Kafka’s “Josefine”: The Animal as the Negative Site of Narration

“Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk,” the last piece Kafka wrote, is not a story about art, or the repudiation of art, but a gesture of retraction not unlike his own last will and testament. In his several instructions to Max Brod, he requested the burning of his entire Nachlass, unread, and forbade the reprinting of published works (“Should they disappear altogether that would please me best”) a request Brod not only refused to honor, but told Kafka he would refuse to honor. Brod, therefore, exonerates himself for defying his friend’s wishes by interpreting Kafka’s will in a more complex way, as a testament embodying the double gestures of Kafka’s destruction and Brod’s redemption of the works. “Convinced as he was that I meant what I said, Franz should have appointed another executor if he had been absolutely and finally determined that his instructions should stand.”2 Kafka was forced to leave us his works, albeit damned and with the mark of death upon them. But in “Josefine,” his last work, he outwits his defiant readership by writing a narrative that consumes itself in the telling.

Kafka’s last story marks the culmination of a generic revolution from representational to virtually self-referential prose. If “Josefine” had a literary antecedent it would have been Franz Grillparzer’s Der arme Spielmann, a story Kafka loved and whose major motif is dispersed throughout the Kafka biography as well as the works: the artist, self-deluded, obsessed, misunderstood, subject to the hard father, yoked to irksome work. Yet in “Josefine” these themes are drained of their significance except as negative indices of the character’s dissolution. Josefine’s unmusicality refers not to Josefine but to the narrator’s other statements about her singing.

Kafka’s last works have some of the self-referentiality of abstract painting, but for philosophical rather than formal ends that have to do with the ontology of the beast. The animal narrator enables the virtual voiding of representation from the
work, the deletion of all human features and cultural references except those the narration itself will prove spurious. But the result is not merely a simulacrum of animal consciousness with its necessarily anthropomorphic configuration. Instead, the narration constitutes a bestial gesture that marks the trajectory from signification to its obliteration, from remembering to forgetting. Becoming the beast is remembering to forget, as being the beast is forgetting to remember, a moment represented by Nietzsche in a hypothetical interlocution. “The human may well ask the animal one day, ‘Why do you not talk to me of your bliss and only look at me?’ The animal really wants to answer and say: ‘It comes of always forgetting right away what I wanted to say.’ But it forgot even this answer and was mute: so that the human could only wonder.”

The ontology of the beast must be situated not in a form of consciousness but in that border region on the edge of consciousness where every perception is erased at the moment of its inscription. This condition is the prehistory of the child, a condition articulated by Freud in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in which he links the Wolf Man’s prehistoric knowledge phylogenetically to the site of animal being.

When one considers the behavior of the four-year-old child toward the reactivated primal scene, or even when one thinks of the far simpler reactions of the one-and-a-half-year-old child during the actual experience of the scene, one finds it hard to dismiss the view that a kind of hard to define knowledge, like the preparation to understanding, is at work in the child at the time. What this may consist of eludes every attempt to imagine it; we have only the single excellent analogy of the far-reaching instinctive knowledge of animals at our disposal.5

Freud’s metaphor for the psychic process is the mystic writing pad, the child’s toy whose prehistoric trace structure becomes more compellingly apparent if it is imagined as being operated by two hands: one writing, the other simultaneously erasing what is in the process of being written.6 Kafka’s narrative will constitute an analogous metaphor, a rhetorically and logically self-consuming fiction.

The narrator of “Josefine” is a mouse, as we infer from his identification with the pack and his representation of its collective point of view. The question raised by having an animal narrator is not, in the first instance, What sort of story would a

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mouse tell? or, How would an animal story differ from a human story? Kafka uses the narrative deviation of “Josefine” to raise questions about the very enabling of narration itself: Can a mouse tell a story at all? and, How can a story be told at all? The mouse narrator, it turns out, cannot tell a story after all, because of the peculiarity of his membership in the pack. Narrative depends on the ability to sustain differences, and, as Josefine’s experience illustrates, it is impossible to maintain difference among the mouse folk. The narrator, like Josefine, fails, and instead of being told, Josefine’s story becomes negatively inscribed in the failure of the narration.

