

From a cockroach's point of view. The metamorphosis of perception in Kafka¹

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Abstract. The article offers a reading of the famous tale by Kafka focused on the consequences triggered by the sudden transformation of Gregor Samsa into an insect. This event constitutes the starting point of a shift that involves phases and components of perception both of the self and the world as well as the relations between the inner and the external world, the most elementary awareness and feelings and the most complex ones, which are affective, cognitive and related to interactions, expressed with particular emphasis by the dynamics of the spatial dimension of the story. Two discursive paths intersect above all: on one side, the traveling salesman wakes up with the in the body of a cockroach while his soul is the same as always. He will have to try to *become cockroach*, that is to assume its perceptions and then, slowly, its tastes, its impressions and any other animal sentiment. At the same time, the *becoming* of Gregor's family will be antiphrastic to the one experienced by him: from inept, passive parasites of their akin, as they are depicted at the beginning of the story, his family members will gradually turn into active bourgeoisies full of projects, rejecting Gregor up to eliminate him: they are the ones dehumanizing themselves, while Gregor refines his sensitivity in suffering, even to the sacrifice.

Hesitation before birth. If there is a transmigration of souls, then I am not yet on the bottom rung. My life is a hesitation before birth.

Franz Kafka

1. Awakening

When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed. He lay on his tough armoured back, and, raising his head a little, managed to see – sectioned off by little crescent-shaped ridges into segments – the expanse of his arched, brown belly, atop which the coverlet perched, forever on the point of slipping off entirely. His numerous legs, pathetically frail by contrast to the rest of him, waved feebly before his eyes.²

The famous story in which Kafka performs a *Gedanken-experiment* – a thought experiment – boasts a mind-boggling incipit: the mutation, the metamorphosis, the catastrophe have already happened. What more can we expect in terms of plot development, what transformations of state might the writer's cruelty hold in store for us?

And yet, we are only at the beginning: the “change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one” (see the Oxford Dictionary) will unfold from here to the end of the book – not without surprises, twists and turns in the plot – and will conclude with a death foretold (poor Gregor's) and a rebirth (his family's), figured in the “young body” of his sister, who at the end of the story would

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² All quotations from Kafka's text are from Michael Hoffman's English translation (see Kafka 2007).



get up “and stretch her nubile young body” (Kafka 2007, p. 126), in an antiphrastic awakening to Gregor’s initial one.

Due to the peculiarity of the *discourse* and its development, we are the onlookers in the account of a *becoming* which brings into play the various phases and components of the perception of oneself and the world, the relationships between interior and exterior, between feeling oneself and feeling from the most elementary to more complex, emotional, cognitive, relational processes.

The account is based on the disruption – we might say a “defamiliarization” – of normal auto and hetero-perceptive relations, as in the analysis of a clinical case. The process takes place on different planes and with different protagonists:

- The most evident narrative trajectory is Gregor’s *becoming*, which starts from the body. His change from travelling salesman to cockroach is, as we have said, a point of departure in the story, not one of arrival: Gregor wakes up with the body of a cockroach, but his soul is the same as ever. He will have to try to *become a cockroach*, take on its perceptions and then, slowly, its tastes, impressions, “feelings”: inhabit the body until he becomes one with it, and find a new *raison d’être*, recreate the gap he experiences as *subject of feeling* and *subject of knowing*. This is the trial put to him, entrusted to him by the narrative contingency;
- at the same time, the becoming of Gregor’s family members, antiphrastic to his, unfolds: they too experience metamorphosis throughout the text, so that from being his inept, passive and affectionate parasites at the beginning of the story, they will gradually turn into active members of the *bourgeoisie*, full of new plans as they push Gregor off into his no-man’s land.

It is a question of and between subjects: in the above-mentioned metamorphoses, what is also significant are the *images*, the simulacra each one of the subjects involved has of himself and of others: each one of them spies their counterpart as they undergo change and judges them accordingly, albeit almost never properly. Both Gregor’s and his family’s existential agenda alternates between *sacrifice* and *rebirth*. The various members can neither establish themselves as autonomous subjects nor as a collective acting unit; their initial cohesion seems instead to come from a mortifying reciprocal dependence which prevents each from being a fully-fledged subject, a dependence which masks a functional separation of the *mors tua vita mea* (“your death, my life”) type.

In effect, once the initial ambiguous equilibrium is broken with Gregor’s transformation, a competition between anti-subjects starts, which will be resolved only with the clear sacrifice of the “mutant”, this time fully functional to the new life of the other family members, sanctioned and fittingly expressed by the final “flowering” of the sister’s body.

The narrative organization itself seems to support the thesis that subjectivity cannot emerge without inter-subjective verification: Gregor’s death in his new life is first of all the death of every affective relation.

It may be useful to recall, along with Deleuze and Guattari (1975), that the theme of metamorphosis is recurrent in Kafka’s work, and is developed – as in this story – by experimenting with all possible contaminations, transformations, and communications – to all appearances doomed to failure – within the animality/humanity and exteriority/interiority oppositions.

We may here cite, for example, the story *The Burrow*, the stream of consciousness of a being who, paralyzed by fear in the darkness of his labyrinthine hiding place, feels the gradual approach of his enemy, in which the reader ends by recognizing the ordinary inhabitant of his own gardens, and also perhaps ends by recognizing himself as his ruthless pursuer. According to Philippe Descola (2005) who considers the possibility of organizing relations with oneself and others as well as the different types of ontology originating (in the process), the case described by the writer turns out to be typical of an *animist* conception, in which a being different to ourselves is endowed with a resemblance on the basis of its inner being³. Kafka however insists – starting with fortuitous or extreme cases – on the process of

³ According to Descola, it is possible to define four major types of ontology, that is systems of properties of the existent, depending on whether in relation to another being – human or non-human – it is supposed that it



the construction of this ontology, often – as we shall see in our case – not shared in the least by all the subjects involved in his story.

