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Particularly Cats: Feline Encounters in Brigitte Kronauer's Narratives

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Brigitte Kronauer has long been known as one of the most sophisticated voices in contemporary European literature. Her narratives reflect the author's "entflammte Aufmerksamkeit der Welt gegenüber," a stance that wavers "zwischen Sarkasmus und Euphorie, zärtlichster Menschenliebe und bösem Blick," as Andrea Köhler writes in her review of Kronauer's 2004 novel *Verlangen nach Musik und Gebirge* (69). Kronauer is an impassioned yet decidedly unsentimental observer of human desires, of the endeavour to find reality beyond the constructs of the mind, and, at the deepest level, of the epiphanies of everyday life. What has gone largely unnoticed, however, is the significance of nonhuman life in Kronauer's body of writing. In her seven novels and several collections of short stories and essays, nature in the broadest sense – flora and fauna, rocks and galaxies – is far more than just a backdrop for human existence. In contemporary German literature this author's continuing fascination with relationships between human and nonhuman is unique. Her afterword to an anthology of Elias Canetti's aphorisms *Über Tiere* (2002) sheds light on the depth of her own relationship with animals. The essay's title "Tierlos" seems ambiguous, yet the two titles are not as incompatible as they appear at first sight. In fact, they have a common root – man's separation from animals, and the interdependence of their fates. Human life without animals means a loss of humanity ("Was zählt eine Kindheit ohne Tiere? Nichts, so Canetti" 107), because their separateness robs humans of the experience of their mysterious, inexpressible connection. "[Sie] raubt dem Tier sein Spezifisches, den Menschen aber im Umgang mit Tieren das Wunder des plötzlich aufblitzenden und wieder verlöschenden tief Bekannten inmitten des Unbegreifbaren" (113). The commodification and extinction of animals, Kronauer warns, "wäre Schlimmeres als eine Kindheit, die tierlos ist, nämlich das Absterben zu einer Gesellschaft, die ihre Kindheit und Kindlichkeit unwiederbringlich verloren hat" (115).

Kronauer's characterization of the young Canetti as someone who "denkt in Tieren, wie andere in Begriffen" might also apply to Kronauer herself, as might *seminar* 42:1 (February 2006)

her appreciation of an author whose "Lebensthemen" always include the animal Other (107–08). On a general level, there is no other fiction in today's German literary landscape that teems with animals, animal references, and reflections on animals as does Kronauer's, from her early stories ("Enten und Knäckebrot," 1988) to her latest novel. Of course, there is no dearth of literary animals such as the feline gumshoe in Akif Pirinçci's popular detective series *Felidae* (from *Felidae* in 1989 to *Salve Roma!* in 2004). But with the possible exception of Karin Kiwus (*Tiere wie wild*, 1988), none of Kronauer's German contemporaries observe and describe animals with comparable fascination and precision. Even fewer inquire into human-animal relationships (as does Patrick Süskind in *Die Taube*, 1987) or participate in the postmodern philosophical and ethical discourse on animals (Eckhard Henscheid, *Welche Tiere und warum das Himmelreich erlangen können*, 1995). Most importantly, no other German author explores the mystical connection between humans and animals, "[die] bis in die Träume reichenden Schrecken, die jede andere Art der Vertrautheit überschreitenden Erlebnisse angesichts von Tieren, das Ahnen einer geheimnisvoll in ihnen sich äußernden Zeichenwelt" ("Tierlos" 107–08) – epiphanies "vom Herzschlag gemeinsamer Herkunft" (*Frau in den Kissen* 164).

It seems astonishing that even *Die Frau in den Kissen*, which has been called a zoo novel, has not engendered more interest in the significance of animals in this author's literary universe. Frauke Meyer-Gosau, for example, addresses Kronauer's animals in the short chapter "Die Katze," but she refers to the animal only in passing and as a simile for the narrator – "eine Katze, gleichsam das Wappentier dieser Art zu erzählen, strengt sich nicht an" (67). That Meyer-Gosau neglects the actual cats that Kronauer constructs as well as their various narrative roles is an oversight reflecting the "unexamined assumption that animals in literature are simply there to be used" (Simons xi). A contemporary narrative that relies on animal agents may automatically raise eyebrows among literary critics as well as among animal advocates. It sounds suspiciously like the traditional "animal story" based on a "speciest equation," as John Simons puts it, a narrative that by replacing the nonhuman experience with the human obliterates the former, no matter how benevolent the intention (116). The fact that *Die Frau in den Kissen* features a cat that serves as the confidante of an old woman in love with a wolf may indeed seem like a throwback to the "unashamedly anthropomorphic sentiment" of the nineteenth century described by Steve Baker in *The Postmodern Animal* (20), when animals were represented not in their own right but as mere extensions of human existence.

For Kronauer, writing about animals without turning them into extensions of ourselves is clearly a daunting task. Any representation of an animal inevitably becomes self-referential, because in a sense all animals are nothing but "the blank paper on which human beings write messages to themselves" (Scholtmeijer 94).

As Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin explain in *Zoo Culture*, “in thinking about animals, we cannot escape creating them, so whatever we say about animals will only reflect our own concerns” (3). In “Tierlos” Kronauer lists the whole continuum of pitfalls – from “Gefühlsdumpfheit,” “Abstraktion,” “Projektion” to “Einfühlungs- und Identifikationsanwandlungen” (109–12) – which she has been turning into sophisticated, ironic, multilayered tales. For the author any encounter with the animal, even just “Denken in Tieren,” takes place in two dimensions. The contact with the animal Other creates an immediate “optischen und psychischen Abdruck in uns,” which needs to be perceived in all its detail, for “Nur das Beharren auf der Fremdheit der Tiere und die Lust an ihr gibt uns die Möglichkeit, sie als Kontur, in der Fülle ihrer Formenvielfalt wahrzunehmen.” Beyond the phenomenological and psychological levels, however, is another, much more elusive dimension – the “Innengestalt” (“Tierlos” 113). It cannot be conceived by the mind, so it requires the writer’s poetic leap across the knowable in an effort to sense “[das] was sie uns von unserem eigenen Innenleben sichtbar machen.”

Kronauer’s attempt to understand animals from a standpoint outside the confines of the human mind places her in the philosophical discourse of Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, and other postmodern thinkers, in which “the animal [...] serves as the very figure of modernity itself” (Lippit 25–26). In *Das Offene: Der Mensch und das Tier* (2002) Giorgio Agamben, for example, similarly describes the encounter with animal essence as surrendering to the “zentrale Leere [...], den Hiat, der – im Menschen – den Menschen vom Tier trennt” (100). According to Kronauer, nonconceptualizing openness to animal being is “der einzige Garant dafür, daß Verborgenes beim Transport ins Bewußtsein vor einer entstellenden Begrifflichkeit gerettet wird” (“Tierlos” 113). The underlying idea that humans and animals live in “fields” distinct yet inseparable from each other reflects the postmodern shift away from defining human existence in contrast to and through the exclusion of animals. Kronauer’s fiction explores a communal nonconscious existence of humans and animals, and in doing so conceptualizes the modern animal in ways similar to Deleuze and Guattari, who suggest that to “become animal is to participate in a movement [...] to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities [...] to the benefit of an unformed matter or deterritorialized flux” (13).

The fluid presence of the animal being is also addressed by Lyotard’s suggestion that animal existence is constantly changing, expressing a “feeling [that] appears and disappears entirely at every instant” (“The Inarticulate”; qtd. in Lippit). This “perpetual presence” of animals, as Lippit calls it (40), is perfectly illustrated by Kronauer’s meditations on cats. She admires the behaviour that in the conventional view appears “unpredictable” or even “deceptive,” praising

the cat as a "Vergegenwärtigende Meisterin der Gegenwart [...] entschlossen, und darauf beruht das Geheimnis ihrer elastischen Lebenslust, nichts als die Gegenwart anzuerkennen" (*Frau in den Kissen* 237). To Kronauer each cat is an individual distinct from all other beings, "eine unlösbare Wahrheit für sich, ein Schloß mit vielen Türen und mindestens einer, die nie unverschlossen bleibt" (*Frau in den Kissen* 232), at the same time representing the fluidity, diversity, and oneness of cat essence, "das einzigartige Katzenwesen" (*Rita Münster* 134), one moment sitting in the sun, dissolving with pleasure, the next changing into a lean, inaccessible, alien creature. But according to the narrator of *Die Frau in den Kissen*, a sensitive observer will also see the fluid "Innengestalt" beyond the phenomenological, die "amöbische Schönheit" (*Frau in den Kissen* 232) inherent in all cats and all animals. She claims that viewed head-on a cat looks eternally young, innocent, and touching. Its profile, however, reveals the hunter – "Wüstenfuchsohren" – and its body the predator – "Proportionen wie der Mähnenwolf" (exotic creatures that appear in the novel). To such an observer "die Katze, die alles auf einmal ist" (187), seems completely transparent. "Von [der Katze ergreifen] die Tiergeister je nach Laune und Mondform Besitz, schlagen aus dem kleinen Katzenleib wie Flammen, Blätter und welken in ihn zurück" (206). Thus each cat is "die Katze schlechthin [und] jedes Tier in seiner Art schlechthin" (232). And, just as important, Kronauer's cats represent the "philosophical animal [that] has come to occupy a constant position in the shadow of human ontology" (Lippit 50), enabling humans to catch a glimpse of their commonality, as if dimly remembering a time when humans and animals peaceably shared the earth: "[Ich] betrachte [die Katze] übrigens auch, dieses unverständliche, offenkundige Wesen, um [...] in eine gegenwärtige Vergangenheit zu schauen, jederzeit und so bequem" (*Rita Münster* 116).

This article argues that Kronauer's animals are anything but traditional representations in contemporary settings. Instead, they challenge a familiar, anthropocentric perspective and consequently our conventional sense of self. It bases this argument on the analysis of Kronauer's representations of one species – the domesticated cat – for several reasons. For one, among all of Kronauer's ducks, horses, deer, tortoises, lovebirds, blue doctor fish, the tribe of the tiger looms large. There is no other animal and no other human-animal relationship that Kronauer describes more often and explores in greater depth. Not only does a pet offer multiple opportunities for observation and an intimate relationship. It unavoidably teaches lessons about illusion and disillusionment, as Kronauer herself writes: "Keinesfalls nur die exotischen Großtiere verfügen ja über jene fesselnde und unbesiegbare Verschlossenheit, die als Stachel und sine qua non der Erotik fungiert. Auch die auf den ersten Blick anspruchsloseren tierischen Hausgenossen bewahren verstockt ihre Rätsel [und verlangen von uns] das zwischen Nähe und Andersartigkeit aufreizend Changierende zu akzeptieren"