“Our singer is named Josefine.” The peculiarity of this opening statement is that insofar as it establishes a code, it has no consequence for the story. It doesn’t finally matter what the singer is called, and there is never any question that she might actually be called something else. The actual function of the statement in the narration is antonomastic, as though it read, “Josefine is our singer,” or “Josefine is called our singer.” Josefine’s identity depends entirely upon her function as the community’s singer; singing constitutes the sole difference that makes her possible as a character in a story. Without this distinctive feature, only her name would remain, a difference, to be sure, but without narrative consequence. If Josefine is not a singer, she loses her function as a character and ceases to exist as a fictional figure; and, indeed, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk” constitutes more than one kind of disappearing act. Indeed, the punctuation of the title (“Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse”) makes it clear that the opposition is not between Josefine and the mouse folk but between Josefine’s identity as a singer and her membership in the pack. The story poses the conundrum, Is Josefine singular or is she plural?—a riddle that insists on the ungrammaticalness (and unintelligibility or logical extinction) Josefine incurs if she is a mouse folk.

The dismantling of Josefine, the singer, begins immediately, although without our quite realizing it. “Whoever has not heard her doesn’t know the power of song. There is no one who is not carried away by her singing” (172). The litotic structure of these statements turns them into understatements, into intensified praises of the singer. Only much later, when we have begun to doubt that Josefine is a singer, that she has ever sung, or ever been heard, do we hear the literal residue behind the trope in these words.7 The double negative, the denial of the

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contrary, suggests the possibility that there may have been nothing there in the first place—no song, no singer—and that the statements refer only to a void or a trace.

The narrator altogether eschews an idealistic or Platonic argument, that Josefine's song must inscribe some musical essence, in favor of a semiological analysis, that in order to constitute singing, Josefine's sounds must exhibit some distinctive features that allow them to be contrasted with ordinary mouse speech or piping. Josefine fails by this criterion, and to clinch any lingering doubt, the narrator evokes a cunning demonstration in the form of the innocent piping up of a silly little mouse during one of Josefine's performances: "Now, it was exactly the same as that which we also heard from Josefine . . . to describe the difference would have been impossible" (174).

Although Josefine's singing is reduced, as it were, to quotations as so-called singing, the effect of her performance, identical to that of an artistic performance, remains to be explained. The narrator attempts to do this with the modern argument (his nut-cracking analogy resonates with Dada and conceptual art theory) that art is whatever is perceived as such by artist and audience. The tautological nature of this reasoning is unassailable, but Josefine's audience refuses to validate her piping as singing. The narrator's theory shatters on the imperfect reciprocity between performer and audience that attends other strange conceptual performances in Kafka's works: the fasting in "A Hunger Artist," and the execution in "In the Penal Colony." The narrator submits the audience's devotion to Josefine to a series of rationalizations: the mice listen not to her piping but to the stillness surrounding it; they hear themselves, not Josefine, in her piping; they attend not a concert but an assembly of the folk; they cater to Josefine's temperamental whims not as to an artist but as to an indulged child, and so on. Ultimately, his argument achieves a wonderful sophistic circularity: "May Josefine be protected from the recognition that the fact that we listen to her is evidence against her song" (178).

Josefine is invalidated as a singer, the mouse folk are invalidated as her audience, and their difference is expunged, and with it one of the major anthropomorphic features of mouse culture. We are prepared for this by the earlier description of the mice's unmusicalness as a pure trace structure: they have only an intimation (eine Ahnung) of the songs that exist but cannot be sung. Yet the relationship between Josefine and the mouse folk
is expressed in another cultural metaphor, that of parent and child, which must also be emptied of its anthropomorphic overtones and restored to its purely biological significance.

