

Grete Samsa's Inconsistent Speech. Victimary Lies and Distortions in Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*

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ABSTRACT

In the third part of *Die Verwandlung*, Grete Samsa delivers a violent speech inciting her parents to get rid of Gregor. This speech contains the most explicit categorisation of the central character as “animal” and “monster”. Given that most scholars think that Kafka tells the metamorphosis of a man into a monstrous vermin, they assume that Grete’s words are (at least partially) trustworthy. A careful analysis of this speech, however, surprisingly reveals that it is full of lies, slander, distorted reasoning and even a parapraxis. Furthermore, it contains a set of fallacies which reproduce each and every one of the distortions which take place within a victimary circle. Hence, Grete’s speech (including her description of Gregor as an “animal”) is wholly inconsistent and unreliable. This conclusion makes the other categorisations designating Gregor as non-human suspicious, and provides a further argument proving that the prevailing interpretation of *Die Verwandlung* as a metamorphosis story is disturbingly misguided.

Keywords: *Die Verwandlung*, Inconsistency, Victimary Logic, Fallacies, Lies, Slander.

El inconsistente discurso de Grete Samsa. Mentiras y distorsiones victimarias en *Die Verwandlung*

RESUMEN

En la tercera parte de *Die Verwandlung*, Grete Samsa pronuncia un violento discurso con el que incita a sus padres a librarse de Gregor. Este discurso contiene la categorización más explícita del protagonista como “animal” y “monstruo”. Dado que casi todos los estudiosos creen que lo que Kafka cuenta en su relato más célebre es la metamorfosis de un hombre en un bicho monstruoso, suponen que las palabras de Grete son –al menos parcialmente– fiables. Sin embargo, el análisis del discurso revela que está plagado de mentiras, calumnias, razonamientos distorsionados y que incluso presenta un acto fallido; además, contiene una serie de falacias que reproducen todas las distorsiones que tienen lugar en un círculo victimario. Resulta, por tanto, que el discurso de Grete (inclusive su descripción de Gregor como “animal”) es totalmente inconsistente y carente de fiabilidad. Esta conclusión vuelve sospechosas las otras categorizaciones de Gregor como no-humano que se hallan en el relato, y constituye una ulterior prueba de que la interpretación dominante de *Die Verwandlung* como la historia de una metamorfosis está inquietantemente desencaminada.

Palabras clave: *Die Verwandlung*, inconsistencia, lógica victimaria, falacias, mentiras, calumnias.

SUMMARY: 1. The Hermeneutical Problem. 2. Lies and Slanders. 3. Distorted Logic, Self-defeating Statements. 4. Parapraxis and its Significance. 5. Victimary Fallacies. 6. Conclusions and Further Remarks.

“The world is still deceived with ornament.
 In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
 But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
 Obscures the show of evil?”
 W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

For Arturo Casas, who loves Literary Criticism
 For Gerhard Rieck and Ewald Rösch, who love Kafka's Works

1. The Hermeneutical Problem

The idea that the most celebrated of Kafka's stories recounts the metamorphosis of the main character, Gregor Samsa, into a monstrous vermin (“ungeheueres Ungeziefer”) has become established both in the *Kafka-Forschung* and the whole realm of literary criticism as the prevailing interpretative paradigm. This is accepted to such an extent that, assuming that the narrative voice is reliable and that the first sentence of the novella leaves little room for doubt, scholars and readers alike tend to forget that this idea is only an interpretation of the novella, and not necessarily the truth. This state of affairs would not be disturbing, were it not for the fact that there are very serious problems with this interpretative paradigm. On the one hand, it has been so far incapable of revealing the meaning of this novella – to the extent that scholars must avow that the text remains for them “incomprehensible” –.¹ On the other hand, there are a huge number of counterexamples to the current view. For instance, not only has it been so far impossible to determine what creature has Gregor “metamorphosed” into, but also there are many details which blatantly contradict such a metamorphosis. In fact, a minority of scholars (e.g. Friedrich Beißner, Robert Ulshöfer, Rudolph Binion, Gabriele Michel, Frank Möbus...) have never agreed with the prevailing view, and have affirmed that the “metamorphosis” could be, for instance, simply a *Wahnidee* on the part of Gregor.

Recently, I have advanced an interpretation of the “drei Zimmerherren” appearing in the third part of the story as the allegorical representation of the moral consciences of Gregor's three relatives.² This view allows us to make full sense of

¹ Hartmut Binder speaks of “das unverständliche Werk” and “die Unverständlichkeit des Dargestellten” (BINDER 2004: 439); “Es wäre naiv und falsch zu sagen, Kafkas ‘Verwandlung’ bedeute etwas Bestimmtes” (VIETTA – KEMPER 1975: 78); “The expectation of complete understanding must remain unfulfilled” (HIBBERD 1985: 51). Concerning Gregor, Heinz Politzer speaks about “unenträtselbarer Komplexität” (POLITZER 1965: 131). The novella has indeed been called “the commentators’ despair” (CORNGOLD 1973).

² See BERMEJO-RUBIO (2011a).

whole sections of the novella, so that the current notion that *Die Verwandlung* is a conundrum which cannot be satisfactorily interpreted seems to be utterly wrong. Besides, if Kafka has represented in the three lodgers the figures of moral consciences, then the existence of a deep moral conflict in the minds of the three family members is made clear. But all this is meaningful if – and only if – Gregor Samsa is, both for Franz Kafka and for the rest of the novella's characters, always a human being and not a monstrous vermin.

Spurred on by these promising results, in a series of further articles I have strongly argued against the *communis opinio*. The hypothesis that Gregor Samsa is a human being within a victimary circle provides solutions to a good number of conundrums for which there were so far no convincing answers in scholarship – for instance: the existence of two different versions regarding Gregor's nature, the pervasive presence of triads in the story (which is, in turn, divided into three parts), the fact that Gregor is sometimes designated with the neuter pronoun “es”, but most frequently with the masculine pronoun “er”, the fact that the literary works whose echoes are found in *Die Verwandlung* are always stories of human beings, and not animal fables –.³ The extraordinary explanatory power of this new reading (which introduces the concept of “corrupt objectivity”) allows us to understand Kafka's novella in an unexpected way, to the point that virtually everything becomes meaningful and intelligible.

