

## From ›Vermin‹ to ›Superhero‹: Continuity and Change in Literary Representations of Disability – Using the Example of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and its Literary Reception in Contemporary Disability Culture in Works by Christoph Keller<sup>1</sup>

### 1. *The Metamorphosis* from a literary and cultural disability studies point of view

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* [*Die Verwandlung*] (1915)<sup>2</sup> has been interpreted in a number of ways, including biographically, psychoanalytically, morally, ethically, economically, socio-historically, and in terms of genre theory, to name but a few frequently recurring readings.<sup>3</sup> The following article presents another type of interpretation, whose potential from a literary and cultural studies perspective seems far from exhausted. The intent is to read this highly canonical narrative through the terms of disability and with key questions from literary disability studies in mind. This field has recently started gaining traction in German-speaking countries.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the article also looks beyond the text of *The Metamorphosis* itself to the reception of Kafka in contemporary disability culture. To this end, the books *The Best Dancer* [*Der beste Tänzer*] (2003) and *Every Cripple a Superhero* [*Jeder*

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1 This article is a translated, edited and abridged version of Johannes Görbert: Vom »Ungeziefer« zum »Superhelden«. Kontinuität und Wandel literarischer Darstellungen von Behinderung – am Beispiel von Franz Kafkas *Die Verwandlung* und ihrer literarischen Rezeption in der Disability Culture der Gegenwart bei Christoph Keller, in: KulturPoetik 24:1 (2024), pp. 22–53. The references for the Kafka and Keller editions in English that I have used are given below. All other translations (especially from research literature on Kafka in German) are my own. For the original German quotes, please refer to the article in KulturPoetik.

2 All quotes from the story are taken from Franz Kafka: *The Metamorphosis. A New Translation. Texts and Contexts. Criticism*. Transl. by Susan Bernofsky, ed. by Mark M. Anderson, New York, London 2016. In the following I quote passages from this edition with the page number in brackets in the body of the text.

3 Cf. the research report by Sandra Poppe: *Die Verwandlung*, in: Engel, Manfred/Auerochs, Bernd (eds.): *Kafka-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*. Stuttgart 2010, pp. 164–174 as well as the interpretations presented in Ulf Abraham: *Franz Kafka: Die Verwandlung*, in: Schneider, Sabine (ed.): *Lektüren für das 21. Jahrhundert*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 18–36.

4 Cf. for example the activities of the German Research Foundation (DFG) network »Inclusive Philology. Literary Disability Studies in the German-Speaking Realm«, [gepris-extern.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/509035805?language=en](https://www.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/509035805?language=en) (6.9.2024).

*Krüppel ein Superheld*] (2020) by the contemporary Swiss author Christoph Keller (born 1963) are explored.<sup>5</sup> The guiding consideration is, firstly, that Kafka's story and its protagonist Gregor Samsa continue to offer considerable potential for being connected with the concerns of disabled people right up to the present day. Secondly, the comparison between the hypotext and Keller's hypertexts, understood overall as a critical homage to Kafka, exemplifies processes of change related to the (artistic) evaluation of disability, shifting from dominant protonormalistic to more flexible normalistic approaches in the terminology of Jürgen Link's theory of normalism.<sup>6</sup> While in Kafka's narrative deviations from societal norms, as embodied by its protagonist, are sharply sanctioned, Keller, specifically through his own fictional text, titled »Bug Story« [»Wanzengeschichte«], presents a literary response to *The Metamorphosis* in which forms of an extraordinary corporeality and diversity more generally appear much more accepted.

Even though perspectives on Kafka through the lenses of literary disability studies and disability culture have been sparse so far, the few existing interpretations never tire of emphasising how productive his work in general, and *The Metamorphosis* in particular, are with regard to the phenomenon of disability. This is true both for perspectives on the affected individual, who has to deal with an unusual physicality, as well as on society, which all too often patronises, discriminates and excludes people as soon as they no longer fit into the grids, patterns and conventions prescribed by social institutions.<sup>7</sup> Central aims of Kafka projects from disability studies and culture are accordingly to »see more clearly through the mechanisms underlying this reduction« or to »reclaim the freedom« to »be oneself [...] through creative action.«<sup>8</sup> Kafka's literature thus offers opportunities for identification and

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5 Christoph Keller: *Der beste Tänzer*, Frankfurt/Main 2003 [This book has not yet been translated into English; the translations are therefore my own]. Christoph Keller: *Every Cripple a Superhero*, London 2022.

6 Jürgen Link: *Versuch über den Normalismus. Wie Normalität produziert wird*, Opladen 1997.

7 The few existing short interpretations include James A. Metzger: *Re-Visioning Kafka's Metamorphosis Through Illness and Disability*, in: *Journal of the Kafka Society of America* 33/34:1 (2009), pp. 56–61; Uttara Ghosh: *The Metamorphosis: Through the Looking Glass of a Disabled*, in: *The Criterion* 4:4 (2013), pp. 1–7; Katherine Findley: *Living as the Bug: Kafka's The Metamorphosis as Read Through Critical Disability Theory*. Texas State University 2020 [Honours Thesis].

8 Renate Hofmann: *Zu Kafka gemalt*, in: *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 16.5.2002 ([www.ksta.de/zu-kafka-gemalt-13836196](http://www.ksta.de/zu-kafka-gemalt-13836196)) (6.9.2024) [first quote]; Olaf Dehler: *Literatur ohne Schranken* ([web.archive.org/web/20180808114839/http://literatur-ohne-schranken.de](http://web.archive.org/web/20180808114839/http://literatur-ohne-schranken.de)) (6.9.2024) [second quote].

invites further critical debate. This applies not least to the interplay between proximity and distance regarding Kafka's work which is evident in the case of Keller's autobiographical and fictional writings. Keller, who lives with spinal muscular atrophy, reveals both a strong connection especially to *The Metamorphosis* and objections to individual elements of the world-renowned story, in particular to the way it ends. As such, this literary dialogue between Kafka and Keller provides some key elements of continuity and change in literary representations of disability in the transition from the early 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. The »monstrous vermin«: Gregor Samsa's disabilities

Not only in *The Metamorphosis*, but in his work in general, Kafka's narrative world bears clear traits of an artistically designed protonormalism in accordance with Link's theory.<sup>9</sup> Boundaries between normality and deviation often appear strictly drawn in Kafka's texts. Normality is generally understood as normative, while deviations from the norm are highly unwelcome and are barely accepted by the authorities and most often punished with severe sanctions. Just two of the most famous examples are the bank employee Josef K., who struggles in vain with the mechanisms of an impenetrable bureaucracy during *The Trial* [*Der Prozess*], or the land surveyor K. in *The Castle* [*Das Schloss*], who is similarly isolated and powerless in the face of the societal principles surrounding him. In many instances, the society depicted in Kafka's narratives asserts a high degree of sociocultural conformity and establishes only narrow zones of normality. Instead of flat hierarchies, steep ones dominate; instead of egalitarianism and democracy, forms of authoritarian or patriarchal behaviour often characterise the narrative events. This constitutive protonormalism permeates all social areas from work life to private life. Instructions from the authorities must be obeyed at all costs; men must start families and provide for them; women must subordinate themselves to their husbands and children to their parents – these are just some of the guiding imperatives of the protonormalist settings that Kafka formulated in equally highly canonical texts such as *Letter to His Father* [*Brief an den Vater*], *The Judgement* [*Das Urteil*] and *In the Penal Colony* [*In der Strafkolonie*].