The parental metaphor initially serves a political function. If we interpret her influence as a secondary effect resulting from the pack’s indulgence, the power struggle between Josefine and the mouse folk appears to be resolved in their favor. “The actual riddle of her enormous influence” is solved by suggesting that her power is as illusory as that of the insistent child whose parent good-naturedly gives her her way. However, the anthropomorphic residue of the metaphor, which defines the child in terms of an ego development resisting socialization (selfish, irresponsible, foolish) suggests that in this struggle, power, like signification, is a function of difference. If Josefine can be distinguished from the mouse folk, even as an infantile brat (“Then inevitably she becomes enraged, then she stamps her feet, swears most ungirlishly, and she even bites” [175]), she becomes anthropomorphized, individualized, significant, and her story can be told. If not, she becomes appropriated by the mouse folk, animalized, obliterated, her story prevented.

The narrator consequently redefines the child metaphor in a way that empties it of its anthropomorphic ego-defining characteristics and obliterates its difference from the parent. The child’s temperamental symptoms of ego immaturity are replaced by kinds of physical immaturity such as difficulty in running, piping, and seeing. The human cultural reference to schools is retracted (“We have no schools” [179]) and with it the notion of childhood as a temporal plenum. The young in the swarm are discontinuous within their momentum (“always, always more new children, without end, without interruption” [179]) but indistinguishable from one another. Childhood itself is a trace structure that disappears while it emerges (“A child barely appears and already it is no longer a child” [179]). The difference between child and adult is oxymoronically collapsed by making the mouse folk “eternally, inextinguishably childish” and “prematurely old” at the same time.

The parental metaphor also defines the controversy governing the relationship between Josefine and the pack with respect to dependency and protection. The predominant question, Who protects whom? is not in itself an anthropomorphic formulation. But corresponding similes, such as Josefine craning her neck above the crowd like a shepherd surveying his flock before a thunderstorm, generate cultural and literary resonances that
resound in Kafka’s other works. Among these, the demonic version of the Orpheus motif, the Pied Piper of Hamlin, would seem best to fit the ambiguously saving and dooming effect of Josefine’s song. Josefine claims that her music saves, or at least sustains, the folk at times of political or economic emergency; they claim that her singing increases their jeopardy by attracting predators.

Kafka himself confounds the critical tendency to endow his fictional music with spiritual essence and transcendental effects (“For Kafka music was, after all, always a means of drawing man beyond all earthly borders”) by satirically describing his childhood music lessons as exercises in mechanical Pavlovian conditioning. “In despair, my violin teacher had rather let me spend my music hour jumping over sticks that he himself held for me, and my musical progress consisted in his holding the sticks higher and higher from lesson to lesson.” Cacophonous circus music and blaring hunting horns reduce the canine narrator of “Researches of a Dog” to a writhing bundle of agony. If the animal’s susceptibility to music is indeed physiological and compulsive, then an ironic, affirmative residue becomes audible in Gregor Samsa’s famous erotesis, “Was he an animal, since music affected him so?”

Like Grete Samsa in “The Metamorphosis,” or the Pied Piper of Hamlin, Josefine seems to serve as a musical pharmakos effecting good and ill, offering salvation and perdition. Either version of her character might confirm Josefine’s influence, the negative version especially so, since it obliges the narrator to explain the mice’s willingness to risk casualty in order to attend her performances. After a futile set of reciprocal denials—Josefine’s rude “I pipe [fart] on your protection” (176) is interpreted as embarrassed, childish gratitude—the narrator redefines the parental function in a way that essentially extrudes Josefine from her own performances. The human sense of parenting as specific nurturant activity is translated in mouse culture into the generalized security conferred on individuals by membership in the pack. “The power differential between the folk and the individual is so enormous that it suffices to draw the weakling into its warmth, and he is protected enough” (176). The mice assemble not to hear Josefine sing but for the sake of an assembly that itself is emptied of all but zooaffective significance: “We submerge into the feeling of the mass, warmly pressed, body against body” (175).

Reduced to a producer of incidental music at her own perfor-

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mances, Josefine is effaced both as a singer and as a savior, not by having her influence denied but by having the concept of influence itself reduced to a meaningless anthropomorphism in mouse culture. The issue is not whether Josefine saves or betrays the pack but whether the concept of salvation has any significance at all for a fatalistic folk who survive not because they change the course of events but because their exceptional fertility neutralizes their exceptional mortality. The term savior itself becomes an acronym, as the narrator describes the mouse as a folk who somehow always manage to save themselves even at the cost of horrifying casualties. The statement makes no sense, the casualties contradict the saving (avoidance of loss or waste), and yet one more anthropomorphic feature in Josefine’s differentiation from the pack has been deleted.

