Chapter 2

The Metamorphosis and the Limits of Metaphorical Language

In The Trial, what seemed to be a nonsensical persecution actually revealed a truly unshakable law: that of symbolic logic. Not that this helped K. at all, for instead of proving himself innocent, he ends up chastised for not understanding that a bipolar innocence/guilt structure is irrelevant to his situation—that, instead, contradiction rules: one should be able to view something “correctly” while simultaneously misunderstanding it (3:223). The wages of K.’s refusal—or failure—to take part in a world that contradiction dominates is death. This poses a question: if, as in The Trial, the very questions “Is Josef K. guilty?” and “What is he guilty of?” are illusory, what other major questions of Kafkology might also be?

There is most certainly a second alleged problem in Kafka studies that requires a dissolution rather than a solution: namely, what appears by all accounts to be the central issue in Kafka’s most widely read work, Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphosis). Whereas the undoing of the guilt/innocence issue in The Trial is a fine example of the logical universalism of an unrealistic fictional situation—a man being simultaneously guilty and innocent with no charge to prove or disprove—The Metamorphosis presents us with a different sort of logically related issue, one that is perhaps even more unique to the literary world. That is, Kafka’s most famous story, famous for what appears to be its central and incontrovertible metaphor, Gregor Samsa’s monstrous body, actually offers a fascinating skepticism of the metaphor altogether. This skepticism goes far beyond even the “metamorphosis of metaphor” Corngold introduced into the discipline some decades ago. Although I agree with Corngold that the structure with which Kafka has written Gregor Samsa’s body, actually offers a fascinating skepticism of the metaphor altogether. This skepticism goes far beyond even the “metamorphosis of metaphor” Corngold introduced into the discipline some decades ago. Although I agree with Corngold that the structure with which Kafka has written Gregor Samsa’s body makes it impossible for it to be a metaphor for anything, I take Corngold’s classic analysis further and argue that Gregor as he is written utterly fails as a metaphor altogether. I will argue that this failure is only possible to see alongside Wittgenstein’s crucial remark in the Tractatus that “what can be shown, cannot be said” (4.1212), a remark I believe applies indeed to the form of all language—including metaphorical language.
The Form of Literal-Metaphorical Storytelling

Kafka’s depiction of Gregor’s body will lead us to a vitally important realization about the structure, purpose, and (lack of) meaning of metaphor itself. This task Kafka accomplishes in large part by narrating Gregor’s story using that hallmark of what many term, somewhat dismissively, the “Kafkaesque”: the paradoxical but compelling act of literal-metaphorical storytelling. Literal-metaphorical storytelling characterizes the technique of creating narrative elements—some more blatant than others—that cannot make literal “sense” in the universe we know, or in any realistically narrated universe: the half-man/half-ape of “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie” (“A Report to an Academy”); the sentient burrow-creature out of “Der Bau” (“The Burrow”); the mouse-people of “Josefine die Sängerin” (“Josefine the Singer”); the talking jackals of “Schakale und Araber” (“Jackals and Arabs”); a team of horses that appear, as if conjured by magic, in a vacant pig stall in “Ein Landarzt” (“A Country Doctor”). And yet, despite their metaphorical necessity, despite nonliteral elements that span from the fantastical to the absurd, the narrative language surrounding these scientific impossibilities proceeds in a matter-of-fact literal fashion.

Martin Greenberg offers a compelling characterization of Kafka’s narrative prose as literal-metaphorical; this trait, he argues, is evident in both Kafka’s writing process itself and his reflections about it. Greenberg reminds us that Kafka did not typically revise, that instead “his hand moved as if possessed across the page, sentences flowing with uncanny smoothness,” and, further, that “his mode of creativity was inspiration rather than making. He was the inspired poet rather than the poet as maker. He did not make or construct so much as he transmitted, even though what he transmitted was shaped at every point by the pressure of his conscious art.” As Greenberg sees it, what Kafka “abominated” was “constructions,” the deliberate contrivances of the calculating consciousness. When his confidence deserts him, then he cries out that Alles erscheint mir als Konstruktion—that everything looks like an artificial construction to him, false and dead, as opposed to the “power of life” that he feels. Inspiration meant the spontaneous expression of his more intuitive, more unconscious side, with its truer grasp of reality, with its grasp of the hidden living rather than the mentally constructed reality.

This Greenberg sees substantiated by the following entry in the Oktavhefte (Octavo Notebooks), wherein Kafka distinguishes between two kinds of truth, the “eternal” truth from the Tree of (a priori) Knowledge, and the transient, manufactured truth from the Tree of Life (that is, experience).
Es gibt für uns zweierlei Wahrheit, so wie sie dargestellt wird durch den Baum der Erkenntnis und den Baum des Lebens. Die Wahrheit des Tätigen und die Wahrheit des Ruhenden, in der ersten teilt sich das Gute vom Bösen, die zweite ist nichts anderes als das Gute selbst, sie weiß weder vom Guten noch vom Bösen. Die erste Wahrheit ist uns wirklich gegeben, die zweite ahnungsweise. Das ist der traurige Anblick. Der fröhliche ist, daß die erste Wahrheit dem Augenblick, die zweite der Ewigkeit gehört, deshalb verlöscht auch die erste Wahrheit im Licht der zweiten. (GW 6:204)

For there exist for us two kinds of truth, as given to us in the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, the truth of the active principle and the truth of the static principle. In the first good separates itself from evil; the second is nothing other than the good itself, and it knows no difference between good and evil. The first truth is given to us really, the second only intuitively. That is what is so sad to see. The cheerful thing is that the first truth belongs to the present moment, and the second to eternity; thus the first fades out in the light of the second.

For Kafka, it seems as if inspired writing that is necessarily thus free of construction reveals the “truth” from the Tree of Life, which is a more authentic and eternal truth than the constructed “truth” from the Tree of Knowledge. Thus it would follow that to get at this more eternal and unconstructed truth, there has to be some sort of nonconstructed sense of meaning as well. The misguided notion of eternal referential meaning must thus be dismissed as construction, a version of the Nietzschean dismissal of truth as a series of metaphors that have, after generations of unquestioning use, finally died.\(^4\) Kafka, it seems, in addition to the Nietzschean language-skeptical undertones so easily attributed to him, embodies a sort of twentieth-century version of Schiller’s naive/sentimental dichotomy—the idea that true great literature was not created, it just was, just came, and with it there was no need for flourishes or “construction”—artificialities such as simile, overbearing narrative voice, or overt metaphor in descriptive language. Greenberg refers to this as Kafka’s “renunciation of metaphors,” dismissed because they are “embellishments that obscured rather than revealed the clear lines of things; they were not ‘true.’ ”\(^5\)

But just because “constructed” language (and thus overt metaphor) is inauthentic does not mean all metaphor must go: Kafka just made metaphor into his literal narration. As Greenberg explains it, Kafka aimed for a “strict truthfulness” in his prose, and he went about that aim by making metaphor “the very basis of his narrative art. Most of his stories are founded squarely on a single metaphor; they are the literal enactment of an abstraction, the embodiment in a concrete image of an idea.”\(^6\) The result being, of course, that Kafka’s narratives depict single, large metaphors described as if they were
literal truth. Take, for example, “Description of a Struggle” (“Beschreibung einer Kampfe”) where only being able to speak in metaphor is the Fat Man’s disease; metaphor is the form and the content of his ailment (GW 5:74); it is the form and the content of Georg Bendemann’s leap to his death in “The Judgment” (GW 1:52); it is the form and the content of the titular structure that exists only in perception and not in “reality” in The Castle. Indeed, metaphor in the place of “straight” expression is everywhere in Kafka; as Adorno or Anders has extrapolated (or, in their own way, Deleuze and Guattari have)—Kafka’s prose is metaphor in form and content. For Kafka, the metaphor is not a way to convey the narration or a “point” to the reader, but rather it is the narrative, in both form and spirit.

Critical reactions to the literal-metaphorical narrative generally come from two polarized camps, both of which have found much to extrapolate from Kafka’s journal entry in 1921 in which he listed metaphor along with insufficient heat in his flat as “eines der Vielen, die mich am Schreiben verzweifeln läßt” (“one of the many things that make me despair of writing”) (GW 11:196). One, which includes the still-compelling work of Anthony Thorlby and J. P. Stern from several decades ago, argues that by literalizing metaphor, Kafka has made everything into metaphor. Thorlby, as we will see momentarily in more detail, argues on behalf of Kafka wrestling with the impossibility of literal expression and emerging victorious by creating “a self-contained metaphorical world.” There is certainly something to be said for the argument that Kafka thus slips into a totally metaphorical universe where literal meaning does not exist (and this seems strengthened by the attack on literal meaning in The Trial). In this popular view, his works are absolved of making literal “sense,” or really any sort of “sense” at all within the narrative. But how, then, does one explain that the vast majority of Kafka’s narration—that is, the drily reported events that take place around the metaphorical set pieces and characters—is not in the least fantastical? That is where the other argument comes in: one that we will see advocated by not just Greenberg, but Corngold, Anders, and Deleuze and Guattari: that Kafka has instead “killed” all metaphor, made all metaphor literal. The fact that “killing” metaphor is itself a metaphorical gesture notwithstanding, the consternating element in the scorched-earth approach is that this metaphor obliteration acts itself as a larger metaphor for the (or Kafka’s) writing process and difficulties (along the vein of, for example, Clayton Koelb’s “Kafka and the Scene of Reading” or Corngold’s reading of “In the Penal Colony” as an authorial fight with the composition of The Trial).