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9 Cf. Link: Versuch über den Normalismus, for the following in particular the tabular comparison of »protonormalistische Strategie« and »flexibel-normalistische Strategie« on pp. 79–80. The fact that Link's work on normalism is central to the disability studies approach is also emphasised by Anne Waldschmidt: *Disability Studies zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2020, p. III.

These and many other texts thus reflect – in the author's own ›Kafkaesque‹ manner – dominant social behaviour as it was widespread at the time of his writing, both in his immediate surroundings in Prague, as well as in Europe more broadly, at the time of the First World War.<sup>10</sup> This early 20<sup>th</sup> century protonormalism also included guiding principles of a ›healthy‹, ›non-disabled‹ physicality. Such principles should fundamentally enable people to take up employment and procreate, and, in the case of men, to perform military service. The fact that Kafka was intimately familiar with such protonormalist norms and the social problems that arose in the event of deviations from them is not only demonstrated by his literary texts, but also by his everyday legal work at the Prague Workers' Accident Insurance Institution in Prague.<sup>11</sup> His official writings largely consist of documenting work accidents at industrial companies, and, during the Great War, impairments acquired on the battlefield that resulted in physical disabilities. Meanwhile, in his literary works, protagonists often transform, from one moment to the next, into involuntary deviants from the prevailing protonormalist physical norms. Gerhard Neumann has described this process, which is so constitutive of Kafka's literature, as »the dropping out of every narrative, every justifying context draining away, and as the protagonist finding himself at the mercy of a shocking event [...]: ›What has happened to me?‹«<sup>12</sup>

*The Metamorphosis* also proceeds along these lines. With its famous first sentence, Gregor Samsa suddenly finds himself cast out of his normal/protonormalist physicality and into deviance. Whereas he was previously a relatively inconspicuous young adult who went through life without being known to violate any norms, he is now highly alienated from his environment in his new form as a »monstrous vermin«. All the criteria for disability as developed by the sociologist Jörg Michael Kastl can be applied to Kafka's transformed protagonist.<sup>13</sup> Firstly, Gregor's capacities deviate from the requirements for certain general activities; for example, his altered physicality makes it impossible for him to continue his previous form of employment.

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- 10 For a detailed account of the socio-historical background to Kafka's writing cf. the voluminous biography by Reiner Stach, especially *Die Jahre der Entscheidungen*, Frankfurt/M. 2002 or, for a broad historical contextualisation of *The Metamorphosis*, Hartmut Binder: *Kafkas »Verwandlung«. Entstehung – Deutung – Wirkung*, Frankfurt/M., Basel 2004.
  - 11 For a short introduction to Kafka's legal work cf. Benno Wagner: *Amtliche Schriften*, in: Engel/Auerchs (eds.): *Kafka-Handbuch*, pp. 402–409.
  - 12 Gerhard Neumann: *Kafka-Lektüren*, Berlin 2013, p. 234.
  - 13 Cf. the definition of ›Behinderung‹ (›disability‹) in Jörg Michael Kastl: *Einführung in die Soziologie der Behinderung*, Wiesbaden 2016, p. 88.

Secondly, they are essentially linked to his physique (and less so to his psyche). Thirdly, they reveal themselves as relics of a process of physical damage that occurred immediately before the beginning of the story. Fourthly, they prove to be permanent right up to the very end of *The Metamorphosis*. And fifthly, they are evaluated negatively throughout by Gregor's social environment, which is also typical of disability phenomena. Thus, certain everyday activities in several crucial areas of life no longer work as they used to do, contrary to the expectations of Gregor himself and his environment. The protagonist's physical mobility changes from walking upright to moving ›on all fours‹. Although he can still passively understand and reflect on the verbal communication of his fellow human beings, he can no longer take part in their conversations himself. Moreover, Gregor's senses (especially his sense of sight) and his ability to eat are increasingly impaired as the story progresses, which ultimately means he can hardly perceive or eat anything, and finally dies an agonising death of starvation, barely conscious. Whereas before his metamorphosis, Gregor pursued a seemingly unproblematic existence as a travelling salesman, seamlessly integrated into the protonormalism of his environment and living independently with his parents and sister, he now finds himself increasingly dependent on the support of his surroundings. Gregor is transformed from the breadwinner of the family into someone in need of care, from a restless traveller to someone locked in his room, from a socially integrated citizen to an ostracised victim of repression and violence.

In the narrative, »a photograph of Gregor from his time in the military, showing him as a second lieutenant whose carefree smile as he rested his hand on his dagger commanded respect for his bearing and his uniform« (14) serves as an image that directly contrasts to the protagonist's transformed existence. The difference could hardly be greater: on the one hand, there is the soldier standing upright, fitting into the hierarchies, fulfilling norms;<sup>14</sup> on the other hand, there is the vermin, always bent over, increasingly isolated, who cannot be integrated into any professional or private hierarchy or convention, and who therefore drops out of any social framework that would match with protonormalist norms.<sup>15</sup> While Gregor's body language as a lieutenant confidently commands »respect for his bearing«, which radiates strength and vitality, he now requires, because of his metamorphosis, »many, many

14 Cf. Harald Neumeyer: Ein Leutnant und drei Insekten: Franz Kafkas *Die Verwandlung*, in: Neumeyer, Harald/Steffens, Wilko (eds.): *Kafkas narrative Verfahren*, Würzburg 2015, pp. 91–109, here p. 95.

15 Along the same lines, cf. Ghosh: *The Metamorphosis*, p. 3.

minutes [...] like an old invalid [...] to hobble across his room« (32). This comparison once again places him in the semantic sphere of the military, but now in the vicinity of phenomena resulting from war injuries and the ageing process, two of the most common causes of impairment. The contrast between the vermin form and the uniform is also striking. Whereas Gregor's outward appearance before could barely conform more to what early 20<sup>th</sup> century society expected of its male members, his transformed appearance overrides all such norms. Gregor's overnight metamorphosis is thus one that leads him from the ›compulsory able-bodiedness‹ of his previous existence to an ›embodied difference‹ with which he continually confronts and challenges his social environment throughout the course of the narrative.<sup>16</sup>

