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“GREGOR HAD YET TO DISCOVER THAT LIFE WAS TRULY STRANGER THAN FICTION”: PROVERBIAL MESSAGES IN MARC ESTRIN’S KAFKAESQUE NOVEL *INSECT DREAMS. THE HALF LIFE OF GREGOR SAMSA* (2002)

Adversaries are no longer considered human, no longer even those humans of whom it is written *homo homini lupus*.  
(461)

**Abstract:** Readers and reviewers alike have delighted in *Insect Dreams. The Half Life of Gregor Samsa* (2002), Marc Estrin’s survey of political and cultural developments in Europe and the United States between 1915 and 1945. Estrin traces the odyssey of Gregor Samsa, Franz Kafka’s most famous literary character, from Vienna to Los Alamos via New York and Washington, D.C. Up until now, however, no one has followed the red thread of proverbs and proverbial expressions throughout this epic work. By exploring when, why, how, by whom, and to whom proverbs are used in *Insect Dreams*, we show what effect the traditional or modified proverbial language has on the style and message of this truly innovative American novel. This modern novel is proof positive that proverbs can play a major role in a literary work whose author plays all registers of language, just as Nobel laureates Günter Grass, Elfriede Jelinek, José Saramago, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn have done with proverbs in their novels.

**Keywords:** American, anti-proverb, Bible, Marc Estrin, function, identification, Franz Kafka, innovation, language, literature, modification, novel, proverb, proverbial expression, style, tradition.

The study of the use and function of proverbs and proverbial expressions in literature has a long and impressive history, as can be gleaned from the 2,654 entries in the bibliography *Proverbs in World Literature* (Bryan and Mieder 1996). While the earlier scholarship consists primarily of annotated lists of the proverbial material found in literary works, more recent studies are character-

ized by the dual process of identification and interpretation of proverbial language in drama, poetry, and prose (Dundes 1965). The locating of proverbial texts serves paremiographical goals in that it furthers the study of the origin, history, and dissemination as well as the variance in language and structure of individual proverbs that can then be included in proverb collections and dictionaries. The interpretation of proverbs goes beyond this step by looking at the function and meaning of proverbs in the literary texts. By asking such questions as when, why, how, by whom, and to whom proverbs are used in literary works, it can be determined what effect proverbial language has on the style and message of an entire work. Of much interest is, of course, also whether a proverb is marked by an introductory formula, whether the standard form has been altered for stylistic effect, or whether a proverb is merely being alluded to or changed into an anti-proverb questioning its traditional wisdom. Most literary works, unless they serve a definite didactic purpose, integrate proverbs with much creative freedom, and it is often the juxtaposition of the traditional proverb text with its innovatively altered wording and form that results in meaningful communication.

Many authors of world literature have been investigated for their proverbial language, including book-length studies on Chrétien de Troyes, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Dickens, Nietzsche, Shaw, Brecht, Achebe, Rushdie, and many others. They all show that preformulated language is part and parcel of literary styles, just as proverbs and proverbial expressions appear in oral communication, in the media, the internet, and literally everywhere. Of special interest to the literary and proverb scholar is the investigation of one single work of literature to see whether the included proverbial language does in fact contribute considerably to its message. Regarding modern literature, studies on individual novels by such Nobel laureates as Günter Grass, Elfriede Jelinek, José Saramago, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn have been undertaken, showing once and for all that proverbs are an intrinsic part of their language, style, and message (Mieder 2012a). This is also clearly true for Marc Estrin's novel *Insect Dreams. The Half Life of Gregor Samsa* (2002), which is particularly rich in proverbial texts that take nothing away from its intellectual heights. In fact, as will become obvious, Estrin plays all registers of the rich Anglo-American language, filling his massive volume with language

and contents ranging from the colloquial to the philosophical, from the mundane to the bizarre, from the athletic to the musical, from the humanistic to the scientific, from the Christian to the Judaic, and from the proverbial to the quotational.

The complexity of identifying proverbs, let alone interpreting their meaning in the novel, can be illustrated by the following contextualized examples without any discussion of their significance in the plot itself. When Marc Estrin writes that "they talked of mice and men, of history and destiny" (13) at the beginning of his novel, he is actually alluding to the proverb "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go astray" that has its origin in Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse" (1785) with the word "schemes" instead of "plans" (Stevenson 1948: 2040). The statement "Our American friend steps in where angels fear to tread" (42) is clearly an alteration of the proverb "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread", and the observation "A leopard's spots are the same and its disposition is the same wherever it is whelped" (293) calls to mind the Bible verse "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots" (Jeremiah 13:23) that has been reduced to the folk proverb "A leopard cannot change his spots". Matters are more complex with the observation "You can't have a divine weapon, a sacred tool, without its abominable owner vomiting curses and fouling his nest" (245-246), since it requires a keen proverbial mind to sense the folk proverb "It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest" behind it that is also used as the proverbial expression "to foul one's nest" (see Kunstmann 1981). Something similar is going on with Estrin's use of the well-known triad "wine, woman (women), and song" in two places in the novel: "A stranger to wine, women, or song, his whole life resolved around his stomach pain" (199) and "The Biblical Samson was more like the Feynman of wine-women-and-song than like Gregor" (347). This Epicurean formula is actually the reduction of the proverb "He who loves not wine, woman (women), and song, remains a fool his whole life long" which has falsely been ascribed to Martin Luther (Mieder 1983). But all of this does not mean that Estrin never integrates proverbs without manipulating them, to wit "He tore into the envelopes, first the bill—business before pleasure—then the thicker packet" (257).

When it comes to proverbial expressions, Estrin is more likely to employ them as ready-made metaphors without letting his lin-

guistic imagination run its impressive course. And yet, instead of citing the phrase “to run the gauntlet” he writes: “To get through the gauntlet of breasts and hips, of smiling faces and gay human flirtation” (188). For some expressions like “to say uncle”, he actually includes explanatory comments for his main character Gregor, who is struggling with learning American English: “‘I’m not doing well, Mr. Samsa. I’m in a bad spell that won’t say uncle.’ / ‘What uncle?’ Gregor interrupted. / ‘Say uncle. That means you give up. It won’t give up. The spell’” (160). But even when Estrin employs a proverbial expression verbatim, he nevertheless overcomes its perhaps clichéd metaphor by placing it into an unexpected context: “It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, except the needle was dispersed in tiny pieces, and the hay was horrendously radioactive” (372). But then, his prose ever ready to offer stylistic contrasts, he also comes up with the scatological: “Don’t tell me that, man. You’ll scare the shit out of me” (364). That type of drastic language can, however, be elevated into a famous quotation, when one becomes aware of the fact that the fifteen minutes of celebrity in the following statement might well be an allusion to Andy Warhol’s famous saying “In the future everybody will be world famous for fifteen minutes” from 1968 (Shapiro 2006: 797): “Gregor’s celebrity lasted about fifteen minutes, and then the office settled in to its daily routine” (186). Knowing Marc Estrin’s erudition, which ranges from his acquaintance with popular culture and on to sophisticated knowledge of the sciences and the humanities, nothing really surprises the reader of this intriguing, fascinating, and unique novel.

Having said this, it is utterly amazing and incomprehensible that reviewers of *Insect Dreams*, while praising its approach and message, have literally nothing to say about Estrin’s command of the English language (see [http://marcestrin.com/marcestrin/Reviews\\_ID/Entries](http://marcestrin.com/marcestrin/Reviews_ID/Entries)). Part of his linguistic genius is, to be sure, his frequent use of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and other types of fixed phrases, including literary quotations. The major references of this type are listed at the end of this study, with many of them being cited in the following proverbial interpretation of Marc Estrin’s fabulous (in various senses of this word) novel *Insect Dreams*. In fact, almost every ensuing quotation from the novel contains a proverb or a proverbial expression, and together they

create a proverbial red thread that helps to understand and interpret this literary and yes, proverbial masterpiece.

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During a visit to the grave of Franz Kafka in Prague, the American writer Marc Estrin left a message in which he whimsically invited his deceased colleague to pay a visit to Burlington, Vermont: "We have a nice guestroom, I wrote, where he wouldn't have to sleep next to his father" (see [http://marcestrin.com/marcestrin/Fiction\\_blog/Entries/2006/2/25\\_InsectDreams](http://marcestrin.com/marcestrin/Fiction_blog/Entries/2006/2/25_InsectDreams)). Three weeks later, Estrin experienced personally the impact of the proverbial saying "truth is stranger than fiction" when he woke up in the middle of the night with the inspiration for his novel *Insect Dreams*—what if Franz Kafka's most famous literary figure had not died at the end of *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis, 1915), but had instead immigrated to the United States?

