

middle member of Rorty's liberal-postmodern triad. The freedom to create oneself offered by modern Western society has narrow limits. It is by no means "freedom on all sides," but merely a "way out," freedom profoundly relativized and restricted. Self-creation remains limited to a single model that it has to imitate—Western mankind's way of life. The former ape acquires something specific, in geographic-cultural terms, and rather narrowly defined—an "average European education" ("die Durchschnittsbildung eines Europäers"). The new self that he has created for himself is his ability to master "average European" behavior and conventions. There was no other choice if he wished to escape his cage and *live*. He was forced to assume "that freedom was not a choice" ("dass nicht die Freiheit zu wählen war") (Kafka 1994, 312; italics mine). Rotpeter could not recreate himself as just anything, but only as something desired and appreciated by the society that had imprisoned him. Thus self-creation can have no other goal but conformity with a prevailing form of life. The ape is free to create himself in its image, but not free to conceive and project a self according to his own deepest wish. He does not even possess the liberty of postmodern architecture of choosing one of many models of the past at the disposal of the present. He can, and must, adapt himself to one single model—Western society of the twentieth century.

In that sense, Kafka's little text helps to uncover fallacies and boundaries of contemporary, postmodern thinking. Dissenting from Lyotard, "A Report" shows that, in a global frame, there can indeed be found one "grand narrative," one single overarching historical tendency—the Westernization of the world that also means its final subjection to the dominion of man. Against Rorty's idea of free self-creation, Kafka's text makes clear that the individual's "freedom" to create himself is nothing other than successful adaptation to the world-dominating culture that has uprooted one. It is not true freedom, "freedom on all sides," which it would be if it offered the possibility of forming the self according to an infinite variety of norms and patterns. However, it is a "way out," infinitely preferable to existence in the cage of colonial imperialism that preceded it.

Through this doubleness of the evaluating perspective that is built into Kafka's text, it makes us see, in the world it depicts, conformity and liberation as interchangeable. With that "A Report to an Academy" exhibits an astounding, paradigmatic relevance to a century that has advanced from the colonialist imperialism of its beginning via the liberal "capitalism with a human face" of its middle to the global uniformity at its end.

## Bibliography

- Kafka, Franz. 1967. *Briefe an Felice und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*. Ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, with an Introduction by Erich Heller. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Lizenzausgabe von Schocken Books, New York.
- . 1994. *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Ed. Wolf Kittler, Hans Gerd Koch, and Gerhard Neumann. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Lizenzausgabe von Schocken Books, New York. Translations from the German text are my own.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1955. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. 17 (1920–1922): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Group Psychology and Other Works*, 7–64. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- . 1957. "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. 14 (1914–1916): *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 73–102. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- . 1961. *The Ego and the Id*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. 19 (1923–1925): *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, 12–66. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- . 1966. "Project for a Scientific Psychology," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. 1 (1886–1899): *Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts*, 295–397. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- . 1991. "Abriss der Psychoanalyse." In *Gesammelte Werke: chronologisch geordnet*, ed. Anna Freud in collaboration with Marie Bonaparte. Vol. 17, 63–183. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1991–1998.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1947. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. by John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. (Original version Amsterdam: Querido, 1947; (c) 1944).
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1979. *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit. (English version: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Foreword by Fredric Jameson. Theory and History of Literature. Vol. 10. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. The reference here is on p. 37).
- Neumann, Gerhard. 1975. "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie." *Erwägungen zum 'Mimesis'-Charakter Kafkascher Texte.* *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 49 (1975): 66–83.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sokel, Walter H. 1964. *Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie: Zur Struktur seiner Kunst*. Munich-Vienna: Albert Langen, Georg Müller, 1964.

## NICOLA GESS

The Politics of Listening: The Power of Song  
in Kafka's "Josefine, the Singer"†

"Solving the riddle of its huge effects"—this is the task that the narrator of Kafka's story sets for himself and every reader in regard

† This essay appears for the first time in this Norton Critical Edition. Printed by permission of the author. Page numbers to this Norton Critical Edition appear in brackets.

to Josefine's song. Many of these effects are owed to a critical assimilation of a certain tradition of thought about music prevalent in Kafka's lifetime: the belief in the power of music to create and represent a people.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the effects of music on its listeners were widely discussed, a discussion of which Kafka was aware. Even though he was by his own account deeply, profoundly "unmusical,"<sup>1</sup> he was, like the narrator of Josefine, fascinated by the riddle of music—in the narrator's words, "what this music is really all about" [p. 95]. In a famous diary entry, Kafka literally made the price of writing a necessary *resistance* to the lure of thinking about music and in this way testified to the power of music over him. He wrote:

