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Audrey Robitaille



## A Changeling in *Disguise*: Liminal Identity in Hugo Hamilton's Novel

Hugo Hamilton is best known for his masterful memoir *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half Irish Childhood* (2003), in which he tells of his nationalist Irish father and his German mother, and of the inevitable quest for belonging that marked his youth. He develops similar themes in his 2008 novel, *Disguise*. The novel centers on the character of Gregor Liedmann, a German musician estranged from his wife Mara and their son Daniel. He meets up with them and the rest of the family on her farm south of Berlin for a fruit gathering in an orchard. Gregor's story is at the heart of the novel; the narration alternates between the happenings at the farm and flashbacks to his childhood and earlier married life. He "replaced" a German boy lost in a bombing during World War II, when his mother Maria adopted him shortly after the death of her son during the mass exodus before the end of the war. Her husband, however, was away to the Russian front at the time, and had no inkling of this exchange.

But this narrative is not the story Maria tells Gregor or, later, Mara. Throughout the novel, Gregor's mother denies ever having "replaced" her child. Obsessed with the idea that he may not be who he has been told he is, Gregor leaves his Nuremberg home at seventeen, never to return. At the core of the narration, then, is the central question, "Who am I?" as Gregor, Mara, and the reader try to make sense of the conflicting stories told by the various protagonists.

Gregor is convinced that he is "a changeling, an impostor living a surrogate life inside the persona of a deceased German."<sup>1</sup> The novel explores themes of liminality, identity, and belonging in a context of tumultuous change for Germany. Hamilton's novel tells the story of a man in search of his own history and identity, and it negotiates the topic of divided identity by using the trope of the changeling, a folk figure prominent in Irish and German folklores. Like

1. Hugo Hamilton, *Disguise* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 33; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*D* 33).

Hamilton himself in *The Speckled People*, Gregor is a rootless character, continually straddling geographic and other sorts of borders.

To employ the terms coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie (Capitalism and Schizophrenia)* (1972), Hamilton “de-territorializes” the figure of the changeling out of folk narratives, and “reterritorializes” it in his fiction.<sup>2</sup> Gregor solves his search for identity through the reterritorializing power of narratives and memory. The concepts of de- and re-territorialization are especially helpful in examining Hamilton’s writings: *Disguise* is concerned with a liminal character moving from one territory to another and grappling with the idea of home.

Although the term “changeling” appears only once in the novel, the folk figure is the cornerstone on which the narrative of *Disguise* rests. The belief in changelings is common in Irish, Germanic, and other traditions. The folk accounts typically depict a human being, often a child or a young woman, abducted by the fairies to the Otherworld, while an ugly fairy substitute, the changeling, is left in their place in the human world. In 1980, Séamas Mac Philib listed some 430 changeling narratives in the archives of the Irish National Folklore Collection.<sup>3</sup> German beliefs in changelings, known as *Wechselbälge*, date even further back.<sup>4</sup> In both traditions, the creature is often represented as an intruder in the home, despite its similarity to the person who has been taken away. The people feared fairy abductions, and the lore includes numerous measures to ward off the evil doings of the fairies, such as a well-lit room, a fire, a sprinkle of salt, or keeping metal tools near the bed.<sup>5</sup> This probably explains the violent banishment methods used in the folk narratives: changelings are thrown in the fire or burnt with red-hot shovels in many cases.<sup>6</sup> The folkloric accounts clearly record the ambivalent feelings of the family. Typically, the parents are at first worried about their ill-tempered but precocious infant who is wasting away, but at the end of the tales they violently attempt to get rid of the child. Such uncertainty is also visible in Gregor’s attitude toward his own story in *Disguise*.

References to these folk traditions recur throughout Hamilton’s book, beyond the one specific reference to a changeling at the start of Chapter 5. *Legenden*, the German edition of the book, sheds further light on this particular

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

3. Séamas Mac Philib, “Iarlaisí Símháirtú Páistí i mBéaloideas na hÉireann,” M.A. thesis, University College Dublin, 1980, 10.

