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Sounding Out the Silence of Gregor Samsa:
Kafka's Rhetoric of Dys-Communication

Robert Weninger
Washington University

By struggling to sound out the depths of their respective languages, poets like Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Trakl, or Celan—to name only a few—have pursued their art to the limits of their medium. Their goal was, among other things, to listen in to the silence behind words. By doing so, many came close to silencing themselves. In various forms of “chosen silence” (Steiner 47), some actually did; Hölderlin’s retreat into madness, Kleist’s suicide, Novalis’ early mortal illness, Rimbaud’s flight from the choking influence of Verlaine into the heart of Africa, Trakl’s self-dispersed overdose of drugs. All their reactions might be viewed, if not literally then symbolically, as different symptoms of one and the same cause, a condition in which they felt their language to have ceased to communicate persuasively between poetic aspiration and life’s sometimes sordid realities, between *Begeisterung* (a term popular among Hölderlin’s and Hegel’s generation) and melancholy (a term popularized in 19th century literature), between the outside and the inside. “This election of silence by the most articulate is,” according to George Steiner, “historically recent” (46). In a similar vein, Susan Sontag has pointed out that:

the exemplary modern artist’s choice of silence is rarely carried to this point of final simplification, so that he becomes literally silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can’t hear. Most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence (or unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility). (184)

Thus the poet who ends in silence stands opposed to the poet who uses silence as an end. Taking my cue from Steiner’s and Sontag’s remarks on poets and silence, I would like to focus attention on an author whom we might consider the “classic” prose writer of the same existential condition that was outlined above, a condition that is based upon the salient, yet often perfidious, relationship between language and life. If any, it is Franz Kafka’s oeuvre that may be called in fictional terms a metaphor of silence.¹

I

Walter Sokel once remarked: "Kafka's goal was 'truth,' i.e. the perfect *adaequatio* between word and feeling, between linguistic sign and inner being. . . . This 'poetics' presupposes two distinct entities—the inner self or inner world, which is to be expressed, and the medium of expression—language. If perfect correspondence between the two is achieved, writing becomes the true vehicle of being" ("Kafka's Poetics" 8). Yet Kafka hardly ever reached that point of satisfaction—or so he believed; his diaries, notebooks, and letters testify to his ordeal with his inability to communicate his inner world in linguistic terms. Kafka complains time and again of this lack of a language with which to surmount the inner divide suggested by Sokel. In his third octavo notebook he once jotted down: "There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world. . . . The inner world can only be experienced, not described" (*Wedding Preparations* 72). In his diaries he commented: "It is certain that everything I have conceived in advance, even when I was in a good mood, whether word for word or just casually, but in specific words, appears dry, wrong, inflexible, embarrassing to everybody around me [an imperfect rendering of 'der ganzen Umgebung hinderlich'], timid, but above all incomplete when I try to write it down at my desk, although I have forgotten nothing of the original conception" (*The Diaries* 151).

Of course, Kafka's unique modernist narrative originates not only from his stringent artistic credo, from his perfectionistic—if often vain—quest for the adequate word.² It is nurtured, too, as is well known, by the intellectual crisis brought about by a stifling family history and the corrosive relationship with his father. For obvious reasons this relationship has been the focus of many studies on Kafka's literary achievement—and it recently inspired Alan Bennet to produce his wonderfully knowledgeable burlesque, *Kafka's Dick*.³ The father-son conflict remains one of the central extra-literary avenues to the psychological aspects of Kafka's narrative universe; the Oedipus-theme underlies more or less transparently many interpretive approaches reaching from Max Brod's religious exegesis through psychoanalytic analyses to autobiographical or socio-historical ones that stress, amongst other things, the role of authoritarian socialization in turn-of-the-century Prague. But, as Bennet hints, had it not been for that most famous (or should I say infamous) letter of world literature, Kafka's "Letter to his Father" (which was written but never sent), we would most probably have little more to say about Kafka's relationship to his father than about any other author's. And yet, in spite of all that has been written about the "Letter"

and Kafka's fictionalization of this Relationship (with a capital 'R'), I would like to come back to it one more time.

The reading of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" that I propose on the following pages is based on two assumptions that are derived from widely divergent approaches to Kafka's writings. The first is the offspring of psychological interpretation and recognizes that homologous unconscious strategies are operative in the "Letter to his Father" and Kafka's tale.⁴ Josef Rattner, writing about the *Ur-Situationen*, the "primal situations" that Kafka experienced as a child and which produced in him his most basic psychological attitudes (Rattner calls them *Grundhaltungen*), concludes: "Kafka's life is an incessant attempt to cope with his father-experience. His father is at the base of his anxiety of life and his crippling hypochondria. . . . Sadism and masochism are distinctive features of Kafka's works."⁵ The second, brought to the fore by recent scholarly examinations of the institutional reception of Kafka's texts by, and their effect on, academic and non-academic readers alike, recognizes that equally homologous strategies underlie both Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and our critical readerly reactions to the text. Thus Allen Thiher remarked only recently that "if the interpretive quest underlies the general structure of 'The Metamorphosis,' the story owes its affective specificity to the way that Kafka uses particular objects, images, and situations to mirror the quest and to force the reader to enter a diffuse hermeneutic labyrinth" (45). For precisely this reason Horst Steinmetz has called—not in the abstract Barthesian sense but on more pragmatic grounds—for a moratorium in Kafka-interpretation. In his essay, Steinmetz presents a graphic picture of the dilemma of Kafka-interpreters like himself who, on the one hand, hardly wish to abandon the quest for more precise readings of Kafka's texts, but who feel, on the other hand, so severely inhibited by the overabundance of scholarship, which is being produced at an ever increasing rate, that he would rather call a halt to it all. Steinmetz concludes: "Kafka-scholarship reflects in its structure, in its basic attitude, [in ihrer fundamentalen Grundeinstellung] the structure and basic attitude of Kafka's writing, it forms a mirror-image of the central structural principles of Kafka's fiction" (159).⁶