It is easy to recognize in myself a concentration on writing. When it had become clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction of my being, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities that were directed first and foremost toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection on music (des philosophischen Nachdenkens der Musik). I starved in all these directions. [p. 196]

The discussion about music shortly before and during Kafka's lifetime focused less on the so-called "autonomous," individual, listening subject of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries than the crowd. A key contribution was made by Nietzsche's<sup>2</sup> treatise *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1871), which, on the evidence of certain remarkable echoes, Kafka appears to have read. Here, Nietzsche addresses the impact of Wagner's<sup>3</sup> music, describing the transformative effect of the music of Greek tragedies and Wagner's music dramas on the crowd of listeners. As persons they are transported, possessed; they lose their individuality and become part of a larger entity, the mass.<sup>4</sup> This mass is then deemed to be itself creative: in a deep sense, it has brought forth the very music it is hearing; it is at once the result and the creative origin of this music.<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche illuminates this paradox by inter-

1. "Do you realize that I am completely unmusical, with a completeness that in my experience does not exist anywhere else at all?" *Briefe an Milena* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1986), 65.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), the most influential of modern German philosophers, creator of the concepts of the "genealogy of morals," "will to power," and "super-man" [Editor].
3. Richard Wagner (1813–1883), great German opera composer of *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, *Parsifal*, and others [Editor].
4. In *Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie. Zur Struktur seiner Kunst* (Munich/Wien: Albert Langen, Georg Müller, 1964), Walter Sokel likens the role of song in Kafka's story to the role of the "Dionysian spirit of music" in Nietzsche (514f).
5. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), esp. 44–67.

preting the individual composer as the mouthpiece of the collective. The composer's song is always already a "song of the people," even though this people will be truly realized as a unity only through listening to his song.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years Nietzsche decisively distanced himself from Wagner as an artist who betrayed his art by seeking to impose his own individual will through it. This is the Wagner whom the devotees of Wagner were nonetheless ready to adore: for them, Wagner was a spiritual leader who impressed his will on his listeners, a "higher" will that gave form to the mass created by his music; and it is this form that is said to realize, for the first time, the true essence of the mass as a *German* people, a *Volk*. We may postulate a fundamental aversion on Kafka's part to this ideology from the fact that not one of his copious diaries or letters contains even a single mention of Wagner—and yet this musical discussion was "in the air."

In the perspective of the early Nietzsche and the Wagnerians, music thus produces two sorts of effects. The first was a familiar element of an earlier, Romantic music ideology: music destroys the autonomy of the subject by dissolving it into an amorphous substance moved by primordial sensations, emotions, and fantasies. But in the newer perspective, the result is not a dangerous chaos. For the shapeless mass is given form by a musical leader (*Führer*) who voices its true being and thus functions as its creator, exemplar, and mouthpiece. In this perspective, the effects of music are no longer anxious ones. Instead of being seen as destructive violence, music is lent a constructive, yet authoritative power, aiding in the formation of a *Volk* (unified people). Particularly in times of war, this formation is linked to military aims. It was, after all, at the time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 that Nietzsche wrote his *Birth of Tragedy*, which declared that Germany needed Wagner's music in order to prepare itself for the war and "console" itself after the war as a victorious German people.<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche's claim was to exercise a prophetic power: at the time of the First World War, German soldiers carried Beethoven's symphonies to the front, using Beethoven's "brazen sound" as a device to strengthen discipline;<sup>8</sup> and in the 1920s reactionary musicologists declared Beethoven the leader of the German people, hearing his music as a call for a military regime of law and order, as a bulwark against an inferior Anglo-French "civilization."<sup>9</sup>

6. See *ibid.* 48–52.

7. See *ibid.* 123, 138–39; also, Friedrich Nietzsche, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," in *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 259–331, esp. 278.

8. Hermann Abert, "Zu Beethovens Persönlichkeit und Kunst," in Rudolf Swartz, ed. *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters für 1925*, 32 (Leipzig: Peters, 1926), 10.

9. Adolf Sandberger, "Das Erbe Beethovens und unsere Zeit," in Adolf Sandberger, ed. *Neues Beethoven Jahrbuch 3* (1927) (Augsburg: Benno Filser), 18–29.