Unlike Kafka's traveling salesman, who metamorphoses into a gigantic, peeping, but otherwise unspecified and incomprehensible "Ungeziefer" (vermin) (Kafka 1946: 69), Estrin's Gregor early on is revealed to be a five-foot-six-inch cockroach possessing the capacity for human speech. Brought from Prague to a Viennese circus in December of 1915 (shortly after the publication of Kafka's story) by the cleaning lady and the three male tenants from *Die Verwandlung*, who commence negotiations with its owner, Amadeus Ernst Hoffnung, Gregor is startled into speech when he hears that he might be exhibited as The Hunger Insect—yet another of the many allusions within the novel not only to the works of Kafka, but a host of literary and musical personalities on both sides of the Atlantic (Mahoney 2008: 324-325). Gregor protests, wanting instead to eat, read, and think (10). Hoffnung accedes to this request, and soon Gregor's lectures on Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity and Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* become the rage of wartime and post-war Vienna, attracting not only visitors like Robert Musil, but also H. V. Kaltenborn, the European correspondent for the newspaper *The Brooklyn Eagle*. Kaltenborn's articles and radio broadcasts about Gregor help inspire not only a new dance, the Jitterbug, but also lead to an invitation for Gregor to come to America for a fan club tour sponsored by American Cyanamide—the manufacturer of Raid! Needless to

say, Gregor decides that he will not do any ads for American Cyanamide, but he is tempted by the idea of traveling to a new continent and becoming fluent in English, which he hitherto knows only from his readings of Shakespeare and Robert Frost.

Gregor's decision to go to America is confirmed by the April 20, 1923 circus visit by Ludwig Wittgenstein, currently serving as a village schoolmaster following the publication of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophus* because he feels he has nothing more to write of philosophical import. Wittgenstein brings along six of his young students to the circus in order to test their assumptions of human nature. Gregor unsettles them further when he reveals that he is Jewish. But Wittgenstein and Gregor are in turn shaken by young Epi Schlüsselberger's anti-Semitic syllogism justifying why a cockroach could be Jewish: "Jews are vermin, right, and isn't a cockroach vermin?" (53; see Mieder 1993: 246-248). Gregor is deeply troubled by this remark and its implications: "But if human character is infinitely plastic, he worried, what is to stop these children from being entirely formed by the resentments of their elders?" (54). This question takes on a special, fateful relevance for the course both of the novel and of world history when one considers that Epi and Gregor have posed their queries on a calendar date soon to become (in)famous as the birthday of Adolf Hitler. Gregor has a question of his own for Wittgenstein: "Why are humans more bestial than beasts?" (54-55)—a variant on the proverb *homo homini lupus* that Gregor encounters during his reading of Schopenhauer during the course of both World Wars (439) and that Estrin's narrator employs in the Afterword to *Insect Dreams* (461). During their subsequent nighttime conversation in Gregor's cage, Wittgenstein expresses his reservations about Gregor's questing nature with the help of the following Biblical proverb (Ecclesiastes 1:18), which he observes has held true ever since Eve and the apple: "In much wisdom is much grief: he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (59). Alluding to the mass destruction of the recent war in Europe, Wittgenstein provides a variant on yet another proverb as a warning on scientific curiosity freed from ethical considerations: "Curiosity will kill the roach—and perhaps a lot of others" (60). Drawing upon Gregor's reference to Goethe's ballad of the Sorcerer's Apprentice as a tale apposite to those who know enough to bring a process in motion over which they learn too late they have no control, Wittgenstein

makes the following prediction, putting the proverbial expression “to hatch an egg” into an apocalyptic context: “Mark my word. There will be scientists who, in the calm and cool of seminar rooms, will hatch the egg of world destruction. And you, dear Chitinous Apprentice, will see it come to pass” (60). These words find their fulfillment in the fourth and final stage of the Half Life of Gregor Samsa, when Gregor becomes a risk management consultant for the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and witnesses the creation of the first atomic bomb. But Gregor may never have made the trip to the United States if he had not received the following advice from Wittgenstein on the question of whether or not he should stay in Europe:

If you think that the naked rule of power will soon transform to Justice under Law—if you believe that story in the face of the last ten years, then stay here. On the other hand, if you subscribe to the Darwinian, to Life emerging out of primal slime and fighting its way upward—fittest dog eats fittest dog, then perhaps you should make yourself scarce—for you will be crushed and devoured. (60-61)

Here we have a fascinating reversal of the proverb “Dog will not eat dog” to fit the Social Darwinism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which ultimately became the so-called scientific justification for the racial politics of National Socialism about which Gregor will learn later in the novel.

In the meantime, Gregor, like his literary half-brother Karl Roßmann from Kafka's fragmentary novel *Amerika*, first finds work in Manhattan as an elevator operator in the Occidental Hotel. Like Roßmann (literally “Horse-Man”) the Gregor of both *Die Verwandlung* and *Insect Dreams* combines an animal's heightened capacity for sensory perception with human reasoning and the desire to learn more about his new and excitingly strange environment. His initial efforts to enter into dialogue with the people he encounters in America, however, are hampered by his still imperfect command of English. No wonder, then, that Gregor is momentarily confused by the phrase “Don't take any wooden nickels” (85) uttered by one of the hotel guests shortly before he presents Gregor with two tickets to the Princeton-Yale championship baseball game in newly-built Yankee Stadium. Gregor, in turn, asks another guest staying in the hotel, the feminist activist

Alice Paul, whether she might be willing to go to this game with him and help explain the American national game, which she agrees to do. Gregor, who finds Alice far more beautiful and alluring than the photo of the woman in furs that he had hung on his wall in Prague (86), frames his delight in language that reflects his (and his author's) equal familiarity with the proverbs of classical antiquity as well as Goethe's *Faust* and Alexis de Tocquville's 1840 study *Democracy in America*: "This was the perfect American day, in the perfect American place, the *mens sana* of universities in the *corpore sano* of sport, and here he was with his newly beloved leading the way, *das Ewig-Weibliche*, Democracy in America!" (87). As luck would have it, the older man sitting in the adjacent box seat at Yankee Stadium turns out to be the life insurance executive and composer Charles Ives, who is happy to share with Gregor and Alice his extensive knowledge of the game and its impact on American culture, including "baseball idioms that have become part of everyday language: out in left field, three strikes, you're out, off-base, switch hitter, wild pitch, in the ballpark, to throw someone a curve ball, unable to get to first base—with Gregor furiously taking notes" (90; see Frank 1983).

Yet another proverbial idiom derived from baseball and the contradictory impulses it inspires in the American psyche prove so striking that "[e]ven twenty years later, Gregor remembered one thread of the discussion, a theme he would encounter, significantly, to the end of his days" (91). It all begins when a foul ball slightly injures the person in dark clothing standing behind home plate, which sets off wild cheering in the crowd. Puzzled why people would enjoy seeing someone hurt, Gregor learns that this "someone" is the umpire. Ives explains the conundrum. On the one hand, the proverb claims "the ump is always right" (91); on the other hand, the American "love affair with lawlessness" (91) inspires another, contradictory impulse made famous in Ernest Lawrence Thayer's poem "Casey at the Bat", namely "'Kill the ump!' [...] In America, freedom is more important than integrity, said Ives. Gregor would have cause, often, to remember these words" (92).