An obvious conclusion of such an approach is that the descriptions of Gregor Samsa in sub-human terms are the result of the typical distortions which take place within a victimary circle, created and maintained by the persecutors and the victim alike. There are several passages in which Gregor is – or seems to be – categorised as sub-human. Besides the very first sentence of the story, where Gregor finds himself turned into “Ungeziefer”, the office manager describes Gregor's voice as a “Tierstimme” and the cleaning woman calls him over to her with words like “alter Mistkäfer”. Among all these categorisations of Gregor as a subhuman being, by far the lengthiest, most clearly articulated and explicit is the speech which Grete Samsa delivers in the third part of the story, aiming at legitimising Gregor's extermination and at persuading her parents to get rid of him. In this speech, composed of three addresses, Grete refers to Gregor as “Tier” and “Untier”, someone who cannot be given the name of her brother.

³ See the articles by BERMEJO-RUBIO cited in the bibliography. On the last point, the sobering fact is that the most convincing attempts to detect the literary echoes in *Die Verwandlung* (Jakob Gordin's *Der wilde Mensch*, Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*, Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Gospel narratives) refer to stories which have striking features in common. First, all of them are stories regarding human beings. Second, every main character is treated in their respective lives, at different degrees, with physical and/or psychological violence, and they accordingly undergo a sharp degradation. Third, in every case, the protagonist is mistreated to the point of being, directly or indirectly, compared to an animal. What intertextuality tells us about Gregor Samsa is that he is not an animal, but simply a human victim who undergoes a strong process of degradation; see BERMEJO-RUBIO (2011b).

Grete's speech has a very important place in the development of the story, as it provokes the *dénouement*. It is delivered in the presence of Gregor, on whom it has a disastrous effect, by destroying what remains of his self-esteem. Of course, it is not sheer coincidence that Gregor's death takes place that very same night, only a few hours afterwards.⁴ Given that an overwhelming majority of scholars think that in *Die Verwandlung* Kafka actually tells the metamorphosis of a man into a monstrous vermin, they assume that Grete's words are (at least partially) trustworthy. The length of the scene where Grete pronounces her speech, and the special place it occupies in the narrative plot is an unmistakable sign of its relevance within the story, but, to my knowledge, no scholar has ever examined it in its totality. Hence, the aim of the present article is to systematically analyse, for the first time, Grete's speech.

2. Lies and Slanders

Grete's speech is delivered after an apparently odd scene in which the family, Gregor and the three lodgers are present. Although Gregor is kept locked up by his family, one evening one of the doors to his room is left open. When his sister begins to play the violin, he starts to move towards the living room, thus transgressing the family taboo. The lodgers discover the presence of Gregor in the Samsas home. Although they are not startled or terrified – the representative of the lodgers simply indicates, with a plain gesture of the index finger, Gregor's presence –, Mr. Samsa tries to reassure them and starts to treat them in a violent way, by pushing them without any respect. In this attempt the father is hastily and quite efficaciously supported by his daughter, to whose actions a whole paragraph is devoted:

Die Schwester [...] war in das Nebenzimmer gelaufen, dem sich die Zimmerherren unter dem Drängen des Vaters schon schneller näherten. Man sah, wie unter den geübten Händen der Schwester die Decken und Polster in den Betten in die Höhe flogen und sich ordneten. Noch ehe die Herren das Zimmer erreicht hatten, war sie mit dem Aufbetten fertig und schlüpfte heraus (DL 187-188).⁵

In this moment, the representative of the lodgers reacts by denouncing the family circumstances ("Verhältnisse" meaning both "circumstances" and "relationships") as disgusting or repugnant ("widerlich") and announcing that he and his companions are leaving. The reaction of the lodger sparks a deep crisis in the family: after having become a self-confident man, the father staggers again ("Der Vater wankte mit tastenden Händen zu seinem Sessel und ließ sich in ihn fallen") and the mother's fingers are described as trembling ("zitternd") (DL 188-189). It is at pre-

⁴ In spite of all this, some scholars strikingly prefer to state that Grete has no responsibility for Gregor's death: "Wenn sie Gregor zuletzt auch nicht mehr als ihren Bruder anerkennen will, so ist sie doch nicht schuld an seinem Untergang" (HENEL 1984: 84).

⁵ For the abbreviations (DL, DLA) used in the present article, see Bibliography.

cisely this moment that Grete Samsa pronounces her terribly violent speech inciting her parents to get rid of Gregor.

As I have extensively argued elsewhere, if we suppose that the three lodgers are an allegorical representation of the appearance and repression of the moral consciences of Mr. Samsa, Mrs. Samsa and their daughter Grete, everything makes sense.⁶ The above-mentioned scene describes the fact that the lodgers/consciences notice what the family would prefer to keep hidden: the existence of a victim (Gregor) at home. It is precisely, however, the revelation of the truth which coward and immoral people are not willing to endure. Kafka starts describing the violent suppression/repression of moral consciences by the father's refusal to account for his behaviour and the aggressive fury through which, forgetting any respect due to his tenants, he physically forces them to go into their room.⁷ The father's effort to prevent the lodgers seeing Gregor's pitiful state reflects the individual's attempt to repress their conscience. Mr. Samsa has, of course, many reasons to be ashamed of the way he treats his son, and to be embarrassed at their lodgers' having discovered it. In fact, the attempt to lock up the boarders who "demanded explanations from the father" is an expression of the individual's desire to calm their moral conscience. In this context, the conscience speaks the simple truth about the Samsas by calling their circumstances "widerlich".

As I have remarked, the trustworthy nature of at least a part of Grete's speech is explicitly declared by quite a few scholars, and it is implicitly accepted by almost all of them, since they take for granted the animal-like nature of the main character: if Gregor is an "animal" and a "monster",⁸ it is only natural for him to be described in those terms, it seems. It is all the more striking to discover that a close analysis of the text shows that Grete's speech is wholly inconsistent. Let us look, for instance, at the accusations she levels at Gregor: "So aber verfolgt uns dieses Tier, vertreibt die Zimmerherren, will offenbar die ganze Wohnung einnehmen und uns auf der Gasse übernachten lassen" (DL 191).