Surprisingly, both Steinmetz' and Rattner's methods, however large the distance may be between them, display a common notion of what Kafka's basic attitudes, his *Grundhaltungen* or *Grundeinstellungen*, may have been. What Rattner (and like-minded psychological interpreters) and Steinmetz (along with like-minded reception-oriented critics) have in common is their view that they are dealing with a homology of some sort where one half of the equation is Kafka's texts; in the one instance

it affects the writer's (un)conscious and his fiction, while in the other there is a palpable correlation between Kafka's narrative world and its interpreters' plight (abbreviated by Steinmetz into yet another level of receptive *Grundeinstellung*). In the tripartite structure that is formed by author, text, and reader, each method is content to elaborate on one of the binary oppositions to the exclusion of the other. The more traditional kinds of psychological interpretation will focus on the author-text relationship to the exclusion of the reader, while reader-oriented studies tend to disregard, or devalue, the authorial component of the equation.⁷ The resulting readings co-exist as alternative interpretations of the same text. They may illuminate one another, more often they clash, but rarely do they interact in any methodical way. But obviously, if both assertions are right, then it should be possible to reveal behind Kafka's (un)conscious authorial design, his textual universe, and its interpreters' hermeneutical dilemma, a unified triangular correspondence rather than two divaricating mirrorings.

It is this possibility that I would like to explore by providing against the background of "The Letter to his Father" and our divergent responses to "The Metamorphosis," as documented by Stanley Corngold's *The Commentator's Despair*, yet another close (but by no means closed) reading of Gregor Samsa's case and, in particular, of his *vocal silence* (the oxymoron is intended and will be explained in the course of this essay). Rather than investigate—as has been done before—how the approaches outlined above work to multiply textual readings without their ever bearing on one another, or how they might succeed in cancelling each other out, my aim is to combine their disparate (if not conflicting) axiomatic claims into an integrated reading of Kafka's text that runs seamlessly from the authorial unconscious through the text and its tale to the reader's predicament.

Many individual points that need to be made in the course of my argument will be known, of course; other details will, hopefully, come to be seen in a new light. For example, most if not all readers accept Gregor's loss of language as a fact; oftentimes it is taken for granted that he had the power to communicate before his transmogrification, which caused him to lose this human faculty. If not literally, then no doubt figuratively it might be argued, however, that Gregor Samsa never really possessed the capacity to speak and had, in effect, neither been able to communicate his subdued feelings of anger, isolation, and frustration, nor that he ever was in a position to express his opinion outright—don't we all agree that this is what finally causes him to metamorphose into an insect? As such this insight may not be original, but if we extend this line of reasoning to focus anew on the dialogue and the structure of commu-

nication that reigns in the Samsa family we come to discern next to that insidious emotional *silence* that looms unsettlingly behind their *Familienroman*—as Freud would have put it—a latent palimpsestical story of inverted, rather than (as is commonly assumed) aborted, communication. Communication, it seems, can hardly cease for Gregor because it never really began (or, to put it minimally, it stopped many years before that decisive morning). Whatever the case, we shall see in the following analysis that Gregor *does* eventually succeed in expressing himself, but in a very unexpected way. And, ironically, it is his metamorphosis with its concomitant loss of speech that will allow his voice to become heard. Indeed, one of the most striking features of this story is how it allows the disquieting contortions of communication displayed on the various levels of its action to reflect simultaneously its author's biographical circumstances and psychological bearing (as the first method represented above suggests) as well as to inflect the reader's puzzlement at its indeterminacy (a notion that must govern any reader-oriented approach). That is to say, with regard to how communication comes about or is delayed or averted or even inverted in this tale, its components converge in one common rhetorical strategy, that of *dyscommunication*. As we shall see through an initial analysis of Kafka's "Letter to his Father" and a more detailed reading of the story itself, *dyscommunication* accounts for the text's production as well as for what it produces.

II

As has often been remarked, Kafka's "Letter to his Father" is located switchboard-like between his biographical circumstances and his literary oeuvre. As autobiographical discourse, the "Letter" is akin to both spheres of fiction and life. In it Franz Kafka set down *eine Geschichte* (the German term suggests simultaneously a story and a history) of his relationship to his father. This relationship was not only an encompassing emotional and physical presence governing all his day-to-day decision making; it was simultaneously a past historical fact of his childhood experiences that had inscribed itself as rule (in its double sense) into Kafka's mental existence.

Tellingly, the "Letter to his Father" begins with the sentence: "Dearest Father, you asked me recently why I maintain I am afraid of you [1]. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question [2], partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you [3], and partly because an explanation of the grounds for this fear would mean going into far more details [4] than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking

[5]" (157).⁸ Clearly, this is a prime example of a vicious circle. And the remark is revealing in more than one respect: first, Kafka knows the answer but will not admit it [3 & 4]; second, he cannot utter the reason because his brain refuses to operate when thinking of the cause [2 & 5];⁹ third, pronouncing the word "Furcht" 'fear' does not suffice to explain the cause—Kafka feels he must elaborate [4]; and finally, by indicating that the father has no notion why his son should be afraid he cautiously suggests that father and son do not communicate well spiritually [1]. This initial sentence is, moreover, profoundly ambiguous; transferred from its subjunctive form in indirect speech back into direct speech, Kafka's father would have asked: "Warum behauptest du, daß du Furcht vor mir hast?" 'Why do you claim to be afraid of me?', thereby dismissing Kafka's fear as unjustified from the very start. Yet another remarkable component of this complex statement might pass unnoticed (to demonstrate this I did not highlight it in my initial citation): two words testify to the full import of Kafka's opening words and the disillusionment on which they hinge, namely "wie gewöhnlich" 'as usual.' He is, of course, hinting at the frustration incurred by the perpetuated experience of violated communication—or the *scandalon* of utter dys-communication between father and son. It is this withholding of speech that makes Kafka's situation within the family so precarious, a situation that remains essentially unchanged throughout his life. Dys-communication is thus the pattern that pervades Kafka's memories of childhood no less than his present situation within the family and his relationship with Felice at the time when he began to write "The Metamorphosis."¹⁰ And, as we shall see, dys-communication is a forceful narrative pattern in Kafka's literary oeuvre.

