

Comments on Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*

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"I am in a jam but I will work my way out of it" (Gregor Samsa on p. 101)

I had read this story a few times before now, but I had never really needed to think too deeply about it. I read it first when I was maybe thirteen or fourteen. At that age I did not particularly like it and I certainly did not understand it. Perhaps I had been watching too much science fiction on TV and thought: "guy turns into insect (or something), what's the big deal?" I read it again in my mid-20s and I both understood and liked it much more, as I now had some experience of life that gave me more compassion for Gregor Samsa. Then, during my post-doctoral work in Germany I picked the book up in the university library and started to read it in German. I was just starting to learn German so I found the text very tough going and did not read more than some scraps of the story, but that encounter with the original text did make me wonder about some of the subtleties and difficulties of the translation from German to English, not least the questions of the title and of what precisely it is that Gregor turns into.

As we all know by now, Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed (the "metamorphosis" of the title). I have never understood the point of translating the German title of the story, *Die Verwandlung*, by means of the Greek word "metamorphosis," which may be loved by philosophers but is little used in colloquial English. It's better, I think, to call it *The Transformation*; indeed this title was used in a British translation in 1949. But transformed into what? I already owned two copies of the story in English before Prof. Marquess kindly gave me a third, and all three versions translate the German words *ungeheueren Ungeziefer* differently. One version says he became "a gigantic insect," another says that he became "a monstrous vermin," and the translation we are reading at SMC says that he became "a monstrous cockroach." The first of these translations seems too bland to me and the third seems to get a little too specific as the German does not say cockroach (there's another word for that). So I'll opt for "monstrous vermin," as it's close to the German original and conveys the sense of disgust

that I think the author intends. The key thing to understand is that Gregor is transformed into something repulsive. Not all insects are repulsive to humans but this one is—think how even his own family members (and, in a slapstick way, the reprehensible chief clerk) recoil from Gregor’s new body. He has clearly been transformed into something that his family and acquaintances perceive as dirty and contaminating (reading the story this time I was struck by how many references there are to dirt and cleanliness). As I’m sure you noticed, Kafka tells us right away that this was no dream. Given that most of us would not consider the literal transformation of a living human being into another creature to be a real possibility (although if you have ever seen the movie *The Fly* with Jeff Goldblum and Geena Davis you might think otherwise!), what interpretation does that leave us with? I have no idea what the Kafka experts say, but I think the main thing is that the way in which Gregor is perceived by himself and those around him has changed irrevocably. Something has happened to him; he has become revolting and foul so that he can no longer play the role of the dutiful son, the reliable breadwinner, the obedient company man who heads off to work at a ridiculously early hour. He has become something utterly different and this event brings transformation not only to him but to everyone in his family too.

We are told that this transformation happens suddenly to Gregor (“one morning”). But as the text tells us quite a lot about what Gregor’s life was like *before* this event, I think we can make the reasonably obvious assumption that Kafka wants us to associate Gregor’s previous existence with the transformation that occurs. So, consider for a moment the “normal” life of Gregor Samsa before his transformation. We learn that he’s a traveling cloth salesman who hates his exhausting job but must stick with it “for the sake of [his] parents” (p.88). By the way, if you know anyone who is a traveling salesperson they will tell you it can be financially rewarding but also very stressful, especially when things are going badly (if you get the chance someday, read Arthur Miller’s great play *Death of A Salesman*). The reason for this situation is that Gregor’s father, following the collapse of his own business, still owes money to the Director of the company for which Gregor works. Gregor has already been at this company for five years and it will take him another five or six years to pay off the debt. Although he makes a good living, he keeps little money for himself, as it mostly goes to the upkeep of the household (did you notice that they actually have servants?). He believes that the company’s traveling salesmen are

not held in high regard and while they are on the road they are gossiped about at head office. The work atmosphere is stifling and even “the smallest lapse was greeted with the gravest suspicion” (pp. 93-94); when Gregor is late for work on the day of the transformation, the bullying chief clerk turns up at his house, assuming that he is malingering. He sets his alarm for 4 a.m. so that he can catch the early train and he works harder than the other sales reps, who breakfast late. He never goes out, has no hobbies other than a little woodworking, and has taken to locking his door at home as well as on the road. (Is this solely for privacy or does he see his family as dangerous and intrusive, like predators who would fleece an unsuspecting traveling salesman?) Of course his parents and sister take him totally for granted; even though they have become dependent on his income, they take his money without any warmth (p. 113). They are lazy and complacent and assume that he will stay with the company for life, thus ensuring a continuation of their cozy lifestyle. So, we can see that Gregor the salesman is miserable, and when the transformed Gregor bumps his head and becomes “frantic with rage and pain” (p. 94) we could reasonably assume that this describes his state of mind before his transformation too. Would you want a job, or a life, like Gregor the cloth salesman? Would you crack under the strain?

