Der Hund ist los: Kafka’s Mysterious Investigations

I.

In German, “Was ist los?” [literally: “What is loose?”] is a greeting, akin to, “What’s going on?” but with a slightly negative connotation, as in, “What is the matter?”

Every German-speaking person has likely heard the reply, “Der Hund ist los” [literally: “The dog is loose”], or some variation thereof: “Der Hund ist los und die Katze ist in der Keller” [“The dog is loose and the cat is in the cellar”].

A greeting in the form of a question is here met not with an answer but with reply, a reply that is a joke, and a joke that is, frankly, a bad joke.

If it is difficult to imagine anything valuable arising from such trivialities, consider the fact that “What is loose?” also suggests, “What is lost?” to which a jocular reply, while communicating little in manifest content, may express the need to deflect the question.

On the other hand, if one were to ask a dog, “Was ist los?” and the dog were to respond, “Der Hund ist los,” the question would have found a substantial, and agonizing, answer.
In Kafka’s difficult story, “Forschungen eines Hundes” [“Investigations of a Dog”], the eponymous yet unnamed narrator (who is a dog, himself) tells us that all dogs “live together in a literal heap,” that “nothing can prevent us from satisfying that communal impulse,” and that “all our laws and institutions […] go back to this longing for the greatest bliss we are capable of, the warm comfort of being together” (1971, 279).

Thus, when, in his youth, our dog spies seven dogs who dance, stand on their hind legs (“uncovering their nakedness”), and make an incredible music without voices—thereby suggesting that “Nature were an error” (284)—he objects to their seemingly willful violation of both the letter and the spirit of dog law.

He demands to know what they are doing. (Perhaps he might have asked them, “Was ist los!?"

But, to his question, “they— incredible! incredible! They never replied, behaved, as if [he] were not there” (283).

Replying to other dogs is “unconditionally command[ed]” by dog law, so their failure to reply is yet another offense against the law that all dogs behave in such a way as to affirm every dog’s membership in “the canine community” (278).

Our dog’s attempts to question the seven dogs, perhaps even to correct them, are in vain, for the seven dogs reply only by continuing their obscenities.

They make a mockery of dogdom, even though they do not do so joyfully. Instead, it seemed as if they danced and made music under compulsion, “quiver[ing] at every step with a perpetual apprehension, as if rigid with despair” (283).

Our dog admits that it is possible that he was deluded, confused, or mistaken in his vision: that he witnessed no such event. But he is not deterred by doubt from his subsequent investigations.

Instead, this “concert” becomes the foundation of his inquiries into the mysteries of dog existence.
He begins, like an adolescent might, by making “accusations and investigations,” trying “to drag others to the place where all this had happened […] to show everybody where I had stood and the seven had stood, and where and how they had danced and made their music” (285).

These activities, he later admits, “robbed me of a great part of my childhood” (286) and inaugurated his ill-fated study, for which — he reminds the reader several times — he is inadequate, unprepared by formal training.

So, our dog turns his attention to a different but not unrelated subject: the greatest mystery of dogdom, upon which countless essays have been published and circulated among the dog community: the question of “what the canine race nourishe[s] itself upon.”

The answer to this question is given to every dog in infancy in the form of a single imperative to “water the ground as much as you can,” for it is well known that the watering of the ground, in addition to the performance of “certain spells, songs, and ritual movements” procures dogs’ nourishment from the earth (286–87).

But if one inquires further, if one asks, for example, “But where does the earth procure the food which it gives to dogs,” no answer can or will be given.

To ask such a question is to elicit only a reply, such as, “If you haven’t enough to eat, we’ll give you some of ours,” which is not only untrue, since dogs are not known for sharing food, but tangential at best, to the matter at hand.

For our dog, such a response is not even a reply but a bad joke, a “jest,” a form of “raillery” (288), not unlike, “Der Hund ist los.”

This sort of jest is but one way in which our dog feels that other dogs seek to divert him from his quest. If other dogs have occasionally shared their food with him, it was merely in order to shut him up.
While, at first, our dog was certain that others were attempting to seduce him into complacency, eventually, he hit upon an insight into his own activity. “I was the one,” he confesses, “who was trying to seduce the others, and […] I was actually successful up to a certain point,” for

only with the assistance of the whole dog world could I begin to understand my own questions. […] It is not merely flesh and blood that we have in common, but knowledge also, and not only knowledge, but the key to it as well. I do not possess that except in common with all the others; I cannot grasp it without their help. The hardest bones, containing the richest marrow, can be conquered only by a united crunching of the teeth of all dogs. (289–91)

Indeed, our dog admits that all along he has wanted to use the dog community to help him gather knowledge, which he would hoard greedily, although it would ultimately sicken him:

I want to compel all dogs thus to assemble together, I want the bones to crack open under the pressure of their collective preparedness, and then I want to dismiss them to the ordinary life that they love, while all by myself, quite alone, I lap up the marrow. That sounds monstrous, almost as if I wanted to feed on the marrow, not merely of a bone, but of the whole canine race itself. But it is only a metaphor. The marrow that I am discussing here is no food; on the contrary, it is a poison. (291)

So, our dog needs the dog community to find answers to his questions, questions which the dog community does not, itself, seem capable of answering and which, we may surmise, should they be answered, would spell the end of “the ordinary life” of dogs.
Our dog, then, wishes to be alone in drinking the marrow of knowledge, which is also a poison: the poison that will kill the dog (and/or the doggishness, and/or the doggedness) within him.