Whether he complains of the "extraordinary terror" he once experienced and the "inner harm" (162) that he suffered from being left outdoors on the balcony during the night, or whether he relives the "disgrace of showing myself in public" (164), in many of the incidents described retrospectively in the "Letter," Kafka analyzes, emphasizes, and conveys to the narratee of the document not only his complaint about the breakdown of communication but also about the repetitive nature of this terrifying experience. Words and phrases suggestive of this abound: "This, your usual way of representing it" (158); "your unceasing reproaches" (158); "That then was only a small beginning" (162); "I am not here speaking of any sublime thoughts, but of every little enterprise in childhood" (165); "The point was, rather, that you could not help always and on principle causing the child such disappointments, by virtue of your antagonistic nature" (165); "But that was what your whole method of upbringing was like" (166). If we take Kafka's words

at face value—although for good reason we should be cautious about doing so—his father's education was the direst of drills, while the rules of the drill eluded the child. Or, to put it differently, the child was taught to observe (i.e. to study *and* to follow) orders, i.e. manifestations of a language, whose grammar he could not put together in a consistent way, as in that famous and illustrative passage of the "Letter" where Kafka ridicules the father's rites (and rights) at the dinner table (a passage which, if the subject were not so serious—Heinz Politzer once referred to it as "a kind of middle-class inferno" (169)—one might envision being enacted as a farce).

The result of this kind of education—if it actually took place in this manner—is utterly predictable: the child would be required to internalize rules whose individual enunciations appear inconsistent, opaque or, worse still, contradictory; he was to adhere to laws which the authority himself breaks at his whim; no communication takes place between father and son as to the import or meaning of these directives.¹¹ Consequently, the grammar that the child is eventually led to assimilate—since some grammar must eventually take hold—will reflect by content not those rules originally imposed on him through parental pressure, but rather their transformed semblance. Is it not obvious that one and the same rule may take on quite different functions within a grammar of command and within a grammar of submission? Whether the father was insensitive to his son's plight or whether the son was merely hyper-sensitive and hyper-critical of his father's personality, the transformed set of rules will produce in either case in the child a disjunction of word and meaning and of prescription and action. Thus, two levels of dys-communication originate: one in which words don't match the meaning, in which *language* has become detached, incomprehensible, and ambiguous; and one in which actions occur without reasonable cause or against all laws of probability, in which (narrative) *logic* therefore has become detached, incomprehensible, and ambiguous. As hardly need be pointed out, these two forms of dys-communication are two of the most potent ingredients informing Kafka's literary poetics.

And yet another consequence emerges in respect to the child's daily behavior, a reaction that Kafka describes in detail:

The impossibility of getting on calmly together had one more result, actually a very natural one: I lost the capacity to talk. I dare say I should never have been a very eloquent person in any case, but I should after all have had the usual fluency of human language at my command. But at a very early stage you forbade me to talk. Your threat: "Not a word of contradiction!" and the raised hand that

accompanied it have gone with me ever since. What I got from you—and you are, as soon as it is a matter of your own affairs, an excellent talker—was a hesitant, stammering mode of speech, and even that was still too much for you, and finally I kept silence, at first perhaps from defiance, and then because I couldn't either think or speak in your presence. And because you were the person who really brought me up, this has had its repercussions throughout my life. (170)

The grammar of childhood, i.e. the glaring contradictions he experienced at home, the unwarranted maltreatment of servants, employees and family members that he observed, the danger he sensed at revealing his thoughts and the incapacity to do so (with the consequent silence he observed when confronted by his father), and the tendency to conceal himself before the man—all this surfaces anew in a poetics of silence, repressed speech, and dys-communication that informs, as we shall see in the following analysis, as much the groundwork of Kafka's "Letter to his Father" as the grammar of his narrative "The Metamorphosis."¹²

III

One morning, Gregor Samsa awakes after troubled dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect.¹³ Although the title of Kafka's tale refers *prima facie* to this change in physique and Gregor's delayed mental adaptation to his novel condition—which led Günther Anders to speak of an "anti-sensationalism of tone"—the story of his metamorphosis parallels the metamorphosis of *all* family members, i.e. his father, his mother, and his sister Grete.¹⁴ By the very next day, the inability of Gregor, previously the family's sole financial provider, to continue to support his relations has been established. Within two months his mother and sister have taken on menial work; his father, too—who previously had been a sluggish and progressively fossilizing veteran—appears revitalized, now dressed in the uniform of, as Gregor speculates, some local banking institution. Gregor's story ends, of course, only three months after his metamorphosis with his untimely death and with the family's deliverance from the socially stifling circumstance of having to put up with a giant beetle living in their apartment. Outwardly, the cause of Gregor's premature death is that gradually decaying apple, that "Andenken im Fleisch" 'visible reminder' (110), which his father had thrust into his back in unwarranted defence of the mother; this is the physical aspect of his passing. Yet the apple's decay in Gregor's body is an index, too, of an analogous spiritual decay taking place between

Gregor and his relations; it symbolizes, as we shall soon see in more detail, the final deterioration of communication that conclusively brings about Gregor's demise.

