

# Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis": A case study

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One cannot say, at least at first, why one does what one does, but it seems to me that what attracted me at the beginning in Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis" was its title, the idea of a transformation. Originally, then, my *intention* was to show how the structure of the metaphor which, as we know, is the structure of discourse, also corresponded to what happens when we imagine a story, exactly, by the way, as when we dream. Such was one aspect of my "response", and it is not at all impossible that what I called my original intention to deal with structure was only an excuse, a defence, in front of this tale of horror, something like a screen which would provide me with a reason to remain at a safe distance from what I was reading.

That there were other, more secret, reasons for my choice is possible, but this can only come to light as I proceed with my analysis – pun intended – of Kafka's tale of imagination. This is how psychoanalytical research into discourse always proceeds: from the desire of the analyst to a possible corroboration of his or her insights. Hypothesis and verification in fact, and this story of the transformation of a man into an insect<sup>1</sup> turned out to be so rich in symbolism – and even in what we can call "elementary symbolism" – that hypotheses were not too difficult to make. Thus did I feel I must delay my demonstration about structure and concentrate on contents instead. That this may have been a second line of defence is possible – the "clinical" study of signs being another way of detaching oneself from the original impression the text had had on me when first read – but it *also* constituted the necessary condition of a psychoanalytical study of the story.

At this point, clearly, a debate on what differentiates analysis from reading is in order. One of the tasks of the analyst – who knows, naturally, that reading, his first encounter with the text, precedes analysis – is to insist on this distinction, and this quite simply because the very function of discourse is to make us forget its hallucinatory nature. It follows that it cannot be said that the analytic enterprise is oblivious of the literary dimension of Kafka's writing precisely because reading and analysis do not have the same object; whereas literature cannot "function" without a "suspension of disbelief", the aim of psychoanalysis is to look into, or even beyond, the hallucinatory nature of discourse. The

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that I am not writing "into a repulsive insect" obviously indicates that my response is made more of empathy than of disgust. *Ungeheuren Ungeziefer* (gigantic vermin) remains a very general term and we must notice that the words beetle – "dung-beetle" in fact – is only used towards the end by the charwoman, while I have not found "cockroach" in the text.

enterprise may seem to disregard the literary dimension of Kafka's writing and appear to amount to a reduction of its status to that of a clinical case but, again, psychoanalytic criticism does not deprive the reader of the emotions that go with reading and in no way ignores the emotional potential of the text (which by the way depends on the reader's ability to be moved), because an emotion can only take place if, as a reader, I remain unaware of what precisely constitutes it. Whatever the complexity of the object considered and my involvement in it, I should be careful to distinguish, at least theoretically, what happens when I read, or dream, and what takes place, *afterwards*, when I analyse my response or my dream. Only at the price of such a distinction shall Freud's teachings make sense at all. The "objectivity" of psychoanalytic discourse is never more than relative, we know this, but it does nevertheless represent a progress in knowledge if always asymptotic.

Keeping in mind Freud's initial invention of the concept of "unconscious", therefore, his discovery of the simple Cs/Ucs structure (which leads to the structure of the metaphor), I shall however begin by looking at the symbolical dimension – dimensions – of Kafka's tale. Such a deferment of intention, from an interest in structure to a concentration on fantasy, is meaningful: it corresponds to an interrogation about what makes a "subject" and may eventually lead us to the actual discovery of what determines a human subject. Naturally, it would be simpler to say that psychoanalysis has no need of such a justification in order to lend an attentive ear to the discourse of Franz Kafka: he had read some Freud – and particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams* –, and his stories are so full of evident symbols, a sign of the time, no doubt, that we can consider them as an invitation to provide an interpretation.

The words, then, for I think there is a good chance the reader might follow me in my interpretation once his or her attention has been drawn to the passages that I find particularly significant for the psychoanalytic critic.

