafka has become a talisman for contemporary literary and cultural theory. In fact, Kafka’s works have been interpreted as allegorical representations of modernity’s insufficiencies, dogmatic impulses and intransigent attitudes. *El proceso*, *El castillo* or *La metamorfosis* insert a critical look at modernity, indicating not only its regulatory character and its attachment to efficiency and control, but also reflecting on Modernity’s violent faith in progress and temporal teleology, its universalizing pretensions and finally its incapacity to promote radical diversity and cultural “others”. Allegorical readings have detected in Kafka a general and uncanny diagnosis about the punitive rationalization of reality, about the bureaucratic character of modern states and about the objectification of individual identities. These readings, useful and productive as they are, run the risk of over-stretching the meaning of these fictions, mechanically amplifying its political and cultural implications. In other words, Kafka’s masterpieces run the risk of signifying too much and, as a result, too little.

Sultana Wahnón’s latest book, *Kafka y la tragedia judía*, proposes a clever and informative intervention in this debate. Wahnón affirms that allegorical and deconstructive approaches have traditionally ignored or minimized Kafka’s literal words, pushing for interpretations that a careful reading of these texts would dismiss. This is probably one of the most useful aspect of Wahnón’s book: *Kafka y la tragedia judía* is not only a compelling interpretation of Kafka’s *The Trial* and other writings, but also a challenging and fine revision of Kafka’s most relevant critics. From Derrida to Barthes, from Deleuze and Guattari to George Steiner, Wahnón reviews these intellectuals’ contributions and limitations to the current understanding of Kafka. This revision is always well grounded and pondered, establishing a stimulating tension with previous explanations of this writer.

Wahnón’s interpretative method tries to historically and biographically contextualize Kafka’s novels in order to show that this writer was not meditating and writing about modernity’s failures in general, but about one of the darkest aspects of modern political atmosphere, anti-Semitism. Wahnón
explicitly points out that this interpretation does not pretend to prolong Kafka’s semantic dissemination, but to stop it or, at least, limit it. In other words, Wahnón critically questions Derridian and deconstructionist understanding of textual meaning, emphasizing that (as Umberto Eco explained in *The Limits of Interpretation*), the hermeneutic task should and can look for the most appropriate and precise interpretation of a text. This interpretation has to compete with others in its search for any sort of truth. For Wahnón, anti-Semitism and the Jewish question are precisely the limits of interpretation that many of Kafka’s critics have ignored or considered as a minor or secondary aspect.

From this perspective, *Kafka y la tragedia judía* rethinks the interpretative problem of K.’s questioned innocence in *The Process*. Many critics have argued that K. is essentially an ambiguous character whose main and fatal sin could be found in his misogynous behavior, his strange sexuality or in his incapacity to establish supporting relationships with others. Wahnón proposes a return to the text’s literal words in order to reframe this debate. After a careful reading of the plot, her conclusion is very clear: *The Process* continuously affirms and defends K.’s complete innocence. The persistent necessity to find K.’s “original mistake” or foundational crime unconsciously echoes of one the discursive assumptions that has animated anti-Semitism: Jews are intrinsically and essentially guilty even before establishing their crimes or even confronting the accusations with real facts. As Slavoj Zizek concludes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the direct contact with Jews never satisfies anti-Semitic prejudices because anti-Semitism is not related to real existing Jews, but to phantasmatic projections and exacerbated social fears that literally invent Jews as disturbing “others”.

