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KAFKA'S "METAMORPHOSIS": REBELLION AND PUNISHMENT

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Only recently has serious attempt been made to subject *Metamorphosis*, one of Kafka's most characteristic works, to genuine critical analysis. These analyses have so far employed three basic concepts: the "extended metaphor";¹ the "inverted fairy tale";² the "parable of human irrationality."³ It is my feeling that the first two of these concepts, though significant as far as they go, are insufficient as total explanations of *Metamorphosis*. The third concept I consider, as will appear in the course of my remarks, to be based on a misunderstanding.

Günther Anders has pointed out that Kafka's literary uniqueness lies in the fact that he dramatizes conventional figures of speech and endows them with full and consistent detail; his tales act out the implications of metaphors buried in the German idiom. *Metamorphosis*, the story of the travelling salesman Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant species of vermin, is cited as a prominent example. In German usage the appellation "dreckiger Käfer" (dirty bug) denotes a slovenly and unclean individual. Kafka transforms the metaphor into a narrative with a minutely detailed bourgeois setting. To contribute to Anders' interesting idea, I would like to note here that the charwoman in the story calls Gregor an "alter Mistkäfer." *Mistkäfer* literally means any species of beetle whose habitat is dung, garbage, and dirt generally.⁴ Figuratively the term denotes, in Austrian and South German usage, a person of unclean and untidy habits. Gregor's father, before he can know of Gregor's metamorphosis, assumes that Gregor's room is untidy. He assures his son that the chief clerk will excuse the disorder in his room—a disorder

¹ Günther Anders, "Franz Kafka—pro und contra," *Die neue Rundschau* (1947), especially 139-140.

² Clemens Heselhaus, "Kafkas Erzählformen," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, XXVI (1952), 353-376; Douglas Angus, "Kafka's Metamorphosis and 'The Beauty and the Beast' Tale," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LIII (1954), 69-71. The germ of the "fairy tale" theory is already contained in Herbert Tauber's pioneering work on Kafka, *Franz Kafka: Eine Deutung seiner Werke* (Zurich, 1941), pp. 31-32. Tauber points to the analogy between Kafka's tale and medieval legends such as the legend of St. Julianus Hospitator, in which true charity is tested by the horrible and physically repulsive.

³ F. D. Luke, "Kafka's 'Die Verwandlung,'" *Modern Language Review*, XLVI (1951), 232-245. On the one hand, Mr. Luke relies on the psychoanalytical approach of Hellmuth Kaiser's *Franz Kafkas Inferno* (Vienna, 1931), which, though chiefly concerned with *The Report of an Ape* and *The Penal Colony*, makes a few comments on *Metamorphosis*; on the other hand, he applies to *Metamorphosis* Charles Neider's theory of "cabalism," expounded in *The Frozen Sea* (New York, 1948).

⁴ According to Meyer's *Lexikon* the term includes three subgroups of the beetle—aphodinae, coprinae, and geotrupinae. The translation given in Cassell's and Hebert's German-English dictionaries is "dung-beetle." Mr. Lloyd in his translation of the story uses the term "cockroach," which comes closer than the Muir "dung-beetle" to Kafka's meaning, since Gregor lives not in a farmyard, but in a city apartment.

expected of someone whom one would call "alter Mistkäfer." Gregor's metamorphosis into a disgusting insect seems to confirm the father's opinion of his son.

However, to see nothing but an extended metaphor in Kafka's work is not to see enough. The tale is too long, too packed with statements, too rich in meaning to be defined simply as a metaphor, no matter how extended. As a first approach to a formal analysis of Kafka's opus Anders' concept is excellent (Kafka himself is reported to have claimed that the metaphor is the basis of all poetry);⁵ as the sole key to his long work it does not suffice. It ignores, for example, the numerous statements in the narrative dealing with the situation of Gregor and his family before the metamorphosis. These alone make for a textual and poetic complexity which overburdens the theory of the single metaphor.