I can't discuss here all the events that transpire after the transformation, or follow all the avenues down which this story could take us, so I'll simply point out a few things I noticed and then tell you what I think the whole thing is about (there are, of course, many different ways to read the story). *On the first day* Gregor's father seems to realize that Gregor is not going back to work again; he gets out his savings book (which he had locked away) and explains the family's financial situation to his wife and daughter. We eventually learn that things are not dire (yet) because the father had a small nest egg and also saved some of Gregor's earnings; nevertheless, the family will eventually have to find new means of income. The transformed Gregor learns about this (poignantly and revealingly, Gregor can still understand human conversation but cannot himself be understood) and realizes that his father could have used this money to pay off part of the debt, thus bringing closer the day when Gregor could quit his hated job. However, his father chose not to do this and Gregor, abjectly it seems to me, now also thinks that the father did the right thing by exercising such “caution and prudence” (p. 114). When the family's conversation, which Gregor listens to from the open door of his room, turns to money, we

learn of the enormous sense of obligation which he had towards his family because he burns “with sorrow and shame” (p. 114) at the fact that they now have to get jobs. It never seems to occur to him consciously that he was being exploited by his parents (after Freud we might say that he repressed that insight) and that even his generous plan to send his sister Grete to the expensive music conservatory is opposed by them because of the cost, which I read as their fear of a reduction in their living standards. Why does it not now occur to Gregor that his father could have helped repay his debt by finding a job and perhaps by using some of the saved money? Is Gregor so cowed by fear and respect, so much the perfect son, that he never questions parental authority? When thinking about your answer to this it is worth reading again the central paragraph on p. 114, which is filled with caustic irony.

Consider also the dramatic scenes when Gregor’s mother and sister decide to clear out the furniture from his room (with the exception of the sofa under which he hides). At first the mother does not want to do this, realizing correctly that to do so is to abandon hope of Gregor’s recovery. Grete, however, insists and they begin to take away “everything that was dear to him” (p. 121). In his anxiety, Gregor reaches out to save one thing that matters to him most, and he flings himself at the picture of the woman with the handwarmer, in the frame he made himself. His mother catches sight of him, screams, and faints from the shock. Angrily, Grete shouts at him by name, addressing him directly for the first time since his transformation. She goes to get some smelling salts to revive the mother but is surprised by Gregor (who wants to help) and smashes a bottle. Shards fly up, cutting Gregor’s face, and he is choked by the harsh fumes of the medicine. Grete slams the door to his room behind her and Gregor, now cut off from his mother, who he thinks is dying, and driven by desperation and guilt, crawls over everything before eventually collapsing on the dining room table. Then his father gets home, dressed in the uniform of a bank doorman and appearing big and powerful to the surprised Gregor (uniforms create respect, see p. 101). Not understanding Gregor’s anguish and his desire to return quietly to his room, his father erupts in anger and attacks Gregor with the “artillery” (p. 125) of apples, one of which sticks in his back, festers, and eventually contributes to his death.

There is certainly a lot to be said here about mother-son and father-son relationships. We learn, for example, that Gregor “had understood from the first day of his new

life that his father thought the only policy to adopt was one of the utmost severity towards him” (p. 125); indeed, this is one of many such comments in the story that make us ask whether it was as true before his transformation as after? But before we get too Freudian about this, let’s look again at what caused this whole violent scene. It was precipitated by Gregor’s desperate attempt to prevent his mother and sister from taking away the picture of the woman that he had cut from a magazine. One of the first things we learn about Gregor (after discovering that he has turned into vermin overnight) is that he had recently clipped this picture from a magazine and hung it on his wall in “an attractive gilt frame” (p. 87). Is it the picture of the woman that matters so much to Gregor? Is she, perhaps, a real person whom he met on his travels? Is she his idealization of womanhood? Is there some sexual significance? Or, is it actually the frame that matters? My wife Cecilia, who knows all about this sort of thing, assures me that if you want to gild something you need to know what you are doing, but for someone competent it can be done reasonably quickly. Gregor’s mother tells the chief clerk that Gregor carved the picture frame in two or three evenings; she reveals that he has been at home every evening for a week so we can take it that he also had time to gild it. Then he cuts the picture from the magazine, puts it in the frame, and hangs it on the wall. Shortly after, he is transformed.