("Tiere" 112–13). Of all our companion animals, the cat seems most conducive to challenging humans with unpredictable and potentially illuminating encounters. Unlike dogs, with what T. S. Eliot calls their apparently "simple soul[s]" (54), cats have always been perceived as complex and ambiguous creatures, lending themselves to the main function animals have for humans – "[staking] out the perimeter of [human] culture" (Malamud 4). The long list of stereotypical cat qualities reflects not only the negative bias that cats (and sometimes even their owners) encounter. Typically placid and ferocious at the same time, cats present a profound duality that threatens human order. As Kronauer puts it, even the puffball will always incorporate the Other: "Die Wildheit will sich [nach unbekannten Freiheitsnächten] eine Weile verkriechen in ausdrücklicher Enge, tarnen in argloser Rundlichkeit" (*Frau in den Kissen* 235). While T. S. Eliot clearly admires the "excessively independent" habits of his own ragtag collection with such telltale names as Growltiger, The Hidden Paw, and Mr. Mistoffelees, less generous humans, judging cats by their own ethical standards, have often seen them as deeply flawed, if not outright immoral, according to Paul Shepard in *Thinking Animals* (80). They seem to be "sexually charged, independent, dangerous, egotistical, and cruel" (Kete 116). Their domesticity is a sham, and for that reason they became both the "anti-pet" of the bourgeoisie and the signature pet of "like-minded" intellectuals, as Kathleen Kete explains in her study of nineteenth-century pets, *The Beast in the Boudoir* (117–18). As for female cats, there are even more questionable characteristics in play – the same, in fact, that have been applied to women. Cats may be attractive, clean, and voluptuous, but they are also untrustworthy, furtive, opportunistic, and self-indulgent (118) – obviously a reflection of male fears and fantasies that can lead to such bizarre claims as Alphonse Toussenel's sigh that "Civilization may no more dispense with the cat than with prostitution" (*Zoologie passionelle*, in Kete 120). German grammatical gender makes a cat female by default. Thus by not introducing the feline companions of her female narrators as clearly gendered tomcats, Kronauer indirectly reinstates the ancient notion of a kinship of felines and females that she then explores in several short stories and above all in *Die Frau in den Kissen* and in *Rita Münster* (1998).

This article argues that Kronauer's representations of cats can be used to analyze the significance of animals for an author whose narratives and essays evoke animal presence at a time characterized by the disappearance of animals and that cats are also a fundamental part of the narrative strategy in *Die Frau in den Kissen* and *Rita Münster*. To do this it analyzes, first, the subtle weave of self and animal Other that makes the fabric of *Rita Münster*, specifically the narrative role of the "accidental" cats in this complex bildungsroman, which, while focussing on human relationships, includes over thirty cat appearances. It analyzes, second, the construction of animal alterity in general and cat identity in

particular in *Die Frau in den Kissen*, a monumental narrative quest through time and space. Both analyses enter into an examination of these novels' fantasies of communion with the nonhuman that occur in an imaginary place "beyond the threshold of human discourse" (Lippit 15).

Rita Münster, a provocative, postmodern reinvention of the traditional bildungsroman, uses nonhumans as a foil, counterpoint, or measure of humanness. When Bettina Clausen views Rita's human companions as "das reichinstrumentierte Figurenensemble [...] den Klangkörper, der am Ende den Namen *Rita Münster* trägt," her description is equally valid for Rita's feline companions (160–61). Initially, the first-person narrator seems to be a tireless and opinionated observer of her surroundings, her inner monologue refracting the world through a consciousness that is relentlessly judgmental, irritable, and at times downright hateful. Since she does not engage in self-reflection, it comes as no surprise that she does not identify herself by name until more than halfway through the novel. Even though she seems invisible to herself, she becomes visible to the reader by projecting her self onto her world. As Kronauer said, "Was wird also gesagt? Es wird eigentlich überhaupt nichts – nichts Objektives – über diese Personen gesagt, es wird etwas über Rita Münster gesagt" (Personal interview).

Rita's transformation happens slowly and almost imperceptibly, and it is through quiet moments of contact with nature and animals that the first signs of a more sensitive, empathic self appear, a self that had been stifled by her incessant chatter. A major shift in this direction occurs when she observes a Turkish worker on the subway holding a kitten in his big hands. "Ich wußte genau, daß sich das Kätzchen am Inneren der groben Hände rieb" (165). The contrast between the kitten's vulnerability and aliveness and the "brutish" male is sharpened by the fact that as a "Gastarbeiter" this man does not "belong." His gentle holding of the animal triggers such a longing for contact and love in Rita that she must struggle to contain it. Painfully aware both of the urge to run from the feeling that is arising in her and of the desire to experience it, she forces herself to sit still. "Das war die einzige andere Möglichkeit. Ich hätte eigentlich mit jedem reden können, es wäre mir mit Leichtigkeit eine Anrede eingefallen. Ich saß still und stieß ihnen doch allen vor die Brust" (165).

The encounter with the kitten on the subway is a paradigm for the novel's thirty other appearances of cats. This woman, who experiences herself only by reacting against others, connects to animals from her unconscious inner core. The feelings surfacing in her soften the hard shell that has protected her and also isolated her from the world and from herself. Each animal encounter challenges some of Rita's concepts and forces her to acknowledge some part of her inner self, engendering her transformation from a harsh, unselfconscious observer (Part I) towards self-awareness (Part II) and finally to her spiritual awakening

to the “Absolutheit eines universalen Lichts” (Clausen 160), where her ego gradually dissolves in the love of the totality of being (Part III). The various cat episodes serve as a map for the reader, pinpointing some quality Rita lacks, announcing the next step, or reflecting the stage of her self-recovery. In fact, the narrator’s inner journey follows cat-ness like a roadmap, even though she does not know herself where she is headed. She seems as unaware of her travel companions’ guidance as a student might be of her teachers’. But she opens herself to a deeply transformative learning experience by closely observing her teachers’ ways of being and acting.

