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Exclusion and renewal: identity and Jewishness in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" and David Vogel's Married Life

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4 CAPTURING ABJECTION IN FRANZ KAFKA'S "THE METAMORPHOSIS"

...modern German-Jewish literature questions and undermines all notions of stability and identity. It is not so much identity but abjection, ambivalence and difference that characterize modern German-Jewish literature.⁸⁰

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I read textual productions of identity and meaning in Kafka's novella "The Metamorphosis" ("Die Verwandlung", 1912) through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notions of abjection and the two registers of identity and meaning, the symbolic and the semiotic, which I discussed in chapter 2.⁸¹

Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", the famous story about a man turning into a giant insect, is perhaps the most enigmatic and challenging work of Kafka's oeuvre, on account of its extraordinary simultaneous realism and fantasy. It centres on the German Samsa family whose only son, Gregor, a hard-working, dutiful young salesman, turns overnight into an enormous horrific insect. The family,

⁸⁰ Fuchs. *A Space of Anxiety*. 3. Fuchs' study explores Jewish experiences of identity and difference in the works of modern German Jewish writers before and after the Holocaust. Explored are Franz Kafka: *Der Verschollene*, 1912 (trans. America), Sigmund Freud, Joseph Roth, Albert Drach and Edgar Hilsenrath.

⁸¹ The German text "Die Verwandlung" (1912) was first published in 1915 in *Die weissen Blätter*, a literary journal edited by the Alsatian novelist René Schickele, and subsequently published in book form in 1916 by Kurt Wolff Verlag, Leipzig. Kafka probably knew the concept of "metamorphosis" as a literary theme from two sources: from his training in the Classics at the German gymnasium (Staatsgymnasium mit Deutscher Unterrichtssprache) (1893-1901), and the German University in Prague (Deutsche Universität Prag), but also from his keen interest in Jewish mysticism, in particular in the work of the Jewish mystic rabbi Nachman of Bratislava, in the years preceding "The Metamorphosis". For possible Jewish mysticism influences referring to the concept of metamorphosis into animals, plants and stones, see Gershon G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken, 1961. 281 ff.

Quotations in English and references to page numbers refer to the edition of "The Metamorphosis". Trans. and ed. Stanley Corngold. New York: Norton, 1996. From now referred to as "The Metamorphosis".

References to the German text in this chapter originate in the German critical edition in two volumes (*Textband* and *Apparatband*): *Franz Kafka: Drucke zu Lebzeiten. Kritische Ausgabe*. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann, eds. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1996.

The *Apparatband* also contains the history of the composition and publication of "The Metamorphosis", 177-91. From now referred to as DzL Textband.

with whom Gregor lives and works hard to provide for financially, is deeply disturbed by Gregor's metamorphosis. Unable to deal with their son/brother's insect difference, they increasingly see Gregor as a threat and start excluding him from their midst. At first they isolate him by locking him in his room but eventually the very relatives he used to financially provide for kill him at the hand of the father who finishes his insect/son off by throwing a rotten apple at him. After protracted suffering, Gregor the insect dies and is disposed of by the cleaning lady, along with other unwanted rubbish the family has no longer use for.

At the end of the narrative, with Gregor the Bug safely out of the way, the Samsas' fate seems to take a turn for the best. The parents, on a family outing with their daughter Grethe, Gregor's favourite sister (and co-plotter in his murder), fantasise with great satisfaction on Grethe's potential (as a future wife/mother) to safeguard the renewal and continuation of the Samsa family identity.

4.2 *Methodology*

Most critics who tried their hand at interpreting Kafka's enigmatic text saw it as representing actual socio-historical structures outside the text (as I will show later). That is not, however, the focus of my attention in this study. Taking a critical position on the border between the symbolic and the semiotic, I will try in this chapter to make the invisible logics of abjection in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" visible, and to investigate how such a reading affects the meaning and function of the text.

My focus on abjection as a universal, instinctive logic of all identity-formation does not imply disregarding the specificity of the text. On the contrary: Kristeva writes that the visibility of abjection in a text takes different forms, in different cultures, for different peoples. This inspired me to explore the universal: the text's production of abjection, alongside with the specific, namely its rootedness in the contemporary body of literature written by Jews, and in the contemporary Jewish discourse on the failure of assimilation.

Thus, I consider the text's specificity together with its universality: its dramatizing the logics of abjection as an ambivalent psychodynamics of exclusion (of an other) and renewal (in order to be a self). It is that life-giving ambivalence of abjection which is most difficult to grasp. Indeed, asks Kristeva, how can we grasp that impossible co-existence of positive and negative from our position in the symbolic order that is grounded in their separation? We can only look for analogies in literature, art, psychoanalysis and religion (and possibly Quantum physics?), and that will be my approach in this chapter. This brings me to a final remark about methodology: my analysis of texts in this study differs from classical Freudian text interpretation in that it does not interpret neurotic afflictions of the

writer into the text. On the contrary, I am not interested in pathology but in the universally human. That is perhaps the greatest shock that the study of abjection and "The Metamorphosis" present to us.

4.3 On the Specificity of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"

Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" teems with inter-texts from the Jewish/Yiddish narrative tradition. The notion of metamorphosis itself, for instance, was a well-known motif in Hebrew/Yiddish literature, though Kafka was also familiar with Ovid's metamorphosis stories which he had read whilst at the German school.⁸²

In addition, Berman (1995) and Mitosek (2004) consider Kafka's deployment of a family setting as a matrix for some of the primary psychic conflicts as a tradition in Polish/Yiddish literature.⁸³ Kafka may have become familiar with this tradition through his keen interest in the Polish/Yiddish theatre which would perform in corners of Prague cafés frequented by Kafka and his friend Max Brod, in the years before and during his writing "The Metamorphosis". As to the family setting, Freud's deployment of the Oedipal family triangle as a matrix for his work might, or perhaps must be, viewed within that same Jewish tradition. Deleuze and Guattari overlooked this issue in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983).⁸⁴ Obviously, their political preoccupations narrowed their view of Freud's Oedipal triangle to a product of a patriarchal, capitalist way of thinking. The "family romance as a setting", writes Berman, "enabled its (Jewish) audience to locate themselves in the world, to achieve identities".⁸⁵ That is, curiously enough, precisely what Kafka's text offers

⁸² Sarah Loeb. *Franz Kafka: A Question of Jewish Identity: Two Perspectives*. Boston: University Press of America, 2001. 53.

⁸³ Marshall Berman. "A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Jewish Family Romance." *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*. Eds. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995. 253-75.

See for the issue of the "family romance" in Polish literature, that inspired Polish-Yiddish writers: Zofia Mitosek. "The Polish Tradition of the Family Novel". *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Eds. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004. 506 ff.

⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari challenge "old" (Freudian) psychoanalysis – specifically the Oedipus complex which they deem a product of a patriarchal, capitalist way of thinking – and which they oppose on every account, shifting their attention to the pre-Oedipus phase of psychic development: the pre-Oedipal world of the schizophrenic (they name their project schizo-analysis), as they "...seek to discover the 'deterritorialized' flows of desire, the flows that have not been reduced to the Oedipal codes and neurotized territorialities, the desiring-machines that escape such codes as lines of escape leading elsewhere". (xvii).

⁸⁵ Berman. *Ibid.* 254. My emphasis.

its readership, when read through the lens of Kristeva's notion of abjection: functioning as a technology of subjectivity for its Jewish audience, as I will show in the Jewish historical context.

Kafka's choice of an animal as the protagonist is reminiscent of Yiddish literature and drama, where the animal fable was part of the great tradition of social satire in which animal figures represented the sufferings of the Jewish people, as can be seen in the work of Eastern European Yiddish writers like Mendele, Peretz and Sholem Aleichem.⁸⁶ To the Western reader, unfamiliar with both this Yiddish tradition and the sufferings that accompanied the failure of Jewish assimilation and acculturation in the west, it is difficult to grasp the contemporary thrust of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" when read as a social satire, or even to recognise the object of his satire.⁸⁷ To appreciate satire one must know what is being satirized. Kafka's satirical bend, writes Ritchie Robertson in his invaluable *Kafka, Judaism, Politics and Literature* (1985), was only picked up by his contemporary (Jewish) audience.⁸⁸ William C. Rubinstein suggests in this respect that Rotpeter (the name of the ape in Kafka's *Report to an Academy*) represents an assimilated Jew who learns to drink Schnapps (Jews did not touch alcohol, except for the Sabbath wine), thus symbolising Holy Communion and hence his conversion to Christianity.⁸⁹ Robertson refers to Evelyn Torton Beck's use of Rubinstein's interpretation in her book *Kafka and the Yiddish Theatre*, in which she argues that the Ape was modelled on the figure of Berele, a converted Jew figuring in one of the Yiddish plays Kafka saw in the Café Savoy in Prague.⁹⁰ Although Robertson disagrees with this interpretation he does agree with its general gist: the ape's representation of the converted Jew. Robertson writes about the ape's subsequent career:

Although his [the ape's] efforts to imitate a human being have gained him admission to human society, he has not been accepted as a human being but

⁸⁶ Mendele Mocher Sforim (Mendele the Bookseller): pen name of Shalom Jacob Abramowitsch (1835-1917), Yiddish and Hebrew author; Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), Yiddish and Hebrew poet and author; Sholem Aleichem, pen name of Sholem Rabinowitz 1859-1916, Yiddish author, born in Russia. Sholem Aleichem is one of the great Yiddish writers, best known for his humorous tales of life among the poverty ridden and oppressed Russian Jews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His works include five novels, many plays and some 300 short stories.

⁸⁷ Acculturation: acceptance of a common culture by a social group that remains distinct.

⁸⁸ Ritchie Robertson. *Kafka, Judaism, Politics and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. 164-70.

⁸⁹ William C. Rubinstein. "A Report to an Academy". *Franz Kafka Today*. Eds. Flores and Homer D. Swander. California: Gordan Press, 1977. 55-60.

