

THE ENEMY WITHIN: ZOOPOETICS IN “ERINNERUNGEN AN DIE KALDABAHN”

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Hier gilt auch nicht daß man in seinem Haus ist,
vielmehr ist man in ihrem Haus.

Kafka, “Der Bau”

I.

In the summer of 1917, Franz Kafka suffered a haemorrhage and was subsequently diagnosed with tuberculosis. A month later, on 12 September, he went to stay with his sister Ottla in Zürau, where he would remain until the spring of the following year, convalescing. As his diaries and letters attest, he had some of the most intensive encounters with animals in his life. “Mir geht es recht gut zwischen allen den Tieren” (KKAB3 339), he wrote to Max and Elsa Brod in early October, in a letter describing his careful observation of one of his sister’s pigs, and his practice of feeding the goats in the garden. Perhaps the most complex and intimate relationship of this period was with his sister’s cat, which assumed a particularly prominent position in his everyday life on account of a third category of animals: hordes of mice which kept him up at night with their incessant scurrying, gnawing, and burrowing—“man hört Kralle für Kralle.”¹ The sensation of being surrounded by this “schreckliches stummes lärmendes Volk [...] dem die Nacht gehört,”² working away secretly in his room, filled him with terror. As he explained to Max Brod:

Das was ich gegenüber den Mäusen habe, ist platte Angst. Auszuforschen woher sie kommt, ist Sache der Psychoanalytiker, ich bin es nicht. Gewiß hängt sie wie auch die Ungezieferangst mit dem unerwarteten, ungebetenem, unvermeidbaren, gewissermaßen stummen, verbissenen, geheimabsichtlichen Erscheinen dieser Tiere zusammen, mit dem Gefühl, daß sie die Mauern ringsherum hundertfach durchgraben haben und dort lauern, daß sie sowohl durch die ihnen gehörige Nachtzeit als auch durch ihre Winzigkeit so fern uns und damit noch weniger angreifbar sind.³

Kafka describes how his hearing became infinitely more sensitive, to the point where he was hearing these industrious mice everywhere, and how he sat up in bed attempting unsuccessfully to peer with “Katzenaugen in das Mäusedunkel hinein.”⁴ He eventually came to an understanding with the cat and was able to leave the business of watching out for the mice to it, but Kafka never truly got over his fear of these creatures, his attempts at “toughening himself up”⁵ by observing the field mice in the surrounding countryside during the day notwithstanding.

This experience immediately brings to mind two of Kafka’s late stories, namely “Josephine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse” and “Der Bau,” both written roughly six years later in the winter of 1923/24, shortly before Kafka’s death on June 3rd of that year. Certain passages in “Der Bau” in particular resonate with the feeling of defencelessness that accompanied Kafka’s musophobia on account of the creatures’ small size. Having worked tirelessly at constructing and patrolling his burrow, the animal narrator of “Der Bau” relates how he fell asleep, but was awakened by “ein an sich kaum hörbares Zischen” (KKANII 606) produced, he surmises, by a “kleine[s] Volk” (608), who spoil the integrity of the narrator’s burrow by digging tunnels of their own. “Was für ein unaufhörlich tätiges Volk das ist und wie lästig sein Fleiß” (606). And yet these industrious creatures are a mere nuisance compared to the enemies lurking “im Innern der Erde”:

ich habe sie noch nie gesehn, aber die Sagen erzählen von ihnen und ich glaube fest an sie. Es sind Wesen der innern Erde, nicht einmal die Sage kann sie beschreiben, selbst wer ihr Opfer geworden ist hat sie kaum gesehn, sie kommen, man hört das Kratzen ihrer Krallen knapp unter sich in der Erde, die ihr Element ist, und schon ist man verloren. Hier gilt auch nicht daß man in seinem Haus ist, vielmehr ist man in ihrem Haus. (578)

The narrator's sense of powerlessness and vulnerability is thus compounded by a gnawing suspicion that he is not truly at home in his burrow, but indeed rather intruding on another creature's territory. The dichotomy between inside and outside which the narrator has worked so hard to maintain is thus undermined from within, by indigenous creatures that render the narrator himself an outsider in this burrow which he has "durch Kratzen und Beißen, Stampfen und Stoßen dem widerspenstigen Boden abgewonnen" (601) and which, he insists, is therefore his alone and could never belong to anyone else. The ultimate threat posed by these mythical inner adversaries is thus the possibility of dispossession, or worse: the realisation that one's home was never one's own to begin with.

"Der Bau" has frequently been read as an allegory of writing, with the constant emphasis on the narrator's hands (as well as his head) as the tools used to construct this labyrinthine network of tunnels referring metaphorically to the author's hand constructing his text on the page.⁶ And certainly, the text itself invites just such a reading—the burrow started out as "ein kleines tolles Zickzackwerk von Gängen" which the animal-narrator began to construct "halb spielerisch an diesem Eckchen" (586), just like the first few strokes of the pen in the top left-hand corner of the page, nearest the "surface." Moreover, the burrow is presented as the narrator's life's work—the narrator regards these first few scribbles fondly as his "Erstlingswerk" (587)—which, in the context of the "*Bau* - Text" analogy, suggests that the text is not merely staging the process of its own production, but rather reflecting on Kafka's entire oeuvre. And it is this oeuvre, flawed though it may be, which the narrator seeks to protect from an outside threat. But what of the "enemy within," who inhabits this subterranean structure and may in fact be its true owner? What is this animal that lives down there and threatens to undo everything the narrator has worked so hard to create? More importantly, if the burrow represents Kafka's entire oeuvre, has it been there all along?

II

With these questions in mind, I would like to turn to an earlier text, which is also in many ways uncannily reminiscent of Kafka's "Mäusenacht" in Zürau—I say "uncannily" because it was written in 1914, fully three years before that experience. The story is told by an unnamed narrator who, seeking solitude, has taken a job as a railway station agent near Kalda, a remote town somewhere in the middle of the Russian Steppes. Following a series of abortive attempts at making himself self-sufficient in preparation for the coming winter, hampered equally by the barren environment and the local population, with whom he has a more or less overtly antagonistic relationship, the narrator reveals that the area is inhabited by a horde of enormous burrowing rats which threaten to undermine the foundations of his lonely hut by the railway line by relentlessly clawing away at the walls at night. Finally, he develops an uncontrollable and debilitating cough, which the other railway workers refer to as "Wolfshusten," apparently as a direct result of prolonged exposure to this inhospitable environment. This condition is accompanied by a wild howling sound, the outward manifestation of the narrator's becoming-animal, which is intolerable to his ears, and which forces him to abandon his efforts at securing his hut from the burrowing attacks of the giant rats. The story breaks off just as the narrator decides to return to civilization to seek medical assistance.