The following analysis of several cat encounters does not attempt to describe the process of “finding Rita” but instead inquires into five junctures along her journey that lead into ever deeper strata, ranging from the ego level to the impersonal and finally the nonconceptual dimension. The first lesson is about the selfconscious existence of animals, and it occurs in the wake of Rita’s describing in detail a bookcase full of knickknacks. She briefly mentions a porcelain miniature of a cat with kittens, an “encounter” as removed from real, live contact as the narrator is herself. She concludes her contemplation of what is to her an incongruous collection of objects with the regret that, although she has looked at it so many times, she cannot commit it to memory. In other words, she fails in her effort to appropriate the objects – the only way she can relate to something she likes. Therefore, with the words “Jetzt aber etwas Eigenes” (46), she abruptly turns to herself. However, what follows is not a comment on her own life, as we are led to expect, but an astute observation of “the cat” sleeping with its “Stiefmütterchengesicht” on the turned-in paws. The use of the definite article indicates that a live cat, too, cannot be owned. However, the vignette of the dozing animal has effortlessly and involuntarily become part of her, as have the associations of complete peace and relaxation that accompany the image arising in her: “Ein Abwenden von der Welt [...], weil die Umstände so beschaffen sind, daß [...] die Zeit eine Weile ohne ihre [der Katze] Aufmerksamkeit verstreichen kann” (46). In the cats’ living presence – porcelain representation or companion – Rita senses a mode of existence that she cannot find for herself, a letting go, and a fundamental sense of safety and belonging.

The non sequitur of this passage reflects both Rita’s attitude towards life and the author’s belief that it is up to the individual to find causality in a chaotic reality. Rita’s life is a frantic attempt to fill the emptiness inside herself with reality’s bits and pieces – a person, an object, an event – by grasping them, scrutinizing them, and talking about them in the same way that she tries to appropriate somebody else’s collection of memorabilia. This passage is also paradigmatic for Kronauer’s fiction in that important things happen at the interstices; sudden shifts that seem incongruous or out of context point to an important insight. It illustrates her position in postmodern literature with its re-

fusal to present a coherent image or history, following instead a "Strategie der Enttäuschung" that thwarts the reader's attempts to string events into a single chain of causality (Riedner 54).

Rita's second lesson is learning to inhabit her body by contrasting a cat's presence, vitality, and *joie de vivre* not so much with her own disconnected and depressed existence but, even more starkly, with another woman's struggle to disown her body. This passage traverses three lessons to embodiment, as it were, beginning with a casual observation of animal presence. The cat, by inventively anticipating any distraction that might snap it into full aliveness, derives pleasure from a moment of boredom that to Rita has nothing to offer: "Ach, die Katze, wie sie federnd durchs Zimmer geht, auf der Suche nach einem Schrecken, der einen gewaltigen Sprung verursachen könnte!" (97). Then Rita's stream of consciousness flows to the description of her friend Ruth's nasty skin disease, the cause of so much pain and embarrassment that Ruth, resenting her body, "legte ihn ab, [...] betrachtete [ihn] nicht wie etwas mit ihr Identisches" (100–01). From Ruth's futile attempt to disconnect from her physical existence the narrator's thoughts shift to another quality exhibited by the cat in its natural embodiment – autonomy. The cat, to itself "ein Mittelpunkt der Welt," playfully uses the world for "eine Vergewisserung der Existenz" (101), rubbing against the shoes of the people sitting in the room in order to feel its own physical presence. To the narrator the cat's behaviour models both an unconscious oneness with its surroundings and an effortless awareness of its own existence.

In her third lesson Rita encounters her own vulnerability and that of the human condition in episodes encompassing life's beginning as well as its end – a significant juncture on her inner journey towards becoming a sensitive, open human being. Rita's increasingly intimate interactions with the cats in her life highlight the difference between the chilly, sarcastic person we initially encounter and the new, gentle Rita, a difference made all the more striking by the atmospheric backdrop of a cold, dark winter. One morning at the end of December Rita takes a bath with the cat balancing on the rim of the bathtub, gently trying to touch her knees every time they surface. "[Sie] bewachte den rauf und runter atmenden Wasserspiegel mit solcher Inbrunst, daß auch ich, die Badende, dadurch in eine sich steigernde Verblüffung geriet." No wonder, she continues, that after a while memories float by, delicate and at a certain distance "als wären sie in der Lage, mir selbst gegenüber eine Art Intimsphäre zu respektieren" (148). This scene is suffused with a sweet delicacy that seems to emanate not just from a human and her cat but also from a watery, uterine stage of life.

Rita's body and soul have become receptive to being touched, but their exquisite aliveness and vulnerability come at a price – the recognition of the transitoriness of all existence: "Manchmal hatte ich das Gefühl, als schnurre

das Leben hinter mir zusammen. Es war gar keine Vergangenheit da" (150). Her experiences on the dim last day of December include a luminous description of the Elbe landscape in the dead of winter, observations about aging women, and several memories of death. The insight that time is unravelling in her fingers like a piece of knitting ("Es entstand nichts über den Augenblick hinaus" 150) is further illustrated by Rita's recalling in haunting detail how she held her father's dying cat. The mute, distraught animal, whose body "used to be able to laugh," now expresses nothing but the quiet grief about its "Dahinwelken [...], so wie Schwertlilien sich beim Verblühen diskret in sich zurückfalten" (159). It is interesting to note that earlier she characterized an old woman as "eine in bester Blüte eingetrocknete Sonnenblume" (151), the imagery underscoring her insight that aging is irreversible and necessary – in a word, natural. The memory of the dying cat's paws faintly holding onto her wrists are physical traces of yet another feline's deep imprint on her consciousness, the lesson of life as "einem sehr zerbrechlichen Prinzip" (159) and Rita's opening towards the suffering that it brings.