Gregor, for his part, subscribes to the proverbial maxim that "honesty was the best policy" (100), which will not prove advantageous in the world of power, aggression, and evil that he gradually becomes aware of on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but



which he does practice later that evening in his room at the Occidental Hotel when he suddenly asks Alice Paul: "'Would you go to bed with me?' There, he said it! All or nothing. Whatever happens, happens" (101). To be sure, these latter two sentiments are dangerous proverbs in a troubled world even on the personal level. The results of Gregor's and Alice's attempts to couple prove so disastrous that—rather than trying again, "hope burning eternal in the sweating breast" (103)—she checks out of her room the next morning, while Gregor is left devastated by the knowledge that once again, as during his sojourn as an insect in Prague with his family, he has given great pain to someone he loved. Hope, to be sure, is a very important theme within *Insect Dreams*, beginning with the name and musical interests of Gregor's circus-owner turned friend, Amadeus Ernst Hoffnung. In that regard, it is not surprising that Gregor, in seeking out a plastic surgeon named Dr. Lindhorst, unwittingly finds himself entering into a scene reminiscent of one of the most famous 'Tales of Hoffmann,' namely *Der goldne Topf* (The Magic Pot), in the hopes of securing a medically induced metamorphosis that will make possible a same-species reunion with his beloved (see Mahoney 2008: 324-325). Before entering Lindhorst's Fifth-Avenue townhouse office, however, Gregor realizes "for the first time that he might be getting into something over his head" (104), which also will be true later on in the novel for the scientists and politicians who get over their heads in their haste to be the first to enter into the atomic age. As Lindhorst observes: "There's no time like the present. Except the future. Except the future" (115). In other words, we must think what our actions mean for the future of humankind. And the conversation that Gregor has with Lindhorst, to the musical accompaniment of the Prelude and Love-Death from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, dissuades him from attempting transformation via plastic surgery. During his reverie, Gregor has a vision from Dante that proves decisive in helping him to change his mind: "that of a man carrying a light on his back to illuminate the way for others: the only way to accomplish that task was to plunge resolutely into the darkness" (121). Darkness and light prove key images throughout the novel. As Gregor's solo flight from Vienna to America nears its first destination, he asks himself: "what did he see by the dawn's early light? Manhattan Island" (66). Even before hearing Charles Ives intone an obbligato to "The Star Spangled Banner"

before the start of the Princeton-Yale game in Yankee Stadium, Gregor already knows the words to what soon will become the national anthem. He will hear “By the dawn’s early light” sung on his final day on earth, twenty minutes before the first testing of the atomic bomb (456).

In the interim, Gregor will have numerous occasions to observe to what extent his new country is, in fact, “the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave” (326). With regard to the first category, early on in his employment at the Occidental Hotel, Gregor learns “the facts of American life [...]—in Colored and White” (82), namely why a black man has to climb the seventeen floors of stairs to Gregor’s apartment rather than riding the elevator, as do his white co-workers. With respect to bravery, Alice Paul demonstrates the latter quality in her championship of equal rights for women and support for the oppressed, despite jailing and force-feeding when she went on hunger strikes—“Like a Hunger Artist”, Gregor observes, in yet another reference to Kafka’s narrative *Ein Hungerkünstler* (95). During a later, platonic stay at her Washington, D.C. apartment, he is perplexed by a letter she receives from the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan advising her via the truncated classical proverb “A word to the wise is sufficient” to terminate this cohabitation with a dark and foreign male: “A word to the wise—and you are wise. Other-wise, we may have to have a fashion show featuring some of our latest Kostumes” (135). Alice’s scorn for the Klan is all the more striking when Gregor personally witnesses not only its size and strength but also just how ‘American’ it is when the two of them watch the following parade on Pennsylvania Avenue: “It was August 8, 1925, and forty thousand hooded Klansmen marched the broad thoroughfare from White House to Capitol celebrating their victories in the recent election, and their faith in America’s future” (138). Alice already has made Gregor aware of the death sentences pronounced on the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti despite any concrete evidence of their involvement in a robbery turned murder (137). No wonder that Gregor takes part in the worldwide protests against their electrocution, even translating a letter of support from Albert Einstein (142), despite such anxiety about the sinister possibilities awaiting him that he literally has an “Insect Dream” in which he and Alice themselves are executed (139-145) for their alleged crimes.

Upon his return to New York City, Gregor attends the January 29, 1927 Town Hall performance of the first two movements from Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony and is so entranced by it that he resolves to pay a visit to his office, where he tells him that Ives has supplanted Gustav Mahler as his favorite composer. In an allusion to Julius Caesar's momentous decision to cross the Rubicon, Estrin's narrator observes, "the die was cast" (158): Ives offers Gregor a position at his life insurance firm, where the latter not only helps initiate the science of risk management but also provides Ives with a sympathetic ear when his employer suffers a spell of depression in November of 1929 that paralyzes his will and ability to compose music. Given the admiration that Ives has for the Concord Transcendentalists, it is not surprising that the composer makes use of Emerson's sententious remark turned folk proverb (Mieder 2007: I, 338) to express his aspirations as well as his seemingly failed attempt to reach the heavenly heights: "You know, a man who tries to hitch his wagon to a star and falls over a precipice, wagon and all, always finds something greater than the man who hitches his gilded star to a mule who kicks him back into a stagnant pool, where he lives forever, safe and sound in his swamp, in his ecstasy of splashing mud on mankind" (159). In his own positive allusion to the proverb *Per aspera ad astra*, Gregor reminds Ives of the "Watchman!" poem that the latter had set to music in 1913 in the process of work on his Fourth Symphony and that Gregor heard at the Town Hall concert (155): "He says that there is a mountain to climb, and above the mountain is a glory-beaming star. He says to hope and make joy, because the night brings the day" (161). As the composer's "thank-you for being reminded of that glory-beaming star, the promised day of Israel" (184), Ives dedicates to Gregor his latest work, "The Insect Sonata" (172), whose premiere performance on April Fool's Day of 1930 Estrin describes in such convincing detail that one might assume that this work actually exists (177-184).

Another attendee of this concert is the current governor of New York State, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who is destined to play an even greater role in politics as well as in Gregor's life. Their common love for music and respective physical impediments—Gregor first notices Roosevelt as "someone in a wheelchair sitting keyboard side, toward the front" (185)—signal an elective affinity that makes all the more understandable Gregor's

willingness to help out in Roosevelt's presidential election campaign in 1932 by providing information on the dubious role played by the Federal Government under the direction of its Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, following the Mississippi River flooding of the year 1927. Hoover had employed his coordination of relief and rescue efforts to secure a national reputation that led to his victory in the Presidential Election of 1928, which Estrin's narrator proverbially describes as "a no-lose situation, doing well by doing good" (189). But the seven volumes of information culled from Gregor's perusal of national and regional newspapers in the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University document the deliberate neglect and mistreatment of the black populace south of New Orleans whose disclosure helps wean African-Americans from their traditional allegiance to the Republican Party and thereby ensure Roosevelt's victory in the 1932 election campaign.

Already during Gregor's 1919/20 Vienna seminars on Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, "one Spenglerian notion seemed always to generate the most light and the most heat: his prognosis for Faustian Man in a Faustian Culture, ever restless, ever longing for the unattainable" (21). Whereas one audience member, for example, might cry out "Anything goes" as his proverbial explanation for the Faustian winter afflicting the world, another, more well-dressed woman would counter with "Not anything goes [...] middle-class values". The common denominator in these debates, however, was the following: "at every seminar, no matter who attended, the government came under fire" (21)—and so it should, as *Insect Dream's* account of Gregor's Half Life in Washington, D.C. will demonstrate. Gregor's initial hero-worship of Roosevelt and the belief in the proverb that "[i]n America, everything is possible" (197) will suffer considerable disillusionment, as he gradually experiences the unfortunate as well as the fortunate directions that the country will be taking during the Roosevelt presidential era. This insight helps explain Estrin's anti-proverb linking politicians with thieves and other criminals, "There is honor even among politicians" (198), when Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago tells Roosevelt that he is glad that it was he, rather than the President-Elect, to have been fatally wounded by a would-be assassin in "Surrealpolitik", the concluding chapter dealing with Gregor's New York sojourn.