Grete's first accusation is that: "This animal persecutes us". The problem, however, is that the novella never indicates in the least that Gregor has persecuted his relatives: not only are his intentions towards them positive, but even if he had wanted to persecute somebody, he would not have been able to do so, because he is kept locked up in his room, and because his physical condition and state of health are pitiful indeed. What Grete is saying is, therefore, simply a lie. The extent of this lie is perceived when we remember that, at the end of the second part

⁶ BERMEJO-RUBIO (2011a, *passim*).

⁷ It is not at all sheer coincidence that, in order to describe what the father does, Kafka uses – on four occasions – the verb "drängen", a clear evocation of the term "Verdrängung", used by Freud to designate the phenomenon of repression. The writer became familiar with Psychoanalysis from 1911, for instance as reader of journals such as *Die Neue Rundschau* and *Pan*. On Kafka's knowledge about psychoanalysis, see e.g. BINDER (1966: 92-114). "It is fair to assume that Kafka knew about psychoanalytic views on sexuality, repression, and the family romance" (RYAN 2004: 695-696).

⁸ "Gregor ist zwar in ein widerwärtiges Tier verwandelt" (Von WIESE 1965: 323).

of the story, the father had chased Gregor around a table; in fact, the narrative voice uses there the term *Verfolgung* (DL 170).⁹

The second accusation that Grete levels against her brother is that: “[Gregor] drives the roomers away”. Again, Grete’s statement is untrue, which can be proved by reading her speech in the overall context of the story: Gregor does not expel the lodgers, neither actively nor passively, since he does nothing to them, and since the lodgers do not flee at his sight (DL 196):¹⁰ whilst Grete is speaking, the lodgers (who have already seen Gregor) are still at home. It is the father who, supported by his daughter, has just treated the lodgers in a violent way, by pushing them without any respect, and it is the whole family which the next morning drives the lodgers away: “‘Verlassen Sie sofort meine Wohnung!’, sagte Herr Samsa und zeigte auf die Tür, ohne die Frauen von sich zu lassen” (DL 197).¹¹ The expulsion of the lodgers by the family proves that Grete’s accusation is not only utterly false, but also again painfully cynical.

Grete’s third accusation is that Gregor wants to occupy the whole apartment and for his relatives to sleep in the gutter. Right from the start, the fact that Gregor, who throughout the story is almost always locked up in his room, is charged with wanting to occupy the family space, is highly suspicious: even if he had wanted to occupy the flat, it would have been physically impossible for him to do so. Moreover, it is Grete (supported by her mother) who had emptied out Gregor’s room, and it is the family that has filled it with junk and rubbish, so in reality it is the family which has occupied Gregor’s room.¹² It is also Grete who, in her speech, says that Gregor should have left home. Besides, the family expresses on several occasions their will to move to a smaller apartment (in which, of course, there would be no space for the son): it is the family itself which longs to get rid of Gregor.¹³

Time and time again, the accusations Grete levels against Gregor prove cynically and scurrilously untrue: they are nothing but slander. The interesting thing is

⁹ This does not prevent Hartmut Binder from saying that Grete’s statements make sense, since Gregor “als Folge seiner Verwandlung [...] übt er Druck auf seine Familie aus, indem er im Lauf der Erzählung dreimal sein Zimmer verläßt, sich also gleichsam mit seinem bisherigen Lebensraum nicht mehr zufrieden gibt und dadurch Angst und Schrecken verbreitet” (BINDER 2004: 466). It is untrue, however, that Gregor causes real fear when he leaves his room. Besides, Binder does not even consider the possibility that Grete lies.

¹⁰ On this point, see BERMEJO-RUBIO (2011a: 110).

¹¹ The fact that the text states clearly that the lodgers are expelled by the family, however, does not prevent many scholars from arbitrarily asserting that it is Gregor himself who expels them: “Um die Verwandlung zu vollenden, darf Gregor nicht nur nichts mehr verdienen, sondern muß durch sein Erscheinen auch noch die Untermieter vertreiben” (WALSER 1981: 170); see also SOKEL (1983²: 98); BINDER (2004: 451); among many others.

¹² “Was nur im Augenblick unbrauchbar war, schleuderte die Bedienerin, die es immer sehr eilig hatte, einfach in Gregors Zimmer” (DL 181).

¹³ “Die größte Klage war aber stets, daß man diese für die gegenwärtigen Verhältnisse allzugroße Wohnung nicht verlassen konnte, da es nicht auszudenken war, wie man Gregor übersiedeln sollte” (DL 175); “Die größte augenblickliche Besserung der Lage mußte sich natürlich leicht durch einen Wohnungswechsel ergeben; sie wollten nun eine kleinere und billigere, aber besser gelegene und überhaupt praktischere Wohnung nehmen” (DL 200).

not only that Grete lies, but the fact that her lies have an unmistakably victimary ring, since the misdeeds Gregor is accused of have been perpetrated by the family itself. This reflects the essential procedure of every victimary situation: the members of a community, unwilling to assume their responsibility in a crisis, try to transfer that responsibility to a defenseless person. Grete accuses Gregor of what she (in fact, the whole family) is doing to him, thereby unfairly inverting their roles.¹⁴

3. Distorted Logic, Self-defeating Statements

Lies and slander are only one element of the suspicious nature of Grete's discourse. Another aspect is the distorted use of reasoning in which she incurs. Before having blamed Gregor for the purported misdeeds listed above, she had pronounced the following words:

“Weg muß es”, rief die Schwester, “das ist das einzige Mittel, Vater. Du mußt bloß den Gedanken loszuwerden suchen, daß es Gregor ist. Daß wir es solange geglaubt haben, das ist ja unser eigentliches Unglück. Aber wie kann es Gregor sein? Wenn es Gregor wäre, er hätte längst eingesehen, daß ein Zusammenleben von Menschen mit einem solchen Tier nicht möglich ist, und wäre freiwillig fortgegangen” (DL 191).

At this point in the text, the members of the family – at least Grete and Mr. Samsa – want to get rid of (“loswerden”) Gregor; in order to do it without pangs of conscience, they must remove (“loswerden”) even the idea that he is indeed Gregor. Such an idea, Grete states, has been held by the family so far. This represents one of the clearest and most explicit indications that what the family sees from the beginning is not a monstrous vermin, but simply a human being. In fact, Grete's whole speech is, from the point of view of the prevailing interpretation of the story, fully superfluous and pointless: Grete would be trying to convince her parents of something which, according to most scholars, they should not have doubted from the very start of the novella, namely, that Gregor is an animal, a monster.

