

Article

# An Unheard, Inhuman Music: Narrative Voice and the Question of the Animal in Kafka's "Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk"

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**Abstract:** In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida wonders whether it would be possible to think of the discourse of the animal in musical terms, and if so, whether one could change the key, or the tone of the music, by inserting a “flat”—a “blue note” in other words. The task would be to render audible “an unheard language or music” that would be “somewhat inhuman” but a language nonetheless. This essay pursues this intriguing proposition by means of a reading Kafka’s “Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk,” paying careful attention to the controversy regarding the status of Josephine’s vocalizations, which, moreover, is mirrored in the scientific discourse surrounding the ultrasonic songs of mice. What is at stake in rendering this inhuman music audible? And furthermore, how might we relate this debate to questions of narrative and above all to the concept of narrative “voice”? I explore these and related questions via a series of theoretical waypoints, including Paul Sheehan, Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy, with a view to establishing some of the critical parameters of an “animal narratology,” and of zoopoetics more generally.

**Keywords:** narrative voice; inoperativity; singing mice; zoopoetics; anthropological machine; community; music

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*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on*

—Keats

## 1. The Songs of Mice

In 2015, a study published in the journal *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* reported that not only do male mice sing songs to attract females, but that these songs are syntactically complex and vary according to social context, placing mice in the same category as songbirds (Chabout et al. 2015). The principal difference is that, unlike birds, mice sing at ultrasonic frequencies (30–120 kHz), and so their songs are inaudible to the human ear. Later that same year, another study found that female mice also sing (Neunuebel et al. 2015). Both studies were widely reported in the online media (e.g., (Devlin 2015; Feltman 2015; Farrell 2015; Miller 2015)). This was not the first time singing mice had been in the news, however: in fact, ever since the pioneering 2005 study by Timothy Holy and Zhongsheng Guo first established that mouse vocalizations have the characteristics of songs—i.e., that they consist of several distinct syllables or phrases “uttered in succession and so related as to form a recognizable sequence or pattern in time” (Holy and Guo 2005, p. 2178; cf. (Arriaga 2014, p. 85))—the media have picked up on a new discovery concerning the songs of mice every few years. Evidently, there is something about these studies that captures people’s imagination. In 2011, for example, the *Smithsonian Magazine* published a piece on a North Carolina project aiming to record and study these

ultrasonic songs, remarking that “the world of rodents, long thought mostly quiet, may be full of songs, broadcast short distances, from one animal to another, songs that we still know very little about” (Dunne 2011). The comments section below the article is filled with notes by readers who either claim to have experienced the singing of mice or are simply charmed by the idea of this unheard music. One reader in particular thanks the author profusely for writing the piece because it reminds them of Franz Kafka’s final story, “Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse People”: “Thank you, thank you,” they wrote, “for giving Josephine a real voice!” (Dunne 2011).

There have been reports of such singing mice since well before it was possible to record them, and indeed before Kafka wrote his story. Alfred Brehm, in his compendious *Life of Animals* published in the 1860s, describes the phenomenon in some detail. Some people, Brehm notes, compare the singing favorably to “that of a Canary or even of a Nightingale” whereas others are less enthusiastic, for instance a certain Herr Schacht, “a well-known educator and reliable and well-informed observer,” who claims to have had a singing mouse for some time (Brehm 1895, p. 338). “Its song did not bear the slightest resemblance to the bright song of a Canary or the deep trills of a Nightingale. It was nothing but ‘a twittering, a mixture of long-drawn, squeaking, piping sounds,’ which in the quiet of night could be heard at a distance of twenty paces. The song of another Mouse, observed by Herr Mueller, another tutor, consisted of ‘soft, whistling sounds, uttered slowly or in a more lively manner, in the latter case reminding one distinctly of a bird’s song, but being much weaker’” (Brehm 1895, p. 338). In any case, Brehm concludes, it would be “more congruous to speak of ‘twittering’ Mice than of ‘singing’ ones” (Brehm 1895, p. 338).

Brehm’s evidence is mostly anecdotal, but some mice do indeed appear to sing at a pitch audible to the human ear, though it remains unclear why this should be. In a 1932 article published in the *Journal of Mammalogy*, Lee R. Dice provides a comprehensive bibliography on the subject, and concludes with the speculation that perhaps all mice sing, but that their songs are “ordinarily too high in pitch for our ears to hear,” so that we can only hear “certain rare individuals” whose vocal apparatus has been changed or deformed in some way (Dice 1932, p. 193). One such case had been described in 1912 by Charles A. Coburn, then a Harvard graduate student, who had captured a singing mouse in his home and taken it to his lab. “The sound is best described as a rapid whole-toned trill involving the tones *c* and *d*,” he writes, even supplying a musical transcription, before adding that “the quality of the tone resembled somewhat that of a fife or flute, but each tone ended with a slight throaty click” (Coburn 1912, p. 366). The mouse was captured in December 1911 and continued to sing until June of the following year. “She died in August, apparently of old age” (Coburn 1912). “During May 1912,” Coburn writes, “‘singing’ was again heard in the room in which the ‘singing’ mice had earlier been captured, but efforts to capture the ‘singer’ failed” (Coburn 1912).