4. See Gisela Piaschewski, *Der Wechselbalg* (Breslau: Maruschte and Berendt Verlag, 1935).

5. Gisela Piaschewski, “Wechselbalg,” *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, vol. 9, ed. E. Hoffmann-Krayer and Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1927–1942), 851–53.

6. Séamas Mac Philib, “The Changeling (ML 5058 [sic]): Irish Versions of a Migratory Legend in Their International Context,” *Béaloideas* 59 (1991), 129.

trope.<sup>7</sup> As in the folk stories, the emphasis is put on both deceit and sameness. The fairy is both a replica of the person it is substituted for and a treacherous trespasser, a two-fold persona with which Gregor can identify.

The first evocation of Gregor's changeling situation comes at the end of the opening chapter, with its ominous closing words, "Nobody could tell the difference" (*D* 11). It sets the scene, detailing how the original Gregor Liedmann disappeared in a bombing and how his mother Maria found the Gregor who will later become Mara's husband. The new Gregor is the same as the old one that he replaces, like a changeling taking the place of an abducted human child. A few pages later, the narration shifts to an internal focalization on Gregor:

Gregor Liedmann grew up thinking that he had been preserved, like a dead animal. He had reasons to suspect that he was not the biological son of his parents. There were certain discoveries he had made which convinced him that he was, in fact, an orphan and that he was Jewish. . . . Whenever he was asked, he would explain that he had been found as a three-year-old boy among refugees during the last days of the war and that he had replaced a child of the same age who had been lost in the bombing. In other words, he had stepped into the shoes of a dead German boy. He had taken on his identity, his name, his date of birth, his religion, his entire existence. . . . His parents had revealed nothing to him, but he had come across some evidence which suggested that he was a changeling, an impostor living a surrogate life inside the persona of a deceased German. Every time he looked at himself in the mirror, it strengthened his conviction that he was not one bit like them. (*D* 33)

The running threads in this passage are the ideas of concealment and disguise. We easily recognize this lexical field of deception a hundred pages later, when Mara becomes aware of the two versions of Gregor's life: "There was something fascinating about this deceit. This was an infidelity. Though it had nothing to do with sexual deception, it contained all the subterfuge and secrecy that goes along with being unfaithful" (*D* 133). When his father believes his son has shown a lack of bravery during a school trip in the Alps, his disappointed words echo Gregor's suspicions and foreshadow these concerns for the reader. Even though his father is not aware of his son's origins, he says, "This is not my son" (*D* 110).

Other allusions to Gregor's changeling state occur all along the narrative. For example, he refers to his birthday as "the date on which he stepped into the place of another child" (*D* 123). He later feels like "a fraud, an impostor dwelling in the human frame of another person" (*D* 200) when talking to his Uncle Max, a friend of his grandfather who was tortured by the Nazis who suspected that the boy may be Jewish. As he leaves home and escapes to London, Gregor is a "lost child" (*D* 42), but shortly before that moment (although it appears

7. Hugo Hamilton, *Legenden*, transl. Henning Ahrens (München: Btb, 2010).

later in the novel because of the many flashbacks), the text evokes the image of the alien, the non-human, like the fairy changeling of the folk beliefs: "By the time Gregor was seventeen years of age, he was convinced that there was no resemblance between himself and his parents. . . . He had become a giant, a monster belonging to a different species" (*D* 193). Although changelings are usually described as frail infants, not gargantuan creatures, Gregor's metaphor emphasizes the Otherness that he feels.

He describes his adoptive parents as victims, in a way reminiscent of the upset family nucleus in the folk accounts. The changeling comes as the intruder, the alien facing the tightly knit household, the fairy host invading the personal space of the human victims. Similarly, Gregor, confronting his parents, becomes an "outsider" against which they gang up to defend themselves (*D* 205). He, in fact, does menace them with a rifle so that they tell him the truth, physically enacting the threat represented by the changeling. At that point, he abandons his family and goes abroad, never to see them again. In most folk accounts, the changeling is violently banished by the household. Hamilton subverts the tradition in *Disguise*, as Gregor imposes this exile on himself by refusing to return to his Nuremberg home. He reproduces this pattern years later when he leaves Mara and their son (although he returns sporadically). Daniel, who is "the image of his father" (*D* 95), finds it hard to forgive Gregor for his desertion.

