

Kafka's The Metamorphosis

Adam Phillips makes a convincing case for why the literary was both a seduction and something suspect for Freud. As he points out, Freud was worried about sounding like a short story writer:¹

"... and it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science."²

Kafka, in his turn, was both seduced by and suspicious of Freud. He writes in his diary of "his thoughts of Freud" on completing his breakthrough story *The Judgement*, which he finished in a night of fevered writing on 22nd September 1912.³ It was the writing of this story, which he elsewhere compared to a bloody and painful giving birth⁴, that confirmed for Kafka the direction his poetic vision was to take.

"I wrote this story 'The Judgement' in the night of 22nd to 23rd from ten in the evening until six in the morning at a single stroke. I could hardly draw my legs, which had grown tired by being seated, from under the desk. The terrible strain and the joy as the story developed before me, and as it progressed through the waters. Often at night I carried my whole weight on my back. How everything can be ventured, how a strange fire is ready for all ideas, however strange, in which they burn up and are resurrected... This is the only way to write, only in such continuity, with this complete opening of body and soul ..."⁵

One can only conjecture how reading Freud could have contributed to such a breakthrough. In the story, Georg Bendemann, a seemingly successful young man, hesitates over the writing of a letter to a bachelor friend in Russia, announcing his engagement. Georg fears arousing the friend's envy, and so enters the darkened sick room of his widowed father to ask for his advice about whether he should tell of the engagement at all. There, instead of receiving fatherly advice, he is subjected to an ordeal of accusations and humiliations by an increasingly empowered father, who literally grows to a terrifying size before his eyes. The father demolishes the son's character, dashes his hopes of marriage and condemns him to death before collapsing. The story ends with Georg carrying out his father's last sentence, the *judgement* of the title, by drowning himself while calling out, "Dear parents, I did always love you".⁶

Perhaps it is possible from this short synopsis to speculate how Freud's early ideas of the Oedipus complex, with its primordial pitting of son against father, could have acted as a suggestion to Kafka to stage an oedipal drama of his own. There is evidence that Kafka read and admired Freud, but, as his close friend and literary executor Max Brod tells us, he was not entirely convinced by him. Kafka considered the psychoanalytic theories "a very rough and

¹ In his essay "Making the Case: Freud's Literary Engagements." Adam Phillips, *Side Effects* (Hamish Hamilton 2006) p.42.

² In "Discussion of the Case of Fräulein Elisabeth von R." Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* 1895 (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol 2 Vintage 2001) p.160.

³ "...Gedanken an Freud natürlich..." Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, Malcolm Pasley (S. Fischer, 1990) p.461.

⁴ "...because the story came out of me like a live birth, covered in blood and dirt, and only I had the hands with which I could reach its body, and the desire to bring it forth." Ibid, p.491.

⁵ Ibid, p.460.

⁶ *The Judgement, a Story.* Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories* (Penguin Books 2000) p.47.

ready explanation which didn't do justice to detail, or rather to the real heartbeat of the conflict."⁷ Instead of going to Vienna to experience psychoanalysis at first hand like so many other writers of the time, Kafka stayed in Prague, and continued to work at the workers insurance firm he so loathed (not because he hated the work itself so much as because it kept him from his writing)⁸. In times of distress and suffering Kafka always turned to writing as his lifeline, preferring instead of the talking cure, the 'writing cure'⁹ in Adam Phillips' felicitous phrase.

By the time he came to writing *The Metamorphosis*, the famous short story of a man's transformation into a cockroach, Kafka was in the grip of an infatuation with Felice Brauer, a young woman he had met a few months earlier. Letter after letter attests to his state of complete desperation at this time, mainly over the question of whether she loved him back, but also over his inability to carry on with his novel (titled *The Man who Disappeared*).

