

a review of

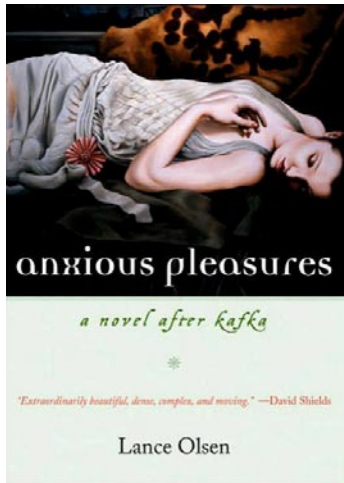
*Anxious Pleasures*

by Timothy Attanucci

*Hyperion*, Volume III, issue 2, April 2008

# After KAFKA

a review



Lance Olsen's  
*Anxious*  
PLEASURES

***Anxious Pleasures: A novel after Kafka***

**Lance Olsen**

**Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007**

**by Timothy Attanucci**

**T**he subtitle to Lance Olsen's book *Anxious Pleasures* reads "a novel after Kafka." If this usage of "after" seems a little strange, it is because it follows the German more than the English convention. The German *nach Kafka* can mean "in the tradition of, following Kafka," or even "adapted from Kafka." Of course the English can imply this range of meanings, as well as the active connotation—Olsen is *after* Kafka, i.e., chasing after Kafka. Thus even before it begins, Olsen's novel poses a question fundamental to the idea of literary tradition: does what comes "after" follow from what comes "before"? The novel clearly answers affirmatively to this question: one of the anxious pleasures is surely the "anxiety of influence." If Olsen's novel "wrestles" with tradition, it does so by calling it names—Kafka but also Coetzee, as well as a host of writers in his "Acknowledgements"—a strategy remarkable not only for its audacity and honesty, but also for its cunning. By acknowledging its debts, the novel both makes itself vulnerable to charges ranging from banality to plagiarism (in the moral, not legal sense of course), but at the same time immunizes itself from such charges.

Whether (s)he is familiar with Kafka's text or not, the reader of *Anxious Pleasures* is faced from the start with the problem of this relationship that Olsen describes with a mere "after." Is the novel a retelling, a rewriting, an adaptation, a translation, or a commentary? Is it a complement or a supplement, an addition or extension, a correction or revision? Should one (re)read Kafka in order to understand Olsen, or in light of Olsen? The concept of "myth" may be helpful in sorting through these questions. A myth is a story that an entire culture has elevated, consciously or not, to paradigmatic status. Myths elicit and survive multiple retellings, to the point where one can no longer distinguish between the original and derivate versions—Kafka's aphorism on Prometheus is a virtuosic demonstration of this. It is arguable that Kafka's *Metamorphosis* has become a myth, although the view that Kafka himself was writing on, rewriting a myth seems to me more convincing. More plausible still is the notion that Kafka the author has become a myth. Olsen's novel thus is a retelling of (at least) two myths: the myth of *The Metamorphosis* and the myth of Kafka.

As far as the first of these myths is concerned, it is an understatement to point out that it is difficult to compete with Kafka. Olsen's fidelity to Kafka's text provides moments of pleasurable recognition for Kafka connoisseurs, but it also weakens Olsen's vision of what a modern metamorphosis could be. At least for the reader familiar with Kafka, the novel disappoints most in the later chapters, as it becomes clear that Olsen is not willing to abandon the main narrative structure of Kafka's text. Since at least the 18th century, fiction

<sup>1</sup> Kafka was indeed an employee of the Austrian State workmen's insurance agency but at a very high level: despite frequent complaints about his day job, he was nonetheless "very interested" by insurance itself, and wrote a great deal, from reports to press releases, for his company. His *Official Papers*, edited by Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner, will soon appear in an English translation.

has lived off the idea that anything can happen, that "you'll never guess the ending, but in retrospect it will make perfect sense" (142). At least as far as the main plot of the Samsa family is concerned, you can guess the ending of *Anxious Pleasures*, and that does not make much sense.