The ideal of the Volk, surfacing in these concepts, was central to the Völkische Bewegung (popular or "folkish" movement) that became increasingly strident in the years around the First World War. A slogan of this movement was "Volk statt Masse" (a people instead of the masses). It promulgated the nationalist and often racist idea of unifying the modern masses into a Volk in which individual differences would no longer exist. It was also directed against everything this movement connected with modernity—e.g., industrialization, capitalism, socialism, women's liberation, and the metropolis: the Volk was to be a pre-modern collective. And it entailed the idea of a leader figure, thought to represent the Volk and its interests while at the same time giving it form and direction.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1921 essay "Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse" (group psychology and the analysis of the ego), Freud<sup>2</sup> famously analyzed the dynamics between the masses and their leader, revealing the psychological mechanisms at work in the ideal of unification—the mechanisms he called idealization and identification.<sup>3</sup> The single individual projects his own Ich-Ideal (ego ideal) onto the leader. He then starts to worship the leader as his ideal, seeing himself represented in the leader and shaping himself on this model. Since all individuals in the mass idealize the same leader in an act of collective self-projection, they can now identify with each other. The leader becomes the representation and model of a new Massen-Ich (group ego). Interestingly, Freud's example for these mechanisms is a concert situation.<sup>4</sup> He describes how a mass of women and girls, who are all madly in love with the performer, throng around the singer or pianist after his performance. All of them idealize the same person and are therefore able to identify with each other, instead of getting jealous, which would be the case in a mere crowd of individuals. Adorno,<sup>5</sup> in his reading of Freud, picks up on this observation when he notes that the power of the leader over the masses seems to be based on his "orality," his powers of verbal sound and verbal gesture.<sup>6</sup> While the ideals of the Völkische Bewegung were influential for nationalist politics, they were also structurally similar to the ideals of the Zionist philosophy of Herzl<sup>7</sup> that

1. See Jost Hermand, *Der alte Traum vom neuen Reich* (Frankfurt: Athenaeum, 1988) and Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler, *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1988).
2. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Viennese creator of psychoanalysis.
3. Sigmund Freud, "Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse," in *Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1974), 10: 61–135.
4. *Ibid.* 112.
5. Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), German philosopher, leading member of "The Frankfurt School," studied with dialectical precision the interconnections of modern society and culture.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," in *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 408–34, esp. 427.
7. Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), founder of Zionism [Editor].

engaged Kafka in the last years of his life.<sup>8</sup> Herzl's idea was to reunify the Jewish people by creating a political structure like an art-form, with the political leader functioning as an artist dealing with human material. For Herzl, as for many in his generation, Wagner and his music dramas were the main inspiration behind this concept; Herzl meant his Zionism, like Wagner's operas, to be a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art).<sup>9</sup> He wrote: "Moses' exodus would compare \* \* \* [to the Zionist movement] like a Shrove Tuesday *Singspiel* of Hans Sachs to a Wagnerian opera."<sup>1</sup>

Kafka's "Josefine, the Singer" takes up the myth according to which the musician has the power to represent and create a Volk by way of music. As the title and the first sentence announce, the story will concern a singer and a people, with the second sentence adding the missing link between the two, namely, the "power of song" [p. 94]. When Josefine is not singing, the mice are divided into at least three different groups—the "followers," the "opposition," and the rest of the "crowd" [pp. 105, 96, 98], who quarrel with each other about Josefine's song. There are also a few isolated, single individuals, such as those prone to "enthusiasm" [p. 104], and the narrator, who distance themselves from any kind of group through their peculiar behavior.<sup>2</sup> However, at Josefine's performances, all differences disappear. As the narrator observes: "Opposition can be offered only at a distance; when you sit before her, you understand: what she is squeaking here is no squeaking" [p. 96]; that is, all doubts about the quality of her song vanish. The song "carrie[s]" the listeners "away" [p. 94] from themselves. They are "plunged into the sensation of the crowd" [p. 98]; "feeling" here means both the feeling of melting into a mass and some specific emotion—like warmth—that this mass might be feeling [pp. 95, 98]. The listeners establish physical contact with each other, "as body press[es] \* \* \* on body" [p. 98], as they "huddle up against one another" [p. 100]. Consequently, the listening crowd seems to

8. See Christoph Stölzl, "Kafka: Jew, Anti-Semite, Zionist," in Mark Anderson, ed., *Reading Kafka. Prague, Politics, and the Fin de siècle* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989). For interpretations of the mouse people as Jews, see Mark Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de siècle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 194–216, and Karl Erich Grözinger, *Kafka und die Kabbala. Das Jüdische im Werk und Denken von Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt: Eichborn Verlag, 1992). For more on Herzl and Kafka's allusions to him, see Benno Wagner's essay in this volume [p. 302].
9. See Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld, 1979), 146–80.
1. "Moses Auszug verhält sich dazu wie ein Fastnachtsingspiel von Hans Sachs zu einer Wagnerschen Oper." Theodor Herzl, *Tagebücher* (Berlin, 1922), 1:44; quoted by Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 163. "Shrove Tuesday": a Catholic holiday, the Tuesday immediately before Ash Wednesday—also called Pancake Day. "Singspiel": an old-fashioned musical comedy featuring folk songs interspersed with banter [Editor].
2. See Wolf Kittler, *Der Turmbau zu Babel und das Schweigen der Sirenen. Über das Reden, das Schweigen, die Stimme und die Schrift in vier Texten von Franz Kafka* (Erlangen: Palm und Enke, 1985), 190.