Though the points each side presents are convincing, each leaves at least one disturbing bit of obscurity. If, for example, we are to adhere to the “self-contained metaphorical universe” approach, what should we make of the literal narration in Kafka’s work? In “Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte” (“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning out of unsettling dreams”) does no literal entity Gregor Samsa exist, and does this nonentity not actually wake (GW 1:93)? On the other hand, if
we are to believe, really, that Kafka has “killed all metaphor,” then how are we to treat the fact that this gesture can only be expressed in metaphor—and how are we to treat the fact that this approach altogether works largely as a metaphor for the writing process itself? Is the literal approach useless when it itself cannot be metaphorized? It is a highly worthwhile endeavor to peer into the dark spots that both of these approaches either deliberately or accidentally obscure, by examining not the result or the “point” of Kafka’s literal-metaphorical narration, but rather the structure and form itself.

All this is to say that the argument that Kafka has something at stake in the creation and portrayal of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* is not particularly novel; what is exciting (in both its literary and philosophical implications) is the charting of why the literal metaphors in *The Metamorphosis* work—and why, more importantly, at times they do not work. This in turn provokes us to ask what the parameters for a “successful” metaphor in this story’s context are and what, if anything, a “failed” metaphor means or does. First: what does it mean to say that some of Kafka’s metaphors “succeed”? Widely discussed movements such as Gregor Samsa’s odd protection of the framed portrait of the lady in fur (GW 1:131), or Herr Samsa’s reverse-inverse-Oedipal pummeling of his son’s exo-shell with apples (GW 1:135), are what a critic in the vein of I. A. Richards (and after him Corngold) or the analytic philosopher of language Max Black would probably deem live, functioning, or “interactive” metaphors: that is, certain (some, *but not all*) characteristics of one thing (or action) are supplanted onto another. And what does it mean to say that some of Kafka’s metaphors “fail”? A failed metaphor is a “metaphor” that looks and acts like a metaphor but is actually the expression of its literal self: it takes the *structure* of one thing evoking the characteristics of another, but evokes a metaphorical “meaning” that is the same as its literal meaning. I will argue that Kafka evokes exactly such a failed metaphor when he creates Gregor Samsa’s body as an *Ungeziefer*, an untranslatable word choice that I will argue cannot lead to any other reasonable conclusion. Kafka’s rendering of Gregor’s body as a metaphor for itself reveals the essence of Kafka’s conception, in this story at least, of metaphor itself. What metaphor is, it will emerge, is not a *thing* but a form, an assertion already somewhat common with critics, Corngold foremost among them, but rarely paralleled with Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.10

*The Metamorphosis* and Metaphorical Sense

While the argument that Kafka has something at stake in the creation and portrayal of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* is not particularly novel, what is exciting is the charting of why—or, more precisely, if—the literal metaphors in *The Metamorphosis* actually do make metaphorical sense (if not literal sense). For a metaphor makes sense as such when it is easily understood that
what has just been described is neither a magical entity nor a lie, but rather a creative use of language that is understood to add richness to the thing described. A nonsensical metaphor, on the other hand, is an alleged metaphor whose context or rendering signals to us that it ought to be taken metaphorically, but which, despite appearances, is actually just something expressing its literal self. The nonsensical metaphor takes the structure of one thing evoking the characteristics of another, but evokes a metaphorical “meaning” that is the same as its literal meaning. Kafka’s rendering of nonsensical metaphors in *The Metamorphosis*, rather than his depiction of sensical ones, will in the end reveal the essence of his conception, in this story at least, of metaphor itself.

In *The Metamorphosis*, the “successful” narrated metaphors are the least remarkable: they are those events or objects that, portrayed in the way Kafka has portrayed them within the story, evoke extraliteral (theoretical, emotional, philosophical) consequences without much incident. They are the metaphors whose definition as “metaphors” is perhaps least objectionable (though at times they beg to be explained away as allegory): a framed portrait of a lady in fur, whose animal/sexual appointments evoke the instincts Gregor’s rigid lifestyle seems to have precluded (1:93); three boarders at the Samsa flat that look exactly alike, and whose replication itself replicates the encroachment of capitalist necessity (1:143); a relationship with his sister whose gestures are almost overripe for psychoanalysis; an apple that is “really” both a phallicus and a weapon (1:135). But at the same time they are metaphors that in their successful evocation—in the complete eclipsing of their literal meaning by their bevy of metaphorical interpretations, in their very vulnerability to the “solution” of allegory—say the least about how metaphor “works.” This is because, unlike the far more interesting “unsuccessful” metaphors we will discuss shortly, the successful metaphor provokes no confrontation of the limits of metaphor, because in its very nature (of being well-contained within those limits) it does not have to.

Justifiably, much of the theoretical debate surrounding metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* centers not only on what Kafka’s metaphors mean, but on how they mean, how they “work” (or do not work). The initial impulse—one many critics indulge but just as many refute—is to treat the story as some amalgam of a dream narrative and allegory for something specific, usually for either Kafka’s fraught relationship with his father, the destructive alienating power of late capitalism, or both. It seems gratifying at first to treat *The Metamorphosis*’s more puzzling narrative elements as dream-allegory symbols that only need to be decoded and analyzed. This is not particularly egregious, especially given the exegetic power granted to Kafka’s oft-cited assertion that his work was an attempt to communicate his “traumhaft inneres Leben” (“dreamlike inner life”). As we have just seen, Greenberg has made a strong case that the literal-metaphorical hybrid is the embodiment of dream logic, that “Kafka’s kind of metaphor—the literal expression in a concrete image of an abstraction—works essentially like dream metaphors.
Embarrassment, in a dream, is not a long word with two r’s and two s’s; it is being naked in public.”¹⁴ That is: repulsiveness is waking up transformed into an “ungeheures Ungeziefer” (usually translated “monstrous vermin”). This is straightforward enough.

But what about the early assertion in the story that it was no dream (“Es war kein Traum” [1:93])? And what about the minor detail that, aside from the transformation itself (which takes place outside of the narrative space), the ninety-odd pages of narrative contain, peppered by a few predominantly metaphorical (or possibly allegorical) gestures, a largely literal and causally plausible narrative, one in which the characters do not morph and their actions are consistent with their initial characterizations? This would seem to undermine the designation of *The Metamorphosis* as a pure dream narrative. And what about Adorno’s reminder that it is fine (facetiously) to call Kafka’s work allegory so long as one recognizes that said allegory has no key—that is, that the corresponding real-life narrative has either been lost or never existed in the first place, a distinction that seems particularly fruitless to pursue?¹⁵ This would seem to undermine the allegorical pursuits of the story as well.

If allegory and dream symbol are too easily undermined in interpretation of *The Metamorphosis*’s (purportedly) nonliteral or extraliteral moments, and metaphor is the most accurate designation, then that still leaves the question: how do Kafka’s metaphors work? For Sussman, they are indications and parts of Kafka’s “linguistic theology experiment,” one that “displace[s]” the “metaphoric substrate of literary figuration” to “a setting of . . . antipodal alienation and marginality, as in ‘The Metamorphosis,’ ” and thus grants literary metaphor “an acrobatic extension and prolongation.”¹⁶ That is, Kafka uses metaphor to stretch and test its own limits, an assertion that will be revisited and revealed as most plausible during the discussion of “unsuccessful” metaphor, but that applies to the “successful” metaphors we are about to discuss as well. Thorlby’s conception of Kafka’s metaphor is, in complement but not contrast to Sussman’s, that for Kafka metaphor and (all) language are one and the same, that metaphor is language, is what is both powerful and despair-provoking about it. The “one and the same” approach (which echoes the Nietzschean) Kafka expresses, unsurprisingly, with a metaphor, the spear remark we have already discussed, from the diary entry from June 1923, his last (see preface).

