Franz Kafka's Transformations

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ALONE amongst the contributions to the volume, this essay does not address a Scandinavian topic. The theme of transformation in Franz Kafka's work and life does, however, allow us to recall that Peter Graves is himself a notable example of a changeling, having begun his career at Aberdeen University as a student of German under the venerable Professor Wilhelm (Willy) Witte. What is presented here may thus serve as a reminder of a world Peter inhabited long ago, before he morphed into the Scandinavian polymath we know and honour today.

The impetus for the present contribution came from reading James Hawes' exhilarating study *Excavating Kafka* (2008).[1] This work was promptly written off by Klaus Wagenbach, the doyen of Kafka studies in Germany, who is quoted as saying: 'Irgendein Dämel kommt daher, weiß nix und schreibt über Kafka' (Jungen 2008).[2] In defence of Wagenbach's po-faced dismissal of a much younger, non-German scholar's work, one might plead that his grasp of English was insufficient for him to grasp the book's satirical and polemical intentions. In fact, *Excavating Kafka* is the work of a scholar who knows a great deal about Kafka, and writes about him with panache and insight. I can match Hawes neither in my knowledge of Kafka nor the secondary literature, but I share with him a mounting frustration with the commonly-peddled myths about Kafka's life and work, and it is some of these which I shall address in this short paper.

Looking at the work first, I shall concentrate on what is probably Kafka's most iconic story, *Die Verwandlung* (1912; '*Metamorphosis*'), the English translation of whose title I find particularly problematic. For sure, the Ovidian reference correctly places Kafka firmly in the mainstream of the Western literary tradition to which he belongs. Kafka did not simply emerge from thin

1 In the USA, the book was published under the title *Why You Should Read Kafka Before You Waste Your Life* (New York: 2008).

2 'some idiot who knows zilch about Kafka comes along and writes about him as if he did'. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

air, as many anglophone readers and critics of Kafka all too readily assume. However, had he intended to draw such overt attention to his story's roots in classical antiquity, he might well have called his work 'Die Metamorphose'. But of course he did not, unlike Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who in 1790 produced the seminal essay 'Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären', commonly known in English as the 'Metamorphosis of Plants'. This is a title which the Gymnasium-educated Kafka is bound to have encountered from an early age, and which he may not have wished to echo. It may also be worth recording here that for Kafka's slightly older Prague contemporary, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* remained a virtually sacred text. Slightly earlier than Goethe, the Viennese composer Franz Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-99) had drawn directly on his knowledge of classical literature when composing his twelve *Sinfonien nach Ovids Metamorphosen* (1783; '*Symphonies after Ovid's Metamorphoses*'), six of which still survive in their original form. *Sinfonia 3*, *Verwandlung Aktäons in einen Hirsch*, portrays the transformation of Acteon into a stag; *Sinfonia 5*, *Verwandlung der lykischen Bauern in Frösche* depicts the transformation of the Lycian peasants into frogs. Revealingly, the German titles of these symphonies, which represent the changes undergone by originally human subjects, refer not to 'Metamorphose' but to 'Verwandlung', the very title Kafka chose for his story about Gregor Samsa's transformation into something non-human.

As I hope to show, a title like *Die Verwandlung* is infinitely more suggestive than 'Die Metamorphose' precisely because it invites a multiplicity of potential interpretations. Kafka is famously fond of titles with a double meaning – *Der Prozess* (1925; '*The Trial*') is a well known example of this – but I would argue that as a title *Die Verwandlung* is even more multi-layered than the posthumously published novel which Kafka had famously requested his literary executor Max Brod to destroy.[3] *Die Verwandlung* is often and rightly paired with *Das Urteil* (1912; '*The Judgement*'), another story whose title has a double meaning. In German, 'Urteil' signifies not only a judgement, *i.e.* a verdict of guilty or not guilty, but also the sort of judicial sentence which is the consequence of the judgement. In this case, it is death by drowning which, as we know from the story, is also to be read as a suicide. Within *Das Urteil* there is also considerable punning on the notion of 'Schuld', a word which can signify both legal and moral guilt as well as financial indebtedness.

3 In German, the term 'der Prozeß' denotes not merely the judicial trial but all the preliminary and surrounding investigations covered by the English notion of 'due process'. *The Trial* is nevertheless a reasonable translation because it also hints at the tribulations which assail the protagonist, Josef K.