be one great body, breathing, listening, and feeling warm [p. 98], turning into a "big warm communal bed" in which everyone may "[relax] his limbs, \* \* \* indulg[ing] \* \* \* his desire to unwind and stretch out" [p. 102]. Unlike mice in everyday life who, according to the narrator, never stop chattering, this great body does not talk. It fills the space between the narrator and Josefine with a ceremonious stillness, thereby absorbing Josefine's song. Filling the silence and supplementing the chatter, this song is experienced not so much as a single individual's but rather as the utterance of the listening people. The narrator observes: "This squeaking that arises where silence is imposed on everyone else comes almost as a message from the people to the individual" [p. 100]. Josefine appears as a mouthpiece giving voice to the people. Experiencing Josefine's song as their own, the listening crowd turns creative, dreaming dreams about its past and its present, all of which are contained in its song. These dreams, just as the whole concert situation and the song, also serve military goals. The narrator admits that "precisely in times of trouble \* \* \* we listen to Josefine's voice with even greater intensity. \* \* \* It is as if we were drinking hastily \* \* \* a communal goblet of peace before the battle" [p. 100]. He also calls Josefine's performances "scant pauses between battles" [p. 102].

Thus, Kafka's story is about a crowd and a singer, and whenever the singer calls, the crowd obeys and gets together to listen to her song. This song has the power to unify the crowd into a Volk ready for battle, experiencing the song as its own utterance. But, then again, other aspects of the story seem to call this narrative into question. Keeping the above-mentioned tradition in mind, one wonders: why are we presented with a performer and not with a composer? Why a female and not a male performer? Why only vocal and not also instrumental music? Why coloraturas and not proper melodies? Why such a spectacle of making gestures and pulling faces and not simple, authentic expression? In all of these aspects, Josefine and her song are radically unlike the early twentieth-century's ideals of German heroes and their music, such as Beethoven, Wagner, or Bruckner, giving voice to a German essence and mirroring and creating the Volk. Indeed, all of these aspects serve only one goal, that of calling the song's aesthetic and ethical quality as well as its supposed power into doubt. For they are taken out of yet another repertoire of ideological suppositions about music circulating in German-speaking countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> At least since the early

3. Anderson describes another set of "ideological assumptions about music" (*Kafka's Clothes*, 196) at the turn of the century, partly overlapping with the one I am going to sketch: the racist stereotype of "Jewish music," famously formulated by Wagner, and the assumption that women, just like Jews, were unable to compose music of any quality,

nineteenth century, German music critics had been eying musical performance with suspicion since it threatened not only to distort the musical essence laid down in the score but also to invite mere sensual pleasure—and not the spiritual elation or the "essential refinement" of the listener. This was thought to be true in particular of female performers, especially female singers, and even more so if they sang songs rich in musical flourishes.<sup>4</sup> For the coloraturas written for the female voice were considered the epitome of mere sensual stimulation in music, lacking any kind of higher quality and purpose.<sup>5</sup> German critics never tired of degrading this kind of music in aesthetic and ethical terms. And by so doing, they served nationalist agendas, because they attributed this kind of "poor" music to France, Italy, or the Jews, while proclaiming the German-speaking lands as the home of "good," i.e. spiritually rich, "essential" music. One of the strategies to degrade this music was to accuse it of being fake, inauthentic, and theatrical. Wagner, for example, reproached the German-Jewish Jakob (Giacomo) Meyerbeer,<sup>6</sup> who worked mainly in France, with striving for mere "effects" in his music, famously defining "effect" as "effects without a cause."<sup>7</sup> Wagner portrays him as a manipulative hypocrite, tricking the listener into beliefs and feelings that have no reality or reason behind them and rarely reach beyond a superficial level.

It is precisely this suspicion that the narrator entertains in Kafka's story. He suspects that there might be no "cause" behind Josefine's "effects," that far from being of the greatest "beauty" [p. 95] her song is in truth something even less than ordinary, indeed a mere "nothing[ness]" [p. 100]. He produces numerous arguments to support his claim, concentrating above all on Josefine's theatricality. For example, she is said to feign injuries, fatigue, bad temper, and weakness at her performances in order to move the audience. The narrator concludes: "In addition to a concert, we have drama" [p. 107], involving weeping, limbs that hang lifelessly, and collapsing—all of them being empty effects since in truth Josefine experiences nothing of the sort. According to the narrator, this kind of empty spectacle is so important to Josefine's art that "to under-

covering up their 'metaphysical 'lack' or 'nothingness' with an artificial, seductive, 'theatrical' appearance" (209). Thus, for Anderson, the narrator gives a "guileful portrayal of Josefine as both Jew and woman" (210).

