

a review of

*Anxious Pleasures*

by Walter H. Sokel

*Hyperion*, Volume II, issue 3, October 2007

HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

● a review of

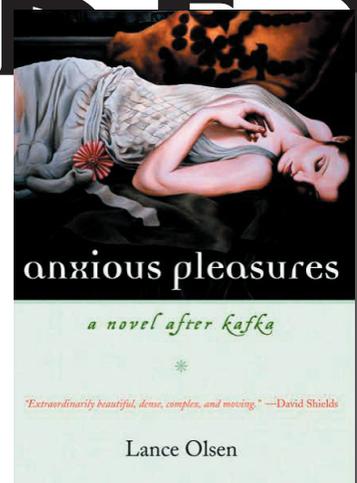
*Anxious*

PLEASURES

***Anxious Pleasures***

**Lance Olsen**

**Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007**



**by Walter H. Sokel**

Olsen's novel is basically a re-telling of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, but significantly enlarged and expanded, and thus much more than a mere re-telling. Yet by also attempting to re-tell Kafka's famous story, Olsen has set himself a daunting task. Ostensibly vying with Kafka, he stacks high odds against himself. Olsen's reader will, initially in any case, ask the question: Why tell again what Kafka has already told so superbly well? Upon the reader's most careful reading, re-reading, and reflecting upon Olsen's text, the question will in all likelihood receive a very satisfactory answer. Olsen's is a thought-provoking novel.

Apart from the considerable enlargement of and significant additions to it, the retelling of *The Metamorphosis* itself proceeds with great narrative skill and delightfully ironic humor. Olsen follows the plot and represents the characters of Kafka's story with a faithfulness of detail that gives the reader, familiar with Kafka's text, joyful chuckles of recognition. Beyond that, the reader gets to know the familiar characters more intimately than in Kafka's original story. For Olsen reverses Kafka's narrative perspective.

That Kafka narrates from a unimental perspective, i.e., from the point of view of a single character, has often been observed and become a commonplace of Kafka criticism. We get to know the other characters only as the single figure whose point of view carries the story sees and experiences them. They themselves, their inner lives, remain inaccessible to the reader. Olsen, on the other hand, lets all the characters, except Gregor, reveal themselves to us directly through narrated inner monologue and dialogic statement, and he presents all narrated happenings through their minds. Thus the reader gets to know the characters more intimately and fully than they appeared when shown solely through Gregor's mind. Olsen's writing acts as a transparent medium through which Kafka's characters seem directly to speak to us, their readers.

Though somewhat more fully developed, the characters largely confirm the view we get of them in Kafka's text. Gregor's sister's, Grete's, relationship to Gregor, however, acquires a complexity surpassing that in Kafka's story. She is certainly the most many-hued and interesting figure in Olsen's version, in which Gregor himself remains largely obscure, and she is also for the reader the principal informant on and observer of her brother's mystifying behavior. Olsen adds some additional characters, such as a Jewish neighbor of the Samsas, topically named Frau Klinghofer, and a humorously drawn occasional boyfriend of Grete, named Herrman. By giving him the name of Kafka's father, Olsen makes a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the closeness of father and daughter in Kafka's tale.

As already mentioned, Gregor himself, who, for reasons not clear to this reader, is also called Uwe in the latter part of the story, remains mysterious. His inner life is withheld from us and we do not get to know his motivations at all. The most striking deviation from Kafka's original story is the absence of its core event—the metamorphosis itself, Gregor's miraculous change into a huge verminous body. Olsen's text never mentions a metamorphosis and several passages clearly preclude the protagonist's transformation into a non-human shape. Instead *Anxious Pleasures* describes, through the observations of the other characters, a process of withdrawal by Gregor, first from his firm when he fails to report for work, then from his family, from taking care of his appearance, from visibility—"nothing," empty space, tending to take the place where Gregor had been expected—from corporeal being, finally from being, from life itself. At one point, as in Kafka's original text, he seems to attempt to rejoin his family scene and show himself, seemingly drawn by Grete's violin playing, but when that attempt is cruelly rebuffed, he, even as in Kafka's text, withdraws to his room to die.

There is a strange stage in that steady process of withdrawal that has no parallel in Kafka. It is Gregor's apparent abandonment of his sex, his masculinity, his de- or transgendering, which meets his sister's eager encouragement and excited complicity. In fact, she seems intent on seducing him to speed up his un-sexing, while seeking to make love to him. By contrast to Kafka's narrative, the thought and desire of sibling incest here issues (proceeds) not from Gregor, but from his sister. Perhaps it is this scene to which Olsen's title *Anxious Pleasures* refers with special relevance.

