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100 YEARS SINCE KAFKA'S "THE METAMORPHOSIS"



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WALTER BENJAMIN

“FRANZ KAFKA. ON THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH”

In early May 1934 Walter Benjamin was invited by the Berlin newspaper *Jüdische Rundschau*'s chief editor Robert Weltsch to write an essay on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Franz Kafka's death. Since Benjamin already had a plan to write on Kafka, he managed to finish the essay in a couple of months and it was first published in two parts in *Jüdische Rundschau*, Nr. 102/103 from 21.XII.1934 and Nr. 104 from 28.XII.1934. Kafka's figure engaged Benjamin for many years and it is a theme of many notes, fragments and letters from his personal correspondence. Some documents even reveal Benjamin's intention to rework the essay published in *Jüdische Rundschau* in order to transform it into a book.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, dialectics, narrative, parable, gesture and drama, Judaic messianism

The translation published here is based on: Walter Benjamin, *Allegorien kultureller Erfahrung: Ausgewählte Schriften 1920 – 1940*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1984; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II, 2*, hrsg. v. Rolf Tiedemann u. Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991.

Translation from German: **Bodgana Paskaleva**

WALTER SOKEL

“KAFKA'S *METAMORPHOSIS*: REBELLION AND PUNISHMENT”

Walter Sokel was born in Vienna in December 1917. He fled soon after the Nazi Anschluss of Austria in 1938, and arrived in New York at the age of 21. On the basis of a letter of recommendation from the German author Thomas Mann, he received a scholarship from Rutgers University, and went on to become a prominent professor and scholar. In a career spanning almost 50 years, Sokel was connected to many top US, German and Austrian universities; he spent the last 20 years of his teaching activity (from 1973 until 1994) as Professor of German Literature at the University of Virginia. He is known for his work on XXth century European literature, German intellectual history, Expressionism, and in particular Kafka. His books published in 1960^s were the first to put Kafka into his proper place as a classic of European literature.

Keywords: Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; “take Kafka at his word”; careful scrutiny of the text; metaphor in Kafka's work; pre-history of the metamorphosis; the role of the chief clerk; Freud's study of accidents; specific insect shape; secret history of hostility and guilt.

The first publication of *Kafka's 'Metamorphosis': Rebellion and Punishment* from Walter H. Sokel: *Monatshefte* (University of Wisconsin–Madison), Vol. 48, No. 4 (Apr. - May, 1956), 203-214. The translation presented here is based on Walter Sokel. “Kafkas ‘Verwandlung’: Auflehnung und Bestrafung” (1956), *Franz Kafka*. Hrsg. von Heinz Politzer. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980, 267-285.

Translation from German: **Mladen Vlashki**

MAURICE BLANCHOT

“THE READING OF KAFKA”

Maurice Blanchot is one of the most interesting and discerning French literary critics of the past century: a writer who considers literature as that unusual language through which we could grasp the utmost possibilities of our existence; in whose writings the boundaries

between fiction and theoretical knowledge, thought and invention are always uncertain; and whose main idea – that of the deep affinity between writing, death and its survival – permeates all his literary and philosophical work.

The Reading of Kafka (La Lecture de Kafka) appears for the first time in the monthly magazine *L'Arche*'s November 1945 issue. In 1949 it was included in the collection of Blanchot's literary critical texts *La Part du feu*. Among his many essays on Kafka this one falls also in the context of his early literary works in which the influence of the Czech writer could be felt particularly clearly.

Keywords: Kafka, fragmentariness, ambiguity, negativity, existence, transcendence, survival, impossibility.

The translation of the text is based on Maurice Blanchot, "La lecture de Kafka", *De Kafka à Kafka*, Éditions Gallimard, 1981, 62-74.

Translation from French: **Philip Stoilov**

STENLEY CORNGOLD

"THE STRUCTURE OF KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS"

The translation presented here is based on: Stanley Corngold, "The Structure of Kafka's Metamorphosis", *Kafka's 'Die Verwandlung': Metamorphosis of the Metaphor*, online: <https://www.academia.edu/>

Translation from English: **Angel Igov**

ALLEN THIHER

"UNDERSTANDING FRANZ KAFKA" (EXCERPT)

Allen Thiher is currently a Curators' Distinguished Professor Emeritus retired from the University of Missouri-Columbia and a permanent fellow of Clare Hall at Cambridge University. His PhD is in Romance Languages from the University of Wisconsin. He has written books on writers like Celine, Queneau, Proust, Kafka, and Musil as well as several on literature and science as well as literary theory.