This is also true for the ape protagonist of *A Report to an Academy*, which describes a process opposite to the one in the *Metamorphosis*: an animal becoming – apparently euphorically – human, an animal that actually turns into an actor, a comedian to amuse humans, who in their turn are transformed from his predators to good-natured spectators at the circus. As Gianfranco Marrone also observes, although much desired, “the metamorphosis is never completely achieved – there is always something that remains, a hybrid, an actor who is never completely man or animal” (Marrone 2017, p. 32). In his extraordinary experimentation Kafka seems to underline the thresholds between the human and the animal (or health and sickness, or something else besides) which cannot be inter-subjectively crossed, and at the same to suggest that, on the contrary, within a different set of values they might be.

2. Space and Place

For this reason as well it seems that the fact that everything takes place in a modest, middle-class apartment is of fundamental importance: the organization of space in the story forms the basis for a syntactic organization that closely corresponds to the arrangement of the semantic content and the circulation of axiological values⁴.

Everything happens in a modest, middle-class apartment: and yet the spatial organization in the story is of fundamental importance on the semantic, syntactic and valorization planes.

The rather simple lay-out of the apartment – “which Gregor had found” (and moving out of it will be the family’s first euphoric plan after his death) – first of all allows the implementation of a discursive device, a dramaturgical machine, which precisely segments, scans, regulates, reveals and “measures” the narrative development, the different stages of becoming to be observed.

Spatiality is unfolded and put into focus by means of the enunciation strategy, always beginning with the way in which Gregor perceives the space, recognizes it, finds his bearings and moves through it, sensing at the same time the other characters’ dislocation and movements.

It is easy to identify the co-presence and tension in the text between two different modalities of space construction, a tension which may be articulated according to Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between *geometric space* (the being “there” of something, “spatialité homogène et isotrope”) and *anthropological space* (the actions and experiences of a subject in relation to his/her environment)⁵. Michel de Certeau refers to this distinction when he identifies in narrative the terrain of a continuous discursive transformation of *places* (instantaneous configurations of positions involving an indication of stability) into *spaces* (when vectors of direction, velocity and time variables are considered), and vice versa.

L’espace est un croisement de mobiles. Il est en quelque sorte animé par l’ensemble des mouvements qui s’y déploient. Est espace l’effet produit par les opérations qui l’orientent, le circostancient, le temporalisent et l’amènent à fonctionner en unité polyvalente de programmes conflictuels ou de proximités contractuelles. L’espace serait au lieu ce que devient le mot quand il est parlé, c’est-à-dire quand il est saisi dans l’ambiguïté d’une effectuation [...] En somme, *l’espace est un lieu pratiqué* (De Certeau 1990, pp. 172-173).

possesses physical and interior elements identical to mine (*totemism*), or that its physicality and interiority are different from mine (*analogism*), or again whether they have a similar interiority and different physical characteristics (*animism*) and finally whether they have a different interiority and a similar physicality (*naturalism*). These ontologies in their turn are the basis for cultural models concerning social ties and theories of identity and otherness.

⁴ Our analysis of the text is based on the theory of narration developed by Algirdas J. Greimas (1983), to whose volumes of the *Dictionnaire* we refer the reader for the definition of more specific terms, should their sense not be evident from the context.

⁵ See Merleau-Ponty (1945).



In dealing with space, language alternates between two main practices: the construction of a *map*, based on “seeing”, in the first or third person, leading to the presentation of “scenes” that reveal an order of places, an all-encompassing manifestation of everything that can be observed; and the description of *routes*, which are rather based on “going”, which focus on “itineraries”, on the discursive series of operations conducted “among” places⁶.

This tension between place and lived space emerges forcefully and continually in Kafka’s story, where the geometric layout of the rooms not only prefigures a syntax of actions carried out (and where coming in, going out, shutting, leaving ajar, opening, slamming are figures of as many narrative actions), but it is often redrawn by the intensity of different modes of inhabiting, and again made into a “scene”, to mark narrative rhythm. Thus, moments of exploration and static reconnaissance of places alternate with highly agitated periods of movement, where the former correspond generally to the cognitive-emotional re-organization of the acting subject and the latter depict his “doing”.

The *absorbing/absorbed* and *open/shut* categories seem to dominate the story’s spatial syntax. The passage from the external world to the hard core of Gregor’s consciousness is figured in something resembling increasingly detailed Chinese boxes: Gregor wakes “inside” his new body, in his bed, in his room, in the family apartment, and the conflicts are all organized in the moments, attempts and figures of the passage from one “container” to another.

Spaces adhere to the subjects that inhabit them: from the body, evidently – which poses the problem of whether it simply contains us or coincides with our being – to one’s own “room”, and beyond. Gregor’s room – described in its normality immediately after his atrocious awakening, perhaps with a reassuring intent – changes greatly through the story. It changes partly in keeping with its inhabitant, but also in the relation it gradually establishes with the other spaces in the house, the spaces of the “others” who are not Gregor, and who in their turn move and re-organize their ways of inhabiting space. The problem of reciprocal vital space, *territory*, will indeed become dominant at the end of the story. Space here is the space of the subjects but also *between* the subjects: it is symbolic space, to be abandoned upon its conquest.

Two different plans will confront each other, as if competing for space in a confined cage: Gregor’s plan to “come out”, “escape”, open, *communicate*, and his family’s plan, in particular his father’s, who repeatedly and violently seeks to reduce Gregor’s mobility; but also his sister’s plot to abolish all communication, as she strives to segregate him, almost to wipe him out from his space of origin: it is no coincidence that at a certain point Gregor’s space is effectively negated as a room for dwelling in and transformed into a sort of storage closet, where things in disuse become refuse⁷. Given the difficulty of annexing, conquering a territory, one can in the meantime seek to deny it.

