Beyond the Body: Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Gibson’s *Neuromancer*

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Abstract
This essay explores the problem of the human/non-human interface, or the transition from human to non-human, in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. I begin by reading Gregor Samsa’s transformation in the light of Kafka’s “On Parables”: here we get the notion of a human subject’s “becoming-parable,” which I interpret in terms of a possible equivalence (or equivocation) of what Lacan calls the énoncé (statement) and énonciation (speech act). I then read Gregor’s becoming-animal as a becoming “parable-subject”: his crucial problem is that he is caught in-between the human-state and insect-state, unwilling to let go of the first and afraid to fully enter into the latter; my analysis of “becoming-parable” as a move-across into the incomprehensible that leaves us in “infinite suspension” offers a way of interpreting this. Gibson’s Case is similarly caught between human body-subject and something Other, in this case no-body (“digital body”). He has “become-digital” to the degree that he has been able to freely jack into cyberspace, but (as in the derivative “Matrix” films) this has always allowed a return-to-body: Case, however, dreads the extreme of being “pure meat.” On the other hand he fears to become machine/matrix intelligence fully “translated into binary codes,” or into cyberspace. The key issue for both Kafka and Gibson is that of subjectivity and its possible limits, which are tested and perhaps transcended by such notions as animal-subject, digital-subject and parable-subject.

Keywords
beyond, parable, subjectivity, human body, animal body, digital body, cyberpunk, cyberspace, énoncé, énonciation
To gain felicity is easy
as long as one entirely abnegates its being human.
—Natsuhiko Kyogoku

Preamble

The idea of the “beyond” is captivating, indeed inescapable. The human subject must confront the “beyond” from time to time, whether (as in the sense of “subject” drawn from Aristotle, Descartes and Hegel) it can define itself as subjectum (“thrown under,” substance, self) only in relation to an object, or (as in the Aristotelian, structural-linguistic, psychoanalytic sense of the term) only in relation to that discourse which “surrounds” it and within which it finds itself as the “I”-speaker, or (as in the Foucauldian and Althusserian sense of the term) only in relation to that socio-political “Other” which subjects it as subjectus. Lacking, then, a fixed and unequivocal sense of our “self” we have no choice but to look toward the “beyond-self,” if only as a strategy for defining or understanding the self. Yet some have claimed that we are now, and on a more radically empirical basis, entering the “post-human age.” In our new era of information technology we are seeing developed biological and technological praxes of extending or moving beyond our own bodies and our traditional sense of subjectivity. While offering new possibilities of human transformation and also new dangers on the empirical level, the increasing interpenetration of human subjectivity with cyberspace also offers new challenges, on the theoretical level, to our “thinking of the subject.”

Parable

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: “Go over,” he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means

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1 My English translation is based on the Chinese version of the Japanese novel.
some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and that therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost. (Kafka, *Stories* 462)

One way to read this parable of/on parables is to argue for a difference between parable and interpretation. While the latter yields to the demands of human understanding, to “convention,” the former defies interpretation by pointing toward a beyond, thus announcing a radical rift or rupture in discourse. Nonetheless, Kafka’s “On Parables” is quoted here in its entirety because its seeming inaccessibility to our (merely human) understanding, that is, its “thinking of the beyond,” offers an interpretive approach to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*). Eggenschwiler, for instance, reads the Samsas’ triumph in getting rid of Gregor at the end of this novella as their having “lost in parable” (92). The Samsas, so to speak, can gain back their life and interpret it in terms of a comfortable hope for a better future only at the cost of Gregor, i.e., by the obliteration of parable. Like the second interlocutor in “Parable,” the family has lost in parable because they fail to incorporate into their interpretable world-horizon a parable that finds its form in Gregor’s entomological shell, his bony beetle’s exoskeleton. Though they have “seen” (in their insect-son, son-as-insect) the

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2 Heidegger’s *hermēneuein* is “to announce, to say, to make known” (37 [33]). Citations of *Being and Time* are from Joan Stambaugh’s English translation. Page numbers in square brackets refer to the original German edition. Occasionally, the shortened form “[MR]” preceding page numbers would appear, referring to John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson’s rendition.

3 That is, it may be that the closest human discourse (and possibly also “human being”) can ever get to the “beyond” is by way of parable, whose signifying system rests here in the fully human domain, where it is accessible to interpretation, and yet simultaneously gestures at something absent, something over there which, like Kafka’s writing itself, can be made present (or interpreted) only as a “perversely deliberate evasion of interpretation” (Bloom 4).
form of a parable, they fail to learn, to successfully interpret, what this actually means in its inner contents. Gregor’s insect shell marks the extreme limit of his family’s power to interpret, to know, to understand, perhaps to think; this “thing” (object, “other”) must therefore be rejected, discarded.