The translated excerpt presented here is a part of his book on Kafka, *Understanding Franz Kafka*, now printing in a series called *Understanding Modern Literature* by the *University of South Carolina Press*. In this book Thiher makes an interpretation of Kafka's work stressing the constant play of self-referentiality that generates Kafka's comic vision of the impossible quest for understanding the quest for understanding. The book deals with Kafka's entire work with equal stress on stories and parables and the three unfinished novels. It also has a biographical introduction to acquaint the reader with Kafka's life as it unfolded in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and his reactions to the Empire's demise during World War I, as well as his disjointed family life as the unhappy bachelor.

MLADEN VLASHKI

"KAFKA'S LONG WAY TO BULGARIA. A REFLECTION ON THE CONTEXTS"

Abstract: The article identifies key moments and issues about the reception of Franz Kafka and his work in Bulgaria up to 1989. In the context of the European reception during the "Cold War", the initiatives of Nikolay Donchev, Minko Nikolov, Dimitar Statkov and

mostly Dimitar Stoevski to promote Kafka's works to the Bulgarian reader despite the ideological barriers, are rationalized.

Keywords: reception; Kafka's work; People's Republic of Bulgaria; European receptive context, censorship.

Mladen Vlashki teaches Classical and Western literature at the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski". He specialized comparative literature at the University of Vienna with a Franz-Verfel Fellowship. His research is focused on literary processes of Modernity with a specific emphasis on Wiener Moderne and German-speaking authors and their Bulgarian reception. Co-founder and editor of the literary magazine *Page*. His publications include literary criticism, academic handbooks and a monograph on the contemporary Bulgarian novel *A Romanology?* (Hermes, 2014).

CLEO PROTOKHRISTOVA
“THE MUSICAL ECSTASY OF GREGOR SAMSA AND KAFKA’S
“PERFECT UNMUSICALITY”

Abstract: The paper is focused on the enigmatic sentence “War er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff?” and the “musical episode” from Kafka's novella “The Metamorphosis”. The interpretation is in conformity with three interrelated contextual frames – certain artistic idiosyncrasies of the author, a synchronic cut of the period when the novella was written, and some particular tendencies in the development of European modernism from 1911 to 1924.

Key words: Kafka, “The Metamorphosis”, music

Cleo Protokhristova is Professor of Ancient and West European Literature and Comparative Literature at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. She has published eight single-authored books, six coedited volumes, and over hundred articles and reviews. Her publications include *Themes and Variations. Studies in Literary Thematics* (2016), *Notes from the Antechamber. Theory and Practices of Titling* (2014), *The Mirror: Literary, Metadiscursive and Cultural Comparative Trajectories* (2004), *West European Literature: Comparative Observations, Theses, Ideas* (2000, 2003, 2008), *Notes from the Antechamber. Theory and Practices of Titling* (2014), *Themes and Variations. Studies in Literary Thematics* (2016).

MAJA RAZBOJNIKOVA-FRATEVA
“DYNAMICS OF THE FAMILY CONSTELLATION IN KAFKA’S
METAMORPHOSIS”

Abstract: The starting point is the specific narrative of Kafka, and the article examines the tensions between the events being narrated, and their evaluation and interpretation, on the one hand, and the presence of a Self hidden behind the narrative in the 3rd person singular, which is at the same time experiencing and commenting itself, on the other. The connection between self-sacrifice and inclusion in the family's relations of power becomes visible through reconstruction of past metamorphoses and careful ignoring of ongoing changes within the family. The text uses the dynamics of the family constellation to expose the illusive perception of the family unit as a source of endless love and its participation in various mechanisms preventing love. Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis saves him from being absorbed ultimately by the family pattern of power. The unity of the hidden and the ambiguous Self allows us to interpret Gregor's metamorphosis as inevitable not only because he has burdened his family with expectations which it is not capable to meet, but also

because he has come to terms with the contradictions of his existence within its confines, and has thus declared the need to be excluded from it.

Keywords: narrative situation, family, self-sacrifice, power, metamorphosis

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GERGANA MIRCHEVA
**“EUGENICS AND BIOPOLITICS: MAIN CONCEPTS AND
METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES”**

Abstract: The article examines some major theoretical discussions and historiographic tendencies of the studies on eugenics discourses. Parallel to that, it traces central conceptual lines of eugenics from a world-wide perspective, including main topics, notions, rhetorical figures and practical effects. They are identified as elements of a common biopolitical field which are involved in complicated relations of “attraction” and “repulsion” with “neighbor” discourses, such as (social) hygiene, preventive medicine, physical, criminal and racial anthropology, demographic control, public health, etc. An attempt is made to localize Bulgarian eugenics projects before the Second World War within this interpretative framework. It is concluded that eugenic ideas and practices, as contradictory phenomena of Modernity, are multi-layered, heterogeneous and culturally (including nationally) specific.

