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# Prologue

Art is not a riddle that we have to solve in order to find the hidden ‘right meaning’. Its meaning, that is, is not something we can appropriate. Paraphrasing a poem, or drawing a sketch of a painting or describing it, are clearly not the same thing as reciting the verses or seeing the painting in real time. Art in one way or another always withdraws itself from the colonial power of our understanding. It points to something, it evokes something – but what is evoked precisely will never itself be ‘captured’ by, say, a book *about* the artist.

But with our colonialist minds we might reach out for something else, namely, we might try to understand why that is the case. How is it possible, we might wonder, that art indeed has this strange power of evocation? How does that work? And where does that power find its roots? And do these underlying roots maybe also show up elsewhere – in philosophy for example, or more in general, in the dynamic evolution of our languages, or even in ourselves? – because are we not ourselves also evocations that keep on escaping definite comprehension?

Apart from a study of Kafka, this book, in trying to understand something of the deeper coherence in Kafka’s oeuvre, necessarily also tries to make sense of how art (and narrativity in particular) fits into the bigger picture of the ‘human revolution’. The human animal is the only animal that brings forth art. On top of that, *all* humans do it. Art is universal: we love art, we are drawn towards it. By using texts and insights from Kafka, I will show that this calls for an approach that sees art not as something that humans discovered by coincidence (a discovery that then sustained itself because it allegedly brought us evolutionary advantages, as many academics nowadays suggest), but rather as something we always, and already, tend towards, which I will link up with the way our human self-consciousness works. For this I will draw on my doctoral research into personal identity, and also on much contemporary cross-disciplinary research (drawing from diverse fields such as the philosophy of mind, phenomenology, cognitive psychology, development psychology and neuroscience). By doing this, I hope to shed new light on what Kafka considered to be crucial to art, namely its intrinsically social aspect – which it inherits from our ‘hybrid’ and social human self-consciousness.

Art evokes. An important stress in these pages is laid on the fact that this also goes for the artist himself: he too does not fully master or ‘possess’ what he has after all evoked himself. But I will also show that a part of the seductive attraction of art lies precisely in the beguiling promise that such an appropriating possession *is* possible. The artist is drawn to art by a promise of clarity. But this longed-for clarity will never be fully achieved – as is perfectly satisfactory for most artists. With Kafka I will not only show that the social aspect of art lies at the very origin of the arts, but also that this same social aspect is the very reason why art cannot keep its promises and why indeed evoking is the only thing it can do. Its power of evocation and its impotence go hand in hand.

But if that is the case, it might also teach us other things. Since the social aspect of art is an ‘inheritance’ from our ‘hybrid’ self-consciousness, the impossibility of full clarity and total intellectual transparency is true of more than art. Or as Wittgenstein’s famous dictum goes: ‘Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.’ One of the main things I want to show here is why human beings cannot remain silent. Or to put it differently, I want to show that it may not be unfruitful to think of art – and even more broadly, of our whole culture, understood as the collection of our shared representations – as ever-resumed but failed attempts to remain silent (or to reach the ultimate).

Although the word ‘failed’ might suggest a dim view on culture, failing to reach the ultimate – and we will see what that means – does not leave us with necessarily bad outcomes. Kafka’s own wonderful works can testify to that, as do so many other works of art and cultural manifestations. Moreover, the fact that outcomes of some sort are reached is a great deal better than nothing: the promise that the ultimate might be achieved is one of the most powerful drives behind our culture, and explains why culture keeps on evolving instead of coming to a standstill. Whether its outcomes are good or bad, is, I think, an open question. It depends on ourselves: it depends on our past, present and future achievements and, along with that, on our ever-shifting interpretations of what those achievements amount to.

