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**LOST IN TRANSLATION: ON KAFKA'S LANGUAGE OF ABJECTION IN
*DIE VERWANDLUNG***

Abstract: Based on critical theory such as Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* and Heidegger's thoughts on dwelling and *lethe*, this article follows the biopolitical movement of destruction in Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis) to reveal some of the challenges this contextualization poses to its English translation. Stanley Corngold's translation serves as an example for the intricacies that pertain specifically to Kafka's language of abjection, words such as the famous *Ungeziefer* of the first sentence. These difficulties for the translator result from the fact that Gregor's transformation into *Ungeziefer* and his family's uncaring treatment of him as such foreshadow the genocidal practices of the 1930s and 40s. By highlighting a selection of passages in which Kafka's writing becomes a harbinger of these crimes against humanity the article demonstrates the subtle discrepancies between the original and Corngold's translation, what gets lost, where at times the translator amplifies the biopolitical message of the original, but also what completely defies translation.

Keywords: untranslatable, homo sacer, abjection, genocide, *Ungeziefer*, humanity, animality

Kafka's timeless story *Die Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis) from 1915 poses great challenges to translators. This holds true already for the first and infamous sentence where Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning transformed into an "ungeheueres Ungeziefer." How can these words best be translated? While there is general consensus to translate *ungeheuer* into *monstrous* in English, the biggest

problem lies with the word *Ungeziefer*. Stanley Corngold (Norton edition) offers us “monstrous vermin,” while Michael Hofmann (Penguin) settles for “monstrous cockroach.” In the French Livre de Poche version Brigitte Vergne-Cain and Gérard Rudent reduce the *Ungeziefer* to “un monstrueux insecte.” Likewise Corinna Gepner’s 2004 translation of *La Métamorphose* uses this option, as does Bernard Lortholary for Flammarion, 1988; for folio Alexandre Vialatte translates it as “une véritable vermine,” thus trying to capture the double sequence of ‘un-.’ Catherine Billman for actes sud translates “une monstrueuse vermine,” and Claude David uses “énorme cancrelat” for Gallimard, a word that suggests disease and is the French equivalent of the intensely scatological German ‘Kakerlake’ (cockroach). The challenge seems to rest specifically in the abjection Kafka inscribes in the double sequence of the prefix ‘un-’. The German text teems with this vocabulary of abjection: *Untier, Unrat, Unzahl der Bewegungen*, which conjoin as a semantic field to express Gregor’s loss of humanity, at least in shape, for deep inside he keeps hanging on to his humanity.

My argument is that the challenges in translating Kafka’s language of abjection result from the text’s biopolitical context in which Gregor’s transformation into and treatment as *Ungeziefer* foreshadow the genocidal practices of the 1930s and 40s. In his chapter “The Ban of the Wolf” in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben has drawn a line from the Germanic *Friedlos* (the man without peace) or *homo sacer* of the Middle Ages to the victims of the Nazi crimes, in particular the euthanasia programme and the Holocaust. The Germanic *homo sacer* has his biopolitical origins in the Icelandic *vargr* or Old Norman *wargus*, a word from which *werewolf* is derived (Guðmundsdóttir 280) and denoting both ‘wolf’ and ‘outlaw.’ The outlawed berserk and other criminals were such human wolves according to Old Germanic law and due to the crimes, mostly murder, they had committed. This figure is cast out into the state of nature/state of exception, where human rights no longer reach this victim of expulsion and where the Hobbesian *homo hominem lupus* is the only law of existence. *Homo sacer* is reduced to what Agamben calls *nuda vita*, naked or bare life, which implies a reduction from political to biological life, a phenomenon that, building on Foucault, he then locates in twentieth-century genocide and other forms of political violence.

Set apart from the community the *homo sacer*’s very human existence has become questionable in the perception of the agents of expulsion, a phenomenon

