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The Metamorphosis

by Franz Kafka





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Translated and Edited by
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Introduction

While he lived, Franz Kafka was an obscure writer of short novels; when he died, he became the body of works that has created our modern awareness. The metamorphosis of history by Kafka, and of Kafka by his art, is the most dramatic evidence of the power of literature since the Romantic movement.

During his lifetime Kafka published only five slim volumes of prose. *Meditation*, a collection of prose sketches reminiscent of Joyce's *Dubliners*, appeared in 1912, followed in 1913 by *The Stoker, A Fragment*, which we know today as the first chapter of the novel *Amerika*. *The Metamorphosis* was first published in November, 1915, scant months before *The Judgment*, the short work which Kafka considered as marking a breakthrough into his mature style. Toward the end of his life there appeared *In the Penal Colony* (1919), a harrowing meditation on torture and justice, and *A Country Doctor* (1920), a visionary tale of estrangement. Only a few of Kafka's friends knew during his lifetime that Kafka was also at work on the great novels which today form the basis for his reputation—*Amerika*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*.

Shortly before his death from tuberculosis in 1924, Kafka wrote a note to his friend, the novelist Max Brod, asking that all his papers, including the manuscripts of the novels, be burned. Brod chose to disregard Kafka's wish: he defended his decision on the ground that Kafka had made his last behest of a man who, he knew, would never consent to destroy his work. The result was that Kafka's novels, though none of them is quite finished, were published in Germany in the late 1920's. They disappeared from view in Germany during the Nazi period, but by then they had been translated and published in

Paris, London, and New York; and there, especially during the 1940's, the truthfulness and beauty of Kafka's work, its logic and bewitchment, began to preoccupy critics and interpreters. Kafka's prestige has steadily increased, so that today it would require a lifetime to study and master the critical literature that has grown up around his work.

Kafka was born in 1883 in Prague, then the capital of a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was born the citizen of a crumbling state, a German-speaker among Czech-speakers, a Jew among Gentiles—and in himself the loneliest of men. Within his family, dominated by his father Herrmann Kafka, a huge, selfish, overbearing businessman, Franz, the only son, lived a life of estrangement in a freezing solitude he called "Russian." He did not live alone until he was thirty-three; and he did not live with a woman until the last year of his life, when he fled Prague for Berlin. His poverty and the cold of winter in inflation-ridden Germany exacerbated his disease, and he died at the age of forty-one.

Kafka's life is almost empty of incident, apart from his two engagements to Felice Bauer, both of which he broke off. He does not appear to have had formative experiences; he did not make extensive trips or form associations with writers of equal stature. He attended a "good" German-language *Gymnasium* and studied literature briefly at the University of Prague before turning to law. Soon after obtaining his doctoral degree, he took up a position at the state Worker's Accident Insurance Institute, where he stayed until illness forced his retirement. He was a conscientious employee, rising to a position of considerable responsibility. He suffered, however, from the routine and stress of the office, for they interfered with the activity that mattered most—indeed, almost exclusively—to him: his nocturnal writing. He wrote in 1912:

It is easy to recognize a concentration in me of all my forces on writing. When it became clear in my organism

that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and above all music. . . . Naturally, I did not find this purpose independently and consciously, it found itself, and is now interfered with only by the office, but that interferes with it completely. . . . My development is now complete and, so far as I can see, there is nothing left to sacrifice; I need only throw my work in the office out of this complex in order to begin my real life.*

But the matter is more complicated. The *Diaries* go on to record periods of freedom from the office, yet no work accomplished. Kafka cared so much about his writing, felt so intensely its power over him, that he must have wanted to put up resistances to it for fear that it would leave nothing of himself.

Kafka's real history is his life as literature. To understand him we should substitute the word *literature* for the word *history* in R. G. Collingwood's formula: "History is the life of mind itself which is not mind except so far as it both lives in the historical process and knows itself as so living." The acts of Kafka's real history are his stories and novels, which are at the same time reflections on the act of writing itself. They are, of course, reflections of something else besides—of the cruelty of the family, the coldness of bureaucracy, the misery of cities. But this something else becomes something less if it deprives us of the most intense and coherent experience of Kafka's world. At the center of this world are the feelings of isolation, indebtedness, and shortcoming which mark his existence as a writer—that form of estrangement that tries to maintain itself as estrangement and to take this condition to its limit. Kafka's stories treat questions of personal happiness, social justice, and filial piety from the standpoint of his fate as literature.