The fourth lesson could be called "Who *is* Rita?" and it happens in two stages, first on a personal, conscious level and then on a deeply unconscious, nonpersonal level. Rita herself takes the first step by finally presenting herself to the world as the person she now knows herself to be: "ich, Rita Münster" (153). Acknowledging her given name, which happens squarely in the centre of the novel, is a crucial shift. Rita now becomes one with her own beliefs and concepts, with her body and her feelings; she consciously owns her hard-won identity. From now on she faces the world open and undefended – "ich, Rita Münster" is how she refers to herself throughout Part II, as if to remind herself. Her newly acquired sense of identity is the precondition for the next step, one that happens to her because she is ready, and it comes as a total shock. Appropriately, it is triggered not by the touch of the gentlest of paws, but by the gaze of a lioness resting among her cubs – a potential killer. In fact, this real, larger-than-life version of the diminutive porcelain cat and her litter marks the trajectory of Rita's journey towards herself. Her initial effort to connect with an idyllic representation of love and belonging was poignant in more than its failure. Her very choice of object already defied her attempt – the cute collectible was part of someone else's life and, worse, it was a lifeless miniature whose kitschy nature was exploited by secret longings.

The lioness, in contrast, is not an object but the source of a powerful essence that turns the human into the object of its gaze. The lioness looks at her "mit unbewegtem Blick," with a gaze that seems to "see" and penetrate her, "[der] mich, Rita Münster, [...] in aller Grausamkeit, ich konnte mich nicht sattsehen daran, betraf" (162). The clarity and steadiness of this gaze directly affect her self in ways both unsettling and exciting. Rita feels "recognized," finally seen

for who she really is, but not as "Rita." What matters is not her name and what is attached to it – her history, thoughts, and feelings – and yet it is "all about her" ("mich [...] betraf"). Significantly, the gaze that sees the being that she does not know herself to be is not a human gaze or a pet's. Being "seen" by the completely Other presents the utmost challenge to the conscious self, because the mind behind the eye cannot be known.

It may be useful at this point to recall Lacan's distinction between the eye and the gaze, because this passage seems to pivot on the idea of "giving body to the gaze." As Lacan points out, the eye sees, but it takes a subject – the mind behind the gaze – to attribute meaning to the image that enters the eye. Conversely, when we are looked at by a human, we are familiar with the range of meanings – be it friendly or not – that the mind behind the eye will attribute to our image, and we have adequate responses. Even a pet's mind seems "readable" to a comforting degree. Rita, on the other hand, experiences a gaze that expresses nothing the human mind can imagine. She calls its total focus "grausam," yet she reacts to its intensity with a mixture of fear, thrill, and longing ("ich konnte mich nicht sattsehen daran"). The animal's gaze speaks to the deepest, innermost part of herself, that "underside of consciousness" (Lacan 82) from which it emanates. It is in this nonpersonal, nonconscious place that she feels finally recognized for who – or what – she truly is: a self invisible and unknowable to the world and to her own mind.

Part III of the novel culminates in Rita's attempt to integrate all the different layers of "self" and live accordingly. Capable of direct contact with herself and the world around, she has outgrown her need for mirrors, human or feline. She looks back at the mirror existences of herself and her cat in the novel's last episode of feline guidance. In a passage introduced by the mirrored phrases "Immer noch habe ich den Wunsch" and "Noch immer gibt es die Katze" (261) Rita fantasizes about a life that is not ruled by the mind but by "simply being," a life of full awareness and presence. She imagines that her only chance of achieving that state would be to live so precariously that she would be forced to be completely mindful at every instant, like walking on ice. Her thoughts move seamlessly towards "the" cat. Unlike her first encounter with the "pansy-faced" cat examined earlier, this animal is clearly not physically present. Rita's consciousness conjures it up as the model of a living presence. She visualizes the cat "vermutlich auf dem Heizungsblech liegend und dabei fallend. Sie fällt mit Kopf, Körper, Schwanz, willenlos hinsackend [...]. Und dieses Behagen genießt sie jeden Augenblick, zu fallen und dabei nicht weiterzukommen" (261). To Rita, the cat hanging over the edge of a shelf, precarious yet completely relaxed, demonstrates the ideal of being fully alive in a state of "non-doing." It is a "mindless" way of being, yet it requires the "[Klugheit] diese Dinge nicht unwillkürlich geschehen zu lassen" and the ability to use what reality offers to

create for itself a balance of true contentment “aus Kleinigkeiten und einigen Extremen” (261). The cat serves as a perfect example of how to live every moment of the day, aware and contented, from the depth of her being instead of from the frantic activity of the mind.