The initial months, even years, of Gregor's association with the White House begin harmoniously. Eleanor Roosevelt, as First Lady, reminds Gregor of her husband's remark in his First Inaugural Address, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" (208, 213) and adds to Roosevelt's Four Freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear—a Fifth Freedom for Gregor: "the Freedom to be a Roach" as a literal and figurative member of the newly created "kitchen cabinet" (208). "So does the world tease us with metaphors, language re-ven-geing itself on reality", Estrin's narrator remarks (208). And, indeed, Gregor's clambering on the hallways and walls of the White House with the Roosevelt children, for whom "Bucking Blattid" and "Roach the Roof" become their favorite games (209), serves as an idyllic contrast to the isolation he had experienced from his actual family in *Die Verwandlung*, in much the same way that the entire country experiences a renewal of hope and resolve during "the famous first hundred days" of the Roosevelt administration (212). Gregor later learns that the "fear itself" remark was added at the last moment to the inaugural address by Louis Howe, Roosevelt's all-powerful advisor and *éminence grise*, whom Gregor regards "as a kind of hideous anti-Lindhorst, a Mephistophelian sculptor of men, scheming others' ambitions into being, then claiming his due" (215). Indeed, this proverbial remark about Fear, while in a way older than Roosevelt (see Mieder 2005a), provides an example of just how language plays a role in shaping human aspirations, regardless of who might have been the originator of such a remark or policy. And so Gregor believes that he has found the firm foundation on which to build a better world, picking up on a saying attributed within the novel to Newton, but which can found at least as far back as Anselm of Canterbury, and applying it to what he perceives as Roosevelt's proverbial sense of noblesse oblige:

Gregor's ambition—not for himself, but for humanity—was great. So he would need great shoulders to stand upon, Newton's "shoulders of Giants." Even a cockroach standing on a giant's shoulders may see farther than the giant himself. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had giant shoulders, shoulders of a football player from his years on crutches, years propelling himself in a chair. His moral

shoulders were huge with noblesse oblige. His spiritual shoulders? Well, he had Henry Wallace close at hand. And now he had Gregor. It was a plan. Why not? Insert roachwise into the crevices of government, earwig into appropriate ears, and do it! Already well placed, Gregor fell asleep to the sweet smell of steaming sourdough. (215)

The high point, but also the turning point in Gregor's positive experiences with Franklin Delano Roosevelt is Christmas Eve of the year 1935, when he attends the President's reading of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) underneath a couch in the presidential bedroom, which causes him to recall his fateful attempt to listen to his sister's violin-playing in their parental living room (216). Another reminder from old Europe pays him a visit that evening like the Ghost of Christmas Past: a nine-page letter in a packet sent him by Amadeus Ernst Hoffnung which Gregor reads in a kind of counterpoint to the passages being recited from Dickens. Hoffnung, deathly ill but also "Cat-curious" (221) in Berlin, provides extensive examples of the persecution of Germany's Jewish population through the newly proclaimed Nuremberg racial purity laws, sending along a "Gift"-copy of *Mein Kampf* as proof of the Nazi leader's poisonous lust for war and use of Anti-Semitism as justification for every totalitarian excess (see Mieder 1997a). In a skillful double allusion to the tales of Chicken Little and the Boy who cried Wolf, Amadeus exhorts his old friend to share his letter with the President of the United States: "This ancient pullet does not cry wolf. The sky is falling" (227). Gregor, in fact, resolves to make use of his proximity to Roosevelt and attempt to help change the world for the better by sharing this letter with the president. But, as Hoffnung writes anti-proverbially with respect to his own fatal condition: "every cloud has its sulfur lining" (228). Louis Howe successfully argues against any specific reference to Nazi Germany in the president's forthcoming address regarding domestic issues to a joint session of Congress on January 3, 1936, citing the recent petition signed by 154,000 American students refusing to bear arms in any war that the United States might conduct: "That's the tip of a very big, very cold iceberg, Franklin" (235). The president responds to Gregor's plea to at least prepare for war with Nazi Germany with a proverbial phrase

of his own: "Let's choose our battles. For the moment, labor versus capital. If we win this, we'll have seventy-five million more voters behind us, and next term, we can do what needs doing about Hitler. Keep me informed. Whatever you find out" (236).

In the course of 1936, not only Roosevelt's attention, but also Gregor's are diverted to domestic concerns, particularly the dust clouds devastating the farming fields of the West and then the locusts that followed in their wake: "a secondary plague perhaps, not as well remembered as the dust, but for those whose lives and livelihoods were decimated, the straw that broke the dying camel's back" (247). Having taken the proverb "The last straw will break the camel's back" out of its traditional structure, Estrin continues on the same page by citing a modern proverb as he observes that Gregor is assigned the task of conducting research in order to help prevent locust swarms from extending into California: "Insects researching Insectiva—a wise move: it takes one to know one" (247). Here the author is somewhat on a proverbial roll, but he is slightly mistaken historically speaking. As far as has been established, the proverb "It takes one to know one" came into being only in 1946 (see Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012: 184). In any case, in 1937 and 1938 there were no major insect swarms, and the simultaneous recession of these years leads to a drying up of funds for WHIRL (White House Institute for Research on Insects). It is not until April of 1939 that another swarm of grasshoppers occurs in Nevada. "But by that time," we learn, "Hitler had invaded Czechoslovakia" (253).

This historical information helps provide a context for the first use of the proverb "Truth is stranger than fiction" within *Insect Dreams*. During the final years of his time in New York City, Gregor had lived in Lower East Side, whose sights and sounds reminded him of Josefov, the remnants of the old Jewish quarter in Prague from his youth that had survived the 'urban removal' of gentrification efforts of the 1890s. Given the Nazi occupation of Prague, one might expect that nothing of Josefov would have survived. Such is not the case, we readers learn from Estrin's narrator, whose seeming omniscience also includes awareness of proverbial phrases such as "With friends like these, who needs enemies?":

But truth is stranger than fiction: the remnants of the old Jewish quarter had their savior, one Adolf Hitler, who chose to preserve what little there was of the ghetto [...] as the basic sites for an “Exotic Museum of an Extinct Race.” Jewish artifacts stolen from all over central Europe were stored in these buildings, and now constitute one of the great collections of Judaica in the world. With friends like these ... (167)

In 1939, of course, Estrin’s hero is not yet privy to such information: “Gregor had yet to discover that life was truly stranger than fiction” (257). But the marriage proposal that he receives that April from Katherine MacPherson, an employee at Ives and Myrick who had been too shy to confess her love for him when they had been fellow workers, contains a further example of Marc Estrin’s use of proverbial speech: “When you left, I thought I would recover. ‘Out of sight, out of mind,’ we say in America. But we also say ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder,’ and almost every day I found my mind wandering” (257; see Mieder 2004: 1). After getting advice from Eleanor Roosevelt on how best to formulate a tactful, but decided rejection of Katherine’s proposal of marriage, Gregor then attempts in vain to find a home phone and address for her, starting in New York City. These efforts provide the occasion for first a positive, and then a negative allusion to the proverb already used by Amadeus Ernst Hoffnung, in that Gregor thereby learns the latest instances of Nazi Germany’s mistreatment of Jews and the tacit support it is receiving from the world community, including the United States: “The silver lining in the cloud was that he became a habitual user of the Library of Congress. The cloud inside the silver lining was that the Library of Congress subscribed to every newspaper published on earth, and Gregor became acutely aware—in all details, in several languages—of the dismaying events unfolding off the coast of Cuba, and now Florida” (261). Gregor reports to the President on the uncertain fate of the 930 Jewish refugees on the *Saint Louis*, the Hamburg-American Line’s cruise ship, after the bulk of them have been refused admission in Havana. He even points out that the *Völkischer Beobachter* is using American silence on this issue as a sign that the United States agrees with Germany’s anti-Jewish policy. Roosevelt, however, continues to find reasons why he needs to delay any open



opposition to Hitler: "I'm sympathetic to the victims, but you know we can't risk being labeled 'pro-Jew.' I want us to be known as 'anti-Nazi'" (263). Gregor warns that Hitler's "actions will grow to a demand for extermination: I need no crystal ball here" (264). Louis Howe, asked for his advice by the President, likewise responds proverbially that "I agree that things may get worse over there before they get better" (264), but dismisses the notion that things could get that bad in the United States, even though he and Roosevelt have just finished practicing their parody of a "President Rosenfeld" Jewish accent. Frustrated by his fruitless attempts to influence presidential policies by means of personal appeals, Gregor abruptly gets up and walks out of the meeting, with the author commenting with a frequently heard colloquial phrase: "You don't get brownie points for such behavior" (265).

Later that summer, to be sure, Gregor proves instrumental in alerting the White House about German attempts to split the atom in the search for an atomic bomb. "We are going to trump Hitler on the bomb" (273), he learns from a new acquaintance, the Hungarian physicist Edward Teller, although Gregor needs an explanation of both this card-playing expression and also the plan to involve Albert Einstein in writing a warning letter to the President. Leo Szilard, Teller's fellow countryman, is initially skeptical of this plan: "Once the government sets its claws on something ..." (275), and Einstein likewise objects with the anti-proverb: "You cannot create peace by preparing for war" (276), contradicting the traditional proverb "If you desire (want) peace, you must prepare for war" that has been attributed to the Roman historian Cornelius Nepos (Mieder 2012a: 95-96). Szilard, eventually however, convinces his pacifist colleague with a statement that appears to circumscribe the classical proverb: "If we make the bomb, and Hitler knows we have done that, he will be afraid to use his, and we will not have to use ours" (276). Einstein agrees to write a letter to Roosevelt, which Gregor agrees to deliver personally and which, we are informed with a phrase from the world of sports, will "set a ball slowly rolling that would gather speed enough to shatter worlds" (278).