The German scholar Heselhaus and the American Angus have analyzed Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as a pessimistic and bitterly parodistic inversion of the *Beauty and the Beast* type of fairy tale. In Kafka's world love fails to overcome horror, and the "beauty" (Gregor's sister) condemns the "beast" (Gregor) to die instead of re-transforming him with her kiss. This view can not fail to attract. Gregor indeed seems to test his family, especially his sister, and his tragedy lies in their inability to pass the test, i.e., to recognize and love the son and brother in the monster. Yet, like the "extended metaphor," the "inverted fairy tale" definition fails to take into account the background of Gregor's metamorphosis, his relationship to his work and his employer. (Nor does it accord with the fact that Gregor consents to his rejection by the family and dies without bitterness toward them.) Moreover, it assigns a central role to Gregor's erotic daydream about his sister when he hears her playing the violin, a motif about which another investigator, F. D. Luke, comes to very different conclusions. Mr. Luke shifts the responsibility for the tragedy from the sister (and the family) to Gregor himself. He points up the aggressive, egotistical, and incestuous nature of Gregor's "poetic" daydream and shows how, if realized, it would ruin the sister whom he pretends to love so tenderly. Luke detects in Kafka's tale the dichotomy between art and life, disease and health, refined perversion and insensitive normality, so familiar to us from Thomas Mann. The major difference is that Kafka ruthlessly shears the sphere of "Art" and the "unnatural" of its traditional splendor and beauty which Thomas Mann's Venetian setting in *Death in Venice*, for example, still bestows upon it.

It lies in the nature of Kafka's deeply ambiguous art that no single analysis can completely comprehend his multi-faceted creation. Each can merely be one step toward the explanation of a "mystery," the essence of which can perhaps never be fully resolved. My own contri-

⁵ Reported by John Urzidil in "Recollections," *The Kafka Problem*, ed. Angel Flores (New York, 1946), pp. 20-24.

bution must not, therefore, be considered as intending to supersede previous studies; rather it proposes to supplement them by viewing certain portions of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* which have not as yet been given sufficient attention.

I propose to raise this question: Does Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis possess a function in the total narrative? Is there a reason for it? The total narrative includes a time before the metamorphosis; it begins with the business failure of Gregor's father and the debt to Gregor's employer contracted at that time. To find an answer to my question it will be necessary to examine the pre-history of the metamorphosis itself, which previous studies have largely ignored, contained in Gregor's musings after he wakes up, specifically his relationship to his firm and to his employer. Also it will be necessary to consider the role of the chief clerk. Finally we must deal with the meaning of the specific insect shape into which Gregor has changed. Mindful of the advice of a number of recent critics to investigators of Kafka's work,⁶ this study will "take Kafka at his word"; it will assume, that is, that every statement made by the author "counts" in the context of his work and that a careful scrutiny of the text may reveal his art and a good bit of its "mystery" to us.

Any reader of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* must have noted with some surprise that Gregor Samsa, upon waking up to find himself transformed, ponders much more over his job than over his strange misfortune. Appearing to forget what has happened to him, he resents the necessity of getting up and continuing the harried existence of a travelling salesman. Gregor has been intensely dissatisfied with his job; he especially chafes under the lack of respect shown him by his firm and the degrading treatment accorded him by his boss, a tyrant who addresses his employees from a high desk as though he were seated on a throne. We learn from Gregor's reflections that he has nurtured rebellious thoughts about his boss and dreamed of telling him off in a fashion that would send the old man toppling off his high desk, while Gregor would walk out into freedom. However, he has had to inhibit this rebellious wish because of the huge debt which his father owes the employer and which Gregor has to pay off slowly by working for him. He has to continue his hated bondage until the distant day when the debt will be paid. Now he must get up, dress, and catch the early train.

However, the metamorphosis has intervened and made this impossible. It accomplishes, as we can see, in part at least, the goal of Gregor's longed-for rebellion. It sets him free of his odious job. At the same time, it relieves him of having to make a choice between his responsibility

⁶See Heinz Politzer, "Problematik und Probleme der Kafka-Forschung," *Monatshefte*, XLII (1950), 279; Theodor W. Adorno, "Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka," *Die neue Rundschau*, XLIV (1953), 327.

to his parents and his yearning to be free.⁷ The metamorphosis enables Gregor to become free and stay “innocent,” a mere victim of uncontrollable calamity.