Like the changelings in Irish folk tradition, Gregor develops a close connection to music. The folk accounts frequently note that the creatures possess extraordinary musical abilities, and they are often encountered playing the fiddle or the bagpipes in Irish folk narratives.<sup>8</sup> Gregor's surname emphasises this strong relationship, as Liedmann translates as "song man." He is a music teacher at the time of his reunion with Daniel and Mara in the orchard. Early on, after his one-to-one encounter with Uncle Max, he had decided that he would become a professional musician. It is Gregor's proficiency on the guitar and piano that leads Uncle Max inadvertently to disclose a hint at the boy's origins, triggering Gregor's relentless questionings:

'He certainly brought the music with him,' Uncle Max said. 'Aren't you lucky you have found such a talented boy.' The room went silent. . . .

'I'm sorry,' Uncle Max said. 'I thought he knew.' . . .

The evening came to an abrupt end. An atmosphere of crisis all around the house that night. . . . He remembers not being able to sleep and going downstairs while they were still discussing things, wandering around the house in the dark and coming across the mirror in the hallway, looking at himself and not finding his own reflection, wondering if there was another version of himself that was being kept from him. (D 183)

8. Mac Philib, "Iarlaisí," 130-43.

The Bach piece that Gregor performs and Max's subsequent remarks bring about upheaval in the household. Gregor's origins, like the creatures in the folk narratives, upset family settings. When all else fails, music is Gregor's means of communication. "Rather than explain things," Hamilton writes, "he sat with Mara in a kind of meaningless twilight, plucking the strangest of notes while she continued to place words in his mouth, as if he came from a different country where it was only possible to communicate through music" (*D* 132).

The folklorist Barbara Hillers argues that music serves as a shorthand symbol for the Otherworld, observing that "music functions almost as a marker of fairy-otherness; their pursuit of music earmarks the fairies, just like their deathlessness, or their ability to shapeshift."<sup>9</sup> In Germanic and other continental traditions, fairy substitutes are discovered because of their rhymed speech; Irish changelings reveal their true nature when they play tunes.<sup>10</sup> Gregor's propensity for music and his inability to communicate with his wife further suggest his changeling identity. At the end of *Disguise*—unlike what happens in changeling stories—in the orchard, music becomes the language that reunites the family, when everyone is given an instrument and Gregor conducts the makeshift "troupe of country musicians" (*D* 260). He eventually accepts his troubled identity when the family recognizes the "fat, warm, bulging word in a brass language which is understood by all creatures, even the worms inside the apples" (*D* 261). They have learned to speak his language.

The changeling exists at the intersection of the human and the fairy worlds, which makes it a liminal being, one whose identity is not clearly defined—in essence, a fairy in the body of a human, although the family does not distinctly discern this. The two entities are merged in this supernatural being. A changeling is situated on the threshold (*limen*, in Latin) in-between two realms. Manuel Aguirre, in *Mapping the Threshold* (2004) suggests a three-fold meaning of the *limen*; the kind of threshold he describes that best corresponds to the situation that the changeling and the abducted human are in is "the shoreline-type: the threshold as an object with minimally two aspects, X and Y, between which it fluctuates, so that its identity is not bound solely to the one or the other aspect but to both."<sup>11</sup> Gregor continually crosses geographical borders, unsure about his identity. He also finds himself at history's crossroads, trying to determine whether he belongs to the alienated Jews or

9. Barbara Hillers, "Music from the Otherworld: Modern Gaelic Legends about Fairy Music," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994), 59.

10. Jean-Michel Doulet, *Quand les démons enlevaient les enfants* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 49.

11. Manuel Aguirre, "Austin's Cat, and Other Observations Towards a Theory of Thresholds," in *Mapping the Threshold: Essays in Liminal Analysis*, ed. Nancy Bredendick (Madrid: Gateway Press, 2004), 14.

to the German communities forced into an exodus by the war. In his eyes, he also believes that he has replaced another boy and thus has crossed the limits of identity by taking on another's.