The final labor dispute between Josefine and the pack reveals the actual object of their struggle to be something other than either labor or art: “Clearly, Josefine does not actually aspire to what she literally demands” (182). The ulterior motive is differentiation; Josefine wants to be regarded as a goddess, that is, to have her difference acknowledged. The narrator confirms this when he concedes that the labor exemption would have no de facto significance in Josefine’s life: she would work no less and her singing would grow no better. What she would achieve by being exempted from ordinary labor is “public, unequivocal, enduring, superlative recognition of her art” (182): not only differentiation, but recognition of difference.

The final conflict between Josefine and the mouse folk emerges as a phantom campaign in which the trace structure of difference becomes apparent. If Josefine possesses difference (and the narrator cites and rejects the argument that her very ability to conceive of demanding an exemption from work proves this), that difference, like a zero suffix, lacks the materiality to make itself perceivable or verifiable. It is simultaneously present and absent, as Josefine’s strategies demonstrate. She offers not positive incentives (differences) but negative penalties (lack of difference) to further her cause: she will not sing at the limits of her talent if her petition is denied. Since her difference is immaterial, her threat to cut the grace notes from her song cannot be verified: “Reputedly she has carried out her threat, although I have noticed no difference from her earlier performances” (184). Her foot injury, likewise, is unverifiable, and the mouse folk believe her disability feigned. She has no means of effecting recognition of her difference.

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The mouse folk’s response to Josefine’s stratagems is carefully emptied of its anthropomorphic residue to constitute a pure, abstract impermeability to difference. The narrator repeatedly describes the mouse folk in terms of the emotional equivalent to this ontological condition: cold, judicial, impenetrable—in short, profoundly indifferent. Their refusal of Josefine’s petition lacks all human motives or rational basis. The narrator deliberately raises, and dismisses, the specter of a folk exasperated beyond endurance by Josefine’s demands and actively resisting her dominance. He likewise presents no arguments for their refusal: “They also do not bother very much to refute the basis of her petition” (181). The mice simply do not change in their comportment toward Josefine; they admit no difference into their own behavior. “The folk listens to her song as gratefully and enchanted as ever, but makes very little fuss over its curtailment” (184). Their indifference does not represent an emotional or rational counterstrategy on the part of the mouse folk. It constitutes instead their radical animality.

Josefine’s last stratagem is intrinsically ironic. Unsuccessful in modifying her song in a way that would create a noticeable difference (not singing as well as she could; cutting, restoring, or deleting her grace notes; singing in ostensible pain or weakness) she stops singing altogether. Josefine therefore disappears, not literally but logically, by obliterating her “difference” from the pack. Her technique achieves a singular circularity as she combats indifference (lack of recognition) by becoming indifferent (undistinguished). Only her anthropomorphic motive, her resort to a stratagem, distinguishes her disappearance from the “disappearance” indigenous to the animality of the mouse folk.

Yet the narrator cancels even this last little anthropomorphism by suggesting that her ploy may have been no ploy, that her disappearance was not a stratagem at all but a destined instinctual act of her mouse nature. “Strange, how she miscalculates, the clever one, so wrongly, that one could think she doesn’t calculate at all, but is merely driven on by her destiny, which in our world can only be a very sad one” (185).

Josefine’s disappearance fully reveals the trace structure of mouse culture. Her silence is as indistinguishable from other silences as her piping was indistinguishable from other piping. Paradoxically, piping and silence (which should be mutually exclusive) become interchangeable and indistinguishable from each other. “How will it be possible to hold the assemblies in perfect silence? Of course, weren’t they also mute with Josefine

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there?' (185). Accordingly, the mouse folk react no differently to Josefine absent than to Josefine present. "She hides and does not sing, but the folk quietly, without visible disappointment, self-possessed, a self-contained mass . . . moves on its way" (185).

