

12 “Une langue ou une musique inouïe, assez inhumaine . . .”

Narrative Voice and the Question of the Animal

Kári Driscoll

1. The Songs of Mice

In 2015, a study published in the journal *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* reported that male mice not only sing songs to attract females but that these songs are also syntactically complex and vary according to social context (Chabout et al. 2015). This places mice in the same category as songbirds. 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. This was not the first time singing mice had been in the news. In fact, every few years the media report on a new discovery concerning the songs of mice, most of which build on the pioneering work of Timothy Holy and Zhongsheng Guo, who first established that mouse vocalizations have the characteristics of songs, that is, 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, 2178). 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).

Some mice appear to sing at a pitch audible to the human ear, though it remains unclear why, and reports of such murine singing mice date back at least to the nineteenth century, well before it was possible to record them. 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.

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, 338)

In any case, Brehm concludes, it would be "more congruous to speak of 'twittering' Mice than of 'singing' ones" (ibid.).

There are thus 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. What interests me about all of this is, first, the way it points to a world beyond human perception which science is only now beginning to be able to detect—that this is, in other words, an unheard, inhuman music—and, second, how this relates to the cultural imaginary surrounding mouse song, which hovers perennially at the boundary between sound and silence.

The most famous articulation of this imaginary is no doubt Franz Kafka's "Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk," the last story he wrote and also the last to be published in his lifetime. Kafka was well-acquainted with Brehm's *Tierleben*, and so it is not unlikely that he was familiar with the tales of singing mice. Moreover, at the time he wrote "Josefine," Kafka was in the process of losing his voice to tuberculosis,¹ and the narrative follows a trajectory from sound to silence, ending with the disappearance of Josefine's voice. Like most of Kafka's late animal stories, it has a first-person narrator, who in this case is not Josefine but rather another mouse, presumably a male, who is describing the relationship between Josefine and the other mice. The entire narrative can be seen as an example of what Gerhard Neumann (1968) called Kafka's "gliding paradox," a peculiarly Kafkaesque rhetorical figure, whereby an initial affirmative statement—for example, "Our singer is called Josefine"—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 Josefine's singing: having announced that Josefine 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" (2007, 100); there is nothing

musical about it, or if there is, “then it is reduced to the lowest possible nothingness” (102); no of course it is whistling, “[h]ow could it be anything else? Whistling is the language of our people” (103), and so on, until at last we learn that Josefne has disappeared, at which point the narrator asks whether there will be any noticeable difference between Josefne’s absence and her presence, and whether the gatherings where she used to sing weren’t in fact completely silent all along.²

The text as a whole resonates powerfully with questions concerning language, music, sound, and voices both human and nonhuman. Furthermore, because Josefne is not the narrator of her own story, she is in effect doubly silenced as we never actually “hear” her speak or sing in the text at all. 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 and in particular the category of the narrative *voice*. It is this ambiguously anthropomorphic category that I would like to explore in this chapter, specifically as it relates to zoopoetics and the question of what it would mean to hear the voice of an animal in or through a literary text.

2. Josefne Sings the Blues

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 staff, and if so, whether one could change the key or the tone of the music by inserting a “flat” (♭)—a “blue note,” if you will:

I wish only to indicate a tonality, a pitch of the notes that change an entire staff [*une hauteur des notes qui changent toute une portée*]. How might one change the range [*la portée*] of such questions regarding the being of what would be proper to the animal? How might one add a flat, as it were, to the key of these questions and change the music? [*Comment, en quelque sorte, mettre un bémol à la clé de ces interrogations et changer la musique?*].

(Derrida 2008, 63, translation modified)

The goal of this transposition or modulation, which he says would be “contradictory” or even “impossible,” would be to “render audible” [*faire entendre*, also: “understandable”] “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, 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 asinainties (*bêtises*) concerning the so-called animal" (63, translation modified). 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 "*différance*" (Derrida 1982, 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 1995, 284–5). 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, and so on, 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 in his book on *Listening*, 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" (2007, 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 elsewhere, "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*" (2011, 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" (2008, 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*]" (*ibid.*). 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” (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” (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” (63). Clearly a reference to “The Burrow,” in which the animal narrator likewise has an “impossible dream” of changing the entire structure of his burrow of words. Yet I wonder if the repeated references to music and singing aren’t in fact a subterranean allusion to “Josefine,” whose voice is thus literally “unheard” even in Derrida’s text. The “dream,” then, would be to make Josefine “sing the blues,” as it were, in such a way that it would be meaningless to dispute whether this is singing or whistling but that she might nevertheless be heard.

3. Who Is Squeaking?

As mentioned, it is not Josefine who narrates her own story but rather an anonymous, intradiegetic narrator, who speaks on behalf of the “mouse folk” (*Volk der Mäuse*), and it is in the mode of a collective “we” that he questions Josefine’s status as the voice of the people. In this sense, the text may be said to stage 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 Josefine, should be on the side of music, childishness, and femininity, all traditionally associated with the body, the sensuous, and the irrational, whereas the latter presents itself as implicitly masculine, paternalistic, rational, “unmusical” (2007, 95), and so on. The text itself appears to invite us to conceive of the relationship between Josefine and the community of mice in just this way, namely as that between a child (Josefine) and its father (the people) (99). Within this logocentric schema, the narrative voice would be the embodiment of λόγος, on the side of the Father and the Law, while Josefine, embodying φωνή, would be on the side of the animal, excluded from political life, “outside the law” (*außerhalb des Gesetzes*) (103). Yet this dichotomy is itself immediately undermined—“all of this is simply, absolutely, untrue” (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?