The longer I consider it, the more I believe *Die Verwandlung* to be *the* emblematic Kafka story, not simply because it embodies virtually everything we now understand by the term 'kafkaesque', but because examples of untoward and unexpected 'Verwandlung', *i.e.* sudden transformation, underpin so many of his other works as well. The start of *The Trial* instantly springs to mind, when Josef K. unexpectedly finds himself under arrest without having done anything wrong. As another example we may take the title figure in the story *Ein Landarzt* (1916/7; '*A Country Doctor*'). There a frustrated doctor, desperate to visit a patient but lacking means of transport, takes a kick at the rickety door of his disused pigsty, which, before his very eyes, is instantly transformed into a stable containing the two rampant steeds that will carry him off, not just to the sick boy, but to his doom. The doctor's personal transformation is complete when at the end of the story he contemplates his future as a sort of landlocked Flying Dutchman, an old man driving an earthly carriage to which are hitched unearthly horses.

Before moving on to other aspects of 'Verwandlung' in Kafka's writing, I would like to dispel once and for all the widely repeated assertion that when Gregor Samsa awakes from his restless sleep he has been transformed into a giant beetle, bug or cockroach. This, of course, is an entrenched part of the 'Kafka Myth'; Hawes even calls it 'quite simply the most famous high-concept literary vision of the twentieth century' (2008: 205). However, Hawes' discussion of *Die Verwandlung* under the heading 'Goethe's Beetle, or the Unbearable Blindness of Kafka Studies' unintentionally helps to perpetuate the myth by what looks like – and is – a very clever reference to the opening letter of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epistolary novel *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* (1774; '*The Sorrows of Young Werther*'), 'a passage [which] would have been read and at least rhetorically studied by *every educated German-speaker of Kafka's day*' (original italics; *ibid.* 208). This is the letter dated 4 May 1771, when Goethe's lachrymose hero wishes he could 'turn into a June bug so that one could swim around in this sea of pleasant scents, getting all one's nourishment like this' (Hawes 2008: 208).[4] Hawes does not challenge the taxonomical category of what it is that Gregor Samsa has changed into. Instead he invites us to hear in Goethe's work a pre-echo of the pathos-laden passage in Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' when the sound of his sister's violin playing seems to show Gregor Samsa the way to the 'unbekannte Nahrung' [unknown food] he longs for (Raabe 1970: 92). Gregor asks if he can really be an animal, given that he

4 Goethe (nd: 10) writes: 'und man möchte zum Maienkäfer werden, um in dem Meer von Wohlgerüchen herumschweben und alle seine Nahrung darin finden zu können'. Since the strict English translation for 'Maienkäfer' is 'cockchafer' not 'June bug', it may be that some things are better lost in translation!

finds himself so moved by music? Yet while Kafka's text makes clear beyond doubt that Gregor has lost all aspects of his human shape, the description of a creature with multiple flimsy legs makes equally clear that the unspecified animal Gregor has become is *not* a beetle or a cockroach (*i.e.* an insect as understood by Linnaean taxonomy. These have only six legs).[5] What *is* described is a crustacean, e.g. a type of gigantic woodlouse. And a crustacean is not a beetle. It could of course be objected that the Samsas' cleaning lady refers to the poor creature formerly known as Gregor as 'alter Mistkäfer' ('old dung beetle') (Raabe 1970: 89), but I suspect that hers is a demotic take on this issue, and that she knows as much about invertebrate taxonomy as your average literary critic or Kafka commentator.

Still with the plausibly Goethean antecedents in Kafka's work, I feel Hawes misses another trick by not moving on from *Werther* to the First Part of *Faust* (1809). In the comic novel *Changing Places* (1975), David Lodge has great fun with the notion of literary influence when he presents a young Irish academic, Persse McGarrigle, who argues that T.S. Eliot had influenced Shakespeare. This in the sense that Persse's involvement with Eliot's writing has altered his own reading and perception of earlier texts. Similarly, it is not hard to think of Kafka when in *Faust* we watch Mephistopheles morph into both a poodle and a pedant. When reading *Ein Landarzt* it takes equally little stretch of the imagination to see shades of Mephisto in the figure of the diabolical groom who offers his dubious services to the despairing doctor.