* *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910–1913*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), p. 211.

On the night of September 23, 1912, in a single sitting, Kafka composed the story *The Judgment*. He then noted in his *Diaries*, with a fine elation: "How everything can be said, how for everything, for the strangest fancies, there waits a great fire in which they perish and rise up again. . . . Only *in this way* can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul." * What, besides the concentrated exercise of his faculties, can have led to such ecstasy?

The Judgment concerns a young businessman, Georg Bendemann, with whom Kafka afterward identified his own bourgeois personality. Georg is about to marry a young woman; and her initials, F. B., are those of the woman Kafka was thinking of marrying. Georg must write this news to a friend who lives in exile, in Russia, but he cannot do so, it appears, without either offending his friend or betraying his fiancée. For in his bitter and unproductive solitude his friend might only envy Georg's happiness and consider an invitation to return for the wedding as a judgment of the failure of his Russian venture. On the other hand, Georg owes it to his fiancée to make a straightforward declaration of his happiness to his friend. Georg finds a compromise, but his letter tells lies in favor of his fiancée, so that Georg must admit, after all, that he cannot tailor himself to his friend's pattern.

The second half of the story is visionary—impossible, really, to describe. This difficulty comes from the fact that the action is itself an unsettled combat between opposing points of view about what is taking place. Georg enters his father's room at the back of the apartment; the old man has been neglected and seems wretched and pitiable. Yet in the course of a few pages the perspective shifts decisively; the old man is changed from a feeble clown wearing soiled underwear into a haughty giant who reveals the news that it is he, not his son

* *Diaries*, 1910–1913, p. 276.

Georg, who really has a friend in Russia. Now the father rises up in bed to his full stature; and after accusing his son of an obscure fault, "radiant with insight," he proceeds to sentence him to death. Georg obeys. With a last display of the nimbleness which had always delighted his parents, and with the fleeting thought that he has always loved them, he leaps to his death by drowning. What is the meaning of this bizarre happiness which accompanies the execution of the most terrible fantasy thinkable?

Everything depends on the identification of the figure of the Russian friend with the life Kafka called "literature." Like the friend, Kafka would, as a writer, be condemned to bachelorhood and isolation. And in view of the intrinsic shortcoming of writing—for it cannot contain or create life—he would suffer a continual sense of poverty. Other details further this identification: Georg's relationship to his friend is based on writing (letters); like Kafka's writing, the friend's attempts at business have been failing; finally, the friend is described at the close of the story as something like an unpublished manuscript, as "yellow enough to be thrown away."

When Georg chooses to stay engaged to his fiancée rather than keep faith with his friend, the narrator of the story, whose point of view is very nearly identical with Georg's, faces a crisis. Breaking faith with literature, how can he continue? He proceeds, in a perspective distorted by anxiety, to envision the father. This is a necessary act, for the son, too, is now embarked on family life. But the surreality of the story suggests the loss of even fictional coherence; we are entering a world of sheer hypothesis. What follows must not in fact happen; the world depicted is the world as it must not be. The father reveals himself to be the true father of the Russian friend, the writer. If Kafka is now to grasp the life of literature as sponsored by the father, as his "ideal" offspring, then writing is only a neurotic reaction to the vitality of the father. Writing cannot be preferred to marriage. The decision to marry becomes inescapable

at the same time that it becomes worthless, for this is the institution which perpetuates neurosis. Georg cannot turn anywhere and escape guilt: guilt toward the fiancée, guilt toward the friend, and worse, the knowledge that this guilt is itself nothing—a contingent and not an essential concern of the self. If this is the case, then Kafka has been sentenced to death.

The Judgment liberated in Kafka the insight essential to his life: he must not betray his writing, either by marrying or by supposing that his father is the source and goal of his art. Through the story, this insight comes into being with such force that Kafka afterward likened it to "a regular birth, [which came out of me] covered with filth and slime." * This image cannot fail to remind the reader of the strange birth which is the subject of Kafka's next story—the monstrous hero of *The Metamorphosis*, trailing filth and slime through the household of his family. †

Now it would seem an extraordinary idea to claim that Gregor Samsa, the vermin, literally expresses the condition of being a writer. It is possible that the obscurity and irrevocableness of Gregor's sentence describes Kafka's fate as a writer. But what connection can there be between a vermin image and the activity of writing?

