

FRANZ KAFKA

THE



A NEW TRANSLATION BY SUSAN BERNOFSKY



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Afterword. The death of a salesman

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Kafka's celebrated novella *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*) was written a century ago, in late 1912, during a period in which he was having difficulty making progress on his first novel. On November 17, 1912, Kafka wrote to his fiancée Felice Bauer that he was working on a story that "came to me in my misery lying in bed" and now was haunting him. He hoped to get it written down quickly—he hadn't yet realized how long it would be—as he felt it would turn out best if he could write it in just one or two long sittings. But there were many interruptions, and he complained to Felice several times that the delays were damaging the story. Three weeks later it was finished, on December 7, though it would be another three years before the story saw print.

As we know from Max Brod's diary, Kafka read his "bug piece" (*Wanzensache*) aloud to friends on November 24, 1912 (the first section), and again on December 15. People started talking about it, and Kafka received a query from publisher Kurt Wolff in March 1913 on the recommendation of Kafka's friend Franz Werfel. Franz Blei, the literary editor of the new avant-garde journal *Die weißen Blätter*, expressed interest, and Robert Musil wrote as well, soliciting the novella for the more established *Die neue Rundschau*, though it was technically too long for the magazine's format. But months passed before Kafka had a clean manuscript ready for submission, and then World War I intervened, causing further delays (Musil was called up to serve, and because of the war Blei decided to stop printing literary texts). In the spring of 1915, René Schickele took over as editor-in-chief of *Die weißen Blätter*, and with Max Brod's help, Kafka placed the story there. It came out in October 1915, and then appeared in December 1915 (though dated 1916) as a slender volume published by Kurt Wolff Verlag in Leipzig.

The story's protagonist, Gregor Samsa, is the quintessential Kafka anti-hero. He has worked himself to the point of utter exhaustion to pay off his parents' debts, and his grotesque metamorphosis is the physical manifestation of his abasement. What exactly is he transformed

into? In Kafka's correspondence with his publisher, he was adamant that the "insect" (*Insekt*) not be depicted on the jacket of the book. And although he and his friends used the word "bug" (*Wanze*) when referring casually to the story, the language that appears in the novella itself is carefully chosen to avoid specificity.

The epithet *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* in the opening sentence poses one of the greatest challenges to the translator. Both the adjective *ungeheuer* (meaning "monstrous" or "huge") and the noun *Ungeziefer* are negations—virtual nonentities—prefixed by *un*. *Ungeziefer* comes from the Middle High German *ungezibere*, a negation of the Old High German *zebar* (related to the Old English *tiber*), meaning "sacrifice" or "sacrificial animal." An *ungezibere*, then, is an unclean animal unfit for sacrifice, and *Ungeziefer* describes the class of nasty creepy-crawly things. The word in German suggests primarily six-legged critters, though it otherwise resembles the English word "vermin" (which refers primarily to rodents). *Ungeziefer* is also used informally as the equivalent of "bug," though the connotation is "dirty, nasty bug"—you wouldn't apply the word to cute, helpful creatures like ladybugs. In my translation, Gregor is transformed into "some sort of monstrous insect" with "some sort of" added to blur the borders of the somewhat too specific "insect"; I think Kafka wanted us to see Gregor's new body and condition with the same hazy focus with which Gregor himself discovers them.

That same blurred focus applies to other aspects of the story. Although Vladimir Nabokov—with his penchant for exactitude—has mapped out the Samsa flat in some detail, I am far from certain that Kafka himself—with his penchant for the blurred perceptions of bewilderment—was much concerned with the apartment's precise geography. How many rooms does this apartment have? Many, too many; just as Gregor, lying on his back in the story's opening sentences, discovers he has "these many little legs" waving in the air above him. Both are physical correlatives of a life that has gotten out of hand. Kafka is not even particularly attentive to the continuity of his cast of characters. Early on in the story we see the maid give notice and flee, only to find her still working in the household several pages later and in fact doing all the cooking, since now it is the cook who quit. Except for the charwoman who plays a starring role in the penultimate scenes, the household help is just part of the furniture of the story, like the cabinet that gets shifted to another room.