As Thorlby sees it, what Kafka is doing here is “summing up . . . his most fundamental insight into language,” that being “its metaphorical capacity not only to transform the experience from which it arises in life into something beyond itself, but actually to reverse what was lived as one thing into what is ‘thought of’ in an infinitely regressing series of reflections.” Language, to Kafka, “presents itself . . . as a problem to be overcome. How can he solve it? The passage itself demonstrates the answer.”¹⁷ Thorlby is certainly accurate about the transformational capacity of metaphor—to make language, *through itself*, more powerful, to make words into spears while at the same
time claiming that that is what they always were. He is also right in claiming
that the passage itself demonstrates an answer—that language can be both
powerful and self-destructive, that metaphor might be the source of this trait,
and that the best or only way to express this idea is with a metaphor. But I
am not sure about his assertion that Kafka sees metaphorical language as a
“problem” to be overcome. I see the diary entry instead as the expression of
a phenomenon, as a manifested impossibility, the claim (through the form of
metaphor) that something was always a certain way, a claim that nevertheless
only becomes that “certain way” in the moment it is claimed. The assertion
that metaphorical language is a “problem to be overcome,” however, is a
necessary precondition to Thorlby’s larger conception of Kafka’s use of meta-
phor, which is that it is all-encompassing: that Kafka transformed whatever
his stories’ “real impulse[s]” were “entirely into the language of metaphor—
indeed, into a self-contained metaphorical world.”

The question still remains, however: how does Kafka’s successful metaphor
really “work”? In my conception—one culled from several compelling meta-
phor theories from the analytic tradition in philosophy—and in the broadest
possible terms, the working metaphor functions by successfully employing
what I call metaphorical form: a description of one entity (Y) in a way that
applies selected characteristics of that entity onto another entity (X), so that
the Y entity is presumed to be understood in scare quotes: X is a “Y.” To
begin to explore this, I will concentrate on the analytic philosopher (and
early Wittgenstein critic) Max Black’s conception, one that seems to echo
(by coincidence rather than design) I. A. Richards’s “tenor/vehicle” model
(and thus also Corngold’s). I believe Black’s schematization of metaphor
is an accurate depiction of what Kafka evokes with and about metaphor,
which he (Black) accomplishes by being simultaneously highly technical and
recognizing, in the end, that even with (or possibly because of) a schematiza-
tion, there is no rational reason why some metaphors “work” and some do
not. Such arbitrariness is, we will see, due to something that is both true and
ultimately inexpressible about metaphor: that it is a structure whose essence
precludes it from being expressible in literal language. This is why so many
philosophers—even analytic philosophers such as Black and Davidson—only
seem to be able to explain metaphor, even while deriding it, in metaphor.

Black’s problem with metaphor is not the simple scourge of its use in
philosophy, though he does begin his study by pointing out that “to draw
attention to a philosopher’s metaphors is to belittle him—like praising a logi-
cian for his beautiful handwriting.” Black’s problem is that its critics simply
assume metaphor is “doing” something far less complicated than it really is.
This he breaks down by explaining two erroneous views of metaphor, the
“substitution view” and the “comparison view.” The substitution view he
sees as facile and, furthermore, not actually “working” as metaphor at all. In
the substitution view, “when we speak of a relatively simple metaphor, we
are referring to a sentence . . . in which some words are used metaphorically,
The Metamorphosis

while the remainder are used non-metaphorically.” An easy example of a metaphor it would be natural to view “substitutionally” would be something like “Mein Vater ist noch immer ein Riese” (“My father is still a giant of a man,” from “The Judgment”), wherein everything but “Riese” is meant to be taken literally (GW 1:44). What, in the substitution view, we are then to do with “Riese” (given that the speaker’s father is a human of slightly larger than average size) is to recognize that the “word or expression having a distinctively metaphorical use within a literal frame” is being “used to communicate a meaning that might have been expressed literally.” Further, “it is the reader’s task to invert the substitution, by using the literal meaning of M[etaphor-expression] as a clue to the intended literal meaning of L[iteral sentence]. Understanding a metaphor,” then, “is like deciphering a code or unraveling a riddle.” This hits upon what I believe is the very nature of Kafka’s work with metaphor—why it made him “despair of writing” and, at the same time, why so many of his readers oversimplify his use of it. The “substitution view” of metaphor presupposes a “solution” to the riddle or a “key” to the allegory—but, lest Adorno remind us again, that is not possible.

Black’s analysis deserves further exploration yet: in the substitution view, metaphor is supposed to “plug the gaps in the literal vocabulary.” The problem with this, with viewing metaphor as “a species of catachresis,” is that the substitution view of metaphor simply calls for the “putting of new senses into old words.” The problem here is that if the catachresis actually “serves a genuine need, the new sense introduced will quickly become part of the literal sense,” and the metaphor will kill itself: therefore if viewing one’s father as a “giant” is actually apt, “giant” will somehow take upon itself a new meaning of “larger than average father” that is just as denotative (rather than connotative) as the word “orange” (as a color, taken from the fruit) is to us now. An example of an otherwise “successful” metaphor that in the “substitution view” causes more problems than its solves in The Metamorphosis comes when Gregor is struggling to leave his bedroom on the first morning of his transformation, an act he seems to think will resolve the conflict with his boss and family but instead results in unsurprising horror (1:110–11). As Gregor struggles to turn the key in his bedroom door with his mouth, he injures it, and a brown liquid comes out of his mouth (1:106). This provokes an understandable but in the end misguided use of the “substitution view” of metaphor. An easy metaphorical designation for the brown liquid would be as a physically repulsive representation of Gregor’s loss of language—as a literally impossible concretization of Gregor’s metamorphosis from allegedly successful language user to vermin animal, as the brown liquid both takes the place of words and is physically alarming and repulsive. In the vein of Deleuze and Guattari, one could potentially argue that this moment seems to indicate a de- (or re-)territorializing of the mouth and teeth, from language organs to their primal function as eating organs, or, in this case, the unappetizing reversal of that, excreting organs.
But this interpretation, in the “substitution view,” is too simple (and we will view it again in the more complex “interaction view” in a moment) and too harshly relegates some elements of the moment to the literal realm and some to the metaphorical: that is, in order for the metaphor of the “braune Flüssigkeit” to “work” substitutionally, as an indication of de- or reterritorialization or anything else, the rest of the moment—that is, of Gregor Samsa in his literally impossible metamorphosed new form attempting to open his door—must be read literally. But the choice to take Gregor’s body (especially this early in the story) at face value but the brown liquid it excretes as something “special” is arbitrary—it would seem far more logical to say that either both things, the body and its secretions, are metaphorical or literal. But with this choice made the moment becomes even more complicated: if Gregor’s body must also be metaphorical in this moment, then the “special” designation of the brown liquid is lost—as is, somewhat ironically, the metaphorical expository power it purportedly has in underscoring both the aphasia and the repulsiveness of Gregor’s new condition. If the brown liquid must also be literal in this moment, then there is no metaphor at all. And yet this moment, in its suspense and vivid imagery, does have a metaphor to express (one that may even be the hypothetical one about aphasia)—it is simply that it cannot be schematized with the more common “substitution” view of metaphor.

Gregor’s struggle with the door comes during a period of narrative focus in the beginning of the story on Gregor’s mouth and its obviously shifting capabilities—another indicator that Gregor’s mouth and everything it is purported to interact with (food, language, objects) has a role in the story that we should not ignore and a metaphor (or metaphors) that, though elusive, will prove to be vital in both the development of the narrative and Kafka’s confrontation with metaphor’s limits. Before Gregor opens the door he attempts to shout excuses through it at both his family and, later, his supervisor. He is shocked and repulsed at the sound of his new voice, one that Deleuze and Guattari have argued that, as the indicator of the movement (and not the evocation of an archetype or any other recognizable referent) of the “becoming-insect,” comes out as “a mournful whining that carries along the voice and blurs the resonance of the words.”  

“This, in context, is actually somewhat of an understatement:

“Gregor,” rief es—es war die Mutter—“es ist dreiviertel sieben. Wolltest du nicht wegfahren?” Die sanfte Stimme! Gregor erschrak, als er seine antwortete Stimme hörte, die wohl unverkennbar seine frühere war, in die sich aber, wie von unten her, ein nicht zu unterdrückendes, schmerzliches Piepsen mischte, das die Worte förmlich nur im ersten Augenblick in ihrer Deutlichkeit beließ, um sie im Nachklang derart zu zerstören, dass man nicht wusste, ob man recht gehört hatte. (1:96)
“Gregor,” came the voice—it was his mother—“it’s a quarter to seven. Didn’t you want to leave?” That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked as he heard the voice in which he answered. It was nearly unrecognizable compared to his earlier voice, which nevertheless remained barely present like an undertone as it mixed with an irrepressible, painful squeaking that made the words audible only in their first moments, so that it wasn’t clear if one had heard them correctly.

The gentle voice of Frau Samsa seems to make Gregor’s painful squeaking all the more terrifying to him—most shocking of all seems to be the labored, silenced version of Gregor’s previous voice the new shrieking has all but eclipsed. Gregor’s supervisor seems shocked as well; from the other side of the door, he decries it as an animal’s voice, a “Tierstimme” (1:105). This sentence of dialogue, “Das war eine Tierstimme” (“That was an animal’s voice”), provokes the exposure via Black of another tempting but ultimately erroneous conception of metaphor, the “comparison view.”