The novel's epigraph—the number 125921—emphasizes anonymity, reminding the reader of the numbers tattooed on deportees by the Nazis on entering the camps and effectively stripping the victims of their name. The German translation of the novel provides further information about this number, noting that it is a detail from Joseph Beuys's "Szene aus der Hirschjagd" ("Scene from the Stag Hunt," 1961).<sup>12</sup> Beuys's painting also suggests Gregor's father's passion for hunting and his collecting of game trophies in the house, the "dead things" (*D* 176) to which the boy refers. Moreover, the first word in the novel is the indefinite pronoun "they"; the protagonist, Gregor Liedmann, is not named until the second page. The three-year-old boy that Maria's father brings has no name and no identity:

But as with everything in Gregor's life, there has always been a question mark floating behind him. Every statement contains a hint of the opposite. Some filament of doubt inside every utterance which calls that very thing into question. They say that every YES contains a NO. . . . The only strong statement left is the question itself. Who am I? Where do I belong? (D 60)

This passage also puts into relief the doubleness of a changeling figure. A changeling is a double-faceted character, at once same and other, the exact image of the abducted human, yet of a different nature. The changeling is, to the original human, a distorted reflection in the mirror. References to mirrors appear regularly in *Disguise*, highlighting Gregor's sense of divided identity:

'He used to stand in front of that mirror at night,' Mara said. . . .  
'He told me that he would see no reflection in the dark.' . . .  
'He stood there wondering if he existed at all.'

And when the dawn came up, Gregor would see himself coming back to life again slowly, along with all the other dead things around him in the house. Gradually the image in the mirror would gather light and he had the feeling that he came from nothing. (D 176–77)

When Gregor sees his double in the mirror, he implicitly puts forward the notion that he is a living ghost. In his quest to answer the questions that assail him, Gregor tries to make sense of this double of his, the other boy whom he replaced unknowingly. The liminal state of being in-between two identities, two lives, burdens the protagonist to the point that he eventually cannot cope with it and leaves his wife and son.

12. Gerlinde Ulm Sanford, "Outsiders," in *Literature and the Fine Arts* 1, ed. Herbert Arlt and Donald G. Daviau (Oxford: EOLSS Publications, 2009), 92.

Gregor, who has had an “entire lifetime of departures and comebacks” (*D* 125), nevertheless returns occasionally to his family. His homecomings, however, serve only to crystallize his liminal position, as an outsider crossing borders and forced to lead a double life: “He only returned to see Mara and Daniel, but even that became like a strange séance in which they stared at each other like strangers across a room. It soon became clear that he hated being back in the city, that it made him feel uneasy, like a ghost of his former self” (*D* 214). The word “ghost” is important: ghosts, too, are liminal beings straddling the border between life and death. Hamilton’s narrative frequently highlights such boundary-crossing:

Coming back is the hardest thing. . . . It’s not easy to step back into the physical world, to feel the substance of life rather than the dream of life, to match up the touch world with the inner world. The returning partner has become a ghost, a shape in the imagination, a desire, a longing waiting to be converted into reality. (*D* 244)

Vanina Jobert-Martini points out that “the first thing we learn about Gregor Liedmann is his death.”<sup>13</sup> Yet the rest of the novel is spent describing his subsequent life; the narrator notes that “his own mother didn’t like him playing in the rubble with other children as he grew up. He had died in those ruins before” (*D* 105). The structure of the book thus treads the border between life and death, with a protagonist in limbo most of his life until he decides on his own story.

The places in which Gregor moves also physically represent his liminality. His Berlin neighborhood is filled with characters who have traveled and who are remnants of other times:

Perhaps he fits in best here with . . . Flower-power people who blurred the boundaries forever between men and women during that golden era. . . . Many of the people here have also travelled a lot, collecting cultural idiosyncrasies from around the world before returning to live in this semi-eccentric, semi-chic and ethnically mixed suburb of Berlin. It’s a district full of borderline people who never fully gave up their anarchism. (*D* 20)

The adjectives employed to describe Berlin in this passage are hyphenated, a subtle evocation of the history of the city itself, which was long cut apart by its wall—as, in crucial ways, was Gregor himself.