First, however, Roosevelt has to win an unprecedented third election to the Presidency in 1940, and elections, we are told, "bring out the worst in people—the duplicity of dignitaries, the gullibility of the electorate" (282). "*Caveat emptor*" (Let the buyer

beware) might serve as a suitable warning for such an electorate; Roosevelt campaigns as a peace candidate, even though he knows that a war against Nazi Germany will be unavoidable sooner or later, and wins convincingly against Wendell Wilkie, the Republican challenger. Several days before the election, on the closing day of the 1939-40 World's Fair in New York City, Gregor visits the exhibits and reads about preparations to preserve records of current civilization via a time capsule, where the Latin proverb has been appropriately rephrased: "When it has been brought up out of the ground, let the finders beware, lest in their eagerness they spoil the contents by ill-considered moves" (286). From all that he has seen since his arrival in the New World, Gregor has become wary of American claims of exceptionalism, which seem to him all-too-reminiscent of salient lines from Goethe's *Faust* (287-289). After his visit to "The World of Tomorrow" at the fair, Gregor reflects on the motives that drive governments and businesses to create what they regard as a glorious future, but he also feels compassion for the people on whose behalf such projects allegedly are begun in an expression that simultaneously cites and qualifies the proverbial opening to the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:2): "Vanity, all is vanity, and yet not so. He looked around at the sad yet marveling crowd, and he found them lovable, all lovable in their sadness, and lovable in their awe" (289).

Gregor's compassion for others becomes evident once again when he witnesses the self-immolation of a young Japanese-American man on the steps of the US Capitol as a protest against the forced internment of his countrymen at the onset of World War II. A policeman responds to Gregor's distressed request for help with the following admonition, in which the stereotypical American proverb "The Only Good Indian Is a Dead Indian" (Mieder 1997b) takes on a deadly life of its own: "Cool it, buddy. The guy's a crisp. Besides, the only good Jap is a dead Jap" (303). A photo of this incident on the cover of the 6 March 1942 front cover of *Life*-Magazine helps bring the relationship between himself and Roosevelt not only "to loggerheads" (304), but also to "the point of no return" (305): "The President did not need moral superiors to criticize or lecture him on behalf of the Jews or Japanese. Gregor, on the other hand, didn't need heroes with moral feet of clay" (304). Although he fully expects and fears in the weeks after the ritual suicide of Yoshio Miyaguchi "to be called

on the carpet" (305) for his failure to prevent it from occurring, it is only at the end of 1942 that the President asks Gregor to go on a special, but unspecified assignment of great benefit to humanity, adding that this might never have come to pass without Gregor and Einstein. Gregor is suitably flattered—"Putting two and two together was easy compared to putting Gregor and Einstein together" (307)—but also suspicious about this request. Attempting to call Leo Szilard for advice, he three times receives a busy signal and is about to retire for the night on New Year's Eve when Szilard reaches him, saying that he had been trying to phone Gregor at the same time, urging him to accept the President's offer. "What do they say?" Gregor asks: "Great minds think alike?" (308). "Great minds think alike" (309), Szilard confirms, adding that he too will be going to this unspecified Site Y. This short verbal exchange occupies a pivotal space in the novel, and it is somewhat reminiscent of the exchange between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when both former Navy men used the maritime phrase "to be in the same boat" to seal their partnership in fighting the Nazi menace (see Mieder 2005b: 199-200).

On June 12, 1943, Gregor boards a train from Washington, D.C, for Lamy, New Mexico, before which destination he follows White House orders and proceeds to the baggage car, where he locks himself into a wooden crate provided for him that will be transported to a site still unknown to him. This experience of being touched on all sides of his body at once produces in Gregor a feeling not of being buried alive, but rather of exhilaration, as is only proper for a being enclosed within the body frame of a roach accustomed to living in tight places. Upon describing this experience "and the sense of power coming at him, into him, out of him" to Seth Neddermeyer, a young physicist working at Los Alamos, the two of them experience an illumination. "Gregor had planted a seed: the implosion bomb idea was born between them", but it is "a rough beast still, and slouching" (326)—not towards Bethlehem, as in the William Butler Yeats poem "A Second Coming," but rather towards the test site of Alamogordo two years from that early July in 1943. That fateful journey receives further impetus two days later on the Fourth of July, when they conduct an experiment in Los Alamos Canyon: "An observer might have mistaken Gregor and Neddermeyer for large boys having fun, playing with

matches and firecrackers on Independence Day” (326). Much earlier in the novel, on the evening after his encounter with Epi Schlüsselberger, Gregor has experienced an “Insect Dream” derived from the “Paulinchen” episode in *Struwelpleter* about the danger of playing with matches and fire (55-56), and now this danger is to become infinitely magnified as the scientists proceed with their nuclear experiments. When Neddermeyer reports on this theory and initial experiment, Gregor observes how the proposal for detonating the atomic bomb via implosion initially is met with skepticism and even derision, as being “‘from left field,’ as Ives had taught him to say” (329), but eventually is adopted by the other scientists. This, we learn, is a “crucial change of heart: for good or ill, had Neddermeyer’s work been stopped, there would have been no atomic arsenal—at least till long after the war” (329)—a proverbial phrase expressing a major matter!

In terms of plot, Gregor’s transfer from the White House to White Sands, New Mexico is the equivalent of his having been “removed” from the familial apartment in Prague by the house cleaner and the three tenants. On the other hand, his time at Los Alamos is for Gregor the equivalent of the Nature Theater in Oklahoma for Karl Roßmann in Kafka’s *Amerika* novel, namely the last chance of a happy ending for him in the New World. The aspens that gave the place its name tremble in the September light of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in ways that recall the legendary origin of the proverbial phrase “to tremble [shake, quiver] like an aspen leaf” (331). J. Robert Oppenheimer, the head of the Los Alamos laboratories, proves to be another beneficent father figure for Gregor like Hoffnung, Ives, and (at least initially) Roosevelt. Through Oppenheimer, Gregor meets Tilano, a Native American who takes him to see a six-foot petroglyph where the interplay of light and shade at sunset produces a human figure that suddenly has six legs, not two. Gregor wonders whether he is seeing the image of his real father (340), as opposed to the vision of his father in Prague “ever ready to wound and punish” (339). Tilano’s mission-school education and benign disposition enable him to finish the second half of a Biblical proverb (Matthew 6:34) in a way that accords with his own unhurried and open attitude toward life: “Sufficient unto the day ...” “is the goodness thereof” (336). In like manner, he comments on the passing glory of the ruins of a three-hundred-room apartment from the pre-Pueblo Anasazi cul-

ture by remarking to Gregor: "*Sic transit Gloria [mundi]*" (338). For the readers of *Insect Dreams*, though, this proverb also stands for the precarious situation of a world with atomic weapons and their danger, no longer just the obsidian spearhead that Gregor discovers at the foot of the boulder on which the petroglyph is inscribed (341). Whereas time seems on proverbial hold in the natural landscape, "above the canyon, on the mesa between the mountains, the clock was ticking, the minute hand drawing ever nearer the putative midnight when Hitler would call the world to attention with nuclear weapons" (332).

