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Kafka L.O.L.

Notes on Promethean Laughter

Quodlibet Elements

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## THE BOOK

We are still debating whether Kafka should be considered as a tragic or nihilist author, a terrifyingly dark, sardonically bleak neurotic, or as a savvy comic writer with a taste for black humor. This quandary explains why I begin by wondering whether one can say that Kafka was “laughing out loud.”

This essay begins by discussing the function of laughter in Kafka in an early novella belonging to the genre of the “comic grotesque” prevalent in the pre-Expressionist German culture. Parallels with Klee’s works help define this tragi-comic version of modernism. A survey of an anthology presenting a “comic Kafka” maps out numerous forms taken by the comic. A critical assessment of Kafka’s oeuvre is then provided by Günther Anders’s groundbreaking but rarely mentioned book of Kafka. Anders highlights the political and atheistic dimension of the work while criticizing Kafka’s Promethean nihilism, before moving to a theory of technology and the “posthuman” condensed in the phrase of “Promethean shame” can be construed as underpinning a “Promethean laughter” to be deduced from reading Kafka’s deviant parables on “Prometheus” and “Abraham.” Kafka’s laughter will make sense via theories of Bergson, Freud and Nancy about being in *statu nascendi*.

## THE AUTHOR

Jean-Michel Rabaté is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, after having taught in Dijon, Paris, Montreal and Princeton. He is one of managing editors of the Journal of Modern Literature. He chairs the Forum for Philosophy and literature at the MLA. He is one of the founders of Slought Foundation, and a curator of exhibitions, conferences, lectures and conversations. He is since 2008 a fellow of American Academy of Arts and Science.

He has authored 25 books and edited 15 collections of essays. Recent titles include Crimes of the Future (Bloomsbury, 2014), The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis (Cambridge University Press, 2014), The Pathos of Distance (Bloomsbury, 2016), Think, Pig! (Fordham University Press, 2016), Les Guerres de Jacques Derrida (Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2016), and Rust (Bloomsbury, forthcoming), as well two forthcoming collections: After Derrida (Cambridge University Press) and The New Beckett (Cambridge University Press).