The comparison view is the idea that metaphor is just a compressed simile. Black’s chief example of this is the sentence “Richard is a lion,” which Black takes as “really” meaning “Richard is like a lion (by being brave).”\textsuperscript{30} The problem with the comparison view is that it suffers from a “vagueness that borders on vacuity,” because the implied simile is also allegedly attempting to say something about the literal qualities of the metaphorically evoked subject. What qualities of a lion are supposed to be invoked in Richard? Carnivorousness? A mane? Without the simile there to explicitly refer to bravery, nobody can really be sure.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, in Black’s view, it would actually “be more illuminating in some of these cases to say that the metaphor creates the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing.”\textsuperscript{32} And indeed, it does seem as if the chief clerk’s use of “Das war eine Tierstimme” is being used as a simile, as a foreshortening of “That was like an animal voice” or “That sounded as if it came from an animal.” This is because, at this point in the story, the chief clerk has not seen Gregor and has no reason to (reasonably) believe that his voice is a Tierstimme (even though, actually, it is).\textsuperscript{33} So it is reasonable to assess that he is attempting to express the idea that Gregor’s voice sounds like an animal’s. But therein lies the problem: what about the way an (unnamed, generic) animal sounds characterizes Gregor’s painful squeaking? Do animals, for that matter, even have what humans would reasonably call a “voice” without a severe degree of anthropomorphism? Again, this is not to say that the chief clerk isn’t using a metaphor: at this point in the narrative there is every reason to believe that he is. It is, simply, to point out that the metaphor “works” in a far more complicated way than an extended simile does, as the extended simile has to create more meaning than it expresses.

Finally we come to what most closely approximates Black’s conception of a “successful” metaphor. The “richer” view of metaphor is what Black
calls the “interaction view,” whose similarities to (and differences from) the Richards “tenor/vehicle” model will soon become readily apparent. Black’s “interaction view” works by summoning up a complex discourse between the literal meaning of the “principal” subject (what Richards will call the “vehicle”) and the “subsidiary” one (Richards: “tenor”), the principal being what in a more erroneous view would be called the literal part of the statement and the subsidiary the metaphorical part. In the interaction view, “the effect . . . of (metaphorically) calling a man a ‘wolf’ is to evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces.”

The “interaction” of metaphor—which I formalize into the template “X is a ‘Y,’” with the scare quotes around “Y” implying a constant and dynamic interaction rather than a simple substitution—is particularly important in the Kafkan literal-metaphorical oeuvre. This we can see not only in the examples from The Metamorphosis we will examine in more detail in short order, but in telling selections from Kafka’s other work as well: in “Ein Hungerkünstler” (“A Hunger Artist”) for example, the panther that replaces the hunger artist in the cage calls up the “commonplaces” of a voracious, very alive, ravenous human being (GW 1:273); in “A Country Doctor” the narrator’s servant being named “Rosa,” the rose-colored cheeks of the apparently healthy (but actually quite ill) patient, and, finally, his “rose” of a wound, all “interact” both with each other across the horizontal indices of the story’s world, and with both the literal and literary “commonplaces” of the rose itself.

Returning to The Metamorphosis, then, and to both the brown liquid and the Tierstimme, we can see that both of these metaphors “work” best in the “interaction” view. The brown liquid does work as a metaphor for the replacement of language if we see it as invoking a set of mouth-related “commonplaces,” and this, furthermore, concurrently with the set of “commonplaces” that Gregor’s transformed body may or may not be evoking simultaneously. The Tierstimme, as well, evokes and displaces “commonplaces,” both more familiar and more challenging, about the voice, human, animal, and otherwise.

How, then, do some of the other successful metaphors in The Metamorphosis interact? Let us first look at the portrait of the lady in fur, as Kafka allows it such terrific primacy. It appears in what we could largely deem the two most important scenes of the story: the first, in the description of Gregor’s room that comes during the discovery of his transformation—“Es stellte eine Dame dar, die, mit einem Pelzhut und einer Pelzboa versehen, aufrecht dasaß und einen schweren Pelzmuff, in dem ihr ganzer Unterarm verschwunden war, dem Beschauer entgegenhob” (“It showed a woman dressed in a fur hat and a fur boa, sitting erect and brandishing toward the viewer a fur muff in which nearly the whole of her forearm had disappeared”) (1:93)—and later, in which Gregor’s drive to protect the portrait causes him to reveal his form to his family and terrify his mother:
Und so brach er denn hervor—die Frauen stützten sich gerade im Nebenzimmer an den Schreibtisch, um ein wenig zu verschlafen—
wechselte viermal die Richtung des Laufes, er wußte wirklich nicht, was er zuerst retten sollte, da sah er an der im übrigen schon leeren
Wand auffallend das Bild der in lauter Pelzwerk gekleideten Dame
hängen, Kroch eilends hinauf und preßte sich an das Glas, das ihn
festhielt und seinem heißen Bauch wohltat. Dieses Bild wenigstens, das Gregor jetzt ganz verdeckte, würde nun gewiß niemand wegneh-
men. (1:131)

And so he scuttled out—the women were just propping themselves
up against the desk, in order to have a little breather—and changed
direction several times, not knowing what he should rescue first. Then
he noticed, on the otherwise empty wall, the picture of the woman
clad only in fur, and he crawled hurriedly onto it and pressed himself
against the glass, which held it there and which felt good against his
hot belly. At least this picture, which he currently covered up entirely,
nobody could take away.

The first metaphorical interaction comes, of course, in the young wom-
an’s animal/sexual appointments, for the fur in which she nearly disappears
evokes not a single, concrete “meaning” but rather, again, what Black has
called a series of fluid commonplaces: about animals (their fur), about unbrid-
dled female sexuality (evocative of pubic or other body hair), about some
heretofore unconceived amalgam of human and animal physicality. This par-
ticular kind of fluid, interactive metaphor appears elsewhere in Kafka as well,
most notably in a scene which we have already discussed in great detail in
*The Trial*, when K. encounters Titorelli’s rendition of the goddess of Justice
and Victory as one entity (GW 3:153), again evoking not only a logical con-
tradiction as previously discussed, but on a metaphorical level a constantly
moving string of associations that bring into question any and all preconcep-
tions about any and all concrete elements depicted (the salesman, the animal,
the primal human female; victory and justice).

The second interaction is understandably more difficult, as it has added
consequences with Gregor’s sister. It is this moment—in which the mother’s
terrified reaction causes Grete’s first instance of direct address to Gregor
since his transformation, one of admonishment, “Du, Gregor!”—in which
either Grete betrays Gregor or the other way around; in any case, their shaky
alliance in which Grete keeps Gregor alive and Gregor stays under Grete’s
control is over. For Deleuze and Guattari this is a crucial point in Gregor’s
trajectory of re-Oedipalization, an instance in which Gregor’s “determini-
ization through his becoming-animal finds itself blocked for a moment,” and
whose consequence is death:
To please him, his sister wanted to empty out the whole room. But Gregor refused to let go of the portrait of the lady in fur. He sticks to the portrait, as if to a lost territorialized image. In fact, that’s what the sister cannot tolerate. She accepted Gregor; like him, she wanted the schizo incest, an incest of strong connections, incest with the sister in opposition to Oedipal incest, incest that gives evidence of a nonhuman sexuality as in the becoming-animal. But, jealous of the portrait, she begins to hate Gregor and condemns him. From that point on, Gregor’s deterritorialization through the becoming-animal fails; he re-Oedipalizes himself through the apple . . . and has nothing to do but die.  

But this only works when an interaction is presupposed: first, a simple reappearance of the previous interaction of the lady in fur, the fluid animal/sexual “meaning” of that portrait, must be present in order for Gregor’s protection of it to mean what Deleuze and Guattari seem convinced it means. Gregor can only reject “schizo incest” with Grete if he prefers “schizo” intercourse with something or someone else; that is, she can only be “jealous” of the lady in fur if the lady in fur continues to “mean” in an animal/sexual interactive capacity.