In so far as *Anxious Pleasures* is about the myth of Kafka, however, it offers more surprises. The references to Kafka's work (beyond *The Metamorphosis*) and life are multiple and ambiguous. The most obvious cipher for Kafka the author has to be "the neighbor," who is described as "the author" and a "petty clerk for the workmen's insurance company" (79).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Olsen gives his Gregor certain qualities of the historical Kafka, notably his picky vegetarian eating habits. The most twisted reference to Kafka must be Olsen's recurrent referral to "jackdaws." *Kafka* means "jackdaw" in Czech, a pun that Kafka himself exploited in the fragment, "A Page from an Old Document." Faced with wartime starvation, Olsen's characters eat not only dogs and cats, an unpleasant but acceptable recourse, but also those jackdaws or *kafkas*. It has become a commonplace to suggest that literary sons need to kill their fathers, but do they need to eat them? (The missing link in the lineage of vegetarian ironists or ironic vegetarians from Kafka to Olsen is of course the aforementioned Coetzee). Needless to say, the historical Kafka haunts Olsen's novel from the very beginning, and yet we are also given to wonder whether the "real" Kafka is part of the novel at all.

Fiction is layered upon fiction in Olsen's novel. Whereas it appears that the reader might be on sure ground in taking the contemporary London that Olsen creates à la Michael Cunningham as "the real world" and the Gregor plot as a fiction, this turns out to be a deceptive impression. In Olsen's London fiction, the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is named Uwe, not Gregor. At the same time, Olsen also tempers the fantastic side of Kafka's story by eliminating the bodily transformation: as opposed to Kafka's Gregor who remains mentally sound, so to speak, within an insect body, Olsen's Gregor remains physically human while suffering some sort of psychotic breakdown. In other words, just as the so-called fiction of the Samsa family becomes more plausible, the so-called reality of a world of readers becomes less so. Moreover, the layers of fiction are intertwined: the London reader Margaret is surely a code for Gregor's sister Magarete/Grete, as is Margi; the name of a young woman with whom the Samsa father enjoys a business-trip escapade.

If the London world does not serve to ground the fantastic story of Gregor Samsa into a more banal, reader-"accessible" quotidian, it does offer Olsen the possibility to reflect on reading, and in particular, the reading of his own work—Margaret reads Kafka, but the book group she joins plans to read "a novel called *Anxious Pleasures* by an author Margaret hasn't heard of" (174). A promising reading of Olsen's novel might begin by considering what Margaret would think of it. One thing she would surely appreciate is the

kind of sleight-of-hand Olsen displays in calling the Kafka's bug-man Uwe, for this is a trick borrowed directly from Kafka, who describes "the Statue of Liberty holding a sword instead of a torch, and how the gleaming bridge in the background connected Manhattan to Boston instead of New Jersey." Such "errors" in realistic description have an estranging effect: "She loved how strange that made her feel, as if she could sense the pressure of another world pushing against the membrane of this one so hard she could distinguish its outlines pushing through" (34). Taking a cue from Roland Barthes, one might call this an *anti-reality effect*.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the referential reality effect of literature constructs a coherent world—a world-view—that readers can share, the poetics of estrangement that Olsen borrows from Kafka points to the constructed nature of all worlds, and hence to the possibility of their multiplicity.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in: *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): pp.141-148.

<sup>3</sup> So according to Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," trans. Sam and Shierry Weber, in *Prisms* (London: Spearman, 1967).