The text of the story will shed further light on this function of Gregor’s metamorphosis. During his bitter reflections upon his job Gregor flares up, cursing it: “The devil take it all!” Immediately he feels an itching sensation on his belly and touches the spot with one of his legs; but a cold shudder ripples through him at the touch of his new body. We note that no sooner does Gregor express the wish that the devil free him of his job than he is reminded of his transformed body. This conjunction endows the figure of speech with a sinister and literal significance. If we substitute “metamorphosis” for “devil” Gregor’s wish has actually been granted, for the metamorphosis has surely taken the job from him. A parallel to the Faust legend suggests itself, with the important qualification that the “devil’s gift” to Gregor has been given him in his sleep. At any rate Gregor has, to be sure unconsciously, exchanged his birthright, his human form made in the image of God, for a “guiltless” escape from an intolerable situation. But a chill seizes him when he realizes his new form of existence. His shudder is the price exacted for his escape.

Furthermore, we discover through the chief clerk’s remarks that shortly before the metamorphosis a crisis has been developing in Gregor’s relations with his work. The chief clerk claims that Gregor’s efforts have slackened badly and that his sales have diminished to such a point that his job is endangered. The boss even strongly suspects him of having embezzled funds of the firm. Gregor denies the truth of these accusations; but he admits that he has been feeling unwell and should have asked for a sick leave. We see then that Gregor’s body was beginning to feel the strain of his work too hard to bear when the metamorphosis occurred, freeing him of any further responsibility.

The question arises whether illness would not have served the same purpose. Indeed there are frequent references to illness in the beginning of the story. Gregor behaves in some respects like a sick man. One of the first thoughts occurring to him is to report himself sick. He feels a “faint dull ache” in his side. He interprets the change in his voice as a symptom of a beginning cold. His sister asks him whether he feels unwell. His mother insists that he must be sick and sends for the doctor, from whom Gregor expects a miraculous deliverance. I have already mentioned that Gregor actually felt sick before the fateful event.⁸ But

⁷ This yearning for freedom on the part of one forever held back by obligations and dependence was, of course, Kafka’s own. In a letter to his fiancée F. B., he put it this way: “I, who for the most part have been a dependent creature, have an infinite yearning for independence and freedom in all things.” *Diaries: 1914-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg with the co-operation of Hannah Arendt (New York, 1949), pp. 166-167.

⁸ Heselhaus has drawn attention to an analogy between the metamorphosis and psychosomatic illness, and has pointed out that Kafka called his own tuberculosis

when he considers reporting himself sick, he immediately rejects the idea. The firm never believes in the illness of its employees; it relies on the *Krankenkassenarzt*, the doctor of the Health Insurance, who "regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers." Gregor visualizes the boss coming to the apartment with the physician and reproaching his parents about their "lazy" son. Illness, therefore, would still leave him helpless in the company's power. Besides Gregor feels perfectly well physically, after his change, and has a ravenous appetite. The metamorphosis is not sickness. For sickness would not provide a condition vital to Gregor's metamorphosis – the element of retaliation and aggression against the firm.

Gregor's daydream, as we have seen, embraced not only freedom from the job, but also aggressive action against the boss. The metamorphosis realizes this dream of revolt in an oblique, indirect way. To explain this, we must examine the role the chief clerk plays in the story.

The chief clerk comes to the apartment to accuse Gregor of grave neglect of duty and threatens him with dismissal. His arrogant tone, his readiness to suspect the worst motives, his pitiless view of an employee's decline in usefulness, so reminiscent of the Taylor "speed-up system" ("This is not the season of the year for a business boom, of course, we admit that, but a season of the year for doing no business at all, that does not exist, Mr. Samsa, must not exist")⁹ – all these typify the inhumanity of the business from which Gregor longs to escape. Whether Kafka intended to pillory the "ethics" of the Central European business world, made merciless by the petty scale of its operations and the stiff competition, does not concern us here. What interests us is that the junior manager's or chief clerk's visit highlights the oppressive hold the company has over Gregor, because of his father's debt, and the terror which it can inspire in him. By sending the chief clerk, the firm pursues Gregor in order to crush him with its threat of instant dismissal before he has had a chance to pay off the debt.