However, a few questions remain unanswered by this opposition between interpretation and parable. For even if we accept this dichotomy and agree that his family have “lost in parable,” can we also say that Gregor has “won in parable”? Indeed, can one win in parable and, if so, how? Although we intuitively accept the idea that the Samsas win in the sphere of “everyday interpretation” and thus lose in parable, the sense of this win-lose dialectics of parable remains somehow still unclear. What, we wonder, might it mean if the Samsas “won in parable” by fully accepting their son-as-insect? The parable-interpretation dialectic keeps intact the mysterious possibility of the “winning situation,” not in reality but in parable. This possibility motivates us to seek an alternative reading of “Parable” and thus too of The Metamorphosis, one that may bring us closer to (but never allow us to be at one with) the “subtraction,” in every sense of the word, of Gregor at the end of Kafka’s novella.

One might also approach the dialogue of “Parable” via speech act theory. We may say that the “subject” is always already in a state of being-split (Spaltung) after it enters the symbolic domain because the language system which precedes the individual subject’s existence and extends way “beyond” any given subject’s (“I”’s) intentional usage will make a cut in the subject’s imagined wholeness. The well-known “paradox of the liar” comes to mind here; if I tell you that “everything I say is a lie,” then a sort of infinite regress is generated. That is, if the subject is in perfect unison with itself then what it says, indeed its very act of saying it, will fall into a loop of self-contradiction that leads nowhere; the “saying” is ruptured, self-different, split from itself. Yet the fact that our daily language practice can still retain its communicative efficacy means that the subject of the statement “I’m telling a lie” and the subject who says it are somehow located in two different domains. The subject “I” is, so to speak, the syntactic subject of the predicate “am telling a lie,” whereas the speaking subject is a person (a mind but also a body) that speaks. Or as Lacan puts it, the “I” is already divided into the subject of statement (énoncé) and that of speech act (énonciation) (Four Fundamental Concepts 139; Écrits 287). Thus we can give the statement “I’m telling a lie” its everyday, pragmatic interpretation.

Coming back to our parable, we might say the second speaker’s problem is that he/she treats his/her interlocutor as a unified subject, failing to differentiate between
the subject of speech and the speech act, between what the first speaker says and does. It is therefore no surprise that when the first speaker claims we can escape “reality” by “becoming parable,” the second speaker assumes this is just “another parable”; it is perhaps analogous to our assuming that one who says “I’m telling a lie” is really lying. On this reading, then, perhaps the first speaker sees that his/her friend is conflating these two senses of the “subject” and can, given this fact, only admit “defeat”; this is also a playful and ironic use of the term “defeat,” of course, since the first speaker would not be likely to take this as a serious “contest.” The second speaker, still not really taking seriously the notion of “parable” (which perhaps he/she assumes is just fantasy or fiction) cannot believe he/she has really “won”: the first speaker must be tricking him/her, for surely he/she has only “won in parable.” The first speaker’s claim that “in reality you’ve won, in parable you’ve lost” gives a serious weight to parable—it now becomes something a bit risky, a domain not so easy to enter after all—and a lighter weight to reality, and in so doing baffles his/her interlocutor, bringing a stop to the conversation. On the speech act reading, the first speaker is saying: “Conflating the two subjects has led you into such confusion that you have failed to see that my statement bears a truth-value that attests to the fact of your win. But if we do allow this conflation, then your win is meaningless since it loses any reference to truthful validation. Once that validation is lost, we both will fall into an infinite regress of parables. To win and to lose would become equivocally true and/or false, thus equally nonsensical. It then is pointless to continue our conversation, for it will then lead only to absurdity. Persevering in this conflation will cause you to defeat yourself by making nonsense of your own ‘speech.’ Thus ‘within parable’ or ‘within the realm of speech itself’ you have lost.”

And yet intuitively we sense that the second speaker is only able to conflate the énoncé and énonciation because he/she has distinguished them in the first place. Intuitively we sense that the only way to “go over” into parable, to oneself (as speaker) “become parable” (the story one is telling), would be to make no such distinction. Perhaps this might mean, to slightly twist Lacan’s famous dictum, simply giving up on one’s location in interpretation but not giving up on one’s location in parable. This would be to conflate, within the larger “language system,” statement and enunciation and thus to reside in the “metonymic chain.” Although, even after this maneuver, the metonymic chain of signifiers that are forever in a state of mutual displacement could only keep the shifter “I” floating around in “here” and not in the “fabulous beyond,” this strategy would nevertheless be the only way for a subject to remain “faithful” to
parable, and indeed to “become parable.” Or, a more “mystical” way to look at it might be: the one who “becomes parable” has allowed the truth-value proper to the domain of statements to “interpellate” his very being as a speaking (announcing) subject; his “truth” is now no longer that of communicable statements but of an incommunicable parabolic discourse.