*Disguise* is set during transitional times for Germany, at the end of World War II, in its aftermath, and later, during the Cold War. Gregor travels to many

13. Vanina Jobert-Martini, “Deixis and Conceptual Ramblings in *Disguise* by Hugo Hamilton,” in *Authority and Displacement in the English-Speaking World*, vol. 1, “Exploring Europe/From Europe,” ed. Florence Labaune-Demeule (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 76.



countries, from Germany, to Ireland, to Canada. In addition to the geographic indeterminacy, the novel also follows a liminal narrative pattern. The time of the narration fluctuates from the present on the farm to various points in the past—among them Gregor's childhood after the war and his son's birth—in what Carmen Zamorano Llena has termed a “pendular movement.”<sup>14</sup> *Disguise* offers a continual to-and-fro between past and present, with chapters at the orchard alternating with analepses to his childhood or his earlier married life. Hamilton's work, as Dorothea Depner has remarked, “explores the connections and continuities between past and present, self and Other.”<sup>15</sup>

The uncertain origins of the changeling tradition parallel Gregor's. The musical connection would suggest that Hamilton is probably drawing on Irish changeling folklore—but the fact that the motif is a migratory one, also found in German folklore reflects Gregor's—and, indeed, Hamilton's—heritage. Although the changeling figure is often thought to be Irish, its earliest mentions have been found on the continent.<sup>16</sup> These early mentions occurred well before Thomas Crofton Croker's popular changeling tales were translated into German in the nineteenth century by the Grimm Brothers, who published the stories in *Deutsche Sagen* in 1816.<sup>17</sup> The term “changeling” was, in fact, first recorded in a German commentary of the psalms in the eleventh century.<sup>18</sup>

Gregor's unending condition of being in-between robs him of any sense of belonging to a place, whether it be Berlin or Nuremberg, Germany or Poland, or to a community, Jewish or Christian. The unnamed boy arrives “in a great drift of people looking for a place to stay and to not have to move ever again” (*D* 8). Rootlessness is at the heart of the character from the start. Gregor is a figure of displacement: from East Germany, he moves to Nuremberg, then runs away from home to Scotland, Berlin, London, and across Europe, then to Greece, Turkey, Toronto, and Morocco to finally settle back in Berlin,

14. Carmen Zamorano Llena, “‘Our Identity Is our own Instability’: Intercultural Exchanges and the Redefinition of Identity in Hugo Hamilton's *Disguise* and *Hand in the Fire*,” in *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Pilar Villar-Argáiz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 110.

15. Dorothea Depner, “‘The Ruins of Identity’: Memory, Postmemory and Belonging in the Works of Christabel Bielenberg and Hugo Hamilton,” *Nordic Irish Studies* 13, 1, special issue “Cultural Memory and the Remediation of Narratives of Irishness” (2014), 137.

16. G. F. Goodey and Tim Stainton, “Intellectual Disability and the Myth of the Changeling Myth,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 37, 3 (Summer, 2001), 223–40.

17. Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy-Legends and Traditions from the South of Ireland* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1844 [1825]), translated as *Irische Elfenmärchen* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (Leipzig: Friedrich Fleischer, 1826). The stories were published by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in *Deutsche Sagen* (Berlin: Nicolaischen Buchhandlung, 1816), 132–35.

18. Doulet, 35–36.

continually “drifting back and forth” (D 42).<sup>19</sup> Gregor is caught in-between two religious cultures, recalling that “I was brought up as a Catholic and there was never any talk about me being Jewish” (D 83). Yet he makes an effort to join Jewish society, only to be devastated when the rabbi “shook his head and said he could not accept him into the community” (D 60). On a personal level, Gregor finds multiculturalism a complex situation with which to cope.

