Franz Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*: Transformation, Metaphor, and the Perils of Assimilation

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Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* is the story of a son whose transformation into a repulsive, inhuman, and steadily weakening body marks his banishment from society and from the family he loves. In the course of the narrative Gregor Samsa follows an increasingly inevitable path towards extinction, a death that this unlucky son himself eventually agrees has become necessary. Further, it is the story of a son whose language has become incomprehensible. As this article will argue, Gregor’s voice, now an unintelligible squeak, is like Kafka’s Jewish voice, both heard and overheard in critical readings and finally ignored because the new code in which it is embedded ultimately falls on deaf ears. Since 1912 Kafka’s story has wandered a long way from its original home in a Czech-Jewish minority culture. It appeared at a time when the younger generation, many of whose parents had migrated to the city from the country, was widely subordinated to their parents’ desire to assimilate into a new cultural environment. The long and tortuous history of the critical reception of *Die Verwandlung* demonstrates over and over again the highly elusive nature of the cultural and aesthetic encoding of the key signifier, the vile body around which the constellation of this family drama endlessly gyrates.

A reexamination of *Die Verwandlung* in relation to issues of ethnicity and gender in the context of recent Kafka scholarship opens a number of interpretative possibilities, including the tantalizing prospect that it may now be possible to uncover with a greater measure of certainty than before the social, linguistic, and ethnopsychological origins of the grotesquely alienated body of the insect man, Gregor Samsa. New evidence supports the hypothesis that the metaphoric body in the text simultaneously expresses and conceals deep-seated anxieties about the writer’s ethnic identity during a period of intense cultural transformation. From this perspective, Kafka’s narrative may have much to tell us about the fictional representation of a severely alienated body – the writer’s body that Deleuze conceptualizes as “an extension of the imagined body of the father.” The narrative is also about the destructive power of abusive metaphors and their relationship to cultural and ethnic identity at risk. Although much scholarly enterprise in the past six decades has been devoted to the interpretation of *Die Verwandlung*,
Verwandlung, it is still unclear what we might learn from this example of “minor literature” about why invoking terms of racial abuse and engendering suspicion of minority groups are not only the linguistic symptoms of a deep social ill, but also to be viewed as modes of behaviour that produce, out of the lives of humiliated fathers and mothers, sons and daughters whose culturally transmitted negative self-perception, in turn, leads to acts of violence and self-destruction.

As prototypical Deleuzean “experimental machines” Kafka’s narratives seem to have become the perfect postmodern playthings. Amidst an array of poststructuralist, post-Freudian, and feminist readings, the abject body at the centre of Die Verwandlung, Kafka’s “ungeheueres Ungeziefer” – or “monstrous vermin” – and the no longer fully human voice that emanates from it threatened to remain abstractions, culturally and temporarily disembodied signifiers, divorced, as they are in the original narrative, from their cultural and historical roots. The widespread critical reluctance to engage with issues pertaining to differences of race and gender in relation to the progression of the narrative’s central metaphor is puzzling given that Réda Bensmaïa for one considers that as far back as 1975 Deleuze and Guattari revealed Kafka to be a “writer who for the first time throws open the question of ‘literature’ to the forces and the differences (of class, race, language, or gender) that run through it” (214). Later, in A Thousand Plateaus (1980), Deleuze and Guattari laid the theoretical groundwork for a future reading of the text’s commercial-traveller insect body as the enunciation of a machinic and collective assemblage. This concept enables an enquiry into the way the fictional transformation of the body in Die Verwandlung refracts both the social transmission of order-words (_mots d’ordre_) pertaining to the male Jewish body in Prague at the time of the novella’s composition and the incorporeal transformations that produced a shift in the semiotic variables operating within the discourse of race (75–80). If, as Deleuze and Guattari also claimed, the essence of the novella as a literary form “is organised around the question, ‘What happened? Whatever could have happened?’” (193) and if, in the critical reception of Die Verwandlung, this question still remains open, then compelling grounds remain for not abandoning the quest for the contributing causes of this abrupt bodily transformation. This article argues that, despite the leads suggested by Deleuze and Guattari and the more recent positive reception of some of them by Sander L. Gilman, a reading of the metaphoric body in Die Verwandlung that provides an adequate account of the issues of cultural transformation encoded in the text has not taken place.

Since the early 1990s, Kafka scholarship by Mark M. Anderson, Gilman, Walter Sokel, Scott Spector, and John Zilcosky has contributed much to our understanding of the cultural-historical context of Kafka’s work. Their approaches underscore the importance of understanding Kafka’s Jewishness while simultaneously pursuing deconstructive approaches to his fiction. Anderson’s analysis of Kafka’s aestheticism argues convincingly that Kafka conceives of the self and the writer’s quest for understanding, expression, and spiritual redemption
in terms that relate to the assumption and removal of layers of clothing from a body that is defined within its ethnocultural setting (6). Sokel advances the notion that, in Das Urteil, Die Verwandlung, and Der Prozess, there is “a striking resemblance of structure between Kafka’s representation of fictional characters with his presentation of the relationship between use of the German language and Jewish being” (852). Spector’s research points to the everyday consciousness of an acute territorial crisis registered by Kafka and his contemporaries among the Prague-Jewish intelligentsia. At the heart of this crisis of territoriality he posits a profound anxiety about Central European Jewishness and the question of assimilation in relation to the ways in which culture, language, and the concept of nation were being constructed in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Zilcosky approaches Kafka’s narratives of alienation through an exploration of Kafka’s intensive reading of travel writing and his own travels, especially the records of his personal experiences while travelling and his reception of travel writing that conveyed the visceral impact on the traveller’s subjectivity of journeys to exotic, utopian, or dystopian places. In the case of Die Verwandlung, Zilcosky argues that a hidden master trope, that of the Reisender, operates in the narrative ex negativo in the form of Gregor’s radical internalization of the exotic vermin Kafka encountered in the course of his reading (77). The studies cited above all include useful commentary on Die Verwandlung that endeavours to locate the narrative in its original cultural and social setting. The argument pursued here is, however, particularly indebted to clues to the enigma of this narrative provided by Gilman in his study of the ethnopsychology of Kafka’s cultural milieu, to Stanley Corngold for his early and later revised reflections on Kafka’s deconstruction of metaphors (The Commentator’s Despair; “Kafka’s Other Metamorphosis” 41–57), and to Nina Pelikan Straus for her insights into the transfer of gender roles between brother and sister in the course of the tale (651–67). Sokel’s reflections on Die Verwandlung in the wake of Gilman’s book are also drawn on in the course of the argument.