This sense of urgency has its effect on Los Alamos researchers like Otto Frisch: "Behind his gentle, cultural exterior was a man bitten by the bug, a scientist driven to quiet lunacy by the question of critical mass" (356). It is ironic that it is Gregor, "the bug", who in his capacity as risk management consultant has warned Frisch about performing the risks in performing hazardous experiments, and yet the latter is still willing to expose himself to radioactivity! Frisch is by no means an exception in that regard. Although General Leslie Groves, the military supervisor of the Manhattan Project, ostensibly has as foremost principle for project design "safety first against all hazards" (374), Oppenheimer informs Gregor that the indisputable first priority for Groves is "speedy production", with the health and safety of workers being "absolutely last" (374)—such are the anti-proverbs of actual importance when constructing the site where the first deliveries of plutonium from Oak Ridge, Tennessee are to be housed, for "good—and bad—things come in very small packages" (372). Faced with the assignment of assessing health risks in a setting where the sharing of such information is regarded as a breach of security, "Gregor was sure he could forge ahead with his Herculean task. But it turned out to be more a story of Samson than of Hercules" (375)—a combination of a classical proverbial phrase and a Biblical allusion that is here ironically appropriate, in that Gregor already has been ordered to change his name to "George Samson" (346) for purposes of military security. In his first official conversation with Gregor, Groves makes unmistakably clear in proverbial language what his priorities are if a decision has to be made between worker safety, on the one hand, and developing an atomic bomb before Hitler does, on the other:

You eggheads with your damn abstractions! You think we need some kind of ethical debate over means and ends? We need the right kind of health people here who can see the larger picture and not worry the community about measly issues. And you're not going to stand in my way, understand? (377-378)

Gregor, for his part, “was getting the picture of how to work here” (378), namely not to send out memos announcing his principles for gathering data, which Dr. Stafford Warren, General Groves’s loyal assistant, terms “a fishing expedition” with the goal of minimizing the dangers of working with radioactive materials (378). This picture becomes even clearer when Gregor finds that his beret has been contaminated with plutonium; despite his extensive report the next day, the culprit is never identified. At the end of August in 1944, Oppenheimer, concerned, calls him into his office to find out how he is doing. Gregor assures him that he is feeling fine: after all, it is well known who will inherit the earth—insects, and not humans like Oppenheimer! (386, 388) This reformulation of a Biblical proverb (Psalms 37:11) in praise of the meek reminds us that, while human beings may well be destroyed by the atomic bomb, insects might have a chance to survive.

By the late autumn of 1944, it has become ever more evident that the Germans have no atomic bomb project and probably never did. In a phrase adapted from “Casey at the Bat”, Estrin’s narrator informs us “There was much joy in Mudville” (395), i.e. Los Alamos, and Gregor initially joins in the jubilation, because he assumes that the work on the Manhattan Project will be terminated once the ostensible reason for its necessity no longer exists. This, however, does not happen, much to Gregor’s dismay, although he himself had experienced the psychological rationale for the continuation of work on the atomic bomb project in the course of his flight from Vienna to New York City when he asked himself while still over the Wachau in Austria: “Why turn back? Why not go all the way? But where was all the way? America” (65). “To go all the way” might have seemed a harmless phrase at the time, but now Gregor is in a better position to appreciate the words of a writer whom, ironically, he has condemned in a letter to Hannah Arendt as a spreader of paralyzing pessimism, namely Franz Kafka: “From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning

back. That is the point that must be reached.' The spirit of Kafka hovered over the land" (396). Thus it is all the more appropriate that Arendt, in her (fictive) reply to Gregor, makes reference to a proverb that has both individual and societal import: "We agree, I think, on the message Kafka brings to a misconstructured world: the ancient admonition to 'Know Thyself.' The truth of our time must be disclosed or uncovered from within its all-pervasive and seductive trappings" (397; see Wilkins 1917).

Another literary reference within the supercharged intellectual community at Los Alamos occurs when Gregor is invited to attend a March 19, 1945 meeting of the Alliance Française for a discussion of the La Fontaine fable of the cat who was metamorphosed into a woman, only to pounce on mice in her bedroom during her wedding night, and its concluding moral: "You'll never be Nature's master. If you push it out the door, it will climb back through the windows" (409). Both this formulation and the remark by the twelve-year-old Gaby Peierls "that inner nature will always assert itself" (411) play around with the uncited proverb "Nature passes (trumps) nurture." As he walks home, Gregor realizes that Gaby and her two preadolescent friends have brought him in to answer their questions because they, like himself, fear what human nature is likely to reveal when freed of any ethical restraints. The proverbial remark "Once bitten, twice shy", in fact, indirectly provides the reason why Gregor has refrained from attending any of the rehearsals to the ballet performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* that Gaby's mother Genia Peierls, is producing: "Perhaps he only feared what the piece might do to him should he become trapped in its powerful jaws. Once devolved, twice shy." (412) Gregor's apprehensions prove correct when the performance on March 21, 1945 is set not in an archaic Russia, but rather Los Alamos itself, and where the maiden to be sacrificed at the end, danced by none other than Gaby Peierls, dies on a ziggurat that resembles Enrico Fermi's uranium pile.

And so it is not surprising that Gregor aids Leo Szilard in gathering signatures at Los Alamos for a petition objecting to the use of atomic bombs on moral grounds. While Oppenheimer refuses to sign the petition, at least he does not forbid its circulation, as Groves would have done. The results, however, are all the more dispiriting for Gregor. In a notebook of entries from the month of June 1945 that he entitles "Death by a Thousand Cuts" (431),

Gregor records quotes from the people who have declined to sign his petition, whose formulaic language suggests that they are responding with pre-packaged opinions rather than reasoned arguments. The following entry from 12 June, for example, combines an allusion to the proverb “If you desire peace, prepare for war” and the modern (from 1917) proverb “There’s no such thing as a free lunch” (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012: 253) turned into an anti-proverb with another image from the world of sports, this time from American football: “It’s a matter of posturing. Peace comes by being too tough to tackle. It’s okay to be an idealist, but you also have to be a realist. There’s no such thing as an ideal world” (433). A reply from later that month on 26 June is even more robotic in its formulation: “I’m only a small cog in a complex machine, but I try to do my job competently and earn my pay” (437). And, if “Nature trumps Nurture,” as Gregor has recently learned from La Fontaine, then the final entry in his notebook from 30 June—“Mother Nature is a mean bastard. She always collects. The only question is who pays and when. She always collects” (438)—makes quite understandable why at the Trinity test site Gregor has begun to re-read “Schopenhauer’s indictment of the state of things, the struggle of all against all, the turbulent division of Will against itself, *homo homini lupus* bringing forth jealousy, envy, hatred, fear, ambition, avarice, and so on without end, the utter misery of the world” (439). For his part, Gregor has formed the resolve to place himself under the site of the atomic bomb test in a suicide that has redemptive intent. During a serious illness that April following the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his delirium Gregor had spoken lines in German from his childhood Bible, and a sentence is provided that well may be Gregor’s self-diagnosis of his illness and path toward final healing: “Fires of hatred, of passion, of despair burnt lower. Dust goeth to dust, and man to his long home” (426). Now he consciously contemplates an end involving “redemption of the mindless whole by the mindful part” (439).

By July of 1945, the United States has a new President, Harry S. Truman, and he is attending the Potsdam Conference, awaiting word of test results in New Mexico. Despite predictions of thunderstorms, General Groves urges that the test take place as scheduled on the morning of July 16: “perhaps the whole future of post-war relations hung in the balance” (451). Seeing that Enrico Fermi



is simultaneously taking bets on "whether the explosion would wipe out the world or merely destroy the state" (451), the proverbial phrase employed by Groves applies to the precarious state of the modern world as well. No wonder, then, that on this Christian Sabbath at Alamogordo, "there was no rest for the weary" (450), an observation that is based on the Biblical proverb "There is no peace for the wicked" (Isaiah 48:22). The one big exception is Gregor, who is as snug as a bug, but not under a rug. Instead, he has asked Oppenheimer to drive him to Site Zero, where he calmly awaits his final metamorphosis.

In the essayistic Afterword to *Insect Dreams* written in April of 2001 by Rudolph Bernard, at one time the youthful hospital director of the Manhattan Project, where he and Gregor became friends following his treatment of Gregor's illness, Bernard observes that "it would seem that Gregor had captured the uttermost prize, a truly owned, passionate, infinite death, with clear mind, and almost sound body untouched by madness or deep disease" (458-459). How appropriate it is that a physician turned biographer would allude to the proverb used by Gregor nearly eighty years ago before his trip to Yankee Stadium with Alice Paul (87)! At the same time, Bernard wonders whether one there can be "a good death via a weapon of mass destruction" (459). Reflecting on the mass killings of civilians in the wars he has witnessed over the course of his lifetime, he makes use of the significant proverbial message that serves as the epigraph to this essay: "Adversaries are no longer considered human, no longer even those humans of whom it is written *homo homini lupus*. The struggles are between complex bureaucratic structures that serve the ideological needs of civilization's death machine" (461). And yet, sustained by the tale of Gregor, Bernard fights against the proverbial "cold heart" (461) that appears to be the trajectory of human history: "That was my friend, Gregor Samsa. I shall follow him soon. And *après moi? Le déluge?* Let us hope not" (463). Here we have a reference to the fatalistic remark of the French King Louis XV in the years before the French Revolution that has become proverbial in English as "After us the deluge" (see Oesch 1971). But this defeatist, non-engaging, and negative proverb is followed by the ultimate, encouraging, and positive message of the novel, namely the call for hope. As Bernard observes: "The second half of the last century did not produce another Gregor, but I have not given up hope. One

must believe the future into existence” (461). In that regard, proverbial hope truly does spring eternal in the human breast, or more drastically “hope burn[s] eternal in the sweating breast” (103), regardless of what its outer appearance may be!