In any case, what Grete is demanding from her father (“Du mußt”) is nothing less than that he suddenly change his perception of reality: a being that has been so

¹⁴ Let us also note that this is not the first time that Gregor is slandered. In the first part of the story, the office manager attacks his employee with insidious accusations (“Ihre Leistungen in der letzten Zeit waren also sehr unbefriedigend”, “Der Chef deutete mir zwar heute früh eine mögliche Erklärung für Ihre Versäumnis an – sie betraf das Ihnen seit kurzem anvertraute Inkasso”) (DL 128). There are, however, very good reasons to suspect that Gregor is innocent. First, the manager is not at all a reliable person. Second, Gregor himself says in no uncertain terms that there is no basis for any of the accusations the manager makes against him (DL 130). Third, the mother and the narrative voice make clear that he is a responsible and hard-working person: ““Der Junge hat ja nichts im Kopf als das Geschäft. Ich ärgere mich schon fast, daß er abends niemals ausgeht [...] Da sitzt er bei uns am Tisch und liest still die Zeitung oder studiert Fahrpläne”” (DL 126).

far perceived as a member of the family must just (“bloß”) be considered a dangerous monster. This striking demand is suspicious when taken alone, but as we read on our suspicions continue to grow. In fact, in this section of her speech the following implicit syllogism is found:

Major premise:	If it were Gregor, he would have gone away
Minor premise:	It has not gone away
Conclusion:	It is not Gregor

This syllogism is a clear example of the inference rule called *modus tollens* (or *modus tollendo tollens* or ‘denying the consequent’). This inference rule has the following argument form:

If *P*, then *Q*.
 Not *Q*.
 Therefore, not *P*.

The syllogism underlying Grete’s words is valid from a formal point of view, but something is deeply wrong with it. The problem, quite simply, lies in the fact that the major premise does not hold. The presumption that Gregor would have gone away – in other words, that he would have left the Samsas’ home – is indeed completely arbitrary. Far from it, if “it” were Gregor, he would obviously have the right to remain at home, and also to be cared for. Not only because he would in that case be a human being, but also because that human being would be the same one who has been working himself into the ground for his family for a period of five years. Therefore, it is rather the opposite of Grete’s major premise which would be true: if it were Gregor, he would not have gone away, or, at least, he should not have gone away. And that, in turn, means that Kafka is telling his readers that Grete’s conclusion (“it is not Gregor”) is unmistakably and thoroughly untrue.

Grete’s distorted reasoning is revealed more clearly when one pays attention to the entire major premise. Regarding the creature she is discussing, she says that if it were Gregor, he would perceive himself as a non-human being: “Wenn es Gregor wäre, er hätte längst eingesehen, dass ein Zusammenleben von Menschen mit einem solchen Tier nicht möglich ist”. This means that, even when Grete considers the possibility that Gregor is human, she continues to assume that he is an animal. Therefore, in the premise there is an implicit inference – “if it were Gregor, it would not be Gregor (it would be an animal)” – which flagrantly violates the principle of non-contradiction. In other words: Grete’s inference is self-defeating.

As if this were not enough, Grete’s reasoning involves an even greater perfidy, because if it is translated as a demand to act, it would be formulated in this way: “Gregor should have gone away of his own free will” (“freiwillig”). Literally understood, this sentence means that he should have voluntarily left the apartment.

But, how would Gregor have been able to leave voluntarily, if the text had previously made clear that he has been locked up in his room by his relatives?¹⁵ Since Gregor is held captive at home, the demand contained in Grete's speech has the pathogenic dimension of a double bind: the main character must face the double and irreconcilable request of leaving and remaining at home, to such an extent that whatever he does (and whatever he is) will condemn him.¹⁶

There is therefore no way out for the victim. If it is assumed that the referent of Grete's speech is a monstrous vermin, there is no way out indeed, because in this case the family would be justified in getting rid of it without ceremony. If, on the other hand, it is assumed that he is Gregor, he is equally condemned, since – according to Grete – in this case he would not be authorised to remain at home. Kafka has thereby shown in a crystal-clear way the self-destructive nature of Grete's utterances concerning Gregor, since her conclusion, far from genuinely following on from its premises, blatantly contradicts them.

4. Parapraxis and Its Significance

Further proof that Grete's speech is inconsistent is the fact that she betrays herself by committing what psychoanalysis calls a parapraxis (i.e., an error in speech or physical action that is interpreted as occurring due to the interference of some unconscious wish, conflict, or train of thought).¹⁷ Put another way, parapraxes (“Fehlleistungen”) are psychic acts, “an denen man Sinn und Absicht erkennen kann, nicht nur, daß sie durch eine Interferenz von zwei verschiedenen Intentionen entstehen, sondern außerdem noch, daß die eine dieser Intentionen eine gewisse Zurückdrängung vor der Ausführung erfahren haben muß, um sich durch die Störung der anderen äußern zu können. Sie muß selbst erst gestört worden sein, ehe sie zur störenden werden kann” (Freud 1944: 61).

As we have seen, throughout her speech Grete categorizes Gregor as “Tier” and “Untier”,¹⁸ that is to say, with neuter gender nouns. Therefore, she uses the neuter pronoun to refer to him: “Wir müssen versuchen, es loszuwerden [...] Wir müssen es loszuwerden suchen [...] es bringt euch noch beide um [...] Weg muß es” (DL 189-191).

The striking thing is that, at the very end of her speech, suddenly she uses the masculine pronoun: “‘Sieh nur, Vater’, schrie sie plötzlich auf, ‘er fängt schon wieder an!’” (DL 191). This pronominal change is clearly wholly intentional; it is

¹⁵ “Die Schlüssel steckten nun auch von außen” (DL 145); “Gefangenschaft” (DL 151). In the second part Grete charges her brother with having escaped: “Gregor ist ausgebrochen” (DL 168).

¹⁶ This is not, of course, the only passage in Kafka's works where double bind situations are described; see e.g. ABRAHAM (1985: 15-19; 58-59).

¹⁷ The theory of Fehlleistungen was developed by FREUD in *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (1901), and summarised in *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*.