In his 1995 monograph Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient, Gilman reached a new and significant understanding concerning the “desirable but inherently impossible” transformation of the male Jewish body in Europe around the turn of the century (13). This sociocultural analysis elucidates decisive elements in the construction of Kafka’s discourse through historical and biographical documents and an analysis of the fiction, but, surprisingly perhaps, does not offer more than brief comments on Die Verwandlung itself. The critical reception of Gilman’s book among North American scholars has been marked by division over the issue of its historicism. Sokel’s review praised Gilman’s research for its success in connecting “Kafka’s discourse, in life documents and fiction, to specific, fatefully influential discourses of his age” (526), but noted what he considered to be Gilman’s apparent lack of attention to what he termed the “uniqueness” in Kafka’s art. What Sokel accepted as an understandable effect of the thematic preoccupation and historical focus of Gilman’s work, Corngold
took to be a glaring and unforgivable omission. Corngold’s review presents an oversimplified view of Gilman’s evidence and methodology and accuses him, in “this original, obsessive and wrong-headed book,” of deliberately ignoring the distinctive literariness of Kafka’s work, reducing it to the same, aesthetically banal level as the other historical documents he produces in order to substantiate the claim that Kafka internalized and reproduced stereotypical features of the anti-Semitism of his times. However, Gilman’s approach proves on a closer reading to be considerably more differentiated with regard to the literary works than Corngold’s review suggests. As its application to the case of Die Verwandlung will demonstrate, the resulting sociocultural analysis of Kafka’s discourse cannot so easily be dismissed. Concluding his more positive review, Sokel observed that “Gilman’s volume is a boon not only to readers of Kafka, but to all who seek to understand our recent past. For future Kafka scholars his book will be indispensable” (526–27). Although Spector does not refer, except in his bibliography, to Franz Kafka, The Jewish Patient and cites only Gilman’s earlier research on the genealogy of the term Mauscheln (90), his exhaustive analysis of the impact of an acute territorial crisis on Kafka and his contemporaries confirms Gilman’s conclusions regarding the strategies Kafka adopted as a Prague Jew in an ethnically hostile environment. When combined with important clues provided by other commentators, Gilman’s ethnopsychological evidence can indeed be seen to point the way to a new reading of this remarkable fictional account of an ill-fated process of cultural adaptation and transformation.

At the beginning of this enquiry stand the two photographic markers of difference that Kafka has subtly positioned in the narrative. In the first section of the narrative, two photographs are on display in the Samsa apartment. They demand closer examination. The first is above the table in Gregor’s bedroom. Gregor has cut it out of an illustrated magazine: “Es stellte eine Dame dar, die, mit einem Pelzhut und einer Pelzboa versehen, aufrecht dasaß und einen schweren Pelzmuff, in dem ihr ganzer Unterarm verschwunden war, dem Beschauer entgegenhob” (Erzählungen 57). The erotic qualities of the image are not lost on Gregor, nor have they been overlooked by Kafka’s commentators. Some of these commentators, including Anderson – the only recent scholar to take up the issue of the photographs in detail – have found in this episode a playful reference to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Venus im Pelz (1880). Later, as his mother and sister try to strip his room of his last bachelor possessions, Gregor, in splendid mock-epic fashion, defends it by covering it with his insect body: “[er] kroch eilends hinauf und preßte sich an das Glas, das ihn festhielt und seinem heißen Bauch wohltaüt” (86). This passage suggests that the photograph is an image of the feminine that in some way Gregor wishes to defend and embrace. Yet apart from the reference to its source in popular reading material and the obvious inference of its relation to Gregor’s isolated bachelor state, Kafka provides us with no further explanations as to the photograph’s meaning for Gregor. Its wider cultural significance becomes apparent only in the context of Pelikan Straus’s and Gil-
man’s research into Kafka’s relationship to the feminine and its implications for
his portrayal of Gregor.
When he first succeeds in unlocking his door, partly revealing himself in
the doorway, the livingroom table has been set for breakfast. As he leans in the
doorway, the second photographic portrait of the story hangs opposite him, “eine
Photographie Gregors aus seiner Militärzeit, die ihn als Leutnant darstellte,
wie er, die Hand am Degen, sorglos lächelnd, Respekt für seine Haltung und
Uniform verlangte” (69). The appearance of such an image in a middle-class
family narrative written during the late phase of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,
when military service was still the norm, is perhaps nothing out of the ordinary.
Indeed, the topic of Gregor’s military service has not been neglected in critical
discussions of the story, but its particular significance in relation to his bodily
transformation has not yet been fully explored. The description of the portrait,
anchored as it is in Gregor’s subjective perception, raises questions about
Gregor’s suddenly altered relationship to this positive photographic image of
himself as a young man fit for military service and therefore to his masculine
self-image. Anderson reads the uniform as an expression of the effacement of
Gregor’s singularity through uniformity (133), a further sign in the text of the
oppressive Verkehr of work and the social order to which the family is enslaved
and from which Gregor in his new animal covering has now supposedly found
a means to escape. While this is a most perceptive interpretation, it nonetheless
overlooks the double-coding in the text of the photographic image both as the
marker of a former state that has been somehow overcome in the process of trans-
formation and as an image of an experience associated with being free of care
(“sorglos”) and the desire to command social respect (“Respekt [...] verlangte”).
This passage emphasizes Gregor’s military bearing – in other words, the outward
appearance of the young lieutenant’s body – and conveys a sense of what has
been lost that remains unaccounted for. As Gilman’s evidence for the cultural
significance of Jewishness in relation to fitness for military service will suggest,
a direct link may be made between the suggestion of loss when Gregor catches
sight of his portrait and his experience, only a few moments before struggling
to open the door to the living room, of the loss of his normal human voice. In
order for this link between the body clothed in the military uniform and the loss
of voice to become explicit, the cultural double-coding of the military uniform
and the body it enfolds must first be unlocked. In view of the importance of the
paradoxes surrounding locked and unlocked doors in the novella and in Kafka’s
fiction generally, it is significant that a locksmith (“Schlosser”; 66–67) is sent
for but never in fact arrives – a sign perhaps that Kafka was anxious that the
ethnocultural source code of the photograph should remain forever well con-
cealed.
Few writers have agonized as much about the body as Kafka. Few writers
have entered so self-consciously into the act of writing as a means of constructing
the image of the writer’s body: “Als es in meinem Organismus klargeworden