This is made clear in the last act: Gregor is ghosted as an internal threat, and the family unit will not be able to solve its problems with the external world, the social sphere – the real invader here – until it has in some way accepted and transformed the offense caused to the ‘other’ into self-defense, according to the well-known strategy of attributing one’s own hostile intentions to the other party:

But as it is, this animal hounds us, drives away the tenants, evidently wants to take over the whole flat, and throw us out on to the street (Kafka 2007, p. 120).

The tradition starting with Propp which posits a topological definition of the short story, proposes to segment its spatiality by drawing a clear distinction between the place of reference – the hero’s familiar space (topical space), in which he establishes a contract with his sender, acquires competency (paratopical space), is then put to the test and where, if he wins, he will be able to “fulfill” himself (utopian space) –

⁶ These observations also recall the categories developed by Greimas of objectified/subjectified space, which also encompasses a static/dynamic opposition: I find the way De Certeau interrelated the two modes of spatiality interesting: the space does not oppose but presupposes the place, and the place – in the story – waits to make itself space.

⁷ “They had started pushing things into his room that would otherwise have been in the way, and there were now a good many such items [...] for that reason, many things had now become superfluous that couldn’t be sold, and that one didn’t want to simply throw away either” (Kafka 2007, p. 114). Note that in turning over and shifting that “arsenal” for hours, Gregor finds one of his last, sad amusements, which hastens his paralysis.



and the “elsewhere”, into which he is thrown by his pursuit or his destiny and is finally recognized (heterotopical space)⁸.

In our text, it is not so much the objectified discursive spaces that function as the substratum to the narrative spaces; rather, the transformational process of the places in relation to the subjects that inhabit them seems to re-define the subjects in such terms – unsuccessfully so, at least as far as Gregor is concerned. His own space is transformed into a dysphorical “elsewhere”, while the space remains *utopian* only in his memories or during the brief time of his unfortunate exits. Gregor gradually loses ground and is finally swallowed up by space.

The space set up by Kafka manages at the same time to take part in a more general referentializing strategy, a strongly “realistic” mode – which only further emphasizes Gregor’s situation⁹ – and to exalt the cognitive-emotional dimension of which it is the vehicle.

In terms of spatial properties, the so-called cognitive relations established among the subjects of the narration are in fact also expressed: “seeing”, “hearing”, “saying”, “feeling”, “touching”. This explains the almost fatal duplication of the narrated space, the physical arrangement of a grammar of actions, but also a tangible substratum of investments on the part of the subject¹⁰.

The theories on the sense-making process developed recently by the so-called semiotics of passions take their cue precisely from the way in which *we feel*; *we feel* our surroundings and in our turn *we are felt* – what may in general be defined as the problem of perception within the framework of an “emerging” semiosis.

Organized within the categories of *proprioception/interoception/exteroception*, this is the first step in beginning to articulate *sensation*, which we can go on to describe in terms of categories, of figures of the world, of specific “meanings”. It is in the moment of perception that the subject begins to take form, to come out of its *con-fusion* with the world and to establish a relation with the world: a relation that is first and foremost one of value, *thymic*, well before it becomes categorical, where one begins to discern what is positive or negative, *attraction/repulsion*, the *euphoric/dysphoric*, *pleasure/displeasure*¹¹.

At the centre of this process is the *body* of the subject which perceives, considered a sort of *sensory interface* between the internal and external, a mediating element of the relation with oneself and with others, the very foundation of the constitution of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.

C’est par la médiation du corps percevant que le monde se transforme en sens – en langue –, que les figures extéroceptives s’intériorisent et que la figurativité peut alors être envisagée comme un mode de pensée du sujet. La médiation du corps, don’t le propre et l’efficace sont le *sentir*, est loin d’être innocente: elle ajoute, lors de l’homogénéisation de l’existence sémiotique, des catégories proprioceptives qui en constituent en quelque sorte le “parfum” thymique et sensibilise même – on dira ultérieurement “pathémise” par endroits l’univers des formes cognitives qui s’y dessinent (Greimas, Fontanille 1991, p. 12)¹².

According to this hypothesis of “epistemological narration”, it becomes clear that the stakes of Kafka’s experiment are directly related to the root of the subject’s “being”, traumatically detaching him from a

⁸ See Greimas, Courtés (1979): “Spatialization”, “Space” and related entries, as they are applied especially in the analysis of “Deux Amis” by Maupassant, in Greimas (1976), and of “La ficelle”, again by Maupassant, in Greimas (1983).

⁹ This aspect is underlined by Eco in his discussion on the “fictional pact” the Author proposes to the Reader who must agree to “pretend that what he narrates actually happened”. The descriptions in *Metamorphosis* are taken as an example of the way in which “in order to construct an absurd world, Kafka must place it against the background of the real world” (Eco 1994, pp. 95-96). One might add that it is precisely this type of *fiction* that the *truth* of the real world emerges.

¹⁰ See in particular Bertrand (1985).

¹¹ We may recall here that Greimas borrows this distinction from the psychology of perception (see Violi 1991).

¹² “It is through the mediation of the perceiving body that the world is transformed into sense (in language), that the exteroceptive figures are interiorized and figurativity can be considered as a mode of thought of the subject. The mediation of the body, whose main attribute is precisely its ability to *feel*, is by no means innocent: such mediation adds proprioceptive categories to the moment of homogenization of the semiotic existence which in some way constitute its thymic ‘perfume’; it also sensitizes – henceforth we will say that it ‘pathémizes’ – the universe of the cognitive forms drawn in it”.



horizon of habitual sensation, of the order of “appearance”, to posit the possibility that an alternative world can be designed by reinventing the existing one. Regressing from shared humanity – which however requires the beastly life of the travelling salesman – to the cockroach form would represent nothing more than a desperate act of veridiction; at the same time, confusedly, it would mean starting from scratch in the I-world rapport, in the search for a new value, or better a new value of values.