In the end, however, Gregor does not permit his sister to continue and further explore their "pleasure." He withdraws even from her, toward absolute isolation, toward non-being.

It constitutes a turning point for Grete. Slapping her uncooperative brother in wounded disgust, she henceforth turns from caregiver into would-be executioner who will eventually insist on his final disappearance even more vehemently than "Papa." Thus Olsen provides an additional motivation for Grete's turnabout. Added to her injured pride as an artist, when Gregor shockingly interrupts her violin playing performance for her parents and the lodgers, is the hurt of the rejected lover, the accomplice in anxious pleasures.

The function or meaning of Olsen's fundamental change from Kafka's original—the omission of its crucial event—centers on the role played by metaphor. In Kafka metaphor becomes event—fictional reality. Gregor feels like a bug, he becomes a bug. By taking away this metamorphosis of metaphor, Olsen removes a central part of the magic, the expressionist or surrealist, and eminently modernist, element of Kafka's story. Thereby, however, he paradoxically "corrects" Kafka along Kafka's own explicit

wish. Kafka made it very clear to his publisher that he wanted no pictorial representation of Gregor's transformation whatsoever. Thereby Kafka showed that his character's metamorphosis should be seen as a purely inner or psychic event, not an external, visible, and miraculous one. So, in a sense, on the plane of narrative representation, Kafka himself violated what he had categorically ruled out in pictorial terms. By enacting Gregor's physical metamorphosis in his narration, he pictured, i.e., externalized what was to be understood as a purely inner tendency, a mental or emotional occurrence. Eliminating any reference to a corporeal metamorphosis, Olsen restores Kafka's own intent when he ruled out any visible representation of his hero's transformation. In a sense, Olsen "outkafkas" Kafka. Staging Gregor's change as a solely inward withdrawal, he fulfills Kafka's demand on the narrative level, which Kafka himself had violated when he shows Gregor actually transformed into the creature he feels he is.

The two most significant additions in Olsen's telling of the story are the intrusion of the socio-political dimension, and a subplot dealing with the reading of Kafka's story and reading in general. I shall call this subplot the reader's plot.

The political dimension is represented by a perpetual and world-wide war with terrible effects on everyday life. Gregor's sister, Grete, for instance, permanently limps as a consequence of an injury caused by modern warfare that does not spare civilians. Both father and son in the Samsa family have had to serve in the war and our sympathies for Gregor's father are awakened when Gregor's mother, referring to her husband's life in the trenches, says that he has "seen things no man should have had to see, heard things no man should have had to hear." The war has been raging for generations. It covers the globe. In the father's memory he had been at the front in Burma. The war is alluded to in terms of both World Wars of the twentieth century. It includes trench warfare and bombing of civilians. The war is all-embracing. It occupies the center of life. The three lodgers refer to it. "Since the invasion (whatever that may be) our work has become more vital" they boast.

Reasons for and causes of the war remain utterly obscure. The enemies are referred to only as "the bastards," "the barbarians," "the natural disasters" without any further identification. The enemy appears dehumanized and deserves no specific characterization. The consequences of the war, however, are ubiquitous and catastrophic. It imposes a stifling bureaucracy on everyday life. Forms have to be filled out for buying "day-old bread." As a political phenomenon accompanying the war, black shirts calling themselves "White Resistance," evoke echoes of Fascism. The prevailing mania for uniforms gives rise to a humorous statement by Grete's boyfriend, Herrmann: "Hatred always being a fashion statement at the end of the day." Meanwhile, the butcher boy, a minor character familiar from the concluding section of Kafka's

text, decides to deliver cat meat “to the Catholics, dogs to the Yids.” A lively trade in pets’ meat requires printed instructions on “the best way” to slaughter dogs.

Does the protagonist’s withdrawal from life reflect the war? Is it reaction to a world out of joint? Neither the individual nor the social receives any illumination. Like Gregor’s metamorphosis, as told by Kafka, and Gregor/Uwe’s withdrawal in Olsen’s re-telling, the war finds no explanation. Like the hero’s story it remains a conundrum. As presented by Olsen, Gregor’s deterioration mirrors the political-social turmoil of a world from which he withdraws. Comparing Olsen’s version to Kafka’s, the reader wonders if the parallel between individual and global fate does not rob the former of the magic uniqueness it has in Kafka’s story, subtracting from it the powerful existential horror of Gregor’s fate. It is precisely its uniqueness that makes Gregor’s story, as told by Kafka, so horrifying.

Yet, on the other hand, its parallel in a perpetual, equally unexplained war adds a dimension of relevance particularly to our present moment in history. Olsen’s version makes Gregor Samsa’s tale an illustration of a general slide into chaos. It does make the protagonist’s withdrawal from life quite understandable. It depicts human beings as entropy. Entropy is literally alluded to in statements such as “resources run down,” “bad becomes worse,” “zeppelin(s) go up in billowing flames” and “little fiery droplets of crew (fall) from the sky,” as the lodgers read in the papers while smoking their cigars.