I have been reading Kafka for quite a while now – as a reader, but also as a writer. I am aware of the fact that a lot of what I have described probably echoes some of my own struggles with writing. Some will doubtless think that this is a bad thing, but I myself firmly believe the opposite. This book does not set out to be a textbook model of academic research. For example, the reader will not find too many secondary references on Kafka listed (nothing of the German Kafka-Forschung is included, for instance). That is not because of any lack of interest, but rather because, as it happened, the insights that blossomed led down another path. I wanted to pursue that path, for it was *my* path: it held a certain promise for me. To insert a lot of secondary literature on Kafka just for the sake of a seeming academic adequacy would have been artificial if not fraudulent. It also might have muddled things, not only for myself, but also for the reader. We might have lost our path. And so I opted not to insert too much secondary literature on Kafka and leave things as clear and straightforward as possible, so that the reader and I

could head on in the most convenient way. It is unnecessary to stress that the path has not brought us its promised ultimate enlightenment. Since that impossibility is exactly what the book is about, that seems perfectly legitimate – especially so because following the path was pleasant and interesting enough in itself. I personally have learnt a great deal by writing this book. And I can only hope that the reader at the end of his or her journey can say likewise.

Seen from this viewpoint, I think it is no coincidence that this book deals with Kafka. Whereas it is probably true that a similar book might also have arisen out of the inner dialogue between me and another author's oeuvre, I personally know of no other writer who has put the impossibility of reaching the promise that is the main drive behind the work of art, as central as Kafka puts it. Or as I have often told myself, with a strong ironic undertone: if there existed a God especially for writers, Kafka would be our Jesus.

This study would not have been possible without the inspiring work and thought of at least the following four persons: Franz Kafka (of course), Arnold Burms, Merlin Donald and Maurice Blanchot. I would also like to thank my warm and hospitable colleagues at the Centre for Subjectivity Research in cold Copenhagen (where I wrote a good many of these pages), my colleagues at the HIW of the K.U.Leuven, professor Vivian Liska, professor Arnold Burms, my parents, my sister, and, of course, all my friends. Special thanks go to Johan Eckart Hansen, a noble devil's advocate, to the two blind reviewers who have so carefully commented on the work, and to the FWO Vlaanderen, for their financial support. Last but far from least, I would like to thank David Seton, for his wonderful linguistic assistance and his insightful help and suggestions: this book owes him a lot.



# 1 The Metamorphosis

As Gregor Samsa wakes one morning from uneasy dreams, he finds himself changed into a monstrous insect.<sup>1</sup> Kafka describes this transformation in *The Metamorphosis* with such accuracy that many readers will find themselves quite uncomfortable with it. The reader looks on with growing horror as the story slowly evolves towards its inescapable and harsh endpoint: the extinction of the verminous insect by the family. Although *The Metamorphosis* is a very surprising and unsettling story, it is also a rigorously logical story, that is to say, it is wholly consistent in following its own logic. What I hope to do in this chapter is to unveil this logic. In the next chapter I will then argue that this very logic should be seen as the beating heart of Kafka's writing, and I will illustrate this as richly as space allows.

What is striking about *The Metamorphosis*, but might escape the attention of the appalled reader, is Gregor Samsa's own reaction to his metamorphosis. He is not worried, or shocked, or stupefied. On the contrary he immediately takes his new condition for granted. He accepts it as just another awkward and inconvenient fact that he simply adds to all the other irksome facts that together form his life. What kind of life that is, is sketched out on the first page when Gregor abandons himself to self-pity. It is a miserable existence, shaped from first to last by the exorbitant demands of his job. Gregor leads the life of a slave. He works day and night, copes with all kinds of unbearable demands from his employer and seems to get nothing in return. He broods by himself:

Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Travelling about day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the warehouse, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant travelling, of worrying about train connections, the bed and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends. The devil take it all!<sup>2</sup>

This getting up early, he thought, makes one quite stupid. A man needs his sleep. Other commercials live like harem women. For instance, when I come back to the hotel of a morning to write up the orders I've got, these others are only sitting down to breakfast.<sup>3</sup>

He often daydreams of quitting his job as a salesman. He wants to lead a normal life and have some spare time for himself. But all his dreams are crudely blocked off by the harsh call of reality: he immediately has to climb out of bed – his train leaves at five o'clock. One minute late at work and he will be dismissed, a threat that really terrorizes him. As the story evolves, we learn that his dread is not on his own account, but his family's: Gregor works for the company to pay back his father's debts.