The link is provided by an early story called "Wedding Preparations in the Country" (1907), which portrays an autonomous self through the figure of a beetle. Raban, the hero, discovers an effortless way to arrange his marriage:

"And besides, can't I do it the way I always used to as a child in matters that were dangerous? I don't even need to go to the country myself, it isn't necessary. I'll send my clothed body. If it staggers out of the door of my room, the staggering will indicate not fear but its nothingness. Nor is it a sign of excitement if it stumbles on the stairs,

* *Diaries, 1910-1913*, p. 278.

† My discussion of *The Judgment* is indebted to Martin Greenberg's analysis of this story in his profound study, *The Terror of Art, Kafka and Modern Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

if it travels into the country, sobbing as it goes, and there eats its supper in tears. For I myself am meanwhile lying in my bed, smoothly covered over with the yellow-brown blanket, exposed to the breeze that is wafted through that seldom aired room. The carriages and people in the street move and walk hesitantly on shining ground, for I am still dreaming. Coachmen and pedestrians are shy, and every step they want to advance they ask as a favor from me, by looking at me. I encourage them and encounter no obstacle.

"As I lie in bed I assume the shape of a big beetle, a stag beetle or a cockchafer, I think. [. . .]

"The form of a large beetle, yes. Then I would pretend it was a matter of hibernating, and I would press my little legs to my bulging belly. And I would whisper a few words, instructions to my sad body, which stands close beside me, bent. Soon I shall have done—it bows, it goes swiftly, and it will manage everything efficiently while I rest."*

This beetle's dreamy magnificence corresponds to Kafka's naive idea, before the fall of 1912, about his literary destiny. He saw it as the source of power and perfection:

The special nature of my inspiration . . . is such that I can do everything, and not only what is directed to a definite piece of work. When I arbitrarily write a single sentence, for instance, "He looked out of the window," it already has perfection.†

My happiness, my abilities, and every possibility of being useful in any way have always been in the literary field. And here I have, to be sure, experienced states . . . in which I completely dwelt in every idea, but also filled every idea, and in which I not only felt myself at my boundary, but at the boundary of the human in general.‡

The movement from the beautiful beetle Raban to the odious vermin Gregor marks Kafka's increasing aware-

* *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York, 1954), pp. 6-7.

† *Diaries, 1910-1913*, p. 45.

‡ *Diaries, 1910-1913*, p. 58.

ness of the sacrifice that literature demands and the sense that writing does not lead necessarily to expansive states but to a kind of living death. Kafka's diary entry for August 6, 1914, reads:

What will be my fate as a writer is very simple. My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; my life has dwindled dreadfully, nor will it cease to dwindle. Nothing else will ever satisfy me. But the strength I can muster for that portrayal is not to be counted upon: perhaps it has already vanished forever, perhaps it will come back to me again, although the circumstances of my life don't favor its return. Thus I waver, continually fly to the summit of the mountain, but then fall back in a moment. Others waver too, but in lower regions, with greater strength; if they are in danger of falling, they are caught up by the kinsman who walks beside them for that very purpose. But I waver on the heights; it is not death, alas, but the eternal torments of dying.*

The precariousness of literature is the subject of a letter written to Max Brod in 1922:

But what is it to be a writer? Writing is a sweet, wonderful reward, but its price? During the night the answer was transparently clear to me: it is the reward for service to the devil. This descent to the dark powers, this unbinding of spirits by nature bound, dubious embraces and whatever else may go on below, of which one no longer knows anything above ground, when in the sunlight one writes stories. Perhaps there is another kind of writing, I only know this one, in the night, when anxiety does not let me sleep, I only know this one. And what is devilish in it seems to me quite clear. It is the vanity and the craving for enjoyment, which is forever whirling around oneself or even around someone else . . . and enjoying it. The wish that a naive person sometimes has: "I would like to die and watch the others crying over

* *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg (New York, 1949), p. 77.

me," is what such a writer constantly experiences: he dies (or he does not live) and continually cries over himself.*

To be a writer is to know the delight of reflection and the beautiful lament, but it is also to be a kind of dead creature, from whom the living must flee and who is thus condemned to homelessness. Kafka was an amateur of etymology and very likely aware of the original sense of those haunting "un-" words, "*ungeheueres Ungeziefer*" ("monstrous vermin"), into which Gregor is transformed. "*Ungeheuer*" connotes the creature who has no place in the family; "*Ungeziefer*," the unclean animal unsuited for sacrifice, the creature without a place in God's order.