Rita herself has stopped trying to make sense out of unrelated bits of experience, and she now looks at reality without doing anything or wanting anything. She understands that in order to create reality all she needs to do is simply observe every moment, letting it take shape as it comes. Even more importantly, she realizes that her task in the world is to recognize life as it constantly creates itself. Rita has arrived at the opposite end of the continuum from where she started: “[Ich] stelle die Gegenwart her. Ich fürchte mich nicht, als hätte ich das persönliche Schicksal verloren, [...] meine eigene Wichtigkeit löst sich auf darin. Wichtig aber ist das Bild, das die Welt durch meine Augen anzunehmen, zu erreichen verlangt” (272). What Clausen calls Rita’s “Kämpfe um immer neue Sichtbarkeiten” (159) culminate in an insight, an extrapolation of imagined “cat reality” that is her epiphany – the ground of all being, invisible to itself and unconscious of itself, needs the “ego-less” gaze and consciousness of humans and nonhumans to know itself.

Kronauer’s novel *Die Frau in den Kissen* also inquires into human and nonhuman nature by describing and exploring the relationship between women and their cats. And as in *Rita Münster*, the first-person narrator is the consciousness and voice that guides us through the narrative – but the similarities end there. Kronauer’s most ambitious novel is an intricate web of 400 pages of a woman’s daydreams, observations, and reflections on life on earth. It is a meditation on the impact of galaxies, rocks, flora, and fauna on a contemporary European consciousness. Five chapters of equal length reflect different stages in the narrated day as well as in the history of our planet. At the same time, ever smaller circles draw us into reflections on the various ways humans relate to animals – from our cultural imaginations and collective “fantasies of Edenic perfection” to the dire realities of animal existences and the commodified roles they have been allocated in our world. The novel spans just twenty-four hours in the lives of two women who can both lay claim to being the woman of the title – the narrator and an old woman with her cat. Like Rita Münster the nameless narrator is an astute observer, but unlike Rita she is not the protagonist. The old woman is the central figure among the novel’s protagonists observed or imagined by the narrator, who serves as a medium that gleefully invents ways for herself to avoid “active living.”

Thus the human-animal encounters in *Die Frau in den Kissen* are not experienced and related directly as in *Rita Münster*, but refracted in multiple ways. As a consequence, the old woman’s complex animal relationships appear removed. At the same time, however, they are touching and immediate, as if placed in high relief by the narrator’s outside perspective and tinged by her ironic

yet compassionate attitude. A closer analysis reveals that the narrator's lens actually transforms the tale of the old woman, her cat, and a wolf into a subtle, tongue-in-cheek study of the two most common traps in human relationships – projection and merging – elevating the narrative from the woman's naïvely anthropomorphized experience to a postmodern narrative about the workings of the human psyche and its fantasies of communality with the nonhuman.

The old woman, like the narrator, is a regular visitor at the zoo. When she stops coming, the narrator decides to call on her. She finds her at home with quilts heaped on her lap, warming her hands in her cat's fur, determined never again to venture out but to spend the rest of her days living off her "[Speck] von Lebenserinnerungen" (333). To the visitor, who is by turns fascinated and repulsed, she leads the wretched life of a dozing queen on a throne that holds all the essential treasures of her empire, "Kamm, Spiegel, Katze, Kölnisch Wasser vielleicht" (333). As the visitor keeps the old woman company through the night – and through 150 pages – observing her and her cat, arguing with her and pitying her, she reflects on the woman's life and her own. She struggles with her own fear of old age and death as desperately as with the depressive "woman in the pillows," who, while pretending to amuse herself with her cat under the aggressive light of the chandelier, chips away "heimlich an der Trennungswand zwischen Leben und Tod" (268–69).

In the old woman's story Kronauer explores the pitfalls of human relationships with animals from the postmodern stance that "the other being is precisely supposed to remain *what* it is and *how* it is" (McNeil 26; emphasis in the original). She does this by creating a scenario in which an animal is completely appropriated by a human. The old woman has constructed for herself a closed universe revolving around a cat that plays the part of friend, playmate, and long-departed lover. However, Kronauer does not tell us directly that the cat is used as a blank screen on which the old woman projects all her contacts with the outside world she has forsaken. Instead, the author steers the reader towards the interstices between the old woman's mind and the narrator's, as when the cat jumps off the woman's lap and she points out to her visitor ("Da, sehen Sie") how her cat uses its imagination to create diversion in a life that has turned stale and deadening: "[Sehen] Sie nur die Katze, wie sie ihren Weg, diesen ewigen Weg durch das Zimmer verschnörkelt, damit es ja was Besonderes ist" (309). The difference between this scene and the apparently similar one in *Rita Münster* – "Ach, die Katze, wie sie federnd durchs Zimmer geht" (97) – is significant. Rita's observation of her cat leads to reflections on cat nature as well as to a deeper understanding of herself, whereas the suggestion of intentionality on the part of the cat ("damit es ja was Besonderes ist") is surely the old woman's fantasy. Even without quotation marks, the phrase would reveal the workings of a rather simple mind, not to be confused with the narrator's. In fact, the cat's

meanderings are the opposite of what the old woman believes, and the narrator is well aware of it. Far from intending to entertain the woman, the cat is simply weaving its way through the room in cat fashion. But the woman, in search of support in her battle against despair, sees the cat as an extension of herself and interprets its movements according to her own needs.

In the same vein, the old woman freely acts out her emotions even to the point of regression, indulging in behaviour that would be unacceptable among “real” people. For example, during one of her monologues she complains about doctors who have no time for their patients anymore. While ironically reenacting that day’s minimalist discourse at the office, she vents her anger at the cat: “Machen Sie sich bitte frei! Gern, Herr Doktor!’ Sie streckt der Katze, die offenbar den Doktor spielen muß, die Zunge raus” (324). In this instance it is the narrator’s “offenbar” as well as the ironic matter-of-fact tone in which she reports this funny outburst that recreate the distance between the human and the animal that has disappeared for the woman herself.