⁹⁰ Evelyn Torton Beck. *Kafka and the Yiddish Theatre: Its Impact on his Work*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971.

rather as an alien with extraordinary imitative skill. The greater his fame, the further he is from real membership of humanity. This expresses Kafka's view about the situation of the assimilated Jew. The Jew can enter Western society only by adapting himself to its customs. If he can act his part skilfully enough, he will be allowed to mix with gentiles, and he may imagine that his mimicry is completely successful. But, to the non-Jews around him it remains obvious that he is an actor, and they appreciate the act without being taken in by it.⁹¹

The story of the ape sums up Jewish assimilation in Prague and modern Central Europe as a two-faced phenomenon: on the one hand there are stories of economical, scientific and artistic success; on the other hand this success was by no means a guarantee of social acceptance. Seen in this light, Kafka's story of the giant bug Gregor in "The Metamorphosis" is even more pessimistic than that of the Ape: where the latter enjoys at least some worldly success, Gregor the bug is doomed to failure and death from the very beginning of the narrative. Evelyn Torton Beck (1971) writes that the fascination of "The Metamorphosis" is "the most widely known and one of the most disturbing of Kafka's works, lies chiefly in the horror of its central metaphor – a man awakens one morning to find that he has become a giant bug."⁹²

Torton Beck writes in her intriguing book on the influence of the Yiddish theatre on Kafka's work:

Although Kafka frequented both German and Czech theatre with some regularity - references to such visits are shattered throughout the diaries - but at no other time in his life was he so deeply involved in a single repertoire, in so concentrated a period, as with the Polish-Yiddish theatre troupe in 1911/12. Had the involvement been less intense, had it not been followed by his sudden literary breakthrough in 1912 (which came only after years of artistic failure) one would place less emphasis on the encounter with the Yiddish theatre. But given the sequence of events, one might well conjecture that the Yiddish plays represented an important factor in Kafka's literary development and merit close attention by the Kafka scholar.⁹³

She also draws parallels in imagery, structure, technical devices, setting and themes between Kafka's mode of dramatization in "The Metamorphosis" and that of the Yiddish playwright Gordin in his play *The Savage One* (*Der wilde Mensch*). Kafka writes in detail about this play in his diaries (1910-23) and outlines the plot in some detail.⁹⁴ Like Lemekh, the protagonist of *The Savage One*, writes Torton

⁹¹ Robertson. Ibid. 167.

⁹² Torton Beck. Ibid. 135.

⁹³ Torton Beck. Ibid. Preface. x.

⁹⁴ Max Brod, ed. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-23*. Trans. Joseph Kresh. New York:

Beck, Gregor Samsa, is barely tolerated at home, and looked upon with disgust (particularly by the father) as an outcast whose very existence shames his family. Albeit in different ways, Gregor and Lemekh combine the same qualities of “thing” (the abject) and “person”. Both are depicted as essentially simple, meek and self-effacing persons who become animal-like creatures because of a drastic transformation, which culminates in Gregor’s murder and Lemekh murdering Zelde. Although Gregor’s physical transformation is already complete when “The Metamorphosis” opens, and the change in Lemekh occurs more gradually, the process of progressive decay continues throughout both works.

Torton Beck also points to another parallel between the restricted space of Gregor’s room where most of the action takes place, and the narrow stage of the Yiddish theatre performances adapted to the very limited space where the performances took place, such as, for instance, the café corner in the Savoy Café in Prague, where Kafka watched the plays. Kafka deeply admired the authenticity of Eastern European Jewry (in contrast to the assimilated Central European Jews’ efforts to free themselves from their bonds to Judaism), as is shown by the fact that he devotes the best part of two years’ diary entries (1911-1912) to Eastern European Jewry, their lives, their spiritual leaders (e.g. Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava whose teachings and person are discussed in Kafka’s diaries), their literature and their drama. Also testifying to this admiration is his interest in Yiddish and his deep concern about bourgeois assimilated Jews’ disdain/fear of Eastern European Jewry and the Yiddish language. Franz Kafka’s “discovery” of Eastern European Jews, according to Aschheim, was a classic illustration of the major impulses behind the movement of young Jewish intellectuals seeking a post-liberal Jewish commitment.⁹⁵

Evidence of Kafka’s intuitive recognition of what Kristeva calls abjection as a universal affect can be seen in his introductory speech on the Yiddish language delivered to an assimilated Jewish audience about to watch a performance of a travelling Eastern European Yiddish theatre group.⁹⁶ Yiddish was despised in the anti-Semitic non-Jewish world as “Jew-talk” and therefore feared and avoided,

Schocken Books, 1976. Section 1910-13, 88-91.

⁹⁵ Steven E. Aschheim. *Brothers and Strangers: The East-European Jew in German and German-Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1982. 204.

⁹⁶ Max Brod, ed. *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*. By Franz Kafka. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins. New York: Schocken Books, 1954. 381-83. Brod adds the following note (52, p. 408) to the text: “The speech which Kafka delivered at the beginning of an evening’s recitations by the Eastern European Jewish actor Isak Löwy in the main hall of the Jewish Town Hall in Prague on February 18, 1912. The original manuscript has been lost; what is left is a careful and complete copy made by Frau Elsa Brod.”

abjected by assimilated acculturated Jews for fear it should draw them back to the very Jewish roots they had had to forgo in order to belong: to be accepted as Germans or Czechs. Remarkable in this reading is Kafka's intuitive recognition and understanding of that unspeakable fear, and his intuitive, didactic strategy to acknowledge it first and then to explain the strangeness of Yiddish by giving an enumeration of its qualities as a language of Jewish exile, a language of a nation without a territory:

Before we come to the first poems by our Eastern Jewish poets, I should like, ladies and gentlemen, just to say something about how much more Yiddish you understand than you think. I am not really worried about the impact this evening holds in store for each of you, but I should like it to be universally comprehensible if it merits it. Yet this cannot happen as long as many of you are so frightened of Yiddish that one can almost see it in your faces. Of those who take an arrogant attitude to Yiddish I do not even speak. But dread of Yiddish (*Angst vor dem Jargon*), dread (horror), mingled with a certain fundamental distaste, is ultimately understandable if one wishes to understand it.

Our Western European conditions, if we glance at them only in a deliberate superficial way, appear so well ordered; everything takes its quiet course. We live in positively cheerful concord, understanding each other whenever necessary, getting along without each other whenever it suits us, and understanding each other even then. From within such an order of things, who could possibly understand the tangle of Yiddish – indeed, who would even care to do so? Yiddish is the youngest European language, only four hundred years old and actually a good deal younger even than that. It has not yet developed any linguistic forms of a lucidity such as we need. Its idiom is brief and rapid. No grammars of the language exist. Devotees of the language try to write grammars, but Yiddish remains a spoken language that is in continuous flux. The people will not leave it to the grammarians. It consists solely of foreign words, but these words are not firmly rooted in it, they retain the speed and liveliness with which they were adopted. Great migrations move through Yiddish from one end to the other. All this German, Hebrew, French, English Slavonic, Dutch, Rumanian, and even Latin is seized with curiosity and frivolity once it is contained within Yiddish, and it takes a good deal of strength to hold all these languages together in this state. And this too is why no sensible person thinks of making Yiddish into an international language, obvious though the idea might seem. It is only thieves' cant that is in the habit of borrowing from it, because it needs linguistic complexes less than single words, and then too, because Yiddish was, for long times a despised language. In this whirl of language there are, however, certain fragments of recognized linguistic laws which dominate it.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Brod, ed. *Dearest Father*. 381-83.

I intend to read “The Metamorphosis” as a Jewish writer’s text and as a text responding to the semiotic (abjection) and the symbolic: the cultural/historical frame of reference of the restricted circle of Jewish intellectuals that constituted the majority of Kafka’s friends in Prague. He would read passages of “The Metamorphosis” to them between 1912, the year of its creation, and 1915, when it was finally published. Within that context I refer to Kristeva’s observation in an interview given to Margaret Waller (1985), where she refers to Ferdinand Céline’s work as giving maximum visibility to abjection, although, so she adds, “of course, this visibility takes different forms in different centuries, for different people”.⁹⁸

This inspired me to explore the visibility of abjection in Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” as a 1912 Jewish writer’s dramatization of what eluded contemporary symbolic discourse: the invisible instinctive forces behind the social exclusion of Jews that Kafka and his contemporaries faced. I refer specifically to the circle of acculturated Jewish intellectuals who were his friends and his audience in the very early years of his career as a writer.

The social abjection of Jews confronted Kafka through two socio-political phenomena, both characterised by a tantalising ambivalence: the Western and Central European Jewish attitude to the Eastern European Jews (who fled the pogroms in their homelands of the Russian/Polish border to Vienna and Prague), which was one of great help and support, combined with a tendency to keep aloof for fear of being identified with the – to Western eyes – culturally backward and poverty-stricken situation of the *Ostjude*.

Brothers and strangers were those Eastern Jews as Steven E. Aschheim writes in his book with the same title, which sums up the ambivalence.⁹⁹ Besides, there was the double-bind situation of assimilated/acculturated Jewry: the impossibility (anti-Semitism) of being a Jew (which originally led to assimilation) and of *not* being a Jew, which was clear in the assimilation failure facing the assimilated/acculturated Jewry.¹⁰⁰ The deep cultural ambivalence with respect to Jewish assimilation in the German cultural context expressed itself on the one hand, through strong cultural pressure on Jews to transform their supposed radical otherness by assimilation while, on the other hand, cultural discourses pronounced

⁹⁸ Guberman. “Intertextuality and Literary Interpretation”. *Julia Kristeva, Interviews*. 1996. 188-203.

⁹⁹ Aschheim. *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁰ Assimilation was, in Kafka’s days, by no means unambiguous: it signified a variety of different positions ranging from the extremes of conversion to another religion (usually Roman Catholicism) to being an “acculturated” Jew, that is interested in Jewish culture but refraining from any involvement with the Jewish religion, to the point of altogether ignoring/forgetting that one was a Jew.

such transformation as absolutely impossible on the grounds that one could switch from one religion to another, but not from one race to another.

Kafka's acute awareness of this double-bind position seems almost unavoidable, in light of the 1910 turning point in assimilated/acculturated German/Jewish attitudes to this situation.¹⁰¹ Before 1910 liberal Judaism (which most assimilated/acculturated Jews identified with) covered assimilation failure of assimilation with the mantle of discretion "no Jew, not even militant German Zionists (ideologically predisposed to uncover that subject matter) had openly pronounced it ...". But in 1912, when Kafka wrote "The Metamorphosis", Moritz Goldstein published an article entitled "The German Jewish Parnassus", in which he argued that "We Jews are administering the spiritual property of a nation which denies our right and our ability to do so".¹⁰² Goldstein's article, by challenging the tacit liberal Jewish agreement to gloss over such sensitive matters, sparked an open debate about the duplicities of assimilation and proposed the creation of a separate Jewish culture.