Throughout, as we can see here, Coburn dutifully places the word “singing” in inverted commas, no doubt to guard against allegations of anthropomorphism. This is a practice which continues to this day, e.g., in the media coverage of the songs of mice, where every reference to ‘songs’ and ‘singing’ is routinely placed in ‘scare quotes,’ as if to indicate that these designations ‘really’ apply only to human beings, despite the fact that most people do not feel the need to mark birdsong as similarly improper. Why should this be? No doubt the aesthetic quality of birdsong is a decisive factor. Like Herr Schacht, we humans have always marveled at the beauty and precision of the nightingale’s song, and, indulging in our species narcissism, we have been able to imagine that the nightingale or the blackbird are singing *for us*. This is simply a further iteration of the general ideology of metaphysical anthropocentrism which arranges the natural world in terms of its utility for humans: cows and pigs exist only to provide us with meat, whereas songbirds provide us with aesthetic pleasure.<sup>1</sup> Within this worldview, the very

<sup>1</sup> As Justin E. H. Smith observes, this conception of animals as having a specific telos or purpose “for us” hinges on a “theory of animals” that reduces individuals to interchangeable instances of a kind. “At its most anodyne,” he writes, “this conception of animals permits us to see entire species as manifesting a single psychological trait of the sort we would ordinarily ascribe to individual human beings (e.g., slyness, laziness), but it is fundamentally no different than the conception that enables us

idea of mouse song must appear as a scandal. Not only are mice a nuisance, traditionally serving no useful function (excepting their comparatively recent use in laboratories), but their songs are inaudible to us. If they do indeed sing, it is not for our benefit or enjoyment. Or, as T. S. Eliot might have put it: I have heard these rodents singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me.

Thus, the singing of mice points to a world beyond human perception, which science is only now beginning to be able to detect, but which has given rise to a cultural imaginary surrounding mouse song that hovers perennially at the boundary between sound and silence. There are several layers of ambiguity surrounding the singing of mice: first, whether it should be characterized as singing at all, and, second, whether all mice sing or only certain exceptional individuals. It will be noted that these very questions provide the narrative impetus of Kafka's "Josephine" (Kafka 2007a), the last story he wrote and the last to be published in his lifetime. There is evidence to suggest that Kafka was well-acquainted with Brehm's *Tierleben* (cf. (Middelhoff 2015)), and so it is not unlikely that he knew about singing mice—he may even have experienced them first-hand at his sister's farm in Zürau (cf. (Driscoll 2014)). When he wrote "Josephine," Kafka had essentially lost his voice to tuberculosis, and the narrative follows a trajectory from sound to silence, ending with the disappearance of Josephine's voice. Like most of Kafka's late animal stories, it has a first-person narrator, who in this case is not Josephine, but rather another mouse, presumably a male, who is describing the relationship between Josephine and the other mice. The entire narrative can be seen as an example of what Gerhard Neumann called Kafka's "gliding paradox" (Neumann 1968), a peculiarly Kafkaesque rhetorical figure whereby an initial affirmative statement—for example, "Our singer is called Josephine" (Kafka 2007a, p. 94, trans. mod.)—is gradually negated, whereupon that negation is itself negated, and so on, until all certainty has been eroded. In this story, the central tension concerns the nature and definition of Josephine's singing: having announced that Josephine is "our singer" the narrator then proceeds to question whether it really is singing, whether it isn't more of a whistling (*Pfeifen*), and then paragraph by paragraph the opening statement is questioned, qualified, and negated until there's nothing left: it's singing; no, it's more like whistling; but no actually it's not whistling; in fact it's less than the ordinary everyday whistling of all the other mice; her voice is really "nothing" (Kafka 2007a, p. 100); there is nothing musical about it, or if there is "then it is reduced to the lowest possible nothingness" (Kafka 2007a, p. 102); no of course it is whistling, "[h]ow could it be anything else? Whistling is the language of our people" (Kafka 2007a, p. 103), and so on, until at last we learn that Josephine has disappeared, at which point the narrator asks whether there will be any noticeable difference between Josephine's absence and her presence, and whether the gatherings where she used to sing weren't in fact completely silent all along.<sup>2</sup>

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to see cattle as 'beef on the hoof'" (Smith 2013, p. 79). Earlier in the same article, Smith notes with reference to Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, that while "Fox" appears to serve both as a surname and a generic species designation for the protagonist, the human characters are not for their part named "Mr. Man." This, he writes, is because even in children's stories "men are always individuals, each with his or her own irreducible uniqueness, while individual animals are instantiations of a kind" (Smith 2013, p. 77). This, in turn, raises intriguing questions, which I cannot fully address here, regarding the relationship between Josephine, who, as the only named character in Kafka's story, is presented as a singular individual, and the nameless, collective "mouse folk." As Margot Norris writes, this ambiguous relationship calls into question the very possibility of telling Josephine's story at all: "If [Josephine] can be distinguished from the mouse folk [ . . . ], 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" (Norris 1985, p. 122; cf. (Danta 2008, p. 161)).

<sup>2</sup> The constitutive uncertainty surrounding Josephine's vocal performances is compounded in translation, specifically with regard to the narrator's use of the word *Pfeifen*. The Muir translation, until relatively recently the only English version of the text, renders it as "piping" (Kafka 1971, p. 361), which is of course cognate with *Pfeifen* and applies to sounds produced by birds as well as musical instruments, and hence resonates nicely with the descriptions put forward by Brehm and others, but sounds rather antiquated and above all awkward as a counterpoint to "singing." Among the more recent translators, Michael Hoffmann gives it as "whistling" (Kafka 2015, p. 229), as does Peter Wortsman, who otherwise takes extraordinary liberties with his translation (Kafka 2016, p. 103). Stanley Corngold, on the other hand opts for "squeaking," explaining in a particularly revealing footnote that "the German word translated here as 'squeaking' is *pfeifen*, which, for human beings, means 'whistling'" (Kafka 2007a, p. 95n1, emphasis added). He thus gratuitously enforces the human-animal binary in a way that I would argue is at odds with the story itself. In most other respects, however, Corngold's translation is the closest to Kafka's text, and so in what follows I will refer to that edition, silently substituting "whistling" for "squeaking" throughout. At