war, daß das Schreiben die ergiebigste Richtung meines Wesens sei, drängte sich alles hin und ließ alle Fähigkeiten leer stehn, die sich auf die Freuden des Geschlechtes, des Essens, des Trinkens, des philosophischen Nachdenkens, der Musik zu allererst, richteten. Ich magerte nach allen diesen Richtungen ab” (Tagebücher 3.1.1912, 167). The complex origins of Kafka’s sense of his own body are hinted at on many occasions in his work. Of particular interest in the present context is the following diary entry:

Ich heiße hebräisch Amschel wie der Großvater meiner Mutter von der Muttersseite, der als ein sehr frommer und gelehrter Mann mit langem weißen Bart meiner Mutter erinnerlich ist, die sechs Jahre alt war als er starb. [...] Ein noch gelehrterer Mann als der Großvater war der Urgroßvater der Mutter, bei Christen und Juden stand er in gleichem Ansehen, bei einer Feuersbrust geschah infolge seiner Frömmigkeit das Wunder, daß das Feuer sein Haus übersprang und verschonte, während die Häuser in der Runde verbrannten. [...] Alle außer dem Großvater der Mutter starben bald. Dieser hatte einen Sohn, die Mutter kannte ihn als verrückten Onkel Nathan [...]. Gegen das Fenster laufen und durch die zersplitterten Hölzer und Scheiben, schwach nach Anwendung aller Kraft, die Fensterbrüstung überschreiten. (Tagebücher 25.12.1911, 156)

Here Kafka recites his genealogy, naming in Hebrew the inherited body: he thinks fondly and finally somewhat apprehensively of his maternal Jewish forebears. Then, with the next stroke of the pen, he traces in imagination the trajectory of an intensely self-destructive urge. The recollection of the body’s ethnic origins in this diary passage is thus spatially and temporally contingent with a violent wish to destroy his own body or at least somehow be free of it.

It is not possible to examine the fate of the protagonist’s body in the fictional world of Die Verwandlung without reference to the construction of narrative’s central metaphor or without taking into account Kafka’s unease about the use of metaphors. Corngold’s great service has been to remind us of what is often overlooked in critical readings of the story, namely Kafka’s intense dislike of metaphor and the despair about writing this negative perception engendered in him:

Die Metaphern sind eines in dem Vielen, was mich am Schreiben verzweifeln läßt. Die Unselbständigkeit des Schreibens, die Abhängigkeit von dem Dienstmädchen, das einheizt, von der Katze, die sich am Ofen wärmt, selbst vom armen alten Menschen, der sich wärmt. Alles dies sind selbstständige, eigengesetzliche Verrichtungen, nur das Schreiben ist hilflos, wohnt nicht in sich selbst, ist Spaß und Verzweiflung. (Tagebücher 6.12.1921, 403)

In particular, Kafka bemoans the difficulty of constructing metaphors for true feelings that would allow him “meinen ganz bangen Zustand ganz aus mir herauszuschreiben und ebenso wie er aus der Tiefe kommt, in die Tiefe des Papiers hinein, oder es so niederzuschreiben, daß ich das Geschriebene voll-
Franz Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* 7

ständig in mich einbeziehen könnte” (*Tagebücher* 8.12.1911, 136; Corngold, *The Commentator’s Despair* 7). What Kafka brings to attention in this diary entry is the cultural conditioning of the signifiers on which all writing inevitably depends, the condition that the later Austrian experimental writer, Oswald Wiener, characterized in 1969 as the unbearable nature of the way language organizes reality: “Die Organisation der Wirklichkeit durch die Sprache ist unerträglich” (LII).