3. Metamorphosis I: the end of the social body

To reconstruct what happens to Gregor we can follow the macro-segmentation offered by the three chapters of the text, for it coincides with important spatial changes: the first chapter opens with Gregor, locked in his room and awakening, and closes with a traumatic return to the room, after having been struck by his father. The second chapter opens with a second awakening (this time the room has been locked from the outside) and closes with another violent intervention by Gregor’s father, while his mother literally flees from his room. Finally, the third opens with a shift in the open/close dialectic between Gregor’s room and the rest of the house, or rather an *impasse* corresponding to the *impasse* in which Gregor’s being now finds itself:

...each evening now, the door to the living room, which he kept under sharp observation for an hour or two before it happened, was opened, so that, lying in his darkened room, invisible from the living room, he was permitted to see the family at their lit-up table, and, with universal sanction, as it were, though now in a completely different way than before, to listen to them talk together” (Kafka 2007, p. 109).

The chapter closes with the departure from the house, from the scene, of all the actors. With Gregor stone-dead and disposed of by the cynical maid, the family finally indulges in a lovely walk in “the park at the edge of the city” (*ivi*, p.125), escaping from the claustrophobia of the drama within the walls of the flat and entertaining the idea of moving house: “The greatest alleviation of the situation must be produced by moving house: they would take a smaller, cheaper, but also better situated and more practical apartment than their present one, which Gregor had found for them” (*ibid.*)

Each chapter thus records one of Gregor’s *exits* from his space, the violent rejection he experiences and his return; as well as, in the final scene, the mysterious departure of his body, about which no-one wants to know any details¹³.

We can attempt to thematically organize these three macro-sequences on the basis of Gregor’s becoming-process, a non-linear path that connects areas of value and sensation in a reciprocal rapport of *instability*: being *human* and *being animal*, where death would in some way represent the impossibility of resolving the conflict between these two attractors, becoming simply the more drastic passage from *animate* to *inanimate*. Three failed tests, if you will, but which are not simply compulsive, given that they signal the advent of multiple changes.

The first – the test of the *man-cockroach* – records Gregor’s attempt to connect his new body with his old corporal scheme, under the imperative of doing and being social.

The entire chapter is built on a double alternation between “inside” and “outside”: what happens inside Gregor’s room (where Gregor has now merged his old consciousness with his new body) in the customary familiar space, and what happens between Gregor’s room and its exterior, the rest of the house with the family, with the quick addition of the chief clerk of the company for which Gregor has worked until then. It is worthwhile to closely examine the story’s *incipit*. Gregor’s exploration of his new body and the “world outside” is done mainly through sight, a gaze that remarks dysphoric connotations when it sees “his numerous legs, pathetically frail” protruding from the body, and that makes him “quite melancholy”, when he turns to the window and sees the “drab weather” outside, and is reassured only – so to speak,

¹³ The maid, who is responsible for the “elimination”, would willingly provide them: but the family’s not wanting to know is in keeping with the condemnation-repudiation of Gregor’s sister, according to whom they have to “try to free themselves of the thought that it is Gregor”. If they still had some doubt, they would not deny him some form of funeral rites.



given that he has discovered that he is not having a nightmare but is experiencing reality – when he recognizes that “there quietly between the four familiar walls, was his room, a normal human room, if always a little on the small side” (*ivi*, p. 75).

As a result of his attempts to make the new body do what the old one did (turning on his side to sleep, getting up, dressing, opening the locked door and going to work), we immediately see the discovery, on Gregor’s part, of the disruption of the “intentional arc”, of that “magic”, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, which means that normally an order given to the body through thought effectively corresponds to its movement.

The new perceptions of the cockroach-body clash with the cognitive interpretations the subject gives of it. Gregor seeks to catalogue what he feels within his habitual schemes; he even puts forward a sort of “sociological” explanation of his new state – the difficult life of the travelling salesman –, he feels extraneous and even feels repulsion toward new body:

[Gregor] was accustomed to sleeping on his right side, and in his present state he was unable to find that position. However vigorously he flung himself to his right, he kept rocking on to his back: he must have tried it a hundred times, closing his eyes so as not to have to watch his wriggling legs, and only stopped when he felt a slight ache in his side which he didn’t recall having felt before (*ivi*, pp. 75-76).

Slowly, he realizes the change in form of the relations to himself and his surroundings, through his sensorial mutations, which from the very beginning exhibit a movement from the human towards the non-human: if for the moment sight seems not to have been affected, the perception of himself changes through the sense of touch – “He felt a slight itch at the top of his belly [...] assayed the place with one of his legs, but hurriedly withdrew it, because the touch caused him to shudder involuntarily” (*ivi*, p. 76); hearing – “But how was it possible to sleep through its ringing, which caused even the furniture to shake?” (*ivi*, p. 77); phonation:

“Gregor”, came the call – it was his mother – “it’s a quarter to seven. Shouldn’t you ought to be gone by now?” The mild voice. Gregor was dismayed when he heard his own in response. It was still without doubt his own voice from before, but with a little admixture of an irrepressible squeaking that left the words only briefly recognizable at the first instant of their sounding, only to set about them afterwards so destructively that one couldn’t be at all sure what one had heard (*ibid.*).

His mother’s call, the one from his father knocking with his fist on the door, and then the one from his sister, who from the opposite room “begs” him to open, inaugurate that sort of third fundamental space of the story, the space of communication and inter-subjectivity, figuratively marked by the interfaces between internal and external which are the *thresholds* that enable opening and closure. Michel de Certeau observes that it is generally possible to study the way in which spaces are connected more or less loosely or tightly by using *modalities*. These can help to specify the *type of passage* leading from one space to another: the passage can be dominated by an epistemic (knowledge-related), alethic (existence-related), or deontic (obligation-related) modality. Regarding the story’s organization of space based on the definition of boundaries – “bornages” – the scholar observes that limits are traced by the points of encounter between the progressive appropriations (acquisitions of predicates in the course of the story) and the succeeding movements (internal and external) of the actants (De Certeau 1990) and he ponders what might be defined as the fundamental *ambiguity* of the frontier. To whom does the frontier belong? “The door that shuts is exactly the same one that opens” – he says: it creates communication as much as it does separation.