"I was just sitting down to yesterday's story with an infinite longing to pour myself into it, obviously stimulated by my despair. Harassed by so much, uncertain of you, completely incapable of coping with the office, in view of the novel's being at a standstill for a day with a wild desire to continue the new, equally cautionary story, for several days and nights worryingly close to complete insomnia..."¹⁰

The 'cautionary story' he mentions here is *The Metamorphosis*. In light of the fact that the story was written at a time of great ongoing emotional stress¹¹ this essay will look at the question of what Kafka discovered and expressed in the course of writing it. And further, how and in what way might the writing of the story have mitigated his suffering? In trying to answer these questions I will read the story alongside some psychoanalytical theories which I see as addressing similar problems, anxieties and questions. In the first part I shall look at John Steiner's theory of psychic retreats, suggesting that Kafka's creature, his metaphor of the cockroach, offered him a psychic retreat from unbearable pressures.

In the second part I shall look at Ella Sharpe's theories of how bodily experience is transformed into unconscious phantasy and dreaming. This I will suggest is the bedrock from which conscious fantasy, like that of Kafka's fiction with its operational metaphors, is mined. In this context I shall wonder what conscious fantasy allows the writer to achieve, and why he or she should wish to make unconscious phantasies conscious? What satisfaction could there be in such an endeavour? Kafka often wrote of his fear of writing, so perhaps one should also ask, in the process of making the unconscious conscious, what is the danger? What was Kafka afraid of?

Finally, in the third part, I shall look for the hidden erotic within the story, following the way the narrative seems to swing between satisfied intimacy and alienation, and suggest that Kafka was in pursuit of libidinal wishes at odds with the law of the father. Both Lacan's idea of the paternal symbolic which requires the child's acceptance of a post-oedipal position, and Freud's ideas of regression onto earlier modes of sexuality in times of stress are relevant in

⁷ Max Brod. *Franz Kafka: A Biography* (Schocken Books 1960) p.18.

⁸ See his letter to Felice on the night of 17 November 1912 where he complains bitterly of going everyday to the office - "a stronger personality would have committed suicide quite cheerfully." *Letters to Felice*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (Penguin 1978) p. 152.

⁹ Adam Phillips, *Side Effects*, p. 57.

¹⁰ In letter of 18 November 1912. *Letters to Felice*, p.154.

¹¹ Kafka had written to Max Brod of his thoughts of suicide just a month earlier. From "Letters and Diaries" in *The Metamorphosis*, translated and edited by Stanley Corngold (A Norton Critical Edition 1996) p.63.

this context. The text shows regression onto sado-masochistic pleasures as well as an attempt at a merging with the mother. One could ask whether Kafka was trying to create an alternative symbolic system - the hermeneutic of his own writing - as a way of revolting out of the paternal symbolic. The fact that he was very unsatisfied with the ending of his story, and considered it a failure, as well as the fact that his hero the cockroach dies, is a measure of the pain and impossibility of such revolt.

"I don't know that anybody's task was ever this hard. You might say it isn't a task, not even an impossible one, it is not even an impossibility itself, it is nothing, it is not even as much a child as a barren woman's hope of one. And yet it is the air I breathe, so long as I am to breathe."¹²

Part 1

John Steiner defines a psychic retreat as "an area of relative peace and protection from strain when meaningful contact with the analyst is experienced as threatening."¹³ He sees it as an organised and powerful system of defences which enable the patient to find relief from intolerable anxieties, which he analyses in Kleinian terms to be either of the paranoid-schizoid or the depressive type. The retreat is like a third position,¹⁴ always available and set up by all types of personalities (both severely ill and less so), which makes possible an avoidance of contact both with the analyst and with reality. Steiner goes on to say:

"The retreat then serves as an area of the mind where reality does not have to be faced, where phantasy and omnipotence can exist unchecked and where anything is permitted. This feature is often what makes the retreat so attractive to the patient and commonly involves the use of perverse or psychotic mechanisms."¹⁵

In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka has his protagonist Gregor Samsa wake up, after a night of disturbing dreams (perhaps in reaction to those dreams), in a psychic retreat of a most unusual kind. It is a *fait accompli*, a mysterious transformation into a giant insect, which leaves the hero clueless about what has happened to him.