This "Russian story," otherwise known as "Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn," was written between mid-August and late November 1914, after Kafka and Felice Bauer had broken off their engagement for the first time—another eerie parallel to Kafka's sojourn in Zürau, which marked the definitive end to that relationship. The fragment does not appear in most collections of Kafka's short prose, but rather merely in his diaries, and has been largely ignored by Kafka scholarship.⁷ The few studies to deal with the text have generally read it in direct relation to elements of Kafka's biography and especially as a means of shedding light on the larger project of *Der Proceß*, which Kafka was writing at the same time.⁸ Although the narrator's battle with the local rat population has been mentioned in passing by several scholars, with very few exceptions no one has yet addressed the story's significance as a document of Kafka's zoopoetics.⁹ In what follows, I aim to delve deeper into this enigmatic and little-read text in order to explore the ways in which the animal presence in this story may elucidate certain aspects of the relationship between animals and writing in Kafka's works as a whole. Specifically, I will trace a trajectory from "Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn" to "Der Bau," exploring the ways in which the earlier text prefigures later forms of animality in Kafka's zoopoetics.

Beyond the “uncanny” parallels between this text and Kafka’s experiences in Zürau—the rustic exile, the sense of being under siege by burrowing rodents, the debilitating lung condition, etc.—“Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn” also contains such a profusion of typically “Kafkaesque” *topoi* that it reads almost like an inventory of Kafka’s literary universe: the protagonist’s social alienation and his ambiguous relationship to his superior; the absurdly futile enterprise of manning a train station on a railway line that leads nowhere; the seemingly decrepit old farmer whose powerful arms could have crushed a full-grown man; the almost total lack of privacy; the constant threat of physical violence; the list goes on. In fact, “Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn” is so thoroughly Kafkaesque thematically and linguistically (not to mention formally: its fragmentary nature only adds to the effect) that one is tempted to regard it almost as self-parody.¹⁰ I would like to propose that the animal presence in the text constitutes one of its most Kafkaesque features, specifically in the way it relates to the materiality of the text and the process of writing itself.

As Cornelia Ortlieb observes, Kafka’s texts are “von Tieren nicht nur gelegentlich belebt, sondern außerordentlich dicht besiedelt” (339). They are literally crawling with animals. Indeed, perhaps more so than that of any other author of this period, Kafka’s entire oeuvre is marked by a sustained engagement with animality. The animal presence in Kafka’s texts assumes many different forms and fulfills a variety of different functions, but in almost all cases, as in the “Kaldabahn” text and in “Der Bau,” the animal presence marks a disruption of the prevailing order, an uncanny intrusion of alterity that is at once unsettling and insurmountable, threatening to upend not just the protagonists’ lives but also the narrative itself.

In the terms elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their influential 1975 study on Kafka, animality serves primarily to *detritorialise* established discourses and power structures by transgressing or eradicating seemingly strictly defined boundaries and opening up new possibilities for dehierarchised sets of dynamic relations constantly interacting through contagions, allegiances, and becomings. If “becoming-animal” plays a prominent role in Kafka’s work, it is, they argue, because such becoming constitutes a “way out” or a “line of flight” out of the Oedipal family structure of domination and frustrated desire that Kafka is known for, and into which the biographical and psychoanalytic readings that dominated Kafka scholarship in the nineteen-fifties and sixties tended to want to reinscribe him. Critics of Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out the inherent paradox of choosing becoming-animal as an emblem of deterritorialisation when in reality animals tend to be highly territorial. Clearly, they are not talking about really existing animals; ‘animality’ and ‘animal’ here name the very process of deterritorialisation itself, where the figure of the animal poses a threat to established orders and boundaries precisely because those orders and boundaries are conceived as anthropo- and logocentric.

The problem with Deleuze and Guattari’s reading lies not so much in this narrow definition of animality; it is that for them becoming-animal *always* serves as an escape route out of this Oedipal reality and, crucially, that the “lines of flight” that such becomings open up appear to exist primarily for Franz Kafka *himself*, not the characters in his narratives, except insofar as they are read as thinly-veiled stand-ins for their author. And since *all* instances of animality serve as vehicles for such deterritorialising, anti-Oedipal becomings, one animal is generally as good as any other. That is to say, despite Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence on the importance of multiplicities and assemblages, their definition of becoming-animal makes it very difficult to account for or even acknowledge *different* types of animality within a text. As we will see, Kafka often aspires to a certain kind of becoming-animal, conceived as a symbiosis of writer and text, and this is a cornerstone of his zoopoetics. But there are other kinds of animal-becomings which are highly involuntary and threatening. Whereas the former is primarily associated with horses and practices of animal training, the latter revolves around untameable, intractable animals, rats and mice and other *Ungeziefer*. Both involve a form of deterritorialisation, to be sure, but they have quite different valences within Kafka’s poetics—or rather, Kafka’s zoopoetics is informed by the very tension between these two forms of animality in and of the text. The question of the animal penetrates to the very core of Kafka’s literary production. As noted, his texts are inhabited by a vast array of animals, many of which appear to be far more “at home” there than the protagonists, who feel perennially isolated and excluded from their surroundings, forever waiting to be allowed in, or under threat of being kicked out. But there is also a sense in which the text *itself* and the language in which it is written has become animal, and it is this, I would argue, that makes Franz Kafka’s poetics a poetics of animality.