It is noteworthy that Kafka endows his protagonist with attributes that strictly speaking cannot apply to his vermin form.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Gregor, insects do not have »eyes« that open and close (3/4), and certainly not a »mouth« (13) from which an »animal's voice« (11) could sound – they have mandibles and are voiceless. Kafka's description of a physical ›above‹ and ›below‹ also does not apply to insects, as Susanne Hochreiter has pointed out: »Because everything that moves on more than two legs is not described from top to bottom, but from front to back. Insects have a three-part body, i.e. head, chest and abdomen: only humans have an upper and lower body«.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, Gregor's body therefore still has unambiguously human characteristics. On the other, Kafka's narrative also exhibits a certain fabulism in the direction of the abject, in that it presents Gregor's metamorphosis precisely in the direction of a vermin and not more like another animal species. That is because, despite all the beneficial insects – butterflies, bees, ladybirds etc. – insects are often regarded as distinctively ugly, disgusting and harmful, especially as soon as they nest in human homes. Waking up in the morning to find yourself in the form of an insect, or finding your own brother, son or colleague transformed in that way is a nightmarish image that the text further develops with all kinds of details. »Waving«, »struggling«, »trembling« and »whirring« legs (3, 4, 17, 20); »peregrinations« of his body that leave behind »sticky trails

16 Cf. Robert McRuer: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence, in: Davis, Lennard J. (ed.): The Disability Studies Reader. Fourth Edition, London, New York 2013, pp. 369–378.

17 Cf. in detail Binder: Kafkas »Verwandlung«, pp. 372–390.

18 Susanne Hochreiter: Kreißende Krisen. Männlichkeiten und Körper in Kafkas Erzählung *Die Verwandlung*, in: Hindinger, Barbara/Langner, Martin-M. (eds.): »Ich bin ein Mann! Wer ist es mehr?« Männlichkeitskonzepte in der deutschen Literatur vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart, Munich 2011, pp. 234–255, here pp. 243–244.

here and there« (25); a back hard »like a carapace« (3); a »curved brown belly segmented by rigid arches« (ibid.); a »brown fluid« that runs out of Gregor's »mouth« (12); a skin rash with »a cluster of tiny white dots« (4) – all this sums into an overall impression of Gregor's embodied difference which can hardly be captured in any way other than with the word ›repulsive‹.<sup>19</sup> As much as Kafka's protagonist retains certain human traits, the text also works hard to not leave the guiding metaphor of the ›vermin‹ as is, but to flesh it out with more details.<sup>20</sup> Gregor's form thus clearly presents a physicality full of ambiguities, which, while still evoking remnants of human ›normality‹ in those around him, at the same time presents them with glaring characteristics of animalistic ›deviations‹.<sup>21</sup>

In his pioneering contribution to literary disability studies, James A. Metzger has provided an illuminating account of how Gregor Samsa himself deals with his transformations. In his view, Kafka's protagonist goes through various phases that correspond to what people are often directly faced with after or during the acquisition of physical impairments. Gregor

1) is suddenly faced with a body that he neither understands very well nor is able to control; [...] 2) initially denies the reality of his new form and tries to proceed with his day as if nothing has changed [...]; 3) gradually adapts and even learns to take pleasure in new sensations and abilities [...]; 4) fears losing touch with his past [...]; 5) longs to be reintegrated into his prior social circle while understandably experiencing moments »of rage at the way [members of his family] were neglecting him« [...]; 6) accustoms himself to solitude imposed both by real bodily limitations [...] and negative social response [...]; 7) is sensitive to the inconvenience he is causing his family and coworkers [...]; and 8) is unable to communicate his experience to others.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth exploring some of the points from Metzger's phase model in more depth. For example, the situational comedy at the beginning of the story, which arises from the discrepancy between Gregor's habits and his

19 Cf. on the aspect of the ›repulsive‹ in the narrative Bernhard Winkler: Der kontaminierte Käfer. Eine ausnehmend ekelhafte Annäherung an Franz Kafkas *Verwandlung*, in: *Literatur für Leser* 40:1 (2017), pp. 73–83, and (with a guiding reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject) Edith H. Krause: Aspects of Abjection in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in: *Literature Interpretation Theory* 30:4 (2019), pp. 303–322.

20 Cf. Abraham: Franz Kafka, p. 23.

21 Andrew J. Webber: Kafka, *Die Verwandlung*, in: Hutchinson, Peter (ed.): *Landmarks in German Short Prose*, Oxford et al. 2003, pp. 175–190, here p. 180, interprets Gregor similarly as a member of a »doubly negated non- or un-species«, which can neither be regarded entirely as human nor entirely as animal.

22 Metzger: *Re-Visioning Kafka's Metamorphosis*, p. 57.

radically changed appearance. After Gregor wakes up, his main concern is not with elements of his vermin form. Rather, his thoughts are mainly focused on the details of his usual daily routine and professional tasks – as if his transformed physicality was merely a trivial matter that could be neglected. At the end of the story, too, it seems almost grotesque when Gregor, shortly before his death, thinks back to his family full of »tenderness and love« (43) – to the people, it should be pointed out, who have betrayed and hurt him, and who ultimately left him alone, neglected and starving. For him, protonormalist principles typical of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as an unconditional commitment to a very hierarchical white-collar existence and a strong respect for his core family with its traditional roles, remain valid even when their representatives have long turned against the protagonist and excluded him from their social circles.

Despite all the physical impairments and social disabilities to which Gregor is exposed, he does not experience his embodied difference as merely weak, frail and burdensome. After he has engaged in moving on his »many little legs« (6) for the first time, it immediately fills him with »physical well-being« (15). And after he has made a »habit« of »crawling back and forth across the walls and ceiling« in his room (26), the text tells of the »almost happy absentmindedness« with which Gregor lets his body, which he now »had [...] far better under control than before«, fall from the »ceiling« to the »floor« (ibid.). Over the course of the story, Gregor thus learns to come to terms with his transformed body to a certain extent, and tries out the possibilities that this new form offers him. In this sense, Gregor's metamorphosis can also be understood as a kind of »release« from previously assumed roles, which at least potentially opens scope for »unconventional being and wilful experience« for the protagonist.<sup>23</sup> His metamorphosis certainly brings about the »great parting« (4) in his own life that Gregor had envisioned for himself – even if not in »five or six years« (ibid.),<sup>24</sup> but virtually overnight and in a way completely different to any he had previously imagined.

23 Cf. Waldschmidt: Disability Studies zur Einführung, p. 181.

24 Fuji Neri: Kafka und der Körper. *Die Verwandlung und Ein Hungerkünstler*, in: Doitsu bungaku ronkō 38 (1996), pp. 73–91, sees »Gregor's new insect body« similarly »liberated from both economic utility and the bourgeois order« (p. 90).