"When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin ... His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, were waving helplessly before his eyes.

'What has happened to me?' he thought. It was no dream."¹⁶

Gregor surveys his bedroom and is reassured to find everything the way it was. He finds his senses intact and his mind operating as normal, but when he tries to get up he cannot because of his new shape, which he at first tries to disavow.¹⁷ He remains in bed and starts to think

¹² Diary entry 21st January 1922, Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, p.884.

¹³ John Steiner, *Psychic Retreats* (Routledge 1995) p.1.

¹⁴ See diagram. *Ibid.* p.160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.3.

¹⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 3.

¹⁷ "How about going back to sleep for a few minutes and forgetting all this nonsense." *Ibid.* p.3.

about his gruelling job as a travelling salesman, which he has been doing as a way of paying off his parents' debts. Gregor's complaints show some of the anxieties he need no longer contend with.

"... I've got the torture of travelling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, constantly seeing new faces ... To the devil with it all! He felt a slight itching up on top of his belly..."¹⁸

Kafka undercuts Gregor's litany of misery with a concrete worry, an itching, which is an example of how Gregor's life and concerns have now changed. The psychic retreat, his new insect form, has allowed him to get away from his usual grown up problems, like catching trains and meeting people. As the story progresses, we can see how being a "monstrous vermin" helps Gregor cope with the demands not only of his work but also of his family. His voice, for instance, has changed to a "distressed chirping" which his family cannot understand, although he is capable of understanding them. This absolves him from the anxiety of having to be understood.¹⁹

As Gregor's family congregate outside his room and implore him to open up, he tries to comply. He heaves himself onto the floor, and by clinging to the furniture manages to open part of the door. But at the sight of him, chaos breaks loose: the assistant manager who has come to call him flees, his mother screams and his father picks up a cane and starts hissing. Kafka artfully weaves the father's symbols of power (cane, newspaper) into a humorous but painful account of how the father finally manages to force Gregor back into his room.²⁰ Gregor is then confined in his room, literally locked in at first, and then allowed out only a little way at proscribed times. On his second attempt to emerge to interact with his family, his father throws apples at him until a rotten piece of apple gets lodged in his back and causes him "startling, unbelievable pain".²¹

That the protagonist seems to accept his fate, and mutely submits to all his family's acts of expulsion and aggression, is thanks to his protective shell. Kafka suggests that what the psychic retreat of his new identity as vermin protects him from is from his own reactions and aggression. If he were not an insect, in the oedipal war with his father, he would have to stand up for himself, which is what Gregor does not seem to be able or want to do. Steiner sees psychic retreats as avoidant of contact with people and reality, but Kafka's version of retreat shows us a protagonist who seeks contact (shown by Gregor's attempts to emerge from his room, his hunger for the family's conversations²², his desire to see his mother²³) but is driven away and forced into deeper retreat. Of course it is only as a cockroach that Gregor makes his offers of contact, which is perhaps Kafka's way of telling us that irrevocable harm has already been done, and that on one level, only a permanent and irreversible retreat, as radical as a change in form, will do.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.4.

¹⁹ See for example the exchange with his mother on p. 5. Ibid.

²⁰ "... the voice behind Gregor did not sound like that of only a single father; ..and Gregor forced himself - come what may - into the doorway. One side of his body rose up, he lay lop-sided in the opening, one of his flanks was scraped raw, ugly blotches marred the white door, soon he got stuck ... when from behind his father gave him a hard shove, which was truly his salvation, and bleeding profusely, he flew far into his room. The door was slammed shut with the cane, then at last everything was quiet." Ibid. p.15.

²¹ Kafka's metaphor for showing the pain of a paternal attack on the ego. Ibid. p.29.

²² Ibid. p.19.

²³ Ibid. p.23.

