WISDOM AND THE TIGHTROPE OF BEING. ASPECTS OF NIETZSCHE IN KAFKA’S THE METAMORPHOSIS (1915)

ABSTRACT

This article illuminates Nietzsche’s and Kafka’s spiritual kinship and its manifestation in Kafka’s story The Metamorphosis. Nietzsche’s role as a practitioner of “disruptive wisdom” serves as the point of departure for the examination of Gregor Samsa’s untimely and abrupt transformation into a giant vermin. The article explores Gregor’s development in light of Zarathustra’s parable of the three metamorphoses of the spirit, and it examines the relevance of the myth of the Way in the protagonist’s search for meaning. Central to this discussion are Kafka’s and Nietzsche’s fascination with animal similes and Kafka’s modification of the Nietzschean metaphor of man as a rope.

Key words: Absolute values; Alexandrian man; altered state of being; belief in Self and Life; communication; community; dehumanization; Deleuze and Guattari; dialogue; disruptive wisdom; human; Kafka; knowledge; metamorphosis; myth of the Way; Nietzsche; search for meaning; self-repression; Socratic man; the tamed human being; transformation; truth; wisdom; Zarathustra.

INTRODUCTION

The wisdom we find in Kafka is not a traditional kind of wisdom. It is not a cultivated treasure of truth, and it is not a kingdom of knowledge neatly packaged to offer profound insight into the complex interrelationships of self and other. It is neither judicious foresight nor deeply anchored sagacity. Nor does it come to us as a stockpile of erudition from which we can draw sustenance. Kafka’s wisdom grows out of a deeply felt pain over the loss of tradition and community. It is informed by his acute sense of vulnerability in the face of the cataclysmic unraveling of the modern world; and it lies at the heart of his constant struggle with the uncertainties about his own place both within the immediate family and the larger social and spiritual continuum.
Kafka’s concepts of self, being, and truth do not fall within localizable parameters of “permanence, stability, and identity”; much rather, his presentation of reality shows greater affinity with what in Deleuze and Guattari is perceived as “[f]lux, change, and relation” (Urpeth 102). At the heart of this ontological approach, we can recognize Nietzsche’s understanding of “being in terms of becoming” (Urpeth 102). According to Nietzsche, “knowledge is possible only on the basis of belief in being” (The Will to Power, section 518, 281). This belief in life and meaningfulness, however, is coupled with a continuing critical examination and an ongoing questioning of existence that undercut generally endorsed assumptions, dismantle transcendent truths, and destabilize accepted customs. Thus Nietzsche emerges as a practitioner “disruptive wisdom”. His “permanent critique of the ‘timely’ present” makes him a representative of an “untimely mode of life” that “entails a perpetual ‘twisting free’ or ‘recoiling away’ from the constraining nets of the conventional epistemic and nomothetic horizon within which we are trapped” (Hicks/Rosenberg 2004, 5).

Nietzsche’s “untimeliness” as a non-normative thinker held much appeal for Kafka who, throughout his life, struggled with the many facets of his “otherness” as an alienated modernist artist, as a distanced son and family member, as an infelicitous lover lacking both the ability and willingness for compromise, as a maladjusted official in the bureaucratic grip of an insurance institute, as an estranged German-speaking Jew in Prague, and as an escapist who was thoroughly detached from the rhythms of modern society. Yet while demonstrating “unusual receptivity for other men’s modes of thought”, Kafka responds to the challenges of thinkers like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer “with a singular independence of mind” (Reed 203).

If Nietzsche’s professed philosophical task was “[t]o make the individual uncomfortable” (“Notes [1875]”, Portable Nietzsche 50) through a “permanent attitude of questioning normal, conventional things” (Hicks/Rosenberg 2004, 4), it was Kafka’s achievement to deliver poignant literary images that show disruptive wisdom at work through the portrayal of the individual in crisis. The Metamorphosis, in particular, opens up “spaces for rethinking our ways of being and acting in the world” (Hicks/Rosenberg 2004, 5). At the same time, the story of Gregor Samsa’s demise provides a highly concrete, physical illustration of someone “who feels wounded . . . in the deepest and most sacred part of his being” (Untimely Meditations 3, § 3, 141) as a result of the loss of “those vital ‘commonplaces’ that heretofore gave [his] life meaning” (Hicks/Rosenberg 2004, 5).

