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Kafka's Bodies: Modernist Conceptions of Humanity in *Die Verwandlung*

„Die Nachmittage, die ich mit den Haaren verbrachte.“

(Kafka's diary, 29 March 1912)

The modernists were obsessed by the limitations and contingencies of bodies. The competing ideological demands of the self understood as a growing dualistic, non-corporeal essence (as seen in Virginia Woolf's 'essential thing')¹ in fiction and philosophy on one hand and the rise of mass culture and commodification (which necessarily tends to emphasise our materiality: consider graphically depicted bodily functions in James Joyce's *Ulysses*) on the other led to a divergence in conceptions of humanity. Woolf's principles, articulated in the context of constructing fictional character, also point to the ways in which literary criticism, theory and practice became blurred in the period loosely conceived of as modernism. As Levenson has convincingly identified in *The Genealogy of Modernism*, 'the critical work became entangled in the creative work, and thus the model of text and context will not serve'.² As such, creative explorations of humanness influenced philosophical norms which in turn produced aesthetic ones.

The notions of humanity explored in Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* are far from conventional. Kafka subverts received ideas of humanity and animalism by instead positing some inner essence³ as the most salient constitutive feature of humanness, rather than concrete physical appearance. In this essay I argue that this approach to bodies is also in large part enabled by Kafka's marked narrative discourse, in which Gregor is part narrative agent and part passive victim. It is this modernist style which formally reflects Kafka's overall stance towards bodies and humanity which problematises the notion of normative appearance as a reliable indicator of consciousness. *Die Verwandlung* thus reflects the ways in which human identity and experience are fatally limited by social structures and institutions, and how such dehumanisation can provoke feelings of corporeal disembodiment. It is, indeed, Gregor's

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' (1925) in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8. In this essay, alongside 'Character in Fiction' Woolf heralds what she sees as a new dawn in English fiction characterised by the modernists' revolution in form, character, subjectivity and representation.

² Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. viii.

³ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle refer to this as a 'self or subjectivity as disembodied, an ultimately religious conception of the self as noncorporeal, intangible spirit or soul' in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Taylor and Francis Ltd, 2023), p.250.

disembodiment (or different embodiment) which leads him to being treated as inhuman in the first place, suggesting that this may be an unreliable guide

Initially the eponymous '*Verwandlung*' which Gregor undergoes produces sharp dissonance between with his new physical state and his 'inner' self. The infamous notion of his waking up one day as an 'ungeheuren Ungeziefer'⁴ is tragically set against the 'unruhigen Träumen'⁵ which he emerges from. The density of use of negative terms, including the prefix *un-*, here reinforces a sense of uncertainty and strangeness endemic to the novel, in which things are defined by what they are not. Such language patterning also serves to stage a key modernist concern: just as conceptions of the self are troubled, so too are conceptions of language's communicative and expressive function, which is constrained rather than expansive. The relationship between reader and narrator might be productively conceptualised in Christine Brooke-Rose's words: as a sort of dialogue, it 'has a revealing/ concealing structure, since we reveal ourselves through utterance, but only to the limits of what can be articulated.'⁶ This alienation from both Gregor's body and the language that describes it is also revealed by the extremely varied ways in which 'ungeheuren Ungeziefer' (the novella's most concrete description of the *type* of creature which Gregor has become)⁷ has been rendered in English. Such variation itself reveals the vagueness of this construction, perhaps supporting the notion that Gregor's inhumanity serves as a conceptual metaphor for a sense of dissociation from one's bodily and social conditions.

Though it later becomes clear that the physical characteristics subsequently associated with Gregor are insect-like, a comparable psychological transformation has by no means taken place and Gregor still presents himself as mentally and emotionally human. The unidentified narrator then reports, "'Was ist mir geschehen?'" dachte er. Es war kein Traum',⁸ an example of how the narrative voices diverge to shatter unified or static narratology. The reported thought given as direct speech suggests the narrator's privileged access into the interiority of Gregor's consciousness, whilst also being separate to him, seeing as the narration of the novella remains in the third person throughout. The notion that 'Es war kein Traum' would seem to have

⁴ Franz Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), p.7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Stories and Style' in *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.112.

⁷ As WB Gooderham notes, this opening has been rendered as 'anything from a giant bug to a monstrous cockroach to a large verminous insect', exemplifying the interpretative ambiguities of just the first sentence, from 'Kafka's Metamorphosis and its mutations in translation', *Guardian*, 13 May 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/may/13/kafka-metamorphosis-translations>> [accessed 25 January 2026].