In order to conceptualise the status of animals in Kafka’s body of work, it may be useful to draw on Akira Mizuta Lippit’s notion of “animetaphor” as the site of an irreducible tension between animality

and metaphoricity within language (particularly literary or rhetorical language). “One finds a fantastic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor,” he writes, and continues:

The animal brings to language something that is not part of language and remains within language as a foreign presence. That is, because the animal is said to lack the capacity for language, its function in language can only appear as another expression, as a metaphor that originates elsewhere, is transferred from elsewhere. (165–66)

The animal’s presence within language and discourse is hence always at base metaphorical. This originary metaphoricity, in turn, has the capacity to destabilise whatever metaphorical valences subsequently become attributed to an animal figure within a text. To put it another way, there is a fundamental discrepancy between what the animal *is* and what the animal *means*. The “animetaphor” is thus both a metaphor and not a metaphor; occupying both positions at once, it stands for the simultaneous production and dissolution of meaning. In the allegorically charged universe in which Kafka’s narratives unfold, everything appears to take on metaphorical significance, but it can be difficult or impossible to pin down what that significance is exactly, especially when it comes to animals. In the case of the giant rats in the “Kaldabahn” text, as we shall see, their incessant burrowing quickly develops into a metaphor for literary production, and this metaphorical association is underlined after the narrator literally “pins” a rat to the wall with his knife and examines it carefully and impassively. Yet in the context of the story, the rats’ “production” is inherently destructive, perceived by the narrator as a threat from outside which he must endeavour to put a stop to. As in “Der Bau,” the narrator is thus at pains to uphold the boundary he has established between inside and outside, while the rats for their part labour tirelessly to undermine it. This too may be said to be characteristic of the function of animetaphor: it is something external to language but which is simultaneously at the very centre of linguistic expression. As such, it also has the power to make language “other” and to dispossess its user of exclusive ownership.

Kafka frequently refers to his texts in animalistic terms. More specifically, on several occasions he conceives of them as horses and of his task as a writer as that of a rider or trainer, who must try to make them bend to his will and steer them in the right direction. As Malcolm Pasley writes: “die Metapher ‘Pferd’ für ‘Erzählung’, bzw. ‘Reiter’, ‘Pferdedressur’ usw. für ‘Erzähler’ [zieht] sich durch Kafkas ganzes Schaffen [hindurch]” (26). Pasley points to the “Elberfeld” fragment (a.k.a. “Ein junger ehrgeiziger Student,” written ca. Dec. 1914–Jan. 1915), as a commentary on Kafka’s growing frustration with his lack of progress on his novel *Der Proceß*, and his misgivings about the new system of “dressage” he had been attempting to bring to bear on his writing. In the story, a young, ambitious student plans to acquire a horse and train it according to his new method, with which “wahrscheinlich jede Starrköpfigkeit überwunden werden konnte” (KKANI 225). Because of his limited financial means, he plans to abandon his studies and give private lessons during the day in order to be able to devote his nights to the actual business of training the horse, which requires complete concentration, as even the briefest distraction of the horse’s attention would do irreparable damage to his dressage. The best way to avoid distractions is to work at night: “Nur die Nacht ist die Zeit der eindringenden Dressur” (KKANI 416).

The parallels to Kafka’s own habit of writing at night are sufficiently clear—more interesting is the conception of this nocturnal pedagogy (or rather, I suppose, hippogogy) not as a process of domestication, but rather of coaxing out and cultivating the *wildness* of the animal:

Die Reizbarkeit, von der Mensch und Tier, wenn sie in der Nacht wachen und arbeiten, ergriffen werden, war in seinem Plan ausdrücklich verlangt. Er fürchtete nicht wie andere Sachverständige die Wildheit des Pferdes, er forderte sie vielmehr, ja er wollte sie erzeugen, zwar nicht durch die Peitsche aber durch das Reizmittel seiner unablässigen Anwesenheit und des unablässigen Unterrichts. (KKANI 227)

This is probably as close to a definition of his zoopoetics as Kafka ever formulated. The most important aspect of the student’s plan is that it calls for exceptional receptivity to stimuli on the part of the human as well as the animal. This is a reciprocal process—the young man is both a teacher and a student, after all, and he is only interested in an “allgemeinen Fortschritt,” not the pitiful and embarrassing “einzelne Fortschritte” (227) that his rivals have been content to vaunt themselves with.

The student's interest in the Elberfeld horses is spurred by his conviction that, given the right method and sufficient patience, it will be possible to achieve something approaching true symbiosis of horse and rider, such as that expressed in "Wunsch, Indianer zu werden" (KKAD 32–33), where the horse's head and neck gradually disappear along with the need for reins and spurs: the horse and its rider have become merged in a "kentaursche Verschmelzung von Mann und Pferd als Emblem des literarischen Schreibens" (Kremer "Verschollen," 247)—an ideal also gestured towards the name of Karl Roßmann (literally: horse-man), the protagonist of Kafka's first unfinished novel, *Der Verschollene*.

Such zoopoetic experiments are not without risk, however, and for the most part the successful fusion of horse and rider, text and writer, proves unattainable—it is no accident that the "kentaursche Verschmelzung" of "Wunsch, Indianer zu werden" is presented as a dream or a fantasy. The "Elberfeld" text ends with a profession of the young student's diffidence in his ability to deliver the total, unblinking concentration that his method requires. A moment's inattention is all it takes to derail the entire undertaking: "Ein Pferd stolperte, fiel auf die Vorderbeine nieder, der Reiter wurde abgeworfen" (KKANII 298). Sometimes such accidents seem to mark the beginning of a new narrative, but these texts usually break off after a few sentences. "Der Aufbruch" is an exception in this regard, because its hero is lucky enough to find his horse and saddle it himself, despite the incompetence and incomprehension of his servants. But in most cases, either the rider is too weak to ride,¹¹ or it is the wrong horse altogether,¹² or else the horse has mysteriously died during the night,¹³ as at the beginning of "Ein Landarzt," forcing the protagonist to make use of two demonic, unearthly steeds that he cannot control and leave him stranded in the frozen winter landscape.¹⁴ Brief images of difficult or failed animal training abound in Kafka's writings, especially in the later notebooks. The idealised, wished-for form of becoming-animal in Kafka's texts invariably involves potentially tameable animals (horses, dogs, apes, etc.), and when the protagonists' efforts at controlling or training these animals result in failure, the result is almost always comical. By contrast, the involuntary becomings-animal, which involve intractable and abject animals (wolves, rats, insects), are terrifyingly successful.