The other important addition is the reader’s plot. It centers around a young woman called Margaret, living in contemporary London, and her attempts to read and understand or, as she calls it, “wrestling with” Kafka and her visits to the British Museum Library where her relationship with Timothy, a security guard at the Library, begins. Dealing with reading, and particularly reading Kafka, the reader’s plot exemplifies the ironic self-referentiality of Olsen’s novel. For what else is his re-telling Kafka’s masterpiece but a “wrestling” with Kafka’s text? Margaret, as a reader of Kafka, is an ironic self-reflection of her creator as the writer of a novel that is, to a large part, a reading of Kafka. Olsen’s novel can be viewed as an attempt to write fiction as reading fiction. It is a “wrestling” with Kafka. We shall come back to the comic parallelism, as well as the play of contrasts, between the reader’s plot and Olsen’s novel as a whole. The former is comparable to the satyr’s play following the performance of a Greek tragedy.

Writing as reading is also writing as interpreting. The most striking instance of that is Olsen’s connecting Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” with *The Metamorphosis*. In Olsen’s version, Gregor has an older brother Georg who was a hunger artist before the advent of radio displaced hunger art as mass entertainment. In making Gregor Samsa the younger brother of Kafka’s hunger artist and by

naming the hunger artist Georg, Olsen performs a shrewdly penetrating act of interpreting Kafka's *oeuvre*. Georg, the hero of *The Judgment*, Kafka's classic tale of the son's suppression by the father, was the immediate forerunner of Gregor in Kafka's *oeuvre*. Both texts were written in the same season, the autumn of 1912. Given the chronological sequence of the stories and their thematic closeness, Georg can literally be seen as Gregor's older brother in Kafka's opus. Making Gregor's older brother the hunger artist reflects a penetrating cross reading of Kafka's works. The relationship between *The Metamorphosis* and "A Hunger Artist" is indeed a very close one and Gregor can be seen as a junior, i.e., more naive, non-exhibitionist kind of hunger artist. In Kafka's story, Gregor is said gradually to lose all appetite for earthly, corporeal food and nourishment. He practically ceases to eat and dies as a "naive" hunger artist, one not self-consciously exploiting and exhibiting his lack as an achievement. He thus represents an unself-conscious more child-like forerunner of the Hunger Artist, his "younger brother." A psychological and existential development in Gregor becomes "art," systematic achievement, a kind of "maturity," in the Hunger Artist. Olsen expresses this likeness and difference in terms of brothers differing in age. The introduction of the hunger artist Georg into the Samsa family shows Olsen's fiction as an apt interpretation of the interconnectedness of Kafka's narrative world. It is a subtle and persuasive illustration of writing as perspicacious reading.

To a large extent, Olsen retains the sacrificial savior and rebirth myth of the rain king whose death redeems his community. As I have tried to show in my essay "From Marx to Myth," this myth underlies the ending of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. In Kafka's story, the ending, subsequent to Gregor's voluntary dying and no longer told from his perspective, stages the rebirth of his family, now freed for a new life by Gregor's self-removal. Significantly the family's hope for a new future, vested in Grete's budding body, coincides with a return of spring. Gregor's *de facto* suicide, forcefully suggested and insisted on by his sister, thus retrospectively bestows upon his transformed existence a "beneficial" meaning paralleling the Christian variant of the rain king myth. Olsen's version takes over this pattern and elaborates the rebirth of the family's spirit in great detail, hinting at the reawakening and continuing of life by allusions to Grete's nubile body. The coinciding of the kindling of hope in the family with the awakening of spring is at the center of the scene. In keeping with his broadening of Kafka's story into the socio-political dimension, Olsen tends to universalize the myth, envisioning a rebirth of society and a possible ending of the war. The universal celebration of the city acquires overtones of the Dionysian. At this point it should be remembered that we owe to Olsen a splendid novel about Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup>

In Olsen's version, the myth loses an essential aspect that connects Kafka's *Metamorphosis* to the story of Christ. For unlike Kafka, Olsen does not show us Gregor's deliberate consent, his decision to die. Olsen's text does not

<sup>1</sup> Read "The Bardo Thodol of Friedrich Nietzsche," Rainer J. Hanshe's review of Olsen's *Nietzsche's Kisses*: <http://nietzschecircle.com/review8.html>. Also available on the NC website: "The World of Words: Ghostwriting with Lance Olsen," an interview with Lance Olsen conducted by Rainer J. Hanshe: [http://nietzschecircle.com/interview\\_olsen.html](http://nietzschecircle.com/interview_olsen.html).

allow insight into Gregor/Uwe's mind and thus gives us no sign that Gregor deliberately sacrifices himself. We are left with Gregor's being sacrificed by his family but not sacrificing himself. In this telling, the myth reverts to the pattern of the rain king, but loses the allusion to its Christian variant. Gregor is a mere victim without the dignity of a tragic hero and redeemer to which Kafka's tale raises him.