These observations are crucial to understanding the description of Kafka’s system of accessibility: at this juncture of the story, all those who are *outside* (the family, soon joined by the chief clerk, readily admitted to the house), *want* Gregor to open the door, come out, and justify the change in his habits. From the outside they *cannot* open the door themselves, unless with violence, so that in exasperation they send for a locksmith (and the outer door to the house would now be left wide open, “as happens at times when a great misfortune has taken place” (*ivi*, p. 85). For the moment, before the harsh reproaches of the chief clerk make him “crazy with remorse”,



...Gregor entertained no thought of [opening the door], instead he gave thanks for the precaution, picked up on his travels, of locking every door at night, even at home (*ivi*, p. 78).

The chief clerk's arrival and the family's consternation drive Gregor to accelerate the attempt to force his new body, at the cost of injuring it, to carry out his old intentions: get up – he will succeed only by “powerfully [swinging] himself right out of bed” (*ivi*, p. 81) and falling –, go to the door “in an upright position” (*ivi*, p. 85), turn the key and open. His new voice – “the voice of an animal” (*ivi*, p. 84) – prevents him from making himself understood – he can no longer communicate like before – and, finally, Gregor too

...truly had it in mind to open the door, to show himself and to speak to the chief clerk; he was eager to learn what the others, who were all clamouring for him, would say when they got to see him (*ibid.*)

This first opening is a great moment of catastrophe that is first cognitive and then pathemic: contact between the two worlds is figured as unbearable disorder brought into the “outside world”. The chief clerk begins to retreat, but prudently as though his right to suddenly burst into the house were replaced by a secret prohibition to leave it; the mother, hindered by her skirts, loses her balance and falls, the father threatens him with his fist and weeps.

At this very moment of outrage, Gregor, turned by the enunciation into actant observer, not yet entering the room but leaning “against the inside of the fixed half of the door, so that only half his body could be seen, and the head with which he was peering across at the others cocked on its side a little” (*ivi*, p. 86), pauses in an extensive exploration of the spatial situation. What he sees outside the house, presumably from his room (the lighter sky, the hospital across the road, the visible drops of rain “individually fashioned and flung to the ground” (*ivi*, p. 87); the breakfast table cluttered with dishes; the apartment entrance up to the landing and the beginning of the stairs; and above all, hanging “on the facing wall”, a photograph of himself in military uniform, “his hand on his sabre, smiling confidently, the posture and uniform demanding respect” (*ibid.*)

Precisely halfway between his old and new self, “in the knowledge that he was the only one present to have maintained his equanimity” (*ibid.*), Gregor seems to reconstruct a complete map of the surrounding territory, reflected in his most reassuring human image. He is thus able to reorganize his competence in view of his old duty *to be*. He will dress, pick up his samples and go off to work, not without addressing a passionate speech to the bystanders, and in particular the chief clerk, his main social “sender”, to whom he will propose a new and more equitable “contract”.

The outcome of his exit cannot be more disappointing: the chief flees, “but terribly gradually, as though in breach of some secret injunction not to leave the room”, the family do not hinder him as “they were so concerned by the anxieties of the present moment, that they had lost any premonitory sense they might have had” (*ivi*, p. 88). Gregor finally enters the room, falling from an upright position, only to discover, with relief and joy, that his numerous little legs support him securely: “they obeyed perfectly [...] even seeking to carry him where he wanted to go” (*ivi*, p. 89).

The cure of all his ills seems at hand – he has taken possession of his new body – but the reaction of those around him is of total rejection: the chief clerk, screaming, flees definitively; the mother is also screaming and asks for help from the father who, “brandishing stick and newspaper, attempt[s] to drive Gregor back in his room” (*ivi*, p. 89). Confused by the backward movement and the savage hissing of his father, Gregor tries to obey, even though the door is too narrow for his wide bulk.

One side of his body was canted up, he found himself lifted at an angle in the doorway, his flank was rubbed raw, and some ugly stains appeared on the white door. Before long he was caught fast and could not have moved any more unaided, his little legs on one side were trembling in mid-air while those on the other found themselves painfully pressed against the ground – when from behind his father now gave him a truly liberating kick, and he was thrown, bleeding profusely, far into his room. The door was battered shut with the cane, and then at last there was quiet (*ivi*, p. 91).



4. Metamorphosis II: the soul

The second chapter registers a marked shift from the “animal” part in Gregor’s process of transformation. It is the moment in which his transformation into a cockroach is fully accomplished, so to speak, and it is also the moment in which the greatest conflict occurs among the family members. Along with his different perception of himself, the perceptions of others in towards him have changed and continue to do so: the sight of him causes horror, his presence in a room makes it necessary to fling the windows open, he is no longer understood, and no-one touches him directly (his father smites him with his boots or with his stick, the maid touches him, although dead, with a broom) or touches things that have to do with him, if not with rags or the like: for everyone else, Gregor already belongs to the realm of the *impure*.

By now the ontological split between Gregor and his family is clearly evident. The latter no longer makes the effort to imagine that despite the physical change Gregor retains an inner resemblance to them (the animist position, following Descola, as seen above), but proceeds in analogical terms: a different body will be correlated with a difference (or rather an absence) of interiority, which turns it into an otherness which calls into question and puts the order of the household, the very identity of its inhabitants, at risk. The strategy chosen by the family to deal with the anomaly created within it is to physically circumscribe it, to the point of assimilation, first by equating Gregor with filth. Following Mary Douglas’s line of argument in *Purity and Danger* (1970) filth is something that is out of place, which implies two conditions: the presence of order, a systematic classification of things, and a violation of this order – which is precisely what has occurred in the Samsa house. This idea of filth, adds the scholar, takes us directly into the field of the more obvious symbolical systems of purity¹⁴.