The first two pages, already, have a lot to offer and the first thing that strikes me is the difficulty Gregor has of getting out of bed. Here are a few sentences which "speak" to me:

*Er lag auf seinem [...] Rücken and sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen [...] Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte.*

He was lying on his back [...] and when he lifted his head a little he could see a dome-like brown belly [...] on top of which the bed-quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely (3).

*[Er] konnte sich aber in seinem gegenwärtigen Zustand nicht in diese Lage bringen [...] immer schaukelte er in die Rückenlage zurück.*

[...] in his present condition he could not turn himself over [...] he always rolled on to his back again.

In passing, we can also notice in what manner Gregor finds his legs "pitifully thin".

In the next few pages, we learn of his difficulty to move, and also of a distinction between the top of his body and its lower part. He would like to get up, but can't:

*[...] er machte sich nun daran, den Körper in seiner ganzen Länge vollständig gleichmässig aus dem Bett hinauszuschaukeln.*

[...] he set himself to rocking his whole body at once in a regular rhythm, with the idea of swinging it out of bed (8).

And his biggest worry, of course, is that he might crash on the floor, and also that the noise of his fall would cause anxiety or terror to his family. All the same, it would be nice if he could get up:

*[...] fiel ihm ein, wie einfach alles wäre, wenn man ihm zu Hilfe käme. Zwei starke Leute – er dachte an seinen Vater and das Dienstmädchen – hätten vollständig genügt;*

[...] it struck him how simple it would be if he could get help. Two strong people – he thought of his father and the servant girl – would be amply sufficient (8);

Should he succeed in his attempt, in any case, he still had to hope that “his legs would find their proper function”. In the end, “with all this strength”, Gregor manages to swing himself out of bed without too much damage: there is a thump but no crash.

You probably have by now an idea of what I have in mind. Another three short quotations will help me to conclude on this first point:

*Gregor schob sich langsam mit del Sessel zur Tür hin [...]*

Slowly Gregor pushed the chair towards the door[...] (13)

*Oder er scheute nicht dit grosse Mühe, einen Sessel zum Fenster zu schieben [...]*

Or he nerved himself to the great effort of pushing a chair to the window [...] (27)

*[...] denn da er nicht verstanden wurde, dachte niemand daran, auch die Schwester nicht, dass er die anderen verstehen könnte,*

[...] for since what he said was not understood by the others it never struck any of them, not even his sister, that he could understand what they said (23)<sup>2</sup>.

If we now carefully examine Kafka’s vocabulary in “The Metamorphosis” we shall be able to form a solid opinion as to the nature of one of the fantasies which concurred to the composition of the tale. A verb, often recurring, seems to me a good indication of what must have been (unconsciously) represented by the writer and tend to “verify” the hypothesis we may already have formed as to the symbolical meaning of the above quotations: *kriechen*, to crawl. Whenever Gregor moves through his room and through the apartment, he **crawls** (and a few times **creeps**).

*[...] kriechen konnte er aber auf den paar Quadratmetern des Fussbodens auch nicht viel.*

[...] he could not crawl very far around the few square yards of floor-space he had (29),

I interpret the frequent use of this verb as an indication that what is fancitized in the tale – among other things – is a regression to infancy. Gregor moves on the floor like a baby on all fours, and this may help to explain the numerous passages where the narrator reports Gregor’s complaints about the weakness of his little legs, *hilflos*, “struggling legs” (3) which “he could not control in the least” (6). That there is more to legs (*Beine*) than this makes no doubt and we shall in due time discuss the word in relation to castration, but for the time being this is a strong sign in favor of the thesis which sees in the story a fancitized return to infancy. It is therefore not at all surprising that we should find many allusions to the sensations of a baby in the text. Like an infant, Gregor “overhears a lot in the neighbouring rooms” (24), and on several occasions he can be seen watching what is happening on the other side of his closed door: “He could see through the crack of the door [...]” (20).