Keywords: eugenics, biopolitics, historiographical debates, methodology, visions of degeneration, Bulgarian eugenics projects

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ALEXANDER KIOSSEV
“INTERNING UNGREGOR”

Abstract: This essay offers a reading of Kafka’s famous novella *Die Verwandlung* through the figures of the monstrous, biopolitics, and the boundaries of the human. The monster in the novella, however, is peculiar: it is an *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* (inaptly translated in bulgarian as “vermin”; “bug”, “cockroach” or “monstrous insect”), something unutterably unbearable; something less terrifying and hideous than repulsive, shameful and loathsome, outrageously-disgusting. Gregor-the-monster-vermin is framed within a small, domestic, petty-bourgeois world and confined to a room/isolator, a minimalistic hell – within what looks like a bourgeois apartment but is actually an exterritorial “nowhere”, excluded both from the divine and the human world. Similar to this gradual isolation is the narrative model of the whole novella, which deals with what happens with monsters in the world of humans at the beginning of the XXth century. Using seemingly realistic literary devices, Kafka coldly examines the metamorphosis of the unbearable creature: its travesty and its gradual, calming inscription into a most ordinary everyday life, the step-by-step isolation of the ever more emaciated monster in its banal, final prison.

Against this background, the interpretation offered here examines the trajectories of the possible preservation of the human in the wretched, monstrous Gregor, proposed by the novella: the narrative analysis traces the gradual loss of compassion for Gregor-the-son on the part of his closest family – his sister, mother and father; it traces how, in the beginning of the story, the narrator reaches into the soul of the human insect in a coldly-understanding manner and how he gradually pulls back from it just as coldly; how, in the end, the reader remains the sole understanding and compassionate keeper of the human in the withering, dying monster.

The second part of the essay traces the fate of the literalized metaphor of the vermin (*Ungeziefer* suggests a whole range of possible meanings: nasty bug, parasite, pest, vermin, parasite, pest etc., placing the stress on the peculiar German prefix *un-*, through which it is related to *Ungeheuer* – monster, *ungeheuerlich* – disgusting, indignating and *Untier* – unthinkable beast). It analyses the history of similar metaphors in the rhetoric of European biopolitics, and above all in the propaganda discourse of the Third Reich where the *Ungeziefer* trope had a key role in the categorization of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, etc., as parasites/non-humans who simply had to be exterminated medically through an elementary hygienic measures. This strange historical contextualization of the novella “in the future” makes it possible to associate Kafka’s story with a host of anticipated and fateful political metaphors – and, through them, with the ultimate isolator, the concentration camp and the dehumanization of the human being in it, a topic explored by many - from Primo Levi to Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy. This type of interpretation claims that the novella implies an anticipatory vision: it shows and warns that it is actually not Gregor who is monstrous, it is that petty and cosy everyday, petty-bourgeois world whose cold depths would eventually give rise to the Banal Evil, Nazism, to the idea of isolation and *Endlösung* for all vermin-like people; the essay demonstrates how direct is the connection between Kafka, the parasite people, the concentration camps and their “Muselmänner”.

Alexander Kiossev is professor in History of Modern Culture, Director of The Cultural Centre of the University of Sofia and editor in chief of the electronic journal “Piron”. His research interests are in the spheres of reading research, cultural history of communist totalitarianism and autobiographical research. He published several books and edited numerous collective volumes in English, German and Bulgarian; his essays are translated in English, German, French, Dutch, Ukrainian, Czech, Polish, Romanian, Serbian and Macedonian languages. E-mail: akiossev@gmail.com.

MONIKA VAKARELOVA

“A SIGHT UNBEARABLE TO THE HUMAN EYES”

Abstract: Departing from the vagueness of the creature into which Gregor Samsa is transformed and hence from the impossibility to give it a clear visual image, the text develops the associative link between three figures unbearable to the human eyes: *ungeheueres Ungeziefer*, the Muslim in the concentration camp (*Der Muselmann*) and the Medusa. While the link between the figure of the Muslim and that of the Gorgon already appears in Primo Levi’s texts and is decisive for Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben’s analysis examined in this article, the analogy with Gregor Samsa stems out of the suggestion to read Kafka’s novel in the biopolitical perspective that is paradigmatic for the Modernity.

Focusing on the problem of visibility, the text makes the following shift explicit: the destruction of the order of the representation in the concentration camps through the overexposition of death and the breaking of the anthropological linkage between image and absence invites us to think of the petrifying/dead gaze of the Gorgon as that possible origin of

the image – not accidentally mythological – which was preferred in the Nazi *Endlösung* project.

Keywords: *ungeheueres Ungeziefer*, Muslim (*Der Muselmann*), Gorgon, image, visibility, biopolitics.

Monika Vakarelova holds a PhD degree in Cultural History of Contemporaneity from the Faculty of Philosophy at the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. Her research interests are in the fields of visual studies, philosophy of the image, memory studies and politics of representation.