***Proverbial references as they appear in the novel***

This list includes only those proverbs and proverbial expressions that have particular significance for the plot and message of the novel. Altogether the novel contains about 300 phraseologisms on 468 pages that amounts to the impressive frequency of one phraseological unit for every page and a half. In comparison, Franz Kafka’s novels and other prose exhibit a dearth of proverbial materials, a clear indication that his style is not particularly metaphorical (see Binder 1992, Doerr 2004, Gross 1980, and Koelb 1982).

p. 5: a collection of wonders that would burst the seams of any cabinet.

p. 6: The name reflected the mind-boggling collection of freaks and oddities there assembled—the cast-off “tailings” of otherwise normal production, the butt-end protrusions, the devil flaunting an anal thumb at the world. (a play with the proverbial expression “to bite one’s thumb at someone”, used so splendidly by Shakespeare at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*)

p. 12: But it was both his cross and his salvation.

p. 13: They talked of mice and men, of history and destiny. (an allusion to the proverb “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go astray” that has its origin in Robert Burns’ poem “To a Mouse” (1785) with the word “schemes” instead of “plans”; see Stevenson 1948: 2040)

p. 17: That would be sensational—if he could get away with it.

p. 21: Anything goes. Not anything goes.

p. 21: But at every seminar, no matter who attended, the government came under fire.

p. 32: It was, as they say now, a win-win situation.

p. 39: how many of you have had the wool pulled over your eyes!

p. 39: may shine some light on the critical problem of authenticity in our postwar world.

p. 42: Our American friend steps in where angels fear to tread.

p. 59: In much wisdom is much grief: he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:18)

p. 60: Curiosity will kill the roach—and perhaps a lot of others.

p. 60: There will be scientists who, in the calm and cool of seminar rooms, will hatch the egg of world destruction.

p. 61: Darwinian ... fittest dog eats fittest dog (based on the proverb "Dog will not eat dog" to fit Darwinism and its aggressive struggles for survival; of course, the phrase "dog eats dog" is part of this as well)

p. 65: Why turn back? Why not go all the way? But where was all the way? America.

p.85: "See ya. Don't take any wooden nickels." [...] "Wooden nickels," Gregor thought. "What is that, wooden nickels?" (see Urdang and LaRoche 1980: 8)

p. 87: The country was quick to react, to wash its dirty laundry clean,

p. 87: This was the perfect American day, in the perfect American place, the *mens sana* of universities in the *corpore sano* of sport, and here he was with his newly beloved leading the way, *das Ewig-Weibliche*, Democracy in America.

p. 90: baseball idioms that have become part of everyday language: out in left field, three strikes, you're out, off-base, switch hitter, wild pitch, in the ballpark, to throw someone a curve ball, unable to get to first base.

p. 91: And the ump is always right.

p. 96: We're putting our heads together about strategy.

p. 98: As usual, Alice was quick to get down to business.

p. 100: under these conditions, honesty was the best policy.

p. 101: All or nothing. Whatever happens, happens.

p. 103: Some will try again, hope burning eternal in the sweating breast. (the proverb “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” originated in Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* in 1733; see Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992: 309)

p. 104: he realized for the first time that he might be getting into something over his head.

p. 115: There’s no time like the present. Except the future. Except the future.

p. 123: Yet Gregor, tutored by cynical bellhop colleagues, was “in the know” about other explanations.

p. 124: You look white as a sheet. Well, tan anyway.

p. 128: It may seem strange to call you out of the blue.

p. 129: “Your English is better. But you have to say, ‘What’s up?’” / “What’s up? I will remember that.”

p. 129: It’s a long story I can tell you later.

p. 135: A word to the wise—and you are wise. Other-wise. (shortened classical proverb “A word to the wise is sufficient”)

p. 141: The stakes were as high as they come.

p. 154: couldn’t make head or tail of the music.

p. 154: hid themselves in the green room, where they could hear scarcely anything (Bryan 1992).

p. 158: the die was cast.

p. 159: You know, a man who tries to hitch his wagon to a star and falls over a precipice, wagon and all, always finds something greater than the man who hitches his gilded star to a mule who kicks him back into a stagnant pool.

p. 160: “I’m not doing well, Mr. Samsa. I’m in a bad spell that won’t say uncle.” / “What uncle?” Gregor interrupted. / “Say uncle. That means you give up. It won’t give up. The spell.”

p. 160: I’m thinking about it. Throw in the towel. Why not?

p. 167: But truth is stranger than fiction.

- p. 167: With friends like these ... [who needs enemies?].
- p. 174: In fact, this little colloquy had quite taken the wind out of Gregor's sails.
- p. 181: "All hands on deck!"
- p. 186: Gregor was a big hit at work.
- p. 186: Gregor's celebrity lasted about fifteen minutes, and then the office settled in to its daily routine. (possibly an allusion to Andy Warhol's "In the future everybody will be world famous for fifteen minutes" from 1968; Shapiro 2006: 797)
- p. 188: To get through the gauntlet of breasts and hips, of smiling faces and gay human flirtation.
- p. 188: A little of that went a long way—far enough to get him to his isolated cubicle in the stack.
- p. 189: a no-lose situation, doing well by doing good.
- p. 190: He rode this wave for all it was worth.
- p. 193: I've got money to burn.
- p. 194: He was still the new kid on the block.
- p. 197: In America, anything is possible.
- p. 198: There is honor even among politicians.
- p. 199: A Stranger to wine, women, or song, his whole life resolved around his stomach pain. (Shortened triad of the proverb "He who does not love wine, women, and song, remains a fool his whole life long"; see Mieder 1983)
- p. 205: when the whole Roosevelt kit and caboodle arrived together.
- p. 208 (also p. 213 and p. 215): The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.
- p. 210: At least that's what he was told by those who wanted off the hook.
- p. 211: Scared the dickens out of one of the chambermaids.

p. 212: The famous first one hundred days—Gregor found himself admiring, then awed by the leader [FDR] behind them.

p. 215: So he would need great shoulders to stand upon.

p. 215: His moral shoulders were huge with noblesse oblige.

p. 217: dead as a door-nail. (see Barrick 1978; Marc Estrin is citing Charles Dickens' use of the proverb here in his *A Christmas Carol* from 1843; see Bryan and Mieder 1997: 98)

p. 221: I heard yelling in the street. Cat-curious, I went down to follow the crowd.

p. 224: Now you can tell all bruchs [the blessings recited at the Passover table] by their covers. (anti-proverb based on "You can't tell a book by its cover", a variant of the more popular "You can't judge a book by its cover; Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992: 62)

p. 224: Since the Night of Long Knives—do you know about this?—guard duty is granted exclusively to Gestapo "Death's Head Units." (Mieder and Pilachowski 1978)

p. 227: This ancient pullet does not cry wolf.

p. 228 (also on p. 261): But every cloud has its sulfur lining.

p. 235: They don't want to "fan the fires of anti-Semitism," as they say.

p. 235: That's the tip of a very big, very cold iceberg.

p. 236: Let's choose our battles.

pp. 245-246: You can't have a divine weapon, a sacred tool, without its abominable owner vomiting curses and fouling his nest (Kunstmann 1981).

p. 247: And after the dust clouds came the locusts [...] a secondary plague perhaps, not as well remembered as the dust, but for those whose lives and livelihoods were decimated, the straw that broke the dying camel's back.

p. 247: Insects researching Insectiva—a wise move: it takes one to know one.

p. 248: Gregor among them, stood at this crossroads.

pp. 256-257: He tore into the envelopes, first the bill—business before pleasure—then the thicker packet.

p. 257: What?? (Gregor had yet to discover that life was truly stranger than fiction.)

