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My Literary Web

Noah Slaughter

One night, my life was changed by an insect. I was reading Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* for the first time. From the first word, I was struck by this strange story, and as I crawled deeper into the tale, its pages seemed to consume me until I read most of the novella in one sitting, unable to remove myself from Gregor's shadowy apartment. Everything I saw seemed cast with darkness, as if I had been pulled into a black-and-white scene where, outside my window, I would see a somber fairy-tale Prague. I loved the mood, the subtle humor, and the strangeness of it all, which were all unlike anything I had ever read: neither realism nor fantasy nor magic realism. Kafka's was an alternative reality, one that I felt so resembled my own.

Gregor was surrounded by family, planted in the middle of a modern city, and he was entirely alone. And so was I. Horribly shy, I had struggled to make friends during my time in college. I spent my nights reading in Olin library or in my dorm, a seclusion which saved me from the discomfort of trying to meet people, but which simultaneously made it impossible to ease that discomfort by having friends. It was a paradox that, as I read *The Metamorphosis*, I thought Kafka would enjoy. In Kafka's story, I found a character who was as alienated from those around him as I often felt on campus. For this reason, I found comfort in *The Metamorphosis*, and also in the awareness that so many readers before me had surely found comfort in Kafka, too. My sudden love for this author even strengthened my obsession with the German language, which I have studied now for seven years, even making it my college major. When I read *The Metamorphosis*, my love for German swelled up again around me, and I applied myself to my study of the language even more, in order to get closer to Kafka's stories, letters, and diaries, which I slowly started to collect.

After I finished *The Metamorphosis*, I read deeper into Kafka's works and learned more about his life. I was surprised then to learn that we shared something in common: a love of Dostoevsky. I first read *Crime and Punishment* in middle school, when I was home with the flu, which came as a bit of a respite from my unhappiness at school. Raskolnikov's story is different from Gregor's—longer, more violent—but he struggles with many of the same feelings of alienation that appear in Kafka's works, feelings of sadness and loneliness that I also knew. In *Crime and Punishment*, I read—perhaps for the first, or at least for the most visceral, time—about mental pain. I then reread *Crime and Punishment* in college, which set me on a love affair with Russian literature. Alone in my room or in the library, I moved through Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gogol, Bulgakov, Nabokov, and Babel. Like those in Kafka's works, the worlds of the Russians were often dark and strange, but beautiful and sometimes very funny. When I found a collection of stories by Nikolai Gogol (yet another influence of Kafka's), I couldn't read it without laughing, and Gogol has since become one of my favorite authors. In the Russians, as in Kafka, I found comfort.

Then, in the summer before my third year of college, I came upon Elif Batuman's novel *The Idiot*. Not a novel about loneliness per se, it was immensely meaningful for me, nonetheless. *The Idiot* (a title taken from Dostoevsky) recounts Selin's first year at Harvard, where she tries to find meaning in the absurdity around her. People are strange, aloof, and pompous, and Selin filters all of this through a lens of the absurd—perhaps like Kafka and Gogol—as she plainly describes the weird things people do and say. I laughed hysterically, especially at figures and situations that were all too familiar to me on a college campus. In the genuine and hilarious voice of Selin, I thought I found a friend I really knew, which gave me confidence in the face of an upcoming school year. But just as important as enjoying Selin's humor, I found something in

common with Selin and with the real-life Batuman: a love of language, and of Russian literature. In the novel, Selin loves Russian literature so much that she decides to study Russian. This confirmed in me a suspicion that, if the Russians were so meaningful to me, I would need to learn their language, as I was already doing with that of Kafka. So, as Selin does in the novel, I decided to sign up for an elementary Russian class that fall semester. Word by word, grammatical case by grammatical case, I am now nearing the language of the literature that has comforted and inspired Kafka, Batuman, and me. It is often quite difficult, even more so than German, but learning Russian has given me a new, distinct purpose, a passion.

Batuman's work held yet another surprise, another thread in the literary web of influence that I was delicately spinning about myself: the novel begins with an epigraph from Proust. I read the entirety of *In Search of Lost Time* one summer, and like my experience of reading *The Metamorphosis*, I knew that my life was irrevocably different once I finished it. I loved the voice of the narrator, which was as lovely and thoughtful as Selin's was funny. I was swept along on trips to Parisian salons, to Balbec and Combray, to the theatre and to bustling restaurants. And through all the scenery and the beauty, Proust's novel taught me about loneliness as much as Kafka's, Dostoevsky's, and even Batuman's had. As the narrator moves from love to love, he finds happiness elusive, declaring that the only true paradise is paradise lost. There is no all-encompassing pleasure to be found in being with someone else. Our beloveds remain distant, unknowable, and turn out to be different people from who we once thought they were. And that party we long to be invited to is probably not as good as we think it is. For Proust, the meaning of life, then, is not in society but in art: music, painting, and, above all else, literature. This conclusion came as a kind of divine revelation for me, as someone who had always preferred books over parties or hangouts but who was led to believe that a central point of college was to

meet people, to go to social events, and to make friends. When those things never panned out for me, I blamed myself for being too shy and for somehow failing at college and at young adulthood. But what if, as I slowly realized while reading Proust, it was okay to be alone? What if it was acceptable to find more joy and comfort with people created through words than I had found with my peers? My company consisted of the words of my favorite authors, and after more than two years of a painful college experience, I finally learned to accept that. At the end of the novel cycle, Proust's narrator retreats from society and finally sits down to write. And so, too, I wrote.

I have always been a writer, but my time in college made writing, for me, something of an obsession. If I wasn't reading, or studying Russian, or studying German, then I was writing. It started as a distraction from my unhappiness at school but morphed into a compulsion. Kafka wrote once about having no literary interests, but of being made of literature. As I pulled these writers close about myself and spun out tale after tale, essay after essay, I finally felt myself to be made of literature. After many years, I had accepted my loneliness, which often no longer felt like being alone. I was solitary, for sure, but I was surrounded by books, by this intricate web of inspiration and influence. To my favorite authors, to the ones who have comforted me the most and to whom I will always return, I am irrevocably bound.

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