Steiner suggests that psychic retreats offer escape from reality and create a space where omnipotence and phantasies can operate more freely. Kafka's cockroach, in contrast, seems addicted to reality. He sees, albeit slowly and with ever increasing surprise, not only the reality of his own situation (he is an unwanted insect of limited capabilities) but also the reality of the family's worries and dynamics. He sees that the more incapacitated he is, the more the others blossom: his father gets a job as a messenger, his mother sews lingerie for a store, and his sister finds a job as a salesgirl. Before the transformation all three had been wasting away at home while Gregor worked. But such awareness of reality brings Gregor no respite. Since he has increasingly less say in the ordering of his life²⁴ (he cannot act upon his sense of reality because he can influence nothing in the household) Gregor takes to finding what pleasures he can in the new situation.

"... so, as a distraction, he adopted the habit of crawling crisscross over the walls and the ceiling. He especially liked hanging from the ceiling; it was completely different from lying on the floor, one could breathe more freely; a faint swinging sensation went through the body; and in the almost happy absent-mindedness which Gregor felt up there, it could happen to his own surprise that he let go and plopped onto the floor."²⁵

The bathos in this passage is a measure of how Kafka sees Gregor's proscribed omnipotence. Couched in a language of seeming freedom, Kafka highlights the hero's self-delusion, and his self-pleasuring which at least offers him some sense of self-control over his body. As Steiner suggests, there is regression here to perverse mechanisms (the cockroach gets masturbatory sensations while in the air), and a feeling that anything is permitted (Gregor likes the idea of an arbitrary letting go). There are very few moments of release such as these in the story²⁶, and when they occur, Kafka carefully underwrites them with irony or false pathos, as a way of showing how this particular form of psychic retreat (being a hardcore insect) fails his hero.

After being almost completely neglected, Gregor eventually dies a quiet, unremarked death.²⁷ The narration survives this death and goes on to ironise how the family deal with Gregor's dying (with a sense of relief). Kafka thus distances himself from his tragically retreated hero, and from the rather inhumane family that surrounds him.

Part 2

Ella Sharpe's idea that speech is a metaphorical activity, ultimately substituting sounds (and later words) for bodily experiences and feelings, is one which Kafka concurs with when he writes of the desire to:

"write all my anxiety entirely out of the depths of me, write it into the depths of the paper just as it comes out of the depths of me, or write it down in such a way that I could draw what I have written into me completely."²⁸

²⁴ His sister for example removes almost all the familiar (and therefore comforting) furniture in his room without any thought for his wishes. Ibid. p.25.

²⁵ Ibid. p.23.

²⁶ Another example is when Gregor listens to his sister playing the violin. The music moves him so that he feels nourished. Ibid. p.36.

²⁷ Ibid. p.39.

²⁸ Quoted by Stanley Corngold in his essay "Kafka's The Metamorphosis." Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p.84.

For both, words are a way in which the immaterial becomes expressible. Sharpe writes:

"At the same time as sphincter control over anus and urethra is being established, the child is acquiring the power of speech, and so an avenue of "outer-ance" present from birth becomes of immense importance. First of all the discharge of feeling tension, when this is no longer relieved by physical discharge, can take place through speech. The activity of speaking is substituted for the physical activity now restricted at other openings of the body, while words themselves become the very substitutes for the bodily substances."²⁹

For Sharpe the angers, pleasures, desires and hatreds of infantile life which had found some outlet in soiling, crying and movement, find a new source of discharge through language. Sphincter control limits the child's expressive capabilities in one area, so the child turns to language as a substitute. She writes of metaphor:

"In metaphor that is the expression of vital emotion the repressed psycho-physical experiences have found the verbal images in the pre-conscious that express them."³⁰ and also: "An examination of metaphors used by patients reveals, as one would expect, a preponderance of images based upon experiences of the pre-genital stages and the repressed Oedipus wishes."³¹

Traditional psychoanalytical literary criticism³² has often looked for the subtext behind a writer's use of metaphors, assuming that most of these were innocent of psychoanalytic knowledge, and could therefore be read as representing consciousness, behind which the critic could decipher the text's (and perhaps even the writer's) unconscious. Kafka's writing, on the other hand, demands a different type of reading since it is not innocent in this way. It shows much knowledge of inner processes, some of it perhaps sparked by Kafka's reading of Freud, but mostly, through a kind of writerly intuition, which parallels the findings of psychoanalysis.