In *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put forward the notion of deterritorialization, the voluntary or forced movement to leave a territory, which can be a metaphorical place as well as a geographical one.<sup>20</sup> They use the example of Franz Kafka, a Jewish Czech, who writes in a “deterritorialized” German, and make an explicit reference to the changeling figure when they describe the German-speaking Jews of Prague as “gypsies who have stolen a German child from its crib.”<sup>21</sup> Deleuze and Guattari refer to the literature of the former as a “minor literature”—that is to say, the literature of a minority in the language of a majority. A minor literature deterritorializes the language through its reinvention. Deleuze and Guattari ask, “How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope.”<sup>22</sup> Hamilton’s character Gregor shares his first name with the figure of deterritorialization par excellence: Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of one of Kafka’s most famous works, *The Metamorphosis*.<sup>23</sup> Hamilton’s use of the English language is likewise a form of deterritorialization, because he writes in Hiberno-English, and thus participates in a minor literature. In addition, his mother’s German immigrant heritage and his father’s Irish-language zealotry further deterritorialize his works from Hiberno-English literature. His oeuvre is, in a sense, doubly minor.

By taking it out of its original folkloric context in *Disguise*, Hamilton deterritorializes the folk figure of the changeling. This inevitably means that there are aspects of the changeling figure in the novel that do not match the folk tradition. For instance, Gregor has no deformity, and is not described as an uncannily precocious child; he grows up as normally as one can in the aftermath of a global conflict. Hamilton also departs from the tradition through his reversal of

19. For a discussion of the difficulty of being on the border between cultures, see Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh, “Homesick While At Home: Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People*,” in *Exploring Transculturalism: A Biographical Approach*, ed. Wolfgang Berg and Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010), 116.

20. Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, 634.

21. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, transl. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.

22. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 19.

23. Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, transl. Willa and Edwin Muir (1933; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

the original folkloric sources: in folk legends, a healthy human child is changed for a sickly changeling. Quite the opposite takes place in the novel, where a dead child is replaced by a healthy boy (although the changed Gregor has an ear infection during their exodus before they settle in Nuremberg). These subversions emphasize the deterritorializing process at work, which in turn echoes the deterritorialized figure of the changeling itself, who left the realm of the fairies to cross the border into the territory of the humans.

To an external observer in the folk tales, saying a child was a changeling implied that the mother had taken ill care of the child, which enabled the fairies to steal him or her. For the household, however, it was a way of negating the death or disease of a family member. Changeling narratives served to explain otherwise inexplicable diseases or deaths: a sudden or fatal sickness would find its cause in a fairy abduction. Such tales functioned as ways of avoiding the reality of the events. In *Disguise*, Gregor's statement that he is a changeling serves the opposite purpose: it does not hide from his uncertain origins, but rather, reproachfully sheds light on an aspect of his own history that his mother would rather forget. Robbed by modernity of this belief to help her find solace through this explanation for the death of her boy, Maria denies both the change and the death of the original Gregor. By refusing to admit the change, she thus negates Gregor's changeling origins.

At the level of the narrative itself, Gregor is deterritorialized by the uncertainty of his identity, as he cannot belong in Germany. This helps to explain the importance of geography in the novel: "He has always been quick to memorise his surroundings. Always mapping. Always aware of geography. Another skill he was taught by his father, or is that a faculty which has been sharpened by the nature of his own origins?" (D 14). Identity, in Mara's eyes, is "not much of an issue any more, except for those who are dispossessed" (D 84). Those—like Gregor—who have been deterritorialized yearn for a territory, an identity that will allow their reterritorialization. Mara compares Gregor's family to refugees, who are by definition deterritorialized beings, always looking back to the lost territory:

He could go into himself, a refugee, staying silent for hours, doing nothing but playing his guitar. Alone. An orphan again. . . . Was it hereditary, that faculty of doubt? Or was it something he got from his adoptive parents. They were refugees, too, and had that dreamy gaze into the past, to what might have been, to empty places in memory. (D 85)

But she also terms Gregor an "orphan"—a figure that Deleuze and Guattari see as the "most deterritorialized and the most deterritorializing."<sup>24</sup> Children, they argue, reterritorialize everything and everyone onto their parents; for example,

24. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 79.

a child sometimes calls a teacher “Mammy,” which amounts to deterritorializing the educator. But an orphan cannot perform a reterritorialization of what has been deterritorialized, because the medium of reterritorialization (the parents) is lost. For the same reason, children without parents are deprived of their family, their home, and their metaphorical territory of origin. Put simply, the disappearance of the parents deterritorializes the child. The foundling who took the place of the original Gregor Liedmann is thus both deterritorialized because we know nothing of his origins, but also deterritorializing, because he rejects his adoptive parents.