For as this parable tells us, parables are indeed incomprehensible; the only “truth” they state (or “announce” or “enunciate”) is that “the incomprehensible is incomprehensible.” And yet “we know that already,” which really means: “what we know of parables is that we don’t know anything.” We are helplessly ignorant of the meaning of parables. Parables are ungraspable, unthinkable. In terms of the language system, they rest in a place language can never reach (either in the mode of the speaker or in that of the énoncé); thus they are resistant to the probe of interpretation. Parables are what language can always talk about but will never be able to directly say; parabolic language is not just a metalanguage but the meta of language, the crossing-over or crossing-beyond of language itself which still somehow (this is the problem, the paradox) lies within language; language itself may approach the parabolic “sense” asymptotically, by infinitesimal increments, but it can never reach it.

Now we have introduced into Kafka’s dialogue the intricacy, the complexity of a speaking subject. Even if we cannot finally pin down precisely what it means (for this would be impossible) to “become-parable,” at least we now start to see that this win-lose dialectics implies or presupposes a subject who either can or cannot become parable. The problem is that we can only “understand” the notion of “winning or losing in parable” in terms of interpretation, not parable. Thus we know, for example, what the Samsas (by discarding Gregor the son-become-insect) win on the side of interpretation and (we infer from an oppositional logic) lose in parable; yet we will find it difficult to know exactly what they have lost in parable, let alone what they could possibly win in it. To win and to lose in parable, that is, in “parabolic terms,” are equally meaningless and pointless. Both actions lack any truth-value that could guarantee communicative efficacy; if they were reduced to the terms of everyday interpretation, they would lose all meaning. Yet how can we speak of winning or losing in the unthinkable terms of parable itself? How can we say something that is destined to remain outside of the only system we will ever have for saying it?

As parable is one more (perhaps one last) attempt of semiological practices to say the unsayable and to think the unthinkable, winning or losing, to be sure, refers not to parable, but to the subject of or in parable. To transport this understanding back to the
relation between subject and language system, we come to realize that, for a parable subject, to win and to lose are equally nonsensical because the shifting “I,” so to speak, is embedded in a metonymic signifying chain that cannot possibly make the ever-shifting signifier meet at last with its sought-for signified. Parable refers to nothing because the very thing it sets out to signify is simply not “here,” cannot be given a fixed signification or sense. Parable is and can only be metonymic at best, despite its semiological attempt to be metaphorical. A parable subject’s condition, therefore, cannot be grasped “in parable” by a win-lose dyad, which refers to interpretation, but only by a “proper-improper” one. That is to say, we can only treat the subject’s victory or defeat in parable in terms of the question as to whether the subject’s “maneuvers” are proper or improper to parable as such. And it has already been suggested that the strategy of conflating énoncé and énonciation may be one way in which the subject, by entering onto or into the “metonymic slide,” becomes “proper to parable.”

**Metamorphosis**

Gregor’s metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*, “changing-through” or “changing-across”) is not simply about “transformation and change (*meta-*),” but also concerns a more “comprehensive (*meta-*)” question—one which remains “after (*meta-*)” his change—about what is “situated beyond (*meta-*).” His condition may seem absurd insofar as the process (*-osis*) of his change (*meta-*) of form (*morph*) is not complete or, again, does not go far enough. He will be “suspended” in an in-between state, between human and non-human. As readers we know that which his family cannot know, namely that the gigantic bug in question is really Gregor himself. Yet we should not forget that if we were put in the family’s place, we also would not be able to “know” this. (Imagine that one morning you open the door of the room of one of your family members and find a huge insect lying in his or her bed; how could you be perfectly sure that a person has changed into this insect, rather than its being “just an insect”?) Gregor has in one sense, perhaps, become parable; yet in another sense his family, and in still another we as readers, would need to “go over into parable” in order to understand what this “means.”

The most striking thing about Gregor’s transformation, as presented in Kafka’s narrative, is that despite his loss of both a human body and human language *at least in*
its spoken form, his self-consciousness (which must in some sense be a function of his language system) as a human being remains intact, as does his awareness of the humans around him (his family members) and his concern (Heidegger’s Sorge, “care”) about them. He continues to worry about his father’s debt, the musical education of his sister, and the well-being of his family as a whole. He sees them every day, hears and understands what they say, yet (having an insect’s voice) he cannot communicate with them. His self (soul) has become radically isolated, alienated. Even his own sense of humanness gradually dwindles through the story, though essentially it remains right up to the end. The Samsas’ own tenuous faith that this insect is Gregor will quickly collapse when Grete voices the doubt that has haunted the whole family from the very start, the suspicion that this cannot be “our Gregor” (The Metamorphosis 1457). Hence the pathos of Gregor’s existential situation. His “case” arouses our pathos, our pity for a human being who has suffered so much.4 It makes us ponder “the difficulty of life” (Caputo 4). The Samsas must face their impotence, their inability to cross over in understanding the place Gregor now inhabits, to communicate with him, as well as their inability to resume a life of “daily cares” as if nothing had happened. But the impotence Gregor must face is his inability to go far enough, to reach the point of understanding (and thus perhaps of being able to communicate to the human world) what has happened to him. He suffers then from the inevitable failure of his continuous attempts to make sense of his becoming-nonsense. It is hard to understand that once one becomes nonsense, there is no way to turn back.