### 3. »It must go«: the abysses of a protonormalist environment

Gregor's immediate environment, however, especially his family, recognise little more in his transformed existence than just the abject nature of his physical ambiguity, in accordance with their protonormalist socialisation. Consequently, the protagonist is confronted with a variety of reaction patterns that people with disabilities have to endure all too often, including outside of literary fiction and throughout history, not just in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The spectrum ranges from disgust, aversion, flight, accusation, half-hearted care, and gradually mounting negligence, all the way to outbursts of violence and obvious relief when Gregor's relatives no longer need to worry about their former provider.<sup>25</sup> In this context, it is of little help that the very term ›vermin‹ refers to an annoying but often completely harmless creature.<sup>26</sup> It is not for nothing that Vladimir Nabokov pointed out in his reading of Kafka »how kind, how good« Gregor is after his metamorphosis into a »poor little monster«.<sup>27</sup> Gregor's new form of existence,

while distorting and degrading his body, seems to bring out in him all his human sweetness. His utter unselfishness, his constant preoccupation with the needs of others – this, against the backdrop of his hideous plight comes out in strong relief. Kafka's art consists in accumulating on the one hand, Gregor's insect features, all the sad detail of his insect disguise, and on the other hand, in keeping vivid and limpid before the reader's eyes Gregor's sweet and subtle human nature.<sup>28</sup>

However, this ›humanity‹ remains completely hidden from Gregor's social environment, in line with their very narrow understanding of ›normality‹: in the end, all they see in him is a disgusting ›thing‹ that needs to be eliminated. Therefore, Gregor *is* not only disabled, but he also *becomes* disabled: due to an increasingly hostile environment that denies him his status as a human being and, as a result, increasingly rejects any responsibility in terms of caring for his existence.

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25 Cf. also Findley: *Living as the Bug*, p. 26f.

26 The German term used in the narrative, »Ungeziefer«, originally simply meant »an animal not suitable for sacrifice« in the religious sense, in contrast to »Geziefer« a term that has long since ceased to be used. Cf. Simon Ryan: Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*. Transformation, Metaphor, and the Perils of Assimilation, in: *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 43:1 (2007), pp. 1–18, esp. p. 11, for the history of the word, related terms, and the metaphorical or ideological charge the term holds for allegedly harmful people, especially in anti-Semitic writings, which gained increasing popularity in Kafka's time.

27 Vladimir Nabokov: *The Metamorphosis*, in: Bowers, Fredson (ed.): *Lectures on Literature*, San Diego 1982, pp. 250–283, here: p. 270.

28 Ibid.

Now, there is a broad consensus in Kafka scholarship that the text not only tells of Gregor's metamorphoses, but also of the transformations of his family members, especially those of his father and sister.<sup>29</sup> From the perspective of literary disability studies, these can be described not as ›dis-‹, but as ›enablement‹ of the minor characters. As Oliver Jahraus has pointed out, the basis of these transformation processes is that the Samsas react less to the »break in their reality« caused by Gregor's metamorphosis itself than to the resulting »change in their social, family, professional or also sexual circumstances.«<sup>30</sup> Since Gregor's embodied difference means that he can no longer think about working and starting a family in accordance with the protonormalist standards of the time, the gap he leaves behind must inevitably be filled in some other way.

Gregor's younger sister becomes this new bearer of hope and responsibility. While she previously appeared to her parents »a rather useless girl« (25), she proves to be more and more ›useful‹ in the course of the story: she initially looks after Gregor, then later begins to work and develops into a young adult. While Gregor's body continues to shrink, dry out and collapse,<sup>31</sup> Grete's body increasingly blossoms; by the end of the story, her ever more »beautiful, voluptuous« female characteristics make her parents think that »how it would soon be time to find her a good husband« (47). In other words, while Grete steadily gains in physical strength and agency within the family, Gregor suffers corresponding losses. This is also evident in the direct relationship between the two characters, which Joachim Pfeiffer has described as a »love-hate relationship« in the »hothouse atmosphere of an isolated nuclear family«.<sup>32</sup> At first, Grete seems to sacrifice herself for Gregor. The further the narrative progresses, however, the more »disgust«, »pointed negligence« and »open rejection« become evident in her.<sup>33</sup> Finally, it is Gregor's own sister who pronounces the death sentence on her brother with the exclamation »It has to go« (42), thus further diminishing him in his creature-like form by use of

29 Cf., for example, the handbook article by Poppe: *Die Verwandlung*, pp. 172–174, with references to further research literature.

30 Oliver Jahraus: *Kafka. Leben, Schreiben, Machtapparate*, Stuttgart 2006, p. 630. Cf. also Findley, *Living as the Bug*, p. 16: »Gregor's change is frightening and strange to his family, but the real animosity comes from the fact that Gregor is no longer able to support them.«

31 Cf. Peter-André Alt: *Franz Kafka. Der ewige Sohn. Biographie*, Munich 2005, p. 334.

32 Joachim Pfeiffer: *Franz Kafka: Die Verwandlung/Brief an den Vater*, Munich 1998, p. 68.

33 Ibid. Metzger: *Re-Visioning Kafka's Metamorphosis*, p. 57, places Grete's behaviour close to the phenomenon of »compassion fatigue« known from the care of relatives, in which the carer's energy for the »initial and well-intentioned commitment to compassionate, attentive care« is lost as time goes on.

the neutral pronoun.<sup>34</sup> In that way, Grete deliberately uses her gain in status to further weaken Gregor's position and to ultimately eliminate him from the family altogether.

A similar ›disinhibition process‹ can also be observed in the character of the father. He had also lived at Gregor's expense for about five years after the bankruptcy of his own business. During this prolonged idleness, he had retained his habitus as the patriarch of the family, but his stature had developed into that of a superficially sluggish, overweight, tired, lethargic and slow person. Things look different after Gregor's metamorphosis, which also gets his father (back) to work. The father, who previously »would trudge [...] rather slowly [...] always with his gingerly advancing cane«, was again looking to be »properly erect«, with his »black eyes« peering out »acutely and attentively«; »his once dishevelled white hair [...] painstakingly combed and parted until it gleamed« (30/31). Whereas his father had previously often received Gregor »in an armchair in his nightshirt«, he is now dressed at home even after work in »a smart blue uniform with gold buttons of the sort worn by porters in banking establishments« (30). The more neglected his son becomes, the more the reinvigorated father pays attention to grooming his own outward appearance, which clearly approximates to the above-mentioned »photograph of Gregor from his time in the military« (14). The father's hypocrisy is doubly evident from his behaviour. Firstly, he had obviously only faked his physical weakness to continue his role as head of the family with the least amount of effort. Secondly, he uses the uniform to present a greater social status than that which he deserves even within the family circle. As a result, he is more than ever recognised as an unchallenged authority by his wife and daughter. This is reflected in how his several physical acts of violence against his son go unquestioned. While Grete's actions remain rather latent for a long time, the father resorts to manifest violence towards Gregor from the very beginning of the story. As a result, he further weakens Gregor physically, who can only succumb to these shifts in the balance of power with respect to his relatives.