¹⁸ The use of “Tier” and “Untier” (“monster”, but also, grammatically, “non-animal”) in the same section might have been intended to further suggest the contradictory nature of Grete's speech.

not a lapsus of the writer himself, but a lapsus on the part of his character, Grete. Common sense may lead us to this conclusion, as we know Kafka was a careful writer, but in this case we do not have to make do with *a priori* suppositions. If we examine the author's handwriting – or the corresponding Apparataband of Kafka's Critical Edition – we can see that in the paragraph where Grete uses the verb “loswerden” (“Wir müssen es loszuwerden suchen”) for the second time, Kafka has substituted a masculine pronoun (“ihn”) for the neutrum (“es”) (DLA: 262). Furthermore, we have a second indirect textual indication in one of Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer, dated 4/5th December 1912. In this letter, the writer draws Felice's attention to the fact that she has committed a parapraxis: “Es fällt mir gerade ein: in einem Deiner letzten Briefe hast Du einmal ‘Dir’ statt ‘mir’ geschrieben, wenn der Schreibfehler einmal Wirklichkeit werden könnte!”. The interesting thing in this indication is not only that the parapraxis concerns the use of a personal pronoun, but also the date. This letter was almost certainly written the same day (or at least about the same day) on which Kafka wrote Grete's speech (Binder 2004: 33). Hence, it is beyond doubt that in *Die Verwandlung* the pronominal change in Grete's speech has been intentionally used by the Prague writer, and that he wished to draw his readers' attention to it.

The revealing contrast of “es” and “er” – which goes usually unnoticed, and which is lost in translation into Romanic languages – has certainly been remarked by some scholars, but it has a deep significance which seems to have been overlooked so far.¹⁹ Grete's parapraxis betrays the existence of an inner conflict. It is through this detail that she betrays the true idea that she has been repressing so far: that Gregor is an innocent human being. Despite having decided not to let it emerge in her speech, the repressed tendency finally manifests itself in the use of the masculine pronoun. And, as far as the use of the distinct pronouns implies a completely different view of Gregor, the pronominal change represents a flagrant contradiction on Grete's part: Gregor cannot be at the same time a monster and a human being, cannot be simultaneously an *es* and an *er*. In Grete's parapraxis, the truth – that Gregor is a human being – appears.

Significantly, therefore, in this speech we find two conflicting visions of Gregor, as Grete oscillates between the neuter and the masculine pronoun. In fact, if we pay attention to the remarks made by the father, we will perceive another conflict: whilst Grete repeatedly uses (before her final parapraxis) the neuter pronoun, the father uses only the masculine.²⁰ Grete says that the members of the family have so far seen Gregor as a human being, but that from now on they must see him as an animal and a monster. She also says that they have done everything humanly possible to take care of him, but now she is encouraging her parents to

¹⁹ In a commentary rich in insight, Ewald Rösch realised that the pronominal change involves a parapraxis (RÖSCH 1999: 216-217). For a thorough analysis of this fact, see BERMEJO-RUBIO (2012a).

²⁰ “‘Wenn er uns verstünde’, sagte der Vater [...] ‘Wenn er uns verstünde’, wiederholte der Vater” (DL 190).

get rid of him. The attentive reader is again faced with two very different interpretations of events.

5. Victimary Fallacies

Thus far, we have demonstrated that Grete Samsa's speech is astonishingly inconsistent: it is full of poisonous lies and slander, and it also contains distortions of reasoning and a parapraxis. From the beginning to the end, the speech is fallacious. This proves that Kafka had a special interest in letting his readers realise that Grete's speech is not reliable in the least. But, why did the author want us to call into question the reliability of Grete's words? Let us note that Grete's inconsistency has nothing to do with that confusing concoction which has so often been called the 'kafkaesque absurd', nor does it imply that Grete is being depicted as a girl lacking in rhetorical skills or going out of her mind. Quite the opposite, she has been described as a perceptive and observant person,²¹ who knows quite clearly what she wants. In fact, her whole speech is designed to categorise Gregor as an animal and a monster and accordingly to justify his elimination. The discrepancy between what Grete wishes to communicate and what she actually says is not due to the fact that she is a befuddled girl speaking without rhyme or reason, but to the fact that what she says is not reliable. And that means, in turn, that there seems to be a very precise logic behind her lies and distortions. To unveil this logic will be the goal of the following lines.

It is important to realise that, if the object of Grete's speech were really an animal and a monster, the speech itself would not make sense. First, because it would be completely superfluous: it is not necessary to persuade people to get rid of a monster, since we would expect a monster to be eliminated without further discussion. It is revealing that the first words Grete pronounces are: "Liebe Eltern [...] so geht es nicht weiter. Wenn ihr das vielleicht nicht einsehet, ich sehe es ein" (DL 189). Evidently, if Gregor were really a monster, the parents would perceive the advisability of getting rid of him without any need to be persuaded. Second, and most decisively, the tensions revealed through the lies and inconsistencies could not be explained: the perspective of getting rid of a monster does not raise doubts, moral scruples or psychological tensions.

The perspective of getting rid of a human being does, however, usually raise such doubts and scruples. Therefore, if we suppose that Gregor is a man, the presence of Grete's lies and the logical failings in her speech become understandable: they can be easily explained as the tensions triggered by the clash between her *willingness* to do something unfair (let us not forget that Grete is urging her parents to get rid of Gregor, and so potentially to commit a crime) and the inescapable *awareness* that she is doing something unfair. In other words, Grete's lies and

²¹ "Wäre doch die Schwester hier gewesen! Sie war klug" (DL 138); "die aufmerksame Schwester" (DL 156).

distortions are understandable as revealing symptoms of a serious moral problem.²² Grete is indeed calling her own brother a “monster”, and is levelling terrible accusations against him, although she knows that he is an innocent man. This is the reason why Grete cannot speak without lying, distorting her reasoning or committing parapraxes.