The question I want to focus on here is this: in what sense is Gregor still a “human being”? Yes, he still has his human mind and he can still think—in, we assume, the German language—but he loses his human body and thus (since the body among other actions can speak) his spoken language, his ability to perform speech acts (énonciations), even if (in his mind) he can think in terms of statements (énoncés), the precondition of Kafka’s narrative. That is, the insect makes non-human sounds not because it has lost the logical-syntactic system of (German) language but because it has lost the corresponding body parts for “articulating” this language. Gregor now looks and behaves exactly like a large beetle, and makes hissing sounds that no one can understand. (In what sense can he himself “understand” these insect-sounds?) Gregor is in a state between human and non-human, a state of “crossing-over” or, as I am (perhaps metaphorically, parabolically) thinking of it, of “becoming-parable.”

4 The noun “pathos” comes from the Greek verb “pathein,” which means “to suffer and to experience.” See Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary.
To the degree that he does maintain a rational human consciousness separated from his (now non-human) body we might say that Gregor is still a Cartesian subject as “thinking I,” res cogitans. Descartes’s famous dictum—“cogito, ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)” (Discourse 275)—makes it clear that a human subject’s essence, its soul, as the cogito (the thinking subject) is independent of the confinement and determinism of the body, thus suggesting the cogito’s immortality:

if I had only ceased from thinking [...] I should have no reason for thinking that I had existed. From that I knew that I was a substance the whole essence or nature of which is to think, and that for its existence there is no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thing; so that this “me,” that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body [...] [E]ven if the body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is. (Discourse 275-76)

As the rational cogito is “not liable to die with” the body, “we are naturally inclined to judge that it is immortal” (Descartes, Discourse 284). The Cartesian scientism is founded on an incommensurable divide between “res cogitans” (a thinking thing) that comprises “ourselves who know” and “res extensa” (an extended thing) that embraces “the objects themselves which are to be known” (Descartes, Rules 240). The thinking thing does not extend and the extended thing does not think, so to speak. By excluding the body from the constitution of subjectivity, Descartes takes his subjectivity as being “simply the ‘I,’ ‘soul,’ or the ‘thinking substance’ which is what it is even without the body and world” (Çüçen). The Cartesian model of the human self involves the “dislocation of self and body” (Christie 175).

From a Cartesian view, then, we might say that Gregor remains human because of his intact (though perhaps weakening) human mind, even though he has an insect-body. The point is that for Descartes our human body is already something “other,” a mere “extended thing” belonging (unlike our mind or soul) to the material world, and thus might as well be the body of an animal, or a plant or even machine:

In the distinction [...] between the “res cogitans” and the “res extensa” Descartes was forced to put the animals entirely on the side of the “res extensa.” Therefore, the animals and the plants were not essentially different from machines, their behavior was completely determined by
material causes [...]. One of the later consequences of this view of Descartes was that, if animals were simply considered as machines, it was difficult not to think the same about men. (Heisenberg 410)

The theoretical separation of “res cogitans” from “res extensa” is necessary for the Cartesian project. Only on condition of thisbinarism can a subject stand at a distance to hold under its theoretical “gaze” (Frede 61) or “staring” (i.e., *theoria*) (Hall 129) the world of things, making it an isolated, independent, and observable entity. It is not surprising, then, to read that Martin Heidegger would regard the Cartesian subject as a “worldless” one (102 [110]) which, like the Kantian “logic subject,” has been reduced to “something always already objectively present (or ‘present-at-hand’ [MR 367])” (vorhanden; 295 [320]; italics in the original).5 The Cartesian subject or self then is really the thinking mind (consciousness), an indubitable and immortal “spiritual thing” (Olafson 110), and the world (including the body) is merely a mental representation and subjective ideation of extension.