If "Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn" has primarily been read biographically and/or allegorically as a self-reflexive meditation on Kafka's life as a writer, it is because this text, like so many of Kafka's writings, seems to invite just such an interpretation. In the second half, the narrator's antagonistic relationship to his surroundings and the indigenous fauna ultimately forces him to abandon his position with the railway company and return to civilization, at which point the text breaks off. In this, as in other aspects, the fate of the protagonist of the "Kaldabahn" fragment appears to mirror Kafka's own experience while writing it. Michael Müller notes that the final sentence, describing the narrator's decision to seek medical assistance in Kalda, is crossed out in the manuscript, and concludes that Kafka deleted the sentence "weil es sich um das endgültige und definitive Eingeständnis gehandelt hätte, daß das Lebensexperiment gescheitert ist: es bleibt ihm nur die Flucht aus der Einöde heraus zurück zu den Menschen" (82–83). Based on the *ductus* of these final lines, Müller surmises that Kafka's Kalda "experiment" came to an end in November 1914, roughly three months after he had begun writing the story (76).¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, Kafka wrote in his diary that he could not go on writing, that he had reached his limit, "[u]nd wie irgendein gänzlich von Menschen losgetrenntes Tier schaukele ich schon wieder den Hals und möchte versuchen für die Zwischenzeit wieder F zu bekommen" (KKAT 702). Müller thus quite plausibly interprets the narrator's self-imposed Russian exile as a metaphor for Kafka's determination to isolate himself from the world following his break-up with Felice.

But what of Kafka's animal analogy ("wie irgendein gänzlich von Menschen losgetrenntes Tier")? We might take this to correspond to the narrator's curious illness, which the locals know as "Wolfshusten," and which spells the end of his "Lebensexperiment." Thus, having become (like) an animal, Kafka abandons the story just as his narrator abandons his position at the railway, when his own becoming-animal begins to manifest itself. According to the "rules" elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari concerning the development of Kafka's stories into novels, this is inevitable, for, as they write, "when a text deals essentially with a becoming-animal, it cannot be developed into a novel," whereas "a text that can be the seed of a novel will be abandoned if Kafka imagines an animal escape that allows him to finish with it" (38). In this case, then, it is the narrator's becoming-wolf which constitutes an "animal escape" (for Kafka, that is) and thus marks the end of the story. But the narrator's decision to move to this remote place was already conceived as an escape from his everyday existence, for reasons "die nicht hierhergehören" (KKAT 549)—which means that this would effectively be an escape from an escape.¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari do not actually discuss the narrator's "Wolfshusten" in their essay on Kafka, but rather only his encounter with the rats. "Kafka," they write (echoing Canetti), "is fascinated by everything that is small" (37), but as his Zürau letters attest,

this fascination is more akin to abject terror, and in any case the defining characteristic of the rats in the “Kaldabahn” story is their unusually large size. Furthermore, the progression from becoming-animal to “becoming-molecular and imperceptible,” which Deleuze and Guattari identify in the stories as a factor in the transition from animal to the “machinic assemblage” explored in the novels, is in fact reversed in “Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn”: the rats at first appear as an undifferentiated mass of black dots advancing on the narrator’s hut, but he later stabs one of these rats with his knife and lifts it up to scrutinise it “in Augenhöhe” as an individual specimen.

III.

As the narrator explains, one of the reasons he decided to take this job as a railway station agent in the middle of the Russian steppe was the prospect of hunting:

Man hatte mir gesagt, es sei eine außerordentlich wildreiche Gegend und ich hatte mir schon ein Gewehr gesichert, das ich mir, wenn ich einiges Geld erspart haben würde, nachschicken lassen wollte. Nun zeigte sich daß von jagdbarem Wild hier keine Spur war, nur Wölfe und Bären sollten hier vorkommen, in den ersten Monaten sah ich keine, und außerdem waren eigentümliche große Ratten hier, die ich gleich beobachten konnte, wie sie in Mengen wie vom Wind geweht über die Steppe liefen. Aber das Wild, auf das ich mich gefreut hatte gab es nicht. (688–89)

The narrator’s ambition of becoming a hunter, of tracking and killing his own game, has to do with his desire to become “möglichst unabhängig von allen” (552), just as his plans to cultivate a small vegetable patch and purchase a cow had been made in the interest of becoming entirely self-sufficient. The lack of suitable game for the narrator to hunt is thus an additional blow to his bid for independence and self-sufficiency, and is instrumental in exacerbating his already fragile health. The shotgun he has procured is rendered superfluous, so he never sends for it, but even the tools he does have prove ineffectual in taming this wilderness. The narrator’s efforts to till the soil also result in failure, because “ich war zu schwach um diesen Boden zu bezwingen. Ein widerspenstiger Boden, der bis ins Frühjahr festgefroren war und selbst meiner neuen scharfen Hacke widerstand” (552). As a result of this strenuous and frustrating work, the narrator suffers “Verzweiflungsanfälle” and takes to his bed in the cabin, not even emerging to greet the passing trains.

“Widerspenstiger Boden” is also the phrase used by the animal narrator of *Der Bau* to describe the earth inside which he has laboriously constructed his burrow (KKANII 601). The narrator of the “Kaldabahn” fragment, however, is in every respect ill-equipped to undertake such domesticating measures, and is ultimately unable to carve out a liveable space for himself in these inhospitable surroundings. The landscape around his cabin is described as a featureless, frozen wasteland, stretching “in einer einzigen Fläche” in every direction “ohne die geringste Erhöhung” (552) as far as the eye can see. Again, this flat, white expanse seems to indicate the blank page, upon which the author is vainly trying to make his mark.¹⁷ It is across this white expanse that the narrator observes the mass of black dots converging on the railway station—“Es waren ganze Gesellschaften, ganze Trupps” (686). At first he takes these apparitions for a mere optical illusion, caused by the distance separating him from his hut, but it later becomes clear that these are in fact the first signs of the hordes of giant indigenous rats mentioned later in the text. Here, they are described in both social and militaristic terms, doubly opposed to the narrator both passively (he is solitary; they form a group or community) and actively (like a marauding army descending on his defenceless hut). Like the footprints of the small arctic dogs which the narrator of “Der Kübelreiter” follows across the “Weißgefrorene Eisfläche” (KKANI *App.* 275, cf. Kremer, *Erotik* 26–29), these black dots on a white background suggest letters or words on the page—words which, moreover, the narrator is unable to read or adequately interpret.