The spiritual kinship between Nietzsche and Kafka, although disputed by Kafka’s close friend Max Brod, has been widely acknowledged in the last fifty years. Nietzsche, whose writings bespeak an “anatomy of despair”, is considered “in many respects a legitimate spiritual ancestor of Kafka” (Heller 207). Despite the fact that their “differences are self-evident” (Bridgwater 14), and even though there are no “references to Nietzsche in Kafka’s diaries and letters”
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(Bridgwater 12), the importance of Nietzsche for Kafka has been documented convincingly in Patrick Bridgwater’s detailed study on *Kafka and Nietzsche*. His subtle analyses succeed in compiling “countless ‘connexion[s]’ and ‘parallels’ between the two writers” that “far from being vague, are strikingly and sometimes uncannily exact” (Bridgwater 14). However, Bridgwater, who so aptly illuminates Nietzsche’s key concepts in Kafka’s novels and stories, includes surprisingly few comments about the relevance of Nietzsche for Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* which, in his view, is “most satisfactorily explicable as a whole in Freudian terms” (Bridgwater 129). The present study intends to focus on this omission. By supplementing the existing body of criticism with an examination of Nietzschean elements in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, this essay will contribute a new frame of reference that adds essential facets to the “multivalency” (Pelikan Straus 651) of this inexhaustible literary paragon of modern existence.

**THE TAMED BEAST**

In his passionate, frank and unconventional engagement with the promises and flaws of human nature, Nietzsche is driven by the fundamental belief “that man is, before all else, an animal being” (Reed 160). As he pursues his goals of “revelation and restoration”, he aims at “persuading men to return to their animal selves” in order to explore their “untried potential” (Reed 161). His hope is to prepare the way for a life that is “much simpler and emotionally cleaner than our present life” (*Human, All Too Human* § 34, 30). The cultural construct at issue in Nietzsche is Christian morality conceived of as an improvement of the human condition. This improvement, according to Nietzsche, has gone awry when it is based on the *taming* of the beast, man. The tamed human being, weakened by the depressive effect of fear, through pain, through wounds, and through hunger*, becomes a pathetic, dispirited “sickly” beast (*Twilight of the Idols* 502), an impoverished, domesticated product of civilized life.

Nietzsche’s penchant for animal similes seems to have held a particular fascination for Kafka whose “human zoo”, like Nietzsche’s rich repertoire of human and non-human figures, emphasizes “the aesthetic and organizational features of certain types of lives, characters, and cultures” and elicits “an immediate and direct aesthetic reaction on the part of the reader” (Hicks/Rosenberg 2003, 9). Gregor Samsa’s unmitigated metamorphosis into a giant vermin at the brink of an “untimely” day confronts the reader with a bewildering “shadow-world of ambiguities” (Williams 97) in which a human being has suddenly ceased to be a man. At the dawn of a perplexing day, we witness “das Phantasma der Geburtsstunde” of a reconstituted subjectivity that is thrown on the path of an unheard of journey and must face anew the challenge “sich als Subjekt in der Welt zu verorten” (Öhlschläger 165).
The following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* titled "The problem of those who are waiting" reverberates in the opening of *The Metamorphosis*:

It requires strokes of luck and much that is incalculable if a higher man in whom the solution of a problem lies dormant is to get around to action in time—to "eruption", one might say. In the average case it does not happen, and in nooks all over the earth sit men who are waiting, scarcely knowing in what way they are waiting, much less that they are waiting in vain. Occasionally the call that awakens—that accident which gives the "permission" to act—comes too late, when the best youth and strength for action has already been used up by sitting still; and many have found to their horror when they "leaped up" that their limbs had gone to sleep and their spirit had become too heavy. "It is too late", they said to themselves, having lost their faith in themselves and henceforth forever useless (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 274, 412).