The timing of Kafka's vision of abjection or the invisible/ unspeakable, to which he hints, appearing in his art is not accidental: it is synchronous with the assimilated German Jewry realising its double-bind situation due to the assimilation failure which I mentioned earlier. Not assimilation in the economic sense (for *pecunia non olet*), but in the social, affective sense: a Jewish crisis of identity in addition to the general cultural identity crisis that was commonplace in Kafka's days.¹⁰³ Assimilation/acculturation had proved to be no "cure" against the socio-political exclusion of Jews despite the significant artistic/economical Jewish contribution to German (and European) culture and economy.¹⁰⁴ When the Jews

¹⁰¹ This turning point was linked to political developments: German Liberalism in Prague, to which most assimilated/acculturated Jews subscribed, was changing. In March 1910 the liberal party transformed itself into the *Judenrein* (cleansed of Jews) German National Union. The Jewish paper *Selbstwehr* responded as follows: "Naturally not the German-liberal Jews, but – pardon the expression – the Jewish Jews, are overjoyed with the death of an unwholesome unjust, unsalvageable, system that can finally be discarded. No one weeps a tear over the passing of this German liberalism except for the German liberal Jews, whose hope to be accepted as real Germans has been robbed forever."

¹⁰² Moritz Goldstein's "The German Jewish Parnassus" (1912) sparked a debate about assimilation, German culture and the "Jewish spirit". Sander L. Gilman and Jack Zipes, eds. *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. 419.

¹⁰³ See also Liska. *Ibid.*, Introduction. 1-11.

¹⁰⁴ Conceptually, *assimilation* encompasses – and is often confused and conflated with – four analytically distinct changes in Jewish behaviour and status in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: acculturation (the acquisition of the cultural and social habits of the dominant non-Jewish group), integration (the entry of Jews into non-Jewish social circles and spheres of activity), emancipation (the acquisition of rights and privileges enjoyed by non-Jewish

became aware of this quandary, it became a strong impulse behind the wish for a Jewish national identity, a place to belong (Palestine), as belonging had proved highly problematic, if not impossible, in Europe (as it seems now in Israel).¹⁰⁵ At first Kafka was critical of Zionism (as was the orthodox Jewry), but in 1913 he attended the eleventh Zionist Congress in Vienna. Within this context, and because it gives an incisive image of how the Jews' realisation of their assimilation failure had a destructive impact on their sense of identity, I refer to part of the correspondence between Kafka and his old school friend Hugo Bergman (1883-1975), published by Scott Spector in *Prague Territories* (2000).

In 1902 Bergman replies to a letter from Kafka questioning Bergman's Zionism. Below are the fragments from Bergman's answer, as published by Spector, as they show the Jewish identity crisis that went hand in hand with the double-bind situation of assimilated/acculturated Jews:

Why have I become a Zionist? ... Don't think that it was sympathy that made me a Zionist. My Zion is a good piece of selfishness. I sense that I would like to fly, I would like to create, and cannot; I no longer have the strength. And yet, I think that I might have the strength under other circumstances, that the innate ability does not abandon me at all. I only lack the strength. ... Perhaps we will in fact overcome this weakness once more, and stand sturdily once more on our own ground instead of waving... like a reed; perhaps, perhaps I will even find strength again... Sometimes I feel that I might be able to fly but then my strength is broken and my wings are lame. I would like to stand for once on our own ground and not be rootless. Maybe then my strength will return to me too.¹⁰⁶

citizens/subjects of similar socio-economic rank), and secularisation (the rejection of religious beliefs and the obligations and practices that flow from these beliefs). In Eastern Europe, as in Western Europe, these processes, while obviously influencing each other, operated in the end independently of each other. Thus, in most Eastern European states, Jewish acculturation and secularisation were well in advance of legal emancipation and social integration. Todd M. Endelman. *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. Ed. Gershon David Hundert. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 81-7. The problem was that neither acculturation, emancipation, integration, nor secularisation guaranteed social acceptance.

¹⁰⁵ In 1913, two years before "The Metamorphosis" was published, Kafka attended the 11th Zionist Congress in Vienna, together with many Jews who had come to realise that the rising tide of anti-Semitism required political action, and that, by analogy to the foundation of the new European national states, the foundation of a Jewish State was the only option for Jews to be safe from the century-long persecution and harassment they had had to deal with in Europe. For cultural Zionism, see Scott Spector, *Prague Territories : National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin-de-Siècle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 135-37. Bergman's was a now extinct, cultural Zionism: a renewed interest in both Palestine as the possible new homeland and in Jewish culture, language and literature.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted by Spector from: *Hugo Bergman to Franz Kafka*, 1902. Reprinted in part in

The fragility/uncertainty of the assimilated Jew's identity was of course not restricted to Prague, but its threat was more acute there on account of the hostility between the various ethnic groups beginning to strive for nationality and hegemony (Germans, Czechs) whilst Franz Joseph's empire was slowly falling apart into nation states. This turned the political situation for Jews in Prague into something entirely different from, for instance, the sophisticated (*salonfähig*) face of the anti-Semitism of Proust's Parisian circles, where the Jew was secretly hated and considered "an eccentricity", an "Orientalism", an "aesthetic interest" or a source of "local colour".¹⁰⁷ Or, for that matter, a focus of a public and/or intellectual debate on a political case célèbre, like the Dreyfus case. The Paris situation cannot be compared with Kafka's situation in 1912 Prague, a world of fierce, anti-Jewish Czech nationalism.

The German Jewish community of Prague, with which Kafka and most Jewish intellectuals identified, was shocked by a nasty, political anti-Semitic discourse intruding from the German-speaking cultures they loved. In that discourse Jews were seen as radically different others, definitely not us. Jews were abject, inassimilable strangers whose exclusion seemed conditional for the formation of a truly nationalist German/Czech identity.

A shattering example of the Jewish anxieties inspired by anti-Semitism in 1912, when Kafka wrote "The Metamorphosis", comes from Vienna where the influence of the anti-Semitic mayor Karl Lueger (who died in 1910) had intensified the tensions between Jews and the rest of the population. In an article by Egon Schwarz (1997) about the Viennese writer Arthur Schnitzler's play *Reigen* (1903), Schwarz writes how Schnitzler

... though every inch the acculturated Viennese citizen, outwardly indistinguishable from the Austrian upper bourgeoisie, was increasingly treated as the Other, the outsider, often as a repulsive intruder, despite his undeniable achievements.¹⁰⁸

The racist, cultural othering of assimilated/acculturated Jews was culturally deeply ingrained and phobia-informed, and threatening for Jews, as shown by H. Sayer's article in *German Life and Letters* (2007) about the reception of Arthur

Tagebücher und Briefe von Samuel Hugo Bergman. Ed. Miriam Sambursky. Königstein im Taunus: Jüdischer Verlag, Athenäum, 1985. 1-9.

¹⁰⁷ Julia Kristeva. *Time and Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature*. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

¹⁰⁸ Egon Schwarz. "The staging of Arthur Schnitzler's play *Reigen* in Vienna creates a public uproar that draws involvement by the press, the police, the Viennese city administration, and the Austrian Parliament." *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996*. 419.

Schnitzler's novel "Der Weg ins Freie" ("The Road into the Open", 1908), written four years before Kafka's "The Metamorphosis". Sayer writes how in a recently discovered diary fragment Schnitzler complains about the atmosphere of insincerity, maliciousness and falsehood that had marked the reception of "Der Weg ins Freie" in the liberal press.¹⁰⁹ This press, although dominated by acculturated Jews, both as owners and critics, had publicly distanced itself from Schnitzler's novel for fear of being accused of "siding with the Jews", according to Sayer.

In "The Metamorphosis", however, Kafka the artist and the Jew is not interested in the socially speakable, such as the discussion about the double-bind position discussed earlier. What he dramatizes in "The Metamorphosis" is that which is not speakable: the instinctive dynamics of exclusion and renewal informing the cultural exclusion of the Jews, assimilated or not. Beardsworth comments:

Abjection is *not* a category, political, or otherwise, if categories articulate what fundamentally structures a society. Rather, abjection is a term that captures the *inarticulate, at the limits of society*. Abjection belongs to subjectivity because it is a journey into what is *not* organized - or regulated - by society ... abjection *shows up as* abjection - after tragedy, defilement, abomination, and sin - precisely because modern secular discourses neglect "messy stuff": what is loose and baggy with respect to the ties which relate the individual to society.¹¹⁰

In Kristeva's terminology, writers like Kafka, who connect the reader with the speakable (the symbolic) and the unspeakable (the semiotic), are avant-garde writers, writers of abjection, like Céline, Baudelaire, Lautréaumont, Georges Bataille and Sartre. Their texts connect the reader to what is neglected in the symbolic order: the instinctive aspects of identity-formation, borderline situations between the I and its inassimilable Other, borderlines as much from the point of view of literary form as from that of their dramatization of identity/ subjectivity.¹¹¹

The borderline, or the limit in Kristeva's thought, is created in and by language itself: it is the limit between what is socially speakable and not-speakable. Avant-garde literature – in her work – is literature created "at the limit" while reorganising what is within the limits, from the perspective of the exploration of what is beyond. For Kristeva the beyond (semiotic) of language is not transcendent, as in surrealism, but within language itself. There is no space beyond the limit that writing cannot reach, that language cannot speak. It is a question of extending language to the limit, and of opening up this space within language. All avant-

¹⁰⁹ Holly Sayer. "Arthur Schnitzler's Critical Reception in Vienna: The Liberal Press and the Question of Jewish Identity". *German Life and Letters*. 60.4 (2007): 186-87. My translation.

¹¹⁰ Beardsworth. *Ibid.* 243.