The apex and collapse of the woman’s self-delusion is her one-sided love affair with a maned wolf at the zoo. That relationship forms the centre of *Die Frau in den Kissen*. The reader is kept abreast of its progress through the woman’s daily reports to her cat, which are in turn seen from the narrator’s viewpoint. In addition, the dynamics between the woman and her feline confidante serve as an ironic reality check – doubly ironic, in fact, because the woman herself interprets the animal’s reactions as if they were actually the nonverbal comments of a human. “Es war einmal eine alte Frau, die zum ersten Mal in ihrem Leben [einen] Mähnenwolf [sah]’, erzählte sie am Abend der Katze, die nicht mit der Wimper zuckte” (213). The metaphor of the cat not batting an eye is an intentional, ironic anthropomorphization – so too are the reactions of an animal that to the old woman seems to have its own “all-too-human” way of coping with a partner’s fling by pretending to ignore it: “Als sie es am Abend der Katze erzählen wollte, gähnte die [...] und drehte den Kopf weg” (215). The “discourse” between the lovestruck woman and her “jealous” cat escalates into an amusing battle of wills. As one or the other gains the upper hand, the reader looks forward to the nightly sparrings. The cat’s “comments” are carefully orchestrated along a continuum from the innocuous to the arrogant that finally extends to the rude. As the reader realizes sooner or later, it is not just the cat’s reactions that are the old woman’s delusion, but her love affair with the wolf, who in their final, all-or-nothing encounter will not even acknowledge her existence.

Nevertheless, the old woman’s animal relationships are not entirely constructs of her mind. As the narrator says in retrospect – and for once her voice does not create a distance between the woman and the reader – “Ich habe die Symbiose der beiden [Frau und Katze] heute abend so lange betrachtet, daß es

mich Tage verfolgen wird, nicht verfolgen, mir entgegenspringen wird" (346). The woman lives in a state of merging with her cat that to even the skeptical outsider represents a true connectedness. Their life together resembles that of an old married couple with the old woman in constant communion with the animal both verbally and nonverbally, taking its presence and attention for granted, and reacting with annoyance when she feels ignored by it. When the cat leaves her lap, the woman does not take her eyes off the animal, as if trying to hold on to the life force it exudes. Their closeness becomes apparent, for example, when the woman bends down to the cat in her lap and they press their foreheads together, both smiling ("bei beiden das gleiche selig versunkene Anheben des Mundwinkels"), oblivious to the visitor (307).

In fact, the human and the animal are so close that to the observer they sometimes seem to switch identities. The woman tends to avoid answering the narrator's probing questions by pretending not to hear them and even tilting her head "nach Katzenart" (263), and the cat appears to translate the woman's weariness at having to venture outside by stretching itself "bis in die Krallenspitzen, stellvertretend für die Frau" (281). Both have their own little routines of relating that they perform without interrupting whatever else they are doing. For instance, the old woman, while complaining about the daily violence shown on television, digs among her blankets until she finds an old sock, which she wraps into a ball and perfunctorily throws towards the cat, which is lying on the rug, busily grooming itself. The cat just looks at it. She finds another sock, focussing now but missing again; this time the cat dutifully jumps into the air "mit allen vier Beinen, strahlend entsetzt" (286). Both participants have played this game innumerable times. Each having acted their part, the old woman is content; the cat hops up on her lap and immediately falls asleep. In fact, they are so intimately connected that the narrator can even gauge the depth of the old woman's sleep by means of the cat, the woman's extension: "Die Katze zuckt mit den Pfoten. Es überträgt sich sofort auf die Lippen der Frau. Im Schlaf sind sie, wenn auch Unterschiedliches träumend, einander besonders verbunden" (344).

One of their games reveals another psychological dimension of the text, the intricate way that Kronauer dovetails two completely different lines of narration – the old woman's interaction with the cat, and the observer's own experience. On the surface very little happens. We witness a pleasant, perfectly harmless scene related only slightly tongue-in-cheek by an observer whose attitude reminds one critic of a cat's seemingly "gleichmütiger Beobachtung und insistenter Einfühlung" (Meyer-Gosau 66). The scene is divided into several sections with the woman's actions always interspliced with the narrator's contrapuntal interior reaction. It starts with the woman humming an operetta tune with a "halsbrecherische Fröhlichkeit" that turns the room suddenly into

a vortex threatening to engulf the narrator: “Der Raum ist [...] ein zu Boden reißender Strudel unter stechendem elektrischem Licht. Die alte Frau hat beschlossen, die Welt von A bis Z darin verschwinden zu lassen, es kreiselt auf mich zu” (267). With the same daredevil fatalism the woman then teases the cat, which is asleep on her lap, with a tassel on her cardigan. The cat yawns, opens its eyes, and sits up. It paws at the tassel first playfully, then violently, and finally draws blood from the woman’s wrist, “das [wohl] unerläßliche Opfer bei so wechselseitiger Begeisterung” (268). They resemble a married couple whose peaceful boredom is interrupted by a sudden outburst against their loneliness or the congenial surface ruffled by an act of aggression that does not jeopardize the bond but reestablishes some sense of separateness. The moment the teasing game gets a little out of control, the listless woman in her armchair jolts into aliveness, and the narrator senses the thrill coursing through the old woman’s veins, “unbestechlich, wüst” (268). Reacting not to the exterior action but attuned to the woman’s inner plight, she becomes more and more panicked: “Todesangst, auf die ich einspreche. [...] Eine unverschämte Flut ist die trostlose Frau, [...] ausdehnen will sich die Trauerseuche” (268). The innocuous operetta tune returns to haunt the narrator’s mind, bringing with it the realization that she too in her old age may forget how to be truly happy. Feeling threatened by the woman and her cat, she views them as two of a kind – desperate evil creatures with the same vicious look around their eyes: “Wie die Katze [...] lauert sie aus den Augenschlitzen auf den wunden Punkt” (270).