If Gregor is a human being who is accused and denigrated, then this means, in turn, that he is a victim of his family. In order to confirm the validity of this inference, we can turn to the rest of the words Grete pronounces in her speech. As we will see, the fallacies which are contained in this speech reproduce each and every one of the distortions which take place within a victimary situation.²³

5.1. A basic distortion which takes place in a victimary situation lies in the idea that it is necessary to point the blame at one single person in a crisis, as without this the critical situation which the community is going through would be unbearable. This claim is simply not true, because, even if facing a crisis is obviously difficult – it compels the members of the community to take on their responsibility and to come to terms with it –, it is nonetheless possible to do so. The choice of a scapegoat is precisely the result of shying away from assuming such responsibility through the easiest (but the most unfair) solution. It is not sheer coincidence that Grete mentions the family's alleged inability to endure their situation several times, right from the very beginning of her speech: “Liebe Eltern [...] so geht es nicht weiter”. Later, she states it more explicitly:

“Wenn man schon so schwer arbeiten muß, wie wir alle, *kann man nicht* noch zu Hause diese ewige Quälerei ertragen. *Ich kann es auch nicht mehr*” [...] “Weg muß es”, rief die Schwester, “das ist *das einzige Mittel*, Vater” (DL 190-191, my emphasis).

The claim that it is impossible to put up with the presence of Gregor at home and that there is no other way of coping with the situation²⁴ is extremely suspicious for at least two reasons. First, because Gregor is permanently enclosed in his room; he is not noisy and does not seriously disturb anybody (on the contrary, he is disturbed by the family). Second, Grete is complaining about how hard the family have to work; this complaint is, however, exaggerated and untrustworthy: the three members of the family have been working for only two or three months – this makes the expression “diese ewige Quälerei” ridiculous – whilst Gregor had been

²² This moral problem is also implied in the figures of the three lodgers. See BERMEJO-RUBIO (2011a).

²³ I have argued elsewhere that there is a leitmotiv in many of Kafka's works, showing his acute awareness of the logic of victimisation processes (BERMEJO-RUBIO 2010: 135-161). On Kafka's awareness of scurrilous accusations and pogroms against Jews, see STÖLZL (1975); BAND (1980).

²⁴ The manuscript originally stated: “Ich laufe von zuhause fort, wenn es länger hier bleibt”. The fact that Kafka later erased this sentence is aptly commented by one scholar: “Der Satz wurde noch in der Handschrift getilgt, denn es durfte die alleinige Perspektive, daß *Gregor* ‘fortgehen’ müsse, nicht durch die Möglichkeit eines Weggangs von *Grete* relativiert werden” (RÖSCH 1999: 216).

working uninterruptedly for five years to support the whole family, without complaint. In the light of the Samsa family's past, Grete's complaints are not only hard to believe: they deserve to be labelled (again) as purely and simply cynical.

The fact that Grete's appeal to get rid of Gregor is the result of a decision characterised ultimately by blatant arbitrariness is proved by some details in her discourse: "Ich *will* vor diesem Untier nicht den Namen meines Bruders aussprechen, und sage daher *bloß*: wir müssen versuchen, es loszuwerden" (DL 189, my emphasis).

Grete makes clear that everything here depends on her will: she does not *want* to call Gregor by his name, and so she says *simply* that they must get rid of him. This is, however, nothing but sheer arbitrariness, as the use of the verb and the adverb show.²⁵ But this is even clearer if, as before, we compare the words pronounced by Grete with her former behaviour. Grete says that this creature cannot be called her brother. Throughout the story, however, she has not only referred to Gregor with the masculine pronoun,²⁶ but has also, quite naturally, used his name time and time again.²⁷ Of course, if in this scene Grete does not call Gregor by his name is because now she *is not interested in* doing so, and not because she *cannot* do it.²⁸

5.2. A second victimary distortion entails the claim that the persecutors are morally impeccable people. Even if – or precisely because – they are violating justice and truth, they try to persuade themselves and others that there is nothing blameworthy in their behaviour. This claim has, of course, nothing to do with a legitimate sense of self-esteem, but is rather only a sign of self-deceit. As Brutus says to the other conspirators against Caesar in Shakespeare's work: "We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers".²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that we should find a similar device – aimed at preventing any eventual questioning of the legitimacy of their actions – in Grete's speech: "Wir haben das Menschenmögliche versucht, es zu pflegen und zu dulden, ich glaube, es kann uns niemand den geringsten Vorwurf machen" (DL 189).

Grete presents the family – and therefore, herself – as nothing less than as irreplaceable.³⁰ But it is important to realise to what extent this claim (Mr. Samsa reacts to it by saying: "Sie hat tausendmal Recht") is a suspicious one. Any at-

²⁵ Arbitrariness will appear again later, when she uses the same adverb to address her father: "Du mußt bloß [...]" (DL 191).

²⁶ "Komm nur, man sieht ihn nicht", sagte die Schwester" (DL 160).

²⁷ "Du, Gregor!" rief die Schwester mit erhobener Faust und eindringlichen Blicken" (DL 166); "Grete antwortete mit dumpfer Stimme [...] 'Gregor ist ausgebrochen.'" (DL 167-168).

²⁸ According to many commentators, Grete "in dem 'Untier' nicht mehr ihren Bruder sehen kann" (RÖSCH 1999: 108). In fact she can, but she feigns that she cannot.

²⁹ *Julius Caesar*, act II, scene I.

³⁰ In this light, the fact that the floor of the Samsa's living-room is described as "makellos" becomes meaningful (DL 184-185). We might also ask why the family should have done 'everything humanly possible' to take care of a "monster".

tempt to present oneself as completely irreproachable would arouse suspicions, but in the case of these characters, whose lack of sensitivity and fairness toward Gregor is made evident throughout the text, such a claim is simply incredible. Moreover, the fact that Grete states that nobody can blame them in the least is revealing, because nobody has blamed them. We have here a good example of the Latin apothegm *excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta*.³¹ Thus, this apology betrays the existence of a guilty conscience, which is again meaningful only if Gregor is a human being.

5.3. A further fallacy of the victimary mechanism is the attribution of every imaginable evil to a single victim, which becomes the scapegoat for the community's problems.³² We have already seen that Gregor is the object of a whole string of accusations: "So aber verfolgt uns dieses Tier [...]". As we have argued above, the charges brought against him are completely untrue, but they would be true if levelled against his own relatives.