The recollection of Corngold’s observation concerning Kafka’s unease about metaphors suggests the importance of assessing the cultural origins and the expressive function of the metaphoric body in Kafka’s “writing out” of anxiety. The original Prague-German phrase for the transformed body is “ungeheueres Ungeziefer.” Students of German literature usually learn that English and other translations of the central metaphor vary. “Ungeziefer” is a generic term referring to “vermin,” but because the new body in the story resembles an insect or beetle of sorts, it is often translated as such, thus obscuring Kafka’s careful choice of the word “Ungeziefer.” This choice will be shown to be significant in another context. Collocated with the adjective “ungeheuer” is the noun “Ungeheuer,” a word with a wide range of connotations in German and various possible translations into English and other languages generally denoting a monster or ogre of the folk-tale variety. The effect of the two negative prefixes is to intensify the impression of something indeterminate, neither human nor animal: an *Un-Tier*. *Die Verwandlung* relates the consequences of Gregor’s transformation into a new and quite “impossible” bodily form: impossible in every sense but especially impossible as a survival capsule for the ill-fated son because it is an ill-adapted creature, a “Mischling,” a hybrid or half-breed of some kind (a favourite Kafka theme, as Gilman notes), still partly human on the inside, with a limited life span and no female mate in sight.

Corngold proposes in his reading of *Die Verwandlung* that Kafka has effectively carried out an act of countermetamorphosis or deconstruction by transforming the body metaphor – a strategy inspired by his fundamental objection to the metaphor. Corngold’s notion of a playful and uncanny destabilization of the literal and figurative poles of the metaphor is certainly relevant to an understanding of its central role in the text. His reading of the literal pole of the metaphor, which he formulates as “this man is a vermin” (*The Commentator’s Despair* 19) or is “said to be a louse” (“Kafka’s Other Metamorphosis” 50), nevertheless tends to divert critical attention from its cultural context. He finally adopts the view that “the attempt to interpret *Die Verwandlung* through Kafka’s empirical personality suffers by implication from the difficulty of interpreting the vermin through the residual empirical sense of the metaphor of the vermin” (*The Commentator’s Despair* 19).

If we accept Corngold’s conclusion, we miss the very real sociocultural context of the term “monstrous vermin” at the time and place of the tale’s composition. Corngold instead argues that Gregor’s alienation is essentially an
expression of the estrangement from the family, which Kafka himself endured because he desired to live for literature alone. Kafka so exhausts himself seeking a state of autonomous aesthetic activity that he becomes “a being that cannot be accommodated in a family” (*The Commentator’s Despair* 11). Corngold thus assumes that Kafka is driven not by any concern over the empirical referent of “the familiar metaphor” – that is, with the man who is designated as a vermin – but by “a radical aesthetic intention” that deliberately sets out to distort and therefore deconstruct the initially monstrous metaphor (10). Gilman’s findings, however, suggest quite the opposite. He suggests that it makes greater sense to assume that in *Die Verwandlung* Kafka is in fact vitally interested in the empirical referent and thus writes against the very idea of metaphor being used at all to establish a relation between a human being and a species of vermin.

Gilman in *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient* and Sokel, writing somewhat later on *Die Verwandlung* in “Kafka as a Jew,” both argue that, for Kafka, the business of assimilation into the non-Jewish world invokes a sense of shame (Gilman 18–19; Sokel 842–43). Sokel demonstrates perhaps most appositely the double-edged nature of this shame. On the one hand, it is the shame of repressing Jewishness in order to be assimilated and, on the other, it is the shame that the writer-son experiences in failing to fulfil the role of the dutiful Jewish son by helping to further the commercial interests that both drive and support the assimilation project of the Kafka family. Sokel finds this shame metaphorically embodied in “the verminous hulk of the commercial travelling salesman” (851). From the point of view of the family, Gregor is the “parasite no better than vermin,” who can no longer work to support them. From Gregor’s perspective – which Sokel, referring to Kafka’s friendship with the Yiddish actor, Yitzhak Löwy, characterizes as “an internalised Yitzhak Levi’s perspective,” namely that of an authentic, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jew – Gregor is a figure of shame because he has failed to pursue the promise of his own liberation from the economic and cultural servitude in which the family is still enmeshed. Therefore he can only wither away. Without wishing to limit the narrative to an allegory of the dilemmas of assimilation, Sokel establishes a clear link between the appearance of the metaphoric body in the narrative and Kafka’s experience of a radical cultural split.

Gilman’s research, however, provides the vital key to the apparently seamless encoding of the metaphoric body. He draws on Kafka’s notion that the literature written in German by Prague (and Warsaw) Jews is a “minor literature” and on the well-known development of this idea by Deleuze and Guattari in their 1975 study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Gilman argues that Kafka tried to “transmute” his “irreducibly Jewish voice” (12) into the discourse of German literary “high modernism.” He explains how Kafka smuggles his compelling need to secure his eminently insecure male Prague-Jewish identity across the linguistic border into the culturally dominant German-speaking world. Prague German, as the language of a ruling minority, was itself the language of a deterritorialized group – an arti-
officially cultivated, formal, and lexically somewhat restricted form of German, which Kafka found he had simultaneously to employ and transcend (22). Gilman emphasizes the importance of understanding Kafka’s self-image when reading his work: “central to the existence of a minor literature is a clear association with the discourse about the body of the writer – bodies and biographies are never peripheral to the construction of a ‘minor literature’” (23).