Hence, the apparent realism with which Kafka describes the vermin should not conjure for the reader an insect of some definite kind. This would be to experience the vermin the way the cleaning woman does, who calls him "old dung beetle!" But "to forms of address like these Gregor would not respond"; they do not reflect his uncanny identity, which cannot be grasped in an image. A creature who could require the help of two strong persons to swing him out of bed cannot stick to the ceiling, however potent his glue. What sort of bug could watch, step by step, the approach of a man from behind him? True, at times Gregor may act like a beetle; but for one moment, when he is lured into the living room by his sister's violin playing, he is a pure spirit. Sometimes he behaves like a low sort of human being, a "louse"; but at other times he is an airy, flighty kind of creature. In the end he is sheerly not-this, not-that—a paradox, a creature not even of dust. He is a sign of that unnatural being in Kafka—the writer.

This equation is important because through it Kafka affirms his existence as a writer. Unlike *The Judgment*, this story does not propose that the father is in league with the vermin or that the vermin is his creature. The

* *Briefe 1902-1924*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), pp. 384-85.

origin of the metamorphosis remains radical, unnatural, and mysterious; the response of the father is to disclaim all connection with it. Psychoanalysis might prove that through this disaster he is secretly avenged on his son; but by this logic, too, the son is secretly avenged by his father's humiliation. The father is not the source of this bizarre and precarious existence; or Kafka would not have shown so clearly that Gregor is actually and independently of him a vermin. Yet this is what happens when the perspective shifts, just after Gregor's death, to authoritative omniscience, and we confront a dried up, inhuman corpse.

Gregor is this vermin; his metamorphosis "was no dream." Except for one moment of eagerness to see "today's fantasy . . . gradually fade away," he does not even express the desire to turn back into his original form. With some cause: his metamorphosis is not entirely a degradation, for it makes possible his first experience of music; before the metamorphosis, Gregor did not love music. Of course Gregor is deceived when he supposes that music will open a way for him toward the unknown nourishment he longs for. His pursuit of the music collapses into a pursuit of his sister and then into a death sentence. But even this moment seems less a sign of Gregor's vileness than of the writer's knowledge that the path of longing leads only to other longings. Gregor's experience of music has the very outcome that it does for the hero of *Amerika*, who feels "rising within him a sorrow which reached past the end of this song, seeking another end which it could not find." * "Art for the artist," said Kafka, "is only suffering through which he releases himself for further suffering." †

The Metamorphosis conveys Kafka's essential vision: to be a writer is to be condemned to irreparable estrangement. In writing about a monstrous non-being, Kafka

* *Amerika*, trans. Edwin Muir (New York: New Directions, 1946), p. 90. Muir incorrectly reads "Leid" (sorrow) as "Lied" (song).

† Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 28.

writes about himself; but in doing so he also stays a little bit ahead of himself, for he is above all the narrator of the story, who survives the death of the vermin. Kafka's strength to contemplate his own death and survive it prepares him only for new deaths; yet in these deaths and survivals there is an element of play. About such scenes in his work Kafka wrote in 1914: "But for me, who believe that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game." *

But the struggle to maintain the clarity of the writer is not always successful: Kafka frequently despairs. A later formulation reads: "What I have played at will really happen. I have not ransomed myself by writing. All my life I have been dead, and now I shall really die. My life was sweeter than others', my death will be that much more terrible. The writer in me of course will die at once, for such a figure has no basis, has no substance, isn't even of dust; it is only a little bit possible in the maddest earthly life, it is only a construction of the craving for enjoyment. This is the writer." †

It is unlikely that many of Kafka's readers since the war have been able to detect the playful element in any of his death scenes. His forecast of a terrible death for not having lived seems to express more exactly the mode, which seems to be the only mode, in which we now understand estrangement and whose extreme form is political terror. Unlike the artist, no political victim can wish to maintain his condition. As political estrangement becomes more and more the norm of Western society, and as capitalism, as Kafka said, becomes "the condition of the world and the soul," ‡ Kafka's late fears will more and more provide the frame in which we read his work. Nonetheless we will misunderstand him if we do not grasp that the way in which he experienced estrangement was literature, with an intensity greater than that of any other

* *Diaries, 1914-1923*, p. 102.

† *Briefe*, p. 385.

‡ Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1968), p. 206.

writer of this century, more inexorably than Joyce or Proust or Mann. From this experience flows the power of Kafka's work to comprehend all forms of alienation, and to suggest a response to political estrangement different from political counterterror: the effort to illuminate this condition by grasping through literature that play is the reward for the courage of accepting death.

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