¹¹¹ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 297.

garde art, such as surrealism, with which Kafka's work is often identified, is art at the limit, but Kristeva's notion distinguishes itself from surrealism in that the latter conceives the limit's "beyond" in terms of an essence residing in a separate "space", while Kristeva views it as a property of language.¹¹²

4.4 "The Metamorphosis" and Literary Criticism – Two Examples: *Eric Santner and Theodor Adorno*

In view of the preceding, the difference between Kristeva's perception of abjection and the entirely different meaning Eric Santner gives it in his 1997 article "Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the Writing of Abjection" is particularly interesting. Santner views Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as a representation of disturbances in the social order outside the text. Santner's article, which incidentally lacks any reference to Julia Kristeva's different theory of abjection, uses the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of abjection: as a condition, or state of being cast down; abasement, humiliation, degradation, rejection; that which is cast off or away; refuse, scum, dregs. He views

... Gregor's fall into abjection ... as a symptom, whose fascinating presence serves as a displaced condensation of larger and more diffuse disturbances within the social field [the crisis of the patriarchal family: the son's revolt to the father] marked out by the text.¹¹³

My reading of abjection as conceptualised by Kristeva is structurally different from Santner's. His abjection relates (in terms of a displaced condensation) to the symbolic order, as I have noted before. He refers, for instance, to the crisis of the patriarchal family; the son's revolt against the father, whereas my use of the term eludes expression in the symbolic order as it falls within that other register of identity and meaning that Kristeva refers to as the semiotic. The latter can only be expressed in literature and art, as I intend to show in this chapter on Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as well as in chapters 5 and 6 on David Vogel's *Married Life*.

I see Theodor Adorno's (1903-1969) extraordinary perceptive critique of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" in his 1953 essay "Notes on Kafka" as foreshadowing Kristeva's perception of Kafka as an avant-garde writer (one who connects the reader to the semiotic and the symbolic).¹¹⁴ Unlike the vast majority of critics

¹¹² For a more extensive discussion of the differences between "Surrealism" and "Avant-garde" see my source for this paragraph: Patrick Ffrench, "'Tel Quel' and Surrealism: A Re-evaluation. Has the Avant-Garde Become a Theory?". *The Romanic Review* 88.1 (1997).

¹¹³ Eric Santner. "Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the Writing of Abjection". *The Norton Critical Edition of The Metamorphosis*. New York: Norton, 1996. 195-210.

¹¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno. "Notes on Kafka". *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical*

reading Kafka's text as "representing" situations or persons in the social context outside the text, Adorno's is unique in that he refuses to do so and, instead, concentrates on the novella's power to evoke fascination (one of the symptoms of abjection, as we saw earlier). For Adorno the most striking feature of "The Metamorphosis" is perhaps the abyss between text and meaning which unsettles the reader, and for that reason arouses fascination.

Adorno ascribes this fascination to Kafka's clever, artistic manipulation of the relation between text and meaning, which are not fused, as one would expect from a parable. "Kafka", writes Adorno, "does not express himself by expressing himself, but by his refusal to do so". Kafka himself – as Adorno reminds us – forcefully protested against Martin Buber's qualification of his work as "parable art". If, according to Adorno, Kafka's novella is parable art, it is parable art whose key has been stolen. Each sentence cries out: "Explain me", but not a single sentence allows interpretation. Yet, seeking "the key" outside the relation text/reader destroys, in Adorno's view, the essence of Kafka's work: the fascination it elicits in the reader. Fascination, according to Kristeva, is beside horror a symptom of abjection.

Adorno explains the effects of Kafka's technique of separating text and meaning in "The Metamorphosis" as follows: the fierce insistence with which the text demands (on account of the precision of its language) the reader's explanation reduces the esthetical distance between text and reader to nil. This is why what is narrated confronts the reader with the force of a locomotive in full steam. The violence of that collision crushes the reader's process of identification with the literary figures in the text and confronts him/her directly with his/her self. Or, to put it differently: Kafka, according to Adorno, turns the text into a technology of subjectivity. I will come back to Kristeva's perception of that term later.

Adorno continues his intriguing theory about the role of fascination in Kafka's art by claiming that the most striking feature of "The Metamorphosis" is perhaps the abyss between text and meaning which unsettles the reader and for that reason arouses fascination. Kafka himself seems to have artistically intuited that unsettling effect as the very purpose of literature, judging from what he wrote in a letter to his friend Oskar Pollak in 1904, eight years before he wrote "The Metamorphosis":

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book that we read does not wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would have been equally happy if we had had no books. And the kind of books that make us happy we could, if necessary, write ourselves. We need, however,

books that affect us like a mishap that wounds us deeply, like the death of one we love more than ourselves, or like we were outcasts in the woods away from humanity, or, like a suicide: a book must be the axe to the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe.¹¹⁵

Adorno claims that the functioning of Kafka's text is completely lost to literary critique which tends to "assimilate Kafka's texts into its established, cultural trend of thought" as, for instance, existentialism in Adorno's days and which, in his view, pays little attention to those aspects of his work that resist such assimilation, and precisely for this reason, require interpretation.

Adorno explicitly warns not to reduce the meaning of "The Metamorphosis" to its representation of something outside the relation text-reader, which "would destroy the essence of Kafka's work", but to focus instead on those aspects of the text resisting socio-cultural interpretation. It is this very resistance, according to Adorno, that unsettles the reader and arouses his/her fascination.

What Adorno and Kristeva have in common is the idea that there are meanings in a text that refuse to show themselves directly to the reader, and that these hidden meanings affect the reader's sense of self. Adorno, however, owes this textual refusal (in "The Metamorphosis") to a creative ploy by the writer (Kafka), while Kristeva views it as an intrinsic quality of the text, related to its position in the two registers of meaning and identity: the symbolic (visible) and the semiotic (invisible/drive-oriented). By artistically dramatizing the invisible semiotic aspects of identity the text forces the reader into a violent confrontation with the instinctive aspects of his/her own self, which prompts a sensation of fascination and horror: the symptoms of abjection as expounded in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*.

Kafka's originality – from my Kristeva-informed perspective of the novella – lies in the fact that "The Metamorphosis" positions its Jewish audience on the border between the semiotic and the symbolic, from where it can view the logics of abjection. There, the Jewish audience half-recognises in horror and fascination, something familiar that shocks, but cannot be named. Yet, naming it is, paradoxically, the object of the text as well as of this study on the text, as I have noted in my introduction to this chapter.

¹¹⁵ Letter to Oskar Pollak. 27 January 1904. *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*. By Franz Kafka. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Schocken Books, 1977. 15-16. "Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt, wozu lesen wir dann das Buch? Damit es uns glücklich macht, wie Du schreibst? Mein Gott, glücklich wären wir eben auch, wenn wir keine Bücher hätten, und solche Bücher, die uns glücklich machen, könnten wir zur Not selber schreiben. Wir brauchen aber die Bücher, die auf uns wirken wie ein Unglück, das uns sehr schmerzt, wie der Tod eines, den wir lieber hatten als uns, wie wenn wir in Wälder verstoßen würden, von allen Menschen weg, wie ein Selbstmord, ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns. Das glaube ich."

Interesting is that Kafka, Kristeva and Adorno endow the un-interpretable (or, in Kristeva's terminology, the semiotic) with the power of catching the reader unaware, addressing him/her alongside the precision of language, arousing the paradoxical emotions of horror and fascination that Kristeva associates with abjection. All three of them view the text as putting the reader literally beside him/her self, on the border, or limit, although using different perceptions of border and self: Kafka a purely intuitive artistic one (1912), Adorno a perceptive, critical one (1953), and Kristeva a post-Freudian and even a post-Lacanian inspired, philosophical one. She writes:

Even before being *like* [seeing a likeness in the Lacanian mirror] “I” am not, but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*. ... Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, is a *precondition of narcissism*. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold, or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed.¹¹⁶

4.5 *Capturing the Psychodynamics of Abjection in “The Metamorphosis”: Reading Kafka’s Text as a Parable of Abjection*

Kafka’s artistic genius in “The Metamorphosis” resides in the fact that the text – as I have noted before – can be read and will be so in this chapter as artistically capturing abjection as the archaic condition that Kristeva calls primary repression (see Kristeva’s developmental account of abjection in chapter 2): “a condition of the subject that is sent to its boundaries where there is, as such, neither subject nor object, only the abject: non-differentiated otherness”.¹¹⁷

From that perspective, the self (the Samsa family) appears in relation to its other (Gregor Samsa) who as the son is actually the discarded, abjected part of the same, namely the Samsa family self.

This ruthless (because drive-oriented) artistic self-other dynamics, set within the context of a respectable German family’s struggle for identity, artistically foreshadows what appears in alterity philosophy only half a century later: the idea that there is no self without its alter, or other. Literature, as the German critic Karl Kraus put it, is always centuries ahead of science (or, in this case philosophy).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 13.

¹¹⁷ Beardsworth. *Julia Kristeva*. 83.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Szasz. *Karl Kraus and the Soul Doctors: A Pioneer Critic and His Criticism of Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976. 107-8. The Viennese Jewish publicist, essayist and cynic Karl Kraus, owner of a celebrated journal named *Die Fackel*, cynically comments on the power of Freud’s cultural impact in Vienna. He writes in the 7-11-1912 issue: “I am often told that much of what I have discov-

The self within the context of "The Metamorphosis" is the Samsa family, and its other is Gregor, the giant bug whose messy animal/otherness blurs (threatens) the family's system of identity, clarity and order. By being exposed to Gregor, the Samsas struggle for identity. This struggle opens new possibilities for renewing the family identity in the figure of Grethe, Gregor's favourite sister who, paradoxically, eventually organises his murder (see my analysis of the plot).

In this perspective, I see "The Metamorphosis" as a parable of abjection whose key has not – as Adorno put it – been "thrown away" but is vested in the semiotic, waiting to be found by the critic on the border between the symbolic and the semiotic, which is my critical position: one that offers access to both registers of identity and meaning. There, on the border, I try to capture the drama of abjection, as a condition of the subject (the Samsa family) that is sent to its boundaries where there is, as such, neither subject nor object, only the abject: Gregor as non-differentiated (man or beast?) otherness.

In this light, I read the Gregor and the Samsa personages as symptoms of abjection engaged in the oscillation between symbolic identity and semiotic rejection that Kristeva describes in her developmental account of the constitution of the subject when exposed to (m)otherness, as we recall from the previous chapter. At this utmost sensitive, archaic in-between moment, after the fledgling (pre-Oedipal) subject's separation from the *chora*, but before entering into language/signification, the abject entices the not-yet-I into a defensive gesture (abjection/exclusion) through which it simultaneously creates itself as an I. In other words, I read "The Metamorphosis" as an artistic vision of that archaic, subjective self-other diachrony engaged in a dynamics in which the abject (other: Gregor) presents to the subject-to-be (the Samsa family) a limit or border, where the Samsa family's identity is both threatened and drawn.

