

Reading for Constructions of the Unspeakable: Teaching Kafka's *Metamorphosis*

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Introduction

One of the most challenging issues confronting secondary and university teachers is how to teach subjects that have been labelled “off limits,” either by school boards or institutional policies or, more pervasively if vaguely, by cultural norms. Discussions of non-normative or minority genders and sexualities are for this reason muted or silenced within educational contexts, ironically the very contexts ostensibly committed to social change and betterment. Teachers are often caught in a battle between idealism and pragmatism: how is one to afford students opportunities for thinking about such typically unspeakable matters as non-normative genders or sexual practices if, in doing so, teachers face the very real risk of not being tenured or of losing their jobs?

In this paper I consider the importance of training students to recognize that the construction of meaning through language, whether in literature or culture at large, is a political process that renders certain subjects legitimate and others illegitimate. I begin by briefly examining one of most disturbing contemporary examples of language as political process: American (U.S.) rhetoric immediately following the September 11 attacks. This rhetoric works to identify and de-legitimize various cultural subjects *as subjects*; in effect, subjects become “others.” So, for example, in the rhetoric produced post September 11, women, gays and lesbians, Muslims, and Arabs were all variously deemed “suspect” subjects, capable of threatening dominant social norms. Discussion of contemporary examples of the rhetorical production of cultural “others” serves as a useful segue for an analysis of literary texts or, more particularly, for moments in literature engaged in censoring their subjects or transforming those subjects into something improper or suspect.

The literary text on which I focus is Kafka's 1915 novella, *The Metamorphosis*. A chilling tale of how social policing and surveillance works to silence accounts of gender (as well as racial and sexual) transgression, *The Metamorphosis* offers students an allegory for the dehumanizing social construction of non-normative groups. My paper argues that by reading texts (in this case specifically Kafka's novella) as fundamentally political, as offering representations of various ways in which populations are controlled, the teacher provides students with an epistemological framework not only for recognizing constructions of the unspeakable in their lives but also for identifying the pedagogical dilemma of how to teach what may not be taught—the “don't ask, don't tell” power play of an ostensibly “open” society—that so many teachers face. Reading for the construction of the unspeakable (the suspect subject) works then, ultimately, to radicalize the educational process for students and teachers alike within a society fueled at least in part by various forms of prejudice such as homophobia and heterosexism.

September 11 and the Death of a Metaphor

I am writing this essay after September 11, a late summer day of brilliant visibility, just at the beginning of the school year: a day when life in the United States changed irrevocably. With the hijacking of four airplanes and the ensuing attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, not only did thousands of people lose their lives, but the possibility of Americans defining themselves as safe and of linking that sense of safety to a commitment to cultural pluralism, vaporized in a matter of minutes. The tragedy of September 11, in other words, is not simply the death of so many people but the death of one of the country's most important metaphors, “the melting pot.”

Seemingly, this metaphor only attests to the horror of the day when so many bodies disappeared together in the burning rubble of the World Trade Center towers.¹

In the wake of this twinned loss of people and metaphor, Americans have begun to scrutinize themselves, engaging in the monstrous activity of dividing themselves between “patriots” and “foreigners”; between “real” Americans and “others.” It is a destructive process, one that has quickly resulted in damage to hundreds of stores, mosques, and businesses, as well as violence against thousands of people, simply because they somehow carry a mark of “difference,” which this time has been labeled “Middle Eastern” or “Arab” or “Muslim.” Bigotry, racism, and other overt forms of violence have thrived on the call for a metaphoric disconnection. On the level of rhetoric, a pervasive language of moral judgement bars any rational contextualization of the attacks. The attacks have been labeled “evil,” the perpetrators “evildoers.” While the violence and horror of the attacks cannot and should not be denied, what the language of morality here effects is the refusal to recognize the attacks as the product of a rationally coherent political position. Instead, the attackers’ motives are represented as “inexplicable”; the attackers themselves stand beyond the pale of reason. This polarizing rhetoric of morality points to the inevitability of the United States’ political response as one of non-negotiation.