The interplay of singing and silence, and its connection to a hierarchy of cunning, is deployed so brilliantly in Kafka's very short work, "The Silence of the Sirens," that it merits a brief digression here. The piece shares the rhetorical structure of other Kafka works, including "Josefine," that construct a dilemma through a series of assertions and retractions.

The song of the sirens is dangerous.
Ulysses stops his ears with wax and chains himself to a mast.
The song of the sirens pierces through wax and undoes chains.
Ulysses trusts to his stratagem.
The silence of the sirens is more dangerous than their song.

(my paraphrase of the argument)

Ulysses appears doomed either way, since silence and singing, which logically should be mutually exclusive, become interchangeable and undifferentiated in their effects.

The solution to the dilemma depends not on a stratagem per se but on a failure to perceive the failure of a stratagem. By thinking the wax and chains are successful, Ulysses mistakes the sirens' silence for escape from their song. Not his cunning, but the failure of his cunning, manages to drive a wedge of difference (or difference, if you will) between the silence and the unheard song. But Kafka cannot resist the final convolution of the conundrum, and he adds the following possibility in a codicil to the story: wily Ulysses hears the silence of the sirens with impunity by pretending not to hear their song. He appropriates the trace structure of silence as both a presence and an absence and neutralizes the danger of both the sirens' song and the sirens' silence by collapsing them as positive and negative versions of one another. His ruse, the pretended failure to hear their song, is interposed like a "shield" between himself and the sirens' double danger.

Some of the features of this Ulyssian cunning pertain also to the mouse folk of "Josefine," notably its complementary relationship to musicality. "With the smile of this cunning, we tend to console ourselves for everything, even if once in a while—although this never happens—we were to yearn for the happiness that music perhaps brings" (172). With its rational implica-
tions, this Schlauheit seems a peculiar distinctive feature to characterize the mouse folk until we note how it is modified to empty it of anthropomorphic significance. As a "perfectly harmless cunning" this prized attribute is stripped of the malice, the ulterior motive, the defensive emotional residue that colors its human manifestation. Furthermore, Josefine's "unworthy tactics," her attempts to manipulate and threaten the mouse folk into compliance, appear to be different from that uncalculated, fatalistic cunning that causes her, in the end, to outwit herself and unconsciously, inadvertently, rejoin the mouse folk. She does this through her failure, like Ulysses, to understand the failure of her stratagem. This zoomorphic cunning of the mice is irrational rather than suprarational, unconscious and instinctive, a matter of "inadequate and even childish" means.11

The cunning and slyness of the mouse folk operate on a double register of human and animal desire that is patterned on the historical models of Hegel and Nietzsche respectively. Josefine wants nothing less than "public, unequivocal, lasting, superlative recognition of her art" (182), that is, "pure prestige" of the kind that animates the Hegelian Master in the evolution of human self-consciousness. The mouse folk not only deny Josefine her recognition ("She sings, in her own opinion, to deaf ears... she has long ago learned to forego real understanding, in her sense of her word" [174]) but they also refuse to enter into the antithetical relationship of the Master / Servant conflict by refusing to claim recognition for themselves. Instead of a dialectical conflict that engenders a human and spiritual evolution, the historical movement of the mouse folk is counterevolutionary, a surrender to the instinctual, the fated, the animal, the "becoming what one is," that marks the counterprogressive history of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Josefine herself loses her struggle for recognition to a Nietzschean amor fati when she submits to her animal fate in the very act and at the very moment she thought to triumph over it.

Mediating the relationship between Josefine and the mouse folk is the narrator of the story. This narrator must, in some respects, be seen as Josefine's double, since their respective enterprises—Josefine's music and his history (storytelling, criticism, philosophy)—form an anthropomorphic pair. Amid an acultural, ahistorical species that ostensibly practices neither music nor history, the singer and the narrator stand as diagnostically marked ciphers. Both constitute difference ("Josefine is the sole exception; she loves music" [172]) and create difference (the

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narrator’s creation of character, event, conflict). But as a member of the mouse folk the narrator can no more maintain difference than can Josefine. His story collapses as Josefine is retracted as a singer, her performances become indistinguishable from one another and from other piping and silence, and her conflict with the mouse folk dissolves in the convolutions of her double self-betrayal. The narrator’s career is fated to follow the ontological trajectory of Josefine’s career as a singer.