If, in contrast to my argumentation, we should envisage a social elaboration of abjection at all, the artistic form it assumes in "The Metamorphosis" is the Samsas' (subject) creating a threatening other (Gregor as the abject), as a defence against social (family) collapse. By rejecting Gregor as different, or (animal) other, the Samsas re-create them-selves in the same movement as self-same: a family. Conceiving of the text as dramatizing an instinctual (semiotic) reality at work in identification seems to do justice to Gregor's outcry when he becomes aware of his insect appearance: "What has happened to me? It was no dream!" Indeed it was not: every single change in the process of Gregor's metamorphosis from man

ered without researching must be true because Freud researched these things and came to the same conclusions. This would be a depressing and wretched criterion for ascertaining the truth. To be sure, the goal or result is important for the seeker. But for the finder the path or way to it is what matters. The twain shall never meet. He who finds travels so much faster than he who searches."

to beast dramatizes the subject-to-be's repetitive (because instinctive) succession of exclusions ("not *me*") that mark the Samsa family's unaware process of abjection/struggle for identity. Unaware to (the Samsa family) self, for they are in a nasty shock about Gregor's metamorphosis, and unaware to Gregor too, as he has no idea what is happening, as is clear from his outcry: "What happened to me?" And his diagnosis: "It was no dream!" It certainly was no dream: it was abjection. I will turn to Kafka's presentation of that process as ambivalent, as both destructive and creative, both horrific and funny, later in this chapter.

"The Metamorphosis" artistically anchors the abject within a monstrous, giant, animal body (Gregor) that nevertheless retains a certain (Samsa) familiarity and therefore blurs the border between man and animal. As a literary giant insect/monster, Gregor the bug, who fills a human bed to the edges, assumes cultural dimensions as well: the literary monster, writes Cohen (1996), is born at a metaphorical crossroads: as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment of a time, a feeling and a place:

The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary) giving it life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture: a construct and a projection: the monster exists, only to be read (monstrum is etymologically "that which reveals", "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant). Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. These epistemological spaces between the monster's bones are Derrida's familiar chasm of difference: a genetic uncertainty-principle, the essence of the monster's vitality.¹¹⁹

Returning to the cultural context in which Gregor appears as an animal/monster, Reiner Stach argues that Kafka had probably been familiar from early childhood with the image of a person degraded into an animal. His father called their clumsy cook a beast, the consumptive shop-boy a sick dog, and Kafka's Eastern European Jewish friend Löwy of the Yiddish theatre group a dog ridden with fleas: "If you go to bed with dogs, you wake up with fleas", he warned his son Franz.¹²⁰

Kafka's culture, according to Stach, likened animal imagery to the idea of horrendous (giant) degradation. Insects (like Gregor) fared the worst. Calling people vermin was a serious insult; treating someone like a bug was to deny his human-

¹¹⁹ Jeffrey J. Cohen, ed. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 4.

¹²⁰ Reiner Stach. *Kafka: The Decisive Years*. Trans. Shelley Frisch. Orlando: Harcourt, 2005. 192-3.

ity. Killing an insect or even an entire species of insect was of no consequence. As a keenly observant child, Kafka, according to Stach, must have concluded that it was a curse to be an animal.

In the 1890s overworked horses were a regular part of the metropolitan street scene. No adult gave a second thought to the creature living in captivity in the zoo and the circus, or to the inferno of the slaughterhouses. Animals suffer, but their suffering is not entered into the moral accounting of human history. They are mute; their forms of expression are not considered *language*. Above all they have no concept of shame: they present their bodies in a way that constantly and painfully reminds people of their own animal nature, evoking disgust, repulsion, and cruelty.¹²¹

The preceding defines Gregor as a highly ambivalent, borderline creature. On the one hand he is as far removed from the humanity of the Samsa family as possible, on the other hand he is part of it, being the Samsa son and heir. Where does that giant bug Gregor come from? It is the Samsa family's phobic fantasy about a threat to the limits of their fragile, social and subjective identity, their *Angst* for his otherness that blows Gregor up into a giant monster.

The text goes to extremes to point to Gregor's monstrosity, otherness and inassimilable difference, firstly by dramatizing him as an insect and secondly by blowing that insect up into enormous proportions, which turns him into an object of horror and laughter.

Here the text connects the reader to the archaic giant monsters of past and present that have haunted the artistic, literary and cinematic literary imagination until the present day (think of the "monster" film industry). Kafka's dramatization of Gregor as a threatening inhuman (because animal) monster is masterly suggested by the rhythmic repetition of the German prefix *un* (*un-geheures*, *un-geziefer*). Seen in this light "The Metamorphosis" might be viewed as heralding the modern body of literature and film that dramatizes giant-monsters functioning as technologies of subjectivity, othering/machines, and providing the reader with, in Cohen's (1999) words:

... a little piece of 'the real' [Kristeva's semiotic] that symbolization exudes [sweats out]: it is everything suppressed in order for 'culture' (or the subject) to come into being.¹²²

¹²¹ Ibid. 193.

¹²² Cohen. *Monster Theory*. 94.

Characteristic, apart from its monstrosity, is the monster's ambivalence: a symptom of the abject, as we know. The monster is not only disruptive, writes Cohen, it is also necessary: the head of the giant, with his obscenely gaping maw, traps the gaze by exciting the audience's body to perverse enjoyment.¹²³

Whilst the monster traps the gaze and fascinates, it also inspires horror and laughter (symptoms of abjection). On the level of the narrative the fact that Gregor provokes laughter is closely connected with the contrast between his horror-inspiring giant-size versus his inability to perform even the most simple of human actions, such as getting out of bed, as his stiff insect-shield deprives him from the plasticity to bend and get up. Driven to despair by this inability he finally decides to wiggle from one side of his shield to the other until he topples over and drops on the ground. However, "No matter how hard he threw himself onto his right side, he always rocked onto his back again."¹²⁴

Even funnier is the huge bug's attempt to get used to his fragile, little insect legs that strangely contrast with the enormous size of his body:

He was lying on his back as hard as armor plate, and when he lifted his head a little he saw his vaulted brown belly, sectioned by arch-shaped ribs, to whose dome the cover, about to slide off completely, could barely cling. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, were waving helplessly before his eyes.¹²⁵

So are his efforts to get in control of that overpowering multitude of legs:

He would have needed hands to lift himself up, but instead of that he had only his numerous little legs, which were in every different kind of perpetual motion and which, besides, he could not control. If he wanted to bend one, the first thing that happened was that it stretched itself out; and if he finally succeeded in getting this leg to do what he wanted, all the others in the meantime, as if set free, began to work in the most intensely painful agitation.¹²⁶

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 4. "Mit welcher Kraft er sich auch auf die rechte seite warf, immer wieder schaukelte er in die Rückenlage zurück." (DzL Textband. 116)

¹²⁵ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 1. "Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch auf dessen höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum glänzlichen niedergleiten bereit, kaum nog erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen." (DzL Textband. 115)

¹²⁶ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 6. "Er hätte Arme und Hände gebraucht, um sich auf zu richten; statt dessen aber hatte er nur die vielen Beinchen, die ununterbrochen in der verschiedensten Bewegung waren und die er überdies nicht beherrschen konnte. Wollte er eines einmal einknicken, so war es das erste, dasz es sich streckte; und gelang es ihm endlich, mit diesem Bein das auszuführen, was er wollte, so arbeiteten inzwischen alle anderen, wie freigelassen, in höchster schmerzlicher Aufregung." (DzL Textband. 121)

In addition to its psychological significance, Gregor the giant monster had a cultural significance to Kafka's contemporary audience of German-Jewish friends to whom he read portions of "The Metamorphosis" before it was published. Gregor's gradual exclusion and his turning into an animal- elicited in Kafka's audience an intuition of the invisible: the increasingly affective and social exclusion that they subjectively experienced as Jews. This brings me to the relation between abjection and laughter, for the obvious question is: what was so funny about a family excluding and killing their son?

Fun, as triggered in Kafka's contemporary Jewish audience by his reading "The Metamorphosis" aloud, generates the joy of identification (ha, ha, ha: that monster is *us*, *Jews*), but also the need for rejection ("ha ha ha: *monster! not us*"), which implies us as different (*no monster at all!*). The fun of the text lies in its evocation of, and putting the reader/audience on, the border, in its poking fun with the unspeakable or, in Freud's terminology, with a *taboo* or, according to Beardsworth, with the inarticulate at the limits of society, namely with that which is not organised or regulated by society. The fun of "The Metamorphosis" relies on its literary (safe) evoking of crossing borders and the fear and thrill of doing so, in other words its artistic evoking of the subjective experience of abjection.

Abjection, as pointed out before, captures a condition of the subject (the Samsa family) that is sent to its boundaries where there is neither subject nor object as such, only the abject: Gregor, non-differentiated otherness (is he a human, or a beast?). From this point of view the key of Kafka's parable is not lost, as Adorno expressed it, but mislaid, in the sphere of the register of identity and meaning that Kristeva calls the semiotic. The semiotic, however, has a great many appearances, some of which I will now identify in Kafka's text. I will then explore how, as manifestations of the semiotic, or instinctive, although not producing meaning themselves, they transform meaning in the text's symbolic discourse.

The threat of losing access to language/meaning – which afflicts the pre-Oedipal subject after separation from the *chora*, when the fragile border of its budding self is threatened to be transgressed by the abject – induces a constant fear of relapsing back into that drive-governed space of anxiety (the *chora*) where language/meaning do not exist and the drive reigns, as in psychosis. This archaic fear appears in the text's many recordings of failing and losing language and meaning, as shown in the interaction between Gregor and the Samsa family.

Gregor literarily embodies this threat to the Samsas: during his process of transformation, he slowly loses the ability to speak (language and signification) as well as the ability to hear/understand it. When Gregor's mother (still unaware of his metamorphosis because he has locked himself in his room and refuses to open the door) calls him in the morning (through the closed door of his room) and tells him to get up for work, Gregor thinks: "What a soft voice!" But then:

Gregor was shocked to hear his own voice answering, unmistakably his own voice, true, but in which, as if from below, an insisting distressed chirping intruded, which left the clarity of his words intact only for a moment really, before so badly garbling them as they carried, that no one could be sure if he had heard right.¹²⁷

Later, when Gregor's employer (who has arrived at the Samsas' to inquire after the reason for Gregor's being late for the morning train, and thus for his work) tries in vain to persuade Gregor to open the door of his room (locked doors are representations of the limit, or border), both his employer and the Samsas are unable to understand Gregor's attempts at explaining the situation; for, rather than words, he produces peeping animal sounds which reach them through the closed door of his room. What Gregor hears on the other side however (bearing in mind that the narrative is still focalised on Gregor) is:

'Did you understand a word?' the manager was asking his parents. 'He isn't trying to make fools of us, is he?' 'My god', cried his mother, already in tears, 'maybe he is seriously ill, and here we are, torturing him.' 'Grethe! Grethe!' she then cried.