Accepting, as we must, that the notion of 'Verwandlung' is at the root of much of Kafka's mature writing, I shall now move on from Goethean echoes to examine the closer context in which this aspect of Kafka's work can be placed. Worth recording here, I believe, is Kafka's reception of Karl Kraus's satirical journal *Die Fackel* (1899-1936; '*The Torch*'). This was a periodical of seminal importance amongst the Prague literary circles in which Kafka moved. Of special significance are the debates on Jewish identity central to Kraus's work, and the emphasis which the Viennese satirist lays on the relationship between language and justice. In May 1912 Kraus published a long essay entitled 'Nestroy und die Nachwelt' ('Nestroy and Posterity'), and it was during the summer and autumn of 1912 that Kafka's artistic breakthrough came about. At this time, first with *Das Urteil* and then with *Die Verwandlung*, he metamorphosed from being a writer in the lineage of contemporary

5 However, in the fragmentary *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (1907/8; '*Preparations for a Country Wedding*'), Eduard Raban has a dream often held to prefigure *Die Verwandlung* and which seems to quote Goethe even more directly: 'Ich habe wie ich im Bett liege die Gestalt eines großen Käfers, eines Hirschkäfers oder eines Maikäfers glaube ich' ('As I lie in bed I take the shape of a large beetle, stag beetle or a cockchafer, I think'). See Raabe (1970: 236).

miniaturists like the Viennese Peter Altenberg and the Swiss Robert Walser and turned into the Franz Kafka we know today.[6]

It is not implausible to suggest Kafka would have recently read Kraus' thoughts on the great Viennese *farceur* Johann Nestroy, and that this could easily in turn have led him to look again at Nestroy himself. If so, Kafka would have found much to remind him of a seminal experience of the previous year, when he had been entranced by the performances of a Yiddish theatre troupe that visited Prague in 1911. Both Nestroy and the Yiddish theatre rely heavily on magic, confusion of identity, and bizarre *coups de théâtre* to achieve their effects. All such elements abound in Kafka's mature writing, and if we look further at Nestroy's texts we will find that the German term he uses to indicate a scene change – a 'transformation' in English theatrical parlance – is none other than 'Verwandlung'.

What I suggest is this: that the title *Die Verwandlung* is itself a play on words which reflects the strikingly theatrical structure of Kafka's story. What bigger change of scene could there be in life's drama than going to bed with a human body and waking up as an 'ungeheueres Ungeziefer' ('enormous vermin') (Raabe 1970:56) with a physical shape that has altered literally beyond all human recognition? The heavily-criticised denouement of the story, when the bereaved but remarkably jolly Samsa family leave the claustrophobic environment of their flat and take a tram out of the city, is a particularly obvious example of a 'Verwandlung', a transformation in a very theatrical sense. It is not hard to find its antecedents in both Yiddish theatre and Viennese farce, with their shared insight into life's inherent melodrama, its cognitive confusions and crass contradictions.

On to this we have to add the impact on Kafka's imagination of the new medium of the cinema, of which Kafka was a passionate devotee at the time of his literary breakthrough in 1912 (see Zischler 2003). What could be more reminiscent of a scene from an early silent movie melodrama than the transformed Samsa roaming round his room, or the horror of his family as they bang on the door, holding their hands up in despair? (Griffiths 2003). In December 1934 Theodor Adorno wrote to Walter Benjamin, describing Kafka's works as 'the last, disappearing textual links to silent film' (Walker 1999: 70).

Die Verwandlung can be further interpreted not just as Kafka's multilayered response to dramatic tradition and cinematic innovations, but also as a parody of the great, ongoing debate surrounding the Darwinian notion of evolution. This had been at fever pitch during Kafka's formative years, when it was difficult for anyone who could read to avoid the flood of writing in German

6 Wilhelm Genazino notes that many of Altenberg's miniatures are characterised by 'blitzartigen Verwandlungen' ('lightening quick transformations'). See Gerlach (2009: 7).

exploring the notion that every aspect of life was caught up in a dynamic evolutionary process.[7] By the end of the of the nineteenth century, not just in Austria and Germany, but across the spectrum of the arts in Europe, we can observe what amounted to an obsession with organic, vegetative forms, and the dynamic merging of human and organic life.