that has existed since Greek antiquity when the essence of human 'being' was closely linked to dwelling inside the *polis*. For Aristotle humans were political animals living in the polis and within the reach of law, while the barbarians outside had no full humanity. In twentieth-century philosophy Martin Heidegger's discussion of 'being,' *Sein* or *Dasein*, then is of key significance for a discussion of the expulsion and wandering of homo sacer in the forest or forest-like places of exclusion as an area in which he is hidden, forgotten, and possibly killed. Linking the Gothic word *wunian* to modern German *wohnen*, which he associates with *Zufriedenheit* (satisfaction [literally being at peace], Heidegger, *Vorträge*, 150-1) Heidegger has noted the connection between being at peace and dwelling. Both *wunian* (*wohnen*) and the Old High German *buan*, which is related etymologically to *Bauen* and *Sein* (ich bin), imply this feeling of being at peace, as the fundamental character of dwelling is the certainty of being cared-for. Ideal dwelling, Heidegger argues, is man's staying within the "Geviert," the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, while not being cared for and the subsequent loss of dwelling imply a detachment from these, especially from the earth (*chthonos*). Excluding humans from the community thus meant excluding them from their autochthony and from 'being' itself. This loss of human *being* then results in the expellee's increasing resemblance to a wild animal due to 'not being cared for' by the other humans, a process that resonates with mythical manifestations of hybridity between the human and the animal, echoing such concepts of monstrosity as voiced, for example, by Foucault: "From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century...the monster is essentially a mixture...of two realms, the animal and the human.... It is the mixture of two individuals...of two sexes...of life and death" (Foucault, *Abnormal*, 63).

This monstrous hybridity is closely linked to the notion of impurity. The medieval outlaw was considered morally 'unclean', due to the crime he had committed. His death was of no consequence to anyone and was exempted from juridical persecution. Agamben's line from here to twentieth-century genocide implies that in the Nazis' massacres resulting from their politics of racial hygiene turning people into the likeness of how they are perceived – namely as unclean animals – is a necessity that follows the perverse reasoning of thanatopolitics. Although such 'unclean animals' cannot be sacrificed they can be killed with more

ease and with impunity, that is, without legal repercussion. Kafka's Gregor Samsa, a human in animal shape, is such an impure creature. This notion of impurity is contained in the etymology of the word *Ungeziefer*, derived from Old High German *zebar*, the sacrificial animal. In order to be sacrificed an animal had to be a clean one. *Ungeziefer* consequently has the meaning of an unclean animal not suited for sacrifice. With this biopolitical background in mind it becomes clear why this word defies all attempts of faithful translation.

As a parasitic *Ungeziefer* Gregor is a wolf (*vargr*) in the medieval sense of the word – someone who preys on the community, in this case Gregor's middle-class family. He is being expelled into his room, cast out from the community, but still included in the law that ordains his annihilation when eventually his family kills him. It is the complex family structure with its densely Freudian scenario that contributes to turning Gregor into an impure creature in the first place. The text's oedipal constellation needs little further comment here. Suffice it to say that Gregor's father undergoes a metamorphosis as much as his son. He grows from a powerless man who depends on his son's salary to the alpha male of the family. His growing aggression towards Gregor is signaled by a spate of actions, from banging his fists on the door of his son's room to bombarding him with apples, which causes a festering wound that leads to Gregor's eventual death. Gregor's gradual killing commences at the end of first part where his father kicks him back into his room so that he starts bleeding, having injured one of his little legs (Beinchen 73), which he "schleppte leblos nach" (dragged along lifelessly, 16). The German diminutive *Beinchen* is very effective here in indicating his physical powerlessness. At the end of the second part the father's readiness for violence increases and he starts bombarding his son with apples, one of which gets stuck in his back causing a wound that subsequently gets badly infected. This image of the father's bombardment conjoins with his physical erectness in expressing his sexualized potency and savage behavior: "Unerbittlich drängte der Vater und stieß Zischlaute aus, wie ein Wilder Es klang schon hinter Gregor gar nicht mehr wie die Stimme bloß eines einzigen Vaters" (72; Pitilessly his father came on, hissing like a wild man. ... the voice behind Gregor did not sound like that of only a single father, Corngold, 15). Corngold gets it right when he translates *Wilder* into wild man, in fact the translator here amplifies on the biopolitical context of Kafka's language, as the wild man is a mythological paradigm closely linked to the medieval practice of expulsion. Speaking in terms of the wolf man, not only does

Gregor follow in the footsteps of the *vargr* of medieval expulsion, although this paradigm has shifted now to a creature far less glamorous than the wolf, but Gregor's father too is a wolf in his own right, reflecting the sovereign whom Derrida has equated with the wolf in his lecture series *La bête et le souverain* (Derrida, 2009). While Derrida associates the wolf primarily with the despot, Agamben recognizes that the medieval wolf man, who in being expelled to a life outside of communal law, is uniquely tied to the sovereign, whose power to abandon individuals equally positions him outside of the law. This symmetry between the sovereign beast and the persecuted *vargr* reflects the animal 'wolf' in his dual perception of the powerful hunter versus the hunted pest.