In this chapter as well, the discursive set-up alternates sequences of Gregor’s transformation with forced confrontation with the parallel transformation of the family; it might be said that on both sides there is actually “progress”, as long as their spaces remain separate or in weak communication, while the conflict explodes when communication (entry/exit) is realized directly.

The first segment may be defined as a *wait*: now submerged in the darkness that envelops the lower part of the room in which he finds himself, Gregor approaches the door where light filters in from the living room; he does so several times, but he is left alone, in an explicit reversal of the situation in the morning:

Once in the course of the long evening one of the side-doors was opened a crack, and once the other, and then hurriedly closed again; someone seemed to feel a desire to step inside, but then again had too many cavils about so doing. Gregor took up position right against the living-room door, resolved to bring in the reluctant visitor in some way if he could, or, if nothing more, at least discover his identity, but then the door wasn’t opened again, and Gregor waited in vain. Previously, when the doors were locked, everyone had tried to come in and see him, but now that he had opened one door himself, and the others had apparently been opened in the course of the day, no visitors came, and the keys all on the outside too (*ivi*, pp. 92-93).

In his solitude, sensory exploration leads to increasing awareness of the thymic characteristics of his new body which gradually re-organizes the pleasure/pain scheme, often in clear contrast with his previous existence. First comes *taste*: approaching the milk left for him “groping clumsily with his feelers, whose function he only now began to understand” (*ivi*, p. 91) he is forced to turn away in disgust from what used to be his favourite food. Moreover, he finds his familiar “high-ceilinged” room now disquiets him, so that “not without a little shame” (*ivi*, p. 93) he drags himself under the sofa.

At this stage his inner conflict is no longer between cognition (human) and perception (animal), but between the new thymic horizon, what gives him pleasure with his new body, and the *moralization*, wholly human, of these obscure impulses, which Gregor struggles to oppose¹⁵. By dividing his self, Gregor

¹⁴ See in particular chapter II, “The contamination of the profane sphere” (Douglas 1970).

¹⁵ With *moralization* we mean here the terminal stage of the so-called “canonical pathemic schema” which in Greimas’ narrative theory on the plane of the emotions corresponds to the canonical narrative development, best suited to describing the actions of the characters involved in the story (Greimas, Fontanille 1991). Thus, to the series



closely examines the social rules shared by the family and the new modes in which he perceives and feels. The oldest part of him – the human part – induces him to feel shame, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior”. The project he resolves to carry out, in keeping with his ancient spirit of sacrifice, is that “he would comport himself quietly for the moment, and by patience and the utmost consideration for the family make the inconveniences he was putting them through in his present state a little bearable for them” (*ivi*, p. 93). A long sequence in the repetitive mode thus represents the deployment of a series of new habits in precarious balance – “of course there could be no question of becoming fully used to it” (*ivi*, p. 95) – and in particular the ritual with which his sister cares for him briefly every day, visibly overcoming fear and repugnance, acquiring as a consequence new standing within the family.

However, the cognitive gap – based on a fundamental dissymmetry – that separates Gregor from his sister becomes wider and wider: “it didn’t occur to anyone, not even his sister, that he could understand others” (*ibid.*), and is figured throughout the chapter with an insistent modalization of *seeing*.

The more his family *cannot see him*, not because of an objective impediment but because they actually *do not wish to, they can’t bear the sight of him*, restricting themselves to spying in alarm for signs of life in him, the more Gregor, in his new condition – now referred to plainly as a *prison* – struggles to observe/learn about them as much as possible, with ever greater knowledge and perspicuity. This will lead him to witness a blinding primary scene at the end of the chapter between his father and mother, a scene that perfectly duplicates and perfects the one in the preceding chapter:

With one last look he saw how the door to his room was flung open, and his mother ran out in front of his howling sister, in her chemise – his sister must have undressed her to make it easier for her to breathe after her fainting fit – how his mother ran towards his father, and as she ran her loosened skirts successively slipped to the floor, and how, stumbling over them she threw herself at his father, and embracing him, in complete union with him – but now Gregor’s eyesight was failing him – with her hands clasping the back of his head, begged him to spare Gregor’s life (*ivi*, pp. 108-109).

Gregor listens behind the closed door, forcing himself into a position now unnatural to him, and participating emotionally in events he reconstructs: “Whenever the conversation turned to the necessity of earning money, Gregor would let go of the door, and throw himself on to the cool leather sofa beside it, because he was burning with sorrow and shame” (*ivi*, p. 99).

Underlined by the enunciation process, which is always articulated from Gregor’s point of view, he pathetically attempts to hold onto a positive image of the family, and believe in the possibility of at least empathetic communication, if only with his sister.

But the revelation of things as they stand is not slow in coming, anticipated by a touching passage in which Gregor struggles to look out of the window, as he used to do (but by now both his internal and external sight is failing):

...clearly in some vague recollection of the liberation he had once used to feel, gazing out of the window. For it was true to say that with each passing day his view of distant things grew fuzzier; the hospital across the road, whose ubiquitous aspect he had once cursed, he now no longer even saw, and if he hadn’t known for a fact that he lived in the leafy, but perfectly urban Charlottenstrasse, he might have thought that his window gave on to a wasteland where grey sky merged indistinguishably with grey earth (*ibid.*).

Manipulation/Competence-Performance/Sanction corresponds Constitution/Sensibilization (Awareness)/Moralization. In this stage, emotion (passion), guided by an acting evaluator, becomes “vice” or “virtue” on the basis of an inter-subjectively shared ethical norm.



4.1. Eruption

In this desert, a cosmological figure for the end of sensation, in which two halves join together in a single absence of profiles, in which nothing more is distinguished or pre-figured, we can easily perceive the portrayal of a world without values, from which any *confidence* in the other seems to be excluded. The image is very close to the one Camus uses in *The Fall* with his description of the Zuiderzee, and considered by Greimas-Fontanille precisely as the “end of all values”, and “of all defined systems that could emerge from it” (Greimas, Fontanille 1991)¹⁶.