From this narrative interplay between Gregor's transformations and the highly ambivalent behaviour of his family members, it follows that what is ›disgusting‹ in the text is to be found less in the ›deviation‹ of Gregor's

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34 Cf. Fernando Bermejo Rubio: Die Bedeutsamkeit der Fehlleistungen. Moralische Konflikte in Kafkas *Die Verwandlung*, in: Sabaté, Dolors/Feijóo, Jaime (eds.): *Apropos Avantgarde. Neue Einblicke nach einhundert Jahren*, Berlin 2012, pp. 253–270 on Grete's vacillation between the personal pronouns »he« [»er«] and »it« [»es«] to describe her brother.

embodied difference than in the ›normality‹ of the Samsas and the society surrounding them. In Kafka's case, this is the social cosmos of Prague's petty bourgeoisie in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for which *The Metamorphosis* attests an unflattering, narrow-minded approach to embodied difference.<sup>35</sup> Gregor's work colleagues and family members show little or no flexibility in the face of the fact that their employee, son and brother no longer conforms to the usual notions of physical normality. Instead, they set in motion a whole series of processes of exclusion and stigmatisation towards him, because he no longer fulfils the social expectations placed on him.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of plot structure and space, this is shown by the transformation of Gregor's room and the attempts of the protagonist, situated at the end of each of the three main narrative sections, to cross the threshold of his room into the living area of the ›normals‹. Exclusion here quite literally means being shut off from the domestic social environment, by means of keys turned »from the outside« (18) to the doors of Gregor's room, which are usually kept locked and are at most »opened a tiny crack and then quickly shut again« (ibid.) to prevent Gregor from gaining access to other rooms. The transformation of his room, which is cleared out in the course of the story (cf. for example 26/27) and thus increasingly resembles a »cave or den« (27), in which more and more »refuse« (37) ends up accumulating, also shows the devaluation of its inhabitant. Gregor's repeated and always futile efforts to get out of his increasingly dishevelled room thus present him as a character of liminality in the sense of Victor W. Turner's concept,<sup>37</sup> which has proven itself fruitful in interpreting the situation of disabled people.<sup>38</sup> In both a literal and a metaphorical sense, Gregor is not in a temporary, but

35 The fact that »Kafka's heroes move on the border between normal and abnormal states, transgressing them and falling out of social convention« and are »sanctioned by being expelled from the sphere of society focused on function and performance« is similarly emphasised by Andreas Dawidowicz: *Die metaphorische Krankheit als Gesellschaftskritik in den Werken von Franz Kafka, Friedrich Dürrenmatt und Thomas Bernhard*, Berlin 2013, pp. 19 and 296.

36 Michael Minden: *Kafka's »Die Verwandlung« and the Condition of Subjectivity*, in: *German Life and Letters* 70:3 (2017), pp. 314–320, here p. 315, also speaks of a process of »exclusion because of its complete otherness«.

37 Cf. for example Victor W. Turner: *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca 2000, esp. pp. 94–105.

38 Cf. Robert F. Murphy: *The Body Silent: The Different World of the Disabled*, New York 1987, p. 112, which assesses people with disabilities as »neither sick nor well, neither dead nor fully alive, neither out of society nor wholly in it.« In his view, disabled people are permanently banished to a kind of »suspended state«: »They are neither fish nor fowl; they exist in partial isolation from society as undefined, ambiguous people.«

in a permanent liminal situation. To cope with the uncertainties associated with his metamorphosis, his social environment has no other answer than to increasingly exclude him and ultimately deny him his humanity and let him die in isolation.

Gregor's embodied difference therefore serves to open perspectives on protonormalist social norms typical of the time of Kafka's writing, along with their unresolved contradictions, breaking points and dilemmas. On closer inspection, his counterparts exactly do not behave in a ›humane‹ way but reveal a highly irritating mixture of »greed and lust for power, sycophancy, intolerance and destructive rage towards the sick, weak and alienated.«<sup>39</sup> While Gregor's harmless unusual physicality brings about the most severe exclusion mechanisms, this abysmal behaviour on the part of the ›normal‹ people is not penalised by society to any significant degree. Rather, it leaves a bizarre impression when, at the end, the family discusses their »quite advantageous and [...] promising [...] future prospects« (46), which are supposedly on the horizon for them after Gregor's death. According to Heinz Politzer, the story thus reveals the entire »brutality of trivial life«, with which the Samsas propagate the power mechanisms and mutual dependency networks they cultivated in a newly configured way, as if nothing had happened before.<sup>40</sup>

Further abysses open as soon as we look back for a final time at the individual character of Gregor Samsa and specifically his ›inconspicuous‹ human existence before the metamorphosis. As with so many of Kafka's protagonists, the description of a »solipsist without ipse«, coined by Adorno, also applies to Gregor.<sup>41</sup> Behind his collected featurelessness, which could hardly be more inconspicuous at first, hides a whole bundle of doubtful traits. Reiner Stach sums it up aptly when he characterises Kafka's protagonist as »submissive to superiors and parents, professionally unsuccessful and without prospects, with modest hobbies, of shallow emotionality and half-smothered sexual desires«, whereby the character is at most capable of arousing »pity«, but not »sympathy«.<sup>42</sup> Gregor may initially appear as a socially integrated citizen in accordance with the rules of the protonormalism of his time, but at no point as a developed and self-defined personality. His novel, insect-like form

39 Dagmar C. G. Lorenz: Familie und Rollenverweigerung in Grillparzers »Der arme Spielmann« und Kafkas »Die Verwandlung«, in: Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft 22 (2007/08), pp. 109–128, here p. 128.

40 Heinz Politzer: Franz Kafka, der Künstler, Frankfurt/M. 1968, p. 129.

41 Theodor W. Adorno: Gesammelte Schriften. Vol. 4: Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt/M. 1980, p. 255.

42 Stach: Kafka. Die Jahre der Entscheidungen, p. 224.

can therefore also be read as a means of liberation, of escaping from his own and his social milieu's demonstrably unbearable lack of personality.<sup>43</sup> On both the social and the individual level, Gregor's metamorphosis into embodied difference hence serves to bring to the fore conflicts that had been smouldering in the background for quite some time – stripped of the deceptive façade of ›normality‹ that had previously cloaked them. This is triggered by a transformative process which turns the protagonist into a physically impaired figure in need of support.

#### 4. »Samsa has SMA«: Christoph Keller's reception of *The Metamorphosis*

The considerable potential for identification and critical reflection that Kafka's story holds for people with disabilities can be seen very prominently in the literary work of contemporary author Christoph Keller. Keller, like his two elder brothers, lives with progressive spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), which he was diagnosed with at a young age. While he was still able to walk longer distances until early adulthood, for some time now he has been increasingly reliant on a wheelchair to get around. Keller addresses his disability in two of his books in more detail.<sup>44</sup> *The Best Dancer* tells of Keller's upbringing in Switzerland in the genre of a »fictional autobiography«.<sup>45</sup> *Every Cripple a Superhero* also contains mostly autobiographical passages, but these are more in the form of miniatures which now centrally related to Keller's later temporary centre of life and writing in New York City. These episodes are interrupted by ongoing chapters of the »Bug Story« mentioned at the beginning. While Keller only refers to Kafka in a single passage in *The Best Dancer*, the reference to the writer from Prague in *Every Cripple a Superhero* can be found throughout the book, both in its autobiographical and his fictional elements. Keller's pronounced admiration for *The Metamorphosis* as »one of the most powerful

43 Akila Ahouli interprets the story similarly »as a strategic rejection of the precarious conditions in which Gregor has lived and worked up to now« (p. 186); see Ahouli: Zum Zusammenwirken von Präkäre, Arbeit und Identität in Franz Kafkas *Die Verwandlung*, in: Acta Germanica 47 (2019), pp. 180–190.