Josefine and the narrator function as creators of difference because they have subjectivity, a consciousness of the self as different from the other, from the mass, and as possessing an individualistic point of view. Josefine’s subjectivity results in psychological and political centricity: she creates centers of opinion and performance amid the random dispersal of the mouse folk. Her centricity is literal and spatial as Josefine determines the site of her concerts not by the needs of her audience but purely by her presence. “She can do this wherever she likes; it need not be a widely visible place: any sheltered corner selected according to the accidental whim of the moment is just as useful” (175). Her performance is, in some sense, no more than an assembly of the mouse folk of which she is the center. The narrator, conversely, conducts his critique of Josefine from his own point of vantage, orienting himself initially to a centered Josefine. “And when you sit before her, you understand her; opposition works only from a distance; when you sit before her you know: what she pipes here is no piping” (174). Later the narrator revises his critique by shifting his point of view. Josefine becomes displaced as a producer of incidental music, and her performance becomes decentered, as mouse relates to neighboring mouse, pressed body to warm body.

The narration is sustained by the conventional literary difference of conflict between Josefine and the mouse folk. But if Josefine is positively marked among the mice with respect to music, the mouse folk are not defined as simply unmusical by contrast, like the other half of a phonemic opposition. The narrator clearly intends to confound their identity altogether, making them neither musical nor exactly unmusical, but rather catching them in a slippery rhetorical web of negatives, conditionals, and hypotheticals that simply dissolves their desire for music altogether into the undifferentiated fatalism of their animal cunning.

Quiet peace is our favorite music; our life is difficult, and, even when we have attempted to shake off our daily worries,
we can no longer elevate ourselves to such things as remote from our ordinary life as music. Still, we do not bemoan this very much; we do not get even so far; a certain practical cunning, which, of course, we need most urgently, we consider our greatest advantage, and with the smile of this cunning, we tend to console ourselves for everything, even if once in a while—although this never happens—we were to yearn for the happiness that music perhaps brings. (172; italics mine)

The musical difference between Josefine and the mouse folk is confounded by the literal residue of the metaphor that equates music with silence ("Quiet peace is our favorite music").

The dramatic center of the work is the political conflict between two groups, Josefine’s sycophantic retinue and her opposition, a conflict whose anthropomorphic configuration makes it accessible to the allegorical interpretation that "Josefine" is a parable of the conflict between the artist and a philistine society. But the narrator confounds this conflict too, first by qualifying his own position with respect to the opposition group ("to which I too half-belong" [174, my italics]), then by qualifying the opposition as "we ostensible opponents" (175, my italics), and finally by dismissing her opponents altogether as Josefine’s paranoid delusion ("If she really had enemies, as she claims. . . . But she has no enemies" [182]). The conflict between Josefine’s supporters and opponents is logically neutralized from the first, when their difference is expunged. They act exactly the same, as we are told that "the opposition, to which I too half-belong, surely admires her no less than the masses do" (174).

If Josefine’s friends and enemies (or putative friends and enemies) behave in identical fashion by equally cheering and applauding her performances, and if both misunderstand her, as Josefine claims, albeit in different ways, then the significance of their difference is obliterated. Kafka indicates a reason for this when he tells us why it is impossible for the mouse folk to laugh at Josefine. "One does not laugh at something entrusted to you; to laugh at that would be a violation of duty" (176). Laughter is possible only when there is separation, alienation, distance, that is, difference. The inability to laugh at Josefine is a symptom of her oneness with the species, her interchangeability with every member of it, a symptom underscored later when we learn that Josefine’s "enemies" do not laugh at her because they recognize that the folk would treat them in an identical way, were they to

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try to establish their own difference. "For this reason alone, because the folk here presents itself in its cold, judicial posture, as one only seldom sees it among us. But even if you were to approve of this posture in this case, the mere consideration that the folk might one day treat you in a similar way, precludes any pleasure" (182). Josefine’s "enemies" have imaginatively identified with her and exchanged places with her. The difference of their hostility (or the hostility of their difference) is collapsed.