Quite literally, Gregor Samsa is one of those who miss their wake-up call: "Had the alarm clock not gone off? From the bed one could see that it had been properly set for four o'clock; of course it must have gone off. Yes, but was it possible to sleep quietly through that ear-splitting noise?" (*Metamorphosis* 309). As an "average case", Gregor does not "get around to action in time" on the fateful morning of his transformation. Moreover, he has spent the past five years in a paradoxical holding pattern as a traveling salesman whose tedious labor serves primarily the upkeep of his parents and his sister. When he assumed the role of sole breadwinner after his father's business failure, Gregor stepped into a position he silently loathed, only to make sure that nothing would upset his parents' and sister's livelihood and decorum. What he did not bargain for is that this act of self-repression would turn against him. Although he has been constantly on the move as a traveling salesman, inwardly he has reached a standstill. As Nietzsche puts it, he has used up his "best youth and strength for action" and has sold out his own self to stagnation. In a startling turn of events, his sacrifice generates an inner distress that now dramatizes his outer self. Thus he transforms into the giant vermin that becomes the visible sign of a comprehensive existential and semiotic disturbance. The lack of "eruption" within him precipitates a rupture that jeopardizes his solidarity with himself and with the world around him. His change subverts a complete system of relationships that extends from the most intimate spheres to universal proportions. Gregor is at odds with himself and the world in a story whose narrative "fourth person" voice vacillates between personal reflection and impersonal observation, between "ein sprechendes und ein besprochenes Ich" (Öhlschläger 165 f.) that will be pronounced dead in the end. He is also at odds with his family whose stability and health are compromised by the unspeakable presence of an unsightly family member who can no longer communicate and who becomes both an expendable entity within the household and a useless link to the outside world.
As a result, Gregor slides into parasitic meaninglessness within the familial and social spheres. His altered state of being is portrayed with cutting clarity and underscored with the triple occurrence of the gloomy German prefix “un-” that sets the tone in the opening sentence of the story. It provides an unsettling, three dimensional aspect of Gregor’s “undone self” by relating the nominal entity (Ungeziefer/insect) to motion (unruhig/uneasy) as well as size and emotion (ungeheuer/gigantic, uncanny; cf. Metamorphosis 308). Gregor responds to the clearly observable yet incomprehensible fact with several attempts to rationalize the event. When the mother cautiously taps on the bedroom door, which is significantly located right “behind the head of his bed” (Metamorphosis 310; author’s emphasis), and her gentle voice reminds him of his duties, his reflective powers begin to operate. He is driven by a rational desire to explain his delay and to account for his behavior in order to expel any suspicions that might arise. However, his insistence that “his own voice answering hers” was “unmistakably his own voice” from before, runs parallel to the horrifying realization that an intermingling “persistent horrible twittering squeak” was encroaching upon the clarity of his words (Metamorphosis 310). Gregor falls further under siege when the father and the sister take their stands at the other two side doors to reinforce the mother’s request for dialogue. The situation escalates with the authoritative appearance of the company’s chief clerk whose presence at the front door makes the need for clarification and action unavoidable. Gregor’s attempt to explain the sound of his voice as “the precursor of a severe chill, a standing ailment of commercial travelers” (Metamorphosis 310) proves to be as futile as his effort to interpret his situation as a “slight illness, an attack of giddiness” (Metamorphosis 314). There is no logical explanation for his physical and mental condition. Moreover, the fact that Gregor has hit his head while trying to get out of bed informs us that the effectiveness of his rational thinking is interrupted. The chief clerk unwittingly supplies the label that captures the occupant’s current state as he clumsily tumbles out of bed: “That was something falling down in there” (Metamorphosis 313; author’s emphasis). Reduced to “something”, Gregor has lost his verbal, mental and physical integrity and thus his status as a human being. The audience behind Gregor’s closed sanctuary has no access to the inhabitant who is beyond interpretation. In the defunct dialogue at daybreak, Gregor qua bug is the “signified” whose meaning cannot be communicated; Gregor qua Gregor, i.e., as the medium that tries to transmit the signified content, is utterly unequipped for the task. Limited by the animal’s anatomy, he does not possess the instrument needed to issue the words. The intended recipients of the message are unable to decode it. “That was no human voice” (Metamorphosis 315), the chief clerk states dryly. In a symbolic act of communication, Gregor attempts to turn the key of his bedroom door with his jaws, but he gets hurt. The brown liquid that oozes out of his mouth and drips on the floor (cf. Metamorphosis 316) serves as a visual demonstration of his abortive effort to reconnect through words.
When Gregor finally appears, he emerges as the visible sign of the breakdown of all communication. Gregor qua vermin, the embodied other, has fallen between the cracks of a reality that dehumanizes difference on the personal, physical, ideological, and existential levels. His state of being resists all configuration. We cannot “say precisely what he is” (Sönser Breen 46), nor can we say who he is or where he belongs. He is, in the words of Stanley Corngold, “not-this, not-that—a paradox” (Sönser Breen 46) occupying an empty space in a verbal engagement between others that traverses his room but bypasses its inhabitant. As a story of a failed “dialogic exchange” (Gray 217) Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, like *The Penal Colony*, exhibits “a conflict between a myth of immediacy and transparency, predicated on ideological identity, and the reality that in a world defined by ideological difference, mediation is either imperfect or impossible and semiotic disjunction is the norm” (Gray 233).

