FRANZ KAFKA'S METAMORPHOTIC PRISON: THE DOOR AND THE WINDOW

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Abstract

Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, foregrounds the condition of the individual in the modern society, an individual who is weighed down by the awareness of his own insignificance in relation to the others and his own dreams. By means of memory, he tries to resist his new identity in an alienated and alienating world/space in which the others gradually turn from powerless witnesses into mighty 'victimizers' whose indifference proves too much for the weakened self. Our paper approaches the metamorphosis Kafka displays in his novella from the perspective of the relation between the individual and the others, viewed through the lens of the (in)ability to stay human(e).

Keywords: memory, identity, metamorphosis, communication, self, space.

> "I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we are reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? ...we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us."[2]

The Metamorphosis is such a book, one that should unblind the blinded, one that calls attention to the quality and privilege of being and staying humane. It tells the story of the powerless individual who is burdened by the tragedy of his own loneliness and insignificance, in a world ruled by those whose indifference proves too much for the weakened self. It is a mirror held against a society which inflicts its impassiveness and fear of difference on the individual whose identity is, thus, deconstructed.

In our analysis, we make use of several concepts that eventually converge and offer a deeper understanding of the story: space, others, metamorphosis (as the title goes), language and communication (with reference to two fundamental spatial cues: the door and the window).

At a closer look, this magical realist novella is not about the metamorphosis of the body alone, but it goes as far as the *metamorphosis of the self*, its structure allowing the reader to observe the stages of such a change, of the process itself.

The book is divided in three parts: the first part depicts Gregor Samsa'smetamorphosis and, once revealed, its impact on the others; the second segment focuses on Gregor's gradual process of adapting to his changed body and on his family's attempts to help him while trying to cope with this new identity triggered by the

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[2]Kafka in a letter to Oskar Pollack, http://www.critical-theory.com/what-makes-a-good-book-kafkas-letters-to-a-friend/

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metamorphosis; the third unit centres on failure of communication, on being forgotten, indifference and (social) death. It is then obvious that the book begins with the metamorphosis of the body (triggered by an already-initiated metamorphosis of the self), lingers over the self which needs to adapt to the limitations of the new body and to the others' perception of and reaction to him, to finally reveal the self giving up when faced with utter rejection and repulsion. It is the very representation of "the moral sensitivity of the self" which the metamorphosed character stands for (Constantinescu 126).

The main character, Gregor Samsa, "the quintessential Kafka anti-hero" as Bernofsky[3] labels him, wakes up one morning and discovers he has undergone metamorphosis and has become an "unusually wide" "monstruous verminous bug", with an "armour-hard back" and "brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections", having very strong jaws but "no real teeth", with "numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference", his limbs "incessantly moving with very different motions and which, in addition, he was unable to control"(*M* 3, 6,8,18).

The change is not grasped in its entirety, the contour of the threshold between the world of dreams and the real world still being blurred to the protagonist, who wants to escape reality as it is and undo the metamorphosis. "'Why don't I keep sleeping for a little while longer and forget all this foolishness', he thought" (*M* 3-4). Everything that follows, from the moment of his waking up to the moment of unlocking the door of his room, is to be perceived as a gradual 'awakening', Gregor having to face the challenges/limitations of his new body, an endeavour which brings about the awareness of the real. Yet, it is only on opening the door and seeing himself mirrored in the others' reaction that he fully understands the metamorphosis is not a mere illusion.

His "immobile voyage" (Deleuze 35) from the human condition to that of a verminous creature has come to an end: the threshold between the worlds has been crossed and the familiar territory is out of reach. Deleuze sees the metamorphosis as a deterritorialization which is devoid of movement: "it constitutes no less an *absolute deterritorialization* of the man in opposition to the merely relative deterritorializations that the man causes to himself by shifting, by traveling; the becoming-animal is an immobile voyage that stays in one place" (ibidem).

"The dream reveals the reality", said Kafka in one of his conversations with Gustav Janouch and this unification of the real and the unreal is to be seen in the novella as well. Although the protagonist's change takes place while he is asleep, it materializes the reality Gregor Samsa has previously identified himself with: an insignificant creature which needs to hide in the darkness, a being whom the others reject because of it/him being different and dismiss because of its/his uselessness.