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, 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, 142) and that therefore "in the text, only the reader speaks" (Barthes 1974, 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). 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. 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." 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—that is, 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 (1995, 284–5, 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 (285). Indeed, as posthumanists like Cary Wolfe never tire of emphasizing, what we tend to call human language is itself a form of prosthetic "technicity or mechanicity," 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, which we share, as animals, with animals, 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 radically ahuman precondition for our subjectivity, for what makes us human.

(Wolfe 2009, 571)

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 an effort 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” (2004, 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” (*ibid.*), 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” (*ibid.*, original emphasis). The human, in short, is a storytelling species—an “autobiographical animal,” to coin a phrase—whose self-image and identity are constituted in and through narrative practices. This applies to myths and folktales just as it does to the discourse of Western, humanist anthropocentrism. 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 the “anthropological machine” (Agamben 2004), a mechanism for producing the recognition of the human, via the “inclusive exclusion” of the animal.³ 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 to "difference, variation and irregularity" (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—that is, the more perfectly it conforms to expectations and generic conventions—the less "human" it begins to seem. After all, we tend to prefer 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," Sheehan writes, can also be thought of in terms of the "play between 'difference' and 'sameness'" (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)⁴ 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" (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 so doing, 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" (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," that is, an "unholy trinity of human, animal, and machine" (2011, 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, 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, for example, 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" (1995, 285). Negotiating this zone of indeterminacy, while still paying careful attention to the specifically literary character of particular texts, and indeed, to quote Susan McHugh, how animals and animality function in those texts "as a function of what we think of as their literariness" (2011, 7)—that, I would say, is precisely the task of zoopoetics as I conceive of it, namely as both a mode of writing and a method of reading. 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 “Josefine” 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” (2010, 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, 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” (1986, 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” (1997, 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, 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.”

4. Mouse, Interrupted

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: “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk.” Ordinarily, you would read the “or” as separating the two titles,⁵ but in view of the ambiguous relationship between Josefine and the rest of the mice as thematized in the text, there is also the intriguing possibility of reading “Josefine” as not only “the Singer” but also “the People” (*das Volk*). Or, to quote Norris: “the opposition is not between Josefine and the mouse folk but between Josefine’s identity as a singer and her membership in the pack. The story poses the conundrum, *Is Josefine singular or is she plural?*” (120, original emphasis). Is hers an individual voice, or is it 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 go 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 Josefine’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 Josefine’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 2007, 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 consolation in their neighbor’s fur (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 Josefine's whistling is the voice that emerges, impossibly, out of this collective.

The nature of Josefine's singing and her relation to the collective are not the only paradoxes of the story. At the end, the narrator says that Josefine will be forgotten, because "we [the mice] practice no history [*da wir keine Geschichte treiben*]" (108), 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 2007, 95). But in any case, Josefine'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 Josefine's singing but *no one* can say what it *is* like.

In conclusion, then, I would like to suggest—all too briefly—that Josefine's ambiguously singular-plural identity and her status as the singer of her community resonate quite powerfully 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" (1991, 51), which is to say that it carries with it a sense of completion or fulfillment. This is true both of ancient myths and of 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" (54). In modernity, this form of immanent, totalizing community has become untenable, co-opted by fascist totalitarianism. The only alternative, however, appears 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, that is, without turning it into complete silence, say, since this too can be appropriated and put to work for the dialectical progression toward 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.

(62, emphasis added)

“A name has been given to this voice of interruption,” Nancy continues, and that name is “literature” (63). By this, Nancy does not mean literary texts 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” (68). In other words, through the “singular eruption” (ibid.) 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 (67), and this limit can and must also be read as the “abyssal limit” (Derrida 2008, 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 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: Josefine’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.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter was originally published as “An Unheard, Inhuman Music: Narrative Voice and the Question of the Animal in Kafka’s ‘Josephine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk,’” *Humanities* 6.2. (2017).

1. Upon completing the story, Kafka is reported to have remarked to his friend Robert Klopstock that he had begun his “investigation into animal squeaking” (*Untersuchung des tierischen Piepsens*) (Kafka 1977, 495n20) at just the right time.
2. The constitutive uncertainty surrounding Josefine’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 somewhat awkwardly as "piping" (Kafka 1971, 361), whereas more recent translations give it as "whistling" (Kafka 2015, 229, 2016, 103). Stanley Corngold, however, 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 2007, 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.

3. Let us remember that the inclusive exclusion of the animal within the human, of ζῷῃ within βίος, which is the founding gesture of politics, is structurally identical to the inclusive exclusion of φωνή within λόγος (cf. Agamben 1998, 7–8). By the same token, Josefina cannot be said to be "outside the law"—at most she is "exclusively included" within it, as an exception.
4. "The rustle," for Barthes, "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" (Barthes 1986, 76–77). 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. It is, hence, "the noise of an absence of noise" (ibid., 78), the sound of silence. Consequently, it is also impossible to determine whether this sound is a singing or a whistling. It is in this sense that we may begin to understand the murine narrator's verdict that Josefina's voice is a "nothing" (*dieses Nichts an Stimme*), but a nothing which nevertheless asserts itself and has an effect (*Wirkung*) on the mice, who, it turns out, "really [*wirklich*] do listen" to her (Kafka 2007, 100–101, trans. mod.).
5. And, indeed, with this exception of Corngold's, all the aforementioned English translations "correct" or normalize this unorthodox punctuation.

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