Gregor has become an unspeakable non-entity that is no longer a meaningful link in the family’s syntactic order. As a disgusting, parasitic insect he has lost the aesthetic, semantic, and pragmatic underpinnings of his being. Moreover, beyond the familial and the ideological spheres, his fall also serves as a gauge for his disjunction from the highest symbolic order in general. The absurdity of his being hints at Kafka’s belief in the absence of a metaphysical superstructure that could provide the comfort of a given, ultimate meaning for life (cf. Öhlenschläger 167).

**TRANSFORMATION AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING**

If life’s meaning is not furnished for ready and seamless appropriation, it falls upon the individual to embark on a search for the essence of being. This is the message in Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* that resonates with Kafka who again and again returns to “the central image of the wanderer-seeker in search of self” (Bridgwater 10). While this connection is particularly prominent in Kafka’s K-novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle* (cf. Bridgwater 11), the image of the wanderer and the myth of the Way through a chaotic, modern world towards a distant goal are also intrinsic to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor as a bug remains confined to the Samsas’ apartment. His past as a traveling salesman, however, shows the marks of a seeker who is “[t]raveling about day in, day out” (*Metamorphosis* 308 f.) towards an unknowable destination and the ever hiding truth of his true purpose.

Little has been written about Gregor’s first transformation when he, enflamed by a youthful “eruption”, begins “to work with unusual ardor” (*Metamorphosis* 324) in order to save the family from bankruptcy. Yet this, too, is a significant turn in his life that changes Gregor “almost overnight” from a little “clerk” to “a commercial traveler” whose “success . . . immediately translated into good round coin” (*Metamorphosis* 324). In the course of time, his “fire” fades in the same measure in which the family members lose the “warm feel-
ing” (*Metamorphosis* 324) in their interactions with him. When family values are measured by their market price and compassion is assessed in cold cash, a process of dehumanization sets in. Thus Gregor’s positive initiative gradually turns into self-destructive negative energy. As a result of “his all-consuming work”, he eventually “finds himself literally estranged from his bodily being” (Sokel 2). Moreover, the family’s indifference foments the crucial disjunction that comes to painful fruition in Gregor’s second and ruinous transformation. In the course of these events, however, we must recognize more than the exclusive portrayal of a private matter. Not only the family’s personal fate but also, on a larger historical scale, the loss of Wilhelminian idealism and the dawn of haunting, destructive forces to come, reverberate in Gregor’s transition from breadwinner to bug.