'That was the voice of an animal', said the manager, in a tone conspicuously soft compared with the mother's yelling.¹²⁸

Evelyn Torton Beck (1971) writes about fascination and horror that

... the fascination of *The Metamorphosis*, the most widely known and one of the most disturbing of Kafka's works, lies chiefly in the horror of its central metaphor – a man awakens one morning to find that he has become a giant bug – a situation which is presented with a matter-of-factness that is difficult to accept or comprehend.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "chirp" as follows: "The short sharp shrill sound made by some small birds and certain insects; a sound made with the lips resembling this; a chirrup".

Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 5. "Gregor erschrak, als er seine antwortende Stimme hörte, die wohl unverkennbar seine frühere war, in die sich aber, wie von unten her, ein nicht zu unterdrückendes, schmerzliches Piepsen mischte das die Worte, firmlich nur in ersten Augenblick, in ihrer Deutlichkeit belies, um sie im Nachklang derart zu zerstören, dass man nicht wusste, ob man recht gehört hatte." (DzL Textband. 119)

¹²⁸ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 10. "Haben Sie auch nur ein Wort verstanden?" fragte der Prokurist die Eltern, "er macht doch wohl nicht einen Narren aus uns? "Um Gottes willen", rief die Mutter schon unter Weinen, "er ist vielleicht schwer krank, und wir quälen ihn Grete! Grete!" schrie sie dann....."Das war ein Tierstimme" sagte der Prokurist, auffallend leise gegenüber dem schreien der Mutter. (DzL Textband. 131)

¹²⁹ Torton Beck. *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater*. 135.

From the preceding sections of this chapter it may have become clear that I take "fascination" and "horror", the "giant monster"/bug Gregor himself, but not in the least the laughter elicited by its pointless efforts to act/speak like a human, as symptoms of abjection, one of which ("a language that gives up") I have already touched upon. The other, "a non-assimilable alien, a monster" inspiring horror and laughter.¹³⁰ I will examine now, beginning with the monster.

Kafka's creation of Gregor as an animal – animals being associated with sex and murder in Kafka's culture, with insects, as Stach argues, faring the worst – radically sets him apart as the Samsa family's Other. The association with murder is obvious: Gregor is murdered by the Samsas, a murder plotted by his (favourite) sister. The text's association of Gregor with sex is less obvious but all the same present in two allusions: the first as early as the first page of the text takes the form of the picture of a pretty "lady done up in a fur hat and a fur boa" hanging above the table on the wall of his room. In Kafka's time, this was the standard image of the *femme fatale* materialised in "The Metamorphosis" by Gregor's most beloved sister Grethe, who is also plots his murder. Cultural models for this ambivalent character are the attractive, demonic, violent and dangerous females in Sacher-Masoch's *Wanda* and Wedekind's *Lulu*, while the other is the sickly, sexually undeveloped woman, for example Hauptmann's Hannele or Gabriele Kloterjahn in Thomas Mann's *Tristan*.¹³¹ The second allusion to sex is when mother and sister are clearing out his room and Gregor, in a pointless effort to salvage the picture of the pretty lady, "hurriedly crawled up to it and pressed himself against the glass, which gave a good surface to stick to and soothed his hot belly".

The reader's sense of horror is repeatedly kindled through the text's association of Gregor with something sickening or, in German, *zum kotsen*. This is not unlike what Kristeva describes as the reaction to viewing a corpse: unclean, dirty animal; dung (dung beetle, as the maid calls him). Gregor emits bodily fluids and eats revolting, rotten food:

...old, half-rotten vegetables; bones left over from the evening meal, caked with congealed white sauce; some raisins and almonds; a piece of cheese, which, two days before Gregor had declared inedible...¹³²

¹³⁰ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 11.

¹³¹ Ritchie Robertson. *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature*, 72, note 73, and Nike Wagner. *Geist und Geschlecht: Karl Kraus und die Erotik der Wiener Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982). 138.

¹³² Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 18. "Da war altes halbverfaultes Gemüse; Knochen vom Nachtmal her, die von festgewordener weisser Sauce umgeben waren; ein paar Rosinen und Mandeln; ein Käse, den Gregor vor zwei Tagen für ungenieszbar erklärt hatte." (DzL Textband. 147)

In psychoanalytical terms, the text's explicit dramatization of Gregor's huge animal body oozing disgusting fluids explodes the fantasy of the clean and proper body (which has nothing to do with hygiene but with abjection: borders that give up) by dramatizing the leaking borders. Eventually Gregor the bug gets out of his human bed and, with great difficulty, tries to open the door of his room:

Gregor slowly lugged himself toward the door, pushing the chair in front of him, then let go of it, threw himself against the door, held himself upright against it – the pads on the bottom of his legs exuded a little sticky substance – and for the moment rested there in exertion.¹³³

Also, the metamorphosed Gregor struggles at length to open the door of his room, behind which the Samsa family and his employer impatiently wait for him to appear. As mentioned before, the door symbolises the border between self and other). His animality appears to frustrate even the most simple human action of opening a door. Deprived of human hands and teeth he turns the key with his (insect) mouth, causing his giant mouth to ooze disgusting liquid, emphasising the fact that he is literally out of place in the orderly, human (Samsa) world:

Unfortunately it seemed that he had no teeth – what was he supposed to grip the key with? – but in compensation his jaws, of course, were very strong; with their help he actually got the key moving and paid no attention to the fact that he was undoubtedly hurting himself in some way, for a brown liquid came out of his mouth, flowed over the key, and dripped onto the floor.¹³⁴

The text's recurring associations of the metamorphosed Gregor with filth and impurity – right from the beginning of the narrative we read about “itching little white patches” on his shield – deserve a little more attention.

“Abjection”, warns Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, “is not about dirt, it is about the subject's [the Samsa-family's] horror/fascination experienced by the fantasy of the abject transgressing the uncertain borders of an ‘I’ that need constant re-settling in the face of that threat.”

¹³³ Kafka. “The Metamorphosis”. 11. “Gregor schob sich langsam mit dem Sessel zur Tür hin, liesz ihn dort los, warf sich gegn die Tür, hielt sich an ihr aufrecht- die Ballen seiner Beinchen hatten ein wenig Klebstoff – und und ruhte sich dort einen Augenblick lang von der Anstrengung aus.” (Dzl Textband. 132)

¹³⁴ Kafka. “The Metamorphosis”. 11. “Es schien leider, dasz er keine eigentlichen Zähne hatte – womit sollte er gleich den Schlüssel fassen? – aber dafür waren die Kiefer freilich sehr stark; mit ihrer Hilfe brachte er auch wirklich den Schlüssel in Bewegung und achtete nicht darauf, dasz er sich zweifellos irgendeinen Schaden zufügte, denn eine braune Flüssigkeit kam ihm aus den Mund, flosz über den Schlüssel und tropfte auf den Boden.” (Dzl Textband. 132)

The defence against this threat is evident in, for instance, the fantasy of (in French) *le corps propre*, meaning clean: the Dutch word *proper*: clean/ hygienic and, in English and French, *proper/proprie* in the sense of something *bordering* on something else, for example property. Thus, *le corps propre* can be translated as the fantasy of the *clean* and proper body that one *owns*, or *is*. Dirt, from that perspective, especially dirt secreted by the orifices of the body (like Gregor the insect's body) constitutes a threat to those imaginary borders. The abject (like Gregor) is disgusting, it makes you want to vomit; it is what does not respect borders (Gregor the insect transgresses the borders of the Samsa family's human self). It is neither one (human) nor the other (animal), it is ambivalence incarnate. The abject (Gregor) is not a "quality in itself". Rather it is the Samsa family's relationship to its inside/outside boundary, and represents what has been jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, the instinctive, the semiotic: the abject, that is, Gregor, the beast.

Interesting, within this context, is the cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas' view of dirt in *Purity and Danger* (2002).¹³⁵ On the issue of dirt, or impurity versus purity, Douglas enjoins the reader to suspend the Western association of the notions of purity and dirt with hygiene/health for a while.¹³⁶ She invites the reader to enter into the world of primitive communities where purity and dirt are not thought of in those terms. Douglas views the notions of purity and impurity as functioning in those communities, not in terms of hygiene, but in terms of setting parameters for conceptual ordering: putting the chaos of experience in place, within conceptual borders. "Dirt", in this outlook, is "matter out of place".¹³⁷ Things are not considered dirty in and of themselves, but because of where they stand in a cultural system of categories, which can include people as well as non-human classes of animate or inanimate objects. From that perspective, Gregor's camping in and oozing dirt signals that he is "out of place" in the human Samsa family.

¹³⁵ Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 2002. Douglas does away with the notions of purity and impurity in terms of hygiene. She explains that the notions pure/impure have no fixed, or essential meaning: what is pure in one society is considered impure in another and vice versa. The notions pure and impure function as parameters for a conceptual ordering of the place of things, of society as a whole. They shape that perspective and come to mean what is "in" or "out of place". Something is "pure" according to that society's perception of the order of things, and something impure does not fit in with that perception and is therefore "out of place".

¹³⁶ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, hygiene is "that department of knowledge or practice which relates to the maintenance of health; a system of principles or rules for preserving or promoting health; sanitary science".

¹³⁷ Douglas. *Purity and Danger*. 50.