One of the most appealing aspects of *Kafka y la tragedia judía* is the reinterpretation of *The Trial* from the tragic thought’s perspective. Wahnón illuminates not only the existing concomitances and parallelisms between some tragic writers (such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides or Nietzsche, among
others), but also the specificity of Kafka’s approach to this literary and philosophical tradition. Wahnón’s insightful remarks show how Kafka creates a modern tragedy in which destiny is not designed by God’s changing will, but by a human tribunal that inflicts pain upon an innocent. In this modern tragedy, the metaphysical evil became a historical and political one. Moreover, Kafka’s characters do not reestablish a moral order in the world because their sufferings are senseless and do not have a teleological determination. There is not a lesson to be learned from this tragic destiny. K.’s death signals the radical pessimism of a tragedy that does not find a final sublimation or an ultimate redeeming end. In fact, Wahnón convincingly relates this pessimism with Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. Kafka and Nietzsche would share a firm opposition to nineteenth century’s “scientific” ideas about the evolution and lineal progression of History. Jews and Judaism become suffering and painful proofs of those nineteenth century theories’ limitations. In other words, Jews and Judaism do not stand as mere metaphors for other Modernity’s victims because, in *The Process*, anti-Semitism is presented as the real dark side of modern History.

Wahnón does not explain Kafka’s writing about human suffering in term of nihilism. The fact that pain and death cannot be transcended does not imply that they do not have any historical meaning. There is not other life or reality that can be achieved through sacrifice or martyrdom. Political crimes and historical repression have to be addressed historically because any utopian future will be not religious or transcendental, but historical and human. Human suffering is finally articulated in Kafka not as a punishment for past sins nor as a price that has to be paid, but as a real and existing reality that hopefully will promote reactions. The result of these reactions could be higher moral standards and material improvements.

Although *Kafka y la tragedia judía* traces classic and modern literary antecedents for *The Trial’s* main character (such as Edipo), Wahnón thinks that the most relevant influence is a biblical character, Job. This last point is intelligently argued
through a close comparison between *The Trial* and *The Book of Job*. Dialoguing with previous essays by Schökel, Sicre or Nemo, Wahnón is probably at her best in these sections. It would be difficult to summarize *Kafka y la tragedia judía’s* ability to rediscover *The Trial* as a novel that is profoundly influenced by Jewish religiosity and narrative traditions. Key concepts in Kafka’s narrative world (such as innocence, guilt, justice or persecution) establish a complex and conflictive relation with Jewish religious believes that Wahnón carefully explains. One of her most important conclusion is that, although Kafka cannot be explained without his Jewish cultural and religious context, this Austrian author offers a secularized version of Judaism. In short, Kafka cannot be explained without Judaism, but Judaism (by itself) does not explain Kafka.

The last three chapters of Wahnón’s book are devoted to the biographical and historical context in which Kafka wrote his main novels, articles and short stories. All the information these chapters set out confirms one of the premises of Wahnón’s analysis: many of Kafka’s critics have tended to ignore or minimize the role that anti-Semitism and Judaism play in *The Trial* and other works. This author came from a Jewish environment, paid attention to Jewish cultural manifestation (such as Yiddish theater), wrote about the difficulties of his community and witnessed the emergence of the National-Socialist Party. Using Kafka’s letters and other personal writings, Wahnón also outlines this author’s political ideas and his multifaceted attitude towards Zionism. From this analysis, it can be obtained a clear and convincing portrait of Kafka as an author that never stopped thinking about the situation of Jewish citizens and about the implications of Jewish identities in a tumultuous and xenophobic society.

I would like to underline one last aspect of this book. Wahnón employs several critical approaches with a consistency and a flexibility that make this book an enlightening lesson: from phenomenology to historicism, from biographical contextualization to intertextual analysis, from hermeneutics to post-colonial theory. Every single chapter of *Kafka y la tragedia*
judía possesses its own autonomy and could be read separately. The compilation of the nine chapters creates a kaleidoscopic and appealing approach to Kafka (an approach that Walter Benjamin would have probably liked). The different directions in which Wahnón pushes her analysis provide a fragmentary but coherent explanation of Kafka as the European author that foresaw the political future of his continent as a time of persecution and annihilation for Jews. The intuition to diagnose the precarious situation of his community runs in parallel with his capacity to explain, in narrative terms, the political and human tragedy that Jews would have to face in Germany, Austria and many other European countries.