The text as a whole resonates powerfully with questions concerning language, music, sound, and voices both human and nonhuman—questions which bear directly on the issue of “animal narratology,” and of zoopoetics in general. The animal narrator speaks on behalf of the “mouse folk” (*Volk der Mäuse*), and it is in the mode of a collective “we” that he questions Josephine’s status as the voice of the people. The text thus revolves around not only the ambiguous distinction between singing and whistling, speaking and falling silent, but ultimately also the question of narrative authority: in a sense, the text stages a conflict between the figure of the voice and the function of the *narrative* voice. Here it is certainly significant that the former, as embodied by Josephine, should be on the side of music, childishness, and femininity, all traditionally associated with the body, the sensuous, and the irrational (cf. (Gross 1985; Lubkoll 1992; Cavarero 2005)), whereas the latter presents itself as implicitly masculine, paternalistic, rational, “unmusical” (Kafka 2007a, p. 95), etc. The text itself appears to invite us to conceive of the relationship between Josephine and the community of mice in just this way, namely as that between a child (Josephine) and its father (the people) (cf. Kafka 2007a, p. 99). Within this schema, i.e., within the logic of carnophallogocentrism, the narrative voice would be the embodiment of λόγος (*logos*), on the side of the Father and the Law, while Josephine, embodying φωνή (*phōnē*), would be on the side of the animal, excluded from political life, “outside the law” (*außerhalb des Gesetzes*) (Kafka 2007a, p. 103). Yet this dichotomy is itself immediately undermined (“all of this is simply, absolutely, untrue” (Kafka 2007a, p. 103), not only because the mice themselves are repeatedly characterized as childlike and because, in Kafka, there is nothing outside the law, but also, I would argue, because the narrative voice is itself also that of an *animal*. But can one even imagine a narrative voice that is anything other than human?

## 2. Who Is Squeaking?

Certainly, within classical narratology, the concept of the “narrative voice” has always been implicitly human, and indeed humanist, invoking a presence and stable point of origin for the narrative, “a subjectivity intimately inhabiting the text” (Gibson 1996, p. 143), speaking to us. This is somewhat surprising, given how narratology has in almost all other respects sought to distance itself from hermeneutics and the humanist legacy. At the same time, it is perhaps understandable, at an intuitive level, given that humans, as far as we know, are the only animals that write (and read) literary texts. Even if we accept Roland Barthes’s famous objection that “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (Barthes 1977, p. 142) and that therefore “in the text, only the reader speaks” (Barthes 1974, p. 151), even this voice, the voice which the reader lends to the text, will be a human voice. It is no doubt for this very reason that (literary) animal studies has for the most part ignored or avoided the term “narrative voice” when discussing the presence and agency of nonhuman animals in literary texts. And yet, the seemingly unassailable, always-already-human identity of the narrative voice causes problems on multiple levels—indeed, a salient characteristic of Kafka’s animal narratives is how they exploit these problems to their advantage.

On the one hand, *voice* (φωνή) is neither synonymous nor coextensive with *speech* (λόγος) (cf. Cavarero 2005). Hence even if the latter has served as a privileged marker of the anthropological difference, the former is shared by all sensate beings and hence not reducible to the human—nor does every human vocal utterance constitute speech.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the status of language as a distinguishing feature of the human is itself highly problematic and ultimately untenable—unless, of course, one consents to define “language” in such a way that it automatically excludes “the animal.”

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the same time, on a more fundamental level the difficulty of finding an adequate translation for “Pfeifen” highlights the inherent difficulty of interspecies translation in general. For more on this complex issue, see Jacques Lezra’s essay on “the animal in translation” (Lezra 2014). On the representation of animal voices in texts, see also Ben de Bruyn’s recent article on “polyphony beyond the human” (De Bruyn 2016) as well as the discussion of onomatopoeia in Anastasiya Andrianova’s article in this special issue (Andrianova 2016, pp. 9–10).

<sup>3</sup> As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “there’s no speech without voice, but there *is* such a thing as voice without speech. And not just for animals, but for us as well. There’s voice before speech” (Nancy 2006, p. 38).

But there is essentially no good reason to accept such a definition, since, as Derrida, for example, insists, the “network of possibilities” that make language possible in the first place, i.e., the trace, iterability, *différance*, etc., “are themselves not only human” and hence do not “give rise to a single linear, indivisible, oppositional limit” between the human and the nonhuman (Derrida and Nancy 1995, pp. 284–85, original emphasis). So-called “human” language would thus need to be considered as fundamentally inseparable from other “forms of marking” including “the complexity of ‘animal languages,’ genetic coding” and so forth (Derrida and Nancy 1995, p. 285). Indeed, as posthumanists like Cary Wolfe never tire of emphasising, what we call human language is itself a form of prosthetic “technicity or mechanicity” (Wolfe 2010, p. 88), meaning that “‘we’ are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, our mammalian existence[,] but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity” (Wolfe 2010, p. 89). In other words, “speech” is not reducible to the human any more than “voice” is; “speech” is not and never has been constitutively or exclusively “human” at all.

What does this mean for our conception of narrative and of the narrative voice? Perhaps we should begin by asking what we mean by “narrative,” a term which is by now so ubiquitous as to have lost all specificity. In order to counteract this diffusion, in his book *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, Paul Sheehan proposes the following basic definition: “Narrative, the process of storymaking and storytelling, is language arranged meaningfully over time” (Sheehan 2004, p. 9). The relationship between these three key elements—language, meaning, and time—is complex, and it is this complexity that constitutes the narrative. In narrative, disparate events are joined together to form a series through a logic of causality and mutual implication—one thing leads to another—and through this process, otherwise known as the “plot,” the events narrated become imbued with meaning. Referring to Frank Kermode’s definition of plot as “an organization that humanizes time by giving it form” (Sheehan 2004, p. 9), Sheehan concludes that narrative “is *human-shaped*. It is a uniquely human way of making order and meaning out of the raw material of existence. [...] Put simply, we tell stories about ourselves to give our lives meaning and purpose, and about our kind to maintain the crucial human/inhuman distinction” (Sheehan 2004, p. 9, original emphasis). The human, in short, is a storytelling species—an “autobiographical animal,” to coin a phrase—whose self-image and identity is constituted in and through narrative practices. This applies to myths and folktales just as it does to the discourse of Western, humanist anthropocentrism.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the “human shape” that Kermode attributes to narrative as such is itself a product of particular narratives that have emphasized certain aspects while suppressing others in order to produce a sense of necessity and order. Narrative, then, is itself a version of what Giorgio Agamben calls the “anthropological machine” (Agamben 2003), a mechanism for producing the recognition of the human, via the “inclusive exclusion” of the animal.<sup>5</sup> In this case, narrative is a machine for transforming contingency into necessity, chaos into meaning.