As I have shown elsewhere (Arnds, 2015), in representing psychoanalytical processes through a hybrid character between the human and the animal, Kafka's text reveals striking parallels with Sigmund Freud's case study of the "Wolf Man," the exiled Russian aristocrat Sergei Pankeiev, from around the same time (from 1910 to 1914 and published in 1918). Freud argues that Sergei Pankeiev's fear of wolves results from witnessing a primal scene as an infant of an *a tergum* sexual act between his parents, causing his later neurosis. The Wolf Man and Gregor suffer from castration anxiety, their neurosis producing their exile, from which to an extent Pankeiev can return thanks to being psycho-analyzed by Freud, but from where there is no return for Kafka's Gregor – an exile ultimately deeply tied to Jewishness and the racial melancholy that determines Jewish culture in the years before the Holocaust (Garloff 123).

Gregor Samsa is an omen of Jewish annihilation. Like Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1927), another interwar text that develops the liminality between the wolf and the human, Kafka's text from 1915 heralds future massacres, specifically those of the Third Reich. The hunting of undesirables is evoked specifically in Kafka's language of abjection, first and foremost Gregor's label of an *ungeheures Ungeziefer*, a monstrous vermin. In view of the use of this word by the Nazis to describe Jews and other minorities, *Ungeziefer* is an uncanny cryptonym in Kafka's story deriving from deep within the collective Jewish unconscious. As encryption, which implies the notion of secret and grave vault, the word is a sinister premonition of

the atrocities in the camps more than two decades later.¹ That it is “ein ungeheures Ungeziefer” means that this creature has no place in the family or in God’s order, an existence Agamben has seen as the fundamental condition of Jewish exile, the abandonment of humans in the camps as state of exception:

The wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews by means of the term ‘Holocaust’ was ... an irresponsible historiographical blindness. The Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of a *homo sacer* in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. His killing constitutes neither capital punishment nor a sacrifice, but simply the actualization of a mere ‘capacity to be killed inherent to the condition of the Jew as such. ... Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, as ‘lice’, which is to say, as bare life (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 114).

The text teems with references to Gregor’s exilic *Dasein* reduced to the shape of a pestilent bug which stirs the fear of infection in his community evidenced by his family’s various responses to his animal presence: they throw out the food he has not touched, “als seien also auch diese nicht mehr zu gebrauchen” (77, as if they *too* [my italics] were no longer usable, Corngold, 18), and Gregor fears that his mother may grow sick at the sight of him, she was “Gregors Anblick nicht gewöhnt, er hätte sie krank machen können” (86), (not used to the sight of Gregor, he could have made her ill, Corngold, 25). After a brief phase of mourning the family essentially considers him dead. Their reaction reflects the *homo sacer*’s status as dead to the community from the very moment he was banned (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 105). *Sacer* in this case has the meaning of ‘being set aside’ from the living, the fate of millions of Jews and other minorities whose physical removal from the community through deportation to the camps where all human rights were suspended equaled the pronouncement of their death.

From the perspective of his family and his employer, Gregor’s human life is extinguished at the moment he has become an animal, but he is clinically still alive and thus a constant reminder of their lack of concern for him. The *creaturely life*

¹ See also Steiner, 121: “Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis ... was to be the literal fate of millions of human beings. The very word for vermin, *Ungeziefer*, is a stroke of tragic clairvoyance; so the Nazis were to designate the gassed.”