What is Gregor's reaction to the chief clerk's coming? First he feels intense anger. Then the thought occurs to him that the chief clerk himself might be changed into a bug some day. ("Gregor tried to suppose to himself that something like what had happened to him today might someday happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible.") There is a parallel between this thought and his former wish of seeing the boss fall down from his high seat. In either "das Tier" ("the animal"). But he rightly concludes that such an analogy does not get us nearer the symbolism, the *Gestalt*, of the work.

⁹ All citations, unless otherwise specified, are from Willa and Edwin Muir's translation of *Metamorphosis* in Franz Kafka, *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, 1948), pp. 67-132. Since my citations from the work are always clearly indicated by their context and since most of them come from the first third of the story, I have dispensed with page references.

case Gregor imagines his superiors humiliated. In one case the desire is openly acknowledged; in the other it is disguised as a possibility imagined, but clearly the fantasy conceals a wish. Two factors might be noted here marginally: the ill-will hidden in the fantasy is aimed only at the representative of the firm, never at the members of Gregor's family; the other is the curious fact that the fate imagined for the chief clerk is actually Gregor's own. The following discussion will shed light on this circumstance.

When the chief clerk starts his reproaches and threats, Gregor quickly succumbs to fear and pushes his anger out of his consciousness. But his metamorphosis, his horribly changed appearance, has precisely the effect which an outburst of rage on Gregor's part would have; it functions as aggression against the chief clerk. The moment Gregor opens the door and shows himself in his new shape to the chief clerk, the roles of the two are reversed in fact even though Gregor does not recognize this. The chief clerk, who has come to threaten Gregor, now retreats in terror while Gregor, hitherto the poor exploited and despised salesman, drives him out of the apartment so that he leaves his hat and cane behind, tokens of Gregor's triumph. Thus the metamorphosis fulfills Gregor's secret wish for rebellion and the humiliation of his superior in the firm. To be sure, it is not the chief himself whom Gregor humbles, but the second in command. However, the switch in targets is not too important, since the chief clerk has acted with the same brutal arrogance which Gregor hated in the boss.

More important is the fact that the metamorphosis fulfills Gregor's desire for revolt without implicating his conscious mind. The conscious aim of Gregor's pursuit of the chief clerk is not to frighten but to reconcile him. While chasing the man, who runs away from him in speechless fright, Gregor begs him to champion him in the office, and promises he will work his way out of the embarrassing predicament. Yet his inadvertent use of the term "pursuit" to describe his advance toward the chief clerk reveals what is actually happening, as does the chief clerk's flight itself.¹⁰ The discrepancy between the actual result of Gregor's action and his own explanation of it has a ludicrous effect upon the reader. It is grotesquely comic to watch the startled chief clerk run away, staring with gaping mouth over his shoulder at the monstrous creature that is relentlessly scuttling after him, while Gregor begs him to stay calm and put in a good word for him at the office. A similarly funny effect is achieved earlier in the story when Gregor tries to assure the chief clerk that he will get dressed, pack his collection of samples, and still catch the train—a program patently absurd in view of his transformation.

In this comic discrepancy between the actual situation and Gregor's

¹⁰ The term "pursuit" is an exact translation of the original.

rationalizations, Mr. Luke has seen a satiric parable on the irrationality of human mental processes; Gregor's transformation into a subhuman creature is for him the external correlative to the atavistic, irrational nature of his thinking.¹¹ However, it is less faulty logic than a psychic compromise which lies at the basis of Gregor's self-deception — a compromise between the satisfaction of an aggressively rebellious impulse and a duty-bound conscience that demands submission. The function of the metamorphosis is to allow the compromise. Rebellion proceeds by mere physical phenomena — Gregor's frightening appearance, his misunderstood movements toward the chief clerk, the snapping of his jaws — facts over which his conscious mind has no control. Thus he remains "innocent," the victim of an external calamity which he does not understand. It is Gregor's ignorance of his suppressed anger and hostility toward his superiors that causes him to be surprised at the chief clerk's (and his parents') reactions toward him. He thinks he is animated only by the best intentions; all he wants is to propitiate the chief clerk and return to his job as soon as possible. How deeply he loathes his job and hates his superiors he has forgotten. But the others cannot hear what he tries to tell them; they cannot hear his rationalizations. All they perceive are his appearance and his motions, and these look menacing, and utterly contradict his professed good intentions. What the metamorphosis does is to make Gregor's suppressed desire visible. It turns his inside out, as it were. (Here, of course, we see the technique of expressionism.) His hostility, having erupted, has made his whole body its horrifying manifestation. His conscious mind, of course, does not participate in this eruption, but its rationalizations cannot be communicated to the others. Only the inner truth is there to see for all except Gregor himself. When the chief clerk runs away from him in fright he reacts to Gregor's true wish and, in a way, understands him better than Gregor dares to understand himself. Likewise when Gregor's father reacts to the metamorphosis as though it were a malicious trick of Gregor's, a refusal to do his duty, he is, as our analysis so far has shown, closer to the truth than Gregor and the superficial reader, for whom the catastrophe is an inexplicable blow of fate, a monstrous "accident."