4. For Kafka's allusions to the negative assumptions about female performers in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, see Elisabeth Boa, *Kafka. Gender, Class and Race in the Letters and Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 175–80.

5. For another account of the musical "paradigm of femininity" and its influence on Kafka, see Christine Lubkoll, "Dies ist kein Pfeifen. Musik und Negation in Franz Kafka's Erzählung 'Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse,'" in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 4 (1992), 748–64, esp. 751–56.

6. Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), German composer, mainly active in Paris [Editor].

7. Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, in *Dichtungen und Schriften* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1983), 7: 98.

stand her art, you must not only hear but also see her" [p. 96]. This point demonstrates, on the one hand, her dependency on effects and, on the other, the "nothing(ness)" of her song because it needs the visual spectacle as a cover-up. The narrator expends great effort on convincing the reader of this "nothing(ness)" by repeating again and again that Josefine is not singing but really "just squeaking" [p. 95 ff.] like every other ordinary mouse or indeed even less competently than they. But the narrator not only calls into question Josefine's art, he also portrays Josefine's persona as a nerve-racking diva, hysterical and childish in her behavior and thus not to be taken (and indeed not taken) seriously.

How do these two different traditions of thought about music fit together? How can Josefine's song fulfill a task considered so deeply important and serious as uniting a people in times of war and at the same time be denied any kind of aesthetic and ethical value and declared a ridiculous fake? Joining these two traditions turns out to be an intricate rhetorical trick of the narrator. For while he is all too ready to question the quality of Josefine's song, he is not at all ready to question the quality of the mouse people. Rather, questioning the former serves as a means of strengthening the latter. Contradicting his own previous remarks, the narrator presents the mouse people as a unity existing eternally and independently of any external events, describing them, for example, as an "immovable body" unswervingly "continu[ing] on its way" [p. 107], even though it only becomes this body for the duration of Josefine's concerts. He talks about the mouse people as if it were one single individual, for example when he notes that "the people take care of Josefine the way a father looks after a child [p. 99]" or that "our people \* \* \* draw different conclusions and calmly reject [Josefine's] claim" or that "the people hear her out and pay no attention [to her argument]" [p. 104]. The narrator talks about the mouse people in this way even though, in several instances, he notes that the people is indeed split into different groups, even into various individuals. Thus, the individual is not at all necessarily integrated into the people, and the narrator's fear of being "cut \* \* \* off so inscrutably" from the people [p. 105] shows that he knows about this. But he holds on to his wishful idea of the people as a unity in which every single mouse is always already integrated; which looks after every "comrade with \* \* \* more than fatherly, with humble \* \* \* concern" [p. 105]; and which exists independent of the vicissitudes of the day, simply being one big, unshakable whole. This is why he cannot allow the people to be in need of Josefine and why he has to claim that after her disappearance, "we will not miss very much at all" [p. 108]. While Josefine's performances are necessary to establish the people, the narrator has to suppress this fact in order to

truly establish a belief in the people's existence. Thus, he mentions Josefine's power to unite the people but only to doubt the power of her song afterwards. Instead, he now tries to attribute the power to the people itself—for example, by calling the song a message of the people or by claiming that Josefine's concerts are "not so much a song recital as a popular assembly" [p. 100] or by suggesting that it is "rather the ceremonious quiet" of the audience and not her singing "that enchants us" [p. 96]. Hence, once the people is established, the narrator takes pains to claim that the power has come from the people in the first place, that not the song but the people "moved" itself, that for this people the song is not really necessary at all.<sup>8</sup> Here, then, Kafka adverts to the second tradition of thought about music in order to suppress the musical "origination" of the people and to establish the people itself at the origin.

"Josefine" joins the two traditions of thought about music only in order to subvert both of them. Kafka's story demonstrates that, despite the first tradition, music does not simply have a mysterious power to move listeners outside their rational selves; rather, this power is attributed to it. But while the narrator develops this insight, he suppresses another insight necessarily accompanying the first and as a result constructs a contradictory and self-subverting narrative. For, contrary to his intentions, not only the power of music but also the mouse people *itself* is shown to be the result of a performative process, existing only as a fantasy and only for the duration of the performance. Josefine's singing functions as a space of projection for the audience onto which they project an idealized version of themselves as a unified people. Then, listening to the song, they hear the voice of this people speaking to them, identifying with this voice and thence melting into the very unity they envisioned. So while, according to the narrator, there is nothing special about Josefine's song, there might just as well be nothing special about the mice. As Josefine's song only seems to have a certain power, the mice only seem to be a unified people—and then for only as long as the music lasts. In yet another way, Kafka's story subverts the second musicological tradition. It shows that "poor" music in fact does what "good" music was supposed to do: it creates, however evanescently, a people. So either it is not "poor" after all or, on the other hand, the opposition between "poor" and "good" music collapses. It turns out that theatricality and make-believe stand at the heart of the power at work in the performance situation. So what was "poor" about the "poor" music is actually what makes the whole process work.