The abject (Gregor) appears when the pre-language subject-to-be (the Samsas) feels that its fragile border is threatened. The fragility of the border, or the law acting as a boundary, is masterly shown in the text through the Samsa family's three boarders (dressed as lawyers) who seem to dramatize that fragility by finding fault with a number of transgressions of the law (or transgressions of the border between the Samsa family self and its animal other, Gregor). Their outward appearance matches their function: their long beards and clothes suggest the authority of the law (the culturally fixed border between human and animal, self and other), which they symbolise in terms of Mary Douglas' law of purity and cleanliness when it comes to animals, especially vermin like Gregor:

These serious gentlemen - all three had long beards, as Gregor was able to register through a crack in the door - were obsessed with *neatness*, not only in their room, but since they had, after all, moved in here, throughout the entire household, and especially in the kitchen. They could not stand uselessness, let alone dirty junk.¹³⁸

Significantly, it is the boarders' presence in the Samsa household that prompts the Samsa family to exclude anything that might "hurt" the boarders' pathological sense of purity into one little room, including Gregor. One evening they spot Gregor the bug, who had escaped imprisonment for a while to attend a violin recital given by his beloved sister Grethe in the drawing room. In a corner of the room the three gentlemen (invited by Gregor's father) find Gregor the bug listening in, thus transgressing the archaic memory of the fixed border between man and animal. That is too much for the three. In a display of the rigidity of the (purity) law transgressed by Gregor, they follow mock legal proceedings by formally holding Gregor's father responsible for the bug's presence in the first place:

"Mr. Samsa", the middle roomer called to Gregor's father, and without wasting another word pointed his index finger at Gregor, who was slowly moving forward. The violin stopped, the middle roomer smiled first at his friends shaking his head, and then looked at Gregor again.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ My emphasis. Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 33. "Diese ernsten Herren – alle drei hatten Vollbärte, wie Gregor einmal durch eine Türspalte feststellte – waren peinlich auf Ordnung, nicht nur im ihren Zimmer, sondern, da sie sich nur einmal hier eingemietet hatten, in der ganzen Wirtschaft, also insbesondere in der Küche, bedacht. Unnützen oder gar schmutzigen Kram ertrugen sie nicht." (DzL Textband. 180-81)

¹³⁹ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 36. "'Herr Samsa', rief der mittlere Herr dem Vater zu, und zeigte, ohne ein weiteres Wort zu verlieren, mit dem Zeigefinger auf den sich langsam sich vorwärts bewegendem Gregor. Die Violine verstummte, der mittlere Zimmerherr lächelte erst einmal kopfschüttelnd seinen Freunden zu und sah dann wieder auf Gregor hin.'" (DzL Textband. 186)

Subsequently the boarders, revolted by Gregor's presence in the house, give notice to Gregor's father in style, with a speech strongly suggesting court proceedings, and delivered by the angry, middle one of the three boarders:

"I herewith declare", he said, raising his hand [as if in a court of justice] and casting his eyes around for Gregor's mother and sister too, "that in view of the disgusting conditions prevailing in this apartment and family" - here he spat curtly and decisively on the floor, "I give notice as of now. Of course I won't pay a cent for the days I have been living here, either; on the contrary: I shall consider taking some sort of action against you with claims that - believe me - will be easy to substantiate." He stopped and looked straight in front of him, as if he were expecting something. And in fact his two friends at once chimed in with the words, "We too give notice as of now". Thereupon he grabbed the doorknob and slammed the door with a bang.¹⁴⁰

This "bang" symptomizes the law capitulating and marks a reversal in the Samsa family's attitude to Gregor: exposed to the threat of the abject's (Gregor's) transgressing the borders (of the family self), the Samsas are confronted with the impossible in their midst; they fall into expulsive rhythms of abjection (like the pre-Oedipal child facing the abject-ed mother). That fall culminates in their conviction that Gregor will have to disappear to purify the family body, to secure its borders and allow it to return it to its clean and proper state or, in Kristeva's words, "to exclude what is felt as disturbing identity, system, order": the abject.¹⁴¹

"My dear Parents", said his sister, and by way of an introduction, pounded her hand on the table, "things can't go on like this. Maybe you don't realize it, but I do. I won't pronounce the name of my brother in front of this monster, and so, all I say is: we have to try to get rid of it. We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and to put up with it; I don't think anyone can blame us in the least." "She is absolutely right," said his father to himself. His mother, who still could not catch her breath, began to cough dully behind her hand, a wild look in her eyes.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 37. "Ich erkläre hiermit", sagte er, hob die hand und suchte mit den Blicken auch die Mutter und die Schwester, "dasz ich mit Rücksicht auf die in dieser Wohnung und Familie herrschenden widerliche Verhältnisse" - hierbei hierbei spie er kurz entschlossen auf den Boden- "mein Zimmer augenblicklich kündige. Ich werde natürlich auch für die Tage, die ich hier gewohnt habe, nicht das Geringste bezahlen, dagegen werde ich es mir noch überlegen, ob ich nicht mit irgendwelchen -glauben sie mir - sehr leicht zu begründenden Forderungen gegen Sie auftreten werde." Er schwieg und sah gerade vor sich hin, als erwarte er etwas. Tatsächlich fielen sofort seine zwei Freunden mit den Worten ein: "Auch wir kündigen augenblicklich." Darauf faszte er die Türklinke und schloz mit einem Krach die Tür.' (Dzl Textband. 188)

¹⁴¹ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 4.

¹⁴² Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 37. "Liebe Eltern", sagte die Schwester und schlug zur Einleitung mit der Hand auf den Tisch, "so geht es nicht weiter. Wenn ihr das vielleicht

After trying to look as well as they could after Gregor, their metamorphosed brother and son, the Samsas move into a psychodynamics of abjection and start turning their abject (son/brother) into an object of hatred. Gregor becomes a despised other, who has to disappear.

Here, “The Metamorphosis” merges two archaic fantasies/memories of the border: a) the social one, that prevented primitive human society from surrendering its human identity by mixing with animals; b) the psychological one (Kristeva), that prevents the fledgling-subject to revert after separation to the instinctive unity with the mother (the *chora*) which means - as we recall from the previous chapter - loss of meaning, or psychosis. Reading the text as rooted in these two fantasies puts the reader on the border between the symbolic and the semiotic, connecting him/her to both. This turns “The Metamorphosis” into an avant-garde text, a technology of abjection, in Kristeva’s sense: a text offering the reader the possibility of sublimation.

Antonin Artaud views the avant-garde writer as taking on the artistic “duty of safeguarding”, of providing:

... a tissue for the anxieties of its time. The artist who has not sheltered in the depths of his heart the heart of his time, the artist who does not know himself to be a scape-goat, who does not know that his duty is to magnetize, to attract, and to bring down on his shoulders the errant furies of his time so as to discharge it of its psychological sickness, he is not an artist. Now, all the artists are not capable of arriving at this kind of magical identification of their own feelings with the collective furies of men. And the times are not all capable of appreciating the importance of the artists and the job of safeguarding that they undertake to the profit of the social good.¹⁴³

Horror and fascination in “The Metamorphosis” are manifest in the subject’s (the Samsa family) response to the metamorphosed Gregor, now their other, or abject. Both ambivalent emotions are of the order of reactions at “seeing a corpse, which confronts one with something encroaching on borders between life and

nicht einseheth, ich sehe es ein. Ich will vor diesem Untier nicht den Namen meines Bruders aussprechen, und sage daher bloß: wir müssen versuchen es los zu werden. Wir haben das Menschenmögliche versucht, es zu pflegen und zu dulden, ich glaube, es kann uns niemand den geringsten Vorwurf machen.” “Sie hat tausendmal Recht”, sagte der Vater für sich. Die Mutter, die noch immer nicht genug Atem finden konnte, fing in die vorgehaltene Hand mit einem irrsinnigen Ausdruck der Augen dumpf zu husten an.” (Dzl Textband. 189)

¹⁴³ Julia Kristeva. “Towards a Cultural Revolution” (1972), a paper delivered by Kristeva at the 1972 Artaud/Bataille conference and published in *Tel Quel* 52-53 (1973). My Artaud quotation is from the English translation of that paper in Julia Kristeva. “The Subject in Process”. *The Tel Quel Reader*. Eds. Patrick Ffrench and Roland-François Lack. Trans. Patrick Ffrench. London: Routledge, 1998. 173.

death".¹⁴⁴ In other words, as dramatized in "The Metamorphosis", reactions to seeing a human turned into a giant insect encroaching on the borders of the Samsa family self, confronting them with what they permanently thrust aside in order to live: the fragility of the borders between humanity and that which denies humanity. This is literarily represented by an insect, the lowest of animals, which is now here, threatening the fragile Samsa family border. From Kristeva's perspective of identity-formation such transgressions signal the abject, that which does not respect borders (does not keep its proper domain), positions and/or rules: the classification, or ordering of things in the dominant cultural discourse. Gregor's appearance and death (through murder), from this perspective, may be interpreted as dramatizing the abject as well as its purification by his sacrificial death. This ambivalent double-role evokes associations with Kristeva's analysis of king Oedipus at Colonus in *Powers of Horror* where she interprets the abject as the defilement (repressed family relationship) of the family by king Oedipus, and that defiled king as simultaneously representing the source of the abject and its purification by his assuming the role of the scapegoat, as Gregor does in "The Metamorphosis". Horror and fascination mix almost seamlessly in the family's and the manager's responses to the metamorphosed (abject) Gregor. Confronted with their son-turned-into-a-monster the parents subside into a metamorphosis of their own, with the mother loosing her bourgeois decorum:

His mother - in spite of the manager's presence she stood with her hair still un-braided from the night, sticking out in all directions - first looked at his father with her hands clasped, then took two steps towards Gregor, and sank down in the midst of her skirts spreading out around her, her face completely hidden on her breast.¹⁴⁵

The father abandons any trace of his patriarchal authority:

With a hostile expression his father clenched his fist, as if to drive Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly around the living room, shielded his eyes with his hands, and sobbed with heaves of his powerful chest.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 1-3.