And yet, as Sheehan goes on to observe, in order for narrative to appear “human-shaped,” there has to be something in it that pushes against the suppression of contingency and difference that lies at the heart of narrative logic. Otherwise, all stories would be the same. In order to account for this, Sheehan reintroduces the concept of voice, proposing a model of literary narrative as “a composite of voice and machine,” where “machine” refers to the mechanics of plot and causality, while “voice” refers

<sup>4</sup> The work of Sylvia Wynter, particularly her conception of the human as *homo narrans* (Wynter and McKittrick 2015) and her insistence on counteracting the historical “overrepresentation” of particular “genres of the human” (Wynter 2003), is an important and productive intervention into this debate, though it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage with her thought in the sustained manner it requires.

<sup>5</sup> Let us remember that the inclusive exclusion of the animal within the human, of ζωή [*zōē*] within βίος [*bíos*], which is the founding gesture of politics, is structurally identical to the inclusive exclusion of φωνή [*phōnē*] within λόγος [*lógos*] (cf. Agamben 1998, pp. 7–8). By the same token, Josephine cannot be said to be “outside the law”—at most she is ‘exclusively included’ within it, as an exception.

to “difference, variation and irregularity” (Sheehan 2004, p. 11). Narrative would thus be characterized by an oscillation between necessity (machine) and contingency (voice). The more “successful” a narrative is in eliminating randomness and contingency, i.e., the more perfectly it conforms to expectations and generic conventions, the less “human” it begins to seem (Sheehan 2004, p. 11). After all, we tend to privilege stories that are not entirely predictable, that seem to depart from the norm in unexpected and innovative ways. On the other hand, if “voice” takes over, then the sense is lost. The “voice-machine complex” can, Sheehan writes, also be thought of in terms of the “play between ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’” (Sheehan 2004, p. 174). It is important to note that at *both* ends of this spectrum represent the end of meaning and signification: either through pure automatism and the “smooth functioning” of mechanicity which eliminates all difference (roughly equivalent to what Roland Barthes calls the “rustle” of language, of which more later), or through the total contingency and randomness of pure vocality, which would eliminate all sameness. Only in the interplay of these two extremes can narrative and meaning emerge.

The narrative innovations of modernist literature, Sheehan’s principal object of study, can thus be read in terms of experimentation with the “voice-machine complex.” And indeed, in order to see this complex at work, one need only open a page of Kafka, where both machines and voices play a crucial role, invariably posing a threat to narrative order, coherence, and meaning. Sheehan’s conception of narrative can thus help us to account for the internal tensions and discontinuities at work in Kafka’s writings. Nevertheless, I find it surprising that in his effort to configure both “human and nonhuman claims” (Sheehan 2004, p. 10) about language and narrative, Sheehan consistently equates “voice” with the human and “machine” with the nonhuman. Why would the contingency and disruption that he identifies with voice be uniquely human? Or, to put it another way, why would Sheehan, whose entire project runs counter to Cartesian humanism, place the animal on the side of the machine? In doing so, he runs the risk of affirming precisely the assumption that he and the modernist authors he reads call into question, namely the constitutive anthropomorphism of narrative as such. “Because narrative is voice *and* machine,” Sheehan writes, “its human countenance is complicated by a nonhuman infrastructure” (Sheehan 2004, p. 175, original emphasis). No doubt, but this supposedly human countenance is *also* complicated by the constitutively a-, in-, or more-than-human nature of the voice itself. In other words, much like Agamben’s anthropological machine, Sheehan’s voice-machine complex presents as a binary what is in fact better understood as what Dominic Pettman calls a “cybernetic triangle,” i.e., an “unholy trinity of human, animal, and machine” (Pettman 2011, p. 5). This would go some way toward liberating the voice from its unquestioned association with human(ist) agency and subjectivity.

With this in mind, let us now revisit Sheehan’s minimal definition of narrative as “language arranged meaningfully over time,” and compare it to the definition of “song” employed in the aforementioned studies of ultrasonic mouse vocalizations: “a sound of animal origin that is not both accidental and meaningless,” consisting of “a series of notes or syllables, generally of more than one type, uttered in succession and so related as to form a recognizable sequence or pattern in time” (Holy and Guo 2005, p. 2178). The resemblance is quite striking. In fact, the two definitions are practically identical, to the extent that, *mutatis mutandis*, the latter could plausibly serve as a definition of human narrative, particularly if we clarify *to whom* this purposeful (non-accidental) utterance is supposed to be meaningful (or at least not meaningless). Moreover, the rather awkward negation/conjunction “not both...and,” with its implicit distinction between intentionality and interpretation, is basically a hermeneutic theory in miniature. Conversely, if we apply Sheehan’s definition to the songs of mice, the question arises: can we identify a “voice-machine complex” there as well? Arguably, this is precisely what the 2015 study mentioned at the outset (Chabout et al. 2015) revealed: namely that the songs of mice are not, in fact, simply mechanical and repetitive, but rather vary according to complex social cues and environmental circumstances. Moreover, these ultrasonic vocalizations seem to comprise both innate and learned elements (cf. (Arriaga and Jarvis 2013)),

meaning that the individual singer is able to introduce variations and permutations into the mouse song ‘canon.’