Therefore from the Cartesian view we might think that Gregor’s subjectivity remains intact; the fact of having an insect-body, upon which he may gaze objectively like a scientist (an entomologist), would hardly affect this human subjectivity. Yet insofar as Descartes also speaks of a point of intersection of mind-body in the pineal gland, which makes possible bodily movement, having a non-human body might after all be a problem. In Gregor’s own Lebenswelt or “lived experience” in the story, the fact of having an insect-body of course greatly confuses and in some way steadily weakens his mind. Descartes’s view has been to a degree supplanted by twentieth-century phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty); for Merleau-Ponty we are “body-subjects”; for Heidegger we are “beings-in-the-world,” and Gregor’s “world” increasingly becomes an insect-world. But for Heidegger Da-sein (“being-there” or “which we ourselves in each case are”) is an entity whose “mode of being” (or Being; [MR 27]) lies in asking “the question of being” (*Seinsfrage*; 6 [7]; italics in the original). An important aspect of Gregor’s lingering human (self-)consciousness is his ongoing endeavor to “understand his situation”—to understand that which, like

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5 Frede prefers “occurrence” to “presence-at-hand” in translating the German word “Vorhandenheit” (or its inflection “Vorhanden”) due to “connotation of nearness” in the latter’s usage of the word “hand” (68). In this regard, Stambaugh’s choice of “objective presence” (or “objectively present”) sounds quite sensible.
parabolic discourse but in another sense like Being itself, can never be fully “made known” to himself.

Yet to the degree that Gregor suffers from his metamorphosis due to certain misrecognition—he fails to recognize the reality of his new state-of-being after the change—we might say that he remains trapped within a Cartesian perspective (or Cartesian “world”). He does not and, if we look closely, cannot learn from his loss that by the change of his physicality he has already traversed the limit of the human subject and set foot in a realm where no-(human-)body has ever been, one where, so to speak, only parable subjects reside. The reason he cannot be aware of this transformation as an actual event is that he still retains human language/consciousness which by its very nature confines “him” to the human world. We could almost read it as a critique, a mockery (by showing its radical limitations, its “absurdity”) of Cartesianism. On the other hand, a Heideggerian “reading” of Gregor’s becoming-insect would note his gradual “immersion” in the immediate “readiness-to-hand” (Zuhandenheit) of his insect-body, whose free and amazing possibilities he increasingly explores. It would note his on-going questioning of the meaning (or “being”) of this new world which he has, in effect, generated for himself through the possession of a new body; his mode of questioning continues to transform as he becomes increasingly aware of the capacities for “articulation” (for “worlding,” for articulating a world) of this new body. And such a reading would note this “being”’s newfound “authenticity,” his heightened sense of being (above all) a “being-toward-death”: for Gregor realizes (again with increasing intensity) that the insect-body is a death-body, is perhaps death itself entering into his life, a thing which abruptly marks the radical finitude of his existence. He sees no “new life”—certainly no “eternal life” or “redemption”—in this new body but only alienation, absurdity, and death.

Thus readers feel the pathos of Gregor’s condition not just in his inability to communicate with his family but in his unwillingness to “give up” being human. The deepest level of pathos in the story perhaps derives from Gregor’s fear of losing what “constitutes the kernel of [his] being and current existence, however miserable it may be,” his fear of “finding [himself] in an entirely new landscape, a featureless territory in which [his] existence will no longer be confirmed” (Zupančič 9). Gregor is unable to fully accept this (virtually impossible) “going over” into something Other than himself, into a world that has now inexplicably changed into a parabolic world. He therefore remains caught, suspended in between the old and new selves, old and new worlds. He suffers because he continues to misrecognize himself as a human subject when in fact
he has become not so much a split-self or Other-than-self (thinking here too of Lacan’s Real, which is still tied to a kind of Hegelian dialectical logic) as, I would suggest, an indeterminate, in-between, crossing-over subject, a “parable subject.” And he is, after all, on another discursive or narrative level, the protagonist and “subject” of Kafka’s parable—ultimately an énonciation of énoncés—of man-becoming-insect. As such he is doomed to being incapable of comprehending his own (parabolic) situation.

Disembodiment

Though the digital age cannot be entirely reduced to cyberspace, such a “space” is nonetheless the most prominent cultural “sign” of and for the age. It is now thought (at least by some) that disembodiment may be possible through digitalization. This strategy would enable us to go beyond the old binary opposition between mind and body, not by inventing a third term through dialectical sublation (Aufhebung) but by abstracting the body from corporeality through a translation into binary codes. As cyberspace is built on “the primacy of [non-corporeal] information” (Coyne 160), it provides an environment that is “stripped of the physical” (Coyne 157) and offers an “escape from the mortal plane” (Novak 241). With the aid of digital abstraction, a human subject can break free of its corporeal confinement to mortality, thus finding a “life-world” (Benedikt 131) marked by “annihilation of space” (Woolley 123) in which dwells either “imagination” (Coyne 157; Novak 225) in its pure form, or “a spirit [that] migrates from the body to a world of total representation” (Heim 75). Part of the reason cyberspace begins to dominate the digital age is precisely this gift of disembodiment which opens us to the realization of “a dream thousands of years old: the dream of transcending the physical world, fully alive, at will, to dwell in some Beyond” (Benedikt 131). By the abstraction of digital codes, cyberspace is then linked to a world beyond the physical one, a world of “pure spirit” or “pure consciousness.” The dream of becoming disembodied through digital metamorphosis is a utopian one; it reinforces the notion of a postmodern subject whose identity is “unstable, multiple, and diffuse” (Poster), and without “univocal conclusions” (Tanzi); this is the dream of a “post-human” world of fluid subjectivity (Pierce; Taylor and Saarinen 8).