Thus, Ella Sharpe's theories of the physicality of metaphor are confirmed by Kafka's own findings. It is because he senses the physicality of metaphor, in his search for origins, that he foregrounds the physicality of his insect protagonist in *The Metamorphosis*. He repeatedly calls attention to the layout of its body - its "itchy spots" and "small white dots" - its oozy substances, smell and stickiness. On his first attempt to get out of his room, for example, Gregor:

"paid no attention to the fact that he was undoubtedly hurting himself in some way, for a brown liquid came out of his mouth, flowed over the key, and dripped onto the floor."³³

His mother, despite her alarm and distress, does not forget to open a window, when he first emerges into the family's presence, presumably to get rid of his horrible smell.³⁴ On his second outing from the bedroom, Gregor inadvertently "crawled over everything, walls, furniture, and ceiling"³⁵, smearing the "little sticky substance"³⁶ that his legs exuded all over

²⁹ Ella Freeman Sharpe, "Psycho-Physical Problems Revealed in Language." *Collected Papers on Psycho-analysis*, ed. Marjorie Brierly (London 1950), p.157.

³⁰ Ibid. p.168.

³¹ Ibid. p.168.

³² For a list of such criticism and of how it tries to psychologise Kafka, see Stanley Corngold's essay, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. *The Metamorphosis*, p. 94.

³³ Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p.11.

³⁴ Ibid. p.14.

³⁵ Ibid. p.27.

³⁶ Ibid. p.11.

the room. It is possible to read from the accumulation of such references, an intense physical source of tension which the text is trying to negotiate. When Kafka writes of his desire to "write all my anxiety entirely out of me", he wants to dispose of the tension. When he writes of wanting to "draw what I have written into me completely"³⁷ it is as if he wants to master the tension, to control it and make it his own.

Although the family shun the changed Gregor precisely because of his intrusive, offensive physicality, Gregor himself begins to relish it. The narration enjoys pointing out the closer, more meaningful relationship he now has with his body. He finds his numerous legs work well, his hard back is useful, as are his improving sense of hearing and smell. Kafka knowingly privileges a lower, more bodily state of being, over Gregor's previously more rational, duty-bound self. He preserves all his powers of thought but in addition, he is allowed to 'think the body', in a manner analogous to Freud's return of the repressed. Viewed in these terms, Gregor's transformation into a cockroach is a symptom formation. At a time when Kafka felt stuck with his own writing³⁸, he creates a character, Gregor, who cannot sublimate his desires. When the repressed (in the form of the body with its forgotten wishes and desires, its physical tensions and substances) returns, he turns into a cockroach. Kafka humorously and painfully insists on the metaphor, but we as readers can see Gregor for the human being he really is, trapped but also oddly freed by his neurosis.

Gregor's neurotic symptom is a fictional creation. Following Sharpe (who in turn was elaborating Freud), one could say that Kafka, at a time of trauma, turned to writing because the present trauma recalled and took sustenance from infantile ones. The psycho-physical nature of these traumas gave rise to unconscious phantasies, which are the place from which Kafka brings up his fictions. Mary Jacobus, in an illuminating essay on Ella Sharpe's "body poetics" gives an account of why an artist might do this:

"Importantly, creativity for Sharpe is driven not by sin and repentance (Christian equivalent of Kleinian reparation and forgiveness) but by the symbolic pursuit of displaced libidinal wishes."³⁹