This need to heap all evils on the victim usually involves the use of persecutory stereotypes, among which certain crimes – especially those perpetrated against the symbols of supreme authority – have a conspicuous presence, as they are seen as the most abhorrent ones, and so they most easily achieve the unanimous stance against the victim.³³ In this light, it becomes meaningful that Grete points to Gregor as potentially capable of parricide: "Wir müssen es loszuwerden suchen [...] es bringt euch noch beide um, ich sehe es kommen" (DL 190).³⁴

Furthermore, it is highly significant that Grete's last sentence in this speech – precisely that in which she commits a parapraxis – is accompanied by the following gesture:

"Sieh nur, Vater", schrie sie plötzlich auf, "er fängt schon wieder an!" Und in einem für Gregor gänzlich unverständlichen Schrecken verließ die Schwester sogar die Mutter, stieß sich förmlich von ihrem Sessel ab, als wollte sie lieber die Mutter opfern, als in Gregors Nähe bleiben, und eilte hinter den Vater (DL 191).

³¹ All this does not prevent many scholars from trusting Grete's words: "Given that he is undoubtedly repulsive and that no understanding with him is possible there is truth in her conclusion: 'Wir haben das Menschenmögliche versucht, es zu pflegen und zu dulden, ich glaube, es kann uns niemand den geringsten Vorwurf machen'" (HIBBERD 1985: 42).

³² "Les persécuteurs finissent toujours par se convaincre qu'un petit nombre d'individus, ou même un seul peut se rendre extrêmement nuisible à la société tout entière, en dépit de sa faiblesse relative" (GIRARD 1982: 25); "Le sens de l'opération est de rejeter sur les victimes la responsabilité de cette crise et d'agir sur celle-ci en détruisant lesdites victimes ou tout au moins en les expulsant de la communauté qu'elles 'polluent'" (GIRARD 1982: 37-38).

³³ "Les chefs d'accusation sont assez divers, mais il est facile de repérer leur unité. Il y a d'abord des crimes de violence qui prennent pour objet les êtres qu'il est le plus criminel de violenter, soit dans l'absolu, soit relativement à l'individu qui les commet, le roi, le père, le symbole de l'autorité suprême" (GIRARD 1972: 122; GIRARD 1982: 25).

³⁴ Let us also note that Grete's triple repetition of the verb "loswerden" recalls the typical repetitive litany which in victimary circles urges the community to get rid of the victim.

This passage contains further hints at the victimary logic which is being displayed through the whole scene. Not satisfied with having called her brother “Tier” and “Untier”, the histrionic sister behaves as if Gregor were actually a dangerous creature:³⁵ when he begins to turn around in order to trek back to his room, she gesticulates so as to create the impression that he is doing something aggressive. This theatrical behaviour by Grete is as arbitrary as her words: not only does Gregor – as the text goes on to confirm – have no intention of frightening or harming anyone, but his wretched state would prevent him from being a danger at all.³⁶ The fact that Grete puts some physical distance between herself and Gregor corresponds to the typical victimary distortion whereby the person who is declared guilty is considered “infectious”, and therefore unsafe to approach.³⁷ The true nature of the situation is further hinted at through the usage of a verb with an unequivocal meaning: Grete would rather sacrifice (“opfern”) her mother than stay near Gregor. This is another unmistakable clue pointing to our interpretation as the intended meaning of the scene.

5.4. In the victimary circles, an essential distortion is to turn an inner reality into an outer one, namely, to turn a member of the group into a non-member, a subject who is the embodiment of otherness. What is familiar and known suddenly becomes something considered radically alien, and so an incarnation of dangerousness. In these circumstances, a favourite strategy lies in categorising the victim as an animal.³⁸ In this light, we can clearly understand why the first thing Grete says about Gregor in her speech is that he is a monster, and that later she calls him an “animal” twice; significantly, the first time Grete does not talk merely about an animal, but about “such an animal” (“mit einem solchen Tier”), that is, an especially abhorrent creature. Having been stigmatised as an animal and a monster, Gregor now provides the ideal scapegoat: he would be an “it”, a subhuman being unworthy of any respect, against whom violence can be unceremoniously unleashed.

Even if literary critics are almost unanimous in accepting these categorisations of Gregor as reliable, they have the same truth content as the rest of Grete’s speech: absolutely none. There is indeed a striking fact in this speech which de-

³⁵ Several passages show that Grete has a talent for acting, for instance she cries and makes eloquent gestures whenever she wants the others pay attention to her or feel sorry for her (DL 167, 189-90).

³⁶ “Aber Gregor fiel es doch gar nicht ein, irgend jemandem und gar seiner Schwester Angst machen zu wollen. Er hatte bloß angefangen sich umzudrehen, um in sein Zimmer zurückzuwandern, und das nahm sich allerdings auffallend aus, da er infolge seines leidenden Zustandes bei den schwierigen Umdrehungen mit seinem Kopfe nachhelfen mußte” (DL 191).

³⁷ “Dans le mythe [...] le coupable est tellement consubstantiel à sa faute qu’on ne peut pas dissocier celle-ci de celui-là. Cette faute apparaît comme une espèce d’essence fantastique, un attribut ontologique. Dans de nombreux mythes, il suffit de la présence du malheureux dans le voisinage pour contaminer tout ce qui l’entoure” (GIRARD 1982: 57).

³⁸ Let us remember, for instance, that in 1994, when the Tutsi Genocide took place in Rwanda, Hutu people were designated as “inyenzi” (cockroach).

serves to be emphasised: in a text designed to persuade the parents to get rid of Gregor by piling up on him the most degrading charges, there is no single concrete reference to Gregor's physical appearance! The speech lacks any mention of many legs, antennae, or anything of the kind. This conspicuous absence makes Grete's words even more unbelievable, since, if Gregor were a monstrous vermin, his – its – appearance would be enough to justify the will to get rid of it.

5.5. There is yet another fallacy in a victimary process which should be taken into account: the claim that the elimination of the victim permits the harmonious existence of the victimary circle (the crisis would be followed by a catharsis). This is however fallacious, for the simple reason that nobody is safe in a victimary circle, as the crisis does not really disappear (the victim is not truly responsible for it) and the same logic which has created a victim will create others as soon as necessary. There is always the possibility of a repetition of a sacrificial crisis, by reason of the inherent fragility of the substitutionary 'solution'. Nonetheless, one of Grete's claims reflects precisely this victimary distortion, according to which the expulsion of Gregor would allow the family's peaceful survival:

[E]r hätte längst eingesehen, daß ein Zusammenleben von Menschen mit einem solchen Tier nicht möglich ist, und wäre freiwillig fortgegangen. Wir hätten dann keinen Bruder, aber könnten weiter leben und seinen Andenken in Ehren halten (DL 191).

