



IS GREGOR SAMSA A BED BUG? KAFKA AND DICKENS REVISITED

The title of this essay is manifestly facetious, for my *donnée* is that the pathetic speaker in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" actually has no specific identity, but still can be classified validly as a "bed bug." His "formulation" as an insect is metaphoric, and, if he can be interpreted denotatively at all, he may best be thought of as a generic byproduct of the confluence of Kant, Dickens, and Shakespeare. But mainly the throwback is to England's Shakespeare of the novel, namely the Inimitable himself.

Let us briefly review Gregor's status in the critical lab. According to John Updike's recent summary, the novelist V. Nabokov in a Cornell lecture seriously disputed the popular view that Gregor is entomologically a cockroach; Nabokov contended that the narrator is "too broad and convex" for that.¹ Although the charwoman designates him a "dung beetle" (*Mistkäfer*), as Nabokov reminded us, "it is obvious that the good woman is adding the epithet only to be friendly."² Perhaps so. Moreover, Updike added that Gregor's numerous legs, if more than six, would label him a centipede, thereby not even a member of the class *Insecta*. The telling point in Updike's essay derives from Kafka's own terse gloss: "The Insect itself cannot be depicted."³ Kafka and Updike went on to show that a psychological reason for this lack of communication is that a "concrete image would be too distracting and shut off sympathy,"⁴ but another valid explanation is that Kafka simply had a neo-Kantian perspective. Like the leading German philosopher's famed *Ding-an-sich*,⁵ which in essence is a riddle, Gregor *in himself* is entomologically unfathomable. Better so.

Although such an apologia makes sense enough, the reader may feel unnecessarily frustrated by such a curt dismissal, and so it is worthwhile to ponder Gregor's literary genealogy to discern exactly how Kafka would have arrived at his curious off-beat conception. In his letter to his publisher, cited briefly above, he reflected on the comic effect he had in mind with his story. His *grotesquerie* thus points back to other well-known authors who have made good use of animal imagery for similar comical

1. See John Updike, "Kafka's Short Stories," *The New Yorker*, 9 May 1983, pp. 125-6.

2. Updike, p. 126.

3. Cited by Updike again, p. 126.

4. Updike, p. 129.

5. See my item "Kafka as Christ or Kant?" *American Notes and Queries*, 11 (1973), 153. (I consider that the initial "K." may connote more than Josef Kafka's own name; it is, for instance, suggestive that *Christ* in Kafka's native Czech is spelled with a *K*. From a Jewish perspective, Jesus was, of course, Ben-Joseph too.)

purposes. The most obvious example, following the lead of Mark Spilka's familiar book on Dickens and Kafka,⁶ is the Inimitable's depiction of humans in bug-like terms.

To begin, since Kafka's *The Trial* bears such well-recognized affinities with *Bleak House*, both novels castigating dragged-out law processes, we might take into account a bug-person in the Dickensian masterpiece: Tony Jobling, a law-writer to Snagsby, who passes under the name of "Weevle." According to the *OED*, the word *weevil* originally meant "a beetle of any kind." In the nineteenth century, it referred to the pest classed under the group *Rhyncophora*. A typical assignment in the *OED* is the following from 1866: "The plaintiff stated that he found the malt contained 'weevil,' a very destructive insect" (sb., 1, b). These negative connotations imposed by a disciplined society connotatively affect the meaning of *Weevle* in the novel and likewise color the ill effects attendant upon Gregor in Kafka's story. (Spilka deals with the *Copperfield* connection only and demotes literary bugs as inorganic.)

Also since Dickens and Poe had a number of close parallels, notably, for instance, in terms of "The Raven" and Grip of *Barnaby Rudge*, as well as plausibly between "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*,⁷ not to mention Poe's strong interest in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, it is worth mentioning that one of Poe's classic detective tales had an entomological title, "The Gold Bug." This "bug" connection could certainly have rubbed off (grubbed off?) indirectly also on Kafka, especially since Poe's influence on continental writers was so pronounced in general, but I find its impact largely by way of Dickens. In *Bleak House*, even Grandfather Smallweed's mind is described as "a grub at first and . . . at last."

Indeed, animal imagery, in one form or another, is almost rampant in *Bleak House*, and so we need not restrict ourselves to a minor specimen like Weevle to find parallels with the human menagerie. For example, men with quaint names emerge like Mr. Guppy (suggesting the fish), Mr. Quail (prompting quail), and the baker whom Mr. Skimpole characterizes as "a sort of human hedgehog rolled up."⁸ Along with the baker in the same chapter, Skimpole speaks of his daughter and the family ornithologically: "their young fledgelings have their nest up-stairs. I dare say, at some time or other, Sentiment and Comedy will bring *their* husbands home, and have *their* nests up-stairs too. So we get on, we don't know how, but somehow."⁹ It would seem as if one nest is going to crowd out another, implying a law of the jungle in miniature. It is of interest, then, that a few pages earlier he ironically but comically remarks, "Mere animal satisfaction!"¹⁰ Mere in-

6. *Dickens and Kafka: A Mutual Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963). His interpretation of the Kafkaesque humor is Freudian, however, whereas mine does not touch on this issue.

7. See my correspondence in *Harvard Magazine*, 85 (March-April, 1983), 20, entitled "The Mystery of Dickens and Poe."

8. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1956), p. 454.

9. *Bleak House*, loc. cit.