8. In *Music in the Works of Broch, Mann, and Kafka*, John A. Hargraves interprets "the narrator's attempt \* \* \* to tell Josefine's story," "criticizing" and finally "killing her," as an attempt to "control and censor the emotions set loose by music," which Kafka appears to have been frightened of as well [p. 329].

Meanwhile the question remains, reaching beyond Kafka's story and the scope of this text: why music? For the narrator is wrong to claim that music is not necessary for the mouse people. It may not have a mysterious power, but it is necessary as a space of projection. But why use music as a space of projection and not, say, any other of the fine arts? The answer is a traditional one: ever since the late eighteenth century, music had been labeled, at first critically and later positively, as the art most difficult to decipher. It means something to the listener, but it seems impossible to pinpoint this meaning. This indefinability makes music into a playground of the fantasies and wishes of its audience, chief among them the desire for an immediate kind of language with privileged access to deeper truths, such as the realm of the divine, of the will, or of the essence of a people. Similarly, in Kafka's story, Josefina's song is first emptied of meaning and then filled with a new one. The narrator claims that Josefina's singing is really just a squeaking, squeaking being the language of the mouse people. However, in Josefina's song, this "squeaking is freed from the bonds of daily life" [p. 103]; that is, as a language, it is deprived of its signifying function. Uttered for its own sake, it points to language as a play of sounds without definitive meaning.<sup>9</sup> It is this very absence of reference that invites the listeners to make music a space of projection. In this respect, Josefina's song is at first filled with the contents of dreams. Listening to Josefina's song, "the true body of her audience \* \* \* has withdrawn into itself" [p. 102], dreaming dreams about their identity. Then, the contents of these dreams are declared to be the contents of the song: "into these dreams comes the sound of Josefina's squeaking \* \* \*. Something of our poor, brief childhood is in it; something of lost, irretrievable happiness; but something of the active present-day life is in it as well" [pp. 102-03]. However, these contents are still very vague and incomplete; "something" of everything seems to be in the song, thereby transferring the indistinctness of musical meaning into an indistinctness of verbal meaning. In other instances, however, the meaning becomes more concrete, when the song becomes a "message from the people" [p. 100]. Yet there is no content to this message; or rather, the supposed origin of the song, the people, becomes its only message: the song is treated as evidence of the existence of a people. Hence, in Kafka's story music is used as a space of projection because of its openness of meaning; and precisely in line with this openness, *the story itself* becomes a space of projection for musical tradition. As we have seen from Nietzsche's early writings and the Wagner reception of the early twentieth century, the dominant tradition available to

9. See Kittler, *Turmbau zu Babel*, 226-228.

Kafka was one in which music was "instrumentalized" as a medium for the political fantasy of becoming and being a unified people.

A final set of concerns: is Kafka's story truly about music? For, as was pointed out above, the theatricality of the performance seems to be just as important for its effects. Furthermore, as the narrator claims, the mouse people is not only "totally unmusical," it also has nothing more than "an inkling of what song is" [p. 95]. This makes their judgment altogether dubious: how can they know whether Josefina's song is song at all; and their mistrust is further enhanced by the narrator's own doubts about the nature of Josefina's squeaking. This, now, is one of several indications that this story may not be specifically about music. Is it about art in general? What we do know for sure is that some kind of art is being consumed here: an audience is watching some kind of performance, be it a song recital, a play, or a monologue. But quite a peculiar performance it is, because there seems to be nothing special about it. In no way do Josefina's actions differ from those of everyday life, except that an audience has gathered to watch her after she has called for them. So—doubts multiply: is this story really about art, or does this gathering together and watching point to a specific behavior of the mouse people? And is it not rather that this behavior makes up the actual art performance, since the behavior (and not Josefina's song) constitutes the difference from everyday life? The narrator strongly suggests that it is really the "ceremonious quiet" produced by the listening audience that "enchants" this audience [p. 96]. In "The Silence of the Sirens" Kafka represents the Sirens as having "an even more terrible weapon than their song—namely their silence" [p. 128]. In "Josefine," too, silence appears to be more powerful than the song; indeed, for the narrator, silence is the sole source of the power experienced during the performance. But note that here the silence does not originate from the singer;<sup>1</sup> rather, the audience enchants *itself* by being silent. In their silence, they listen to themselves as a unified people, to the sounds of their communal listening, their "breathing with awe" [p. 98].<sup>2</sup> The unusual silence produces the situation of ceremony, elevating the performance situation above everyday life and creating a "stage" for Josefina's song. The short episode about the child's interrupting the performance and being immediately shushed by the audience proves how active

1. Admittedly, one could claim with the narrator that Josefina is not really singing at all—and Josefina's later refusal to sing goes hand in hand with her total disappearance, which does not seem to bother the audience very much.