In the discursive structure, the image is also somewhat prophetic. Before being fulfilled another primary tie must be settled: “Gregor’s desire to see his mother” (Kafka 2007, p. 101). This wish will soon be fulfilled because the mother in her turn insists on seeing her son. The most action-packed part of the chapter, full of exits and entrances in Gregor’s room, it starts with the greatest identification between Gregor and his new body, the deepest penetration into the animal being, to the point of ecstatic pleasure:

...to divert himself, he got into the habit of crawling all over the walls and ceiling. He was particularly given to hanging off the ceiling; it felt very different from lying on the floor; he could breathe easily; a gentle thrumming vibration went through his body; and in the almost blissful distraction Gregor felt up there, it could even happen that to his own surprise he let himself go, and smacked down on the floor (*ibid.*).

His sister is ready to clear the ground of any remaining obstacle to his complete metamorphosis. She asks her mother to help her remove the furniture from Gregor’s room, and it is the mother herself, hesitating before such an unequivocal gesture, who once more “calls back” Gregor:

As he listened to these words of his mother, Gregor understood that the want of any direct human address, in combination with his monotonous life at the heart of the family over the past couple of months, must have confused his understanding, because otherwise he would not have been able to account for the fact that he seriously wanted to have his room emptied out [...] and if the furniture prevented him from crawling around without rhyme or reason, then that was no drawback either, but a great advantage (*ivi*, p. 103).

The empathetic contract with his sister being broken, Gregor decides on an *eruption*, to come out in the open in an attempt to save his territory: sticking himself to the picture of the woman with a muff which he liked so much, he finally makes himself *visible*, as he actually is. The consequences are again catastrophic: his mother is terrorized and faints, he follows his sister to help her find assistance, but she threatens him with her fist, and, returning to Gregor’s room with the salts, she shuts him out, in the family living room, now forbidden to him and which he attempts to re-appropriate by concentrically crawling through it:

Gregor was now shut off from his mother, who, through his fault, was possibly close to death; there was nothing he could do but wait; and assailed by reproach and dread, he began to crawl. He crawled over everything, the walls, the ceiling, and finally in his despair, with the whole room already spinning round him, he dropped on to the middle of the dining table (*ivi*, p. 106).

The eruption has thus turned into exclusion; it has provoked a further sanction of incommunicability, and the father’s return signals the need for punishment. This is the time to appreciate the entity of the father’s metamorphosis: he emerges from his previous old worn-out self and now stands “fairly erect; wearing a smart blue uniform with gold buttons” (*ivi*, p. 107) and advances menacingly towards him: at

¹⁶ Here is the text they cite: “Well, what do you think of it? Isn’t it the most beautiful negative landscape? Just see on the left that pile of ashes they call a dune here, the gray dike on the right, the livid beach at our feet, and in front of us, the sea the color of a weak lye-solution with the vast sky reflecting the colorless waters. A soggy hell, indeed! [...] Is it not universal obliteration, everlasting nothingness made visible?” (Camus 1956, p. 28).



bottom 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 for him” (*ibid.*)¹⁷. At the end of the long chase, in which Gregor, paralyzed by fear, is incapable of exploiting his new resources, his father pelts him with apples until one becomes lodged in his back. This is the definitive mark of a double failure: failure to re-establish an inter-subjective space with his family, and to complete his becoming other.

5. Metamorphosis III: sacrifice

The grave wound to Gregor from whose effects he suffered for over a month – as no one dared to remove the apple, it remained embedded in his flesh, as a visible memento – seemed to have reminded even his father that, despite his current sorry and loathsome form, Gregor must remain a member of the family, and not be treated as an enemy, but as someone whom – all revulsion to the contrary – family duty compelled one to choke down, and must be tolerated, simply tolerated (*ivi*, p. 109).

The apple embedded in Gregor’s back functions somewhat as the Greek *xoana*, “signs that cannot delimit except by being moved”. Gregor becomes the living sign of a threshold that confines him, banishes him, and the apple also imprints something on his body. The apple brands him, maiming his new body forever, and above all “nails” him – as the text underlines when it penetrates his flesh. It fixes him in the monstrosity of an incomplete transformation from human to animal, making Gregor’s unformed form now fully visible, “sorry and loathsome”. It is also a sign that reminds the family of an event: in essence, an attempted murder. Gregor experiences temporary improvement on the cognitive plane, which he tries to consider just compensation for the definitive loss of his body’s fullness of being:

...each evening now, the door to the living room, which he kept under sharp observation for an hour or two before it happened, was opened, so that, lying in his darkened room, invisible from the living room, he was permitted to see the family at their lit-up table, and, with universal sanction, as it were, though now in a completely different way than before, to listen to them talk together (*ibid.*)

But the family’s prostration and its reflection is of brief duration, as if to say, there seems to be no more story for Gregor. He is in fact excluded forever: the only narrative thread that remains is the mere chronicle of his jailers’ growing indifference; of the increasingly inhuman and possessive treatment his sister inflicts upon him; of his room being turned into a rubbish dump; of his impotent rage and his futile plans to come out and seek revenge; of the derision that even the servant doles out, in contrast to the fear he used to instill.

Gregor no longer sleeps, no longer eats; he remains stationary for lengthy stretches of time, or indulges in questionable activities like rolling in dirt, which leave him desperate and weak; his wound still hurts, as if fresh from jealousy or pain, when his mother and sister shut his door, and abandon themselves to emotion. Detachment from the world of relationships, even *minimally trusting*, seems to be achieved entirely, when he sees, as in a dream, all the people he had known, frequented or loved, who now seem “inaccessible” (*ivi*, p. 112); he feels relief only when they disappear. For his family he now feels only “rage at how they neglected him” (*ibid.*) – a feeling that emerges at intervals; it is final resentment, one last trace of *phoria*, deep protest of the rights of his being.