The next encounter with the rats occurs at much closer quarters. The narrator, still without a shotgun, resorts to defending himself and his food supplies from the rats with a long knife. One time, having stabbed one of these encroaching rats, he lifts it up on the end of his knife and pins it against the wall in order to observe its pathetic struggle for life, and, he insists, to get a clear, detailed look at these creatures. “Man sieht kleinere Tiere erst dann genau,” he says, “wenn man sie vor sich in Augenhöhe hat; wenn man

sich zu ihnen zur Erde beugt und sie dort ansieht, bekommt man eine falsche unvollständige Vorstellung von ihnen" (689). The narrator's objectifying gaze and quasi-scientific interest in documenting the physical features of this rat is made possible only through an act of casual violence and cruelty. His insistence on scrutinising the animal at eye-level is in no way geared toward establishing an equal or de-hierarchised basis for inter-specific encounter, but rather cements the pre-existing power-dynamic inherent in the relationship between human subject and animal object.

And yet, the encounter also contains a specular moment of sorts, revealing, once the observer and the observed find themselves at eye-level with each other, a potential avenue of identification and exchange which is then promptly abandoned, and things appear to go back to how they were before. But in fact something does pass between these two at this moment, there is a transference of agency, or at least an acknowledgement of this creature's specific identity which has a profound effect on the course of the narrative from this point forward. "Das Auffallendste an diesen Ratten," the narrator writes,

waren die Krallen, groß, ein wenig gehöhlt und am Ende doch zugespitzt, sie waren sehr zum Graben geeignet. Im letzten Krampf, in dem die Ratte vor mir an der Wand hieng, spannte sie dann die Krallen scheinbar gegen ihre lebendige Natur straff aus, sie waren einem Händchen ähnlich, das sich einem entgegenstreckt. (690)

Here, again, a metaleptic substitution of digging or burrowing (*graben*) for writing (*graphein*)¹⁸ becomes possible through the description of this animal's quill-like claws, even as, in its death throes, the rat becomes anthropomorphised, its claws coming to resemble a tiny human hand, reaching out imploringly to its fellow creature. This gesture occurs seemingly "against its nature." The species fellowship fleetingly glimpsed at this extreme moment runs counter to the "natural" order of hostile relations, which, moreover, are predicated on the rats' superior digging capability just as much as they are on the narrator's casually violent acts of self-preservation. That is to say, the fact that the claws of these indigenous rats are uniquely suited to digging contrasts sharply with the narrator's ineffectual attempts at tilling this foreign and intractable soil. Thus burrowing is quite literally *in their nature*, and, as the narrator fast discovers, it takes the form of relentless and destructive nocturnal "attacks" on his hut and his livelihood.

The narrator's urge to counteract the "falsche unvollständige Vorstellung" of the animal reveals his desire to grasp the object in its entirety, from a rational, objective perspective. But it is in fact this perspective that is wrong: it is a mistake to think that one can ever *know* the object completely, least of all if one persists in thinking of it as entirely different from oneself. Thus when the narrator realises that the rat's claws are like a human hand, it undermines the rational, anthropocentric viewpoint, establishing a metaphorical link ("einem Händchen ähnlich") between man and animal. When the narrator pins the rat to the wall, it becomes a specimen, an object of detached, rational observation. The act of lifting the animal up into "Augenhöhe" is tantamount to fixing the non-linguistic in language, constraining it to a strictly defined and immutable concept: "The animal dies at the moment it is thrust into contact with abstraction, with language" (Lippit 48). While pinned to the wall of the narrator's hut, the dead, anthropomorphised rat suddenly becomes comprehensible at a human scale. But down below, "im Innern der Erde," the digging continues. What is more, this subterranean murine activity is not only unavoidable; it is an indispensable part of the structure of the text—and, indeed, of language itself.

The narrator's hut, we read, is in truth more of a shed, left over from when the railway was being built, consisting of a single room equipped with a bunk and a desk "für mögliche Schreibarbeiten" (550). He does not, however, appear to engage in any writing beyond the bookkeeping required of his job, with which the inspector who comes once a month automatically finds fault. But in any case this is a different kind of writing than the "graben" toward which the rats are so naturally predisposed, and the "gardening" which the narrator so abortively attempted. The ability to burrow through the frozen earth—rather than simply to build tracks across it, tracks which lead nowhere and serve no purpose, but which must nevertheless be endlessly and rigorously maintained—that is the truly transformative writing to which Kafka and so many of his protagonists aspire. "Nur so kann geschrieben werden," he wrote two years previously of his story *Das Urteil* which he had written in one sitting, "nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele" (KKAT 416). Kafka, like these rats, worked at night, but he rarely if ever achieved the kind of openness and coherence as he did that one night in late September 1912. This, like the "kentauresche Verschmelzung" described above, is the ideal form of writing.

In early October 1917, about a month before his terrible “Mäusenacht,” Kafka wrote a letter to Max Brod from Zürau telling his friend that he had been reading but not writing, and nor did he have any desire to write, before concluding: “Könnte ich mich wie die Fledermaus durch Graben von Löchern retten, würde ich Löcher graben.” Clearly it is not as easy for Kafka to write literature as it is for the bat to dig holes, but both activities constitute an existential necessity, a “way out” (or, perhaps, a “line of flight”) to salvation. Even for the Russian rats, however, the compulsive burrowing represents hard, seemingly senseless work. “Es war ganz nutzlose Arbeit,” the narrator notes upon observing one of the rats feverishly clawing away at the wall from outside,

denn um für sich ein genügend großes Loch zu graben, hätte sie tagelang arbeiten müssen und sie entflohen doch schon, sobald der Tag nur ein wenig sich aufhellte, trotzdem arbeitete sie, wie ein Arbeiter, der sein Ziel kennt. Und sie leistete gute Arbeit, es waren zwar unmerkliche Teilchen, die unter ihrem Graben aufflogen, aber ohne Ergebnis wurde die Krallen wohl niemals angesetzt. (690)

In the interplay of affirmation and negation, or, in this instance, negation and re-affirmation, this passage exemplifies the style of the text as a whole—a particularly Kafkaesque rhetorical gesture, which Gerhard Neumann famously called Kafka’s “gleitendes Paradox.” Here, the rat’s activity is at first described as futile and senseless, but gradually its persistence gives way to “gute Arbeit,” and finally it appears that the rat knows exactly what it is doing and that this work is proceeding at a steady, albeit glacially slow pace. This nocturnal diligence is reminiscent of both the “unaufhörlich tätiges Volk” in *Der Bau* who spoil the animal narrator’s burrow with their burrowing while he is asleep, as well as the “geheimabsichtliche Erscheinen” of the mice in Zürau, who, Kafka fears, have dug their tunnels through every inch of the walls of his room.