In Olsen's telling, the myth is further undermined by Grete's attitude. In the myth, Gregor's parting is to lead to the regeneration of his family in new love and hope. Grete, through her body, is the carrier of this hope. However, in Olsen's version, Grete holds the whole idea of family in low regard. "In the end, family" she thinks, "exists for no reason other than leaving it. This is the secret everyone keeps from you." Grete plans to exclude her parents from her life. She resolves to look for a flat of her own in which she would be sole possessor of the key and not share it with her parents. "Papa and Mutti," she thinks, "may not appreciate my decision at the outset, but they will get used to it." Not an auspicious beginning for the rebirth of the family. Grete's skepticism toward the idea of family makes Gregor's sacrifice quite questionable. Given Grete's thoughts, one cannot hold much hope for the future of the Samsa family—quite an ironic deviation from the idyll projected by Kafka's ending of the story. In Olsen's version, the family, by sacrificing its member, negates, while pretending to regenerate, itself.

A further ironization of the myth lies in the questionableness of Grete's supposed emancipation. Grete's "maturing" is also shown as a backsliding, a retrogression. Grete seems to regress emotionally into a little girl. Despite her show of rebelliousness, she also submits slavishly to Papa's authority—an ironic parallel to her brother's metamorphosis from breadwinner to utter dependent.

The supreme example of ironizing the myth of rebirth lies in the parallelism established between the plot of *The Metamorphosis* and the reader's plot of *Anxious Pleasures*. In both a displacement occurs. The renewal of life through sexuality displaces the subject of each story—Gregor Samsa in the former and the activity and concerns of reading in the latter. As the prospect of marriage and progeny opens up at the end of Kafka's story, Margaret's preoccupation with reading ends in a budding love affair with Timothy, a security guard in the British Museum's Library. Beginning their relationship by discussing Kafka, they end up a quasi-engaged couple of lovers. Life triumphs over reading as it triumphs over Gregor. Thus an analogy emerges between Kafka's protagonist and the act of reading. Rebirth, the rejuvenation of life, seems to demand the elimination of such extravaganzas as Gregor's strangeness as well as that sphere of privacy and inwardness to which reading consigns us. By the same token, Olsen ironically devalues the myth of the rebirth of life by coupling it with the budding of a banal love affair, grouping it with what looks very much

like kitsch. The paralleling of the fates of Gregor and of reading constitutes a prime example of the ironic self-reflexivity of Olsen's novel in which writing as reading seems to project its own fate of being superseded in turn.

This connects it to the anti- or counter-myth, which Olsen juxtaposes to the rebirth myth of Kafka's story. Significantly the anti-myth occurs in the concluding part of the reader's plot when the reader, Margaret, suddenly remembers her grandparents whom preoccupation with reading has made her forget. The anti-myth deals with the approaching end of the grandparents. It is in a way the opposite, the answer to, the myth of rebirth of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. It is an ending not in rebirth and Dionysian expansion, but in relentless contraction, the losing of all physical and mental ability, a horrifying story of disintegration and entropy. This gloomy and sobering answer to the jubilation with which Olsen's re-telling of Kafka's plot ends receives heightened significance by originating in the "author"—the "author" being Kafka himself who as their neighbor lives one flight below the Samsa family.

Yet this cynical and melancholy anti-myth is not the last word either. It is devalued or relativized in turn as a mere dream annulled by waking up. Olsen's text ends indecisively without any final and conclusive "meaning." Both the Samsa and the reader's story end suspended in mid-sentence. The act of narration, not any "meaning" or message derived from it, literally has the last word. Narration stops without conclusion. It is nothing but itself, the act of narrating. There is no "meaning" to be distilled, no "answer" to be gained, merely the act of raising questions. The goal is withheld, the search remains, accompanying the reader as she parts from the text. Olsen presents us with Kafka turned eminently post-modern. That is no mean achievement.

*Anxious Pleasures* does not yield easy emotional identification. On the contrary, it frustrates and alienates its reader, leaving her suspended like Olsen's final sentences. It presents itself as obscure and off-putting. By that same token, however, it calls for and urges upon us a questioning, a re-reading, a renewed reflecting again and again. Then, gradually, it opens its riches.

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