The reader Margaret offers other criteria for a good book, however, some of which lead to a less favorable evaluation of Olsen's novel. For example, Margaret "loves how Kafka doesn't use a showy style or look-at-me gimmicks" (85). Olsen's prose is sleek and elegant, and with the exception of his forays into dialect imitation, particularly in the chapters narrated by the cook and charwoman, could hardly be called "showy." As for "look-at-me gimmicks," *Anxious Pleasures* is teeming with them. Despite its admittedly crucial function in re-envisioning Gregor's "metamorphosis," the multiple narrative voices constitute, to this reader's mind at least, one such "gimmick." Another is the aforementioned embedding and layering of fictions. Gimmick, of course, has a pejorative ring to it. If Olsen did not use the word himself, I might have opted for "trick." My point is that, at least as far as poetic technique is concerned, Olsen does not dispose of the same straightforward power as Kafka. In this regard, Olsen's narrative, like so many other so-called "postmodern" texts, has more in common with German Romantics such as Ludwig Tieck or E.T.A. Hoffmann than with a writer *sui generis* such as Kafka. While Kafka's texts are anything but simple, his style does elicit, or even demand,<sup>3</sup> literal readings. According to anecdote, Kafka once said that metaphor is one of the things that made him despair of writing. Clearly, Kafka does not eschew metaphor, which would be impossible, but he does seem to undermine his metaphors, mainly by bringing them down to earth, so to speak. This can mean that a metaphor (Gregor is a vermin) becomes a metamorphosis. It can also mean that a psychic wound becomes a physical wound, as in "A Country Doctor," or that the cliché of the starving artist becomes a "Hunger Artist."

One trick that Olsen purports to borrow from Kafka deserves closer attention. Without disclosing the plot's finale, I think I can safely reveal that Olsen's narrative is cyclical. At least, the last sentence of the novel, rather than stopping with a period, continues on into the white space of the final page: "It's ... a quarter to seven. It's already a" (179). The reader is thus immediately pulled back, or forward, to the novel's first sentence fragment: "-quarter to

seven, Gregor, says Mutti from the hallway” (1). Beginning with the classic opening *in media res*, Olsen’s novel thus closes the circle it inaugurates. In other words, if an all too hapless reader stumbles in, he may never find his way out. This technique of circular narrative echoes Camus’ reading of Kafka, which Olsen paraphrases as follows: “the whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explications which, however, are not revealed in clear language but require that the story be reread from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings” (123). Note that Camus speaks of a double interpretation—the same that arises from every, even the most banal metaphor—as the reason for the necessity to reread. His statement hardly applies to Kafka alone. Still, it is an important insight in so far as Kafka’s texts do tend to begin with an enigma and rarely if ever end with a solution. Moreover, the power of his texts often lies in the first words rather than the last. (One notable exception is of course *The Judgment*.) Nevertheless, Kafka’s stories never finish with the kind of literal return to the start that one finds in *Anxious Pleasures*.

I believe there is an important reason for the fact that Kafka does not “force the reader to reread” in any literal way. One of novels that Kafka likely read in his youth bears a title worth citing in this context: it is Theodor Fontane’s *Irretrievable* (*Unwiederbringlich* in the original German). It is not difficult to argue that many of Kafka’s texts, and *The Metamorphosis* above all, invoke a tragic world of irretrievable loss. Once transformed, Gregor Samsa will never return to his human body. Such devastating linearity is not necessarily incompatible with notions of circularity or rereading. When Nietzsche describes the idea of the eternal return of the same in *The Gay Science*, he takes pain to insist that the idea is not born of dreary monotony, but arrives in a moment of demonic, ecstatic epiphany. Even the great and unbearable idea of eternal return can only come to us at a particular moment. The loss of that moment brings us the other great and unbearable idea: time devours all things. Rereading may bring an enriched understanding of a text, but it cannot bring back the intense pleasure of a first reading.