that Eric Santner has identified specifically for Kafka and which resonates with Agamben's concept of *nuda vita* characterizes Gregor even before he has turned into a vermin. In fact, his metamorphosis could be a manifestation of the way he feels in his excruciating employment situation – “Er war eine Kreatur des Chefs, ohne Rückgrat und Verstand” (59), (he was a tool of the boss without brains or backbone, Corngold, 5). To my mind, Corngold's translation of ‘Kreatur’ into ‘tool’ does not fully render justice to the language of abjection Kafka uses. ‘Kreatur’ implies a great deal more, a live organism neither clearly human nor animal, while ‘tool’ is an abstraction, and thus inanimate. That things are lost in translation here can also be seen in other passages. Gregor's job does not allow for illness, as for the ‘Krankenkassenarzt,’ the health insurance doctor “es nur ganz gesunde aber arbeitsscheue Menschen gibt” (59; the world consisted of people who were completely healthy but afraid to work, Corngold, 5). Especially the German ‘arbeitsscheu,’ which Corngold's translation as ‘afraid to work’ does not render very closely, is part of a vocabulary that expresses fascist medical practice and points to the Nazi jargon of *Gesundheitspflicht*, the persecution of *Arbeitsscheue*, the work shy, in labor camps, and ultimately the complete perversion of the bourgeois work ethic in the annihilation method of *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* (destruction through work) in the camps. His employer's view of Gregor's abstention from work reflects the Enlightenment discourse of disciplining and punishing bodies that are not docile, trying to withdraw from the rationalist work ethic of the rising middle class. Determined by utilitarianism, this rationalism is intolerant towards laziness, and classifies the lazy as Aristotelian *idiotes* deprived of logos – speech and reason – in a word, as animals. This is precisely the way Gregor is seen by his fellow human beings. To his employer and family who fail to understand him he has lost the faculty of human speech, his voice has become “ein Piepsen” (59), a chirping that garbles (“zerstört”) the words (Corngold 5). Corngold's ‘chirping’, a word that belongs to birds, does not fully render Kafka's original language of abjection, as *piepsen* may also refer to mice, vermin. His boss thinks that Gregor's ‘idiocy’ will infect everyone around him, that he is “trying to make fools of us ... That was the voice of an animal” (Corngold 10). Gregor's animalization is like an infectious illness, the fool being traditionally associated with animal images as can be observed, for example, in the picaresque tradition.

The main character has given up human reason for animal whims, for *caprice*. “Ich glaubte Sie als einen ruhigen, vernünftigen Menschen zu kennen, und nun scheinen Sie plötzlich anfangen zu wollen, mit sonderbaren *Launen* [my italics] zu paradieren. ... Wie das nur einen Menschen so überfallen kann!” (65; I thought I knew you to be a quiet, reasonable person, and now you suddenly seem to want to start strutting about, flaunting strange whims ... It is strange how a person can get attacked by such caprice. Corngold, 9). Corngold’s translation of *Launen* into *caprice* is even closer to the biopolitical context than the original, as ‘caprice’ is a word derived from *capra* (goat), the scapegoat being one of the traditional animals referring to the expulsion of evil. The original word *überfallen* (literally to fall upon someone), however, is more telling than ‘getting attacked,’ as it expresses both animal aggression and animal passivity clashing with human agency and reason. Gregor is the human upon whom the shape of an animal has fallen overnight. In that sense he has been *überfallen* by animality, attacked and devoured by it. In contrast with Robert Louis Stevenson’s Jekyll who contains the animal Hyde within himself, Gregor is the animal that contains the human. The human lies hidden inside or underneath the animal, unrecognizable to the world around him. This *sub*-humanity of his – Gregor as *Untermensch* in fascist terminology – is signaled by a variety of motifs. He acts from below, hides under the couch, and is no longer able to lift his head, which according to Walter Benjamin marks him as the melancholic afflicted by the saturnine spirit, his erect body cringed, the back bent forward, drawing the gaze downward in “indefatigable rumination like a dog eager to follow a trace into depth” (Benjamin vol. I.1, 329-330). But his change is not only external. His taste buds have become those of a vermin feeding on garbage, as he prefers to eat only half rotten vegetables, bones, and unpalatable cheese. Unable to feel his wounds, he thinks: “Sollte ich jetzt weniger Feingefühl haben?” (76; Have I become less sensitive? Corngold 18). ‘Feingefühl’ clearly belongs to the world of humans, a word that strongly defies translation. It denotes the subtle feelings of which animals may not be capable (who are we to know though!), while Corngold’s ‘sensitive’ may not be as strong in conveying a sense of humanity.