The multiple instances of Gregor’s change and becoming can be seen as a modulated echo of Zarathustra’s speech about the “three metamorphoses of the spirit”. *Zarathustra* describes, “how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child” (*Zarathustra* 137). When Gregor accepts his responsibilities as a provider, he “kneels down like a camel wanting to be well loaded”, and “like the camel that, burdened, speeds into the desert” (*Zarathustra* 138), Gregor embarks with passion on an onerous roadway into his own wasteland. In retrospect, he calls these years “fine times” whose luster would never recur, and he revels in the memory of this glorious era that allowed him to carry “the expenses of the whole household” (*Metamorphosis* 324). Moreover, he saw himself on a path that promised liberation. Therefore, under the auspices of future rewards, Gregor willingly shoulders the burden in order “to pay back [his] parents’ debts” and to atone for their guilt (*Metamorphosis* 309). Thus Gregor, on his lonely passage, sets out to undergo “the second metamorphosis” that gives the Nietzschean lion his purpose, namely, to “conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert” (*Zarathustra* 138). Nietzsche’s “majestic animal that takes on the dragon and the luster of “[v]alues, thousands of years old” (*Zarathustra* 139) appears in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as the giant vermin. This reconfiguration relocates the lion’s mythic struggle with the past into the ordinary quarters of a bourgeois setting. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s beast of prey, whose charge it is to create freedom for new creation, prepares the grounds for a third possibility, a third metamorphosis that rests in the hands of the child. Imbued with the drawing power of “innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel”, the Nietzschean child creates new values and a new world (*Zarathustra* 139). In Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, this third stage remains at the level of desire, of possibility, but it is not quite borne out through Zarathustra himself. By contrast, Kafka plays with this aspect of the child when he visualizes Gregor’s becoming as a rebirth that fuses infantile dependency and the discovery of a new existence. At the same time, however, he gives this child-image a deeply probing spin by presenting it as a grotesque bug. As a vermin, Gregor is abandoned by his family who no
longer recognizes his place in their value system. This lack of personal and social coherence and belonging underscores a characteristic Nietzschean sentiment that permeates Kafka’s thinking: “Mankind has lost its home” (Janouch 173). Thus Gregor’s homelessness and grotesque being point to the most “essential link” between Kafka and Nietzsche, namely, “Kafka’s adoption of the existential Nietzschean attitude toward a horribly absurd and irrational reality” (Golomb 280).