With the exception of Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka scholars writing before the 1990s tended to view Kafka’s anxiety about his body as a feature of his individual psychology rather than as a manifestation of wider ethnopsychological issues faced by Western European Jews who were dealing every day with the very real difficulties of acculturation. Following Deleuze, Gilman contends that the writer’s body is “an extension of the imagined body of the father [...] it is not that the father is the (positive) Oedipal aggressor dominating the son; rather the father is” – and here Gilman cites Deleuze’s 1967 essay “Coldness and Cruelty” (60–61) – “not so much the beater as the beaten. [...] Is it not precisely the father-image in him that is miniaturised, beaten, ridiculed, and humiliated? What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father’s likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the humiliated father” (23). Building on this causal formulation of the socially inflicted suffering of the father in the process of assimilation and its atonement in the son, we can begin to discern the way the writer’s body is projected into the fiction of "Die Verwandlung."

What Gilman demonstrates through his precise and detailed historical study of the ethnopsychology of Kafka’s time in relation to the prevailing discourses of race, gender, and illness is that Kafka’s intense desire to write – to establish over a textual world the control that the surrounding culture denied him (158) – was motivated to a considerable degree by an overwhelming anxiety that the fatally marked Jewish body inherited from his father would inevitably betray him and, through that betrayal, abort the whole project of assimilation for which the father intended his son’s body should also serve as a vehicle. As Gilman argues, the form that betrayal would take Kafka glimpsed all too clearly in the outwardly strong but inwardly weakened, potentially ill, and socially humiliated body of his own father, who, even as he hastened to flee his fate by trying to become that impossible creature, a fully assimilated Western Jew, worked relentlessly to fulfil in his own body the turn-of-the-century, anti-Semitic stereotype of the male Jew.

Gilman’s analysis of the transformation of the anti-Semitic stereotype also bears implications for a reading of "Die Verwandlung. He produces a considerable body of documentary evidence to support the view that towards the end of the nineteenth century the older theological difference of the Jew from his Christian neighbours was in the process of being translated into a new, biologically founded discourse. As Kafka grew to manhood in Prague, the result of this process was a new set of stereotypical traits that overlaid earlier anti-Semitic prejudice and characterized the everyday thinking of many non-Jews about their Jewish
neighbours. Fitness for military service was the overarching measure of masculinity in Europe at the time. In spite of the innumerable examples of highly competent Jewish soldiers serving in European armies, male Jews were popularly believed to be physically weak (especially in the lungs and feet), to be cowards, shirkers, and potential traitors. The practice of ritual male circumcision and the traditional restriction of male Jews to certain professions had served in the eyes of non-Jewish men to “feminize” the body of the male Jew. Circumcision was widely equated either with castration or with an unmasculine inclination towards lewdness and depravity. In the popular mind, together with the traditional anti-Semitic images of Jews as ritual murderers of Christian women and children, Jews were believed to be carriers of disease, especially diseases of the blood, syphilis (associated with the practice followed by Eastern Jews of metsitsah during circumcision), tuberculosis (which, when associated with speculation about higher levels of immunity amongst Jews, led to deep suspicions about their ritual complicity in spreading the disease), and infectious skin diseases (compare the itching white spots on the belly of Gregor Samsa’s insect carapace).

Jewish sexuality was also suspect: they were believed to be either promiscuous or very likely to be homosexual or both. The body of the male Jew becomes “an analog of the body of the homosexual” (160), a site for a conflation of images – a fact that also suggests the importance of reconsidering critical readings of Kafka’s homoerotic fantasies. Female Jews were often portrayed as prostitutes or otherwise libeled as seducers of Aryan men. Gilman concludes that the marked body of the Jew as a social construction of European anti-Semitism entered into both the self-perception and self-actualization of the Jew to such an extent that the word “Jew” had clearly become for Kafka’s contemporaries a precisely gendered concept that linked the idea of Jewish masculinity with pathological traits (21). As the archetypal “Jewish patient,” Kafka, Gilman argues, always lived as if predestined for the illness to which he finally fell victim. When the evidence for the internalization of anti-Semitic views in such celebrated instances of Jewish self-hatred as the case of Otto Weininger and the occasional outbursts of Karl Kraus is also taken into account, Gilman’s thesis appears much less extreme and obsessive than Corngold’s response to it would suggest.

To this general profile of the anti-Semitic stereotype Gilman adds compelling evidence that Kafka’s particular belief that assimilation is an impossible bodily transition was nowhere more palpably instilled in him than through the long-running Dreyfus Affair – the trial, incarceration on Devil’s Island, and torture of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army maliciously accused by conspiring fellow-officers of betraying military secrets to the Germans (Gilman 72–78; 116–18). This infamous abuse and acid-test of the French justice system gripped the whole of Europe and especially its Jews from 1894 to 1906, the year Kafka turned twenty-six. The fate of Dreyfus represented to Kafka and his whole generation the ultimate betrayal of the Jewish body. The letters and diaries of Dreyfus were avidly consumed. Gilman argues that the sketch of the torture
Franz Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* 11

machine Kafka included in a letter to Milena Jesenská in March 1920 closely reflects Kafka’s reading of the 1901 German edition of Dreyfus’s memoirs and letters (87). If the thoroughly acculturated, physically robust, wealthy, cultured, highly educated, confidant, even occasionally arrogant Jew, the impeccable career-officer Alfred Dreyfus, could be falsely accused, roughly seized, exposed to the worst forms of anti-Semitic slander, and physically reduced by torture to manifest the “concealed body” of the stereotypical sick, physically decaying male Jew, what might happen to less secure, less socially prominent male Jews like Kafka who, even while exercising and dieting furiously, believed his body was already primed for some fatal disease or for insanity like his mother’s “crazy Uncle Nathan”?