Thus, we can say that this physical metamorphosis is triggered by the character's *self-depreciation* rooted in a postponed "big break" (*M* 5) - a need to break away from a frustrating existence as a traveling salesman who is 'chained' by his parents'debts. Gregor, who sees himself as "the boss's minion, without backbone or intelligence" (*M*

[3]www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-translating-kafkas-the-metamorphosis

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6), takes pride and comfort in being the family's provider, but at the same time he feels suffocated and dehumanised by"a demanding job" which requires being "day in, day out on the road", dealing with "the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly *changing human relationships which never come from the heart*"(*M* 5, 6; emphasis added), facing the possibility of becoming "a victim of gossip, coincidences, and groundless complaints" (*M* 21). His "half-articulated resentments concerning his job", states Preece, "clearly reveal the emotional and psychological damage his economic bondage has inflected" (135).

Bernofsky adds an interesting perspective here, stating that what this salesman has sold "is himself: his own agency and dignity, making him a sellout through and through", whereas his metamorphosis is "the physical manifestation of his abasement". Preece, on the other hand, sees the metamorphosis as a kind of escape, allowing Gregor "to abandon a social identity which is based on the son's obligation to clear the parental *Schuld*, a term which connotes both financial debt as well as guilt" (Preece 37)

Analysing the very concept of *change/metamorphosis* as (plainly or subtly) displayed in the novel, we need to differentiate between Gregor's change and the others'(where the others, that is, Gregor's family, stand for the society the individual is part of).

Gregor's change, on the one hand, takes place both at a mental level (his gradual self-depreciation) and at a physical level (the metamorphosis itself); the only constant is the struggle to stay humane while caring for his family (trying not to forget his human past). His entire existence proves a sacrifice in the name of one's *love for the other*. At a symbolic level, Gregor remains the same despite his moral humiliation, asserts Constantinescu, his metamorphosis being, first and foremost, "an extended metaphor of his deformed life" (Constantinescu 131), a conversion which "is not a matter of morality or belief", as Breckman emphasizes, but difference "written literally on the 'body'"[4].

On the other hand, the others' change is not a physical one, they do not transform into inhuman creatures, yet they gradually get dehumanized as they give up helping and caring for Gregor, taking refuge in forgetfulness and indifference. There is another change they are subject to: once Gregor becomes an insect and ceases to be the family's provider, they need to take control over their lives and provide for themselves. However, the newly-acquired social strength and purposefulness prove dehumanizing, hence destructive, drawing their attention away from what should have stayed their focus: caring for the other.

The metamorphosis of the body implies subsequent changes: behavioural alteration and *loss of comprehensible, human language*. Gregor Samsa loses his ability to speak, he can no longer communicate with the others and gradually ceases to even try to communicate. Language is seen an attribute of humans and the loss of this ability underlines the very idea of loss of human condition/identity. Deprived of human contact and hiding in the darkness of his "cavern" (*M* 44), Gregor finds comfort and

[4]http://www.upenn.edu/nso/prp/met/breckman_lecture.html

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even joy in eating spoiled food, hiding under the couch and "crawling back and forth across the walls and ceiling" (*M* 41).

Kafka parallels the idea of metamorphosis with a transformation of the *space* which witnesses the life and death of Gregor-the-man turned into Gregor-the-verminous-creature.

In the first part of the novella, the reader is presented with the brief description of the protagonist's room, a real and familiar space ("the four well-known walls") which offers reassurance and a feeling of safety, a shelter/refuge Gregor locks himself in:

> His room, a *proper room for a human being*, only somewhat too small, lay quietly between the four well-known walls. Above the table, on which an unpacked collection of sample cloth goods was spread out (Samsa was a traveling salesman) hung the picture which he had cut out of an illustrated magazine a little while ago and set in a pretty gilt frame. It was a picture of a woman with a fur hat and a fur boa.(*M* 3; emphasis added)

Gregor's choice of locking the door is seen as symbolic, mirroring the individual's relation with the outside world, his 'cautiousness' in communicating, if not his inability to approach the others and to allow them in. From a different perspective, one might see it as Gregor's attempt to hold on to his individuality which should be kept private, safe, unspoiled by the others.