Now, to be clear, I am not claiming that there is *no difference* between an ultrasonic mouse vocalization and a literary text written by a specific human being, e.g., Franz Kafka. Nor do I wish to imply that these diverse practices exist on a scale or within a hierarchy that would once again place human modes of *poesis* and narrative ‘above’ those of other species. Rather, I am proposing merely that the structural similarity of these two definitions should serve as a further reminder, to quote Derrida again, that there is no “single, linear, indivisible oppositional limit” between the human and the nonhuman to be drawn on the basis of language, and that the growing scientific knowledge surrounding “the complexity of ‘animal languages’ [ . . . ] does not allow us to ‘cut’ once and for all where we in general would like to cut” (Derrida and Nancy 1995, p. 285). Negotiating this zone of indeterminacy, while still paying careful attention to the specifically literary character of particular texts, or indeed, to quote Susan McHugh, how animals and animality function in those texts “as a function of what we think of as their literariness” (McHugh 2011, p. 7)—that, I would say, is precisely the task of an “animal narratology,” or, more broadly, of zoopoetics as I conceive of it, namely as both a mode of writing and a method of reading (cf. Driscoll 2015b). In other words, while it is crucial to acknowledge that human and nonhuman modes of communication, including speaking and singing, are evolutionarily related processes, existing on a continuum and not as a strict binary, this does not ultimately tell us very much about the specific ways these processes are at work in any given literary text. Kafka’s “Josephine” is not just a story about mice: it is also, importantly, a story about *art*, about language and music; it is a literary text that is fundamentally about its own status as literature. Moreover, this self-reflexivity is inextricably bound up with its engagement with the question of the animal. This is what makes it a zoopoetic text.

This is important to keep in mind, especially because Kafka chooses to approach the essentially poetic problem of literature and writing in terms of music, and, indeed, an unheard, inhuman music. As Burkhard Müller observes, in order to grasp the core of language, Kafka must seemingly “transpose it to a place where it loses its potential to communicate and is reduced to mere sound” (Müller 2010, p. 113). The text is thus predicated on a double transposition, first from the world of humans to the world of mice, and, second, from speech to song. This double transposition is then followed by a third, namely from sound to silence, and this silence, crucially, is a silence of *writing*, a silence in words. Strictly speaking, there is no voice, either human or nonhuman, *in* the text. What the text does is take this absence of voice and transform it into a (zoo)poetic principle. Hence, although music is a central motif in his late animal stories, “Kafka is at pains to prevent it from entering the realm of audibility”:

The language Kafka employs attests to the overpowering force of music without giving a hint of what it would sound like—and does so by assuming that quality itself. It plays on syntax like a musician plays on keys and strings; their mechanical properties, however, tell you nothing of the notes that stream forth. (Müller 2010, pp. 113–14)

Although he does not employ this idiom, what Müller is describing here is ultimately quite close to what Deleuze and Guattari mean by a “minor literature” which deterritorializes language and puts it to “strange and minor uses” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 17). As Deleuze writes in a late essay, authors like Kafka “invent a minor use of the major language within which they express themselves entirely; they minorize this language, much as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium” (Deleuze 1997, p. 109). Language thus modulated into a minor key (or mode) is always at the limit and on the verge of breaking down. It “stutters,” as Deleuze puts it; it introduces a disturbance into the smooth functioning of language by tapping into

a line of variation or subtended modulation that brings language to this limit. And just as the new language is not external to the initial language, the asyntactic limit is not external to language as a whole: it is the outside of language, but is not outside it. It is a painting or

a piece of music, but a music of words, a painting with words, a silence in words, as if the words could now discharge their content. (Deleuze 1997, pp. 112–13)

One of the principal ways that Kafka achieves this “stuttering” is through the asignifying sounds and unheard, inhuman music that pervade especially his animal texts. In Deleuzian terms, the series of transpositions Müller describes could be conceived as successive stages of deterritorialization. First, speech is stripped of signification, “reduced to mere sound,” whereupon that sound is itself reduced to silence, but this silence is a silence *in* and *of* the text and of language itself: “a silence in words.”

### 3. Josephine Sings the Blues

In order to pursue this elusive, mute music that inhabits Kafka’s text further, I would like to return now to Derrida and the “question of the animal.” Near the beginning of the second part of *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, having reeled off a long list of questions concerning what is “proper” to “the animal,” Derrida wonders whether it would be possible to reimagine the discourse on the animal in musical terms, as a score or stave, and if so, whether one could change the key, or the tone of the music, by inserting a “flat” (b)—a blue note, if you will:

I wish only to indicate a tonality, some high notes [*une hauteur des notes*] that change the whole stave [*toute une portée*, also ‘litter (of animals)’]. How can the gamut [*la portée*] of questions on the being of what would be proper to the animal be changed? How can a flat, as it were, be introduced in the key of this questioning to tone it down and change its tune? [*Comment, en quelque sorte, mettre un bémol à la clé de ces interrogations et changer la musique?*]. (Derrida 2008, p. 63)

The goal of this transposition or modulation, which he says would be “contradictory” or even “impossible,” would be to “render audible” (*faire entendre*, hence also ‘comprehensible’) “an unheard language or music” (*une langue ou une musique inouïe*) that would be “somewhat inhuman,” but a *language* nonetheless, “not those inarticulate cries or insignificant noises, howling, barking, meowing, chirping, that so many humans attribute to the animal”—and here we should of course add ‘whistling’ and ‘squeaking’—but “a language whose words, concepts, singing, and accent can finally manage to be foreign enough to everything that, in all human languages, will have harbored so many asinities [*bêtises*] concerning the so-called animal” (Derrida 2008, p. 63, trans. mod.). The first *bêtise* to eradicate would thus be the one that reserves language and singing exclusively for human beings.