But there is a further significance to this description, which has to do with the conception of this persistent, seemingly fruitless, yet ultimately purposeful and rewarding activity as the embodiment of a particular form of writing, indeed, as a particular way of inhabiting the text. As I have argued, the relationship between the narrator and the rats (or, more properly, the frozen landscape as a whole) may be seen as analogous to the relationship between the author and the text, which, in Kafka’s case, is frequently characterised in terms of domination or cultivation. Hence, until the writer succeeds in “breaking” the text, it remains recalcitrant (*widerspenstig*) and the relationship between him and the text will be antagonistic. But more than that, the text will actively seek to counteract the author’s incursions into this territory, just as the rats relentlessly seek to undermine the walls of the narrator’s hut. He, in turn, stuffs the holes with straw and tow, and kills whatever rats he comes across. The constant oscillation between the rats’ burrowing and the narrator’s reparations mirrors the ebb and flow of negation and re-affirmation that characterises the language of the text itself. In a sense, the text, embodied in the pack of black rats that inhabit this space, is constantly preoccupied, for its own “secret purposes” (*geheimabsichtlich*), with undoing whatever progress the writer has made to bend it to his own wishes. At the same time, however, it is important to note that this burrowing is in itself an act of creation, but one whose purpose is inscrutable to the narrator and which must hence be at odds with his own aims and desires.

IV.

By the time we get to “Der Bau,” the narrator has learnt how to construct his own burrow within this stubborn ground, and although his fellow inhabitants have not ceased their furious industry, the structural damage wrought by these smaller creatures is significantly less serious and the narrator is more easily able to accommodate their additions and alterations into his plan. He is inside the text in a way the narrator of the Kaldabahn story could never be: although the deletion of the final sentence to a certain extent leaves him stranded there, unable to return to civilisation, the narrative perspective announced in the first sentence—“es ist nun schon viele Jahre her” (549)—assures the reader that the narrator lived to tell the tale.¹⁹ But even in the burrow there are lingering doubts about the relationship between the narrator and the ground of the text. He has learnt to live with the little mice that create connecting tunnels between those he himself has chosen to construct, and although they may alter the overall structure of the burrow, they nevertheless form part of it and can be incorporated into his plan. The more serious threat, as we saw earlier, lies in the

mythical and obscure “Wesen der innern Erde” who have the capacity to expropriate this textual construct and evict the narrator from it entirely—suddenly it is no longer *his* burrow which the other, smaller creatures are spoiling, but rather *their* burrow, which the narrator has been illegally occupying. Once the polarities of ownership and intrusion, inside and outside have been reversed in this way, there is no hope of escape, let alone of regaining one’s control: “man hört das Kratzen ihrer Krallen knapp unter sich in der Erde, die ihr Element ist, und schon ist man verloren.” (KKANII 578)

We see something of this already in “Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn,” particularly in the giant rats and their relentless attacks. They too appear to be “in their element”; their claws are uniquely suited to burrowing, and they seem intent on destroying the narrator’s hut. Awakened by the sound of clawing one night, the narrator goes outside in order to get a look at the rat trying to get in. As he describes it, the animal’s snout and front paws are so thoroughly wedged into the hole it is excavating that “[m]an hätte glauben können, jemand halte in der Hütte die Krallen fest und wolle das ganze Tier hineinziehen” (691). This scene anticipates a future reversal as the narrator goes outside in order to inspect the progress of the rat toward the inside: for the moment, it is still only halfway there, and he easily dispatches it with a well-aimed kick. Yet the rats’ incursions into his domestic space (such as it is), seen from a different perspective, at the rats’ eye-level perhaps, might easily be reinterpreted as an attempt to repair the damage caused by the narrator’s (and the railway company’s) incursion into *their* territory.

For the time being, the narrator’s hut is still standing, and with it the distinction between inside and outside that makes his life possible in this inhospitable climate. But soon—a mere three months after his arrival—these boundaries are rendered effectively meaningless as the narrator’s body falls victim to an incursion from the surrounding landscape in the form of a serious illness accompanied by a violent cough. When the train crew hear this cough, they refer to it as *Wolfshusten*. “Seitdem begann ich das Heulen aus dem Husten herauszuhören. Ich saß auf dem Bänkchen vor der Hütte und begrüßte heulend den Zug, heulend begleitete ich seine Abfahrt” (693). It is striking how the narrator only begins to notice the howling once his condition has been given an animal *name*. That is to say, the inarticulate sounds which the narrator is now compelled to utter are seemingly called forth through language. The condition is thus linguistically determined, and is, on some fundamental level, brought forth by contact with a specific type of language embodied by the surrounding landscape. If you will pardon the expression, this is, in short, a textually transmitted disease.

At the same time, this quasi-lycanthropic transformation represents the next stage in the process that began with the anthropomorphisation of the rat’s claw into a tiny hand. The transference of human and animal attributes, which the narrator resisted at the time, now becomes unavoidable. Having failed to begin “writing like a rat,” he now instead begins howling like a wolf and is forced to stop trying to defend his hut from the rats. All he can do is kneel on his bunk with his head buried in animal furs in order not to have to listen to the terrible howling. He is thus fully immersed in traces of animality. Covering his face may muffle the sound, but it does not provide an escape from the animal which now resides within his own body. The wolf is the “gänzlich von Menschen losgetrenntes Tier” *par excellence*. As such, then, far from marking the failure of his “Lebensexperiment,” this metamorphosis ultimately represents its logical conclusion: the narrator had sought a way to live as far away from other people as possible; in becoming like a wolf, he has become alienated even from himself. There is nothing left to do but to return to civilisation; the story must end here. The unmistakable assonance of the names “Kalda” and “Kafka”—another example of what Malcolm Pasley long ago called Kafka’s “semi-private games”—means that in abandoning his solitary exile and returning to Kalda, he is, in effect, returning to himself.