Taste (22, 40, 42) and smell (19, 22) are also mentioned, and music, at one instance, convinces him that he is no animal. One thinks of Caliban, of course:

*War er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so regriff?*

Was he an animal, when music had such an effect upon him? (45)

The picture is quite complete indeed: filth and dirt (45) – realistic details in this portrait of a baby – are not forgotten, and there is a passage about teeth I find particularly significant:

*Sonderbar schien es Gregor, dass man aus allen mannigfachen Gerräuschen des Essens immer wieder ihre kauenden Zähne heraushörte, als ob damit Gregor gezeigt werden sollte, dass man Zähne brauche, um zu essen, and dass man auch mit den schönsten zahnlosen Kiefern nichts ausrichten könne.*

It seemed remarkable to Gregor that among the various noises coming from the table he could always distinguish the sound of their masticating teeth, as if this were a sign to Gregor that one needed teeth, in order to eat, and that *with toothless jaws* even the finest maxillae could do nothing (43-44) (my italics).

<sup>2</sup> See also, for instance: “But although Gregor could get no news directly, he overheard a lot from the neighbouring rooms, and as soon as voices were audible he would run to the door [...]” (24).

Not a beast, Gregor is nevertheless helpless, like an infant (who has no teeth), and I cannot help reading also a discreet allusion to castration in this absence of teeth.

Which seems a good introduction to a commentary on what is very likely one of the words most frequently used in “The Metamorphosis”.

Indeed, rare are the pages in which the word **door**, *Tür*, does not appear<sup>3</sup>.

In the fifty-one pages (3-54) of the Vintage Classic edition (2005) I am using, only ten do not have the word “door”. Gregor crawls to the door of his room, runs or flees to it, and it is often closed or even violently shut on him

*Die Tür wurde noch mit dem Stock zugeschlagen [...]*

The door was slammed behind him with the stick (19).

*[...] blieb die Wohnzimmertür an manchen Abendessen geschlossen,*

[...] the living-room door stayed shut many an evening (43).

An opening for entrance and exit, the door in our tale organizes the narrator’s relationships with his parents and with his sister. It is in fact a perfect symbol of what structures Gregor’s relationship to the world. It delimitates two different entities: the world of Gregor-the-infant (and Gregor the monstrous creature) and the world outside, the world of others.

Without stretching things too far, one could even see in the doors of Kafka’s story a good representation of the Freudian “bar” between Cs and Ucs and therefore also the distance phenomenology sees in what separates the subject from the world out there. As such, it is the barrier through which communication must pass: gazing through a crack in the door, or overhearing what is being said on the other side, Gregor-the-infant thus gets acquainted with his family. And it is of course significant that the door of his room is so often kept shut. It is here that we best understand in what manner “The Metamorphosis” is an overall representation of the structure of the metaphor. Clearly, Gregor’s fate depends on the way his family accepts to communicate with him.

At first, it is true, Gregor is the one who is responsible for the lack of communication between himself and his family:

*Gregor aber dachte gar nicht daran aufzumachen, sondern lobte die vom Reisen Her übernommene Vorsicht, auch zu Hause alle Türen während der Nacht zu Versperren.*

However, he was not thinking of opening the door, and felt thankful for the prudent habit he had acquired in travelling of locking all doors during the night, even at home (6).

But we soon realize that communication is not the only problem we are confronted with here. If Gregor, at this point of the narrative, hesitates so, or even refuses to open his bed-room door, it is because he can hide behind it: the door is a convenient screen, or veil, as we shall see. And as a consequence, I come to the conclusion that the fanciful regression with which I began my interpretation is only a small part of a larger and more complex fantasy.

For indeed it is not possible to forget that the desire to become a baby again – should this first part of my interpretation be correct – is accompanied by a metamorphosis into a repulsive creature, an *Untier*:

*Er erkannte daraus, dass ihr sein Anblick noch immer unerträglich war [...]*

This made him realize how repulsive the sight of him was to her [his mother] (28)

*[die Mutter] erblickte den riesigen braunen Fleck auf den geblühten Tapete, rief, [...] mit schreiender, rauher Stimme: “Ach Gott, ach Gott!” [...]*

She caught sight of a huge brown mass on the flowered wallpaper and [...] she screamed in a loud hoarse voice: “Oh God, oh God” [...] (33)

<sup>3</sup> The other word is probably “room”.