⁸ *Die Verwandlung*, p.7.

reverted to the objective, anonymous narrative voice of the third person owing to the removal of quotation marks, but such a realisation as to whether Gregor's transformed state has really taken place is surely more convincingly understood as Gregor's own. This free indirect speech is extended in use of the third person singular indeterminate pronoun: the description that 'man hörte Regentropfen auf das Fensterblech aufschlagen'⁹ and later 'man sah vom Bett aus',¹⁰ with the repeated verbs of perception 'sehen' and 'hören', and given that Gregor is in the room alone, suggests that this is really Gregor speaking, only mediated through the nameless third person narrator. This disassociation from Gregor's own voice suggests that his distance from his humanity unfolds narratologically as well as thematically. This seems to support Sweeney's point – offering as he does three explanations for the construction of identity in *Die Verwandlung* – who argues that 'Kafka offers a dialogical, polyphonic work'¹¹ in which conceptions of the self are not embodied and static but constantly shifting. As such, these conceptions are fundamentally challenged by Kafka not only on a bodily but also on a psychological plane.

It is in the aftermath of Gregor's transformation, however, in which his human and animal instincts diverge, placing competing demands on his new body, and his worth is questioned within a totalising capitalist system. It is striking that perhaps Gregor's most pressing concern upon waking up is the prospect of missing work and thus losing his ability to provide for his family: the notion that 'er [hätte] sich unsinnig beeilen müssen'¹² to catch the train is telling, the adjective 'unsinnig' seeming to refer not only to the nature of his hurry but also to the absurdity surrounding the situation. The effects of the capitalist machine in dehumanising individuals are reinforced, however, by the notion the attendant 'war eine Kreatur des Chefs, ohne Rückgrat und Verstand',¹³ in which any remaining humanity is deconstructed linguistically through the neuter pronoun 'es' normally reserved for non-humans. Additionally, the construction 'Kreatur des Chefs' identifies possession and repression, that Gregor exists as a mere accessory to the 'Chefs' work. That the attendant is 'ohne Rückgrat' is thus both a physical reflection on his insect-like body *and* on his powerlessness in the face of the power structures governing his work and by extension, his whole life. This argument is largely supported by Straus' notion of *Die Verwandlung* as a Marxist critique on a society 'with

⁹ *Die Verwandlung*, p.7.

¹⁰ *Die Verwandlung*, p.9.

¹¹ Kevin W. Sweeney, 'Competing Theories of Identity in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*', in Bloom, Harold (ed.), *Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis* (New York: Chelsea, 1988), p.23.

¹² *Die Verwandlung*, p.9.

¹³ *Die Verwandlung*, p.9.

its tyrannical bureaucracy, its class warfare between appropriators and expropriators, its conversion of workers (like the salesman Gregor Samsa) into dehumanized [sic.] things whose labor [sic.] is exploited.’¹⁴ Once again, the narrative voice embodies an internalised dehumanisation that is both disembodied (outside of Gregor’s own voice) and yet deeply inflected by it. To extend Straus’ critical perspective, then, it is perhaps most striking that this dehumanisation comes as a result not of Gregor’s disturbing physical metamorphosis, but rather of the economic conditions in society; he was thus perhaps already a mere ‘Kreatur’ within the power dynamics of work before the novel started.

Notwithstanding capitalist strategies of alienation and subjugation, Gregor still in this episode demonstrates inherently human characteristics in his emotional responses to his condition. The soft yearning of “‘Mutter, Mutter”, sagte Gregor leise’¹⁵ is surely at odds with his supposedly verminous exterior: notwithstanding the traumatic aftermath of his transformation, he longs for maternal care and attention. Whilst it may be argued that he later develops animalistic desires and impulses which correspond to his physical appearance, such as his newfound taste for ‘halbverfaultes Gemüse’ and ‘ungenießbar [Käse]’¹⁶ as well as his crawling movements ‘[hinauf]kriechen’,¹⁷ the more convincing view is that these are corporeal, impulsive desires which he cannot rationally express. In this way, it appears that he retains his human emotions and rationality whilst developing uncontrollable animalistic instincts, further presenting a form of Cartesian mind-body dualism in perhaps its clearest form. This challenges the pre-modernist tendency to ground humanity in embodiment. Gregor’s humanity is thus maintained, then, in his mental (experiential, phenomenological) characteristics rather than corporeal ones: he is ‘a consciousness disembodied from his original body and locked into an alien organism’.¹⁸ In Woolf’s modernist terms, like Joyce, ‘Mr [Kafka] is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain’.¹⁹

Having first explored Gregor’s experience of different embodiment, Kafka then puts pressure on conventional models of human relationship through Gregor’s dehumanisation by his family. We learn that he is initially left to his own devices, as ‘In den ersten vierzehn Tagen

¹⁴ Nina Pelikan Straus, ‘Transforming Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”’, *Signs*, 143 1989, p.654.