At the core of disembodiment lies the removal of the body, a prerequisite for immortal consciousness and a post-human environment. This is William Gibson’s view
of the body in *Neuromancer*, whose publication in 1984 initiated the sci-fi sub-genre known as cyberpunk. Here we see the protagonist, Case, a “console cowboy” and “netrunner,” enjoy jacking into cyberspace precisely for the ecstasy that comes with temporarily forgetting the corporeal body. This transcendence of the body through “becoming-digital” shows a longing for the beyond while at the same time confirming a perception of body as being “here,” not “there,” and as a site of bondage rather than freedom. When Case gets caught engaging in foul play by his employers, they punish him by leaving him alive but only as a body—nothing but a body. His nervous system is permanently (though almost painlessly) impaired so that he will never again be able to jack into cyberspace. For them it is a simple punishment; for Case “who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he’d frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh” (6).

The disembodiment of cyberspace denies any middle ground where a spiritual life could exist side by side with a mortal body. The notion of the body as only “meat,” sinful flesh into which a subject would not wish to permanently “fall,” can of course be traced back at least to the early period of Christianity. In his epistles to the Romans the Apostle Paul spoke of an intimacy between body, death (mortality), and sin (the Fall), a model to which the imaginary logic of disembodiment in cyberspace has recourse. Case cannot help longing for a triad of bodilessness, redemption, and immortality all of which, in his world, are promised by the digital utopia (“good place” but also “no place”) of cyberspace. In the Epistles Paul also says: “For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” (8:24). *Real* hope, then, is hope for that which we will never be able to see, to cast our gaze at, to theorize (“theoria” originally means “to see objectively,” “to speculate on”) or discourse upon. Whatever we can perceive, imagine, or think of as the meaning (or contents) of “hope” is irrelevant to hope as such. Whenever we think we know what we hope for, we must lose hope at once; as long as what one hopes for becomes humanly conceivable or imaginable, one is at the farthest remove from hope. This is because we humans can hold onto a real hope only by accepting the fact that we are never able to see and to know what we are really hoping for; “if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it” (Romans 8:25; italics in the original). From the Christian view as presented by Paul we need to be, in a certain sense, infinitely patient, infinitely expecting the arrival of the future which will bring that
which utterly transcends our understanding.\(^6\) Only if it expects what is unknowable can hope be real, can we really have hope. This suggests that hope has a metaphorical, indeed a parabolic quality. Among the best-known passages of the Gospels are of course Christ’s parables, in which he tries to reveal to ordinary humans through metaphorical (parabolic, “throwing-beyond”) language a divine truth—the nature of God, of that Heaven for which they wait—which “passeth all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

The longing for any form of disembodiment, of bodiless and immortal consciousness, has to take into its account this “parabolic” dimension of hope. The cowboy Case, by way of his experiential encounter with other entities (or semi-entities) from the beyond (reminiscent of demi-gods, divinities, angels and even of the figure of Christ in the Gospels), seems to approach an understanding that what lies in front of or “before” his dream of disembodiment is an unknowable darkness: this is real hope, for he simply cannot see the ultimate goal. Case’s mentor, McCoy Pauley, has his own “personality construct,” named Dixie Flatline, uploaded into cyberspace after his bodily demise. In a sense, Pauley has become a pure consciousness made up of binary codes of abstract information; he has metamorphosed into some variant form, perhaps, of what Paul or Plato would call the \textit{psyche}, soul, and Descartes the \textit{ego cogito}, “thinking I.” Encountering this digital construct in cyberspace, Case asks his ex-mentor if he is sentient and the latter replies: “it feels like I am, kid, but I’m really just a bunch of ROM […]. I ain’t likely to write you no poem, if you follow me. Your AI, it just might. But it ain’t no way \textit{human}” (Gibson 131; italics in the original).