And yet, when we come to think of it and make a list of the passages where Gregor's monstrosity is alluded to, we realize that they are rather scarce in the fifty-one pages of the tale. Indeed, once the narration is under way and has established the nature of Gregor's metamorphosis, we mostly come across short phrases reminding us briefly of the transformation he has suffered, and – this is worth noticing – referring to parts of his body only. In fact, "The Metamorphosis" is mainly about the difficult life of a "monster", the word being taken in all its possible acceptations, physical or mental. And at this point one cannot help wondering to what an extent the source of Kafka's literary invention did not lie in the fact that he thought he was "a monster" for his own parents. Only a thorough analysis of the writer's complete works could enable us to sustain such a thesis, but it certainly constitutes an interesting line of investigation. And thus, having read "The Metamorphosis", one may well ask the question: what does it mean to be a monster?

What is striking, however, and this is a tribute to the talent of the writer, what is striking is that "The Metamorphosis" not only provides us with a representation of what it is to be an infant (its sensations), but also of what it is to be "abnormal". And, more specifically, to be abnormal in the eyes of others. It seems that what was fancitized in Kafka's tale – "I am a monster" – concurred to the representation of a realistic situation:

*In der ersten vierzehn Tagen konnten es die Eltern nicht über sich bringen, zu ihm Hereinzukommen [...]*

For the first fortnight his parents could not bring themselves to the point of entering his room[...] (28)

This may be one of the reasons why the word "door" is the substantive most used in the text: as we saw, doors are often shut on Gregor, and his family wants him to stay away from them in his room, even to the end:

*Kaum war er innerhalb seines Zimmers, wurde die Tür eiligst zugedrückt, festgeriegelt und versperrt. [...] Es war die Schwester, die sich so beeilt hatte. [...] "Endlich!" rief sie den Eltern zu, während sie den Schlüssel im Schloss umdrehte.*

Hardly was he well inside his room when the door was hastily pushed shut, bolted and locked [...] It was his sister who had shown such haste[...] she cried "At last" to her parents as she turned the key on the lock (50).

A most appropriate way of speaking of the estrangement of the forlorn child, kept on the other side of the "door", the passage can also symbolize the obstacle the child wishes to surmount.

At this point, one cannot help thinking that the representation of a physical abnormality is so disturbing because it is in fact the sign of a trait that goes beyond the physical appearance of the narrator: this, we can call the symbolical dimension of the unconscious subject.

For a close scrutiny of Kafka's text reveals yet another type of fantasy, a deep-rooted fantasy which may help us to articulate more satisfactorily the fantasy of a return to infancy and the representation of the abnormality we have already noticed.

If we go back to the opening of the tale and carefully re-read its very first paragraph, an interesting detail calls our attention: "the bed-quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely"<sup>4</sup>. Then, as we go on reading, we find, in the second paragraph, the picture of the lady which Gregor "had recently *cut* out of an illustrated magazine"(italics mine) and this detail makes us think that we may have found what explains the sliding bed-quilt. Here is the passage:

*Es stellte eine Dame dar, die, mit einem Pelzhut und einer Pelzboa verstehen, aufrecht dasass und einen schweren Pelzmuff, in dem ihr ganzen Unterarm verschwunden war, dem Beschauer entgegenhob.*

It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished (3).

<sup>4</sup> Later on, Gregor will cover himself with a sheet.