In the article "Unexilatîn sine însuşi: Franz Kafka", Mihaela Zaharia (147-149) brings into discussion two spatial cues that offer a symbolic reading of the kafkaesque space: *the door* and *the window*. According to Zaharia, the door connects two spaces which just seem to be different, it mediates between inside and outside, between the conscious and the unconscious; the enclosed space is a protective one, offering comfort and a feeling of safety, inaccessible to the others and, at the same time, protecting the individual from himself (152). The window is associated with a complete separation of the characters from the outside world, it is a refuge as well as a place for contemplation, states Zaharia, offering the possibility to observe the world without being seen, a place of both hope and hopelessness, a means of bringing the outside world closer.

We see these spatial cues that Kafka makes use of in *The Metamorphosis* as mirroring the relation between Gregor and the others: they are to be seen as means of communication, either allowing or blocking it, compensating for the character's loss of a comprehensible language and mirroring the gap bewteen him and the others. The door that is kept locked (first by Gregor, then by the others) is suggestive of the inability to communicate and also of the fear of the unknown, fear of life itself. The window allows the protagonist to still be part of a world which has come to fear and reject the individual, yet it stands for pseudo-communication, for the illusion of belonging.

In the second part of the book, the once-comforting room Gregor has lived in for 5 years, becomes "threatening" to him, making him *anxious*. It is an alien"high, open"

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space he does not feel safe in any more, a space of *"imprisonment"* (*M*34) where he spends the days and nights in semi-sleep, hungry, worrying, hoping and craving for affection:

> But the high, open room, in which he was compelled to lie flat on the floor, made him anxious, without his being able to figure out the reason, for he had lived in the room for five years. With a half unconscious turn and not without a slight shame he scurried under the couch, where, in spite of the fact that his back was a little cramped and he could no longer lift up his head, he felt very comfortable and was sorry only that his body was too wide to fit completely under it.(*M* 29-30)

If prior to the metamorphosis it was Gregor's choice to keep the door locked at night (a "precaution, acquired from traveling, of locking all doors during the night, even at home" [*M*7]), we now witness a transfer of choice with regard to communication: the different one (the verminous creature) is no longer allowed to exit his space, he is kept locked inside, which is the only way the others feel protected against the frightening unknown his being different stands for. Communication between the two spaces/worlds – the individual's and the others' - is no longer possible.

> But now the door was not opened any more, and Gregor waited in vain. Earlier, when the door had been barred, they had all wanted to come in to him; now, when he had opened one door and when the others had obviously been opened during the day, no one came any more, and the keys were stuck in the locks on the outside. (*M* 29)

The window becomes a refuge, a means of comfort and escape for both Gregor and his sister (the only one that enters his space). Gregor, on the one hand, needs to escape loneliness, isolation, his fear of forgetting and being forgotten and it is the window that grants this illusion, the mere illusion of belonging, as previously mentioned: "He undertook the very difficult task of shoving a chair over to the window. Then he crept up on the window sill and, braced in the chair, leaned against the window to look out, obviously with some memory or other of the satisfaction which that used to bring him in earlier times" (*M* 38). On the other hand, the window represents for Gregor's sister a means of escaping the darkness of the room where the verminous creature hides and crawls across the walls, a familiar opening that would allow light and air in, quietening down her fear of the unknown:

> As soon as she entered, she ran straight to the window, without taking the time to shut the door (in spite of the fact that she was otherwise very considerate in sparing anyone the sight of Gregor's room), and yanked the window open with eager hands, as if she was almost suffocating, and remained for a while by the window breathing deeply, even when it was still so cold. (*M* 39)

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A further change is yet to come: in the attempt to help him cope with the new coordinates of his life, Gregor's sister decides to remove the furniture from his room so that he can freely move about, without worrying that he might get hurt. She does "all she can to reconcile herself and the family to the monster he has become" (Gray 83). The mother gets involved as well, yet she is afraid that the removal of furniture would be perceived by Gregor as a sign of giving up all hope of an improvement, a way of abandoning him. It is on hearing his mother's words that Gregor realizes the once-familiar space is and should remain *an extension of his human identity*; his desperate endeavor to 'rescue' the picture becomes, then, a symbolic act of his struggle to hold on to his space/identity, both the picture and the room being understood as 'identity markers'.