The action that directly succeeds this moment and indirectly causes Gregor’s death is what at first appears as the allegory but reveals itself to be another interactive metaphor: the pelting of Gregor’s body with apples, thrown by his enraged father:

Es war ein Apfel; gleich flog ihm ein zweiter nach; Gregor blieb vor Schrecken stehen; ein Weiterlaufen war nutzlos, denn der Vater hatte sich entschlossen, ihn zu bombardieren. Aus der Obstschale auf der Kredenz hatte er sich die Taschen gefüllt und warf nun, ohne vorläufig scharf zu zielen, Apfel für Apfel. Diese kleinen roten Äpfel rollten wie elektrisiert auf dem Boden herum und stießen einander. Ein schwach geworfener Apfel streifte Gregors Rücken, glitt aber unschädlich ab. Ein ihm sofort nachfliegender drang dagegen förmlich in Gregors Rücken ein; Gregor wollte sich weiterschleppen, als könne der überraschende unglaubliche Schmerz mit dem Ortswechsel vergehen; doch fühlte er sich wie festgenagelt und streckte sich in vollständiger Verwirrung aller Sinne. (1:135–36)

It was an apple, and a second one flew at him after it. Gregor stood still in terror; running was useless, in that his father had decided to bombard him. Out of the fruit bowl on the credenza he’d stuffed his pockets full and now threw apple after apple, without even looking. These small red apples rolled around on the floor as if electrified, bumping against each other. A weakly thrown apple grazed Gregor’s back but skidded off harmlessly. But another one, thrown immediately
thereafter, drove hard into Gregor’s back. Gregor wanted to drag himself away, as if he could make this surprising and unbelievable pain disappear with a change of location; alas, he felt instead as if he were nailed to the floor, and lay stretched out in complete confusion of all his senses.

Why is this not an instance of simple allegory, for a father/son relationship all too well documented? It may have allegorical results, to be sure, but in order to work as an allegory—to stand in, as an entire gesture, for the physical and psychological domination of a son by a father—the fluid morphing of “commonplaces” must first take place, and that is not an allegorical but rather an interactive metaphorical gesture. That is, the apple must interact twice, with the commonplaces of the concept “weapon” and then “weapon” (and, by extension, “apple”) with “phallus”; the first happens in the literal story but the second only by evoking certain prior archetypal narratives. But even that must be exposed as an interaction rather than a “solid” evocation of an archetype (something at least Deleuze and Guattari argue does not exist in Kafka): the Oedipus story involves the son penetrating, not the father, and the sexual congress is with the mother; thus what happens in The Metamorphosis, if it is to evoke some sort of Oedipal narrative (that itself evokes a “real” historical one) in some sort of allegorical fashion, can only do so if the interactive perversion of that prior narrative is recognized. Thus the interaction view either takes the place of or is necessary for the full comprehension of gestures that may at first be conceived of as simpler (“substitution” or “comparison”) metaphors or pure allegory. This is, then, how several of the “successful” metaphors in The Metamorphosis work; though they and their workings are fascinating, we will see that it is the “unsuccessful” metaphors that carry more (and more interesting) implications about what metaphor is and how (or if) it works. Even Black’s analysis provokes such an examination, as his rendition of the “interaction view” ends with his acknowledgment that “there is, in general, no simple ‘ground’ for the necessary shifts of meaning, no blanket reason why some metaphors work and others fail.” In other words, there seems to be no explanation for why some ostensibly metaphorical language does constitute a working metaphor and why other ostensibly metaphorical language is just literal language that subjects us to the illusion that it is metaphorical—just, so to speak, “metaphorical nonsense.”

The Tractatus and Nonsense

The relevance of the Tractatus to this story, from which it admittedly seems quite distant, comes in the exploration of Wittgenstein’s contrast between language that makes sense and language that does not—specifically, in his conception of the logical form of language and how this form has bearing
on linguistic sense. As we have already seen with respect to *The Trial*, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein determines that the logical form of language is, in effect, what makes language able to express anything at all. And as we have briefly touched upon in Josef K.’s inability to verbalize his true conundrum, this form itself, in its nature as a form, is not expressible in language.

I believe the same can be said about metaphorical language—that, just as literal language has a logical form, metaphorical language has a metaphorical form (X is a “Y”), and that this form is both what makes metaphor metaphorical and, being form, is inexpressible in natural language. For when a metaphor works without incident, we take for granted the mistaken idea that its content has “metaphorical meaning,” that there is such a thing as metaphorical meaning at all; I am able to recognize this mistaken way of thinking because Wittgenstein has discovered something remarkably similar about the logical proposition. That is: when it makes sense, we are lulled into assuming that that sense comes from, or is part, of what that proposition actually means. But this, as we are about to see, is most certainly not the case. Instead, although all sentences that make sense have logical form in common, that form is itself inexpressible.

Wittgenstein demonstrates logical form’s inexpressibility in language by providing examples that make progressively less sense, but whose logical form remains intact. This demonstration provides the unexpected but vital link to literary study. What we will see now is that Kafka—in a remarkably similar way—demonstrates metaphorical form’s inexpressibility in language by providing examples of metaphors that make progressively less sense, but whose metaphorical form remains intact.

Let us first revisit logical form, which we have previously encountered in our exploration of *The Trial*, specifically with the truth table and the “special case” of tautologies and contradictions. Another way to understand logical form is basically to take the opposite tactic as the truth-table method: that is, to force ourselves to begin paying attention to how logical form is present in everyday language, again concentrating on tautologies and contradictions as an excellent example of this. That is, if we hear someone say, “I am going to the store,” we do not immediately notice that sentence’s logical form; we do not even know what that is. Instead we concentrate on what that sentence is purportedly doing: alerting us to assess the truth or falsity of the speaker’s actual state of affairs (*Sachverhalt*), with respect to her motion toward a retail establishment.

The logical form—how “I,” “store,” and “am going to” disambiguate into formal logic when compared with the actual *Sachverhalt* in the world—should be, in nonlogician households at least, summarily ignored. Thus, the inexpressibility in language of this statement’s logical form should not even register with the speaker or the hearer. If, however, we hear a tautological statement, such as “I am either going to the store or not going to the store,” we are more likely to concentrate on the fact that a sentence has been uttered
when it might as well not have been, because, though uttered, it didn’t actually tell us anything (TLP 4.442–4.4661).

Now, suddenly, the inexpressible things that make this sentence “language” come to the forefront: how can we tell that something was uttered, if nothing was expressed? Because the logical structure of the sentence signals that something was. It is the logical form of tautologies (as well as contradictions: “I am both going to the store and not going to the store”) being apparent, when the tautologies and contradictions themselves say nothing, that causes Wittgenstein to determine the following: first, language can express reality, but it cannot express what it has in common with reality: logical form (“Die Sprache kann die gesamte Wahrheit darstellen, aber er kann nicht das darstellen, was er mit der Wirklichkeit gemein haben muß, um sie darstellen zu können—that logische Form” [TLP 4.12]). This is because “um die logische Form darstellen zu können, müßten wir uns mit dem Satze außerhalb der Logik aufstellen können, das heißt außerhalb der Welt” (“In order to represent logical form, we would have to set ourselves, with the proposition, outside of logic; that is, outside the world”) (4.12), and of course we cannot go outside the world of things we can express in order to express something. Hence, we have this oft-cited remark: “Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden” (“What can be shown, cannot be said”) (4.1212).

Wittgenstein means it literally when he claims that language shows its logical form—for language relates to the world precisely by creating a tangible, easily recognizable logical structure that mirrors (or fails to mirror) the literal situation in the world that the said language is supposed to be describing (the general upshot of the “picture theory” sections of the Tractatus, TLP 1–3). Thus, in 4.1212, the “was” Wittgenstein is talking about is not merely a singular “was,” but rather what all language has in common with whatever reality it purports to express. Logical form, in turn, is what language shows that allows it both to make sense and to alert us to when it does not make sense. The proposition shows but cannot express to us its sense, because it is impossible to explain why a proposition that makes sense makes sense, because logical form exists outside of language, and “explaining” without language is impossible.

The “was” in 4.1212 refers to that which language has in common with reality, an assertion that comes out of the picture theory of language, which Wittgenstein develops in the earlier propositions of the Tractatus. The picture theory, to recall our earlier brief discussion, is the idea that the language we use with each other shares a logical form with the reality that language is supposed to express. This is why the world must be the totality of facts, and not things (1.1)—what makes it “the world” is how these things relate to each other in logical space, not the things themselves. And logic, rather than being something in a proposition, is the structure that binds and arranges the sentence; the space that allows for that sentence to be arranged and that makes that sentence “match” whatever it is allegedly supposed to depict in reality.
This is the crux of the picture theory, which, as I have mentioned before, biographical legend has it that Wittgenstein developed after being inspired by a famous court case in which an automobile accident was re-created in the courtroom using models, the position of the models corresponding exactly to the position of the “real cars.” Propositions, Wittgenstein argued, should—if “the world” actually is “the totality of facts, and not things”—work along similar lines, their logical form mirroring the way the actual “things” they refer to in the world are arranged. In the picture theory, then, the argument is that an elementary proposition (Satz) is a fact (Tatsache [3.14]), “in which the elements, the words,” as Black explains, “are united in a definite structure—a definite arrangement or mode of combination.” This, as expressed in 2.18, is logical form, the quality about language that makes it “language” (i.e., able to represent reality):

2.18 Was jedes Bild, welcher Form immer, mit der Wirklichkeit gemein haben muß, um sie überhaupt—richtig oder falsch—abbilden zu können, ist die logische Form, das ist die Form der Wirklichkeit.