Even the main characters tend to appear categorically, named only by their functions: “father,” “mother,” “sister.” Only one of them gets a name, Grete (rhymes with *beta*), but even she is usually referred to only as “sister” throughout, until the decisive moment near the end when she becomes instead a “daughter.” By defining all these characters through their relationship to Gregor, Kafka slyly allows Gregor’s point of view to dominate the story even when he is not actually present in the scene being described.

One leitmotif I was unable to preserve in translation is the theme of *ruhig/unruhig*. *Ruhig* denotes “calm,” “peaceful,” “quiet,” “tranquil,” “at ease,” and *unruhig* its opposite. Starting with the *unruhigen Träumen* (“troubled dreams”) in the first sentence, the narrative oscillates between untroubled and troubled, tranquil and harried, peaceful and unsettled. Since no one word in English fits well enough in all the contexts Kafka presents, I decided to translate the word in many different ways; but note when you are reading all these synonyms that you are watching a motif unfold.

The post-metamorphosis activity that gives Gregor the greatest sense of freedom appears in my translation as “crawling”: he enjoys crawling around the walls and ceiling of his room. Ironically, the German verb *kriechen* (which also translates as “to creep”) has the additional meaning of “to cower.” To *kriechen* before someone is to act sycophantically toward him. In this sense, too, Gregor’s new physical state appears as a representation of his long-standing spiritual abjectness.

Finally Gregor has only himself to blame for the wretchedness of his situation, since he has willingly accepted wretchedness as it was thrust upon him. Like other of Kafka’s doomed protagonists, he errs by failing to act, instead allowing himself to be acted upon. Gregor Samsa, giant bug, is a cartoon of the subaltern, a human being turned inside out. He has traded in his spine for an exoskeleton, but even this armorlike shell (“carapace” and “armor” are the same word in German, *Panzer*) is no defense once his suddenly powerful father starts pelting him with apples—an ironically biblical choice of weapon.

Gregor is a salesman, but what he’s sold is himself: his own agency and dignity, making him a sellout through and through. For this reason I occasionally use the word “drummer” (commercial traveler) to describe his profession, referring back to another of his ilk, “a

hardworking drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them.” That’s Willy Loman as described by Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* (1949). *The Metamorphosis* is Kafka’s own *Death of a Salesman*, with all the sad, grubby tragedy, all the squalor. Like Willy Loman, Gregor is a suicide, though of a different sort: he dies a hunger artist, perishing of starvation because nothing tastes good to him anymore. And like Willy’s, Gregor’s death is the final service he performs for the benefit of his family.

At the same time Kafka’s tragicomic tale—unlike Miller’s—is very often hilariously funny. I imagine Kafka laughing uproariously when reading the story to his friends. Gregor’s naïveté (one might also call it gullibility) combined with his earnestness and his tendency to sound somewhat overwrought in his assertions is perfectly risible. To bring out this side of the story, I’ve emphasized the slight tone of hysteria in Gregor’s voice wherever it seemed justified.

The story is brutally comic in parts, and never more so than at the moment when it is revealed that—despite the fact that Gregor has been living more or less as an indentured servant to pay off his parents’ ancient debts—in fact the family has plenty of money; not enough to allow them to stop working altogether, but a proper little nest egg. And although they are described as poor, they are never too hard up to retain the services of at least one domestic servant.

One last translation problem in the story is the title itself. Unlike the English “metamorphosis,” the German word *Verwandlung* does not suggest a natural change of state associated with the animal kingdom such as the change from caterpillar to butterfly. Instead it is a word from fairy tales used to describe the transformation, say, of a girl’s seven brothers into swans. But the word “metamorphosis” refers to this, too; its first definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “The action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance; esp. transformation by supernatural means.” This is the sense in which it’s used, for instance, in translations of Ovid. As a title for this rich, complex story, it strikes me as the most luminous, suggestive choice.

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