He feels as if they were depriving him of "everything he cherished" (*M* 46), obliterating his past, his former identity ("a quick and complete forgetting of his human past" [*M* 44]). He needs to react and to take back just one of his previous possessions that would *remind* him of his human condition, *memory* being his only ally (the only means of fighting forgetfulness and loss of identity). The struggle for his past is perceived by his family as a sign of aggressiveness and the second part ends with Mrs. Samsa begging the father to spare Gregor's life.

The third section of the novella focuses on the family's weariness, their decision to give up hope on Gregor-the-human. At the beginning, the father's feeling of guilt for having hurt the son he can no longer recognize translates into a sort of compensation: the door is kept open in the evening so that Gregor can observe his "overworked and exhausted" family (*M* 53). Once again the issue of communication is brought forth, yet the image of the open door does not imply dialogue, access to both worlds – it is now a symbolic window representing pseudo-communication, Gregor remaining *an outsider* who observes life going on on the other side of the door/window.

The family acknowledge Gregor-the-bug's uselessness and gradually forget about his existential needs. The care he used to get has now changed into a "wretched" one (*M* 57) and the room becomes a storage place full of dust and garbage, of things "which they couldn't put anywhere else" (*M* 60), useless items among which a useless creature crawls like "an aged invalid" (*M* 53), barely sleeping and gradually ceasing to eat.

Kafka's use of the image of the door which is now kept shut many evenings is suggestive of the others' growing indifference and unwillingness to communicate with the individual who is no longer one of them – the different one. There is a last attempt on the part of Gregor Samsa, the generic modern individual, to be part of the normal, human world: while seduced by his sister's playing the violin, "the unknown nourishment he craved" (*M* 64), he steps out of his refuge/prison cell. The family's reaction and their words are a sentence to death:

> 'It must be gotten rid of,' cried the sister; 'That is the only way, father. You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we have believed for so long, that is truly our real misfortune. But how can it be Gregor? If it were Gregor, he would have long ago realized that a communal life among human beings is not

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> possible with such an animal and would have gone away voluntarily. Then we would not have a brother, but we could go on living and honour his memory. But this animal plagues us. It drives away the lodgers, will obviously take over the entire apartment, and leave us to spend the night in the alley. Just look, father,' she suddenly cried out, 'he's already starting up again.' (*M*69)

Gregor crawles back in his room, not wanting to trouble his family. Faced with their inability to recognize and accept him despite his changed appearance, with their openly-displayed desire to get their normal life back, he finally gives up hope and will to live:

> 'What now?' Gregor asked himself and looked around him in the darkness. […] He remembered his family with deep feeling and love. In this business, his own thought that he had to disappear was, if possible, even more decisive than his sister's. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful reflection until the tower clock struck three o'clock in the morning. From the window he witnessed the beginning of the general dawning outside. Then without willing it, his head sank all the way down, and from his nostrils flowed out weakly out his last breath. (*M*71)

"The verminous self must go: it has no hold of life, and no destiny but extinction. On the other hand, the brave new world now emerges, not unsatirised" (Gray 91) offering "a bleak and tragic vision of the modern condition" (Breckman), the novella being ultimately seen as "a protest against society's attempt to lock us into an identity that denies or obstructs our search for human connections" (ibidem).

Indeed, the end of Kafka's book emphasizes the condition of the modern individual in a society blinded by selfishness, defined by its inability to see and heal loneliness. It is a story about gradual resignation and loss of meaning, about opposing the deconstruction of identity by means of memory, the story of a man defeated by life itself.

Abbreviations

M - *The Metamorphosis*

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