Gregor moves back to the German capital in his attempt to reterritorialize himself. Reterritorialization creates a new territory out of something else, something of a nature other than the original territory that has been lost.<sup>25</sup> This may, in fact, help to explain the striking prominence of trees in Hamilton’s novel, most vividly represented in the forest where Gregor picks mushrooms and in Mara’s orchard. The rootedness that the trees embody is what Gregor is hoping to achieve; these chapters are written in the present tense, making the trees powerfully immediate. Gregor has never felt that he “belonged,” neither during his childhood nor his earlier married life; notably, the chapters that describe those parts of his life are both recounted in the past tense. When he eventually experiences a sense of belonging, at the end of that day on Mara’s farm, the chapter is written in the present tense.

Yet, it is not simply a physical movement back to Berlin that allows for Gregor’s reterritorialization. Rather, it is through stories and the power of narrative that Gregor achieves his reterritorialization. The importance of writing is called out as early as the second page, when we are told that stories are what define the character of Gregor.

He would grow up around her imagination. He would go to school every morning with a big hug and return in the afternoon with his own stories. She would buy him a new writing pad and new pencils so that he could continue learning the alphabet, just as before, kneeling down in the kitchen with the pad open on one chair and his dinner on another chair, so that he could alternate between eating and writing, one word, then a forkful of food, followed by another word.

(D 11)

The connection between food and literacy is unmistakable: the boy is fed with words. Gregor is created by his own story, and the story itself is his true home. His story is the place and the agent of his reterritorialization, although it takes him the whole novel, and indeed, his whole life, to realize this: “In a Dublin

25. Robert Sasso and Arnaud Villani, *Le Vocabulaire de Gilles Deleuze*, Les Cahiers de Noesis, *Vocabulaire de la Philosophie Contemporaine de Langue Française* 3 (Printemps, 2003), 88.

bar that evening, he understood for the first time in his life what it meant to be homesick. . . . He had no story to live inside, no place in the imaginary world” (D 220).

Mara goes through a similar process. At first, she accuses Gregor of inventing a narrative about his identity: “For whatever reason, you made up a story about being Jewish, because you couldn’t face up the truth. You preferred to be the victim, is that it? You fabricated this story about being replaced as a child, so you could escape from our history, isn’t that so?” (D 146–47). Gregor, too, first sees these narratives in a negative light: “Looking back now, Gregor feels more like an invented character, swept along a predestined narrative” (D 131). But Mara recognizes that whether this story about Gregor’s origins is true or not is irrelevant. It is the existence of the narrative itself that matters:

Everybody needs an identity, a disguise, a story in which they can feel at home. . . . Was he not making good use of the name he was given by his mother, regardless of his true origins? Whether he was inhabiting the soul of a dead boy or a living boy, he had made it his own now. And maybe he was not unlike all other people in that respect, part human, part fabrication. Part ghost, part living being. Part real, part invented. Existing mostly in the minds of those around him, his family and friends, his fellow inhabitants in the city where he lived. (D 149–50)

The double-faceted nature of identity lies behind the mask, or disguise, called out by the novel’s title. The mask is the narrative disguise woven around one’s features to give someone an identity; Mara reflects, “Perhaps the face is too much of a disguise. Something which is constantly in motion, a story unfinished, a mask, a representation full of incoherence and guessing, more in the realm of fiction than fact” (D 248).