Viewed in this way, the metamorphosis reveals a pattern which Freud has made known to us in his study of accidents.¹² Accidents, says Freud, are often acts springing from motives of which the conscious mind keeps carefully unaware. Accidental injuries are often self-punishment induced by hidden guilt feelings. Accidents in which one person injures another may be caused by unconscious hostility. For example, a person A, who may feel nothing but respect for B, suddenly hurts B "accidentally." A careful analysis of the relationship of the two

¹¹ See Luke, 238-240.

¹² See *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Authorized English Edition, with introduction by A. A. Brill (New York, 1914), pp. 198-211.

may disclose a history of suppressed hostility in A. By the time he wrote *Metamorphosis* (November, 1912) Kafka was familiar with the writings of Freud; he alludes to Freud in his diary, in connection with his earlier story *The Judgment*, two months before he wrote *Metamorphosis*.¹³ His familiarity with the world that Freud opened to the Occidental mind does not, of course, mean that he applied Freudian insights deliberately during the composition of his works; everything we know about Kafka's spontaneous mode of creation, especially in the autumn of 1912, would speak against a deliberate, calculating manner of composition. It is something else to suspect that Freudian ideas might have colored the background of his mind and influenced his spontaneous thinking. At any rate, the remarkable parallelism between the pattern of the metamorphosis and the pattern of many "accidents" described by Freud remains unaffected, whether or not Kafka was aware of it during the writing of his work.

Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis resembles both types of "accidents" described by Freud, those in which a person satisfies his suppressed hostility by "accidentally" hurting someone else, and those in which he hurts himself. So far we have established that Gregor's metamorphosis expresses his secret hostility toward his work and his boss. Now we have to show that it also expresses his guilt and the punishment for this guilt. The metamorphosis clears him of any "official" responsibility for betraying his parents; but it fails to free him of a vague, pervasive sense of guilt toward his family. This sense of guilt manifests itself in a panicky need to prove his innocence, and this need in turn plays a vital part in bringing him to ruin.

When the story begins, the metamorphosis is not complete. Gregor is still able to speak and be understood by his family. When he first hears his voice issuing from his altered body, he is, to be sure, "shocked." "As if from below"¹⁴ a humming or twittering squeak mixes with his speech and tends to distort and obscure his words. But by pronouncing each syllable slowly and distinctly, Gregor is able to counteract this tendency "from below" (from the subconscious, the realm of dreams, the country of sleep in which Gregor fails to hear the alarm clock summoning him to the routine life, and from which he wakes late to find himself transformed.) He retains a control over his speech that leaves it intelligible and recognizably human. He loses this control after the chief clerk accuses him of indulging in "strange whims"¹⁵ and warns him of losing his job (the very thing Gregor secretly desires). These accusations throw him into a state of "agitation" in which he forgets "everything

¹³ *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1910-1913*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York, 1948), p. 276.

¹⁴ This is my literal translation of the original "wie von unten her." Muir's translation "like an undertone" is more definite and, at the same time, more limited than Kafka's original and excludes some of its connotations.

¹⁵ My literal translation of the original "sonderbare Launen."

else" but the desperate need to show his good will and conceal the truth of his situation. Thus he forgets to discipline his voice during his frantic pleading with the chief clerk and his speech is no longer intelligible. The chief clerk tells the flabbergasted parents that what they heard from Gregor's room was "no human voice"; and from then on Gregor loses all possibility of communication and is thrown forever into his terrifying isolation.