What every picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all—rightly or falsely—is the logical form, that is, the form of reality.

The crucial role the logical form of reality plays in all interpretations of the Tractatus (and in my interpretation of Kafka’s use of metaphor) does not truly emerge until far later in the Tractatus, in the 4s, when it becomes clear that the most important thing about the logical form of reality—that is, what literal language has in common with reality that makes it allegedly able to represent it, that makes it, in the Wittgensteinian conception, make “sense”—is that it cannot be said, but only shown:

4.022 Der Satz zeigt seinen Sinn.
   Der Satz zeigt, wie es sich verhält, wenn er wahr ist. Und er sagt, das es sich so verhält.

The proposition shows its sense.
   The proposition shows how things stand, if it is true. And it says, that they do so stand.

The picture theory of language comes together to work like this: the Tatsache that a Satz depicts is compared with “reality” (4.05) and then judged on whether it matches or does not match what is “really” there. Thus, although a proposition is the expression of a fact, its sense is independent of what that fact actually is (i.e., whether it matches or does not match with reality).
That is why it is possible to understand why, when pointing to a black dot on white paper and saying “this is black,” that such an assertion is “true,” but why doing exactly the same thing while pointing to the white part is false (4.063). That is why *propositions always already have a sense*; asserting them doesn’t *give* them sense; what a proposition asserts is the sense it already must have to be a proposition in the first place (4.064).

This, then, is why it is impossible to explain *why* a proposition that makes sense makes sense, because it just does, and in order to explain logical form, one would have to go outside of logic to do so, and that is just not possible. It is Wittgenstein’s argument as to why certain things about language can only be “shown” that brings this all together in the lead-up to 4.1212, which upon our second viewing (see this book’s introduction) should make a substantial amount more sense:

4.12 Der Satz kann die gesamte Wirklichkeit darstellen, aber er kann nicht das darstellen, was er mit der Wirklichkeit gemein haben muß, um sie darstellen zu können—die logische Form.

Um die logische Form darstellen zu können, müßten wir uns mit dem Satze außerhalb der Logik aufstellen können, das heißt außerhalb der Welt.

Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—the logical form.

In order to represent the logical form, we should be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world.

And then, soon thereafter:

4.1212 Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden.

What *can* be shown *cannot* be said.

This, then, is what may allow the propositions of the *Tractatus* to retain some sort of worth even though they decidedly fail Wittgenstein’s test of what does and does not make sense. For in 6–6.54, Wittgenstein reveals that all propositions dealing with ethics, aesthetics, riddles, or enigmas—in short, what most people consider “philosophy”—cannot possibly make sense, an issue we will take up in far more detail in chapter 3. For now, it is most important to remind ourselves that the ultimate fate of language that doesn’t make sense is that it is simply illusion *masquerading* as language.

Now we are pointed once again to the tautology/contradiction example that began this section. For the true moment when one can understand that
our language shows its sense and cannot say its sense is the moment language makes no sense at all. For it is not, actually, something like the tautology “I am either going to the store or not going to the store”—which technically falls within the rules of logic by being classifiable as a tautology, but that expresses nothing—that causes logical form’s inexpressibility in language to become obvious. Rather, that honor falls to a total violation of logic, in the manner of “I am going to the readily.” Why do we recognize this sentence as gibberish? Because, unlike “I am both going and not going to the store,” it contains a glaring category error, the substitution of an adverb for a noun. Its linguistic form is wrong. Yes, now the speaker has done something notice-ably against the rules, and in doing so has made the very existence of those rules—in this case, that a sentence needs a form to make sense—clear. The structure that still makes this recognizable as an English sentence, albeit a nonsensical one, must itself not be expressible within that sentence, since the sentence itself expresses nothing other than nonsense.

Now, finally, we can move on to the way in which Wittgenstein’s theory of the inexpressibility of logical form fits in with what I believe to be the illusory “chief question” of The Metamorphosis (“What is Gregor Samsa a metaphor for?”). I would like to posit that the same form/content separation Wittgenstein insists governs propositional language also applies to literary metaphor, and that the rendering of a failed one, an illusory one, a nonsensi-cal one, is what makes this most evident. For the rules of metaphor are most apparent when a violation occurs, when, for example, the X and “Y” entities of a metaphorical utterance are the same thing. Being the same thing, they cannot “interact” since the prefix “inter” presupposes difference. Thus, the richness of expression we expect (X is a “Y,” metaphorically) is displaced by redundancy (X is an “X,” nonsensically), and this redundancy, this absence of richness, forces upon us the recognition of the metaphorical form itself.

At last we can begin to see a bit more clearly what connects metaphorical structure in The Metamorphosis with Wittgenstein’s theory of the logical form of language in the Tractatus. It is the idea of something presented in the form of language that cannot be said in language, but nevertheless shows what is important about language. In the end, just as Wittgenstein has shown that what makes language language is inexpressible in language, a closer look at nonsensical metaphor in Kafka’s Metamorphosis will reveal exactly why what makes metaphor metaphorical is also inexpressible in its language.

**The Metamorphosis and Metaphorical Nonsense**

First let us confront the idea that we “must” recognize Gregor’s body as a metaphor in the first place, an act that some critics fear comes as a result of decades of critical conditioning rather than textual necessity. Anderson points out that “few if any readers of The Metamorphosis have wished to recognize
Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosed body as an aesthetic form,” reminding us that “for Kafka’s early public the bug was simply too repulsive, and was explained away with allegorical notions like ‘alienated labor’ or ‘unconscious self-loathing.’ The explaining away has, in turn, provoked not only classic interpretations like these, but also others, so many that Anderson is here inspired to the assignation of “negative infinity,” a description I have previously invoked. There is, however, a textual reason—over and above the repulsiveness—for this presupposed metaphor, and that is that Gregor’s literal body is possible for the reader to picture only in bits and pieces, details Anderson describes as “scant and contradictory”; furthermore, “since the story is narrated largely from Gregor’s perspective, his own body tends to disappear from the reader’s view.” Take, for example, Gregor’s first self-appraisal, taken directly after waking up (that is, in the story’s second sentence):

Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang dün- nen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen. (1:93)

He lay upon his hard, armor-like back and if he raised his head up a bit he saw his concave, brown belly, which was now divided by arches into stiff sections, now so tall that the blanket could not cover it, and indeed seemed ready to slide off it entirely. His many legs, so pitifully thin compared to the rest of his body, waved about helplessly before his eyes.

If Gregor’s back is indeed armor-like, then it is a curiously weak armor, as it is pierced fairly easily by an apple; odder still is the absence of number of Gregor’s legs—is it six? Is he an insect? Is it more, like a centipede? Is it some fantasy number in the middle? Further, the “noch nie gefühlten, leichten, dumpfen Schmerz” (“light, dull pain he had never felt before”) Kafka describes Gregor feeling directly after waking up is striking and memorable, and given so much attention that we as readers are sure it must mean something—and not only does it not develop into anything major, it is never mentioned again.

For Anderson, the task is, in spite of or because of these lapses in descriptive coherence, to focus on Gregor’s body—in short, to remind ourselves, by removing the necessity for metaphor, of “the audacity of using a human-sized cockroach as a main figure in a literary text.” But a problem arises when we only, as Anderson seeks to do, “describe Gregor’s form in visual and aesthetic terms, even when the text itself leaves these terms vague or obscures their reference.” And that is that in doing this we ignore another
bit of audacity—and that is the audacity to create something whose literal and aesthetic being is simultaneously inescapable and vague. Take for example the entire sentence in which the “leichte[r], dumpfe[r] Schmerz” comes into play, in which Gregor is attempting to get out of bed for the first time. Kafka describes Gregor’s body in vivid but obscured detail, and here this pain appears that never develops into anything:

Er versuchte es wohl hundertmal, schloß die Augen, um die zappelnden Beine nicht sehen zu müssen, und ließ erst ab, als er in der Seite einen noch nie gefühlten, leichten, dumpfen Schmerz zu fühlen begann. (1:94)

He tried it a hundred times, closing his eyes in order not to have to see his floundering legs, and only stopped when he began to feel in his side a light, dull ache he had never felt before.

Gregor’s body is being rendered as simultaneously very real, very “experienced” (i.e., not an “absolute metaphor”) and yet it is inherently vague—but does this translate directly into the necessity of metaphor? As we will shortly see in detail, the necessity of metaphor comes not just in Kafka’s portrayal of Gregor’s vague/concrete body, but from the word Ungeziefer itself, a term that is literal and metaphorical at the same time, that is, what Corngold will term a “second-order metaphor” for a particular kind of indescribably disgusting insect-esque creature, a “shifting, unsettled constellation of features.”