He acknowledges that his “questions only serve as a goad to myself; I only want to be stimulated by the silence which rises up around me as the ultimate answer. How long will you be able to endure the fact that the world of dogs […] is pledged to silence and always will be?” (291).

And yet he too is a “bulwark of silence.” He, too, has “the impulse to question and the impulse not to answer” (293). Thus, “all this ceaseless labor — to what end? Merely to entomb oneself deeper and deeper in silence, it seems, so deep that one can never be dragged out of it again by anybody” (299).

4.

It is hard not to remark the resemblances between the shocking concert our dog witnesses and a kind of traumatizing, Freudian “primal scene,” just as it is hard to ignore the themes of food, hunger, and fasting that run throughout the story. But none of these themes brings us much closer to understanding the story’s meaning. Worse, they may be distractions.

The extensive literary commentary on the story — rife with discussions of sex and food (see, e.g., Williams 2007) — may only demonstrate that we cannot help ourselves but to return and return, to be both bored and fascinated, like dogs, by these subjects.

It is true that our dog undertakes a lengthy fast as an experiment to discover the source of dogs’ nourishment. And it is true that fasting is contrary to the laws of dogdom as well as to the most fundamental of a dog’s instincts.

But what our dog is after is an ultimate understanding that he cannot conceive. The inconceivable, then, is the real foundation of his inquiries. Put another way, he is motivated by and fascinated by that which he cannot imagine.
Primal scenes of singing dogs and lengthy fasts unto delirium are but stand-ins, as it were, for the impossible understanding he wishes to possess.

5.

Here, then, are the real conundrums:

Our dog hates silence, but admits that silence is his ultimate goal.

The dog community is pledged to silence, and yet they are forbidden to be silent.

In fact, the dog community constantly asks questions, and constantly replies to each other’s greetings, but only to drown out and “obliterate the trace of genuine questions” (297).

Dogs are naturally groupish, drawn to live together, and even our dog admits that his goal, much of the time, is easily achieved with a howl or a bite: “amiable attention, friendly contiguity, honest acceptance, ardent embraces, barks that mingle as one: everything is directed toward achieving an ecstasy, a forgetting and finding again” (290). And yet the seven dogs are different, and witnessing their difference marks our dog as different, separate, exiled.

These (apparent) contradictions suggest that we ask: What does our dog mean by “a forgetting and a finding again”?

Does he mean that to ask impossible questions is to seek not answers but replies, a series of replies, even an assurance of never-ending replies?

A reply is not as satisfying as an answer, but a reply may be given again and again, whereas an answer, presumably, need be given only once.

Consider, on this point, the chatter of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1956). The often comic, often tragic absurdity of their speech, its madness even, may be applied according to a certain method: It assures endless, although confounding, conversation.

It ensures contact and togetherness, but not communication and relatedness. Indeed, it assures the absence and poverty of
communication, for fear that genuine communication and relatedness might destroy the security of a more primitive contact and togetherness.

Or consider the case of Job, who receives, at best, a tangential reply, but not an answer, to his interrogations of God. God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind with no real regard for Job’s inquiries, complaints, and protestations. God declares His supreme majesty and power. He overwhelms Job in His reply.

It is difficult to know whether Job is satisfied by this. Perhaps God’s reply resounds in Job’s ears until the day Job dies. Perhaps this continued “presence” of God — even a different and diminished God — is better, in some sense, than an answer to the question: “Why did the God Job thought he knew betray Job, permitting all that Job loved to be destroyed?”

What if mysteries exist so that we always have something about which to cry out, as if we were seeking answers when, in fact, we seek only endless and repetitive (and perhaps even insubstantial or boring or meaningless) replies?

What if, even more than we need answers, we need replies to assure us that we are not alone in silence?

What if silence, itself, is not categorically distinct from a reply but is, in essence, a reply that carries a kind of meaning? It is, after all, in a kind of silence that we, as children, first encounter the idea: “not good enough,” i.e., “I am not good enough to deserve the response from the other that I most desire.”

What if it is, then, upon the reply that is contained in silence that we construct a psychic shrine to missing words, missing touches, missing persons, and other mysteries: an invisible temple, and a poor substitute for a home.

6.

Our dog (ambivalently) wishes to be alone, and is encouraged in this quest by at least three examples of dogs who have achieved a definitive separation from the canine community: (1) the seven dog musicians, (2) the “soaring dogs” (294), who have never
been seen but of whom many credible accounts have been given, and (3) the ancient or original dogs.