44 In an interview, Keller emphasises that in the first »five or six books« of his literary oeuvre, he deliberately focused on topics other than his disability: »Until then, I was still able to suppress it well. [...] But then I was no longer able to separate a large part of my personality.« Christoph Keller: Interview with Peer Teuwsen, in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag, 28 November 2021, p. 65.

45 See Gieri Cavelti's review, in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 10.1.2004, p. 47.

disability stories ever written« runs through both books.<sup>46</sup> Keller very much recognises his own situation in the narrative about Gregor:

Rereading *The Metamorphosis*, I notice the many indications that Gregor could have my disability, and I can see the headline: SAMSA HAS SMA! As Kafka precisely describes, his muscles weaken, they atrophy, every movement is an unheard-of effort that leaves Gregor on his bed for hours, exhausted [...] Not even his family wants to help him anymore. Wouldn't it be best for everyone if he died of his own accord? And the Gregor beetle does them the favour. He dies of muscle loss, starves to death because no one feeds him, finally suffocates under the weight of his body because of his weakened muscles.<sup>47</sup>

Keller's way of identifying himself in the reading is thus initially focused on the signs of Gregor's increasing physical impairment, especially his declining muscle strength, which similarly determines his own everyday life. Moreover, this is not the only point at which he reflects on the aversion that the social environment has towards Gregor as an »emotional and financial burden« for his family.<sup>48</sup> Keller describes this assessment of people with disabilities as »a monster, as a dung beetle, a deformity, a disgrace«, as »an obstacle in every respect« as the »true horror« of the disability experience even before any physical infirmity: »knowing that you're disabled and knowing that the world perceives you as such.«<sup>49</sup> Despite all the difficulties that somatic impairments entail in everyday life, the sociocultural forms of disability are ultimately the greater burden in Keller's view.

Alongside all the appreciation for the portrayal of Gregor Samsa's fate, a second focus of Keller's examination of Kafka's story is to imagine alternative scenarios for his handling of the experiences of disability. He works hardest on the end of Kafka's story, which already leaves a disappointing impression on him in *The Best Dancer*: »It's a pity that Gregor simply loses his strength and dies. The Samsas simply got rid of him. Kafka has evaded responsibility.«<sup>50</sup> Keller accuses Kafka of having given no room in his story for the »thought« that »a creature no longer conforming to the norm could

46 Keller: Every Cripple, p. 7. Cf. also p. 87, where Keller speaks of the »bravest, cruellest of all tales.«

47 Keller: Der beste Tänzer, p. 150. Cf. similarly, Keller: Every Cripple, p. 7, where, however, in addition to other similarities, differences between Kafka's character and the author are also noted: »The strength of Gregor Samsa's legs and arms is weakening. [...] Quickly worsening (I am very slowly worsening), he is soon unable to make his way through his room, then even out of his bed (by now I need a lot of help getting out of my bed).«

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., p. 87.

50 Keller: Der beste Tänzer, p. 149.

find happiness [...] outside the protected world of his room« in the Samsas' household, for example with »an insect lover«, in »an experimental laboratory«, in the »zoo« or in »a travelling circus.«<sup>51</sup> To a certain extent, Keller's criticism corresponds to that of Kafka towards himself. After one of his own re-readings, the latter reports a great frustration with the narrative conclusion of his own story in his diaries: »Unreadable end. Imperfect almost to the core.«<sup>52</sup> A major formal reason for this dissatisfaction could lie in the fact that the narrative style – which shifts here from a personal or internally-focalised perspective to a more authorial or zero-focalised one after Gregor's death – perhaps does not make sufficiently clear the irony with which the narrative instance could distance itself from the illusions and the implications of an authoritarian protonormalism as represented by the Samsa family.<sup>53</sup>

In *Every Cripple a Superhero*, Keller takes a somewhat more conciliatory approach to the ending of *The Metamorphosis*, which he nevertheless still identifies as the »story's flaw«: »That the master of the fragment succeeds in this case is this tragedy's real tragedy.«<sup>54</sup> His interpretation here is that Kafka »simply isn't a writer of happy endings«,<sup>55</sup> or, that he, as »so often in his stories [...] [is] trying to undo his own existence«:<sup>56</sup>

I realize now that Kafka gave his grisly tale a happy ending, the only one he could conceive of: one without the dung beetle in it. One without *him* in it. Or me. He, Franz Kafka, is The Other, The Cripple, who has come to the conclusion that *he* is the problem. The solution is simple: Gregor must die.<sup>57</sup>

Keller's reinterpretation thus consists of extending his identification with the character to the author as well. Now he understands not only Gregor's, but also Kafka's perspective as that of a »cripple« who sees himself as a questionable existence, as a »problem« for the world of the »normals« that demands a »solution«. His more recent reading thus resembles biographical interpretations in Kafka research, according to which *The Metamorphosis* fulfils roughly the same function in Kafka's work that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* may have had for Goethe: that of an artistic »self-destruction« whose

51 Ibid.

52 Entry from 19 January 1914, see Franz Kafka: Tagebücher. Ed. by Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasley, in: Koch, Müller, Pasley: Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe. Kritische Ausgabe. Ed. by Jürgen Born et al. Frankfurt/M. 2002, p. 624.

53 Cf. Pfeiffer: Franz Kafka, p. 59–60.

54 Keller: *Every Cripple*, p. 33.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 7.

57 Ibid., p. 33 [original emphasis].

literary representation replaces a real self-destruction.«<sup>58</sup> In this sense, Keller joins a line of interpretation that evaluates the »fate of Samsa« as the »way out of misery [...] which does not exist (for Kafka).«<sup>59</sup>

However, even this modified interpretation does not change the fact that Kafka's story can still be read in terms of the plot pattern of a »kill or cure narrative«, as is often strongly criticised in contributions from literary disability studies on artistic representations of disability.<sup>60</sup> This refers to narrative plots in which a temporary disruption in a certain social order is exemplified through a disabled character, who is ultimately ›smoothed over‹ again at the end, either through a miraculous ›cure‹ or through the character's death, thereby ultimately confirming the validity of the established order. As much as the end of *The Metamorphosis* can certainly be read (in contrast to Keller's and probably also Kafka's own criticism) as a subtly ironic treatment of this narrative pattern and thus as its subversion, Kafka's story continues to be based precisely on a plot framework of this kind.