¹⁵ *Die Verwandlung*, p.25.

¹⁶ *Die Verwandlung*, p.31.

¹⁷ *Die Verwandlung*, p.37.

¹⁸ Sweeney, ‘Competing Theories of Identity’, p. 23.

¹⁹ Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, p. 10.

konnten es die Eltern nicht über sich bringen, zu ihm hereinzukommen',²⁰ a particularly cruel formulation which bitterly focusses on the feelings of Gregor's parents who cannot bring themselves to visit him rather than Gregor's helplessness and isolation. The emotional damage evolves into physical violence when 'der Vater hatte sich entschlossen, [Gregor mit Äpfeln] zu bombardieren',²¹ the vivid verb here serving to reinforce the senseless and frenzied violence. This evolves once more into total erasure from the family setting, with the 'Zimmerherren'²² who occupy Gregor's room so that Gregor's family can instrumentalise his dehumanisation for capitalist income generation. Though Sweeney argues that 'the social-constructionist theory of the self underlies much of the family's discussion of what to do with the monster',²³ Kafka is not entirely sympathetic to this social constructivist notion of our collective humanity. Such theories, he appears to warn, permit the formation of consensuses which dehumanise and other those like Gregor who do not fit normative standards of humanity. It is such consensuses which would go on to enable the worst human atrocities of the twentieth century.

Gregor's treatment at the hands of his family following his transformation ultimately critiques conventional notions of human bodies as his function in the family is effectively subverted and replaced by Grete's. In contrast to her youthful submissiveness at the novel's opening, Grete is depicted as 'immer lebhafter werdenden' and that she 'zu einem schönen und üppigen Mädchen aufgeblüht war'.²⁴ The figurative notion of 'aufgeblüht' seems an innocent and natural progression, but the subtext is clear: she has become an adult (or, at least, adolescent) woman with all of the constraints that will mean for her in a patriarchal society. This represents the *very* same social norms about bodies that led to Gregor's treatment and death. Grete's eligibility for marriage is coextensive with her embodiment as an adult. The notion that 'Es nun Zeit sein werde, auch einen braven Mann für sie zu suchen'²⁵ further suggests that Gregor's death has provided a convenient opportunity to seek his male replacement to restore normative balance to the family. The institution of marriage thus ensures that all kinds of encoded values of normalcy and propriety are superficially maintained. Straus claims that 'it is mainly Grete, woman, daughter, sister, on whom the social and psychoanalytic resonance of the text depend [...] It is she whose mirror reflects women's present situation as we attempt to critique patriarchal dominance in order to create new lives that avoid the

²⁰ *Die Verwandlung*, pp.39-40.

²¹ *Die Verwandlung*, p.49.

²² *Die Verwandlung*, various: see, for example, p.64.

²³ Sweeney, 'Competing Theories of Identity', p.32.

²⁴ *Die Verwandlung*, p.71-72.

²⁵ *Die Verwandlung*, p.72.

replication of invalidation'²⁶ As such, Kafka's is a world in which individuals are commodified and objectified based on abstract notions of value derived from bodies, systems from which no character can escape. Kafka thus both offers an alternative conception of the self *and* critiques the perpetuated norms that remain tragically intact by the novel's end, thus dually challenging contemporaneous orthodoxy.

Ultimately, perhaps the most striking element of *Die Verwandlung* is the extent to which Gregor, the ostensible 'Ungeziefer', is the most human character in Kafka's novella. In 'Laughing With Kafka', David Foster Wallace writes that 'with respect to *The Metamorphosis*, then, I might invite students to consider what is really being expressed when we refer to someone as "creepy" or "gross" or say that someone was forced to "eat shit" in his job.'²⁷ He thus draws attention to the fundamentally figurative nature of Kafka's language, through which the allegory of *literal* bodily difference reveals latent prejudices which are forced to the extreme within a capitalist system. It is through the novella's formal aspects (a means of overcoming modernist limits of communication) that his prose achieves its effects, criticising exploitative human interactions, enabled by the metaphysical separation of Gregor's mind and body. This separation prompts Gregor – and perhaps even the reader – ultimately to distrust their own emotions and dissociate from a world in which Gregor remains tragically unseen both because and indeed quite regardless of his bodily metamorphosis.

²⁶ Straus, p.652-653.

²⁷ David Foster Wallace, 'Laughing with Kafka', *Log*, 22 2011, pp.47-50

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