The idea of the “unheard”—*l’inouï*—is a recurring figure in Derrida’s work, going all the way back to the inaudible distinction between the *e* and the *a* in “difference” and “*différance*” (Derrida 1982, p. 22). It is thus, fundamentally, allied with the *trace*, with the movement of *différance* and differentiation, in short, the entire “network of possibilities [ . . . ] without which there would be no language” (Derrida and Nancy 1995, pp. 284–85). As a consequence of this, the “unheard” or “unheard-of” (both meanings of *inouï*) refers to an alterity or exteriority that cannot be assimilated to the text of philosophy, or which philosophy cannot domesticate and organize under the established rubrics of “the Other” and “the Outside,” but which could in some way occupy a position outside, beyond, or prior to the classical dichotomies of self and other, man and animal, male and female, *λόγος* and *φωνή*—but also, importantly, beyond the very distinction between audible and inaudible, intelligible and unintelligible. The dream of rendering audible [*faire entendre*] this unheard language is “impossible” and “contradictory” precisely because, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, the philosopher is “someone who always hears [*entend*] [ . . . ], but who cannot listen [*écouter*], or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize” (Nancy 2007, p. 1). The “impossible” task thus involves not only finding a new mode of expression, but also teaching philosophy to hear and understand (*entendre*) the question (of Being, of the animal, of language) “otherwise”: “that is,” as Derrida puts it in *Voice and Phenomenon*, “within the openness of an unheard-of [*inouïe*] question that opens itself neither onto knowledge nor onto a non-knowledge as knowledge to come. In the openness of this question,



*we no longer know*" (Derrida 2011, p. 88, original emphasis). And it is within this space of openness and indeterminacy that an unheard, inhuman language or music might, perhaps, become audible. This unheard language thus appears to be aligned with the unheard(-of) questions that deconstruction has always sought to open up, and, in this regard, we may observe an affinity between it and that which Derrida had, in the first part of his lecture, referred to as *la pensée de l'animal*—translated as "thinking concerning the animal" (Derrida 2008, p. 7) but which could also equally refer to the thoughts of the animal itself; a thinking, in other words, that would not hinge on the a priori exclusion of "the animal." This animal thinking, he writes, "derives from [*revient à*, also: 'comes back to'] poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially [*par essence*], had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking [*une pensée poétique*]" (Derrida 2008, p. 7). Poetic thinking, by implication, is in some sense synonymous with 'animal thinking,' and both are essentially at odds with philosophical knowledge. Thus, if this unheard, inhuman language is to be made audible anywhere, it will be through literature, not philosophy.

It is not altogether surprising, then, that throughout this passage, Derrida appears secretly to be talking about Kafka. Just a few pages earlier he has reminded the audience that it was in this very *château* that he once spoke of "Freud and Kafka" (Derrida 2008, p. 55), by which he means the Château de Cerisy-la-Salle, where the conference on the "autobiographical animal" was being held, but which also clearly recalls the title of Kafka's final novel, *Das Schloss* [*The Castle; Le Château*]. This leads him to ponder the question of the subconscious and whether animals dream, which in turn leads him to his own dream of this unheard and inhuman music: "Before even beginning to dig into the burrow of words and images on the basis of which, in this château, I would dare address you, I dreamed for a long time" (Derrida 2008, p. 62). And then, just after imagining how you could sneak a "blue note" into the musical score of the question of the animal, he repeats that he is "dreaming, therefore, in the depths of an undiscoverable burrow to come" (Derrida 2008, p. 63). This is clearly a reference to another of Kafka's late animal stories, namely "The Burrow,"<sup>6</sup> but I wonder if his references to music and singing aren't also a subterranean nod to Josephine, whose voice is thus literally "unheard" even in Derrida's text. The "dream," then, would be to make Josephine "sing the blues," as it were, in such a way that it would be meaningless to dispute—because *we no longer know*—whether this is singing or whistling, but that she might nevertheless be heard.

Like Derrida, the animal narrator of "The Burrow" has a dream, namely of reconstructing his burrow (which, of course, can be read as referring to the text itself), "altering it completely, swiftly, with titanic powers, in a single night, entirely unobserved, and that now it is impregnable" (Kafka 2007b, p. 168–69). This too is an "impossible" dream, as becomes clear when he is rudely awakened by "a barely audible hissing" (Kafka 2007b, p. 177)—which may in fact be more of a "whistling" (Kafka 2007b, p. 178, trans. mod.). At first he takes this noise to be produced by the small, industrious rodents—presumably mice—with whom he reluctantly shares his burrow. Ultimately, however, it proves impossible to locate the source of the disturbance because, essentially, it is the sound of the "limit," the "outside of language" which "minorization" lays bare, and which, crucially, is not located *outside* language, but rather *inside* it, pervading the rhizomatic burrow of language to such an extent that the very distinction between inside and outside is rendered inoperative. As I have suggested elsewhere (Driscoll 2015a), the noise in the burrow can be read as a form of what Roland Barthes calls the "rustle of language" [*bruissement de la langue*]:

The rustle is the noise of what is working well [*Le bruissement, c'est le bruit de ce qui marche bien*]. From which follows this paradox: the rustle denotes a limit-noise, an impossible noise, the noise of what, functioning to perfection, has no noise [*pas de bruit*]; to rustle [*bruire*] is to make audible [*faire entendre*] the very evaporation of noise: the tenuous, the

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Denise Reimann's fascinating article on Kafka and "animal phonography" (Reimann 2015), in which she also makes this connection.

blurred [*brouillé*], the tremulous are received as the signs of an auditory [*sonore*] annulation. (Barthes 1986, pp. 76–77)

The “dysfunctions of language,” Barthes writes, are encapsulated in the “auditory sign [*signe sonore*]” of stammering [*bredouillement*], whereas the smooth functioning of the machine of language “is displayed in a musical being: the *rustle*” (Barthes 1986, p. 76). Without viewing these systems or models as simply or wholly compatible and coterminous, we may nevertheless note the parallels between Barthes’s binary opposition of “stammering/sonorousness/sign” vs. “rustling/music/being” and Sheehan’s voice–machine complex. Both extremes, as we noted earlier, result in a loss of meaning and narrative coherence; too much signal or too much noise. By the same token, Deleuze’s “stuttering” [*bégaiement*] would correspond, roughly, to Barthes’s “stammering” [*bredouillement*], occupying the position of linguistic “deterritorialization” and difference, working against the “reterritorializing” tendencies of the machine of language and narrative.