This points to the true theme of the story. Gregor's relations with his family are unsound. He effaces himself and all his needs in favour of them. We see this when he realizes that his new insect-body makes it impossible to get up in time, and he cries out in his thoughts to his boss to spare his parents and not to dismiss him – while he himself could wish for nothing more than such a release.<sup>4</sup> Gregor is the only working member of the family, because, as he tells himself regularly, his old father is too fat and the poor man has already met with too much misfortune in his life. His mother suffers from asthma, his poor sister is only seventeen and should have some opportunity to dress up, sleep late and play the violin.<sup>5</sup>

In view of this servile attitude towards his family, it becomes clear that the transformation into an insect only follows an earlier and more important transformation. Turning into the insect, we could say, is the outer translation of a logic that was already in full play long before the story began. It is a logic of self-effacement: you yourself, this logic seems to declare, deserve nothing, you have nothing joyful to add to life, and all you are is a worthless insect. Gregor considers himself to be a great nuisance to his family – the mess he creates as a vermin, one could say, being a literal illustration of the way he thinks about himself -, so that when he hears that his father has debts, he is only too happy that he has finally found an opportunity to be of some use to his family. His self-loathing goes so far that near the end of the story, when he hears that his family has decided to get rid of him, he fully agrees with them and, apart from his guilt over the fact that they will have to clear away his dirty body, he feels nothing but warm love for them:

He thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister – if that were possible. In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning. The first broadening of light in the world outside the window entered his consciousness once more. Then his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last faint flicker of his breath.<sup>6</sup>

Now that we know all this, it might seem as if Gregor's behaviour is very praiseworthy. It is not his fault that his father ran up debts and it is very altruistic of him to throw himself into the breach for his poor old parent. But things are not that simple. Gregor dreams all the time of handing in his notice. He constantly cheers himself up with the



thought that in five or six years' time he will finally have earned enough money to pay back the debts of his father, which will release Gregor from his self-imposed duty:

Well, there's still hope; once I've saved enough money to pay back my parents' debts to him – that should take another five or six years – I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then. For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train goes at five.<sup>7</sup>

But when – towards the end of the story – he hears that his father has not lost all his money and that Gregor's monthly salary (of which he keeps almost nothing to himself) has been accumulating into a small capital, so that the debts could be paid back very soon, Gregor immediately finds new reasons for not resigning yet. It is important that his family holds something in reserve, he tells himself. The money they live on should by rights be earned income.<sup>8</sup>

This shows that Gregor's self-sacrifice was not only visited on him by external, unforeseeable circumstances beyond his own control. The debts were of course not imaginary, but the critical point is that Gregor would never have felt responsible for them in the first place if the logic of self-effacement had not already been brought into play. So what at first sight seemed to be the starting point of a change in his life – his engagement with the company to earn back the debt of his father – should rather be understood as a manifestation (on a par, it seems, with the change into an insect itself) of a deeper *inner* logic that was already operative and that thus seems to be in line with Gregor's nature.

In the next chapter, I will give a fair number of examples in order to show that these patterns recur everywhere in Kafka's work. Kafka's preference is to write about some remarkable event or other that drastically changes the life of the main character. The event at first sight seems to be external to the character, just as the debts of Gregor's father seemed external to Gregor. A closer reading however shows that the event has only begun to play such an important role in the character's life because it responds to an inner logic of his own make-up. Or as the dog-narrator in *Investigations of a Dog* puts it:

But it began with the concert. I do not blame the concert; it is my innate disposition that has driven me on, and it would certainly have found some other opportunity of coming into action had the concert never taken place.<sup>9</sup>

Kafka's stories are not about the events themselves. They are about an innate mechanism that makes use of the events to come to the surface and which, if the events had not happened, would simply have found another opportunity to reveal itself.