Keller's disillusionment at the fact that *The Metamorphosis* presents what he sees as »the perfectly bourgeois solution« to the ›problem‹ of Gregor's embodied difference at the end is therefore entirely understandable: »With the dung beetle out of the way (shoved away with a broom!), the remaining family, The Normal Ones, are free, freed again to resume their normal lives and celebrate their normal bodies.«<sup>61</sup> Alongside Kafka's delight in the literary concretisation of Gregor's body as that of vermin, which is as ›abject‹ as possible with its whirring legs, dripping bodily fluids, etc., it is certainly this ending – which even the author himself described as ›imperfect‹ and ›unreadable‹ in his diaries – that is most likely to invite fruitful critical reading from the perspective of literary disability studies, despite all the significance of the story for phenomena of disability.

## 5. Beyond »kill or cure«: on flexible normalism in Keller's »Bug Story«

Based on this, Keller's fictional »Bug Story« can be seen as another example of an artistic project in which people with and without disabilities can both

58 Abraham: Franz Kafka, p. 24.

59 Ibid., p. 25.

60 See, for example, the standard work by David T. Mitchell/Sharon L. Snyder: *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Ann Arbor 2000, p. 53f.

61 Keller: *Every Cripple*, p. 33.

be inspired by Kafka's work and creatively rethink it themselves. Keller's text, whose eleven sections are typographically separated from the autobiographical passages in *Every Cripple a Superhero*, thus undertakes a whole series of narrative modifications. Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Keller's protagonist, whom he names Dane, is confronted with a physical metamorphosis into an insect-like existence, which also begins overnight.<sup>62</sup> Unlike in *The Metamorphosis*, however, Dane's appearance does not change abruptly, but continually, with individual parts of his skin changing colour and then ants hatching from his navel and populating more and more parts of his body.<sup>63</sup>

This more gradual transformation of his protagonist is accompanied by a clear shift from manifestations of a pronounced protonormalism to those of a much more powerful flexible normalism. Keller sets his narrative in the urban cosmopolitanism of New York City in our immediate present, rather than in the petty-bourgeois milieu of Prague around one hundred years ago. His protagonist and those around him do not present themselves as colourless middle-class white-collar employees, but as self-confident urban hipster figures with a strong awareness of consumption, fashion, fitness, style and hygiene trends. Instead of the loneliness of Gregor Samsa, Dane is by no means limited to the radius of action of his flat, and neither is he increasingly isolated in his social behaviour. Instead, he can move around freely in New York City and maintain his friendships and work contacts throughout the story. Moreover, unlike Gregor, he is in a stable relationship involving an active sex life. All in all, the characterisation of Dane is not that of a colourless functionary, but rather of a dazzling personality who, before and after his metamorphosis, is standing ›in the middle of life‹ instead of on the sidelines. While Kafka's depiction of the Prague petit bourgeois cosmos is thus characterised throughout by hard boundaries and strict mechanisms of exclusion between the ›normal‹ and the ›different‹, Keller's »Bug Story« is located entirely in a setting in which such demarcations appear ›softer‹ and much easier to shift.

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62 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 65.

63 As unusual as this metamorphosis seems at first, the story hints at one point that it is fundamentally concerned with the depiction of the human body as a »host« organism. See Keller: *Every Cripple*, p. 109: »Dane knew well that he was some kind of planet to billions of bacteria, which kept him alive. They lived through him, and he lived through them.« The external symbiosis that Keller stages here using literary fantasy and ants thus externalises processes that ultimately take place internally in every human being in the interplay of macro- and micro-organisms.

Against the background of this generally ›more open‹ design to diversity phenomena, a different approach to the topic of Dane's disability also unfolds in »Bug Story«. True, Keller also includes aversive social reactions to Dane's somatic changes: for example, with his ex-partner Gale, who runs away from him in horror as soon as he draws her attention to the ants on his body, and with his boss Lofty, who as soon as he learns of his employee's transformations angrily calls him a »cripple« and a »freak«, before sacking him on the spot.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, Dane's somatic deviations from ›normality‹ are by no means presented as isolated, because the bodies of other characters in the story also reveal similar abnormalities. Dane's boss, for example, has a »birthmark the shape of Sicily and the size of the Sichuan province«; and the dermatologist Dr Petrossian, whom he consults, is also marked »on his left cheek« by a »strange hairy dermatological irregularity«.<sup>65</sup> Compared to Gregor, Dane thus is to a much lesser extent depicted as ›completely different‹ in relation to the seemingly ›completely normal‹ minor characters surrounding him. Instead, everyone in Keller's story is ultimately ›somehow different‹ such that Dane's physique differs gradually, but never categorically from those of his counterparts. While in Kafka's text, in the words of Link's normalisation theory, a »maximum compression of normality zones« can be observed, in Keller's response there is instead a »maximum expansion«, with »flexible« rather than »fixed normal and limit values«.<sup>66</sup>

The differentiated behaviour of Dane's partner Jess also fits in this respect. Jess at times clearly leaves the well-trodden paths of a consistently negative reaction to phenomena of embodied difference, behind. It is true that the text also describes occasional feelings of »repulsion« in Jess in the face of her partner's transformations.<sup>67</sup> However, this is only one aspect of a whole range of feelings towards Dane's transformations, which in other places is characterised by quite contradictory emotions such as »ardour«, a touch of enthusiasm, and a certain jealousy.<sup>68</sup> The ›roller coaster‹ of her feelings is made more visible in the various scenes of physical intimacy, in which Jess is both repelled and attracted by Dane's altered form. Jess thus also arrives at a variety of ways of dealing with Dane's extraordinary physicality that go

64 Ibid., p. 151.

65 Ibid., p. 88 and p. 64.

66 Link: Versuch über den Normalismus, p. 81.

67 Keller: Every Cripple, p. 89.

68 Ibid., pp. 121 and 135, where Jess is »disappointed« that Dane's ants do not also take to her body: »Wouldn't it be natural for them to migrate? Colonize me as well? Why don't they?«

far beyond an overall gesture of negation. She is determined to see Dane's transformation as »something positive«, as »a good thing«, which she alternatively interprets as »some sort of pregnancy«, as »a second skin« for Dane, and at one point even as possibly »everybody's future« in human history.<sup>69</sup> She interprets changes such as those in her partner's form not simply just as »hard«, but also as »bittersweet« and ultimately as inevitable.<sup>70</sup> In this way, she approaches very similar thoughts to those of her partner, who sees himself living in a »trial-and-error world, a world that came with unwelcome side effects« such as his own physical metamorphosis »whether one liked it or not«. <sup>71</sup> Both Dane and Jess understand his metamorphosis not as a shock that causes the protagonist to fall through all existential cracks, with no prospect of improving his situation, but as an unexpected and ambivalent, but ultimately integral ›fact of life‹ that must be accepted and lived with.