During her visit with the old woman and the cat the narrator’s feelings run the gamut from pity to resentment, anxiety to amusement, impatience to relief. Once she has finally escaped from them, she wonders why the couple has such an intense and lasting impact on her: “Ich probiere das mit der Symbiose aus: Wenn ich auf die Tischplatte sehe, ist dort die Frau mit dem Tier” (347). The mixture of hatred and love turns into feelings of longing and regret as she realizes that she has just witnessed a profound experience that she has never had herself. Distracted and even irritated by the woman’s unreflective and at times absurdly regressive interactions with her cat throughout the night, the observer-narrator has missed what is real and true about their connection. She was right there when she witnessed the woman and the cat touching each other, for she clearly sensed their togetherness: “Beide lächeln, bei beiden das gleiche selig versunkene Anheben des Mundwinkels, [...] bis sie, beide im selben Moment, damit aufhören.” But instead of tapping into the sweetness of their communion, she waited “bis sie fertig [waren],” impatient, insensitive, and jealous (“[sie] kümmern sich nicht um mich”; 307). Only after the woman has fallen asleep can the narrator open herself to their deep bond. Now she notices that the sleeping woman’s lips respond with a slight quiver to the cat’s subtle twitching, and she understands their unconscious communication. It is almost as if the old woman,

by showing off their intimacy, had prevented the observer from perceiving the deeper dimensions of their relationship. In the gray morning light it dawns on the narrator that, if only she had liked the cat more, she could have shared their special relationship, at least for one night. Their circuit of love might have changed her life forever, for "ein einziges Mal [hätte] genügt für das aus Maß und Gesetz geratene Aufblühen der Bilder" (346).

At this point the readers may also feel deprived of an opportunity, for we can never experience the old woman's reality "directly," only filtered through a consciousness that is inherently suspicious and openly afraid of lonely old women who prefer the company of pets to humans. On a philosophical level, the narrator's mind is defined by an equally skeptical, postmodern sensitivity that shies away from the naïve impulse of empathizing or identifying with the animal Other and discounts the urge to coopt and appropriate it. Aware that human contact with animals has always been about "wanting [animals] to be meaningful, and wanting [...] to be consoled by these meanings," as Baker puts it (82), and critical of any relationship that smacks of anthropocentrism, the narrator does not realize that the old woman's interactions with her cat transcend a mere need. Therefore, the narrator cannot relax into the place that the woman effortlessly inhabits with her cat, the simple, physical, and soulful place where words do not matter because contact happens beyond words. As Lyotard notes, animals' "muted communication" creates an impasse only for the conceptualizing mind. Rita Münster's journey shows how the human awakening to her inner world is accompanied by the animal that "opens up a channel of unconscious communication" that carries with it the "possibility of an unconscious world" ("The Inarticulate"). Animal being, as different from ours as it may appear, is linked to humanity on a deep level inaccessible to thought. Lippit calls it "the place of an alien thought" (7), locating it in the "interstice between mind and matter" (8). According to him, this space outside the traditional mind/brain duality of Cartesianism establishes a "third term" (6) shared by humans and nonhumans alike.

When a human surrenders to this "field of animal," as Rita does and in a subconscious way the old woman does too, the forgotten communality can emerge and lead to the experience of a simpler, "mindless," more essential mode of existence. It is this shift that Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming animal" (37). Kronauer's novels *Die Frau in den Kissen* and especially *Rita Münster* explore this adventure of "becoming animal." When Lippit explains that "[contact] with animals turns human beings into others, effecting a metamorphosis. Animality is, in this sense, a kind of seduction, a magnetic force or gaze that brings humanity to the threshold of its subjectivity" (51), his words also describe the experiences of both Rita and the old woman. Thus both novels help us rethink our relationship with animals by illustrating the possibilities

and the pitfalls of understanding the wholly Other. In these narratives Kronauer explores the human tendency to appropriate animals, points out the ways in which humans naively anthropomorphize animals, and enjoys playing games with a reader's anthropocentric attitude about nonhuman existence. On the other hand, these feline appearances are far more than just clever devices to uncover a reader's self-serving assumptions about animals. Kronauer's cats "speak" to humans through their animal existences. Once their human counterparts learn how to listen correctly they have much say about the boundaries between humans and animals, the cultural constructs of the animal, and their underlying preconceptions and assumptions.

Kronauer's fiction reflects the sensitivity and integrity with which she re-thinks both nature and humanity, celebrating the animal as the familiar and yet fundamentally Other. In her stories it is always the humans who need animal essence in order to recognize who they are, so that they can be liberated and redeemed. To those humans open to the seductiveness of animal existence, their magnetic force, and their gaze, an encounter with an animal can propel them into a different orbit of being – what Kronauer herself has called "[ein] ekstatisches Aus-der-Zeit-Fallen" ("Das Strahlen der Schlümpfe: Gespräch" 13). It is at such moments when the conceptualizing mind is quiet that the imagined boundaries between animal and human collapse and an epiphany occurs, a glimpse of the truth of human existence.

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