Deprived of absolute values and facing a life without ultimate metaphysical security, the individual self is thrown upon a hazardous road toward never attainable aspirations. Both Nietzsche and Kafka construe their versions of the myth of the Way and its impact on the human being. Nietzsche views man as “a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss” (Zarathustra 126). Similarly, Kafka formulates his aphoristic concept of the individual’s quest: “The true way leads across a tightrope” (“Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil”; Bridgwater 27; author’s trans.). Despite the fact that these two notions are indisputably related, there is a striking difference that mirrors an “obvious contrast” in temperament “between Kafka’s humility, and the arrogance which Nietzsche evinced in his work” (Bridgwater 22). While Zarathustra carries his “fire into the valleys” and walks “like a dancer” (Zarathustra 122 f.), Gregor’s flame is burning low as he tumbles out of bed and becomes his own biggest obstacle when he tries to come to terms with the riddle of his altered state. The depth of Zarathustra’s abyss is unfathomable, and the wanderer, in the company of the daunting snake and the majestic eagle, sets off to a lofty journey whose large-scale images are conveyed in a language full of operatic grandeur. In Kafka’s Metamorphosis, the abyss has shrunken to crevices, little holes, and the dark hide-out under the sofa where the vermin can bide its time between feedings. Compared to the utopian scope and surging tone of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, Kafka’s Metamorphosis, fantastic as the central event may be, remains on a plain level of the ordinary. He conceives of Gregor as a paltry corporeal being enclosed by a mundane cordon in space, time, and cultural context and presents him in a language whose profound undercurrents are tamed by a striking clarity, glaring simplicity, and deceptive directness. Gregor as a bug is utterly human in his desperation and desires. He is tired and hungry, weak and weary, angry and hurting, dreaming and watching, distraught and confused. In his frustrated efforts to grapple with loneliness, anxiety, and misunderstandings, he becomes a paradigm of modern man who faces the endless question of how to create meaning against an overwhelming climate of negation marked by “the traumatic death of God and the barbaric nihilism inevitably to follow” (Golomb 280). Stretched thinly between beast and man, Gregor is an earthbound entity who showcases our isolated existence on a lonely path full of obstacles, packed with missed opportunities, and void of absolute rewards. Most of all, it is a path along which the notion of life as suffering becomes intricately connected to the quest for dialogue and the search for nourishment.
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Man as a rope bridges an abyss in Nietzsche's definition. His image speaks of "[a] dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping" (**Zarathustra** 126). In Kafka, "man as a tightrope, as the embodiment of his own desperate Way" (Bridgwater 27 f.) experiences the day-to-day tedium of life. Kafka's rope is "not tied up high, but stretched out close to the ground. It seems to be designed to make one stumble rather than to be walked upon" ("nicht in der Höhe gespannt ... , sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt, stolpem zu machen, als begangen zu werden"; aphorism 1; Bridgwater 27; author's trans.). Following the motto "Become who you are!" (**Zarathustra** 351), Nietzsche "prefers to speak of creating rather than of discovering truth". Accordingly, the hero and his disciples in **Zarathustra** appear as originators in a work that "revolves around the idea of creating one's own self" (Nehamas 76 f.). Kafka modifies this idea of the Way. In Nietzsche's image, the self, standing alone and shuddering above the abyss, is always thrown back upon itself. Even speech as the prime human act leads "to the circle of self-doubt" (Williams 97) in the self's creative and self-creating struggle: "Lonely one, you are going the way to yourself" (**Zarathustra** 176). In Kafka's notion, the earthbound self builds creative potential by entering a dialogue with itself as well as with those around it. The self on its road will come upon barriers. Moreover, man as the embodiment of Kafka's tightrope is designated to cause others to stumble. Pursuing our journey to self-knowledge and truth, we as individuals become stumbling blocks for ourselves as well as for those we encounter along the way and by whom, in turn, we are moved and transformed. This is convincingly illustrated in the transformation of Gregor who, as a giant vermin, becomes a transforming obstacle for himself and the family and who faces the necessity to completely renegotiate his body, space and spirit.

**GREGOR'S END**

When Gregor wakes up in the morning, he feels odd and most uncomfortable. Lying helplessly on his back and unable to control his many "struggling legs", he is utterly incapable of regaining his position on the "right side" (**Metamorphosis** 308) to which he was accustomed. He has quite literally lost the right physical pose and with it all the psychological safeguards of his quotidian world. The sudden change has rendered him a helpless invalid, an invalid entity who has fallen out of the family fold as well as the wider collective mold in which he used to be embedded. Gregor, the traveling salesman, is truly the troubled wanderer who experiences, "in person", the consequences of a tenebrous journey (**Metamorphosis** 317). Waking up as an insect, he encounters himself as a mystifying "obstacle" (**Hindernis**; cf. Metamorphosis 317; author's trans.) that must be dealt with. Since man "is above all the speaking animal" (Williams 97), Gregor first hopes to reach clarity through speech. When the
regular channels of communication through language fail because the vermin’s
tongue is as alien as its physique, he resorts to body language. His efforts, how-
ever, are not only futile but perceived by his family as a vindictive attack:
“Gregor’s broken loose” (Metamorphosis 331). Nobody understands his verbal
entreaties. Desperate gestures that humbly signal the need for help are mis-
judged and his willingness to cooperate is seen as an aggression. Moreover,
either consciously or subconsciously, he completely misinterprets both the ac-
tions of others around him as well as his own frame of mind. Coexistence be-
tween the family and Gregor is only possible as long as the tacitly established
modus operandi is respected: Gregor must be neither heard nor seen. Even in his
own room, he is expected to stay out of sight when Grete, the sister, exercises
her role as his caretaker.