Soaring dogs are, to our dog, an outrage, for they are very small and let their legs “fall into desuetude.” Worse, they “reap without having sowed,” since they do not “water the ground” or contribute to the collective life of dogs in any way but still gather nourishment from the earth, only to return to their “senseless occupation” of floating in the air (294).

Since they are literally set above other dogs, they are imagined to hold a “higher” knowledge and, indeed, “are perpetually talking, partly of their philosophical reflections, with which [...] they can continuously occupy themselves, partly of the observations they have made form their exalted stations” (295). But their philosophies are worthless and, according to our dog, in reality, contribute nothing to dogdom.

The ancient or original dogs, about whom we can only conjecture, brought the dog community together but, in doing so, lost “the Word” and condemned all dogs to an ignorance and a silence about that which was most sacred.

No one knows, of course, what “the Word” is or was, but it is imagined by our dog not to be a set of laws but as a divine presence, much as John (1:1–2, KJV) famously begins his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.”

Their fates less determined by habit, custom, and community life, the early generations of dogs had the opportunity to seize upon “the Word” but failed. “The edifice of dogdom was still loosely put together, the true Word could still have intervened, planning or replanning the structure, changing it at will, transforming it into its opposite,” just as “the Word was there, was very near at least, on the tip of everyone’s tongue, anyone might have hit upon it” (Kafka 1971, 300).

In the beginning, the ancient dogs were closer to “the Word.” It was therefore “easier to get them to speak out,” “even if nobody actually succeeded in doing that” (299), but the ancients “strayed” (got lost, got loose [los]), not knowing their “their aberration was to be an endless one” (300), and began to enjoy
“dog life,” which is a life without the possibility of uttering or hearing the true Word, without the possibility of answering the ultimate questions.

The ancient dogs committed the canine version of original sin. They left behind that which was divine in order to become “doggish” (300), to enjoy ordinary life.

Now, the Word is lost and can never be found. This is not the fault of the current, “fallen” generation of dogs. For them, the Word is but “the thousandth forgetting of a dream forgotten one thousand times” (300), which is why it is possible to say that a dream forgotten a thousand times has an exquisite quality.

7.

In this story, then, we are presented with at least two kinds of silence and at least two kinds of guilt.

There is, first, the silence of the ancient dogs, who strayed from “the Word,” but who could have run back to it, “hounded” it, chased after it “doggedly,” and perhaps even have heard or spoken it.

But there is also the silence of latter-day dogs, locked in ignorance, fated never to know “the true Word,” although impelled by dog nature to investigate and question.

Since the potential to discover “the Word” is lost today, silence is what holds dogs together in their community. The communal bonds of dogs are forged in silence. Even questions, even replies, even the loudest barking of dogs are parts of this silence: a reminder that, while words or barks may be uttered, “the Word” shall never again be spoken or heard.

In the same way, the original guilt of the original dogs, who condemned all future dogs to a life of ordinary communality but severance from the divine, is a (poisoned) gift to latter-day dogs, who now hasten “in almost guiltless silence toward death in a world darkened by others” (300).

Of course, should a dog attempt to reject his fate, his instinct, and, with apologies to Marx, his “species-being,” the guilt the dog experiences only brings him closer to the community of
dogs and their eternal silence, which is, after all, what our dog truly seeks.

Perhaps the dream of no longer being a dog is shared by all dogs, even the most contented, ordinary dog.

Perhaps this dream is dreamt a thousand times or more, perhaps every time a dog sleeps. But this dream, like the Word — and which may very well be “the Word,” itself — is never remembered, always forgotten.

W.R. Bion suggests that, in our nascent states, we encounter proscriptions against seeking “the Word,” the ultimate truth, mainly from “Arf Arfer” [i.e., “Our Father Who Art in Heaven”] (Bion 1982; Grotstein 2007, 229).

But, of course, “the Word” is merely imagined, just as “Arf Arfer” is imagined.

Both “the Word” and “Arf Arfer” are imagined and then imagined to have been lost.

In guilt, we imagine them, then we imagine that we have abandoned “Arf Arfer” and His Word, or that they have abandoned us, which, psychologically, amounts to the same thing, since if we imagine to have been abandoned, we find ways to justify our abandonment by imagining that we deserved to be abandoned.

In any case, we imagine that we cannot know “the Word” and that we are simultaneously condemned for our ignorance of it.

Then, in our frustration and anxiety, we declare “the Word” to be a mystery, which, at least, is something that can be worshipped in place of the absence of the Word and the divinity who held it.

Of course, this worship of the mystery that arises from the imagined loss of an imagined Word uttered by an imagined divinity takes place in silence.

The irresolubility of the mystery is attributed to our inheritance of “instinct,” the “more profound cause of [our] scientific incapacity” (Kafka 1971, 315–16), but is, actually, the most basic necessity of this form of communal, religious practice.

Finally, we imagine our “instinct not to know” to be our hereditary sin, leaving an indelible mark upon our identity.
We are guilty of the “sin of wanting to know” that which cannot and ought not be known (Camus 1955, 49).

Since we cannot be rid of our hereditary sin, all we can do is torment ourselves with endless investigations conducted in such a way as to be — necessarily — fruitless.