By virtue of his altered nature, Gregor is speechless from the outset. Understandably, his new insect-like body cannot form human sounds, at best he can produce senseless brutish screeches. It is, surprisingly, this factor that confounds Gregor most: for the first time this morning he reveals genuine astonishment at his incapacity to communicate with his family, especially because, intellectually, he feels as active as ever:

"Gregor," said a voice—it was his mother's—"it's a quarter to seven. Hadn't you a train to catch?" That gentle voice! Gregor had a shock as he heard his own voice answering hers, unmistakably his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it like an undertone, that left the words in their clear shape only for the first moment and then rose up reverberating round them to destroy their sense, so that one could not be sure one had heard them rightly. Gregor wanted to answer at length and explain everything, but in the circumstances he confined himself to saying: "Yes, yes, thank you, Mother, I'm getting up now." (70)

No one can understand him now that he has turned into a beetle. Like at the opening of the story, we should expect Gregor to fall prey to an attack of panic. Any reasonable person would. But again the reader is surprised. The stunning fact that even now Gregor remains composed and demonstrates little awareness of the urgency of his condition makes us more alert to various seemingly detached facets of his present situation as well as of his occupational and familial pre-history. We come to note, for example, that Gregor has often imagined giving notice to his chief and, moreover, giving him a piece of his mind, but he has been constrained by his father's debts to the company. We notice further how the family reacts to Gregor's futile attempt to communicate his normality:

The wooden door between them must have kept the change in his voice from being noticeable outside, for his mother contented herself with this statement and shuffled away. Yet this brief exchange of words had made the other members of the family aware that Gregor was still in the house, as they had not expected, and at one of the side doors his father was already knocking, gently, yet with his fist. "Gregor, Gregor," he called, "what's the matter with you?" And after a little while he called again in a deeper voice: "Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door his sister was saying in a

low, plaintive tone: "Gregor? Aren't you well? Are you needing anything?" He answered them both at once: "I'm just ready," and did his best to make his voice sound as normal as possible by enunciating the words very clearly and leaving long pauses between them. So his father went back to breakfast, but his sister whispered: "Gregor, open the door, do." (71)

Obviously, none of them can really make out a word of what he is saying, and we might expect them to show some sign of alarm. Yet only his sister's conduct evidences any apparent concern for Gregor's bestial noises and his atypical tardiness. It soon becomes clear that neither his father nor his mother take any interest in their son's spiritual well-being, that is, as long as he lives up to his role as provider for the family. Thus by now it should be fairly well-established that Gregor Samsa, by means of his metamorphosis, has reversed a humiliating situation that has prevailed for the last five years, namely the parasitic exploitation by his family. But if we look more closely, we can also notice that the basic structure of relationship has actually remained unchanged, except that the figures in the play have exchanged roles. For Gregor, his mutation can hardly be called upsetting, since in regard to the family's disinterestedness toward their son and brother nothing much has changed. And as we shall see, even Gregor's massive corporeal intervention does little to improve the interpersonal constellation. Indeed, from Gregor's perspective, the fact that his relatives and the chief clerk, who was dispatched to criticize him for his absence from work, can communicate with him, but not he with them, can hardly be called a new situation at all. Their reactions merely sustain, or even reinforce, the speechlessness and the formulaic behavior that had prevailed in and outside the family prior to his metamorphosis. Accordingly, following his mutilated dialogue with the chief clerk, who sermonizes in the name of the Trinity of mother, father, and chief, Gregor at last recognizes that "The words he uttered were no longer understandable . . . although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before" (79-80).¹⁵ This sentence is revealing: Gregor's language seems clearer than ever, but neither now nor previously was anyone seriously interested in what he felt and what he had to say.

In view of his being wedged firmly and uncomfortably between family and profession, of the constraints that grew out the family's financial default (a plight that the father was continually exaggerating), and of the neglect of Gregor's physical, spiritual, and emotional needs, his sister Grete must appear as the only consolation and bright spot in his bleak life.¹⁶ It is she who whispers to him a warning of the chief clerk's

rapid appearance; it is she who places the basin with fresh milk (before his metamorphosis, Gregor's favorite beverage) with little sops of white bread in his room; it is she who takes note of his repugnance and replaces the milk with a selection of food reaching from dry bread to delicious half-decayed vegetables. Grete is from the outset the family member who cares most for Gregor. She alone retains the umbilical cord between him and his family. Yet even with her, of whom Gregor thinks so highly, communication does not hold for long. Her conduct soon establishes for herself a new and more powerful function within the family, one of authority even:

For the first fortnight his parents could not bring themselves to the point of entering his room, and he often heard them expressing their appreciation of his sister's activities, whereas formerly they had frequently scolded her for being as they thought a somewhat useless daughter. But now, both of them often waited outside the door, his father and his mother, while his sister tidied his room, and as soon as she came out she had to tell them exactly how things were in the room, what Gregor had eaten, how he had conducted himself this time and whether there was not perhaps some slight improvement in his condition. (99-100)

She is the "expert" (103); her advice is followed, and her arguments prevail when, for example, mother and daughter discuss whether to leave Gregor's room untouched in remembrance of things past, or, as Grete urges, to empty the room of furniture to accommodate Gregor's newly acquired natural habit of roaming over walls and ceiling.