Both the subsequent acts of terrorism and the responses that they have engendered have participated in this symbolic register of non-negotiation. In the case of the anthrax mailings, correspondence has itself become diseased. Letters have literally infected

¹ It is worth noting that one of the most popular post-September 11 bumper stickers has been one with an American flag and the phrase “These colors don’t run.” The text here suggests that at a time of national crisis the running of colors, and, by extension, the

people. On the level of metaphor, people have reacted by refusing correspondence: in the name of national and personal security, they have called for various forms of profiling; they have split the country into camps of “them” and “us.” September 11 and its aftermath have thus revealed the Conradian horror of the rhetorical practices of social control. Terror, whether induced by a foreign or domestic agent or by the state itself, exacts the death of the metaphoric relation between self and other; it exacts the refusal to engage the other as oneself. In this sense, September 11 has only writ large the processes of dis-identification that are always at work in order to isolate and eradicate particular individuals or groups that pose some kind of social threat.

Dis-identification and *Metamorphosis*

The shift in cultural mood in the United States after September 11 seems as sudden and as irrevocable as the change accorded the protagonist of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915): “When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (3). From the beginning of Kafka’s novella, there is never any question that Gregor is some kind of cultural “other”; only the extent to which the people around him, most notably his family, will be able to recognize his humanity is at issue. Because their ability to identify with him steadily and irremediably erodes, Kafka’s early twentieth-century parable of alienation might well be read as a parable for the epistemological fallout of September 11. And vice versa. Christian Fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell’s infamous reaction to September 11 comes to mind: “I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make an alternative

blurring or melting together of cultural boundaries, is a cowardly and, potentially, un-American act.

lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”²

For Falwell, the tragedy of September 11 testifies to the United States’ fall into secularism, by which we may understand a fall *from* a Christian fundamentalism that refuses to grant value or legitimacy to cultural and religious practices beyond its own. Such a compulsion to stigmatize bespeaks an epistemological entrenchment that requires the dismissal of the importance of the melting pot metaphor: various ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and/or sexual minorities become unassimilable, even unthinkable, within the metaphoric stuff of cultural exchange. The numerous post-September 11 manifestations of prejudice of which Mr. Falwell’s comments provide one instance thus teach us much about the social mechanisms of dehumanization, so that the quasi-fantastic tale of Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis into a bug no longer seems so fantastic or improbable. Perhaps that metamorphosis even seems inevitable.

In other words, *pace* Oscar Wilde, much as literature can help us understand reality (that is, the cultural constructions and social assumptions upon which the conventions of “reality” are based), reality can help us understand literature. It is my belief that by reading at this present cultural moment *The Metamorphosis* we can readily identify its constructions of the unspeakable and the dehumanizing consequences of their enforcement for Gregor Samsa. Kafka’s text is a text for our own time, a powerful literary witness to the persistent cultural practices of alienation and dehumanization.

² Falwell’s remarks are quoted in Eric Alterman, “The Uses of Adversity.” *The Nation*. October 8, 2001: 10, 10.

The Metamorphosis and Contemporary Constructions of the Unspeakable

From the novella's beginning, Gregor resists the ready categories of thought that the text supplies in order to contain him. When he awakens to find himself a bug, it is as a bug like no other. He is a "monstrous vermin," an embodiment of processes of dis-identification that render him neither fully bug nor fully human. It is difficult to say precisely *what* he is. As Stanley Corngold argues, "the vermin should not conjure for the reader an insect of some definite kind.... Sometimes he behaves like a low sort of human being, a "louse"; but at other times he is an airy, flighty kind of creature. In the end he is sheerly *not-this, not-that*—a paradox..." (xix; emphasis added). Gregor's alienation (including self-alienation) exists even on the level of language itself.