In the context of Gilman’s reading of the Dreyfus Affair, the alleged unfitness of male Jews for military service and Kafka’s manifest interest in reports of Dreyfus’s trial and incarceration, we cannot now overlook the way in which Gregor’s early glimpse of the photograph of himself in military uniform takes on a precise and painful ethnopsychological significance that has not been registered in other accounts of the narrative. The military uniform that had previously held out to this middle-class son the utopian promise of cultural uniformity and ethnic anonymity in a state of full assimilation has turned out like the world of secularized industrial labour for which Gregor has only just now also proved unfit, namely to represent a false hope.

To consider the question of whether the body in which Gregor now finds himself is a body already marked for extinction, it is necessary to return to the cultural history of the term “Ungeziefer.” Early in the critical reception of the novella Corngold reminded us that the noun “Ungeziefer” in Middle High German signifies an “unclean animal not suited for sacrifice” (*The Commentator’s Despair* 10). Kafka, Corngold argues, was quite likely to have been aware of this. From other sources (Gray; Sokel) we learn that “German usage applies the term ‘Ungeziefer’ to persons considered low and contemptible,” equivalent to calling someone in English a “louse” or a “cockroach.” However, it is not until Gilman’s 1995 study that we are made incontrovertibly aware of the anti-Semitic connotations that the word “Ungeziefer” carried for Kafka in Prague around the turn of the century. In German and Austrian anti-Semitic political publications, Jews were frequently referred to as “rats,” “mice,” “insects,” and “vermin” – “Ungeziefer der Menschheit” (31; 80, the last descriptor cited from Hiemer 34–40). In the intense anti-Semitic language that the French anti-Dreyfusards employed in their newspaper, *La Libre Parole*, the Jew was described as “a stinking and dangerous animal, a plague, a centipede, a microbe, a mite, a cancer, an ugly spider and synagogue lice. [...] ‘Long live the sabre that will rid us of the vermin.’ [...] ‘God’s goodness ends where the Jew begins’” (Denis-Bredin 351).

The conclusion reached on the basis of Gilman’s research – namely, that the empirical referent of the central metaphor cannot be overlooked as securely as Corngold insists – gains further support from Sokel. He clarifies a number of
issues concerning Kafka’s realization of the false consciousness arising out of the unresolved tension between Prague German as the language of his “official, assimilated, Germanised surface consciousness” and Yiddish as the language of “the submerged Jewish self” (848). The result is a Germanized surface consciousness that is out of step with the inner emotional life: “[s]ince emotional reality can no longer find expression in speech, it is stifled and condemned to wither” (848). In evidence, Sokel cites Kafka’s own statements expressing his awareness among his parents’ generation and that of his contemporaries of an agonizing social and cultural rift between assimilated Central European Jews and Eastern European Jews. Such “Ostjuden” were frequently viewed with a mixture of disdain and disgust as the culturally backward inhabitants of a narrow, dark, and poverty-stricken world that their parents had been anxious to leave behind. In addition to Kafka’s well-known speech of February 1912 on the significance of Yiddish for his contemporaries in Prague, Sokel refers to the appearance of what he takes to be the striking insect metaphor in the often cited letter to Max Brod of June 1921: “so they wanted to write in German; but with their little hind legs they remained stuck in the Jewishness of their fathers and with their little front legs they were finding no new ground. The despair over that was their inspiration” (844–45).1 Gilman interprets the same image in the immediate context of Kafka’s letter to Brod, where he likens the tendency of Kraus’s wit to mimic Yiddish-German Mauscheln, as depicting “a mouse caught in a glue trap” (31–32). Insect or mouse, in either reading of the image the association between Jewish writers and a species of vermin remains unmistakable. Sokel also cites Kafka’s letter to Milena Jesenská, which the writer penned after several afternoons of “bathing in Judenhaß” (850; Briefe an Milena 240). In the context of a comment on Jews’ insistence on living where they are not welcome, Kafka compares them directly with cockroaches (“Schaben”) that cannot be eradicated from the bathroom (Briefe an Milena 240).

By concentrating exclusively on the aesthetic dimension of the metaphor and its reflection of a self trying to exist in an impossible field of tension between the demands of everyday life and the allure of a pure aesthetic realm, Corngold overlooks the copresence of another code that reflects Kafka’s enormous anxiety over an equally unresolvable tension between the social and familial pressure to assimilate and his manifest desire to enter into a state of authentic Jewishness. Kafka clearly recognized that such a desire was popularly associated with living like vermin that are difficult to eradicate from the European social terrain. His father’s contemptuous comparison of his son’s association with Yitzhak Löwy to the condition of a man who beds down with dogs and gets up with fleas was undoubtedly still ringing in his ears when he wrote Die Verwandlung. The entry in the diary for 2 November 1911 recording this event reads: “Mein Vater über ihn: ‘Wer sich mit Hunden zu Bett legt, steht mit Wanzen auf’” (Tagebücher 103).

Like the word “Ungeziefer,” “Wanzen” is also a generic rather than a specific term that presents a problem to the translator. “Fleas” is the natural English rendering, but the word obscures Kafka’s preference for the more indeterminate sense of “Wanzen.” Now, in the face of the vilification of Jewishness that was inseparable feature of the process of the cultural transformation in which he was enmeshed in Prague, the prospect of an authentic Jewish existence perhaps appeared forever out of reach.