Of course, her decisions display her self-interest in that they serve to amplify her power: "Another factor might have been also the enthusiastic temperament of an adolescent girl, which seeks to indulge itself on every opportunity and which now tempted Grete to exaggerate the horror of her brother's circumstances in order that she might do all the more for him. In a room where Gregor lorded it all alone over empty walls no one save herself was likely ever to set foot" (103). Thus her management of Gregor's affairs is deceptive. Maybe she *is* motivated at the beginning by remnants of affection for her brother, maybe she *does* feel that she has a more intimate understanding of her brother's needs but as the story unfolds her care is progressively downgraded to a mere call of duty. Increasingly she handles his affairs with detachment, and her actions assert ever more strongly her control over Gregor's standing in the family. Her willingness to communicate with Gregor and to manage his needs immediately following his metamorphosis allows her, later in the story, to disregard his existential desires all the more energetically.¹⁷

Moreover (and hardly noticeable to Gregor himself, who remains throughout the story a virtuoso of self-deception), Grete manages his life while gradually fusing with the father-figure. This culminates on that fatal day, the focal point of the story, when his sister has set her mind on rearranging his quarters by removing all his furniture. The brutality of the scene manifests itself in the extreme dys-communication that obtains between brother and sister, man and woman, insect and human. Her superficially sincere desire to create a more appropriate habitat for his bestial life-style only veils her ultimate attempt to dehumanize and evict the brother. Her maneuver is counterpoised by Gregor's haunting sense of helplessness and speechlessness. Gregor, who is not at all enthusiastic about his sister's scheme to deprive him of these last exterior rudiments of his humanity, envisages losing, too, the romantic portrait of the lady with the muff and, in his alarm, to save her he places his insectile body squarely on her portrait. The following scene ensues:

They had not allowed themselves much of a rest and were already coming; Grete had twined her arm round her mother and was almost supporting her. "Well, what shall we take now?" said Grete, looking round. Her eyes met Gregor's from the wall. She kept her composure, presumably because of her mother, bent her head down to her mother, to keep her from looking up, and said, although in a fluttering, unpremeditated voice: "Come, hadn't we better go back to the living room for a moment?" Her intentions were clear enough to Gregor, she wanted to bestow her mother in safety and then chase him down from the wall. Well, just let her try it! He clung to his picture and would not give it up. He would rather fly in Grete's face.

But Grete's words had succeeded in disquieting her mother, who took a step to one side, caught sight of the huge brown mass on the flowered wallpaper, and before she was really conscious that what she saw was Gregor screamed in a loud, hoarse voice: "Oh God, oh God!" fell with outspread arms over the sofa as if giving up and did not move. "Gregor!" cried his sister, shaking her fist and glaring at him. This was the first time she had directly addressed him since his metamorphosis. (105-06)

This episode is crucial for two reasons in particular: Not only—as most critics have pointed out—do the sexual implications of Gregor's metamorphosis surface by way of his flagrant conjugation with the framed lady (we are told that the glass of the picture "comforted his hot belly") and his clearly fecal appearance; we also experience a sister who

at last drops her mask and openly substitutes for the father. Now it is she who, in the absence of the father, defends the mother. She urges her to leave the room of shame, thus driving a wedge between mother and son as if she were her father's oedipal counterpart; she chides the brother for his insolence. Moreover, by raising her fist and her voice, she momentarily metamorphoses into the father figure of the opening paragraphs of the story.

Gregor, we now hear, is once and for all "cut off from his mother" (106). The ties to his sister, too, are severed by his radical effort to undermine her objective. And, as if to ratify the breach between Gregor and the family, the father, who returns only moments after the ordeal in Gregor's den, misinterprets both Grete's words and Gregor's appeasing behavior:

"Ah!" he cried as soon as he appeared, in a tone which sounded at once angry and exultant. Gregor drew his head back from the door and lifted it to look at his father. Truly, this was not the father he had imagined to himself; admittedly he had been too absorbed of late in his new recreation of crawling over the ceiling to take the same interest as before in what was happening elsewhere in the flat, and he ought really to be prepared for some changes. And yet, and yet, could that be his father? (107-08)

The father chases his son around the table and bombards him with apples, one of which finally enters Gregor's back. Its decay will eventually lead to his death. So, with the father's strength, ire, and hatred redoubled, with Gregor's separation from his mother, and with his sister's emotional withdrawal, all remaining bridges between the human beetle and his relations have been destroyed. Communication, before Gregor's metamorphosis only a shroud covering familial vacuity, during his recreated presence as beetle a lifeline upheld with sheer condescension, may now emerge in its true and aboriginal nature.

But for a short while, Gregor's increasing debility changes the family's attitude toward him:

The serious injury done to Gregor, which disabled him for more than a month—the apple went on sticking in his body as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it—seemed to have made even his father recollect that Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, family duty required suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience. (110)

The translation would be misleading if we were not to mention that in German the word "patience" is expressed by the term "dulden"; more than patience, this verb means to endure, to tolerate, and to suffer. These words circumscribe accurately the emotions Gregor must have gone through in the period preceding his metamorphosis. The injurious action taken by the father has, of course, forced the family unwittingly into Gregor's previous position. They now cannot blame *him alone* for his invalidity. The "Andenken im Fleisch," rendered by Willa and Edwin Muir as "a visible reminder," obliges them to recognize at last the fact that they themselves are ultimately one cause of Gregor's deterioration. And it produces, as with Gregor in his prime, a sense of guilt, even if only for a short while. From his vantage-point, Gregor has succeeded, maybe more effectively than if he had been outspoken, but also more effectively than he had hoped for, in demonstrating to his family what his situation must have been like before his metamorphosis.

While Gregor's metamorphosis has enforced a reversal of dependence, it perpetuates the basic structure of dys-communication. And Gregor has added to that domestic state of predictable dys-communication the fact that this new family structure is irreversible. This of course makes Gregor's story so immensely disturbing for the reader. We sense that beyond the physical appearance of the family members—Gregor's beetle-like constitution, the father's new attire, the mother's and sister's new occupations—very little has changed.¹⁸ (If a change takes place at all besides Gregor's corporeal metamorphosis, it seems to be located at the end of the story rather than at the beginning.) And we feel from the beginning and throughout the story as it evolves that there is so much to be said between father and son, mother and son, and even sister and brother, that remains uncommunicated. Gregor's metamorphosis not only originates from a deficit, it nurtures rather than corrects this familial shortcoming. Familial dys-communication is a paralyzing force. Yet the reader, who intuits the dilemma and pins his or her hopes on some sign of rapprochement, remains disappointed to the end. With the feeling of desolation and demotion that now proliferates in the family, Gregor's situation is bound to grow worse. Adding to his mortal injury, Gregor soon experiences an increasingly humiliating treatment by his family members. No one has time for him, no one cares for his well-being, no one ever tries to communicate with him, with the exception of the maid who treats him with spite. Even his sister has completely emancipated herself from the brother; her behavior has become utterly devoid of affection:

His sister no longer took thought to bring him what might especially please him, but in the morning and at noon before she went to business hurriedly pushed into his room with her foot any food that was available, and in the evening cleared it out again with one sweep of the broom, heedless of whether it had been merely tasted, or—as most frequently happened—left untouched. The cleaning of his room, which she now did always in the evenings, could not have been more hastily done. (114)¹⁹

The emotional silence that prevails in the family comes to the fore when parents and daughter argue over the duties each of them should perform. Even Gregor cannot refrain from "hiss[ing] loudly with rage because not one of them thought of shutting the door to spare him such a spectacle and so much noise" (115). Here the relationship among the family members is portrayed in its true light—and Gregor, too, shows himself a true son of the family!

The appearance of those three obscure boarders toward the end of the story only serves to corroborate this reading. One evening after dinner, Grete plays on her violin in the kitchen. Soon the boarders ask her to play for them in the living room. Gregor is attracted by his sister's playing, and he ventures further into the room than usual. As soon as Mr. Samsa discovers Gregor's presence, he tries to shepherd the three boarders into their room to prevent their noticing the vermin. But they react as Gregor should have reacted many months earlier:

The old man seemed once more to be so possessed by his mulish self-assertiveness that he was forgetting all the respect he should show to his lodgers. He kept driving them on and driving them on until in the very door of the bedroom the middle lodger stamped his foot loudly on the floor and so brought him to a halt. "I beg to announce," said the lodger, lifting one hand and looking also at Gregor's mother and sister, "that because of the disgusting conditions prevailing in this family and household"—here he spat on the floor with emphatic brevity—"I give you notice on the spot." (123)

Their outspokenness is balanced against Gregor's reticence; they verbalize what he has suppressed. And not only do they, by proxy for Gregor, give notice to the family; the family, having endured for the short span of a couple of weeks what Gregor suffered for close to five years, reciprocally gives notice to Gregor. After the boarders have retreated, his sister declares to father and mother: "things can't go on like this . . . we must try to get rid of it. We've tried to look after it and to put up with it

as far as is humanly possible . . . it will be the death of both of you, I can see that coming. When one has to work as hard as we do, all of us, one can't stand this continual torment at home on top of it. At least I can't stand it any longer" (124).

Clearly, Grete is expressing what Gregor has felt all along. Through his metamorphosis, Gregor, who was incapable beforehand of communicating his quandary and now has no control over human speech, has forced everyone else, from family members to boarders, to express in words precisely what he had felt plaguing him for years. His speechlessness has marvelously compelled others to speak in his name. His silence has become his form of speech. Or, as Stanley Corngold once described Gregor's predicament: "his body is the speech in which the impossibility of ordinary language expresses its own despair" (13). Nevertheless, it enters no one's mind that their grievance against him should mirror Gregor's own (albeit unuttered) complaint about them. However fitting their words may be to Gregor's circumstances before his metamorphosis, neither father, mother, nor sister suspects any connection between their present and his past predicament. This attests once more to the inveteracy of dys-communication in the Samsa family.

IV

As we have seen, Gregor's obtrusive presence in his family is grounded in the mutual inability to communicate with even the closest of fellow beings. Maybe his situation *was* a cul-de-sac in human and emotional terms and suggested to him no other solution than physical transformation. He could have tried to speak, of course—but that would have been another story, a more contemporary one perhaps, and certainly not Kafka's. But, more probably, even if he had used words, understanding would hardly have come about—does not the "Letter to his Father" bear testimony to this fact? And other texts and other protagonists tell the same story. We are dealing throughout Kafka's oeuvre with a grammar of communication that is partially derived from his childhood experiences, a grammar that was imprinted by his father on the susceptible child as a pronounced, but hardly pronounceable, second nature. His father's core of regimentations translated for Franz into a grammar of dys-communication. This begat his quintessential doubt, which "in me turned into mistrust of myself and into perpetual anxiety in relation to everything else" (*Wedding Preparations* 191).

Similarly, analysis of "The Metamorphosis" reveals that beneath the surface structure of the text, beneath its manifest appearance, we find on Gregor's part—next to his need for self-expression—a desperate

strategy of avoidance or circumvention of verbal confrontation. A fitting metaphor for this strategy is, of course, the form he has taken through his transformation, his shell or "Panzer." Most critics of the story point out correctly that with his physical transformation Gregor succeeds in turning the tables on his family; less attention has been given to the fact that this does *not* apply to the use of language and the vocalization of sentiment. For many years prior to his metamorphosis, Gregor lived in a state of virtual silence and hardly, if ever, did he dare to express his opinion of his employer, his job, his father or mother or sister. Not so his family, his employer, or the three boarders once they are put in his position: sooner or later they all articulate their grievances and vocalize their complaints. They speak out and verbalize the problems he is causing, thereby giving him (or those who symbolically take his place) a piece of their mind. At the outset of the story the chief clerk addresses Gregor with the words: "You amaze me, you amaze me. I thought you were a quiet, dependable person, and now all at once you seem bent on making a disgraceful exhibition of yourself. . . . But now I see how incredibly obstinate you are, I no longer have the slightest desire to take your part at all" (77). Like with his family's and the boarders' statements, the chief clerk's words echo Gregor's most secret thoughts.