¹⁴⁵ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 37. "Die Mutter – sie stand hier trotz den Anwesenheit des Prokuristen mit von der Nacht her noch aufgelösten, hoch sich sträubenden Haaren – sah zuerst mit gefaltenden Händen den Vater an, ging dann zwei Schritte zum Gregor hin, und fiel inmitten ihrer rings um sie herum ausbreitenden Röcke nieder, das Gesicht ganz unauffindbar zu ihrer Brust gesänkt." (DzL Textband. 134)

¹⁴⁶ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 12. "Der Vater ballte mit feindseligem Ausdruck die Faust, als wollte er Gregor in sein Zimmer zurückstoszen, sah sich dann unsicher im Wohnzimmer um, beschattete dann mit den Händen die Augen und weinte, dass sich seine mächtige Brust schüttelte." (DzL Textband. 134)

So does the manager: at the sight of his employee-turned-into-a-giant-vermin he lets slip the cloak of authority that fits his position as Gregor's superior, and succumbs to horror and fascination:

... the manager [on first seeing Gregor the bug], burst out with a loud "Oh" - it sounded like a rush of wind - and now he [Gregor focalising the action] could see him [the manager] standing closest to the door, his hand pressed over his open mouth, slowly backing away from, as if repulsed by, an invisible, unrelenting force [the object].¹⁴⁷

Subsequently, the manager relapses into a bout of animality (curling his lips like an aggressive dog), transgressing himself the archaic border between human and animal. Snarling aggressively like an animal (curled lips), panics and takes flight in horror, no matter how Gregor beseeches him to stay and listen to his arguments against sacking him on account of failing his duties (being late for work):

But at Gregor's first words the manager had already turned away and with curled lips [animality] looked back at Gregor only over his twitching shoulder [fear]. And during Gregor's speech he did not stand still for a minute but, without letting Gregor out of his sight [fascination], backed toward the door [panic], yet very gradually, as if there were some secret prohibition against leaving the room. He was already in the foyer, and from the sudden movement one might have thought he had just burned the sole of his foot. In the foyer, however, he stretched his right hand far out toward the staircase, as if nothing less than an unearthly deliverance were awaiting him there [taking flight in panic].¹⁴⁸

Obviously a fear of insects alone cannot explain the phobic intensity and violence of the family's and the manager's reactions to the metamorphosed Gregor. Phobias, as Kristeva explains in the episode about (Freud's) *Little Hans*¹⁴⁹, are

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem. '... da hörte er schon den Prokuristen ein lautes "Oh" ausstoszen – es klang, wie wenn der Wind saust – und nun sah er ihn auch, wie er der der Nächste an der Türe war, die Hand gegen den offenen Mund drückte und langsam zurückwieg als vertreibt ihn eine unsichtbare, gleichmässig fortwirkende Kraft...' (DzL Textband. 134)

¹⁴⁸ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 13. "Aber der Prokurist hatte sich schon bei den ersten Worten Gregors abgewendet, und nur über die zuckenden Schulter hinweg sah er mit aufgeworfenen Lippen nach Gregor zurück. Und während Gregors Rede stand er einen Augenblick still, sondern verzog sich, ohne Gregor aus den Augen zu lassen, gegen die Tür, aber ganz allmählich, als bestehe ein geheimes Verbot das Zimmer zu verlassen. Schon war er im Vorzimmer, und nach der plötzlichen Bewegung, mit der er zum letztenmal der Fusz aus dem Wohnzimmer zog, hätte man glauben können, er habe sich soeben die Sohle verbrannt." (DzL Textband. 137) My explanations in square brackets.

¹⁴⁹ Kristeva. *Powers of Horror*. 34-5.

hieroglyphs condensing all fears, from nameable to unnameable. The latter is reminiscent of the suffering of unacknowledged subjectivity: that conglomeration of fear, deprivation and nameless frustration that marks the "in-between" child, between separation from the instinctive unity with the mother and signification, and its entrance in the symbolic order, its ability to enter into subject/object relations without which there is no meaning, like in psychosis, a situation Kristeva refers to as horror.

Of particular interest are Kafka's notes on "The Metamorphosis" in his diary entry of January 1914, two years after he wrote the text and one year before it was published:

Anxiety alternating with self-assurance at the office. Otherwise more confident. Great antipathy to 'Metamorphosis'. Unreadable ending. Imperfect almost to its very marrow. It would have turned out much better if I had not been interrupted at the time by the business trip.¹⁵⁰

Kafka the artist has clearly no inkling of the imperfection that he has turned into literature: an imperfection "almost to its very marrow". Marrow signals the invisible other side, the semiotic, that turns Gregor into that "little piece of the real", as Žižek formulates it. The whole narrative appears as a vision of the real, or the semiotic in Kristeva's terms, a vision of the border. The unreadability of the ending through the lens of abjection marks the rebirth of the Samsa family, made visible by the narrative's double, ambivalent life-in-death movement that I have discussed before. With Gregor out of the way, the Samsa parents (now on a family outing with Grethe, Gregor's favourite sister and plotter of his murder):

Growing quieter and communicating almost unconsciously through glances, thought that it would soon be time too, to find her a good husband. And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when, at the end of the ride their daughter got up first and stretched her young body.¹⁵¹

Here "The Metamorphosis" uses artistic dramatization by placing the reader on the limit between the symbolic and the semiotic, Heidegger's ambivalent machinery of *Dasein*. This productive ambivalence of Being as subject is abjection in Kristeva's reference framework.

¹⁵⁰ Max Brod, ed., *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1910-23*. Trans. Joseph Kresh. New York: Schocken Books, 1976. 253.

¹⁵¹ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 42. "Stiller werdend und fast unbewusst durch Blicke sich verständigend, dachten sie daran, dass es nun Zeit sein werde, auch einen braven Mann für sie zu suchen. Und es war ihnen wie eine Bestätigung ihrer neuen Träume und guten Absichten, als am Ziele ihrer Fahrt die Tochter als erste sich erhob und ihren jungen Körper dehnte." (Dzl Textband. 200)

4.6 Conclusion

The critic is greatly tempted to explain the text's dramatization of abjection in causal relation with the social sphere in which it came into being. Eric Santner's essay "Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the Writing of Abjection", for instance, views Gregor's fall into abjection "as a symptom whose fascinating presence serves as a displaced condensation of larger and more diffuse disturbances within the social field marked out by the text" but also "a change in the nature of patriarchal power and authority that infects its stability, dependability and consistency with radical uncertainty".¹⁵²

My reading of "The Metamorphosis", through the lens of Kristeva's entirely different notion of abjection, does not focus on societal/cultural structures but rather on what resists interpretation in the symbolic order as it "resides beneath religion, morality and politics as systems of representation: the unbearable fragility of identity - inexpressible in terms of the symbolic order, but nevertheless (experientially) real".¹⁵³ Gregor seems to hint at this reality of the impossible when he wonders at the very beginning of the narrative: "What's happened to me? ... It was no dream."¹⁵⁴

This does not mean however that one can discard the symbolic when writing about the semiotic, only that one cannot be explained as causally related to the other. Kafka's genius lies in my view in his artistic/ intuitive vision of what eluded expression in the contemporary symbolic order but which he sensed in all dynamics of exclusion, whether within or outside his Jewish cultural context. What he saw, without realising what it was yet expressing it in his art, was what Kristeva conceptualised as abjection, which appears whenever the law is weak. This weakness of the law is dramatized by Gregor the insect transgressing it by mingling with the humans attending his sister's violin-recital. As soon as the three boarders have restored the law by confronting the Samsa family with its transgression, the abjection/expulsion of Gregor, after his isolation in a rubbish room, sets in. Isolation of the other always precedes expulsion in any sense and context.

I believe that my above analysis of the text shows that "The Metamorphosis" can be read as an avant-garde text in Kristeva's sense: written at the border between the Samsa family's self and Gregor as other, or abject. Read in this light, the narrative action can be viewed as a vision of abjection as well as a technology

¹⁵² Eric Santner. "Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the Writing of Abjection". *The Norton Critical Edition of the Metamorphosis*. New York: Norton, 1996. 195-96.

¹⁵³ Beardsworth. *Julia Kristeva*. 117-8.

¹⁵⁴ Kafka. "The Metamorphosis". 3. "'Was ist mit mir geschehen?' dachte er. Es war kein Traum." (Dzl Textband. 115)

of subjectivity since this vision enables the reader/writer to re-constitute his/her self. Or a vision, in Slavoj Žižek's terms as noted before, that temporarily intermits the agency of the symbolic (signification) to which the reader is exposed, while offering him/her artistically the agency of the real (Kristeva's semiotic).¹⁵⁵ Kristeva refers to the aforementioned textual technology in terms of the text offering the reader the possibility of sublimation, as I have pointed out earlier.

My view is that Kafka, both as a Jew and an artist, intuited the invisible drive behind his culture's socio-political exclusion of Jews, despite their artistic/intellectual/economical contribution to German culture. Other German/Jewish writers shared this insight but it was Kafka's artistic genius to sense the ambivalent machinery of the drive, which excludes and creates in one sweep, but also to artistically associate that machinery with the process of identity-formation, which Kristeva calls abjection. A process that he literally dramatizes in "The Metamorphosis" through the German Samsa family's move from exclusion (of the other: Gregor) to renewal of the Samsa family self. This is also the machinery that the reader half recognises in horror and fascination: something familiar, a burning sensation that cannot be remembered. For how can we grasp the impossible co-existence of positive and negative from our position in the symbolic order that is grounded in their separation? We can only look for analogies in literature, art, psychoanalysis and religion.

¹⁵⁵ Based on Slavoj Žižek. *The Fragile Absolute, or Why the Christian Legacy Is Worth Fighting For*. New York: Verso, 2000. 74-5.

DAVID VOGEL

[עָרֵי נַעֲוָרִי] [MY CHILDHOOD CITIES]

עָרֵי נַעֲוָרִי,
עַתָּה אֶת כָּלן בָּרַךְ שִׁכַּחְתִּי
וְאוֹתָם בְּאַחַת מֵהֶנָּה.

My childhood cities, by now I've
forgotten them all, and you in one of
them.

תוֹךְ שְׁלוּלִית מִי-גֶשֶׁם
יִחַפָּה בְּשִׁבְלִי עוֹד תִּרְקְדִי –
וְהִנֵּה נִדְאִי בְּכָר מָת.

You still dance on for me in a puddle
of rainwater – but surely you're already
dead.

מִתוֹךְ יְלֻדוֹתֵי הַרְחֹקָה
לְדוֹר אֶיךָ נִחְפְּזוֹתִי,
עַד בּוֹא אֶל הַיֵּבֶל הַזֶּקֶנָה הַלָּבֵן –
וְהוּא רָחֵב וְרִיק.

How quickly I galloped out of my
distant childhood, until I reached the
white palace of old age, and found it
wide and empty.

רֹאשִׁית דְּרָכֵי
שׁוּב לֹא אֶרְאֶה,
וְאוֹתָם לֹא אֶרְאֶה,
וְלֹא אוֹתִי מֵאֵז.

I can no longer see my road's begin-
ning; I cannot see you or the self that
I was.

אֶרְחַת הַיָּמִים,
מִרְחֹק,
לְנוֹעַ תּוֹסִיף הַלָּאָה,
מֵאֵין אֶל אֵין,
בְּלִעְדִּי.

The caravan of days, from afar, will
move on its way, from nothingness to
nothingness, without me.