I find the insistence on vision interesting. Isn't it as if Kafka were "holding out to the spectator" something he wished him or her to notice, something that mattered to him as author in any case? And of course he could well have been the spectator of the scene he had himself imagined. The bed-quilt *about* to slide off has been replaced by the huge fur muff: in spite of the "sitting upright" – which can be read "erect" – *there is nothing to see*. We shall never know what is really inside the fur muff or behind the bed-quilt: the forearm or its *absence*. Obviously, this "*Vénus à la fourrure*" introduces an essential theme into the story. In a few moments, it is true, the bed-quilt will eventually fall to the ground, but this is another part, another act of this complex fantasmatic drama.

We remember that the baby wanted to get out of bed, wished he could be supported by its "little legs", and how realistic the representation was when he called for the help of two adults! Again, this forms part of the rich complexity of Kafka's tale. If we accept the fact that another fantasy – a second fantasy – was at work in the production of the story, there is no need to speak of a contradiction. The infant wants *to get up*, and the adult – or more likely the child who is no longer an infant – is responding to his discovery of a difference between the sexes and begins therefore to worry.

*Er erinnerte sich, schon öfters im Bett irgendeinen vielleicht durch ungeschicktes Liegen erzeugten, leichten Schmerz empfunden zu haben, der sich dann beim Aufstehen als reine Einbildung herausstellte, und er war gespannt, wie sich seine Heutigen Vorstellungen allmählich auflösen würden: Dass die Veränderung der Stimme nichts anderes war als der Vorbote einer tüchtigen Verkühlung [...] daran zweifelte er nicht im geringsten..*

He remembered that often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains, probably caused by awkward postures, which had proved purely imaginary once he got up [...] That the change in his voice was nothing but the precursor of a severe chill [...] he had not the least possible doubts (6).

"Only a chill, no more", although once again the narrator gives himself away when he mentions "a change", not forgetting that the reference to voice also seems a discreet – if not conscious – reminder of the fact that male and female voices generally differ<sup>5</sup>. An obvious denial indeed, it should not prevent the analyst from understanding what is at stake here: confronted with the idea of castration, the unconscious subject looks for a solution, looks for a suitable "posture" to adopt: simultaneous to a desire to be a baby again, we find this discovery of a "monstrosity" which I take to summarize the fear of the child. Could it be possible, then, that our subject see a "solution" in the choice of femininity?

*Die Decke abzuwerfen war ganz einfach; er brauchte sich nur ein wenig aufzublasen und sie fiel von selbst. Aber weiterhin wurde es schwierig [...]*

To get rid of the quilt was quite easy; he had only to inflate himself a little and it fell off by itself. But the next move was difficult [...] (6).

It is as if our narrator were saying – and by saying I mean unconsciously implying, fancifying – that the solution he was looking for was to transform himself into a woman and that that was not so difficult after all. We can perhaps even read "to inflate himself a little" as produced by a desire for pregnancy or at least for its possibility? And now we can understand why Gregor is jealous of those of his colleagues who "live like harem women" (4). The first few pages of "The Metamorphosis" reveal a fascination for femininity.

Gregor's recrimination about a job which so often causes him to get up so early, then – "The devil take it all!" (4) –, may well be interpreted as directed at a sexual status he would like to change: unable, as an insect or as an animal, to get up, Gregor worries about missing his train.

<sup>5</sup> Voices are mentioned several times in these first pages: Gregor's mother's voice is gentle, "*Die sanfte Stimme!*" and he has a shock as he hears "his own voice answering hers". Already, it is the voice of the "baby" he has become, no doubt, *different* but still his own, but the *change* is not complete yet – the change to womanhood, I mean – for "the wooden door between them must have kept the change in his voice from being noticeable outside". The "quilt" – wooden door – is still here and will only fall to the ground in a little while.