There remains the reciprocal méconnaissance between Josefine and the mouse folk. But if Josefine believes this to be a mere confusion of signifieds, if she believes her song to be one thing while the mice believe it to be another, the narrator, who believes her song to be nothing, makes the misunderstanding more radical still. Yet the narrator, in treating her song as signifying nothing, treats it like the Lacanian parole vide, the empty Word that retains social value while saying nothing, that stands for the possibility of communication even while communicating nothing, that functions, ultimately, as a tessera. "Josefine asserts herself; this Nothing in voice, this Nothing in accomplishment asserts itself and makes its way to us; it is comforting to think about" (178). Josefine’s song is the trace, the presence of an absence, and serves, in this respect, as an analogue to Jakob’s music in Grillparzer’s Der arme Spielmann.

This méconnaissance becomes, in a sense, the irreducible difference of the work because it makes its trace structure possible. The narrator recognizes that it is equally important for Josefine to sing and to sing nothing. But if Josefine knew she were singing nothing, she would not sing at all. This clarifies the narrator’s enigmatic reference to the public service rendered by Josefine’s sycophants: by keeping her blind to the insignificance of her song, these flatterers keep her singing (177). Conversely, the folk, or at least the narrator, must understand the significance of the insignificance of Josefine’s singing, a state of affairs that Josefine senses and that causes her dissatisfaction with her public adulation. "She surely has an inkling of this—why else would she deny so passionately that we listen to her?—but she continues ever to sing, piping this suspicion away" (178).

The also seemingly irreducible difference of sex or gender in the work cannot be dismissed as a merely grammatical attribution, a feminization because Josefine is die Maus. The narration displays cultural sexual attitudes toward Josefine anthropomorphic enough for Michael Feingold to speak of "her virtually feminist bitterness when mouse-males treat her as a mere love
object” in his preface to Michael McClure’s Obie Award-winning play, *Josefine: The Mouse Singer.* But like the parental metaphor, these sexual allusions are also emptied of their cultural content in various ways and reduced to their biological and insignificant difference.

Josefine’s behavior contradicts the sexual stereotypes the narrator imposes on her. “She, who on the outside actually represents perfect delicacy, conspicuously delicate even among our folk so rich in such feminine types, seemed at that moment downright vulgar” (173). Elsewhere, Josefine flies into a terrible rage, stamps her feet, “swears most ungirlishly” (175), and bites, behavior still anthropomorphic but with its animal residue violently erupting. Josefine’s femininity is always introduced at the moment it is denied, and her behavior signals not its cultural opposite, masculinity, but its natural opposite, animality. If Josefine’s gender distinction seems preserved to the very end, when at her apotheosis she joins her brothers (“alle ihre Brüder” [185]), it is preserved at the moment of dissolution and obliteration when Josefine is lost among them and forgotten like them.

The movement of the story of Josefine, such as it is, is inscribed in its entirety in the first paragraph of the work: Josefine moves from music to nonmusic, from life to death, from difference from the folk to identity with the folk. The narrative “events” at the end of the story, when we learn that Josefine refuses to sing, that she has vanished, that she will die, are merely a mimetic enactment or repetition of the logical movement of the narration in the first paragraph. This interplay of narrative and logic in “Josefine” reveals the awful secret of storytelling, which Kafka was by no means the first to discover: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* illustrates as well as any work that storytelling requires the repression of its own logical processes and that narration and narrative, logic and tale spinning, are inevitably at war with one another.