What could cause Kafka to figure his protagonist not simply as a bug but as an obscured figure composed of human and bug-like characteristics? Here one can consider the alienating cultural contexts for Kafka's own life. His estrangement as a German-speaking Jew living in Prague during the waning days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is well known and has been much discussed. Much less discussed is the issue of homosexuality, the ubiquitous taboo of Kafka's time, euphemistically referred to as "the unspeakable vice."³ Partially because it itself was the paradoxical off-limits, omnipresent topic of the late Hapsburg era and partially because it has retained that status within the American classroom almost a century later, homosexuality proves a key focal point for teaching *The Metamorphosis*. By considering those moments in the text that actively figure representations of sexuality as censored, we can draw attention not only to

³ One of the most fascinating recent studies of cultural otherness in Kafka's work is Sander Gilman's *Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient* (1995), which argues that in turn-of-the-century sexological discussions, "the Jewish male body" functioned as "the analog to the body of the homosexual" (160).

the prevailing social and moral codes of Kafka's era but also to comparable mechanisms that police and delimit the scope of the teachable in the present time.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discussions of sexuality prove important for *The Metamorphosis*' characterization of Gregor precisely because these discussions rely so heavily on the kinds of rhetorical censorship at work in Kafka's text. As Mark Anderson's study of Kafka's writings has shown, the latter was well aware of contemporary debates on homosexuality. As Anderson notes, even as

homosexuality was far from being an accepted practice either in Habsburg Bohemia or Wilhelminian Germany...Kafka's culture produced an astonishingly rich body of theoretical studies, from Freud and Krafft-Ebing to Otto Weininger, Magnus Hirschfeld, Hans Blüher and Otto Gross, which laid the groundwork for a non-normative view of same-sex relations between men....Kafka came into contact with many of these theories and in several instances freely speculated about his own homoerotic impulses. (79-80)

Thus, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexological studies occupied an uncanny cultural space that offered Kafka and his contemporaries in-depth discussions of unspeakable sexual behaviors.

One of the most well known of these studies is Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, originally appearing in 1886 and then substantially revised and posthumously published in 1906. For Krafft-Ebing, non-normative sexual practices, including masturbation and homosexuality, were the product of a hereditarily determined moral degeneracy. The language of the preface to *Psychopathia*'s first edition reveals this assumption:

The scientific study of the psychopathology of sexual life necessarily deals with the miseries of man and the dark sides of his existence, the *shadow* of which *contorts* the *sublime image of the deity* into *horrid caricatures*, and leads astray aestheticism and morality. (vii; emphasis added)

Krafft-Ebing's language here participates in a kind of metamorphosis that resembles Gregor's own. Non-normative sexual practices can not be spoken of directly; they must be understood as "miseries" and as "dark sides" that in turn cast a "shadow" on the individual's existence. The word "shadow" here of course extends the metaphor of moral "darkness." Given that it means "figure," "shadow" also draws our attention to "figure of speech" or language and the constructions of thought that "shadow[s]" convey. Aberrant sexualities, in other words, must necessarily be represented in terms of ruptured categories of thought and contorted metaphors. So, Krafft-Ebing explains, the "shadow...contorts the sublime image of the deity into horrid caricatures." Like Gregor's own, the sexual deviant's horror is that s/he transgresses the boundaries of thought: s/he is not simply a "horrid caricature[]"; s/he is that *and* the "sublime image."

Stated another way, non-normative sexual practices threaten not only individuals but also language. For Krafft-Ebing such practices signal both "normal" individuals' propensity for perversity and "tainted" individuals' latent perversion.⁴ So, for example, masturbation is problematic not simply because it is a non-normative sexual behavior that Krafft-Ebing reads as working to inhibit heterosexual relations; masturbation can also be indicative of a perverse identity category, homosexuality. Masturbation, in other words, is threatening as both a practice and a sign, a sign that, significantly, can call

⁴ Krafft-Ebing distinguishes between perversity (non-normative sexual acts by normal individuals) and perversion (non-normative sexual acts by sexual deviants) on page 286.

homosexuality into being. Krafft-Ebing's rhetorical struggle to contain masturbation's power as a sign is apparent in his introduction to the section on masturbation, titled "Homo-sexual Feeling as an Acquired Manifestation in Both Sexes," from which I quote at length. Krafft-Ebing writes,