This “bunch of ROM” is rational in the sense that it is able to doubt (whether it is human) and to differentiate one category of entities (what is human) from another (either ROM or AI). Here it seems we have come across the double of Kafka’s Gregor Samsa. Pauley-Flatline, like Gregor, has overstepped the boundaries of the human body and stepped into a beyond where no human has ever been. And both keep intact their human consciousness, even though this represents or contains everything that is opposite to and incompatible with the nature of the yonder they have already entered into. Whatever consciousness, if any, can be found in this yonder will not be a human one. Both “men” (entities, figures, characters) are therefore confined to a pathetic and absurd existence, trapped in the limbo between here and there, between the human domain and what we see (\textit{via Kafka}) as a “parable dimension.” While Gregor is

\(^6\) Not entirely irrelevant here would be found the trope of the “infinite expectation of the dawn” (1815) that Henry David Thoreau has put in chapter 2 of his \textit{Walden}. 

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encased in an insect body and thus made to suffer (from) the difficulty of life, Pauley-Flatline, with nothing left of his mortal body, has to face the difficulty of death, of dying a human death. His/its resurrection through digital disembodiment denies him/it both a (mortal) body and death in a human sense. Regardless of the fact that Pauley-Flatline is no longer human, its consciousness keeps reminding itself of its once being human, keeps arousing nostalgic memories of its human past, thus condemning it to longing for a death that can never be possible for a bodiless entity. The only way such an entity can make itself “die” is by data-deletion or formatting: “I wanna be erased” (Gibson 206). Gregor also becomes at last resigned to the idea of his own death as the only “escape” from his existential situation.

Yet there are still better “models,” in *Neuromancer*, for entities that have entered the parable dimension: Neuromancer and Wintermute. These are not personality constructs extracted from dead human beings, for they never had mortal human bodies. Instead, they were built from scratch *via* abstract codes, and possess sufficient intelligence to be aware of their own existence. Since these entities were born out of the very infrastructure of cyberspace itself, called the “matrix” (Gibson 5), they should be called MI—machine or matrix intelligence—rather than AI, as the latter implies an inheritance from human consciousness and intelligence. Later in the novel, these two entities evolve through hybrid recombination into a higher being which, Case starts to realize, is of the non-human beyond that he will never be able to see or to know. Case converses with this evolved MI one last time:

“So what are you?”
“I’m matrix, Case.”
“Where’s that get you?”
“Nowhere, Everywhere. I’m the sum total of the works, the whole show.”
“So what’s the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?”
“Things aren’t different. Things are things.”
“But what do you do? You just there?”
“I talk to my kind.”
“But you are the whole thing. Talk to yourself?”
“There’s others. I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the nineteen-seventies. ‘Til there was me, natch, there was nobody to know, nobody to answer.”

“From where?”

“Centauri system”

“Oh?…Yeah? No shit?”

“No shit.” (269-70; italics in the original)

Case’s seeming indifference to the MI’s “state of being” makes it clear that a human being need not be obsessed with disembodied entities and crave to enter there; due to total ignorance and the inability to imagine that world, he may simply be indifferent to it. Pauley-Flatline said to Case, “if you follow me […]”, yet we (humans or, like Case, almost-humans) can never follow MI; we do not know what it is talking about, how it thinks, how it communicates with “its kind.” We do not even know whether this “it” has a new body and a new soul and, if so, how new it is/they are. The beyond is a world of non-human entities that are not only unknown to us but also beyond our concern.

When Case meets Neuromancer earlier, the latter explains itself to him: “Neuromancer […]. The lane to the land of the dead […]. Neuro from the nerves, the silver paths. Romancer. Necromancer. I call up the dead […]. I am the dead, and their land” (243-44; italics in the original). Neuromancer offers Case a chance to discard his mortal body and be metamorphosed into another kind of entity; it is an opportunity for Case to defeat death, to get rid of his sinful meat, to achieve immortal disembodiment. Yet he decides to follow another path, one that leads him, through an encounter with the meat of another, to a place to which only those who are attuned to bodily mortality can have access:

It was a place he’d known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he always manages to forget it. Something he’d found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew—he remembered—as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowledge, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read. (239)
Case’s indifference to the MI is a symptom of his feeling that he would not want to go so far, to become so non-human an entity, at least not yet. He has come to realize that this more total beyond is one to which, at least for the present, he must remain blind. But if Case at last chooses to stay “here” and not “there,” then what about MI? For Case as well as for us, MI simply is “it”—a parable beyond all human powers of interpretation.

Coda

Even in our digital age, the human dream of a “beyond” persists. This dream is an old one; it grows out of that religious-metaphysical (and onto-theological) tradition which sees the world as having a transcendent, or metaphorical, or parabolic dimension, one in which only a “parable subject” or “it” could ever dwell. Yet, as we read Gibson by way of Kafka, one thing becomes manifestly clear. While life without a soul, without a spiritual dimension or belief in a transcendent realm where we can be immortal may never fully satisfy human beings, it is also true that human life requires as necessary (if not sufficient) condition that it be embodied life. Metamorphosed into an insectoid body or a bodiless (equally non-human) consciousness, one will end up like Gregor or Pauley, both of whom feel that they “are nowhere”: looking back, they see their own human past through a mist of nostalgia; looking ahead, they see the darkening world of the unknowable.