10. *Bleak House*, p. 451.

deed. When we recall other prominent animal designations, such as the aviary of little Miss Flite (whose name implies her bird-like, light-weight aspirations) and the cat of Mr. Krook (who, we are told grotesquely, could have exchanged eyes with his pet), we can readily see how a Dickens enthusiast like Kafka would have been absorbed or amused by such comparisons of brute beast with humankind. Not the least significant parallel *à propos* of bug imagery specifically is Skimpole's famous "Drone philosophy," his "discourse about Bees."¹¹ (Does *Skimpole* anticipate *Sherlock* — Holmes' own later bees?)

Further, a quick check in a standard *Dickens Dictionary*¹² reveals that such correlations were dominant throughout the Inimitable's work. They are on a par with his use of animism (imitated so wonderfully in illustrations to his novels). Sometimes the metaphor is playful, other times wilder or grotesque. Mr. Hamet Safi, for example, is memorably depicted as Secretary to His Rolling Hulk the Hippopotamus; in turn, Mr. Carlton has a gargoylish countenance: "It was impossible to look at his face without being reminded of a chubby street-door knocker, half-lion, half-monkey."¹³ Partly owing to the introductory use of such imagery already in the very first paragraph of *Bleak House* — namely, the celebrated description of London's "primordial" mud in terms of the Megalosaurus — that dark novel evidently has more impelling animal associations than the others, and Kafka, we suspect, was aware of this richness. As evidence of this connection, let us take into consideration that Sinclair Lewis too was strongly indebted to the Inimitable, even having been called an "American Dickens,"¹⁴ was likewise much taken by Dickensian-like animal imagery,¹⁵ and wrote satirically about America in a manner somewhat comparable to Kafka's own satirical comments on American mores, especially in terms of the bias toward blacks. Compare Kafka's hero's pseudonym *Negro* and "Mr. Blackboy" in Dickens. I hasten to add that Lewis and Kafka are not directly related in terms of influence; their kinship, like that of Charlie Chaplin, is through Dickens only.

To qualify the Dickens relation somewhat, we recollect easily that such imagery is evident enough already in Shakespeare, for one, notably in the animality of his own bleak dramatic work, *King Lear*, which could also sensibly be termed a tragedy resulting from the "legality" of the mixed-up love-test at the onset. So Lear himself becomes a species of proto-Samsa, as it were, a bewildered animal on a barren heath: he spouts off, dubs his daughters pelicans, and totally disrobes in a mad moment. With regard to the title of Kafka's story, however, we might better recall *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which, in popular terms, is most memorable for man's

11. *Bleak House*, p. 71.

12. Alex J. Philip, *A Dickens Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1928).

13. Philip, p. 44.

14. See my studies on Dickens's impact on Lewis: " 'Something Out of Dickens' in Sinclair Lewis," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 74 (1970), 607-16; "Charles Dickens and Sinclair Lewis: An Exordium," *Sinclair Lewis Newsletter*, 3 (1971), 10-13.

15. Robert L. Coard, " 'Vulgar Barnyard Illustrations' in *Elmer Gantry*," *Sinclair Lewis Newsletter*, 4 (1972), 8-10.

becoming an ass; Shakespeare, in this transformation, was indebted perhaps to Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, but especially to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and clearly Kafka appropriated the Ovidian element in his own title. The shape-shifting is obviously comical and metaphoric, a bit like in Kafka's novella, albeit his effect is bitterer. The main difference, then, between Shakespeare and Kafka is that the latter dealt here more with satire. Yet, with both, in terms of sheer comedy, the same apothegm would apply: "What fools these mortals be!" Dickens, too, in his own borrowings from Shakespeare,¹⁶ was well aware of this maxim, reapplying it. But Kafka used it best.¹⁷

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16. See my *Dickens and Shakespeare: A Study in Histrionic Contrasts* (New York: Haskell House, 1965).

17. Hence my title. If Gregor cannot be taken seriously as a bedbug in the technical sense (*Cimex lectularius*), he still is, literally speaking, a bug in bed since he wakes up that way one morning. As with the narrator's finding himself arrested when he awakens in *The Trial*, the initial predicament has a metaphoric meaning which, sociologically speaking, pertains to the plight of the individual caught up in a world he does not fully understand. For the latest, somewhat extensive commentary on the Kafka-Dickens relation, see David Ball's review article of *La Maison d'Àpre-Vent; Récits pour Noël et autres*, trans. Sylvère Monod (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), in *Dickens Studies Newsletter*, 14 (1983), 105-10 (110n).

"GIMPEL THE FOOL": SINGER'S DEBT TO THE ROMANTICS

"Gimpel the Fool" is generally regarded as Isaac Bashevis Singer's greatest fictional masterpiece and for good reason. Its appeal to the reader is personal and immediate. Gimpel, the narrator-protagonist, represents that child-like quality in all of us which is the source of both our humanity and our vulnerability: the need to believe in the people around us and in the credibility of our own experiences. Singer's story is about Gimpel's search for manifest truth, or as Sol Gittleman declares, "for the nature of truth in reality."¹ While Gimpel's quest has obvious precedent in many literatures throughout the world, it has a special debt to the literature of the Romantic period. As I shall suggest, Singer's thematic concerns with disillusionment, the difficulty of belief, and especially with the relation of worldly experience to truth were clarified and shaped by the poetry of the Romantics. Finally, Singer may have incorporated at a focal point in his story the language and events described in Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known."

1. *From Shtetle to Suburbia: the Family in Jewish Literary Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 106.