*Vorläufig allerdings muss ich aufstehen, denn mein Zug fährt um fünf.*

For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train goes at five (4).

and:

*Was aber sollte er jetzt tun? Den nächste Zug ging um sieben Uhr; um den einzuholen, hätte er sich unsinning beeilen müssen [...]*

But what was he to do now? The next train went at seven; to catch that he would need to hurry like mad [...] (4-5)

“Like mad”, yes, *unsinning*, for it may not appear as such an easy choice after all! For quite a while, at the beginning of the story, before the “falling of the quilt”, Gregor worries about trains; the atmosphere is almost that of a dream: missing a train, catching a train... I think this can be interpreted as representing a choice not so easy to make but expressing an unconscious desire to change. One misses a train in order to be able to catch another. It is as if “Gregor” were thinking of a second choice, a way, perhaps, to start life all over again, and this may help to explain the sentence about the quilt which eventually falls “off by itself”. (In keeping with such an interpretation, a sentence like “I’ll cut myself completely loose then”. (*Dann wird der grosse Schnitt gemacht*) (4) acquires a strong symbolical meaning, a complex meaning which will become clearer as our analysis develops: openly speaking of Gregor’s relationship to his family, the sentence implies much more and bears a relation to Gregor’s sexual status and to unconscious desire).

That such a choice is difficult to make is what can be witnessed in these first two or three pages. Although the transformation has already “taken place” with the very first sentence of the tale, it is possible that the consequences of such a radical change are considered by the writer-dreamer with apprehension. The mood is one of hesitation. Having missed his train – which in a dream could certainly be interpreted as expressing a desire to change or to give something up, and here, probably, to abandon one’s present sexual status –, the alternative is not readily or easily accepted.

*Was aber sollte er jetzt tun?*

But what was he to do now? (4).

As if in a no man’s land for a while, the narration hesitates: the alarm-clock has “not gone off”, or *perhaps* it has, yes, “it must have gone off” (*Sollte der Wecker nicht geläutet haben? [...] gewiss hatte er auch geläutet*).

*Nun, ruhig hatte er ja nicht geschlafen, aber wahrscheinlich desto fester.*

Well, he had not slept quietly, yet apparently all the more soundly for that (4).

Could this procrastination reveal a desire for an ambiguous, hermaphroditic status? It is of course not impossible, but what is certain is that femininity in the end prevails.

For indeed, whatever the difficulty to go on (in “the next move”) (6), the fantasy follows its course to the end, while the writer almost points out the place in the body where the change has occurred. The quilt has fallen to the ground – that was easy –, and Gregor will now try to get out of bed “with the lower part of his body first”, a lower part “he had not yet seen and of which he could form no clear conception”, but which must have mattered a great deal to the writer since the word (*unter*) appears three times in the paragraph. Should this, besides, not be sufficient, Kafka’s paragraph closes with a piece of information which reveals the obvious nature of the fantasy: “[...] the stinging pain he felt informed him that precisely this lower part of his body was at the moment probably the most sensitive” (7).

Naturally, we cannot be satisfied with just this short analysis of the first four pages of Kafka’s tale, but at least we have now a fairly sensible hypothesis. It remains to find out whether the other fifty pages of “The Metamorphosis” corroborate this first interpretation, or commentary: the discovery of a difference between the sexes and the possibility of (what the writer thinks is) castration sends the “young boy” on a quest for a “solution”. That this would be solution reveals itself as destructive as what is feared is not the least of our analytic problems, as we shall see.

That castration is at the heart of “The Metamorphosis” is no exaggeration and this is no doubt the place to mention the aggression suffered by Gregor at the hands of his father later in the story. I spoke of a regression and of a desire to be an infant again, and as the story develops we can witness the child’s entry into the Oedipal triangle. Gregor has to face the stern presence of a father whom we see “advancing with a grim visage” towards him. No wonder that he should be “dumbfounded at the enormous size of his [father’s] shoe soles” (35). In the tale, the father is an essential *and complex* character (as is the sister); there is no doubt that this ambiguous figure, now weak and indifferent, now aggressive and violent, deserves an entire study in itself. Let it suffice for now to mention, page 36, the incredible scene in which Gregor is pursued by what I can only call a formidable father figure:

*[...] er wusste ja noch vom ersten Tage seines neuen Lebens her, dass der Vater ihm gegenüber nur die grösste Strenge für angebracht ansah.*

[...] he was aware as he had been from the very first day of his new life that his father believed only the severest measures suitable for dealing with him.