For Sharpe, the original displaced libidinal wish is something she calls the "wish-psychosis", which is the belief in an incorporated object, such as the mother's breast, which "preserves the illusions of non-bodily separation."⁴⁰ Such an incorporation brings not only the power of the incorporated object with it but also intense anxiety (because the incorporation includes all the hatred and aggression which had been initially projected onto the object).⁴¹ Thus when a writer makes unconscious phantasies conscious, it is as a means to an end. He or she does so in the pursuit of displaced libidinal wishes. When one asks why one pursues such wishes in the first place, theory takes us back to the Oedipus complex and the creating of subjectivity. It is subjectivity, a sense of being alive and whole, that is at stake for Kafka when he writes.

³⁷ See earlier quote on p.5 of this essay, footnote 29.

³⁸ See earlier quote on p.2 of this essay, footnote 10.

³⁹ From the essay "Body Poetics: Ella Sharpe." Mary Jacobus, *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis* (Oxford University Press 2005) p.23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.18.

⁴¹ Jacobus quotes Sharpe: "As she would have taken those things from her mother she desired and envied, from milk to children and the father's penis, so there had been projected on to the mother intents as destructive to herself." *Ibid.* p.30.

"My life consists and, at bottom, has always consisted of attempts at writing, most of which have been unsuccessful. But when I was not writing, I was lying flat on the floor, fit to be swept out of the house..."⁴²

Gregor, with his inability to sublimate, also ends up lying dead on the floor of his room in *The Metamorphosis*.⁴³ Kafka is not identical with his protagonist - on the contrary, the writing, if successful, seems to offer an affirmation of selfhood. Kafka turns to writing at times of trauma as a means of recreating the "I". If we come back to the question of why writing should also be a source of terror, Kafka tries to answer it for us.

"But what is it to be a writer? Writing is a sweet, wonderful reward, but its price? During the night the answer was transparently clear to me: it is the reward for service to the devil. This descent to the dark powers, this unbinding of spirits by nature bound, dubious embraces and whatever else may go on below, of which one no longer knows anything above ground, when in the sunlight one writes stories."⁴⁴

Part 3

As Georg Bendemann in *The Judgement* is catapulting over the bridge to his death, Kafka writes: "At that moment the traffic was passing over the bridge in a positively unending stream."⁴⁵ To Max Brod he later explained what he had written: "Do you know what the last sentence means? When I wrote it, I had in mind a violent ejaculation."⁴⁶ So, an ejaculation, whether of urine or semen or of sound and meaning, closes the story which Kafka saw as his breakthrough. The father destroys Georg's erotic pretensions by pouring scorn on his thoughts of love and marriage, but the text preserves them for Kafka.

In *The Metamorphosis* too, Kafka weaves an erotic satisfaction that he hides to a large extent or makes only fleetingly visible. On the very first page he has his hero Gregor gazing at a picture of "a lady done up in a fur hat and a fur boa, sitting upright and raising up against the viewer a heavy fur muff in which her whole forearm had disappeared."⁴⁷ This iconic picture is an allusion to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's cult novel *Venus in Furs*, in which the protagonist (also called Gregor) pursues his fantasies of being sexually subjugated.⁴⁸ Kafka also played with the name of Sacher-Masoch (Sa-Mas) with his invented surname of Samsa. When Gregor's sister and mother are removing all the furniture from his room, he looks about wondering what to save. Kafka writes:

"then he saw hanging conspicuously on the wall, which was otherwise bare already, 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."⁴⁹

⁴² From letter of 1st November 1912. *Letters to Felice*, p.120.

⁴³ "Gregor's body was completely flat and dry;" *The Metamorphosis*, p.40.

⁴⁴ Letter to Max Brod 5th July 1922 *The Metamorphosis* (Norton Critical Edition) p.73.

⁴⁵ *The Judgement, Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, p.47.

⁴⁶ Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography* p.129.

⁴⁷ *The Metamorphosis*, p.3.