Without repressing other forms of alienation to be encountered in *Die Verwandlung*, Gilman’s study provides firm evidence in support of the hypothesis that the “monstrous vermin” in this family drama is, at perhaps the deepest level of Kafka’s writerly imagination, a manifestation of the “impossible body” of what for him at least had become the “impossible transformation” into that shameful being, the fully assimilated westernized male Jew. The anxieties that Kafka both reveals and conceals in the narrative are then, in this reading, the cruel results of the struggle to repress the truth of one’s origins in the process of trying to acculturate. Exhausted by an unequal struggle with the harshly competitive and commercial values of what is portrayed in the sketch of labour relations early in the narrative as a replica of the invasive, industrialized, secular or gentile world of modern capitalism, Gregor betrays the father’s wish to integrate the family into an inhospitable social environment. His betrayal takes the form of an involuntary reversion to what the dominant culture, in which the family is embedded, soon believes him to be: the physically weak, lazy, “feminine” (in as far as he is a male no longer fit for military service and now dependent on the labour of others, including his mother and sister), and contagiously infected monster that, as Gilman shows, was socially constructed in Western and Central Europe as the anti-Semitic stereotype of the male Jew. And the implication of the opening descriptor, “ungeheueres Ungeziefer,” is that it is the abusive, “ordinary language” metaphors of European anti-Semitism that have signalled so clearly to Gregor what he must inevitably become.

The body in the text is revealed as a creature akin to “the savage one” that Evelyn Torton Beck finds invoked in a speech in Yakov Gordin’s Yiddish play *Der Vilder Mentsch* (1907). When viewed in the context of Gilman’s analysis, this figure must be seen to represent the grotesque body of the male Jew condemned to self-extinction as a nasty half-breed because he has, in contravention of Kafka’s scrupulous ethic, bowed down before “the graven idol” of gross materialism and attempted complete assimilation:

What – where is this savage one? A savage who observes our behaviour and our ways is buried deep within each of us [...]. When we improve ourselves, when the spirit in us wakens, when our souls reign over our bodies, then the savage one within us sleeps. But when we strive only for material goals, when we have no ideals, when our spirit sleeps, then the savage one awakens and forces us to go against civilisation, against the laws of humanity. (145)
In an essay that investigates the narrative’s presentation of relationship of the son to the Schuld der Eltern and the Schuld des Vaters, Sokel examined the literalization of self-alienation in the sudden transformation of Gregor into a bestial form. He made use of a number of theoretical models ranging from the writings of early Marx on alienation to the primitive myth of the scapegoat. Beck’s discovery of the tale’s incorporation of structural and thematic links to Gordin’s play and Sokel’s analysis of the father’s double betrayal of the family – first through the father’s surrender of the family to the entrepreneurial individualism of capitalism and then through his duplicitous enslavement of the son to the ensuing debt – underscore Walter Benjamin’s prescient remark in 1934 that “[n]o other writer has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully” (808). From Kafka’s perspective at the time of writing Die Verwandlung, it must have indeed appeared that the struggle to assimilate into a culture of pure commercialism and material striving represented an abhorrent abandonment of his Jewish cultural heritage. For many young male Jews of Kafka’s generation in Europe it appeared that there might well be no psychologically or culturally coherent way forward.

In an almost symbiotic relationship to the transformation experienced by Gregor are the changes affecting his sister, Grete, who grows in determination and purpose even as her brother declines. This parallel series of events also warrants closer investigation. Gilman’s study provides convincing evidence for the notion that the male Jew was subjected to a process of feminization. The process of an exchange of signifiers whereby this particular transformation enters into the text had already been elucidated by Nina Pelikan Straus in 1991. From a feminist position she views Kafka as “a prophet of the complexities engendered by the woman question.” She demonstrates clearly Kafka’s “discomfort with the male role” (667) and advances the significant notion that Grete’s experience is crucial to the understanding of the story. While Gregor exchanges responsibility for regressive dependency, “Grete exchanges dependency for the burdensome efficiency and independence that Gregor formerly displayed” (655).

Here we find a cogent explanation of Grete’s newfound “determination” and “confidence.” In addition we see Gregor (and Kafka himself) “caught between the shameful desire to identify himself with women and the consciousness that he cannot identify himself with man” (657). The hidden purpose in Gregor’s metamorphosis, this time in the zoological sense, is seen in the butterfly-like blossoming of the sister Grete out of the pupa or chrysalis of Gregor, who in the narrative is left “mager” and “vollständig flach und trocken” (104). The hard, armoured shell of Gregor’s doomed masculinity is finally crushed. Grete’s anima at the end the narrative is exchanged for the collapsed “Ich” of the protagonist.

Biographical evidence for this fantasized exchange with a female double is provided by Kafka’s close relationship with and enormous regard for his youngest sister, Ottla. “Im übrigen ist meine jüngste Schwester (schon über 20 Jahre alt) meine beste Prager Freundin,” says Kafka in a letter to Felice Bauer that is
exactly coeval with Die Verwandlung (Briefe an Felice 11.11.1912, 87). In his biography of Kafka, Ernst Pawel makes the projection of the brother’s wishes onto the sister explicit: “Throughout her rebellion and search for self – defying the father, working the land, breaking away from home, marrying a non-Jew – she in fact acted out her brother’s wildest and most impossible dreams” (87). What Sokel implies but does not explicitly state in his article, “Kafka as a Jew,” is the repressed cultural subtext of Gregor’s desire to send his sister to the conservatory and his craving for that seemingly impossible other “food.”