Why the father in the story “decides” to throw *apples* at his “transformed” son, or rather, what can we read in this choice of Kafka’s is not easy and will have to be the subject of another psychoanalytic commentary. Was the jocular nature of this aggression with apples destined to conceal the violence of the scene? This reminds us of the ambiguity with which Gregor’s father is treated throughout the tale. Unless there was in “apples” something reminiscent of an incident in real life? This may be for the biographer to say, who knows? Responses may naturally vary, but I cannot help noticing the violence of the scene.

*[...] da flog knapp neben ihm, leicht geschleudert, irgend etwas nieder und rollte vor ihm her. Es ein Apfel: gleich flog ihm ein zweiter nach; Gregor blieb vor Schrecken stehen; ein Weiterlaufen war nutzlos, denn der Vater hatte sich entschlossen, ihn zu bombardieren [...] Ein schwach geworfener Apfel streifte Gregors Rücken, glitt aber unschädlich ab. Ein ihm sofort nachfliegender drang dagegen förmlich in Gregors Rücken ein [...]*

[...] suddenly something lightly flung landed close behind him and rolled before him. It was an apple; a second apple followed immediately; Gregor came to a stop in alarm; there was no point in running on, for his father was determined to bombard him [...] An apple thrown without much force grazed Gregor’s back and glanced off harmlessly. But another following immediately landed right on his back and sank in [...]

One can of course read the scene as a farce and accept the humorous tone of the narration, but it remains that Gregor is openly victimized in such a representation, that “incredible pain” (*unglaubliche Schmerz*) is mentioned and that the page which follows the scene begins with a reminder of the harm done to the son:

*Die schwere Verwundung Gregors, an der er über sinen Monate litt [...]*

The serious injury done to Gregor, which disabled him for more than a month [...] (37).

There is no doubt, a violent aggression was carried out. It is not possible to decide whether “lightly flung” and “without much force” were meant to temper that aggressivity or are simply there to reinforce the ambiguity I have just mentioned. Between the two explanations however there is no contradiction: the scene may carry both motives, and what remains primarily is this confrontation between father and son. The mother, in any case, will soon appear, thus completing the triangle, with the son, this time, in the role of the one who watches the (primal) scene.

And what we have now is a wounded hero, a hero “impaired, probably for ever”. This, however, is not entirely new to us, for even before this fierce, and bizarre, Oedipal episode, the narrator mentioned bruises, “horrid blotches [which] stained the white floor” (19), and above all a “scar”:

*Seine linke Seite schien eine einzige lang, unangenehm spannende Narbe, und er musste auf seinen zwei Beinreihen regelrecht hinken. Ein Beinchen war übrigens im Laufe der vormittägigen Vorfälle schwer verletzt worden [...] une schleppete leblos nach.*

His left side felt like one single, *long*, unpleasantly *tense scar*, and he had actually *to limp* on his two rows of legs. *One little leg*, moreover, had been *severely damaged* in the course of that morning's events [...] and *trailed* uselessly behind him (19) (my italics).

Obvious references to some impairment, "To limp", "little leg" and "trailed uselessly" can easily be analyzed as signs of a "wound" inflicted by the Oedipal father, but the "long" and unpleasant "scar" may point to another direction or, *rather*, implies a second, complementary signification, the image, this time, being simply an effect of the discovery of a difference between the sexes, the striking disclosure of something to be dreaded.