2. As Gerhard Kurz notes with regard to *The Burrow* (paraphrasing the work of Martin Seel), "silence is not simply acoustic emptiness. (In silence, we can already hear our own circulation rustling.) If we immerse ourselves in silence like the animal 'I' ('deepest submersion'), it begins to 'rustle.' It is experienced as an intensity, as the being of emptiness become fullness. Experiencing this, the animal 'I' would experience 'rapture'" [p. 344].

the audience is in providing Josefine with her special status. It is altogether aggressive in the way it prohibits this one individual, the child, from disturbing the communal silence so as to protect another individual, Josefine, whose voice it wants to be heard.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Josefine's distinction, her song, and the power of her song, appear to be the creations of the audience.

The same is true for Josefine's power to gather the crowd. In order to do so she takes up a theatrical pose, "her little head tilted back, mouth half-open, eyes turned toward the heights" [p. 98]. This posture "indicates that she intends to sing," that is, it functions as a sign that is read and obeyed by the mice. But Josefine's sign does not reach far enough. The mice need to send out messengers gathering the listeners and to post sentinels on the roads waving to the newcomers. Hence, Josefine's initial sign initiates a chain of signs spreading the meaning of her posture everywhere. However, the fact that Josefine's initial sign needs messengers and sentinels in order to be effective is kept a secret and never told to Josefine. As a result, the illusion is preserved that Josefine has the power to gather her people by using signs immediately understood by everyone, not needing the help of any mediators, while in truth it is once again the mice who attribute this power to her.<sup>4</sup>

Hence it is the audience that makes Josefine's song into song. It is the audience that establishes the work of art it is watching and listening to.<sup>5</sup> This fact not only makes reception the most important component of art, it also brings the whole performance situation into close proximity with ritual. But what is this ritual about? Why are the mouse people so interested in it, imbuing Josefine and her song with their power? The performance situation establishes an (albeit temporary and illusory) identity of the mouse people. This is its primary function. And since Josefine and her song are to be used as a projection space for the identity of the mouse people, she has to emblemize the features ascribed to the mouse people by the narrator. According to him, the life of mice is defined by a continuous "struggle for existence" [p. 101], "shirking [being] utterly unknown" [p. 104] among mice. So he argues that Josefine, despite her demands to be relieved of work, "does not actually aspire to what she literally demands. She is reasonable, she is not work shy; \* \* \* even if her demands were granted, she would surely not change her way of life, her work would never get in the way of her song" [p. 104]. Similarly, her negative character traits are described as also typical of the mouse people in general. Her ability to stand her ground against the opposition, as "insolent," "arrogant"

3. See Kittler, *Türmbau zu Babel*, 192.

4. See *ibid.* 196-97.

5. See Menke, *Prosopopöia*, 749-56.

[p. 96] and "unworthy" [p. 103] as her reactions may seem, only mirrors the ability of her people to survive in an antagonistic environment. "Josefine asserts herself, this nothing of a voice, this nothing of an achievement asserts itself and makes its way to us," writes the narrator, noting at the same time that her "thin squeak in the midst of grave decisions is almost like the wretched existence of our people amid the tumult of a hostile world" [p. 100]. Finally, the art-less quality of Josefine's song also fits into the cultural decline of the mouse people. As the narrator writes, "we are too old for music, its excitement, its uplift does not suit our gravity; wearily we shoo it away; we have fallen back on our squeaking; some squeaking here and there, that is what suits us" [p. 102]. All throughout, Josefine's persona and her song are portrayed in a way to agree with the qualities of the mouse people. She remains the ordinary mouse, her song remains an ordinary squeaking, and this assures that the mice can identify with her. This is quite in line with the point that Adorno stressed about Freud's theory: the ordinariness of the leader is necessary for the mechanisms at work binding the masses and their leader. This fact is complemented by the idealization of the leader figure. In Kafka's story this idealization occurs through the attribution of a special position and power to Josefine and her song, achieved, for example, through the self-imposed gathering on her command and through the self-imposed silence of the audience.