Nothing is so prone to contaminate—under certain circumstances even to exhaust—the source of all noble and ideal sentiments, which arise of themselves from a normally developing sexual instinct, as the practice of masturbation in early years. It despoils the unfolding bud of perfume and beauty, and leaves behind only the coarse animal desire for sexual satisfaction. If an individual, thus depraved, reaches the age of maturity, there is wanting in him that aesthetic, ideal, pure and free impulse which draws the opposite sexes together. The glow of sensual sensibility wanes, and the inclination toward the opposite sex is weakened. This defect influences the morals, the character, fancy, feeling and instinct of the youthful masturbator, male or female, in an unfavourable manner, even causing, under certain circumstances, the desire for the opposite sex to sink to *nil*; so that masturbation is preferred to the natural mode of satisfaction....

With *tainted* individuals, the matter is quite different. The latent perverse sexuality is developed under the influence of neurasthenia induced by masturbation, abstinence, or otherwise.

Gradually, in contact with persons of the same sex, sexual excitation by them is induced. Related ideas are coloured with lustful feelings, and awaken corresponding desires. This decidedly degenerate reaction is the beginning of a process of physical and mental transformation, a description of which is attempted

in what follows, and which is one of the most interesting psychological phenomena that have been observed. This *metamorphosis* presents different stages, or degrees. (286-87; 289; first two emphases in original; third emphasis added)

Masturbation awakens in the homosexual “a process of physical and mental transformation...[a] metamorphosis.” Strikingly in this section, even as Krafft-Ebing asserts that “the matter is quite different,” the description of normal individuals in their perversity itself blurs into a description of “tainted” individuals in their perversion. Thus, even in “normal” individuals masturbation is always a sign of homosexuality. The practice in play always suggests the possibility of the identity category at work.

What is one to do then but to censure masturbation as a sign? Such is the case in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. In a key scene near the end of part two, Gregor the bug responds to his mother and sister’s removal of his furniture from his room by climbing atop his one prized possession, a picture from a glossy magazine of a woman that he has framed and hung on his wall:

...he broke out...then he saw hanging conspicuously on the wall...the picture of the lady all dressed in furs, hurriedly crawled up on it and pressed himself against the glass, which gave a *good surface to stick to* and soothed his *hot belly*. At least no one would take away this picture, while *Gregor completely covered it up*.

(35; emphasis added)

Pressing his body against the image of the woman in furs, where furs, as Elizabeth Boa notes, are “evocative of the furry animality of the female genitalia” (128), Gregor

redirects the framed image: it becomes one of a masturbator.⁵ This scene does not, however, as Boa asserts, identify Gregor as “*homo futuens*” (128) or “heterosexual man.” Instead, as the analysis of the extended passage from *Psychopathia Sexualis* makes clear, Gregor’s masturbatory posture threatens to disclose his homosexuality.⁶ His sticky “hot belly” testifies to the wider “metamorphosis” that, as Krafft-Ebing has argued, masturbation engenders within the congenital homosexual. Significantly, mother and sister respond to Gregor with verbal indirection. His mother screams, “Oh, God, Oh, God!,” and his sister calls out “You, Gregor” (36), turning his name into an invective. Taken together, the reactions frame Gregor’s action as a moral transgression, but for mother and sister alike that action remains unspeakable.

So, too, does Gregor, for his redirection of the image enacts his parodic christening: stuck to the glossy photograph and secreting bodily fluids, he becomes an embodiment of perversion, an identity category to which the picture frame that he has made itself draws the reader’s attention. Gregor the masturbator/homosexual occupies a rhetorical silence. Unspeakable as a human being, Gregor must henceforth be identified only as a bug, a “monstrous vermin,” an “it” that his family would rather eradicate than

⁵ I am indebted to my colleague Pam Brown for drawing my attention to Kafka’s likely allusion here to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870). As Larry Wolff notes, when Krafft-Ebing coined the term masochism in 1890, he “was not merely borrowing the name of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch as a convenient label; rather, the case histories in the many editions of *Psychopathia Sexualis* indicated that Sacher-Masoch, through his published writings and even through personal contacts, had already long exercised a sort of cult appeal upon people who recognized their own sexual inclinations in his literary work” (vii).