*Disguise* also highlights the importance of narrative through its many allusions to fairy tales and their closeness to Gregor’s world. Mara’s brother-in-law wishes for elves to collect the apples and turn them into juice, which “seems not to be so far from reality” (D 49), for instance. The novel later asks, in a reference to the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, “Could the old fairy tales be coming back? Or did they ever disappear?” (D 165–66). This echoes an earlier question, when the scene is being set on Mara’s farm, in what used to be East Germany. The land, too, is changing identity, as it was where the Russian army was garrisoned, before being turned into a film set:

they say the land is already so deserted in some places that it will eventually be handed back to nature. The forests will grow back one day and the wolves will return, maybe even the bears. Who knows, all the fairy tales that came with them as well? (D 13)

The permanence of the stories is linked to the trees, exemplifying the reterritorializing power of both.

Memory, in *Disguise*, is the sum of past stories, as the opening words of Chapter 3 suggest: “What is Gregor Liedmann’s first memory?” (*D* 18). As a special, personal kind of narrative, memory contributes to the creation of identity and thus to a reterritorialization for Gregor:

Memory is like stored energy which has not been spent yet. It comes to life in family folklore. It produces a special kind of identity, like all things collected among people to mark the time they spent together and the times they have been apart. (*D* 187)

Gregor explicitly compares memory to the forest, the latter being to Gregor the “physical shape” of the former (*D* 15). Gregor’s walk in the woods to search for mushrooms before meeting the family at the farm gives him an opportunity to reconnect with the forest, and therefore, with memory. He finds what he thinks is a hollow created in the ground of the grove by an explosive during the war. “Standing beside such a vicious bomb crater, he feels like a man living in the afterlife” (*D* 16), an image recalling the figure of the ghost that will be mentioned numerous times later in the novel. He compares the unexploded bombs found at times in the countryside to “a folk memory in the ground” (*D* 16). Corpses are sometimes found too. These are the “remains of people who never belonged to any side” (*D* 16)—evoking once more the dividedness of the changeling figure that lies at the core of the novel.

Liminality, then, becomes not the symptom of a changeling and of the rootlessness that it embodies, but rather, the characteristic and glorified sign of personality. Gregor’s friends are not questioning him. They do not need to know where he is from, because they “were aware that biography is never a stationary thing, but something that constantly changes shape” (*D* 87), like the changeling. Near the end of the novel, Hamilton states, “Our identity is our instability” (*D* 258–59). After the fruit picking in the orchard, the family goes bathing in the nearby lake. Gregor is last to go in, where “He immerses himself into this quiet baptism of belonging” (*D* 189). At this moment, he finally accepts the liminality of his own story, as does his family:

They have rediscovered the lightness of their true nature, this half-human species of people-fish. They have returned to water as though to a primal memory, to the outer limits of their freedom. They swim and float and remember and move on, with the clear water washing away all catastrophes gone by and yet to come. (*D* 189)

They acknowledge the duality inherent to identity, as well as the narrative aspect of it. Memory and stories create identity, metaphorically represented in this “baptism” in the lake.

Toward the end of the novel, Mara and Gregor come to realize that identity is liminal and binary:

And maybe this was the moment of immortality, the moment where they began to convert each other back into real people. Nothing is real in the end, not until it's reported. Nobody is real unless they have a witness to their lives. We exist only in the imagination. . . . Gregor Liedmann has been brought to life by Mara, by his family, by the external story created around him, existing only inside those experiences he has shared with others. These are the ingredients of his identity, his narrative, that strange human genius of belonging. (D 254)

The back-and-forth movement between physical life and imagination, between the corporeal self and the stories intertwined with it, are the essence of identity. It is this alternation that allows the reterritorialization of the protagonist who ultimately becomes Gregor Liedmann. When Gregor has finally accepted the liminality of his identity and conducts “the raucous band behind him” playing an alternative orchestra of kitchen utensils and musical instruments, “they have gone to bless the trees” as a “protection march” (D 260) to preserve the fragile peace that has been made with Gregor’s past. The music that had earlier branded him as a stranger, even to his family—music that functioned as his own solitary language, now becomes the unifying *lingua franca*, endorsed by the trees, symbols of his recovered sense of rootedness, since “the humming sound of the trumpet settling along the silvery branches” is the last “long, living note” (D 261) heard in the novel, on the very last page. If liminality is what sparked Gregor’s deterritorialization, then the acceptance of his liminality is what enables his reterritorialization.

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