48 So Gregor’s body in its original characterization must be a metaphor—and yet he must also be literal.

The idea that Gregor must be a metaphor but can’t be a metaphor has been hinted at (albeit in pieces, and in different phrasing) by Kafka critics, traceable back to Adorno’s assertion that everything in Kafka be taken literally (“alles wörtlich nehmen”), but also present in Günter Anders’s Kafka Pro und Contra, in which he makes the astute observation that the point of departure in The Metamorphosis is ordinary language, and in it Kafka’s chief accomplishment is that he has forced a metaphor to literalize itself, to take its words “at their word.”

49 Corngold reads Anders here as claiming that Gregor is a metaphor come alive, and it is with this assumption that both his 1973 and 2004 examinations of “the metamorphosis of metaphor” begin. Corngold first recognizes the problem with what he sees as the concept of metaphor broadly conceived in The Metamorphosis by recalling Kafka’s own distaste for metaphor (back again to the idea that they made him “despair” of writing, as wrote in his diary [GW 11:196]). Kafka is after all “the writer par excellence who came to detect in metaphorical language a crucial obstacle to his own enterprise.”

50 Corngold’s argument hinges on his application of Richards’s concept of the metaphor (which resembles Black’s “interaction view”), in which some
thing (A, a “vehicle”) is designated as some other thing (B, a “tenor”). But if what is supposed to be a “vehicle” that evokes a “tenor” is purposefully forced “out of context,” made into a literal thing, then it just functions as a name, and directs us not to the qualities of the “tenor” we wanted to ascribe to the “vehicle,” but the whole “tenor” itself. Everything that would normally remain in the “metaphorical unconscious” suddenly becomes literal as well, precluding any of what Black would call the “interaction” between commonplaces that do apply in the situation and exclusion of those that don’t. Gregor is not “a vermin,” a human with some applicable vermin-like qualities, he is a vermin; he has woken up “in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt” (“in his bed transformed into a monstrous Ungeziefer”) (GW 1:93). Not a giant cockroach (Käfer), not a massive spider (Spinne), not even an Insekt, or the bug (Wanze) Kafka often mentioned to his friends—Gregor is an Ungeziefer, a word stemming from the Middle High German word zebar (meaning a classification of animals fit for sacrifice) whose modern incarnation the Duden Bedeutungswörterbuch defines as “bestimmte [schmarotzende] tierische Schädlinge /bes. Insekten/” (“particular [scrounging] pests, particular insects”). This itself is a designation that is both specific and vague; though a particular sort (a sort defined by their observer) of “pests” is meant, no specific species are designated. With the simple choice of one word—and bolstered by Gregor’s inconsistent and perplexing rendering—Kafka has assured that Gregor is both literal (he is not “like a vermin,” a man with vermin-like qualities, whatever commonplaces that may or may not evoke; he is one) and inherently metaphorical, inhabiting a word, Ungeziefer, that has no concrete literal reference. It is this self-collapsing action—a metaphor that acts like a metaphor but cannot be a metaphor—that demonstrates the inability for this metaphor to “be the case” metaphorically, that reveals it as metaphorical nonsense, that shows Kafka to be confronting the meaning limits of metaphorical language in a way remarkably similar to how Wittgenstein uncovered what he saw to be nonsense in philosophical propositions.

But how does this really work? By the structural examination the collapse of Gregor as a metaphor provokes. Corngold argues that Kafka’s rendering of Gregor’s body is “destructively paradoxical,” for if a metaphor becomes literal, “we go to (B) as an object in the world in its totality,” while at the same time we know it is a metaphor and read it metaphorically; we “go to (B) only in its quality as a predicate of (A).” That is, we expect, still, Gregor to stand for something even though apparently now all he stands for is himself. And thus we have a problem:

As literalization proceeds, as we attempt to experience in (B) more and more qualities that can be accommodated by (A), we metamorphose (A). But if the metaphor is to be preserved and (A) and (B) are to remain unlike, we must stop before the metamorphosis is
complete. If, now, the tenor—as in *The Metamorphosis*—is a human consciousness, the increasing literalization of the vehicle transforms the tenor into a monster.\(^\text{56}\)

Ergo, “the continual alteration of Gregor’s body suggests ongoing metamorphosis, the *process* of literalization . . . and not its end state.”\(^\text{57}\)

But what does the process of literalization say? It says *nothing* and can only show, and, furthermore, shows *that* it can only show (and cannot say). The idea that governs this argument is that the way Kafka has chosen to use metaphorical language in the creation of Gregor Samsa’s body forces us to acknowledge several “ineffable truths” (in the words of Hacker, referring to the *Tractatus*) about the structure of metaphor, foremost among these being that metaphor is a structure and not a thing. This is an idea hinted at by Deleuze and Guattari when they argue that Kafka’s animals evoke no mythology and no archetypes, but rather correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them. There is no longer anything but movements, vibrations, thresholds in a deserted matter: animals, mice, dogs, apes, cockroaches are distinguished only by this or that threshold, this or that vibration. (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 13)

When something is freed from its signifier, so to speak, the movement or threshold of that (empty/misguided) signifying remains. Unlike what Deleuze and Guattari seem to be arguing, however, I see the perseverance of the movement or threshold, the alleged signifying-toward-nothing, to *show* that Kafka’s metaphorical rendition of an animal is only a structure, a movement, the demonstration of a threshold. The genius of Kafka’s story is that he forces us to acknowledge that the metaphorical form is independent of content by way of the recognition of Gregor’s body as a failed or metaphorically nonsensical metaphor: one with the proper metaphorical form but only its original literal content.

Metaphor’s independence of content is also recognized in the philosophy of language that grew and splintered out of both the early and late Wittgenstein, both in the world of critical theory and that of analytic philosophy. This is the idea that, in the (metaphorical) parlance of Donald Davidson, “to make a metaphor is to murder it,” a view (and, more or less, a terminology) shared by Derrida. Before reaching his own death metaphor, Derrida begins “White Mythology” by reminding us:

If we wanted to conceive and classify all the metaphorical possibilities of philosophy, there would always be at least one metaphor
The Metamorphosis

which would be excluded and remain outside the system: that one, at least, which was needed to construct the concept of metaphor, or, to cut the argument short, the metaphor of metaphor.58

The only way to “get around” this would be to discover, somehow, that metaphors have “another origin” (“White Mythology,” 18). For, after all, in an unattributed nod to Blumenberg, “concept is a metaphor, foundation is a metaphor, theory is a metaphor; and there is no meta-metaphor for them” (23). Derrida argues that metaphor is a special linguistic/philosophical moment, “the moment of possible sense as a possibility of non-truth. It is the moment of detour in which truth can still be lost” (42). Metaphor’s “real meaning” is in fact the dialectical moment it creates, its existence as a “provisional loss of meaning,” something that “always has its own death within it” (73–74). That is: metaphor, in having its own death within it (in necessarily “killing” its own content), means with its form.

Death metaphors used to describe metaphor are not unique to critical theory; Davidson chooses one as well, when, in his rebuttal to Black, he presents his own more drastic view of “what metaphors mean” in his essay of the same name. Black’s interaction view is too permissive for Davidson, whose more dramatic conception of metaphor is that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing. That is, a statement can have a metaphorical use but there is no such thing as an inherently metaphorical statement. Davidson demonstrates his theory before he explains it, beginning his essay with the assertion that metaphors are “the dreamwork of language” (“What Metaphors Mean,” 31). Rather than explicate what he has done with that metaphor, Davidson leaves it, and argues that metaphors (including presumably the one he just used) “mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more” (32). While he concedes that “metaphors cannot be paraphrased,” this is “not because metaphors say something too novel for literal expression but because there is nothing there to paraphrase” (32). This, in turn, is because of the distinction he makes between “what words mean and what they are used to do,” a distinction on which the central argument of the essay is based, and one that his use of “metaphor is the dreamwork of language” purportedly demonstrates. For Davidson, “it is no help in explaining how words work in metaphor to posit metaphorical or figurative meanings, or special kinds of poetic or metaphorical truth. These ideas don’t explain metaphor, metaphor explains them.”59 Davidson’s argument here seems to point back to Derrida’s—the uncovering (metaphorically speaking) of a metaphor is an illusion, because all there is underneath is more metaphor. The difference with Davidson is that this death possibility isn’t a sort of always-already-contained innate characteristic of metaphor—it is not a possibility at all; it is a constant fact that metaphors are simply literal speech and nothing more. He writes: “If we are to think of words in metaphors as directly going about their business of applying to what they properly do apply to, there is no difference
between a metaphor and the introduction of a new term into our vocabulary: to make a metaphor is to murder it.” Davidson attempts to make stronger with the example that determining the way in which words are used is the only way to tell the difference between a metaphor and an outright lie. What could be termed Davidson’s “resolute” conception of metaphor (after the “resolute” reading of Wittgenstein we will see developed momentarily) ends in the following directive:

We must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning). The various theories we have been considering mistake our goal. Where they think they provide a method for deciphering an encoded content, they actually tell us (or try to tell us) something about the effects metaphors have on us. The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself.