Gregor's isolation crowns his metamorphosis. As long as he can be understood, he cannot be a complete insect. To be sure, his mind always remains human; but, after the loss of his voice, his humanity cannot be perceived by his fellow men. It cannot communicate with and act upon them. For the world he has become nothing but an insect although continuing to be a human being for himself. This is, of course, Gregor's agonizing tragedy: that he feels and thinks as a human being while unable to make his humanity felt and known. In this respect he is like the hero of Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got his Gun*, who lost face and limbs in the war and was left a mute, deaf, and blind torso with a mind shut up inside. The nature of the physical transformation in either case makes any attempt to communicate ineffectual — unnoticed or misunderstood; and the mind stays imprisoned, a torturing instrument in a functionless vacuum. But whereas Trumbo's anti-war tract shows this tragedy caused by entirely external factors, Kafka's incomparably more subtle work shows that the hero at least accentuates his tragedy by his panicky urge to conform to what is expected of him, while leaving his real desires unacknowledged even when they work havoc with him. Gregor loses his ability to be understood when he tries to minimize and conceal his catastrophe. He pretends that nothing unusual has occurred and promises he will catch the eight o'clock train. Mr. Luke has seen in Gregor's specious pleading the deterioration of his rationality, an inner correlate of his external transformation into a subhuman creature. But the pleading is a failure of nerve rather than a failure of logic. It is the compulsive effort to deceive himself and the others about the truth; for his sense of guilt at "deserting his parents", which has been aroused by the chief clerk's accusations, will not let him face this truth. By his deception, however, he only worsens his situation, excludes himself from the human community, and prevents the possibility of his restitution. Let us suppose, for instance, that Gregor, instead of succumbing to panic, had retained the control over his words which he exercised before the junior manager's arrival. His speech would have been intelligible. Let us further suppose that instead of concealing the true facts Gregor had reported them in a slow disciplined speech. Such a report would have made it clear to the others that his mind at least had remained human. Communication would have been established and Gregor's fate would have lost its most essential and horrible aspect — utter isolation.

To further confirm our argument let us examine another passage in the text. Soon after waking up, Gregor thinks that if he lies still in bed and ceases to worry about getting up, "such complete repose" will "restore things to their real and normal condition." His hope for a return to human status, to his "real and normal condition," lies in consenting to his true desire—his longing for leisure and freedom. But his powerful conscience does not allow him to rest. It leads him away from "cool reflection" and "complete repose," it leads him to fret and to try by "desperate resolves" to do his duty, no matter what his *real wish* is. The antidote to the metamorphosis, so the passage hints, would be Gregor's yielding to his guilty desire, which his conscience forbids. Thus it is his obedience to duty, his cowed compliance with something he deeply hates, that tends to carry him away from the hope of recovery and to involve him ever more deeply in his catastrophe. Soon afterwards, as we have seen, this sense of obligation to his family and his work achieves his final isolation and seals his doom.

The same tendency helps bring about his physical destruction in the end. When his angry father pursues him, Gregor, bent on proving his obedience and good intentions, abstains from fleeing up the walls to the ceiling, and so deprives himself of the only advantage his insect shape gives him. Instead he stays on the floor within reach of the father's menacing boots and becomes the easy target of the apples with which his father bombards and cripples him. Gregor never recovers from this wound, and it hastens his death.

From these examples we can now deduce that Gregor's catastrophe is intimately linked to the appeasement both of his own conscience and of his superiors in firm and family. He loses his voice when he seeks to appease the chief clerk; he courts death in seeking to appease his father. Now, it is remarkable that this appeasement has precisely the opposite of the effect it should have. Instead of saving Gregor, it brings him ever closer to destruction. Above all, the examples show us that this ineffectual appeasement of the "superego" tends to accentuate the natural effects of the metamorphosis, namely isolation and helplessness. May we not infer from this that the metamorphosis itself is such a treacherous appeasement of a sense of guilt which in demonstrating innocence and helplessness actually invites punishment and destruction? In order to answer this question let us see what it is exactly that Gregor has been changed into.