Gregor’s surviving internalized humanity, his ‘Feingefühl’, shows itself primarily in his reaction to his sister’s violin play. “War er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff?” (98; Was he an animal that music moved [literally: seized] him so). Resisting easy translation, the word ‘ergreifen’ (to seize) is an interesting one in

the context of music, as it may conjure up the music of Wagner, especially his *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods) modelled on the world's end at Ragnarök. In his famous Wotan essay the psychoanalyst C.G. Jung once discussed this *Ergriffenheit* (the act of being emotionally seized) in the context of the Greek god of intoxication Dionysus, whom Nietzsche has associated with Wagner, and his Germanic equivalent in the mythological Wild Hunt complex, Wotan/Odin, that 'Ergreifer' of souls with whom Hitler closely identified, especially by way of Wagner's music. The *Ergriffenheit* of a dying animal, Gregor's heightened sensitivity to music, is a moment in which impending *thanatos*, de-humanization, and possibly the keenest expression of human sentiment (of intense *Feingefühl*) through art conjoin.

Although Kafka's original 'ergreifen' may remind us of Wagner and the Nazi obsession with Wotan, it also contains an intense foreboding of Auschwitz, specifically of the *Mädchenorchester von Auschwitz* founded in June 1943. In this orchestra of talented girls, which perfidiously brings together German high culture with its greatest barbarism, these young women were spared from the gas chambers as long as they were able to keep playing their instruments with great sensitivity, as many of their murderers were music lovers. As one of the most intense sarcasms of genocide, they were reduced to the bare life of *Ungeziefer* while their humanity was displayed in rendering German high culture with a sensitivity both heightened and challenged by the permanent threat of death. It was music that spared the homo sacer from her complete animalization and annihilation.

Gregor is so moved by his sister's music that he wants to lure her into his room and never let her go again as long as he is alive, his love of her music being the last thing that keeps him alive, but there are undertones of incestuous desire here. His sister's response to his desire reflects the sudden violent turn from heightened sensitivity to death-bringing violence that we also see in the commanders of the camps.

"Ich will vor diesem *Untier* nicht den Namen meines Bruders aussprechen, und sage daher bloß: wir müssen versuchen, *es* [my italics] loszuwerden. Wir haben das Menschenmögliche versucht, es zu pflegen und

zu dulden, ich glaube es kann uns niemand den geringsten Vorwurf machen ...*Weg muss es!*" (100), (I won't pronounce the name of my brother in front of this *monster*, and so all I say is: we have to try to get rid of it. We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and to put up with it; I don't think anyone can blame us. ... *It has to go*. Corngold 37)

Corngold's *monster* traditionally as something to be 'shown' (It. *mostrare*) is a far cry from the abjection expressed in *Untier*, a creature at a level even lower than the animal (so that it becomes an un-animal) and hidden from sight, which is precisely the way the Nazis perceived and treated the Jews, as well as other persecuted groups. Corngold's 'it has to go' is likewise a relatively mild translation of the forceful German 'weg muss es' (literally 'away it must be'), implying complete annihilation that leaves no trace of Gregor, his consummate disappearance from the apartment.

Gregor himself thinks that he must disappear and his reaction to his sister's disgust is one of self-sacrifice, reflecting his intention not to stand in the way of his family's progress: "Seine Meinung darüber, dass er verschwinden müsse, war womöglich noch entschiedener als die seiner Schwester" (103; His conviction that he would have to disappear was, if possible, even firmer than his sister's, Corngold 39). Strictly speaking, the word 'disappear' does not fully render the German 'verschwinden', which contains the act of 'shrinking (*schwinden*) away' (*ver-*). Gregor is filled with a sense of shame similar to that of Joseph K. in *Der Prozess* (1925, *The Trial*) at the moment the latter is about to die like a dog. For Gregor to survive as a dust-covered bug, who clearly sees himself in the way of his family's happiness, would result in that sense of shame, and for him too it seems "as if his shame were to survive him," and that "the unrestrainable impulse to flee from oneself is confronted by an equally certain impossibility of evasion" (Agamben, *Remnants*, 104). It is the classical shame of the victim. Quoting Levinas' *De l'évasion* (1935, *On Escape*), Agamben argues that what "appears in shame is therefore precisely the fact of being chained to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself, the intolerable presence of the self to itself" (Agamben, *Remnants*, 105), to the extent that 'evasion' in the sense of disappearance, 'Verschwinden,' becomes impossible. This idea of the intolerable presence of the self to itself is implanted in Gregor's mind by his sister whom he overhears saying "weg muss es:" it must be gone. This desire of hers to be rid of

her brother of whom she wants no trace and no memory left is the ambition of the Nazi perpetrators in ridding themselves of millions of camp victims. There was to be no trace of them, their lives completely blotted out and forgotten.