Furthermore, in keeping with the title of Keller's book, Dane not only appears as a ›cripple‹, but also as a ›superhero‹. He not only loses abilities due to his insect-like, extraordinary physicality, but also gains them to a far greater extent than Kafka's protagonist. Dane's superpowers consist in using his altered physical form to solve some of mankind's everyday problems, such as ensuring a sufficient supply of food and keeping his own body warm with clothing and heating, in an unorthodox but nevertheless effective way. The »Bug Story« thus insinuates that some of humanity's central environmental problems could be solved if far more people adopted Dane's ›eco-friendly‹ extraordinary physicality, i.e., were transformed from ›normals‹ to similar ›freaks‹ resp. ›vagaries of nature‹. While Kafka's use of the term alone suggests that an entire society similar to a ›monstrous vermin‹ would almost certainly be doomed to its own destruction, Keller's ›superhero story‹, by contrast, suggests that a physicality like that of Dane could be conducive to an upswing in the general quality of life and to overcoming existential global dangers such as the consequences of environmental pollution. As such, there is much more of a focus on a ›disability gain‹ in »Bug Story« than on the ›disability loss‹ that *The Metamorphosis* emphasises over long stretches of the story.

In addition, »Bug Story«, if at all, only gives some space to a ›kill or cure‹ plot pattern through two nightmares that Dane and Jess have, in both of which the symbiotic relationship between the human body and the ant

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69 Ibid., pp. 71, 109 and 133/134.

70 Ibid., p. 134.

71 Ibid., p. 123.

population breaks down violently. However, in both cases there can be no question of restoring a certain social order via these elimination processes, especially since in the characters' waking hours, everything remains consistently peaceful in the depicted hybridisation of the macro- and micro-organisms.<sup>72</sup>

Here, the story ends with some of Dane's ants, which he describes as the ›first of his children‹, founding ›a new bud colony‹ in an idyllic New York City park.<sup>73</sup> Unlike in Kafka's story, it is not old life that ends here, but new life that begins. On top of that, Dane once again presents himself both as a revenant of Kafka's protagonist and as a counterpart to Gregor Samsa's sister, in that at the end he is ›delightfully stretching his young body‹<sup>74</sup> – almost word for word identically to Grete in *The Metamorphosis* – and then is simply ›floating away.‹<sup>75</sup> While Gregor dies completely exhausted, Dane lives on full of vitality; and while Gregor's embodied difference is portrayed throughout as a ›problem‹ awaiting a ›solution‹, ›Bug Story‹ presents Dane's extraordinary form rather as the embodiment of a new, enduring, relevant ›superhero‹ phenomenon for all people,<sup>76</sup> for which its environment is not yet prepared, but may be so in the future.<sup>77</sup> It is therefore not the protagonist himself who has to change (back) and ›overcome‹ his disability either through being ›healed‹ or through his own death to help sociocultural ›normality‹ to find its proper place again. Instead, society needs to evolve towards a broader acceptance of physical diversity, much like Dane's partner Jess already exemplifies it with her entire range of possible behaviours.

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72 Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 150, where Dane contrasts his situation in conversation with Hale with the ›ant scene‹ in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Here, too, he emphasizes that in comparison to the ›brutal all-out ants civil war in *Walden*‹, his metamorphosis is an ›entirely peaceful process.‹

73 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

74 *Ibid.* Cf. the last sentence of *The Metamorphosis*: ›And when they arrived at their destination, it seemed to them almost a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions, when their daughter swiftly sprang to her feet and stretched her young body‹ (47).

75 Keller: Every Cripple, p. 166. In Keller: Interview with Teuwsen, p. 65, the author emphasizes that in this ending he also identifies with his own protagonist, in contrast to Kafka's character: ›My dying goal is to avoid the fate of Gregor Samsa. I do not want to be an obstacle that has to remove itself from life, to then be swept out of the house by the cleaning lady. I will voluntarily float away when the time comes.‹

76 Cf. also the reaction of Dane's boss to his statement that he lives with a disability: ›I also have a condition. Who doesn't?‹ (Keller: Every Cripple, p. 151).

77 Cf. the following passage at the end of the text: ›He felt a bit like a product that nobody wanted. The world, however, was rarely ready for a new product upon first sight; it usually took some [time] getting used to‹ (*ibid.*, p. 165).

## 6. From Kafka to Keller, or: from protonormalism to flexible normalism

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* offers a rich potential for readings of the phenomenon and differentiating category of disability. The basis for this is the acquired embodied difference of the protagonist Gregor Samsa and the aversive reaction of his professional and family environment to his metamorphosis. Kafka's narrative thus corresponds with the dominant protonormalism of his time according to Jürgen Link's theory of normalism, which also has an enormous impact on the treatment of people with disabilities. Kafka's story thus exposes a problematic norm system in which ›able-bodiedness‹, which goes hand in hand with the capacity to work and start a family, appears to be an imperative. This socio-cultural environment is ill-prepared for deviations from such normality; when they occur, it reacts with a combination of flight, hypocrisy, dishonesty, disregard, neglect and physical violence that does little to promote community. In the end, Kafka's protagonist has no other way out than to step aside via his death, which provides his family members the opportunity to return to their dubious ways of being ›normal‹. Samsa's fictional ›fate‹, presented in a mixture of fantasy and realism, thus offers considerable potential for identification for all those who find themselves confronted with social aversions or experiences of devaluation due to an unusual physicality that does not meet protonormal standards.

Christoph Keller's work presents a case in point to show that Kafka's story continues to resonate with people with disabilities up to our present day. *The Metamorphosis* enables them (regrettably) to see their own common everyday experiences conveyed by social environments reflected in literary form: for example, opinions of being ›useless‹ for society, of only causing trouble, of being best kept apart from the ›normals‹ and of providing most of society with something like ›relief‹ through their own demise. At the same time, as seen in the example of Keller, the text encourages further critical thinking. This takes on both the form of autobiographical writing and the form of a fictional response narrative, which confronts the story of Gregor Samsa with a changed, historically updated understanding of disability. As we have seen, this change can be summarised with Link's terminology as one towards a much more flexible normalism, which has generally been significantly more common for large parts of ›Western‹ societies, at least since the decades immediately before and after the turn of the millennium.<sup>78</sup>

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78 This paradigm shift is crystallised in a formula in the famous statement »It is normal to be different« in the speech given by Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker at the opening

While Gregor finds himself exposed to a sociocultural normativity in which there is no room for his embodied difference, Dane's story ends with more confidence in social change processes towards more acceptance for his ›abnormalities‹. And while Kafka's ›vermin‹ is increasingly locked away and condemned to die isolated and abandoned in his room as a ›useless existence‹, Dane remains a lively, fully-fledged, mobile member of society until the end. In both stories, dealing with one's own altered body and with the various social reaction patterns is highly ambivalent and associated with constantly changing attitudes. These range from disgust towards the respective insect-like figure to trying out and even enjoying new somatic possibilities, in Dane's case even in the context of a ›superhero‹ existence. While Gregor's physical changes remain unintegrated to the end, Dane's appear as an integral part of a new, but still human existence: as an essential element of unexpected, unwanted and unpredictable, but ultimately also unavoidable processes of change, with which it is possible to continue living.

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