In due time, we shall have to explain why Gregor was "chosen" to represent all that is hideous in Kafka's tale, and it will not be easy, but what is certain is that this is a representation of castration. The monstrous "baby", the horrible creature which frightens family and visitors alike is Kafka's representation of the sexual organ of woman. It is the "proof", for him – and I take this to be unconscious –, that the loss, or lack, of what he considers as essential is possible. Repulsive and disgusting this is what Gregor is:

*Aber der Prokurist hatte sich schon bei den ersten Worten Gregors abgewendet, und nur über die zuckende Schulter hinweg sah er mit aufgeworfenen Lippen nach Gregor zurück.*

But at Gregor's very first words the chief clerk had already backed away and only stared at him with parted lips over one twitching shoulder. (*aufgeworfenen Lippen* can be said to express disgust and seems stronger than just "parted lips") (16).

*Er erkannte daraus, dass ihr sein Anblick noch immer unerträglich war und ihr auch weiterhin unerträglich bleiben müsse, und dass sie sich wohl sehr überwinden musste, vor dem Anblick auch nur der kleinen Partie seines Körpers nicht davonzulaufen, mit der er unter dem Kanapee hervorragte.*

This made him realize how repulsive the sight of him still was to her, and that it was bound to go on being repulsive, and what an effort it must cost her not to run away even from the sight of the small portion of his body that stuck out from under the sofa (28).

The insistence on sight, on appearance, is clear, and it is not difficult to interpret what is meant by "the small portion of his body"; the sofa, also, is a good reminder of the sheet or veil we have already met. For Gregor's monstrosity – his "wound" – is such that others have to be spared the view of "it":

*Um ihr auch diesen Anblick zu ersparen, trug er eines Tages auf seinem Rücken [...] das Leintuch auf das Kanapee und ordnete es in einer solchen Weise an, dass er nun gänzlich verdeckt war, und dass die Schwester, selbst wenn sie sich bückte, ihn nicht sehen konnte.*

In order to spare her that, therefore, one day he carried a sheet on his back to the Sofa [...] and arranged it there in such a way as to hide him completely, so that even if she were to bend down she could not see him (28).

Quite simply, "The Metamorphosis" is a representation of the horror of what is fancied as "castration". A dramatisation of what Freud discussed in "The Uncanny", Kafka's tale, however, leaves us with a central and difficult question. For we still have to explain the role performed by the hero of what is, after all, a tragic tale.

I have suggested that Gregor's choice of a transformation was a flight to what he thought was femininity. Hoping to be "safe" on "the other side", hoping to be spared castration thanks to a change of sexual status, he nevertheless encounters a fate which is just as dreadful as the one he was running away from. His identification with what he takes to be a hideous wound leads him nowhere.

Could a close examination of the writer's discourse help us to understand the secret reasons which presided over such a neurotic choice? I think so, although the result of such an enquiry can only be an hypothesis. What is certain, however, is that "The Metamorphosis", on two occasions at least, very clearly describes an identification with a woman. We have already encountered the first occurrence, here is the second apparition of the "Lady muffled in so much fur":

*Und so brach er denn hervor [...] wechselte viermal die Richtung des Laufes, er wusste nicht, was er zuerst retten sollte, da sah er an der im übrigen schon leeren Wand auffallend das Bild der in lauter Pelzwek gekleideten Dame hängen, kroch eilends hinauf und presste sich an das Glas, das ihn festhielt und seinem heissen Bauch wohltat. Dieses Bild wenigstens, das Gregor jetzt ganz verdeckte, würde niemand wegnehmen.*

And so he rushed out [...] and four times changed his direction, since he really did not know what to rescue first [of his furniture], then on the wall opposite, which was already otherwise cleared, he was struck by the picture of the lady muffled in so much fur and quickly crawled up to it and pressed himself to the glass, which was a good surface to hold on to and comforted his hot belly. This picture at least, which was entirely hidden beneath him, was going to be removed by nobody (33).

Yes, Gregor “*presste sich an das Glas*”, and as if this were not enough he then covers the lady’s portrait with his own “hot” body, hiding her “entirely”, thus taking the place of the image but at the same time also concealing... what is too horrible for us to see.