This tale is a pitfall for speculation, but here is one possible interpretation of the story. Gregor is at an age when he could reasonably expect to find a wife, settle down, and start a family of his own. *But even if he wanted to, he can’t; he’s stuck.* He’s stuck with his aging parents, his young sister, and the ever-present obligation of the debt and the hateful job that he must keep. The picture on the wall is in one way a comfort to him, but it is also a reminder of his pitiful situation. It represents both his creativity (he made the frame himself) and his desire for love and an independent life (the picture of the woman). But it also reminds him that he is not in a position to have these things. (Could it be that he has no social life by choice, because he is afraid of meeting someone and falling in love, thus forcing a choice between his sister and parents on the one hand and his own life on the other?) What does Gregor have to look forward to in his life except more of the same?

Now you might say “why doesn’t he run away from the whole thing?” and, in a perverse stroke of genius, the ending of the story shows that he could have done that, because his parents and sister survive without him. But Kafka makes it clear that running

away is not an option for this dutiful bourgeois son in early 20th century Prague (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). If he does run away not only does he think that he will guarantee poverty for his parents, but also that he will bring even more social shame on the family (did you notice how much their station in life matters to the parents?). In the USA we may be used to stories of guys who, when the going gets tough at home, get on the train, motorcycle, their horse, or whatever means of transportation will get them out of town. But Gregor can't do that. It's Kafka's genius that he gives Gregor no easy way out. So, in the end, to me this is a story of the traumas brought on by excessive devotion to duty. It's a tale of debt, obligation, work, and the suffocating expectation of others that induces paralyzing guilt. And this scenario has become, of course, an abiding artistic theme of our age.

In my view, two factors make this story so compelling and of such enduring interest to later generations. First, the usual way we experience these situations has been reversed. In our culture we expect the parents to care for the children, to make sacrifices for them, and we even expect the children to be ungrateful sometimes. You know the scene: parents slave at their jobs to send Susie to Harvard, but Susie meets surfer dude, drops out, moves to California, and never calls home. Believe me, no matter how much your parents love you they will occasionally look at you and think, "Does he/she have any idea what I have done for him/her?" (See *Almost Famous* for Frances McDormand's brilliant portrayal of an anxious mom.) We seldom expect the young to sacrifice their hopes and aspirations for the older generation, yet in this story it is the young person who is trapped: *huit clos* ("no exit"), as Jean-Paul Sartre said.

Secondly, Gregor does not escape, except into madness and death. But, after Kafka and other artists who followed him, much twentieth-century literature, cinema, poetry, and popular song was about how to escape from commitment, how to free oneself from bourgeois obligation and convention. Indeed, in the modern west we have perhaps gone so far in the direction of personal freedom from family duty that Gregor's deep sense of obligation to his parents and sister seems perhaps quite strange, misplaced and even somewhat unnatural to many of us. But for many more traditional cultures—in Asia for example—Gregor's responsibilities to his family and the fulfillment of his duty would seem perfectly normal; indeed duty towards parents is what is expected of eldest sons in particular. I am not denying for a moment that we too have such care and consideration in

abundance, but in American popular culture, especially after Jack Kerouac and the Beat generation, we are given the impression that the cool thing to do when faced with too much trouble at home is to hit the road. As Bruce Springsteen sings: “Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack / I went out for a ride and I never came back.” (But remember that even the footloose Kerouac spent a lot of time hanging around his mother’s house for free!) Eventually each of us has to find some balance between Gregor’s suffocating and self-destructive sense of duty on the one hand and, on the other hand, an equally destructive freewheeling individualism which undervalues or denies responsibility towards others, children and the elderly in particular.

A couple of final thoughts about the ending of the story. At the end the future looks rosy for the parents and for Grete; they are themselves transformed into new people with a sense of purpose for the future (a future denied to the unfortunate Gregor). But this new life is only achieved through Gregor’s death. Without him around they have found the strength to do it themselves; we might say that the son had to die so the others might live. Did Kafka, a Jew living in a predominantly Christian culture, intend a parallel between Gregor and Jesus? Your guess is as good as mine. Finally, the story ends with the parents noticing Grete’s “nubile young body” and thinking that it’s time they found a husband for her, no doubt someone with money. Just as Gregor was their meal ticket in the past, now Grete’s body can be their meal ticket for the future. Nice parents!

Have a great semester!