That through his transmogrification Gregor is enabled to ventriloquize his voice onto other speakers is indicated by the text itself when Gregor's first aborted attempts to communicate are described: "Gregor had a shock," we read, "as he heard his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it like an undertone, that left the words in their clear shape only for the first moment and then rose up reverberating round them to destroy their sense, so that one could not be sure one had heard them rightly" (70). His speech is uttered from below: "wie von unten her," from inside his body. This need not imply, as Sokel suggests from a psychological vantage-point, that it issues from his unconscious; we might just as well read it literally as referring to the physical strain of trying to produce words through the belly—which would be quite appropriate for an animal that lacks human organs of speech. So while through his transformation Gregor inscribes his silence into his body, he (unnoticeably for all involved) eventually succeeds in relegating his subdued voice to his counterparts, thereby forcing them to speak his mind. To be sure, his shell symbolizes his withdrawal, his isolation, and his alienation, but it also forces others to pronounce his unspeakable thoughts, to make his motives known for those who wish to hear. Through ventriloquy, Gregor compensates for his loss of language. We see him regain his language in form of a palimpsest which, by doubling on speech, makes his repressed thoughts known without others

knowing. Ironically, this flawed reversal works to increase our discomfort as readers of the story's conclusion: although Gregor has found a means to overcome his silence, unfortunately neither he nor any of the actors recognize how their words tend to echo the suppressed feelings of his former self. Again, the father's last words in the story are telling: "Let bygones be bygones," he says, "and you might have some consideration for me" (132). They would have befitted his son. In a way, we as readers sense that the family is reacting (or will react) as he should have done long before the story began, namely by changing jobs, leaving home, and taking a new apartment (and, possibly even, by taking a wife, as his sister is predestined to take a husband).

Gregor's "ventriloquist method" thus clearly mirrors Kafka's own: narrated silence (in German we might use a similar oxymoron, "erzählte Sprachlosigkeit") is a paradox; it is a form of speech that allows language to resist meaning and yet be meaningful. We all know how, in Kafka's tales, events can be vague and actions unpredictable while the language of the teller displays unusual clarity and stunning precision. We, as much as the characters, come upon places that are perplexingly inaccessible, in spite of personal perseverance. Meetings cannot take place because people who seem so close at hand are suddenly worlds apart. Others find themselves banished and dislodged for no recognizable reason at all. Time and again their behavior is misinterpreted, their language turns out ambiguities, their words are taken amiss. By and large, men fail to communicate. In Kafka's universe these are "alltägliche Verwirrungen," "everyday misapprehensions."²⁰ And no one is immune from them.

In turning back to our initial reading of Kafka's "Letter to his Father," we notice not that the past torments of his childhood, but rather their structure re-emerges time and again as the ingrained mold of his narratives. By dint of repetition, Kafka's father produced in his son a sense of the world and its language as dys-communication, one where the meaning of an enunciation is not determined by plain words—there is, of course, no such thing for Kafka—and palpable social law, but rather by an incomprehensible, unpredictable, and unbearable logic of authority. The father's and the son's difference is one of language: while the father is an eloquent speaker, the child is prone to stutter. Stuttering is a repetition of sound, in itself linguistically meaningless, but psychologically all the more eloquent. Stuttering is sounding silence, meaning deferred yet fraught with emotion.

The correspondence between the grammar of the *author's* childhood experiences and the famed illogicity of his *textual* world (we recall that first interpretive approach that assumes a mirroring of Kafka's unconscious processes in his fiction) can demonstrably be carried over to the

third level of *readers'* responses (and the second interpretive approach that recognizes an homology between the opacity of Kafka's textual universe and the continually aborted quest of critics and readers for sense and interpretive closure). Thus, technically, Kafka's mature narrative point of view reproduces for us as readers a form of stuttering and deferred meaning, much as Gregor's transformed body does for his family. That is, Kafka performs through the language of his narrative on us what his father did to him. In this way, we as exegetes of Kafka's texts, the Samsa family as readers of Gregor's "Panzer," and Kafka as interpreter of his father's speeches take on analogous roles. The silence of the child brings out the voice of the writer, the silence of Gregor brings out his voice in the family, the silence of the text brings out the voice of the critic. And none of us recognize the rule. Like his father's table talk, Kafka's prose is replete with words, but is lacking in definite meaning and logic for the reader—as so many critics have acutely observed.²¹ The configuration of his stories does not match the rules we are accustomed to. So our reaction is much like Kafka's reaction: to cope with the menacing void he produced text upon text; we procure from the texts palimpsest upon palimpsest of meaning. But in the multitude of meanings that our readings engender we fail, like Kafka in his childhood, to make out the grammar that governs them all. So, finally, while he has become the eloquent speaker, we are now prone to stutter. Through the rhetoric of dys-communication, Kafka has, in the end, become the Father for us.

Notes

1. Maurice Blanchot once referred to Kafka's works as "fundamentally silent works" (11).

2. Some critics have opposed Sokel's view that Kafka's writings are representative of a modern "Sprachkrise" or "Sprachskepsis" ("Kafka's Poetics" 7). In the context of the story "The Metamorphosis," Ingeborg Henel has argued for example: "Das Bild von dem zum Insekt gewordenen Menschen, der die Sprache verloren hat, hat nichts mit verhindertem Schriftstellertum zu tun und auch nichts mit Sprachskepsis. Es war nicht Sprachskepsis, sondern sein Perfektionismus, ähnlich dem Flauberts, der Kafka, abgesehen von äußeren Umständen, Schwierigkeit beim Schreiben verursachte und Zweifel in ihm aufkommen ließ, Zweifel nicht an den Möglichkeiten der Sprache, sondern an seiner eigenen Kraft" (80).

3. For a sampling of essays and books cf. Frederick Hoffmann, Heinz Politzer, Josef Rattner, Heinz Hillmann, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari listed below.