If Josefine's performances are necessary for the founding of an identity of the mouse people, what then will happen after her disappearance? Is this the end of a mouse people capable of identifying itself as such? On the one hand, one could claim that her disappearance serves the narrator's desire to downplay her importance in order to stress the independence and timelessness of the people. On the other hand, he suggests that the memory of her squeaking will be just as loud and lively as her squeaking was when she was still present. Noting that "even during her lifetime" her squeaking might never have been "more than a mere memory" [p. 108], the narrator emphasizes the audience's participation in the creation of Josefine's song. And so, after her disappearance, the audience might still participate in her song by keeping her memory alive. Josefine's song might become a myth, building the foundation of the people's identity, being celebrated in ritualistic performances and itself functioning as the space of projection. And yet, on the other hand, the narrator also seems to doubt that such gatherings will still be possible after Josefine's disappearance. And this, in turn, raises the question of whether the mouse people would still be able to identify itself as a mouse people should the gatherings stop and the memory of Josefine's song no longer be kept alive. But Kafka's story provides no answer to this; it only confronts us with

these questions. In this way, "Josefine" at once foreshadows and at the same time subverts a new kind of political ideology gaining ground among Kafka's contemporaries, such as the Conservative Revolution and Zionism and one ultimately practiced, in the worst case, by National Socialism<sup>6</sup>—this is the construction of a folkish identity by way of artistic performances and by way of a leader who fancies himself a great artist and his state one gigantic "total work of art." In this matter, Kafka specifically contributes an analysis of how actual or fictive listening behaviors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could become models for nationalist politics and be concretely "instrumentalized" for political agendas.

### VIVIAN LISKA

#### Positions: On Franz Kafka's "Poseidon"†

##### Abstract

In addition to the traditional, allegorical interpretations, Franz Kafka's "Poseidon" can also be read as a parable of the hermeneutic<sup>1</sup> situation itself. The various positions of the God of the Seas who has never really seen the seas correspond to the hopelessness of any attempt to achieve a definitive reading. The fruitless search for neutral intellectual understanding is contrasted with the positive alternative of experience through involvement.

Kafka's allegorical figure of thought (*Denkbild*) entitled "Poseidon" is a demythologizing play on traditional cultural material, transforming the energetic, earthshaking Greek God of the Seas into the tragicomic figure of a stressed-out administrator. In the guise of a grotesque mythological contrafact,<sup>2</sup> a parable arises about the limits of knowledge, the presumptions of rationality, and the unreadability of the world. The present essay begins by sketching possible biographical, psychological, socially-critical, religious, and philosophical readings and provides a brief overview of existing interpretations. Then it attempts to make clear the hermeneutic

6. See Peter Reichel, *Der schöne Schein des dritten Reiches. Faszination und Gewalt des Faschismus* (Munich: Hanser, 1991).

† Originally published as "Stellungen: zu Franz Kafkas 'Poseidon,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 115 (1996), 226–238. Translated by Eric Patton. Page numbers in brackets refer to this Norton Critical Edition.

1. Interpretive, as referring to hermeneutics, the study of the principles of interpretation and explanation [*Editor*].

2. In music, an entirely new composition produced by using the chord structure of a given, established composition [*Editor*].

dimension of the text from the connection between the reader's difficulties in understanding and the implicit epistemological<sup>3</sup> problems in the text.

From a narrative perspective that is at first unclear, the parable tells of Poseidon's conscientiousness and thoroughness in his administrative work, which is imposed upon him by some higher impersonal and nameless authority, and of his dissatisfaction with this office and his desire for "more cheerful work." A change in these conditions, however, does not seem possible. Several alternatives are suggested and then taken back at the same time in opaque arguments. The reasons for this "case [having] \* \* \* absolutely no prospects of success" lead to the central paradox of the parable, which takes this absence of any "prospects" literally: This is a god of the seas who has hardly seen the oceans, his empire and the domain of his life, and probably never will, as we may well conclude from the end.

The bizarre play between the mythical realm of the Greek god and modern bureaucracy first evokes the parodic figure of a grim, mistrustful, continually dissatisfied administrator entangled in an inscrutable hierarchy, who has missed his true life owing to the pressure to master his realm, the need to look after his daily business, and the impenetrable restrictions imposed on him from above.

A number of allegorical interpretations suggest themselves. The text can first be read in connection with Kafka's own unhappy official work or as a parody of the paternal work ethic. There are also parallels between Kafka's description of his own literary activity and Poseidon's tasks: the continual need to make corrections ("he did the accounts over again"), the awareness of doing work that was "imposed on him"—the sense of which he doubts again and again, although "nothing really appealed to him so much as his present office." Above all, there are resonances with Kafka's recurrent feeling of being outside of real life, of glimpsing it only from afar—or further, from the depths of a lonely observation post—and, like Poseidon, never having really seen the seas. This would also be the sense in which to understand the rare "trip," the forays into real life; and the "quick little tour" at the end would perhaps represent the dream of a final experience of real life before death (Kafka was already aware of his tuberculosis at this point in time).

From a socially-critical standpoint, we can read the text as a general parody of administrative activity: the boredom, the deceitful superiors ("one must try to seem to accommodate him"), the au-

3. Having to do with knowing, more precisely, with epistemology, the study of the method, grounds, limits, and validity of knowledge [*Editor*].