p. 257: When you left, I thought I would recover. “Out of sight, out of mind,” we say in America. But we also say “Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” and almost every day I found my mind wandering, thinking resentful thoughts.

p. 261: The silver lining in the cloud was that he became a habitual user of the Library of Congress. The cloud inside the silver lining was that the Library of Congress subscribed to every newspaper published on earth.

p. 264: But his actions will grow to a demand for extermination: I need no crystal ball here, or especially smart.

p. 264: I agree that things may get worse over there before they get better.

p. 265 (also on p. 388): And Gregor got up and walked out. Walked out on the President, and on his gray-green eminence. You don't get brownie points for such behavior.

p. 266: The neutron. [...] but heavy enough to throw its weight around at the behest of others. A well-placed tool in the pantheon of power.

p. 272: While salami is a far cry from weapons, he was again years ahead of his time.

p. 273: “We are going to trump Hitler on the bomb.” / “What is trump?” / [...] / “Trump is when you get the better of someone. Surprise them.”

p. 275: Once the government sets its claws on something.

p. 276: You cannot create peace by preparing for war.

p. 278: It set a ball slowly rolling that would gather speed enough to shatter worlds.

p. 279: they came up with a compromise dark horse: Gregor.

p. 282: Elections bring out the worst in people—the duplicity of dignitaries, the gullibility of the electorate.

p. 286: When it has been brought up out of the ground, let the finders [buyers] beware, lest in their eagerness they spoil the contents by ill-considered moves.

p. 289: Vanity, all is vanity, and yet not so. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

p. 293: A leopard's spots are the same and its disposition is the same wherever it is whelped. (see the Bible verse "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots"; Jeremiah 13:23)

p. 303: Cool it, buddy. The guy's a crisp. Besides, the only good Jap is a dead Jap

p. 304: the war had brought the President and his blatted guest to loggerheads.

p. 305: Gregor felt the point of no return had been his failure.

p. 305: Gregor expected at each moment to be called on the carpet, to be punished according to the enormity of the crime.

p. 307: Putting two and two together was easy compared to putting Gregor and Einstein together.

p. 308 (also on p. 309): "How peculiar! What do they say? Great minds think alike" / "Only mediocre minds think. Great minds don't think at all." / "um ... yes. Well, mediocre minds think alike, then." / "Speak for yourself."

p. 313: "What's bad with his [Dr. Bong] name?" / "A Bong by any other name would [*sic*] smell like feet." (anti-proverb to Shakespeare's "A Rose by any other name would smell as sweet"; Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992: 516)

p. 314: I could make such monkey business up?

p. 314: Vat [*sic*] the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't feel.

p. 324: A light bulb lit in Gregor's head.

p. 326: Gregor had planted a seed: the implosion bomb idea was born between them, a rough beast still, and slouching.



p. 326: An observer might have mistaken Gregor and Neddermeyer for large boys having fun, playing with matches and firecrackers on Independence Day.

p. 329: Admittedly, this was a proposal "from left field," as Ives had taught him to say

p. 329: A crucial change of heart: for good or ill, had Neddermeyer's work been stopped, there would have been no atomic arsenal—at least till long after the war.

p. 331: Two legends are told about the aspen [...] its leaves began to tremble with horror and have never ceased. (the proverbial phrase "to tremble [shake, quiver] like an aspen leaf")

p. 332: But above the canyon, on the mesa between the mountains, the clock was ticking, the minute hand drawing ever nearer the putative midnight.

p. 336: Sufficient unto the day ... is the goodness thereof. (Matthew 6:34: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof")

p. 338: *Sic transit Gloria [mundi]*, was, strangely, all he had to say. Where did he learn Latin? His companion wondered.

p. 344: It drove the all-too-similar Feynman up the wall.

p. 347: the Biblical Samson was more like the Feynman of wine-women-and-song than like Gregor.

p. 347: She [...] had fallen head-over-heels in love again.

p. 351: Put it there, pod'ner, he said, imitating a phrase he had heard on the radio. He held out his claw.

p. 356: Behind his gentle, cultural exterior was a man bitten by the bug, a scientist driven to quiet lunacy by the question of critical mass.

p. 364: Don't tell me that, man. You'll scare the shit out of me.

p. 371: George, you sure are one fubar'd cat. Gregor looked bewildered. That's army for "fucked up beyond all recognition."

p. 372: Once neutrons had been harnessed [...] it was only a matter of time.

- p. 372: But good—and bad—things come in very small packages.
- p. 372: It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, except the needle was dispersed in tiny pieces, and the hay was horrendously radioactive.
- p. 373: All project design here at the site is governed by three rules: One: safety first against all hazards—known and unknown.
- p. 373: It's obvious the general don't know beans about science.
- p. 375: Gregor was sure he could forge ahead with his Herculean task. But it turned out to be more a story of Samson than of Hercules.
- pp. 377-378: You eggheads with your damn abstractions! You think we need some kind of ethical debate over means and ends? We need the right kind of health people here who can see the larger picture and not worry the community about measly issues. And you're not going to stand in my way, understand?
- p. 378 (also on p. 380): He was getting the picture of how to work here.
- p. 378: The word "specific" gutted Gregor's interest in low-level radiation: "a fishing expedition," Warren called it.
- p. 386 (also on p. 388): I'm feeling fine, Gregor assured him. It's well known who will inherit the earth. Insects. Naturally. (Psalms 37:11: "The meek shall inherit the earth")
- p. 388: Will you do it? You'll get extra brownie points.
- p. 388: That's because you're not going to inherit the earth.
- p. 397: We agree, I think, on the message Kafka brings to a misconstructed world: the ancient admonition to "Know Thyself." The truth of our time must be disclosed or uncovered from within its all-pervasive and seductive trappings.
- p. 399: and head home to hit the straw.
- p. 409: *Jamais vous n'en serez les maîtres. / Qu'en lui ferme la porte au nez, / Il reviendra par les fenêtres. / You'll never be Nature's master. If you push it out the door, it will climb back through the windows. A delightful image [proverb!], Gregor*

thought, and probably true. He resolved to read all of La Fontaine. (allusion to the classical proverb "Nature passes [trumps] nurture" illustrated by folk narratives; see Braekman and Macaulay 1969; and Mazzarella 1970)

p. 411: If La Fontaine is correct that inner nature will always assert itself. (allusion to the proverb above)

p. 412: Perhaps he only feared what the piece might do to him should he become trapped in its powerful jaws. Once devolved, twice shy. (anti-proverb to "Once bitten, twice shy")

p. 421: It is written in the stars that the second half of April will be the turning point for us.

p. 426: Fires of hatred, of passion, of despair burnt lower. Dust goeth to dust, and man to his long home. (Bible proverb plus phrase about grave and casket)

p. 433: It's a matter of posturing. Peace comes by being too tough to tackle. It's okay to be an idealist, but you also have to be a realist. There's no such thing as an ideal world. (anti-proverb to "There's no such thing as a free lunch")

p. 437: I'm only a small cog in a complex machine, but I try to do my job competently and earn my pay.

p. 439 (also on p. 461): Gregor relaxed, gratefully, into Schopenhauer's indictment of the state of things, the struggle of all against all, the turbulent division of Will against itself, *homo homini lupus* bringing forth jealousy, envy, hatred, fear, ambition, avarice, and so on without end, the utter misery of the world. (Bertolt Brecht employed this proverb several times in his poems and plays to show inhumanity; see Mieder 1998:60-62)

p. 450: It was the Christian Sabbath, but there was no rest for the weary. (Isaiah 48:22: There is no peace for the wicked")

p. 451: perhaps the whole future of post-war relations hung in the balance.

p. 456: Surely a curious nut being cracked.

p. 458: it would seem that Gregor had captured the uttermost prize, a truly owned, passionate, infinite death, with clear mind,

and almost sound body untouched by madness or deep disease. (allusion to the proverb “A healthy mind in a healthy body”, see above on p. 87)

p. 461: Adversaries are no longer considered human, no longer even those humans of whom it is written *homo homini lupus*.

p. 461: Even though the trajectory of human history seems to be toward complacency, decadence, and coldness of heart, we may still be saved by obscure efforts of heroic individuals whose passion it is to redeem the world, they who live a faithful life, and will rest in unmarked graves.

p. 463: That was my friend, Gregor Samsa. I shall follow him soon. And *après moi? Le déluge?* Let us hope not.

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