Darwin's theory of evolution is, of course, the epitome of the notion of transformation. It may be noted how in his essay on Nestroy, Kraus (1912: 1) too joins in the Darwinian debate, noting laconically 'Gott erbarme sich der Entwicklung' ('God have mercy on evolution'). In *Die Verwandlung* Kafka obviously suggests something like evolution in reverse, only then in the later story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917; '*A Report to an Academy*') to point forwards in a more traditionally, albeit ironically, Darwinian fashion. In this story Kafka presents a great ape, Rotpeter, who has been captured in the African jungle and brought back to Europe. There he has acquired the power of speech and developed habits and mannerisms to the extent that he now appears almost human. Many commentators have recognised the debate about Jewish identity and self-presentation to be central to the interpretation of both these stories. Specifically in *Die Verwandlung*, however, the use of the term 'Ungeziefer' ('vermin') to denote Gregor's new appearance presents a very clear allusion to the unsavoury political aspects of the debate about Jewish identity. In the vocabulary of popular antisemitism, the term 'jüdisches Ungeziefer' ('Jewish vermin') had become a commonplace insult by 1900.[8]

Being aware of the role of popular ethnic theatre in awakening Kafka's true narrative style, we can appreciate just how staged – and stagey, not to say melodramatic – are both *Die Verwandlung* and its immediate predecessor *Das Urteil*. In both works are found quasi-theatrical scene changes (*i.e.* 'Verwandlungen') and even prose-narrative equivalents of a *coup de théâtre*. An obvious example comes in *Das Urteil* when Georg Bendemann's bedridden and befuddled old father suddenly changes into a titan (yet another 'Verwandlung'!) in order to take control of his errant and now submissive son.

The examples adduced above will, I hope, demonstrate how notions of transformation are embedded within the internal narrative strategies of Kafka's stories. However, these stories can themselves also represent metamorphosed

7 *E.g.* Ernst Haeckel *Die Welträtsel* (1895–1899) published in English as *The Riddle of the Universe* (1901).

8 Speaking in Berlin on 22 February 1897, the Reichstags deputy Hermann Ahlwardt addressed the 'Antisemitische Lese und Rede-Vereinigung' ('Antisemitic Reading and Speaking Organization') exhorting his audience 'das *jüdische Ungeziefer* zu bekämpfen und *das germanische Haus von Juden zu reinigen*' ('to fight the *Jewish vermin* in order to *cleanse the German household of Jews*') (Landesarchiv Berlin).

versions of other writers' works. In Czech, the surname Kafka means jackdaw, and we can observe several instances where the author displays a corvid-like capacity for appropriating external material and then making it his own. The impact of Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des Supplices* (1897; '*The Torture Garden*') upon the sado-masochistic fantasy *In der Strafkolonie* (1919; '*In the Penal Colony*') is one well-attested example of Kafka's magpie tendencies. Another is Peter Altenberg's story 'Die Hungerkünstlerin' (1909; 'The Hunger Artiste') (Altenberg 1909: 167-8), which can be regarded as the direct, albeit unacknowledged, evolutionary ancestor of Kafka's *Ein Hungerkünstler* (1922; '*A Hunger Artist*'). Similarly, Altenberg's talking ape Peter, who appears in a sketch entitled 'Der Affe Peter' (1911; 'Peter the Ape') finds himself, if not cloned, then at least genetically engineered into Kafka's similarly simian orator Rotpeter in *A Report for an Academy* (Altenberg 1911: 73-5; See Barker 1996: 174-85).

And finally we have the biographical 'Verwandlung' of Franz Kafka, the German-speaking Prague Jew into Franz Kafka the Czech. This takes place on the morning of 29 October 1918, when the author awakes to find he is no longer the Habsburg subject he had previously been. From being a very conscious member of the highest caste in the Empire (*i.e.* a German-speaking 'Volksgenosse' who identifies with the German-speaking people and who wholeheartedly supports the military efforts of the Austro-German alliance, even to the extent of buying war bonds), Kafka suddenly becomes, if not vermin, then certainly a member of what he and his fellow Germanophones often perceived as a people with an inferior culture. In other words, he becomes a citizen of the newly-founded Republic of Czechoslovakia (Hawes 2008: 91-6). Like Gregor Samsa, however, Franz Kafka's inner self remained unaltered by these momentous geopolitical changes, over which he obviously had no control. Nevertheless, it has now become widespread critical practice, certainly throughout the non-German speaking world, to designate Kafka quite simply by the Czech citizenship which was imposed unbidden upon him following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[9] In other words, Kafka has come to be generally, albeit erroneously, perceived as something which he was not, and certainly never wished to be. Not for the first time, Kafka's life seemed determined to copy Kafka's writing.

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9 As far as I know, no critic has yet claimed the Prague-born writers Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Werfel for Czech literature.

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