While Olsen’s novel does not spare Gregor from his fate, it does imply that this fate is as light as fiction. Was it not only a dream, after all? Or a fairy tale in the tone of the incantation “*heart of my heart*” that reappears throughout the novel, sung by various voices? The intrusion of dream elements into waking life can produce powerful effects—an insight that the Surrealists never ceased to exploit. What we often forget, however, is that our most powerful and indeed most disturbing dreams are those invaded by the sober facts of our reality. Dreams of loss and death do not reveal any profound secret of the soul; they remind us of the painful life we live every day. Are Kafka’s stories really so haunting because he lets a grotesque fantasy break into the quiet quotidian, or rather because he does not allow his fantasies to remain free of the pressure

of reality? Because of its cyclical structure, *Anxious Pleasures* resembles a siren's song, though its prose rarely has the same beauty. Still, it tempts the reader to plunge into that hazy netherworld where stories never end and never end being retold, the world where readers disappear if they are not called back to reality by a library bell or alarm clock.

This neo-romantic structure would be fine by me, as long as it does not reach beyond its bounds. I would argue that history sets these bounds. By "history," I do not mean historical facts, but instead something like a historical consciousness. The modern consciousness of history has two aspects: the first is an irretrievable past; the second an uncertain future dependent upon the present. History is an idea full of both tragedy and hope. As Kafka once said to Max Brod, "there is hope, just not for us." This modern consciousness of history has liberated humanity from fatalism, and released it into a world of uncertainty, risk, and decision. In the place of prophecy, the modern world has probability. As an expert in insurance technology, Kafka knew this better than most. It is thus unfortunate that Olsen seems to subscribe to the view of Kafka as a prophet: "All of Kafka is about history that had not yet happened. His sister Ottla would die in the camps, along with all of his kin. *Ungeziefer*, the word for insect that Kafka used for Uwe, is the same word the Nazis used for the Jews, and *insect extermination* was one of their obscene euphemisms, as George Steiner as pointed out" (125). A modern writer cannot write about the future *as history*, he can only make predictions of more or less probable outcomes. It is a testament to Kafka's profound skill for observation and analysis that his literary calculations were so often correct. Nevertheless, anti-Semites used the word *Ungeziefer* in Kafka's time, and pogroms were frequent enough to explain the tragic nature of Kafka's narrative.

It can be difficult to accept Kafka's blindness to our world, the realization of his uncertain future. We would like to have him as our contemporary, as our brother. Olsen seems keenly aware of this loss. The question, however, is how we revisit, return or reinvent him. Supplementing Kafka's knowledge with our own, the benefit of hindsight, is surely the wrong path. The unique value of the texts from our past lies not in the future that they have correctly predicted, for that is something we already know. But what of the worlds they envision that never came to pass? The past is full of potential futures. Of course, past futures cannot be our future, but they can shed a different light on our present. The motto of modern historical thinking is: it could have been otherwise. This is a necessary condition for the thought that the future depends on us.

This fact may throw an unexpected light on the epigraph to *Anxious Pleasures*, a quotation from Milan Kundera: "Remembering is a form of forgetting." The novel unfolds under the aegis of the imperative that all history is what historians like to call revisionist. The coherence of any memory, any vision of the past, depends on the erasure of all that does not confirm the current

interpretation. This is as true for history as it is for personal recollection: forgetting is ineluctable. From another perspective, however, one might begin to see how remembering the past is also a form of forgetting the present. At least this is the wager of a historical reading. One no longer reads Kafka insofar as he exists for us, reinventing him as necessary. One reads Kafka in order to see our world through his eyes, as if he could reinvent our present. In order to achieve this, one must confront historical reality as best one can. In part, this means revising tired narratives, or as Olsen writes, “short-circuiting the comfortable narratives produced by dominant cultures committed to seeing such stories told and retold until they begin to pass for something like truths about aesthetics and the human condition” (125). In part, it means revisiting those narratives that never have become comfortable, and facing their strangeness as directly as possible. If you feel reassured by Kafka, then maybe Lance Olsen can provide you with a new jolt of curiosity. If, like this reader, you find *The Metamorphosis* enigmatic and troubling enough as it is, then you might not need *Anxious Pleasures*.

published in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, a web publication of  
The Nietzsche Circle: [www.nietzschecircle.com](http://www.nietzschecircle.com), Volume III, issue 2, April 2008