4. For reasons that will become apparent, this approach is restricted here to psychological criticism. As Stanley Corngold has pointed out, this form of criticism can more generally be subsumed under approaches that rest on the belief that there is a "residue of real meaning" in Kafka's tale, that it is "an essentially realistic tale of humiliation and neurosis [that] reflects Kafka's tortured personality. Innumerable attempts have been made," he continues, "to explain Gregor's debasement in terms of the ways in which a man can be humiliated. The Marxist critic Helmut Richter, for example, alludes to the deformed products of a mechanical work process, to Gregor the alienated salesman; Sokel, as a psychologist, stresses Gregor's intent to punish through his repulsiveness the family that had enslaved him. Kaiser views the metamorphosis as retribution for an Oedipal rebellion; the pathologist Wilfredo Dalmau Castañón sees it as the symptomatology of tuberculosis" (*The Commentator's Despair* 17-18).

5. "Kafkas Leben ist der unaufhörliche Versuch, mit seinem Vater-Erlebnis fertig zu werden. Dem Vater verdankt er seine Lebensangst und seine lähmende Schwermut. . . . Sadismus und Masochismus sind Grundzüge des Kafkaschen Werkes" (*Kafka und das Vater-Problem* 47).

6. "Die Kafka-Interpretation bildet in ihrer Struktur, in ihrer fundamentalen Grundeinstellung die Kafkasche Struktur und Grundeinstellung ab, sie ist zum Spiegel des strukturellen Zentralprozesses des von Kafka Erzählten geworden" (my translation).

7. More recent psychological interpretations tend to move away from this exclusive bias for the author-text relationship to include readerly reactions; one instance is an excellent Freudian reading of "The Metamorphosis" by David Eggenschwiler.

8. All references to the "Letter to his Father" are to *Wedding Preparations in the Country*.

9. Incidentally, the subsequent sentence of the "Letter" relates that "the magnitude of the subject goes far beyond the scope of my memory and power of reasoning."

10. In Chapter 3 of his book *Kafka. Der Schaffensprozeß*, which traces both the extra-literary sources for and the biographical background of Kafka's creative process, Hartmut Binder describes the Samsa family's relationships as "ein Spiegelbild sowohl der gegenwärtigen als auch der Verhältnisse in der Kindheit Kafkas" "a true image of both Kafka's present and his childhood circumstances" (175). With regard to "The Metamorphosis," Binder stresses in particular the "lebensgeschichtlichen Strukturen" "biographical structures" at the close of 1912, i.e. the argument about the factory, Kafka's disappointment about his sister Ottilia taking sides with his parents on this issue (which almost brought about a suicide attempt), and the

crisis with Felice. He goes on to say that it is very likely that Kafka himself would have been conscious of the homology between his present situation around 1912 and his experiences of early childhood: "Es ist zu vermuten, da diese Ereignisse ihm in bestürzender Weise zum Bewußtsein brachten, wie abhängig er eigentlich von seinen Eltern war, da dadurch Emotionen freigesetzt wurden, die Kindheits Erinnerungen zum Durchbruch verhalfen und ihm verdeutlichten, da die Gesetzmäßigkeiten seines gegenwärtigen Lebens vielfach deckungsgleich mit längst überwunden geglaubten Kindheitsmustern war" (173; for more details cf. 136-90).

11. Josef Rattner put it thus: "Die strafenden Eltern erscheinen dem Kinde als unberechenbare Tyrannen, denen man auf Gnade oder Ungnade ausgeliefert ist. Das lähmende Gefühl der Ohnmacht ist die Folge solcher Episoden" (21).

12. Kafka remarks: "I became completely dumb, cringed away from you, hid from you, and only dared to stir when I was so far away from you that your power could no longer reach me, at any rate directly" (171).

13. All references are to the text of "The Metamorphosis" in *The Penal Colony. Stories and Short Pieces*.

14. Anders wrote: "Nicht die Gegenstände und Ereignisse als solche sind bei Kafka beunruhigend, sondern die Tatsache, daß seine Wesen auf sie wie auf normale Gegenstände oder Ereignisse—also unerregt—reagieren. Nicht da Gregor Samsa am Morgen als Käfer aufwacht, sondern daß er darin nichts Staunenswertes sieht, diese Alltäglichkeit des Grotesken macht die Lektüre so entsetzenerregend" (*Kafka. Pro und Contra* 13).

15. The Trinitarian connotation is contained quite overtly in the chief clerk's statement: "I am speaking here in the name of your parents and of your chief" (77).

16. Gregor describes his situation with the phrase: "Ich bin in der Klemme" which is rendered into English less forcefully and less ambiguously as "I'm in great difficulties" (83).

17. In a letter to Grete Bloch Kafka writes: "Incidentally, the heroine's name is Grete and she doesn't discredit you at all, at least not in the first section. Later on, though, when the agony becomes too great, she withdraws, embarks on a life of her own, and leaves the one who needs her" (*Letters to Felice* 394-95).

18. This impression coincides with Erich Heller's claim that "the most oppressive quality of Kafka's work is the unshakable stability of its central situation. It takes place in a world that knows of no motion, no change, no metamorphosis" (*The Disinherited Mind* 220).

19. Hartmut Binder relates Grete's reversal of behavior to two autobiographical incidents involving Kafka's sister Ottla and Felice Bauer. In respect to the former Binder concludes: "Denn nicht nur vollzieht Grete einen Ottlas Stellungnahme vergleichbaren Positionswechsel, sondern Gregor verliert auch wie sein reales Vorbild jede weitere Lebensmöglichkeit. Kafka hat, so könnte man sagen, die lebensverneinenden Folgerungen, die sich für ihn aus der Sache ergaben, an Gregor Samsa delegiert" (*Kafka* 144; for more details cf. also 183).

20. The story referred to here, "An Everyday Occurrence," is an entry in Kafka's third octavo notebook. It relates, in a quasi post-Einsteinian setting, character A's thwarted attempt to meet his business partner B.

21. To my knowledge, the first to analyse this in a methodical way was Ulrich Gaier.

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