MARK M. ANDERSON

Sliding Down the Evolutionary Ladder? Aesthetic Autonomy in The Metamorphosis†

Was he an animal that music moved him so?
(The Metamorphosis)

I

A few years ago an art gallery in New York created a mild sensation by dousing a number of human models, clothes and bodies, in green paint and hanging them on its bare white walls. Although the models adopted various poses, they made no attempt to deny their living status, and interacted freely with the bemused public. Somewhat at a loss to describe this artwork, which apparently was not for sale, the media spoke of ‘Dada’, ‘performance’, and ‘action’ art. Franz Kafka’s literary masterpiece of 1912, The Metamorphosis, enacts essentially the same scenario when its human-sized bug hero climbs the wall of his bedroom and usurps the aesthetic space occupied by a gilt-framed photograph, hugging his flat body against the glass until it ‘completely covers’ the picture. When his mother, less blasé than a New York audience of the 1980s, enters the room, her senses are overwhelmed. She perceives only a huge brownish spot against the flowered wallpaper and, crying out ‘Oh God! Oh God!’, falls into a dead faint. No avant-garde artist of the modern period could ask for a more satisfying public response.

Since the story’s initial publication in 1915, few if any readers of The Metamorphosis have wished to recognize Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosed body as an aesthetic form. For Kafka’s early public the bug was simply too repulsive, and was explained away with allegorical notions like ‘alienated labor’ or ‘unconscious self-loathing’. Further, although Günther Anders in an early and quite perceptive essay interpreted Gregor Samsa as a Luftmensch and ‘artist’ figure, and although subsequent critics have seen a parallel between Gregor’s isolated condition and Franz Kafka’s monk-like dedication to his writing, readers have been hard put to reconcile this aesthetic dimension with the specificity of Gregor’s outward form. In fact, close scrutiny of the story has led critics to deny that the bug has any reliable visual specificity at all: actual descriptive details are scant and contradictory, and since the story is narrated largely from Gregor’s perspective, his own body tends to disappear from the reader’s view. The opening designation of Gregor as an ‘ungeheuer Ungeziefer’ or ‘giant vermin’ is notoriously ambiguous, for Ungeziefer refers to a broad range of animal parasites rather than a single type, ungeheuer (‘monstrous’) is by definition vague, and the ‘un-’ prefix in both words double the term’s lack of specificity into a kind of negative infinity. Significantly, when the cleaning lady calls to Gregor with the precise term Mistkäfer (dung beetle), he refuses to respond. Thus abstractly or negatively defined, the bug would seem to have no discernible form, and to the reader at least it remains a visual cipher.

This critical tendency to de-emphasize the bug’s status as a visual object of representation reached its most extreme and brilliant limit in Stanley Corngold’s influential essay ‘The Metamorphosis of the Metaphor’. Drawing on Anders’s insight that Kafka often literalizes metaphors as the basis for his central images and plot lines, Corngold interprets Gregor’s form as primarily linguistic and rhetorical rather than visual. Because the text circumvents the dialectical relationship of metaphor, insisting that Gregor is a bug but without denying him specifically human traits, the monstrous vermin form functions as a ‘mutilated metaphor, uprooted from familiar language’ (59), an ‘opaque sign’ (56). Anything disturbing about his appearance arises primarily from a disturbing use of rhetorical structure, an ‘unclean’ mixing of the metaphor’s human tenor and its material vehicle:


2. Because Gregor Samsa wishes to live as an artist (i.e. "free as air" [wie ein Luftmensch], he is considered in the eyes of the respectable, down-to-earth world, to be a "bit of an insect"; thus, in The Metamorphosis, he wakes up as a beetle, whose idea of happiness is to be clinging to the ceiling. Franz Kafka, trans. A. Steter and A. K. Thorley (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1960), 43.


4. First published in 1970, the essay was reprinted in an expanded version in The Necessity of Form, which is the edition quoted here.
It appears, then, that the metamorphosis in the Samsa house-
hold of man into vermin is unsettling not only because vermin
are disturbing, or because the vivid representation of a human
'house' is disturbing, but because the indeterminate, fluid crow-
ing of a human tenor and a material vehicle is in itself unset-
tling. (56)

Such interpretations have an indisputable hold on Kafka's story
and, I suspect, are ultimately correct. Kafka knew that his story was
a kind of literary tease, that it depended on the reader's imagination
to visualize what is only suggested by the text. When confronted
with his editor's plan to illustrate the bug for the cover of the first
edition, his response was unambiguous: 'The insect itself cannot be
depicted' (letter of 25 October 1915). He proposed instead the image
of a half-opened door with only darkness behind it—the bug itself
remains unseen and the reader must perform the same act of imag-
ination that is required by the text in the passage from linguistic sign
to mental image. Kafka's suggestion was in fact taken up, and a
black-and-white illustration by Ottomar Starke adorned the story's

None the less, one cannot help feeling that such critical and
authorial strictures have something of a magician's legerdemain—
Now you see him, now you don't—and hide as much as they reveal.
Although the text is a verbal artefact which expertly subverts the
metaphorical function of language, it also requires the reader to
make a sustained effort to visualize the bug within a minutely
described environment. Moreover, such strictures obscure the fact
that the text repeatedly displays Gregor's body as a visual object of
unusual power—a scandalous, grotesque object difficult to behold,
yes, but one that is attributed with an undeniable aesthetic func-
tion, as in the scene when Gregor hangs himself on the wall in front
of his mother and sister. Indeed, the basic movement of all three sec-
tions of the novella consists in covering and uncovering Gregor's
body, like a monster at a fair or a sacred icon.

Accordingly, this essay will attempt to describe Gregor's form in
visual and aesthetic terms, even when the text itself leaves these
terms vague or obscures their reference. Two avenues of interpreta-
tion will be followed: a historical, deliberately digressive approach
that compares Kafka's use of the vermin image to contemporary
developments in science and literature; and a textual reading in
terms of the problematic of Verkehr, clothing, and corporeal gymnastics
and on which The Metamorphosis, perhaps more crucially than
any of Kafka's other writings, depends.