This loss of human shape and being, the *Verschwinden* of Gregor and millions of victims of genocide who literally 'shrank away' by starving to death, condemns them to what the Greeks perceived as the realm of *Lethe* in its three dimensions of concealment, destruction, and forgetting. Gregor's gradual *Verschwinden* follows precisely these three meanings of the Greek term as Heidegger discusses them in his Parmenides lectures at Freiburg University in the winter semester 1942/43, at a time, that is, when millions were condemned to disappear without a trace in the camps. Heidegger was, of course, not aware of what really went on in Auschwitz and other camps, hence the Freudian uncanniness of his lectures – as uncanny as Kafka's premonition of Jewish exile and murder. First Gregor's family attempts to render him invisible by banishing him into his room (concealment), then they remove his identity by emptying out his room (forgetting), and his father, who does not spare him as he throws apples at him, initiates his destruction. Sparing, caring, and the loss thereof are closely intertwined in this scenario, with the father's reluctance to spare the protagonist resulting in the whole family's reluctance to care for him. Out of a sense of shame, Gregor supports his own abandonment and his family's extortion of his dwelling as his very being by receding further and further into his exile, covering himself over with a sheet so that his sister does not balk at the sight of him, and by finally sacrificing himself. Gregor creates his own exilic home in the sense of a place of hiding within the former home. His room becomes a home within and away from home, where he is excluded but still included at once, thus following Agamben's logic that in the state of exception bare life is excluded and included at the same time: "What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it – at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 107).

It is in this state of exception that the language of abjection, of dehumanization, develops its full potential, in German words of negation (they tend to be words with negative associations) which pose extreme problems to

being translated into other languages, like *Ungeziefer*, *Untier*, *Unrat*, *Unzahl der Bewegungen*, *verschwinden*. Gregor's room becomes a place where *homo hominem lupus est*, and he seems well aware of its Freudian quality of *Heimlichkeit* (secrecy) and *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness). Suspended in his animal shape between his reluctance to subscribe to society's work ethic and his elimination as an undesirable element, he becomes a sinister premonition of the Nazi persecution of *nutzlose Esser*, useless mouths to feed, and other undesirables. Quite literally, Gregor's *Heim* is a topos of *Heimlichkeit* (Freud's notion of secrecy echoes the Greek *Lethe*), in which his family keeps the secret of their son's transformation, in itself *unheimlich* in demonstrating the liminality of the parasite with human sensitivities. His erstwhile *Heimlichkeit* (the feeling of being at home) morphs into *Heimlichkeit*, a secret location from where the *Unheimliche* emerges with him whenever he appears. His room represents this space in which the secret is kept, locked up, and in which he is first concealed, in which he forgets his former identity and that identity is also quickly forgotten by his family, who unwilling to care for him is ready to get rid of him. Initially the idea of deportation occurs to them, of resettling him, likewise reminiscent of the fate of millions of Nazi victims deported in cattle wagons: "Wer hatte in dieser abgearbeiteten und übermüdeten Familie Zeit, sich um Gregor mehr zu kümmern, als unbedingt nötig war? ... denn ihn hätte man doch in einer passenden Kiste mit ein paar Luftlöchern leicht transportieren können" (92; Who in this overworked and exhausted family had time to worry about Gregor any more than was absolutely necessary ... for he could easily have been transported in a suitable crate with a few air holes, Corngold 31). Corngold's 'worry' (*Sorge*) and Kafka's 'caring' (*sich kümmern*) are indeed close, they are part of the German semantic field to which also belong *Schonung* (sparing someone) and *Pflege* (looking after someone), all of which found no place during the Holocaust.

The lack of the family's care for Gregor ultimately causes his death. He dies the death of an *Untier*, a sub-animal: "es ist krepirt" (104, it's croaked, Corngold 40). The word *krepieren* used in the context of Gregor's death points to the biopolitics of genocide that dehumanized humans and human death, reduced it to the perishing of animals of the lowest order. Originally used by soldiers during the Thirty Years War (1618-48), *Krepieren* (Italian: *crepare*) implies the worst form of death, a death wished upon vermin. When his family finds Gregor's dead body, it is as emaciated as those millions of victims of genocide as the ones completely

stripped of their humanity – “Seht nur wie mager er war. Er hat ja auch schon so lange Zeit nichts gegessen Tatsächlich war Gregors Körper vollständig flach und trocken, man erkannte das eigentlich erst jetzt” (104; Just look how thin he was. Of course he did not eat anything for such a long time. ...As a matter of fact, Gregor's body was completely flat and dry; this was obvious now for the first time, Corngold 40), while his sister has blossomed into a flower, stretching her erect young body.