Though Black ends up rebutting Davidson’s argument, Davidson has managed to strengthen (for better or worse) the final element in Black’s own conception of “interactive” metaphor, which is that there is no systematic way to tell why some metaphors work and others don’t. If metaphor only exists as a form or a use, and there is no such thing as metaphorical content with meaning (or metaphorical meaning of content), then the “interactive” and skeptical views of metaphor can actually conflate. There is such a thing as a “successful” metaphor—one that, though it might, as Derrida argues, have its own death within it (after long and protracted-enough use, in the Nietzschean sense), still “interacts” (Black) between some sort of tenor/vehicle combination (Richards), but whose designation as metaphor is completely independent of its content and simply rests on the fact that it conforms to the form of metaphor. And thus, should the tenor and vehicle happen to be the same thing—the same Ungeziefer, for example—it is also possible to have a “failed” or metaphorically nonsensical metaphor whose structure is exactly the same as a “successful” or sensical one (ergo it is also a metaphor) but whose content, once again necessarily independent from the form, may evoke “commonplaces” but also simply evokes itself. This designation takes much the same form as Wittgenstein’s examination of the tautologies and contradictions of logic, which he describes as senseless (sinnlos) but not nonsensical (unsinnig) due to the logical form they take—the same form as sentences that do make sense. That is, the sentence “It is raining or not raining” is put together using exactly the same logical and grammatical rules (which Wittgenstein demonstrates using the construction of a truth table) as “It is raining.” Thus, though it ends up telling us nothing about the weather (in Wittgensteinian parlance, it makes no “sense” because it does not give us a picture in our head with which we can match or not match reality), it shows
us a great deal (everything, in fact), about how logical form is independent of content (TLP 4.31).

In Kafka, though the designation of Gregor Samsa as an “ungeheures Ungeziefer” tells us only confusing accounts of exactly what kind of animal Gregor is (or what, even, his face looks like), the structure of the metaphor—the way the word Ungeziefer is meant, in the German language, to evoke “commonplaces” about unwanted invasive creatures in an otherwise civilized household—shows us everything we need to know about metaphor: that it is a structure that must be independent of content. As Gregor’s body begins to die after being struck in the exoshell by his father’s apple, the very concreteness of his pain, of his serious wound (“schwere Verwundung”) of the apple remaining lodged in his shell for a month, is set against the consciously milder behavior of the father, whose act of wounding served somehow to remind him that Gregor was a member of the family (1:136). This scene takes place in the final act of the story, thus reinforcing Kafka’s consistent portrayal of Gregor as both inescapably concrete—his pain being the primary evidence of that—and oddly esoteric (his family-member status is still in there somewhere); as embodying the form of a metaphor and the content of himself. A recognition of a parallel trajectory with Wittgenstein in provoking with form the importance of form is what both recalls and departs from Corngold’s examination, both of the “metamorphosis of the metaphor” and of the “necessity of form” in Kafka’s work.

According to Corngold, the real metamorphosis of The Metamorphosis is the struggle with the process of literalizing a metaphor—the process of concretizing a moving, shifting interaction (Black), solidifying what Derrida called the moment of possible meaninglessness—which is impossible. All that really results (Davidson would argue) is whatever is literally there. The “wahrer Sachverhalt” of the situation (Sachverhalt being a term used both by Kafka to describe the Samsa cleaning lady confirming Gregor’s demise and the centerpiece of Wittgenstein’s picture theory) is that Gregor stands only for himself (GW 1:153). And here reemerges the original question I sought to avoid: why would Kafka do that? For Corngold the genius seems to be in the demonstration of metaphorical nonsense itself, in the failed literalization of metaphor. Gregor’s status as a living “shifting” metaphor either shows us nothing at all about metaphor (in that he is metaphorically nonsensical), or, simultaneously, everything there is to say about metaphor, “that metaphor is an enigma, to be grasped, if at all, only by approximations,” which would certainly echo Black’s sentiment that there is no way to tell why one metaphor succeeds and another fails. But is metaphor really an “enigma” we can grasp only in bits and pieces? Or is it, rather, an easily recognizable structure that, in its status as a structure, makes itself free of its content (and that content’s signifying-consistency obligations) and thus is not responsible, in the end, for whether or not this content means, whether or not this content makes metaphorical sense by meaning in a consistent extratextual direction?
Interestingly enough, this is what those who attribute philosophical or
metaphysical content to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* argue he has done with
philosophical language (or, in some conceptions, all literal language): he has
shown, through the representation of a breakdown of semantic content, the
difference between form and content, and the role that form must play in lan-
guage. And this, then, is what I argue that Kafka has done in confronting the
limits of metaphor: he has shown, through the representation of a metaphor
that both cannot and must be a metaphor, the role that form must play even
in purely literary or heavily metaphorical language. Metaphorical language
may just be, as Thorlby conceives it, an “obstacle to be overcome”; but not
in the way we might imagine; “overcoming” it results in the acknowledg-
ment of and adaptation to the vital role structure plays in representational
language.65 There is also a moment where Wittgenstein, too, insists that the
propositions of the *Tractatus* must be overcome (“Er muß diese Sätze über-
winden” [6.54])—the difference, as we will momentarily see, between the
metaphysical and resolute readings of the *Tractatus* is that the metaphysical
conception argues that the act of conquering, overcoming, or transcending
these sentences, of recognizing them as *unsinnig*, is predicated on the dis-
cover of and not saying, they show their form.

Though Gregor Samsa’s body is perhaps the largest and most drastic
self-collapsing or nonsensical metaphor in *The Metamorphosis*, there are
others—some, in fact, we have already examined as “working” metaphors—
that bear examination. Anders has said that “Kafkas Welt wird undeutlich,
weil seine Metaphern kollidieren” (“Kafka’s world becomes unclear because
his metaphors collide”).66 And they do—with other metaphors (as in the case
of the “negative infinity” of possibilities) but also, and more interestingly,
with their literal selves. That is, Gregor Samsa’s metaphor body “collides”
with his real body; they are the same thing. Or take, for example, the animal
voice (*Tierstimme*) about which the chief clerk remarks in the earliest pages
(1:105): from the clerk’s perspective he is using metaphorical language, but in
“reality” he is using literal language; Gregor’s voice is, in fact, a *Tierstimme*.
The dramatic irony of the moment comes in the remarkably simple conclu-
dion of literal and metaphorical truth.

Remember, also, Gregor’s own recognition of his *Tierstimme* early on, as
he has “a shock” to hear his own terrifying warbling juxtaposed with his
mother’s “gentle voice” (1:96). Here we effectively have Gregor’s aphasia
standing in for Gregor’s aphasia, the inability to communicate with his family
that preexisted Gregor’s transformed condition. However rich the metaphor-
ical meaning is here—the great joke of Gregor’s transformation being that it
makes manifest an inability to communicate with his family that was always
there—what is truly remarkable is that it is the same as the literal meaning.
One subtle kind of aphasia stands in for another, but aphasia it is—the con-
tent of the aphasia (i.e., how or “why” Gregor cannot talk) varies, but the
form (i.e., that Gregor cannot talk) is consistent. And this continues as he
attempts to speak in human language through the door: “Ich komme gleich,’ sagte Gregor langsam und bedächtig und rührte sich nicht, um kein Wort der Gespräche zu verlieren” (‘I’ll be right there,’ said Gregor slowly and carefully . . . so as not to lose a word”) (1:102). Again, we have a language crisis standing in for a language crisis, a fear of losing the efficacy of language standing in for a fear of never having had the efficacy of language in the first place. The metaphorical “truth” may be so prone to overpowering the literal truth in this scene because they are, slight content differences aside, the same truth. In this way they both don’t “work” as metaphors and completely work as metaphors—they show that they are metaphors by the way that they both work and don’t work. That is, they show that the structure of something purporting to stand in for something else works in exactly the same motion when there is a “something else” as when there is not.

**Conclusion**

Kafka has not, then, as Deleuze and Guattari claim, “killed” metaphor in some quest for the purification of language which the modernists—including and especially Wittgenstein—apparently sought. Instead, in narrating both a literal metaphor and a failed metaphor, Kafka has just shown us what metaphor is: a form, one that can have a discernible semantic “interaction” between the literal and otherwise, but one that does not have to; one whose content can be said, but whose form can only be shown. For Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, it seems as if in the end the “saying/showing” distinction is what keeps its nonsensical remarks from being wholly useless. As long as there is recognition of the logical form of reality and of language’s ability to show that form, then the *Tractatus* still has plenty of meaning, both as philosophy and to philosophy. In working with Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, what we can now see after exploring its connections with the *Tractatus* is that, even if the metaphorical “meaning” of Gregor Samsa’s body can never be agreed upon and Anderson’s “negative infinity” remains, a solid “meaning” the story can have is that with and through this instance of metaphorical nonsense, he shows what metaphor cannot say.