We have already seen how Kafka considers his texts in animalistic terms—as horses, for instance, that need to be trained—where the ultimate goal was to effectuate a centauric fusion of the rider/writer with the horse/text. The “Wolfshusten” cannot be said to represent this form of idealised symbiosis any more than the narrator’s exhortation to examine small animals at eye-level can. Throughout the narrative, he has sought to fend off the indigenous animals and dominate this textual landscape; his illness puts a definitive end to such ambitions and he must admit defeat. Unable to defend his hut from the rats, it is only a matter of time before its walls collapse entirely, leaving nothing to separate him from the rest of the landscape. Worse, even his body is not his own, having been taken over by an animal presence which compels him to vocalise in a non-human idiom that he cannot endure, much less understand.

What is this animal presence, this “enemy within,” other than animetaphor? Traditionally, language has been seen as a house built and inhabited by humans, while animals have resolutely been kept outside its walls. Yet upholding this boundary requires constant vigilance, since the animals are forever finding a way in, in the shape of metaphors, analogies, figures of speech. Once in, they take up residence, leaving a trace that is at once external *and* constitutive, alien *and* fundamental. The animetaphor thus constantly threatens to deterritorialise human language even as it opens it up to new forms of expression. Kafka’s zoopoetics in particular rely on granting access to the animal, on allowing it to construct its own meanings within the network of human language, but there is an inherent risk involved in this process. The lingering threat that one day you will wake up from unsettling dreams and instead of finding yourself in your own house, you’ll be living in *theirs*.

Notes

¹ Letter to Max Brod, 24 Nov. 1917 (KKAB3 367). For abbreviations see *Works Cited*, Kafka

² Letter to Felix Weltsch, 15 Nov. 1917 (365).

³ Letter to Max Brod, 3 Dec. 1917 (373).

⁴ Letter to Max Brod, 10 Dec. 1917 (378).

⁵ Letter to Felix Weltsch, ca. 30 Nov. 1917 (372).

⁶ Cf. Menke 32: “Das im Text verschwiegene, metaleptisch ausgesparte *graphein* stiftete den literalen Zusammenhang des Baus und des Textes, das heißt auch zwischen dem, *was* oder *worüber* das Tier erzählt, und dem, *wie* das Tier erzählt oder dem Erzählen selbst. Das Schreiben–Graben gibt also vor, daß Bestimmungen des Baus quasi-allegorisch als solche für den Text-*Bau* gelesen werden können.” See also Corngold 283 (“it is an allegorical burrow of writing”) and Politzer 319 (“In an almost allegorical way ‘The Burrow’ is identical with Kafka’s own work”), among many others.

⁷ “Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn”—the title is Kafka’s own—first appeared in print in 1951 with the publication of Max Brod’s edition of Kafka’s diaries. The Critical Edition follows Max Brod’s lead on this point by reproducing the text only in the *Tagebücher* volume (549–53, 684–94). The Fischer Taschenbuch edition of Kafka’s *Erzählungen*, edited by Roger Hermes, likewise does not contain the story, and the same is true of the Muir translation of Kafka’s *Complete Stories*. The only English translation of the story is thus to be found in volume two of Kafka’s *Diaries* edited by Brod and translated by Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt. It is not clear why Brod opted not to publish the “Kaldabahn” fragment separately, but it is conceivable he suppressed it because of the overtly homoerotic description of the relationship between the narrator and the inspector who visits him every month. On Brod’s heteronormative “censorship” of Kafka’s texts see Anderson.

⁸ Peter-André Alt and Reiner Stach both mention the text briefly in their recent biographies of Kafka, the latter in reference to the fragmentary nature of the majority of Kafka’s writings (Stach 44, 496), the former in the context of Kafka’s uncle Josef Löwy, who was involved in the construction of a railway in the Belgian Congo for nearly twelve years, and whose exploits are commonly held to have at least partly inspired the “Kaldabahn”-story (Alt 28; cf. Northey 15–30). Hartmut Binder reads the narrator’s decision to isolate himself in the depths of Russia in terms of Kafka’s break-up with Felice (173), a view shared by Michael Müller, who furthermore posits a link to the final days of Leo Tolstoy, which had been prominently reported in the press four years previously (75–76). Müller’s is one of only two scholarly articles devoted explicitly to the “Kaldabahn.” The other is by Bernd Neumann, who quite rightly takes issue with the preponderance of biographical readings of the story, but his subsequent attempt to interpret the Russian setting as an explicit reference to contemporary anxieties surrounding the fate of the region’s Jews in the wake of the outbreak of the First World War is spurious and far-fetched, and his insistence that “Kaldabahn” forms part of a trilogy of Russian stories (42)—the other two being *Der Proceß* and “In der Strafkolonie”—is plainly wrong and most likely based on a misreading of Kafka’s diary entry of 21 August 1914, in which Kafka complains of

being “von allen drei Geschichten zurückgeworfen” before concluding that “Vielleicht ist es richtig, daß die russische Geschichte nur immer nach dem Proceß gearbeitet werden durfte” (KKAT 675)—a reference to “Kaldabahn,” certainly, but indisputably singular, and there is no apparent reason why *Der Proceß* (let alone “In der Strafkolonie”) should be considered a “Russian” story.

⁹ Neither Müller nor Neumann pays more than the most cursory attention to the role of animality in the text. Karl-Heinz Fingerhut does devote several pages (69–74) to the story in his encyclopaedic survey of animals in Kafka’s works, but his approach is largely thematic, and his reading is problematic in places (see note 19 below, for example). A number of other scholars mention the text in passing, in particular the episode with the rats, e.g. Elias Canetti (99), Cornelia Ortlieb (353–54), and Jacques Berchtold (62–68), who considers the text in his survey of the fear of rats in literature and film. In her “Kleine Zoopoetik der Moderne,” Isolde Schiffermüller briefly contrasts the scene in which the narrator kills one of the rats to the image of the dying flies in Robert Musil’s “Fliegenpapier” (204–05).