It must not be forgotten that for many educated Central and Western European Jews during Kafka’s lifetime a career in the arts, especially literature, music, and the theatre, was seen as a way to overcome the dilemmas imposed on them by their Jewishness. Moved as he is by his sister Grete’s violin recital, Gregor feels he might now be able to find the way to the “ersehnten unbekannten Nahrung” (98), the unknown nourishment that he craved. The projection of this wish for a form of cultural attainment acceptable to the gentile world onto the figure of the sister in Die Verwandlung can be seen to reflect Kafka’s shame over own his stifled Jewish voice and his conviction that, for him at least, any genuine cultural reconnection with it was impossible. Sokel and Spector both argue that this was Kafka’s actual position on the matter. While it is certainly possible, as Erich Heller suggested in the 1970s, to link Gregor’s desire for this unknown nourishment to Kafka’s interest in Schopenhauer’s view of music as the only art form that promises to overcome the suffering caused by individuation (38), it also makes sense to link it to a last fleeting wish to recover for the young male European Jews of Kafka’s generation the lost ground of a positive Jewish acculturation. The rejection of this projected wish through the philistine behaviour towards Grete of the three bearded boarders, who, as Sokel reminds us, are present only by dint of a commercial and contractual arrangement in the Samsa apartment, adds a further twist of the knife to Gregor’s dying hope for some small, albeit vicarious or, in the context of his apparently incestuous desire to kiss her on the neck, even vampiristic, share in this longed-for social acceptance and cultural nourishment.

In the context of the disrupted trajectory of male Jewish assimilation into Western and Central European society, the transformation of Gregor’s human voice into an inhuman twittering squeak demands a reading that links it to the critically well-established discussion of Kafka’s awareness of the absence of an authentic literary language for Western Jews like himself. As established or aspiring Kulturjuden, they were always in danger of slipping back into the Yiddish-derived habits of articulation represented in the popular discourse of the period as Mauscheln, or at least of being unfairly accused of doing so. In Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews (1990) Gilman exposed the origins of the term in anti-Semitic discourse. Spector draws on Gilman’s analysis of the term to show how two of Kafka’s contemporaries, Heinrich Teweles, a Prague German liberal, and the Bohemian Jewish German
nationalist and philosopher of language, Fritz Mauthner, interpreted the persistence of *das Mauscheln* in Jewish speech and writing as a considerable barrier to the attainment of authentic German nationality (90–91). Mauthner maintained that any German text by a Jewish author inevitably remains “Jew talk” and that the German Jew “will become a full German only when *Mauschel* expressions become a foreign language or when he no longer understands them” (91). In *Franz Kafka, The Jewish Patient*, Gilman makes explicit Kafka’s awareness of the association in popular German usage between *Mauscheln* and things “mouse-like” (23). The application of this association to *Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse* needs no further commentary here. The link between Kafka’s suppressed, unattainable, or perhaps forever “lost” authentic Jewish voice and what is perceived by the family and the irascible chief clerk as Gregor Samsa’s incomprehensible language must be drawn over the concealed bridge that joins the figurative and literal poles of the central metaphor. Kafka’s strict injunction, sent in October 1915 to his publisher Kurt Wolff, against any attempt to offer a visual representation of the “monstrous vermin” clearly signalled that Kafka meant it to be an indeterminate creature, not any particular insect or bug but a generic species of vermin, a hybrid thing, a true *Mischling*. Part human, part animal, part insect, the “ungeheueres Ungeziefer” suffers from intense anxieties about employment, has a form of skin disease, exhibits dietary peculiarities, finds itself in intense conflict with the father, agonizes about cultural matters, is progressively stripped of its masculinity, is forced to retreat into increasingly filthy quarters as soon as it advances into the “living room,” and, instead of communicating in the human voice it imagines it possesses, is perceived as emitting only what the ethnocultural context of Kafka’s writing invites us to hear as a “mouselike” squeak. Faced with intolerable stress, Gregor’s human voice recedes and, with it, both his command of the language of the dominant order in which the family is located and everything else he holds dear. He thus regresses to an increasingly primitive and abject state. His potential for communication with an alluring feminine other has been reduced to the silent contemplation of a mere image clipped from a magazine. The young lieutenant in the photographic portrait has been exposed for the hybrid creature that he really is: he can no more pronounce words of command than Gregor can make his case understood in a language that the chief clerk from his employer’s office can understand. *Mauscheln* will out.

The coda to the narrative sketches the liberation of the family and the blossoming of Grete. In order to relate Kafka’s ending to the argument above, it remains only to apply to the encoded body the ethnopsychological conversion factor suggested by Gilman’s research and the significance of the “hourglass-shaped” exchange between brother and sister depicted in Pelikan Straus’s account of Gregor’s “feminization” becomes alarmingly clear (655). For the male Jew there is indeed no possible way forward. The repressed bachelor Gregor is literally replaced by the marriageable Grete with her lovely “young body”: 
“[M]eine kleine Geschichte ist beendet, nur macht mich der heutige Schluß gar nicht froh, er hätte schon besser sein dürfen, das ist kein Zweifel,” wrote Kafka in a letter to Felice Bauer (Briefe an Felice 6–7.12.1912, 163). The melancholy tone of this remark is hardly surprising, nor, given the nature of the story’s ending, is Kafka’s dislike of metaphors: metaphorically at least, he had just written himself out of existence.

Works Cited


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