⁶ Krafft-Ebing’s discussion of perverse metamorphosis (*metamorphosis sexualis*) finds resonance in this moment in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, when Gregor presses himself against the picture of the woman in furs. In the original German, while Krafft-Ebing uses the term “*Metamorphose*,” Kafka chooses “*Verwandlung*,” a synonym that also connotes “transubstantiation.” Kafka’s word choice in effect allows him to keep the reference to

engage. So Gregor's sister remarks some pages later: "I won't pronounce the name of my brother in front of this monster, and so all I can say is: we have to try to get rid of *it*" (51; emphasis added). This refusal on the part of the family to recognize Gregor as one of their own, as human, underscores how theirs is a repudiation of his identity category. The etymological meaning of the name "Gregor" notwithstanding, Gregor exists apart from the "herd" or, in this case, the familial household: rejected by his family, he remains closeted within his room, where, eventually, he dies.

Lessons from *The Metamorphosis*

The Metamorphosis, particularly when read against turn-of-the-century sexological discussions, provides a powerful example of how society, whether as local as the family or as extensive as a culture, polices its members. Some of these means of control are readily identifiable; others are not. Similarly, Kafka's text offers both overt and subtle signs of Gregor's alienation. In terms of the former, the text's continual comparisons of Gregor with Christ come readily to mind. Beginning with the novella title, which in German (*die Verwandlung*) conveys the idea of transubstantiation as well as metamorphosis, these comparisons with Christ ultimately culminate in Gregor's death, which he understands as a self-sacrifice for the good of his family. Such overt signs of course allow the reader to identify Gregor's estrangement and to recognize his heroism in the process. Importantly, though, such signs do not allow one to experience *The Metamorphosis* as a text that itself participates in the censorship of its meaning. That is, key to understanding Gregor's alienation is the reader's consciousness that the narrative itself works to disrupt the reader's interpretation of and identification with the

Krafft-Ebing in play, even as "*Verwandlung*" foregrounds the tension between sexuality and conventional Christian morality within Gregor's world.

protagonist. *The Metamorphosis* most effectively conveys Gregor's alienation in those moments that themselves call attention to the text's construction of meaning as unspeakable. Those moments exist *both within* the narrative framework of text *and within* the reader's own social context. In terms of the text, because of the policing mechanisms at work within it, Gregor's masturbation scene could be readily overlooked in a discussion of the novella that focuses on Gregor's alienation without considering the power of cultural frameworks to determine that alienation. Yet, importantly, within the scene Gregor *is framed*, and, pressed against the picture of the woman in furs, Gregor is framed by a frame that he has himself made. This scene, then, attests not to the power of social transgression but instead to the power of the cultural closet to which Gregor himself adheres. Here Gregor's identity as a sexual deviant is codified through its construction as unspeakable. This scene proves crucial to understanding the political power of Kafka's literary text in particular and cultural texts in general. Brilliantly demonstrating the pervasive power of cultural frameworks to define subjects' il/legitimacy, *Metamorphosis* both mirrors and participates in Gregor's alienation.

If, as this reading has suggested, that alienation depends upon the political practice of stigmatizing non-normative practices and people, one is left wondering whether Gregor would fare any better in post-September 11th American society. It is a question worth asking our students as well, for, like the text itself, the reading context is rife with mechanisms of social control. The classroom is a political space, and many teachers can speak of such unspeakable subjects as non-normative sexualities and genders only at very real risk to their jobs. We would do well to tell our students that, some ninety years after *The Metamorphosis*'s publication, the teacher, like Gregor

Samsa, remains an embattled subject. How is one to speak of homosexuality when homosexuality remains culturally proscribed as “unspeakable”? Perhaps the most important lesson that we can offer our students is that the construction of meaning through language is a political process that always harbors the potential for subjects’ horrifying metamorphosis. If we are to resist the fate of the alienated being that is Gregor atop the framed magazine picture, we must draw attention to the various forms of bigotry, homophobia among them, that frame educational experience.

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