Kafka states in the first sentence that Gregor wakes up to find himself changed into a giant kind of vermin ("Ungeziefer"). The term "vermin" holds the key to the double aspect of the metamorphosis. Vermin connotes something parasitic and aggressive, something that lives off human beings and may suck their blood; on the other hand, it connotes something defenseless, something that can be stepped upon and crushed.

Gregor's hugeness emphasizes the aggressive aspect. Moreover, at the beginning of the story the reader might be inclined to think of Gregor's new form as that a bedbug. Kafka's famous letter to his father would give support to such a view since Kafka has his father refer to him as a blood-sucking type of vermin, a bedbug or a louse.¹⁶ But later we discover that Gregor does not possess the aggressiveness of the blood-sucking vermin. He does not feed on blood, but on garbage. This diet (as well as the term "Mistkäfer" used by the charwoman and a later reference in Kafka's diary to "the black beetle" of his story)¹⁷ lead one to believe that Gregor is akin to a cockroach, a creature that may nauseate human beings but does not attack them. Offensive in looks, it is defenseless in fact.

The image of the giant cockroach perfectly expresses the two aspects of the metamorphosis, aggression and helplessness, and the order of their importance. The metamorphosis endows Gregor with a terrifying exterior; it causes panic in the chief clerk and makes his mother faint. But at the same time it renders him infinitely more vulnerable than he was in his human form. A foot held up over his head, a chair raised over his back, threaten death. An apple almost kills him. Gregor realizes that, apart from his "frightening appearance," he has no weapons. At one point, to be sure, he thinks of jumping into his sister's face and biting her; soon afterwards, however, while watching the roomers devour their meals, he understands that one needs teeth in order to bite and that "toothless jaws even of the finest make" are quite useless. When he dreams of keeping his sister in his room and defending her against all intruders, he relies on his frightening looks and not on any tangible means of defense. As soon as his appearance fails to intimidate — as it fails to intimidate his father and the charwoman — Gregor is absolutely defenseless. His menacing appearance is merely appearance, but his helplessness is real. It exposes him to merciless punishment by anyone who, like his father, is eager to exploit it.

Thus the metamorphosis links punishment to aggression, for the very transformation which enables Gregor to drive the chief clerk away renders him helpless in the face of his father's wrath; but punishment, rather than aggression, is its ultimate function. For the father transforms Gregor's victory over the chief clerk into ruinous defeat. He takes over as the chief clerk flees. He seizes the trophy of Gregor's triumph, the chief clerk's cane, left behind in his flight, brandishes it over Gregor's head, and threatens to crush and flatten him with it. Gregor has to cease his movement toward the outside, toward the world and freedom. Under the threat of his furious father he now has to turn

¹⁶ "Letter to his Father," *Dearest Father: Stories and other Writings*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York, 1954), p. 195.

¹⁷ *Diaries: 1910-1913*, p. 304.

back to his room, henceforth the prison in which he will pine away his life in solitary confinement.

In conclusion, it may be said that the metamorphosis would not have occurred in either of these two cases: if Gregor had not nurtured hostility toward his work and his boss, or if he had revolted openly and thrown up his job without regard to his parents. To put it in positive terms: the metamorphosis accommodates Gregor's conflicting needs, the need to rebel, and the need to suffer punishment for this rebellion. Above all, by being an unconscious process, the metamorphosis protects him from self-knowledge. Indeed, one of the most curious facts about it is Gregor's lack of curiosity as to the causes of his change. These causes are something Gregor wishes not to know, something he would prefer to leave buried. Therefore, the metamorphosis appears as an utterly mysterious, inexplicable event. The author, however, by letting us see Gregor's feelings of revolt at the opening of the story (after which they are repressed and extinguished in guilt and fear) has given us a key to the mystery of the metamorphosis. If we make use of this key, Kafka's work seems like the expressionist illustration of an "accident" that is not a true accident according to Freud. To the victim and the superficial observer such a calamity appears a senseless and unforeseeable event, a brute happening bare of meaning. Upon analysis of the victim's life, however, the accident is found to fulfill a function. It comes as the climax of a secret history of hostility and guilt. These combine to erupt in the catastrophe which mutilates and destroys him who has failed to face the turmoil in his soul.