Gregor's family belongs to a social class that tries to transcend working class towards middleclass but, in order to do so, it has to get rid of an undesirable minority that stands in the way of that progress. At a more personal level, Gregor, the vermin, whose parasitism denotes that bourgeois class's undesirable other, the working class bent over like animals, also heralds Hitler's self-loathing, his hatred of Jews that he considered to be vermin, because “he felt Jewishness to be an evil within himself” (Waite 363). In the end, however, Kafka's text resonates with Agamben's argument that those who have seen the Gorgon, who have touched bottom (Agamben, *Remnants*, 120), and whose humanity seems completely destroyed are the ones who remain human, echoing what the Sicilian writer Elio Vittorini once expressed in his novel *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941) written still during fascism. Vittorini's narrator is a defender of the down-trodden, the small people, the hungry and poor who in the author's eyes are more a part of humanity than those in power. In his discussion with his mother, who disseminates injections to those suffering from either consumption or malaria, he expresses it thus:

But perhaps not every man is a man; and not all humanity is humanity. This is a doubt which arrives in the rain when you have holes in your shoes, water seeping through the holes in your shoes, and you no longer have anyone in particular dear to your heart, you no longer have your own particular life, you've done nothing and have nothing still to do, nothing even to fear, nothing more to lose, and you see, outside yourself, the world's massacres. . . So not every man is a man. One persecutes and another is persecuted; and not all humanity is humanity, only those who are persecuted. You can kill a man and he will be all the more a man (mas

hombre). And so a sick man, a starving man, is all the more a man; and humanity dying of hunger is humanity all the more. (Vittorini, 249-50) [My translation]²

Vittorini's concept of *mas hombre* reminds us that the victim is more human than the perpetrator, who in his sovereignty to decide over life and death is the real beast according to Derrida, reducing their targeted victims to the level of beasts.

It is the biopolitical undercurrent in Kafka's language of abjection that leads me to contend that the word *Ungeziefer* poses extreme challenges to the translator. 'Vermin,' French 'vermine,' comes close to the original, as does 'cockroach,' French 'cancrelat,' while French 'insecte' would be furthest removed from it.³ The psychoanalytic dimension in Kafka's text is inextricably linked to the condition of hybridity and expulsion whose roots harken back to the medieval wolf man. The task of the translator would be to try to convey as closely as possible the historical and cultural implications of this word, as this cryptonym is specific to Kafka's racial melancholia, the notion of Jewish exile, and the persecution of Jews in

²: 'Ma forse non ogni uomo è uomo; e non tutto genere umano è genere umano. Questo è un dubbio che viene, nella pioggia, quando uno ha le scarpe rotte, acqua nelle scarpe rotte, e non più nessuno in particolare che gli occupi il cuore, non più vita sua particolare, nulla più di fatto e nulla da fare, nulla neanche da temere, nulla più da perdere, e vede, al di là di se stesso, i massacri del mondo. . . Non ogni uomo è uomo, allora. Uno perseguita e uno è perseguitato; e genere umano non è tutto il genere umano, no, ma quello soltanto del perseguitato. Uccidere un uomo; egli sarà più uomo. E così è più uomo un malato, un affamato; è più genere umano il genere umano dei morti di fame.'

The "insecte," however, seems to carry greater weight in French than it does in English or German, if we listen to Balzac and Camus, for example: "Être sans valeur, personne méprisable. Quoique vous ne soyez que des insectes, je veux tirer de vous une vengeance éclatante, et je saurai la prendre, reprit le gentilhomme (Balzac, 231 ; Although mere insects, I would call down a signal vengeance upon you, and I know how to, said the nobleman. [Donal Lyons]). Ou bien je ne voulais pas te faire mourir et tu me suspectes injustement, moi, ton empereur. Ou bien je le voulais, et toi, insecte, tu t'opposes à mes projets (Camus, Caligula, 50 ; Either I was not willing to put you to death and you suspect me unjustly, I, your emperor - or else I wished it, and you, insect, opposed my plans [Christopher Williams]).

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Germany, a task that ultimately appears to be impossible in view of the significance of the etymology of the word for the homo sacer in a German context.

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