His last sally into the living room now occupied by the boarders, at first seems to lead Gregor to again and finally reflect on the incompatibility between his state and that of the others. The boarders are eating while Gregor has long been unable to touch food:

¹⁷ “Once, at night, I was whining for water, not because I was thirsty of course, but probably as a way of giving bother to amuse myself. After some ineffective threats You took me out of bed, took me to the landing and left me there in my shirt in front of the shut door. [...] For years after I was tormented by the thought that my father, the giant, the supreme power, could come almost without reason in the middle of the night and take me onto the landing, and that I was therefore for him less than nothing” (Kafka 1988, p. 7, my English translation).



It struck Gregor that out of all the various sounds one could hear, it was that of their grinding teeth that stood out, as though to demonstrate to Gregor that teeth were needed to eat with, and the best toothless gums were no use. 'But I do have an appetite', Gregor said to himself earnestly, 'only not for those things. The way those tenants fill their boots, while I'm left to starve!' (*ivi*, p. 115).

That evening, listening to his sister playing the violin for their guests, he can compare the bored indifference of the humans with his new (as a human he did not like music) aesthetic sense. His metamorphosis may have "removed" some of his senses, now even the sense of shame, but had evidently also given him new possible ones. Better: his progressive loss of sensation, of the pleasure of the senses, may now portend a new revelation. On the "pristine floor of the living room" (*ivi*, p. 116), he, now quite dirty, advances towards something he perceives as a promise, the true promise of regeneration and re-composition:

And yet his sister was playing so beautifully. Her face was inclined to the side, and sadly and searchingly her eyes followed the columns of notes. Gregor crept a little closer and held his head close to the ground, so as to be prepared to meet her gaze. Could he be an animal, to be so moved by music? It was as though he sensed a way to the unknown sustenance he longed for (*ivi* p. 117).

Gregor pathetically plans to retrace his path to that point: to convince his sister to follow him with her violin into his room where, after some preliminary explanations, they could live freely shut up together in a re-found – and somewhat incestuous – *common sense*. His incursion, however, produces no aesthetic rift in the others, just "*the sudden interruption*" (*ivi*, p. 118) of the music, and, after some initial bewilderment, clear condemnation expressed by the sister herself.

"We must get rid of it" (*ivi*, p. 119). Gregor cannot be her brother: "If it was Gregor, he would long ago have seen that it's impossible for human beings to live together with an animal like that, and he would have left of his own free will" (*ivi*, p. 120). Laboriously, Gregor returns to his room where this time he is locked in:

He thought back on his family with devotion and love. His conviction that he needed to disappear was, if anything, still firmer than his sister's. He remained in this condition of empty and peaceful reflection until the church clock struck three a.m. The last thing he saw was the sky gradually lightening outside his window. Then his head involuntarily dropped, and his final breath passed feebly from his nostrils (*ivi*, p. 122).

His body, "utterly flat and desiccated" (*ivi*, p. 123), which the servant complacently disposes of, serves as a double for the sister's at the end:

While they were talking in these terms, almost at one and the same time Mr. and Mrs. Samsa noticed their increasing lively daughter, the way that of late, in spite of the trouble that had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into an attractive and well-built girl. Falling silent, and communicating almost unconsciously through glances, they thought it was about time to find a suitable husband for her. And it felt like a confirmation of their new dreams and their fond intentions when, as they reached their destination, their daughter was the first to get up, and stretched her nubile young body (*ivi*, pp. 125-126).

6. Anonymous/Inanimate

This reading has aimed to show that Gregor's transformation into a roach is not necessarily only a calamity for him. On the contrary, it could in theory be an *interesting accident*, the starting point of that blessed "rebirth" which Gregor confusedly longs for, and which until now has been postponed for the future – that is, never: settling the debt with his employer, opening his own business, enrolling his sister at the Conservatory, and so on.

In a previous, unfinished story, as in many other places in his work, Kafka foregrounds the desire to be an insect as the answer to the integration of the Id into a generic and impersonal "one", as opposed to



the euphoric original happy confusion with a world that precedes the birth of the Subject; but also, at the same, an obligation and constriction into a type of behaviour that lacks any individuating interface:

One works so feverishly at the office that afterwards one is too tired even to enjoy one's holidays properly. But even all that work does not give one a claim to be treated lovingly by everyone; on the contrary one is alone, a total stranger, and only an object of curiosity. And so long as you say 'one' instead of 'I', there's nothing in it and one can easily tell the story; but as soon as you admit to yourself that it is you yourself, you feel as though transfixed and are horrified [...] but if I myself distinguish between 'one' and 'I', how then dare I complain about the others? (Kafka 1971, pp. 75-76).

Hence, the fantasies of the protagonist, Edward Raban:

I will send my clothed body. [...] As I lie in bed I assume the shape of a big beetle, a stag beetle or a cockchafer [...] 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 body. 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 bows, it goes swiftly, and it will arrange everything efficiently, while I rest (Kafka 1971, pp. 78-79).

This passage enables us to read the “metaphor” of the cockroach as a reversion between the internal and external, in a plan – albeit an unconscious one – for self-preservation which refuses to assume the body as a text in which to inscribe the condition of being slave to the world. It is an act so radical that it denies the human as defined by society, choosing to descend in the scale of being to the rank of a mere *animate* entity.

Kafka's experiment is in this sense an almost categorical plan of rebirth; where the rather deep difference between *feeling* like an insect and *being* one is explored. In the *Metamorphosis*, hesitation in the gradual discovery of the new body is not constantly defined by horror, but it is animated at intervals by curiosity and acceptance of the new state. This is so true that just before the end, Gregor attains an aesthetic experience which before had been denied him. The subject of the enunciation does not deny himself the pleasure of imbuing the tragedy with an irresistible comicality, which exposes the empty reality of the shared norm. What stops and repels Gregor on the verge of a new rebirth, the space which encloses him and hinders him, is not the insect-body, but rather the social aspect of the relations he must entertain with other people – in particular his sister, his true anti-subject. And it is no coincidence that she is transformed from a chrysalis into a butterfly.



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