The situation escalates when the unwritten rules of the family’s status quo
are violated and Grete decides to clear out Gregor’s room, which threatens what
little personal space he has left. Her intervention revives his dulled thinking
processes and he recognizes “that the lack of all direct human speech for the
past two months together with the monotony of family life must have confused
his mind, otherwise he could not account for the fact that he had quite earnestly
looked forward to having his room emptied of furnishing” (Metamorphosis 328
f.). Ironically, he sees more value in “the good influence of the furniture on his
state of mind” (Metamorphosis 329) than in the presence of his human compan-
ions. Thus he defends his space with a great determination. His spirited retalia-
tion even borders on violence in the case of the picture of the lady in fur, a visu-
alization of his human sexual desires: “He clung to his picture and would not
give it up. He would rather fly in Grete’s face” (Metamorphosis 330). Leaving
his hiding spot in the presence of the others, Gregor has also breached the un-
stated agreement by becoming visible. Formerly a distant third person “he” that
is no longer engaged in speech, his sudden appearance cannot be ignored. The
sister’s lethal gaze instantly reduces the brother to a “huge brown mass on the
flowered wallpaper” (Metamorphosis 330), and the impact of his presence trig-
gers a direct address: “You, Gregor!” (cf. Metamorphosis 330; author’s trans.).
This is, however, not an invitation for dialogue. Much rather, Grete’s words,
accompanied by the threat of her “shaking . . . fist” (Metamorphosis 330) are a
condemnation to silence. The scene culminates in a series of collective misun-
derstandings: Gregor leaves his room because he falsely assumes that he can be
of help to Grete when the mother faints; the father, who has just returned home,
misunderstands Grete’s remark about the brother’s escape and suspects that
Gregor has committed an act of violence; Gregor, again, is mistaken about his
ability to calm down the father, and the father, in turn, does not recognize in
Gregor’s demonstrative flight back to his bedroom any indication of submission
and cooperation.

Further confusions and delusions arise during Gregor’s final attempt to leave
his room when Grete plays the violin to entertain the three lodgers. At the sound
of the music, Gregor himself doubts the nature of his being: “Was he an animal that music had such an effect upon him?” (Metamorphosis 339). Grete, however, does not understand the brother’s intention to express to her through his presence a deep appreciation for her musical performance. Moreover, Gregor is mistaken when he assumes that “his frightful appearance” would be a “useful” tool in his desperate plan to win the sister’s attention and to draw her close to him (Metamorphosis 339). In fact, it is the vermin’s offensive visibility and the father’s inability to prevent the lodgers from seeing the slowly advancing insect that lead to the final collapse of Gregor’s existence (cf. Metamorphosis 341).

Grete’s comment demonstrates clearly the rupture between the family and the bug when she proclaims that she can no longer pronounce her “brother’s name” in the face of this “creature” (Metamorphosis 341). Given the bug’s state of physical neglect (to which she herself has contributed), she is no longer willing to raise the monstrous entity to a living power. Thus the name Gregor becomes a dead name, and the entity it comprises is transformed from a “he” to an “it” with whom no understanding and no agreement is possible. While a dignified picture of Gregor in his military uniform still adorns the Samsas’ living room and speaks of his past belonging and inclusion (cf. Metamorphosis 317), the naked body of the bug that soils the confines of his bedroom must disappear: “We must try to get rid of it” (Metamorphosis 341).