These words convey another aspect of the macabre, heinous logic of the victimary mechanism.³⁹ When the members of a community facing a crisis refuse to take on their responsibility, the coexistence or cohabitation ("Zusammenleben") of all members is no longer possible, since someone will be chosen as a victim so that the others can live ("weiter leben") without concerns.

In Grete's speech Kafka has reflected the whole panoply of distortions and fallacies typical of victimary processes. This is further corroborated by another interesting aspect. A necessary condition for the success of victimary distortion is, of course, the unanimity of the members of the community. The fact that this is achieved here is hinted at as the mother – who had sometimes taken Gregor's side – does not say a single word in this scene. She does not put up a real resistance to the mistreatment of her son – the only attempt she makes now is to cough with a wild look in her eyes –, and by the end of the scene she has fallen asleep.⁴⁰ Even though Grete is pronouncing Gregor's death sentence, she does not come to her son's defense. This means that there is nobody left in the victimary circle to take

³⁹ "La mort de l'isolé apparaît vaguement comme un tribut qu'il faut payer pour que la vie collective puisse continuer. Un seul être meurt et la solidarité de tous les vivants se trouve renforcée" (GIRARD 1972: 381).

⁴⁰ "Die Augen fielen ihr vor Ermattung fast zu"; "die Mutter, die nun völlig eingeschlafen war" (DL 192).

Gregor's side. The unanimity has been obtained, and the victim is definitively lost.⁴¹

The striking correlations between Grete's speech and the distortions of victimary processes cannot credibly be put down to chance. In the light of this victimary logic, it becomes clear why Kafka has Grete fall into so many lies, fallacies, distortion of reasoning, and even a parapraxis. They make full sense as revealing symptoms of the blatant inconsistency of the victimary procedures, built on nothing but arbitrariness. Grete's categorisation of Gregor as an animal and a monster does not hold water at all: the systematic distortion of truth in that speech – whose inconsistency is, of course, wholly independent from the eventual developments which Grete undergoes in the story – makes one of its main utterances (that Gregor is a subhuman creature) wholly unreliable.

6. Conclusions and Further Remarks

In order to realise that Grete's speech is utterly inconsistent, only two things are needed: a close reading of the whole novella and an eye for logical consistency. Our point is not that this speech contains some falsehoods, but that everything in it is the product of falsehood. There is not a single word uttered by Grete which has a grain of truth. This obviously means that Kafka wanted his readers to perceive that her words are unreliable from beginning to end, and consequently to distrust this character. Given that among the contents of her speech we find the statements that Gregor is an animal and a monster, and that the family must get rid of him, it should become clear that Kafka wanted his readers draw the conclusion that these judgments are also wholly unreliable.

As paradoxical as it might seem, Grete's speech proves just the opposite of what it seems to prove. The systematic demonstration that this speech is absolutely inconsistent means that the most explicit categorisation of Gregor as animal and monster in *Die Verwandlung*, far from being a trustworthy description, is simply slander and insult. This unexpected conclusion opens a promising heuristic path, as it makes the other categorisations designating Gregor as non-human suspicious. There is every indication that a close reading of the passages designating the main character as a sub-human being could yield similar conclusions: they might be nothing but the result of several distortions of the truth.⁴²

⁴¹ This allows us to understand that Gregor's fear just before Grete begins to speak is fully justified: "Er fürchtete mit einer gewissen Bestimmtheit schon für den nächsten Augenblick einen *allgemeinen* über ihn sich entladenden *Zusammensturz* und wartete" (DL 189; emphasis F. B.-R.). In this mention of a "general debacle", Kafka wants his readers to realise that the victimary unanimity has been achieved.

⁴² For instance, despite what most scholars assume by speaking about a beetle, the passage which describes the charwoman calling Gregor "alter Mistkäfer" makes absolutely clear that these words do not have any descriptive sense, as they are nothing but arbitrary designations bordering on insult. Moreover, the sentences are only *examples* of the kind of expressions the charwoman uses: "Anfangs

Furthermore, our survey of the nature of Grete's lies and slander reveals that they are the typical distortions which take place within a victimary circle. This leads us to think that the problem which the central character faces in this story is that of being a (human, too human) victim. In fact, a sound reconstruction of the prehistory of the Samsa family reveals a clearly victimary context.⁴³ This is extraordinarily revealing, for the simple reason that in victimary processes very important cognitive distortions take place (to the extent that a person can be categorised – and can see herself – as a subhuman being). Furthermore, we know that Franz Kafka was well aware of the twists and turns of this kind of processes, whose aspects he has reflected in many works.⁴⁴

The amazing fact that most scholars misinterpret the text to the point of trusting (at least partially) Grete's words is another clear proof of the existence of an extremely serious hermeneutical problem regarding *Die Verwandlung*. The interesting thing is that, once we realise that those words are nothing but a bundle of lies and distortions, we can begin to see the solution to one of the most disturbing literary riddles of the 20th century.

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rief sie ihn auch zu sich herbei, *mit Worten*, die sie wahrscheinlich für freundlich hielt, *wie* 'Komm mal herüber, alter Mistkäfer!' oder 'Seht mal den alten Mistkäfer!' Auf solche Ansprachen antwortete Gregor mit nichts, sondern blieb unbeweglich auf seinem Platz, als sei die Tür gar nicht geöffnet worden" (DL 179; my emphasis). Hence, the scholarly decision to turn these expressions ("Redensarten" [DL 180]) into an objective description of Gregor is just as arbitrary and insulting as the expressions themselves.

⁴³ If Grete's speech is characterised by the victimary logic, we are justified in suspecting that this is precisely the same logic that prevails in the Samsas' home. Of course, to demonstrate that the problem of the main character lies in the fact that he lives within a victimary circle would demand an analysis of the whole story. For such a detailed analysis, see BERMEJO-RUBIO, "Truth and Lies" (2012b: 437-448, 453-458). In fact, Gregor calls the travelling salesman (and, therefore, himself) literally a *victim*: "[D]er Reisende, der fast das ganze Jahr außerhalb des Geschäftes ist, so leicht ein Opfer von Klatschereien, Zufälligkeiten und grundlosen Beschwerden werden kann, gegen die sich zu wehren ihm ganz unmöglich ist" (DL 136).

⁴⁴ For a systematic demonstration of this point, see BERMEJO-RUBIO (2010).

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