¹⁰ I am of course aware that it must appear almost comically redundant to insist that something written by Franz Kafka is “Kafkaesque.” Nevertheless, since the term Kafkaesque generally refers only to certain themes, situations or impressions that are deemed particularly characteristic of the “Kafka universe,” it seems reasonable to assume that even within the corpus of works produced by Franz Kafka, some will exhibit more Kafkaesque elements than others. In “Erinnerungen an die Kaldabahn,” it seems to me, there is an unusually high frequency of such elements, which can lead to the impression that Kafka is simply “having us on” here and writing in a deliberately Kafkaesque way. Although the text is undeniably self-ironic in places, in truth it is more likely that the story was a sort of testing ground for many of the elements we have since come to associate with Kafka’s literary universe and which he worked out more fully in his later texts and in the novels.

¹¹ “Ich wurde zu meinem Pferd geführt, ich war aber noch sehr schwach.” (KKANI 417)

¹² “Das ist nicht mein Pferd, sagte ich als mir der Knecht des Gasthofes am Morgen ein Pferd vorführte.” (KKANI 417)

¹³ “in den Pelz gepackt, die Instrumententasche in der Hand, stand ich reisefertig schon auf dem Hofe; aber das Pferd fehlte, das Pferd. Mein eigenes Pferd war in der letzten Nacht, infolge der Überanstrengung in diesem eisigen Winter, verendet” (KKAD 252–53).

¹⁴ Isolde Schiffermüller views the texts published in the collection *Ein Landarzt* (1920), most of which were written in 1917, as records (“Protokolle”) of the nocturnal experiments announced in the “Elberfeldheft.” And, to be sure, there is a conspicuous abundance of horses in the stories contained in that volume. “Es sind Erzählungen, die die Grenze der menschlichen Sprachordnung befragen und die Schwelle erkunden, an der sich die Stimme der Tiere von der Sprache der Signifikanten scheidet” (“Elberfelder Protokolle,” 87).

¹⁵ Here, again, the story appears to mirror the conditions under which it was written. Kafka began writing it in mid-August; as the narrator arrives in Kalda it is still summer and he frequently mentions the need to prepare for the coming winter. Kafka seems to have abandoned the story in mid-to-late-November, roughly three months after it was begun; some three months after his arrival in Kalda, the narrator falls ill with his mysterious “wolf’s cough” and is forced to leave his post with the railway company. Despite these precise temporal markers, however, the chronology of the text frequently appears protracted or otherwise unreliable. The inspector, for instance, comes once a month to check the logbooks, which means that he can only have come two or three times before the narrator falls ill, and yet his visits are described in a way that implies a continuity and routine that can hardly have established itself over such a short space of time.

¹⁶ We may note the parallel here (particularly in the context of Kafka’s failed engagement with Felice) with K.’s conversation with Pepi in *Das Schloß*, in which he admits to having neglected his fiancée Frieda, and that that is the most likely reason she left him: “Das ist leider wahr, ich habe sie vernachlässigt, aber das hatte besondere Gründe, die nicht hierher gehören; ich wäre glücklich, wenn sie zu mir zurückkäme, aber ich würde gleich wieder anfangen, sie zu vernachlässigen” (KKAS 480, emphasis added). This phrase occurs in a number of Kafka’s texts, almost invariably with reference to unresolved issues of familial shame and guilt,

which go unspoken but nevertheless continue to haunt the text. In *Das Urteil*, for instance, when Georg's father accuses him of not telling the truth (about his friend in Russia? or about something else?), he adds: "Ich will nicht Dinge aufrühren, die nicht hierher gehören. Seit dem Tode unserer teuren Mutter sind gewisse unschöne Dinge vorgegangen" (KKAD 52, emphasis added)—including, presumably, Georg's engagement to Frieda Brandenfeld, (another Frieda, whose initials mirror those of Felice Bauer, a link Kafka himself emphasised). Similarly, in "Der Heizer" (the first chapter of *Der Verschollene*, written in late September 1912, just days after *Das Urteil*), Karl Roßmann's uncle explains that he has been living apart from his European relatives for years "aus Gründen, die erstens nicht hierher gehören, und die zweitens zu erzählen mich wirklich zu sehr hernehmen würden" (KKAD 96, emphasis added). He says that he dreads the day when he may be forced to tell his nephew the reasons for his exile, because it will require him to speak frankly about Karl's parents and their relatives. These reasons that "do not belong" and "shall go unmentioned" thus seem to pertain primarily to Oedipal relations, which through the rhetorical gesture of paralipsis are invoked through the very process of dismissing them and thus placed "under erasure." If becoming-animal serves as a "line of flight" out of such Oedipal structures of frustrated desire, then the need for a second animal escape might be explained by the fact that in beginning with such a paralipitic gesture, the text represents a failure to find a way out of the "Gründe" it seeks to leave behind.

¹⁷ Michael Müller presents physical evidence to support this reading: "Die ersten beiden Abschnitte des *Kaldabahn*-Textes sind mit einer offenbar schon stark abgenutzten Feder geschrieben [...] im weiteren Verlauf der Niederschrift hat die Feder angefangen, sich zu spreizen, so daß Doppelkonturen entstanden. Im dritten Abschnitt hat Kafka dann die defekte Feder durch eine neue ersetzt" (80). The "neue scharfe Hacke" the narrator mentions shortly thereafter may thus be taken to allude to this newly replaced writing instrument. Compare also this untitled fragment from the spring of 1922, where Kafka employs the same extended metaphor: "Ich wollte mich im Unterholz verstecken, mit der Hacke bahnte ich mir ein Stück Weges, dann verkroch ich mich und war geborgen" (KKANII 370).

¹⁸ In addition to the passage in Menke cited above, also Bay 60 and Kremer, *Erotik* 151.

¹⁹ The abrupt end of the story has led Karl-Heinz Fingerhut to conclude that "Der von Krankheit geschwächte Jäger wird vermutlich zum Schluß von den unheimlichen Ratten umgebracht" (73), but this reading is difficult to reconcile with the story's opening.

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Individual volumes are abbreviated as follows:

KKAD = *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*

KKANI = *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*

KKANII = *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*

KKAT = *Tagebücher*

KKAB3 = *Briefe, April 1914–1917*

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