Do Kafka’s animal narratives “stammer” or do they “rustle”? Does Josephine “sing” or does she “whistle” (or “pipe” or “squeak”)? The point, surely, is that *we do not know*: the force of the unheard, inhuman music is such that these binary oppositions have been rendered inoperative; the voice-machine complex has broken down. The “rustle” of language is the sound of the limit, the impossible noise of the linguistic machine functioning to perfection, which means that we do not hear it: hence it is “the noise of an absence of noise” (Barthes 1986, p. 78), the sound of silence. Consequently, it is also impossible for the animal in the burrow to determine whether the noise is a hissing or a whistling, or something else, until finally he asserts that it is neither the one nor the other, but rather “a nothing” (Kafka 2007b, p. 181). (The same verdict, we will recall, is issued by the narrator-mouse with regard to Josephine’s voice.) Since it is impossible to represent this ‘rustling’ directly or, rather, to represent it in *positive* terms, in writing, Kafka’s gliding paradox overloads his narratives with negations, pushing the sentences to the limits of sense and signification, until they begin to deconstruct themselves: “Our singer is called Josephine. Anyone who has *not* heard her does *not* know the power of song. There is *no one* who is *not* carried away by her singing, a fact deserving of all the more appreciation since, by and large, people of our kind are *not* music lovers [*als unser Geschlecht im Ganzen Musik nicht liebt*]” (Kafka 2007a, p. 94, emphasis added, trans. mod.).

In addition to this general rustling or stuttering of the narrative machine, the aforementioned antagonism between the *voice* and the *narrative voice* at the heart of the narrative has significant implications for how we read both the “The Burrow” and “Josephine.” Whereas the narrative voice, even in the case of extra- and heterodiegetic (or so-called third-person) narration, is always ultimately conceived as that of an individual, speaking to us in the first-person singular,<sup>7</sup> the voice, by contrast, particularly when it is associated with “rustling,” is collective and impersonal. We can see this clearly at the end of Barthes’s essay, where he describes a scene in Antonioni’s documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972), in which a group of Chinese children all read aloud from different books. This, he says, is a perfect example of rustling: “the meaning was doubly impenetrable to me, by my not knowing Chinese and by the blurring of these simultaneous readings; but I was hearing [ . . . ] the music, the breath, the tension, the application, in short something like a *goal* [*un but*]” (Barthes 1986, pp. 78–79, original emphasis). At the risk of seeming paranoid, here it seems to me that Barthes is also secretly referring to Kafka’s *Castle*, specifically to the scene when K. tries to call the Castle, in which the sound of the telephone line is described as “the humming of countless childlike voices” or not really humming, but rather “the singing of the most distant, of the most utterly distant, voices—as though a single, high-pitched yet strong voice had emerged out of this humming in some quite impossible way [*in einer geradezu unmöglichen Weise*, also: ‘tune’ or ‘melody’]” (Kafka 1998, p. 20). This would be a fitting

<sup>7</sup> “Every narrating is, by definition, to all intents and purposes presented in the first person” (Gérard Genette, qtd. in Gibson 1996, p. 145).

description of Josephine's voice as well, particularly given the way she is associated with youth and childhood throughout the narrative.

In what is to my mind still one of the most compelling readings of the story, Margot Norris draws attention to the rather surprising punctuation of the title: "Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk." Ordinarily, you would read the "or" as separating the two titles,<sup>8</sup> but in view of the ambiguous relationship between Josephine and the rest of the mice as thematized in the text, there is also the intriguing possibility of reading "Josephine" as not only "the Singer" but also "the People" [*das Volk*]. Or, to quote Norris: "the opposition is not between Josefina and the mouse folk but between Josefina's identity as a singer and her membership in the pack. The story poses the conundrum, *Is Josefina singular or is she plural?*" (Driscoll 2014, p. 120, original emphasis). Is hers an individual voice, or is hers the voice of the people? In keeping with the general subversion of binary oppositions, the space of indeterminacy opened up by the 'unheard' language or music, it seems that the only possible answer is that we do not know, and that she can and must be regarded as both singular *and* plural. In fact we might so far as to say that this is the irresolvable tension that drives the entire text.

There is one point in the narrative where this tension comes close to resolution, namely when the narrator describes the dreams of the mice—which, in fact, come quite close to Derrida's dream of making Josephine's singing audible by rendering the distinction between singing and whistling inoperative. In the "scant pauses between battles," the narrator says, the mice dream of being united, "stretch[ed] out in the big, warm, communal bed. And here and there into these dreams comes the sound of Josephine's whistling; she calls it sparkling [*perlend*], we call it stuttering [*stoßend*]; but whatever it is, this is where it belongs more than anywhere else, in the way that music hardly ever finds the moment that is waiting for it" (Kafka 2007a, pp. 102–3, trans. mod.). This passage is remarkable, since the narrator effectively (albeit only momentarily) concedes that this is music, no matter what you call it, because of the *effect* it has, namely that of establishing a community, where everyone may find solace in their neighbor's fur (Kafka 2007a, p. 100). "Naturally, it is a whistling," he says, "how could it be anything else? Whistling is the language of our people." They all whistle, but Josephine's whistling is the voice that emerges, impossibly, out of this collective.