Like Kafka’s hunger artist, Gregor dwells in a cage of misconceptions. His state of confinement betrays a distinct kinship with Nietzsche’s idea of man who, “imprisoned in an iron cage of errors, . . . a caricature of man, sick, wretched, ill-disposed toward himself, full of hatred for the impulses of life”, becomes “a walking picture of misery”, a “sinner” (Will To Power, section 397, 214). Gregor’s wretched condition is compounded by the punishing hand of the father who persecutes the son with a stick and throws the apple that lodges in his back as a visible sign of his guilt. Thus Gregor suffers the wound of existence from which he cannot recover. Injured, misunderstood and condemned, he literally disintegrates. His progressive erosion, which is emphasized by the loss of his eyesight and a growing lack of appetite, coincides with an increasing awareness of unfulfilled hunger. When he finally listens to the sound of Grete’s violin, he is overcome by the keen sensation that, through this music, “the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved” (Metamorphosis 338). As Bridgwater notes, “Nietzsche applies the starvation-metaphor to modern Socratic man in general” (Bridgwater 139) who “remains eternally hungry”, a “‘critic’ without joy and energy”, an “Alexandrian man, who is at bottom a librarian and corrector of proofs” and “wretchedly goes blind from the dust of books and . . . printers’ errors” (Birth of Tragedy, section 18, 114). Thus Gregor’s decline is linked both with Kafka’s and Nietzsche’s views concerning “the degenerate civilization of their times”. Furthermore, as a formidable exponent of Kafka’s theme of the desired unknown nourishment, the figure of Gregor becomes a literary sign that “embraces the spiritual hunger of modern man at large” (Bridgwater 139).
Gregor may crave a sign from above, but his journey leads him only through the dust of his dirty little empire, deficient dialogues, and deforming encounters. In the monstrous embodiment of the bug he presents a hurdle to his own stagnated self. Moreover, he becomes a stumbling block that turns the family members’ ordinary world upside down. Thus Kafka establishes, in the figure of Gregor, a configuration whose disruptive nature has the potential for bringing about positive changes. But the downfall for all is the fact that they miss the time and the opportunity to create something new, a new collective experience that, as a joint construct, becomes their story, their history, and their source of inspiration and solidarity. They are oblivious to the possibility of a collectively forged existence in which wisdom is not drawn as mysterious nourishment from above but unfolds in the continuous give and take of dialogue and discourse. Instead of creatively taking on the stumbling block that the giant bug presents, the Samsas relegate the insect to invisibility. Nobody wants to touch Gregor and nobody wants to see him. Confronted with the unspeakable monstrosity, the Samsas cannot make the leap of faith that would allow mediation between the family and Gregor. Their rejection of him concludes with the final denial of Gregor’s existence: “But how can it be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away on his own accord” (Metamorphosis 341 f.). In the end, behind closed doors and in the darkness of his room, Gregor’s neck grows stiff and he is “unable to stir a limb” (Metamorphosis 343). Deprived of voice and body, he ceases to hang on to life thus abandoning an existential premise that both Nietzsche and Kafka shared as a “keystone” of their philosophies: man cannot live without believing in something indestructible in himself (Bridgwater 36). Gregor, who no longer resists the family’s radical act of elimination is, in the end, without this “belief in Self and Life” (Bridgwater 37). Thus he succumbs to oblivion and fades away. It is true that the other family members live on, but their pursuits indicate an empty circularity that is emulated in their final outing when, at the end of the day, the streetcar takes them back to where they started. Moreover, the sister Grete, who has become a sales clerk, essentially metamorphoses into a new Gregor. With her transformation, another encounter with another stumbling block and another experiment in disruptiveness become feasible, but there is also the possibility of yet another failure.

CONCLUSION

Kafka may have been a man of uncertainty, but as an artist he elevated this uncertainty to a firm principle. As a man he might have been vulnerable, but as an artist he constructed textual fortresses that have become testimonies of his strong creative power and will. As a man he may have suffered from alienation, but as a writer he transformed his sense of isolation into a powerful instrument of communication thus leaving us with messages whose meanings we are still in
the process of deciphering. The multitude of readings of Kafka’s “most disturbing and unsettling tale” (Beicken 21), The Metamorphosis, illustrates the striking success of the author’s method and the subtle dynamics of his wisdom. He has bestowed, upon a simple, abhorrent bug, countless layers of meaning. Gregor’s mesmerizing muddle keeps testing the spirit and substance of our ever transforming world and the wisdom of its ever changing and probing generations of readers. Thus Kafka’s untimely work, that begs us to disrupt our ways of life, becomes our timely tightrope, and we will be all the wiser for stumbling over it.

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Edith H. Krause