In “Josefine” this problem is best explored as one of logical direction. The narrator never gets on with a tale because instead of the logical processes that propel a story forward (belief in causality, the development of consequences, the drawing of inferences and conclusions) his determination to analyze premises and assumptions and to explore the ground of Josefine’s ontological status preempts the narrative. With the pivotal statement, “I have often wondered how it actually is with this music” (172), the narrator returns the story to its origin; the story becomes the reverse of born, not its negation or opposite,
nor a stillbirth or abortion, but its directional reversal, which, for lack of a word or concept, can be illustrated only with comedienne Joan Rivers's visual joke when she suggested to her parenting class that for a lark they run their childbirth film in reverse and watch the infant disappear into the womb. Freud's mystic writing pad has a similar structure.

"Josefine is the sole exception; she loves music and knows also how to communicate it; she is the only one; with her passing, music—who knows for how long—will disappear from our lives" (172). As the narrator proceeds to explore the ontological question of "how it actually is with this music," and Josefine is revealed to pipe just like other mice, the logical erasure of Josefine's difference becomes identical with the death predicted for her. Implicit in all the ambiguous meanings of Hingang, that euphemism for death (passing, departure), is the notion that ontologically death is precisely an erasure of difference, a transition from difference to lack of difference, for is it not the case that in life we are all different while in death we are all the same? Or, to put it another way, is death not precisely the inability of the living to sustain their difference from the dead?

The narrator's sophistic logic, which might be paraphrased into the following syllogistic forms, makes just such a conclusion inevitable:

1. Josefine is different from the mouse folk because she has music while they are unmusical.
2. When Josefine is dead, she will be unmusical like the mouse folk.
3. The mouse folk, being unmusical, are dead.
4. If Josefine lacks music, like the mouse folk, then she is dead before she dies.

Just as music and silence, instead of being logically mutually exclusive, become identical elsewhere in the story, so life and death, which should also be logically mutually exclusive, become identical as their difference collapses. Josefine's Hingang is therefore ironic, for it is not a passage or a transition at all. This explains why the mouse folk will not miss her, either when she disappears or when she dies, why their comportment and sentiment are identical toward Josefine alive and Josefine dead, and why Josefine, like her song, is unverlieberbar, impossible to lose. "Was her actual piping noticeably louder or livelier than its memory will be? Was it even in her lifetime ever more than a mere memory? Did not the folk, in its wisdom, value

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Josefine’s singing so highly precisely because it was, in this sense, beyond losing?” (185).

Kafka turned to the animal in his late fiction because the radicalness of his ontological vision required a negative site of narration: the site of animal being. Kafka dismantles logic as Joyce dismantles language. He systematically deanthropomorphizes language by emptying the conceptual universe of its cultural residue and by emptying rhetoric of its metaphorical residue. This latter process is the Lacanian version of dream work, a reminder, like Freud's in the Wolf Man case, that the analogy of the unconscious and the infantile must also be extended to the animal.

Kafka's technique, finally antiphilosophical insofar as it depends on the dissolution of rational thought, appropriates the negative or deconstructed metaphysics of Derrida's trace. The metaphor of writing forces itself upon Kafka as it does upon Derrida, for in the trace, or *Spur*, left by the erasure it is possible to have a narration that is simultaneously present and absent. How else could we have the story of Josefine, the singer who is no singer, told by a member of a folk who practice no *Geschichte* (history or narration) except as a phantom narration, a trace.

Finally, if one wishes to read "Josefine" as an autobiographical fable, as Kafka’s own swan (or mouse) song, then the final gesture consigning his works to the flames takes on the significance of that mysterious double cunning that prompts Josefine to stop singing. The parallels between story and biography—Kafka’s lifelong desire for exemption from ordinary labor, his temperamental recoil from an avid, but misunderstanding public, the persistence of loyal supporters, like Brod—suggest that Kafka’s motives may have been far more philosophical and ironic than neurotic. Recognizing the trace structure of works that consume themselves logically and rhetorically in paradox and self-contradiction, perhaps he sensed that in their conceptual insubstantiality his texts were already as spectral as ashes and therefore past losing. With superior cunning he may therefore have wanted to surrender to fate, to absorption in the self-contained, undifferentiated, eternally recurring mass of the folk who practice no history or narration and so forget their heroes. Perhaps at the end of his life, Kafka forgot to tell us that to be happy we must, like Nietzsche’s animal, remember to forget.

*Kafka's 'Josefine'*