The nature of Josephine's singing and her relation to the collective are not the only paradoxes of the story. At the end, the narrator says that Josephine will be forgotten, because "we [the mice] practice no history [*da wir keine Geschichte treiben*]" ((Kafka 2007a, p. 108, cf. p. 100): "in general we completely neglect historical research"), but this too is a paradox, of course, since he is indeed telling a story [*Geschichte*], even if it is a self-effacing one. And hence the foundation of the narrative, and by extension the community of mice, cannot be seen simply as "silence" or as the "absence" of voice and history, but rather history *under erasure*, preserved in its negation: a "no-history." By the same token, at the beginning of the story, the narrator informs us that even though the mice are thoroughly unmusical, they nevertheless have an "inkling" [*Ahnung*] of what song is, and that some ancient songs have been preserved, although, of course, "no one can sing them anymore" (Kafka 2007a, p. 95). But in any case, Josephine's singing bears no resemblance to these songs of legend. The entire narrative is thus framed in terms of a forgotten or erased communal history, which is nevertheless preserved as an "inkling" that can only be described in negative terms: it is *not* like Josephine's singing, but *no one* can say what it *is* like.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Mouse, Interrupted

In conclusion, then, I would like to suggest—all too briefly—that Josephine's ambiguously singular-plural identity and her status as the singer of her community resonates quite powerfully

<sup>8</sup> And, indeed, with this exception of Corngold's, all the aforementioned English translations 'correct' or normalize this unorthodox punctuation.

<sup>9</sup> In this context, we may see how what Derrida refers to as "Kafka's vast zoopoetics" relates to what, a couple of lines later, he calls his own "negative zootheology" (Derrida 2008, p. 6).

with Jean-Luc Nancy's discussion of founding myths (or legends) in *The Inoperative Community*. All community, he writes, is founded on myth, and all myth is "the myth of community" (Nancy 1991, p. 51), which is to say that it carries with it a sense of completion or fulfillment. This is true both of ancient myths and folktales as well as the more modern myths or "grand narratives" of humanist anthropocentrism: "Myth, in short, is the transcendental autofiguration of nature and of humanity, or more exactly the autofiguration—or the autoimagination—of nature as humanity and of humanity as nature" (Barthes 1986, p. 54). In modernity, this form of immanent, totalizing community has become impossible, co-opted by fascist totalitarianism. The only alternative, however, seems to be liberal humanist individualism, which is synonymous with capitalist exploitation and the myth of progress. Thus, the only hope, as Nancy sees it, is to "interrupt" the myth of community, but to do so without negating it entirely, i.e., without turning it into complete silence, say, since this too can be appropriated and put to work for the dialectical progression towards totality. The term he gives to this interruption that forestalls the putting to work of myth is "inoperativity" (*désœuvrement*): not total silence, but rather the absence or the interruption of sound.

In the interruption of myth something makes itself heard, namely, what remains of myth when it is interrupted—and which is nothing if not the very voice of interruption, if we can say this.

This voice is the *voice of community*, [ . . . ] of the interrupted community, the voice of the incomplete, exposed community speaking as myth without being in any respect mythic speech. [ . . . ] When a voice, or music, is suddenly interrupted, one hears just at that instant something else, a mixture of various silences and noises that had been covered over by the sound, but in this something else one hears again the voice or the music that has become in a way *the voice or the music of its own interruption*: a kind of echo, but one that does not repeat that of which it is the reverberation.<sup>10</sup> (Nancy 1991, p. 62, emphasis added)

"A name has been given to this voice of interruption," Nancy continues, and that name is "literature" (Nancy 1991, p. 63). Here we seem to encounter an aporia in Nancy's conception of the inoperative community. On the one hand, he insists that community, as he conceives of it, which is ontologically prior to the theme of man as a *zoon politikon*—and hence prior to the distinction between *logos* and *phoné*—is not limited to "man" and does not exclude "the animal" (Nancy 1991, p. 28). On the other hand, he appears to exclude "the animal" once more by placing "literature" at the heart of this inoperative community. Nancy is the first to admit that he "[does] not reserve any special place for animals" in his world (Derrida and Nancy 2014, p. 84), but only because for him the relevant category is "living beings," which includes both so-called 'human' and 'nonhuman' animals as well as trees and plants. Hence, the apparent anthropocentrism of his emphasis on literature can be at least partially remedied once we understand that "literature" for Nancy does not mean specific "literary texts" or the literary canon, or anything that is clearly specific to human cultures and practices. Rather, the point is that the "literary" as such, its singularity, *is* the interruption of the myth of community. Nothing can follow from it: "this inaugural act founds nothing, entails no establishing, governs no exchange; no history of community is engendered by it" (Nancy 1991, p. 68). Or, in other words, through the "singular eruption" (Nancy 1991, p. 68.) of this "nothing" of a voice, "we" practice "no history." Hence this voice does not found a new myth or a new homogeneous community, but is always at the limit (Nancy 1991, p. 67), and this limit can and must also be read as the "abyssal limit" (Derrida 2008, p. 12) between "man" and "animal." Hence, perhaps we can risk positing that in order for literature to be the "voice" of a community that does not exclude "the animal," in order for this inoperative community to call into question precisely that distinction (without, however, claiming

<sup>10</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (cf. Driscoll 2011), this kind of echo that is not a repetition is itself a foundational principle of Kafka's poetics.

to have overcome or abolished it, which would, again, plunge us into the realm of mythology), this literature must be *zoopoetic*. Perhaps this is what Kafka's story reveals: Josephine's voice is the silent voice of an inoperative, inhuman community, singing the music of its own interruption. And what is this other than the unheard, inhuman music Derrida was dreaming of? Perhaps, then, it is not a question of inserting a *flat* into the score, but rather a *rest*. And if we listen closely, if we learn to listen "otherwise," we may be able to hear that the rest is not silence, but the interruption of song.

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