⁴⁸ Krafft-Ebing coined the term 'masochism' from the author's name Sacher-Masoch, thereby creating a new clinical category for his *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Freud took the terms sadism and masochism from the latter work, suggesting that these were the names of the most common of all perversions in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." Sigmund Freud, *Complete Works* Vol.7, p.157.

⁴⁹ *The Metamorphosis*, p.26.

Venus in Furs provides Gregor with some sense of satisfaction (of the sado-masochistic kind Kafka suggests) at a time of profound stress. But this satisfaction is markedly different from those he sees around him. He witnesses, for example, an implicitly sexual encounter between his father and mother when the latter runs out to stop his father from killing him with pelted apples. Gregor

"saw his mother run up to his father and on the way her unfastened petticoats slide to the floor one by one; and saw as, stumbling over the skirts, she forced herself onto his father, and embracing him, in complete union with him - but now Gregor's sight went dim - her hands clasping his father's neck, begged for Gregor's life."⁵⁰

Gregor's sight goes "dim" because he does not want to see the primal scene, but the text, with its building rhythm and - in the original German even more⁵¹ - suggestive writing leads to a consummation of sorts. Kafka recognised that his father was the centre around which his trauma gathered. In the *Letter to My Father* he writes:

"My opinion of myself depended more on you than on anything else ... where I lived I was an outcast, condemned, defeated, and although I struggled my utmost to flee elsewhere, it was labour in vain, because I was trying to do something that was impossible, that was beyond my strength ..."⁵²

In both *The Judgement* and *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonists come to grief at the behest of their fathers. Kafka writes elsewhere in the letter that in front of his father "he exchanged his self-confidence for an infinite sense of guilt".⁵³ Max Brod tried to apply Freud's theories of the Oedipus complex to Kafka's relationship with his father but drew back in the face of what he regarded as Kafka's excessive abjection on this point. He states that he does not understand why Kafka needed his father's approval so much that he felt his life was unbearable without it.⁵⁴

Jacques Lacan's theory of the importance of the phallus for entry to the symbolic order in which subjectivity is essentially constituted points to why the figure of the father is so vital for a sense of self-hood.⁵⁵ A helpful commentary on Lacan states that "The phallus provides the vital link between desire and signification."⁵⁶ For Lacan the Oedipus complex is the site of competing desires. The child who until this point has been unified with the mother (in the child's imaginary world, both desiring each other reciprocally) suddenly notices that the mother's desire is directed elsewhere. The commentary goes on to explain:

"In this sense, argues Lacan, the Oedipus complex involves an element of substitution, that is to say, the substitution of one signifier, the desire of the mother, for another, the Name-of-the-Father. It is through this initial act of substitution that the process of signification begins and the child enters the symbolic order as a subject of lack."⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.29.

⁵¹ "wie dann die Mutter auf den Vater zulief und ihr auf dem Weg die aufgebundenen Röcke einer nach dem andere zu Boden glitten, und wie sie stolpernd über die Röcke auf den Vater eindrang und ihn umarmend, in gänzlicher Vereinigung mit ihm - nun versagte aber Gregor's Sehkraft schon - die Hände an des Vaters Hinterkopf um Schonung von Gregor's Leben bat." Franz Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* (Suhrkamp 1999) p.51.

⁵² From "Letter to My Father", quoted by Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, p.25.

⁵³ Ibid, p.24.

⁵⁴ Ibid, Chapter 1.

⁵⁵ For Lacan what the father stood for, what he signified, was more important than the real, actual father.

⁵⁶ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (Routledge 2005) p.56.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.56.