Our desire for such a world becomes then, like the early Christian Heaven of St. Paul, the hope for that which is totally unknowable, totally beyond our mere human understanding. This is a parabolic hope, the parabolic expectation of a (perhaps infinitely) delayed future. Standing on the edge of such hope and looking into the darkness in front of us, how can we not be seized with fear and trembling at what lies beyond? We know, “deep in our souls,” that without a body we could not really be human; beyond the limits of our body only parable subjects dwell. And yet we also want to make the leap. We are caught in the tension between wanting to go beyond ourselves and fearing to lose ourselves. But this is really the tension of the bodily limit itself; that is, it is the tension between this limit and the darkening world beyond it,
which promises a becoming-parable-subject. It is this tension of the bodily limit, the tension between human and beyond-human, that essentially defines us as human.7

This tension is closely related to the tension of and within language itself. Kafka in his “On Parables,” we remember, distinguishes what I call “interpretation” from “parable.” There the first speaker says that we can, in effect, solve the problem of the “difference” between reality and parable—terms which we cannot really equate with reality and fantasy—by “becoming-parable,” a trope that I am here associating with that of becoming-insect or becoming-cyberspace. And the fact that all three becomings are—like parables and cyberspace themselves, if not also insects—essentially tropes (figures of speech) is crucial. In Kafka’s “parable of parables” (“meta-parable,” meta-parabolic language or discourse) the second speaker thinks that this praxis of becoming-parable is no real praxis but itself merely a parable—a trope, not merely a fantasy. And his/her friend then says that by saying (assuming) this, the worldly pragmatist “has won” (is right) but “only in reality; in parable you have lost” (you are wrong). I have suggested two readings of this, depending on whether we see the pragmatist (realist) as failing to distinguish what Lacan calls the énoncé (statement) from the énonciation (speech act), so that he/she will end up being entangled in an infinite regress; or (as I think more likely) we see him/her as the one who demands the distinction, whereas the “sage”—who believes it is possible to become-parable, who has perhaps the “infinite expectation” of becoming-parable—by drawing no such distinction makes the move “into parable,” that is, the move beyond (merely human) understanding.

We must consider, then, what it would mean in this “linguistic” context to say that beyond the limits of our human bodies we could no longer be human—though of course we might be “divine,” or be something else that is “more-than-human” or (like an insect) “less-than-human.” On the one hand we tend to assume that the move-into-parable would be a move into the actually “transcendent” and “unknowable reality” figured in the metaphorical language of the parable—as in Christ’s parables of God in the Gospels, or Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” near the end of The Trial. Yet this “transcendent reality” is after all unknowable; its only form of “being,” for us, is its being within (parabolic) language itself. The key point here is that this being-within-

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7 Allison Muri comments that we have, in the digital age, a kind of tension or contradiction between “the anxiety for the loss and obsolescence of the body and a distaste for the physical functions of the body” (88); it is perhaps another way of saying that we are simultaneously attracted to and afraid of that which lies beyond our body.
language is already something that goes “beyond” the being of our physical body, and however much we might wish to “remain (in) a human body” (“human form”)—as we stand trembling at the edge of the unknowable abyss, of the uncertain future transformation—we have in a certain way already gone beyond our bodies inasmuch as we have the power of speech and of language (Logos). The nature of cyberspace itself as a domain of information, a medium of communication, already testifies to this fact.

But if the move into parable is one which no longer distinguishes *énoncé* from *énonciation*, the problem will be this: in “becoming-parable” (becoming-insect, becoming-cyberspace), does one first move one’s speaking body into this other zone, so that the network of *langue* is then generated around this speaking body? Or, does one first “lose oneself” within the very network of an encompassing *langue*, language or language-space, out of which the new language-body, parabolic-body is, only then, mysteriously formed?9

**Works Cited**


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8 See the discussion in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, on “becoming-animal.” This “transformation” is analyzed in terms of “becoming-multiplicity,” of a human voice reduced to the non-sense of pure sound (or rather noise): the move from man to animal is read then as “flows of a sonic energy” (244, 309).

9 See the previous note. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari see Kafka’s writing as a “minor literature,” in effect a “minor practice of major language from within” (16, 18); in the later essay “Bégaya-T-Il” (in *Critique et Clinique*) Deleuze claims that the vibrating force of this “foreign language within [standard or major or paper] language” (“la langue étrangère dans la langue”) makes the “whole language system vibrate, or stutter” (“la langue elle-même se met à vibrer, à bégayer [...]”) (136, 142).


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