In *The Metamorphosis* Kafka repeatedly shows us the desire of the mother for the father, where it is always ironised and shown up as excessive and florid, almost comic: "At this his mother screamed once more, fled from the table, and fell into the arms of his father, who came rushing up to her."⁵⁸ He cannot accept his position as the observer of his mother's love, especially for a father who competes openly with him, and withholds the love and approval which could have helped him to climb out of the oedipal cauldron. He both loses the fight (loses his self-confidence) and feels guilty, presumably because of the murderous rivalry with his father and his inability to give up the desire for his mother. Gregor's hateful thoughts are cloaked however in Kafka's self-ceding, submissive, ironic prose. Real aggression, which we as readers are aware that Gregor feels, is allowed to surface only intermittently.⁵⁹

Enjoyment, desire, pleasure, even self-expression, all become contaminated with both guilt and a sense of inferiority. It is perhaps not surprising that at a time when Kafka found himself in love (with Felice) he is suddenly confronting the old oedipal drama and gives expression to it in his short story. Freud writes:

"Being in love consists in a flowing-over of ego-libido on to the object. It has the power to remove repressions and re-instate perversions."⁶⁰

Kafka shows us a hero who has similarly retreated into a state where perversions are given relatively free play. The whole metaphor of the cockroach, with its connotations of a thing that thrives on excrement, is an anal repost to his family, a regression into a childlike place (the clarity and simplicity of the prose are indicators of this sense of childishness) when open hostility and hatred cannot be permitted. Kafka creates a subtly rebellious hero, whose poignant death points to the writer's oedipal tragedy at the same time that the writing itself revels in a veiled sexual enjoyment all its own.

Conclusion

This essay has looked at Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* from three points of view, reading some of its essential themes and methods with the help of psychoanalytical theories that have similar concerns. Thus, John Steiner's theory of the use of a psychic retreat at times of stress is one which parallels what Kafka tries out in his story. He creates a porous but irreversible psychic retreat for his hero by turning him into a giant cockroach. This essay also looked at Ella Sharpe's theories of transformation, in which she aligns the emergence of language and metaphor with the repression of the body and its "outerances"⁶¹. Kafka, as he examines his metaphor and searches for its origin, comes up with similar conclusions as Sharpe. He foregrounds the insect's physicality because he senses the physicality of the body that has been repressed and tries to bring it back to life in his fiction.

⁵⁸ *The Metamorphosis*, p.14.

⁵⁹ See for example Gregor's hissing on hearing the family's rows, *Ibid.* p.32.

⁶⁰ On Narcissism: An Introduction. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol.14* (Vintage 2001) p.100.

⁶¹ A term she uses to distinguish the body's expressionistic capabilities to those involving language use. "Psycho-Physical Problems Revealed in Language." Ella Sharpe, *Collected Papers*, p.157.

The return of the body allows for some pleasure and enjoyment, but at the same time, entails a "descent to the dark powers"⁶² and a sense of unbinding which is reminiscent of Freud's description of the death instinct.⁶³ Finally, this essay traced the hidden erotic within the story, suggesting that the text was privileging regressive sado-masochistic fantasies over more normal ones. It went on to suggest, with the help of Lacan's theory of phallic symbolisation, that part of the reason for such regression could be defeat in the oedipal war with the father. Access to self-hood and signification are hindered by hostile paternal attack. Every time Gregor tries to emerge from his room, he is driven back by his father, for example, which is Kafka's metaphorical way of telling us of his essential trauma:

"If there is such a thing as metempsychosis then I am not yet at the lowest stage. My life is the hesitation before birth."⁶⁴

The symbolic order which everyone needs for a sense of the self is blocked and sullied for him by guilt, shame and self-hatred. It is because of this perhaps that Kafka considers himself one of the unborn, and needs to write as a way of constantly restaging his own birth.

⁶² See earlier quote on p.8, footnote 45.

⁶³ "After long hesitations and vacillations we have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, Eros and the destructive instincts... The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus - in short, to bind together; the aim of the second is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things." Sigmund Freud, from "An Outline of Psycho-Analysis", *Complete Works* Vol.23, p. 148. Freud used the terms *death instinct* and *destructive instinct* interchangeably.

⁶⁴ Diary entry, 24 January 1922, *Tagebücher*, p.888.