

Of Mice and Women: Reflections on a Discourse in Kafka's "Josefine, die Sangerin oder Das Volk der Mause"

RUTH V. GROSS

In recent years the theme of any given male author and women has become a favorite recurring topic of discussion at conferences and in articles. There are several avenues such discussions can take. One is psychologically biographical (or biographically psychological), examining the life of the author and his relationship to women. Another is analytical and literary, studying the female characters of various works and how they are portrayed. Often the two approaches are combined and the portrayal and treatment of female characters are related to the author's own life. Some critics take the latter approach a bit farther by questioning the heretofore accepted universality of these male authors. Texts that have been described as "universal" are now being explained as tentatively masculine in perspective. Each of these approaches has its validity, and, not surprisingly, each of these approaches has at one time or another been applied to Kafka. In fact, the topic "Kafka and Women" has recently engendered a great deal of critical literature.

The subject is certainly not without its attractions and dangers. Fortunately or unfortunately, Kafka, the male writer, left behind a large body of personal writings for critics to peruse. His problems with women are well documented in his diaries and letters, which have become part of the author's *uvre*. They are studied and applied to his works of fiction. Moreover, Dora, Felice, Milena, et al., have become characters of the text we call Kafka.

In her book *As Lonely as Franz Kafka*, Marthe Robert uses biographical information and what she calls Kafka's "autobiographical notations" as evidence for her conclusions about the problem of Kafka's identity.¹ At one point Robert connects the years between 1914 and 1920, the publication years of the big novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* to Kafka's relationships with women, seeing them as only part of a larger emotional and social substance upon which Kafka drew. She also discusses Kafka's problems with women, understanding him as "a textbook example" of psychoanalytic theory with his "all-powerful father" and "passionate attachment to the

mother."² In this book Robert remains almost entirely in the realm of the biographically psychological.

Often biographical information is presented in the context of a larger analysis, as in Karl-Bernhard Bodeker's *Frau und Familie im erzahlerischen Werk Franz Kafkas*, the only real book on the problem of Kafka and women. Bodeker begins his study with a discussion of the relationship of woman and family in Kafka's own life. He summarizes Kafka's feelings by citing his diaries and comes to the ultimate conclusion that every emotional conflict in Kafka's life ends in resignation, and that the root of all Kafka's unhappiness lay in his inability to decide what direction his relationships should take.³ Bodeker then proceeds to discuss women—that is, analyze the characters and situations in Kafka's works—keeping the two worlds, the real and the fictional, quite separate. He does, however, finally come to some conclusions about what he calls antifeminist aspects in Kafka, stating that the feminine in his works can never intervene as savior, because Kafka's "absolute male self" sees no equivalent female self who could save the hero.⁴ Quoting Janouch, Bodeker sees Kafka's women as traps who wait to pull man into the "Nur-Endliche"—the only finite. For Bodeker, however, Kafka's writing is social criticism in which the author depicts the negative aspects of humankind in order to effect a consciousness in the reader about positive human tendencies. He applies this to Kafka's portrayal of women, when he writes: "Kafka's depiction of woman and her role within the family is . . . not a real reversal of her traditional perception as 'guardian of morals, of tradition, of personal intimacy . . . but rather a different newly opened accessibility to her positive determination, one achieved by means of negation and paradox."⁵ In other words Bodeker maintains that Kafka's position with regard to the women in his texts as non-redeemers is the reverse and certainly no worse than the figure of the woman redeemer as we find her in the German literary tradition from Goethe through Wagner.

Other critics draw the image of an indecisive, paralyzed Kafka with his neurotic relationships to women by

using his fictional characters as evidence. Heinz Politzer, in *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*, compares Kafka's view of women with that of the Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger, and concludes: "The insecurity which caused both the philosopher and the writer to distort the images of womanhood almost certainly originated in the mistrust which the two men had in their own identity."⁶ The distortions he specifically points to are the female characters in *The Trial*. Unlike Bödeker, Politzer does not consider these distorted depictions as necessarily positive, but he argues that Kafka was "interested in womanhood as a metaphysical principle;⁷ in other words, the female figures are incapable of realizing the problem of existence; they are individuals beyond the law, and thus merely instruments of it.

Speaking against the grain of the criticism cited, Meno Spann in his book *Franz Kafka* compares Kafka to his protagonists and comments: "Like the heroes of all his novels and in strictest contrast to Kierkegaard, Kafka sought refuge with, and help from, women. While he never set out to find female saviours, he accepted them eagerly when given the chance."⁸

Walter Sokel, in *Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie*, often masterfully interweaves biography and fiction, for example when he writes about Kafka's indecision with regard to Felice. He puts, however, an unusual twist into the comparisons and applies elements of the fiction to Kafka's life, concluding the Kafka's life imitated his art rather than his art imitating his life.⁹

Still other critics use the correspondences as illustrations of Kafka's indecision and neuroses. Charles Bernheimer, in his recent book *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure*, includes an important discussion of Kafka's "Letters to Felice" in which he describes Kafka's wish to translate Felice into writing, considering her as a kind of response to his own writing.¹⁰ In Bernheimer's study, Felice takes on the role of reflector. Analyzing the conclusion of one of Kafka's letters to her in which Kafka expresses the desire to be nameless, Bernheimer remarks: "It is typical of Kafka's identification of his very being with the writing process that he responds to his fantasy of narcissistic union primarily in terms of its meaning for his writing rather than in terms of its consequences for the relationship itself."¹¹ Writing was for Kafka a way of escaping relationships.

In Erich Heller's monograph *Franz Kafka*, the "Letters to Felice" are also used to illustrate the ambivalence and indecision of Kafka in his relationships to women, but the relationship Heller portrays seems to make Felice disappear. He writes: "Suppose that Felice . . . had gathered the courage to read his letters again and asked herself: was it really 'I' whom he thought he loved? Would she not have discovered that 'she' did not have any real existence on these sheets of paper?"¹² Heller's Kafka makes Felice a literary creation. The reality of the woman is in doubt, but her literary presence remains a

powerful force "even after the 'real' Felice recedes from his [Kafka's] life."¹³ The examples I have used here are, of course, excerpts from larger studies and are meant to show tendencies in criticism.

Typical of the analytical, textual approach to Kafka and Women is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, in which the authors maintain that in Kafka's works, women are "in contact," "in liaison," "in contiguity with the essential," and thus they see women in Kafka's fiction as "connectors."¹⁴ They describe the Kafkan female as a combination of sister-maid-whore, a type which, they believe, obsessed Kafka. Another critic who uses this textual method of discussing Kafka and women is Larysa Mykyta. In her article on the women in Kafka's novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*, she demonstrates how the female figures in these novels take on one of two contradictory functions—either as obstacles or as paths for the male protagonists' desires and goals.¹⁵ These critics differ from those I have previously mentioned in that they, for the most part, do not run back and forth from Kafka's texts to the text of Kafka. In other words, their focus remains on the created characters.

But there is yet another type of criticism which calls itself a "feminist reading," which questions the universality of Kafka's works and sees them as insidiously male centered. Evelyn Beck, in an article entitled "Kafka's Traffic in Women: Gender, Power and Sexuality," writes: "The most serious implication of the texts' male-centered angle of vision is that it makes impossible the existence of real women, and substitutes in their place false constructs, projections of male fears and fantasies, idealizations and demonizations of woman, and asks us to accept these as real representations of ourselves."¹⁶ This type of criticism asks that we read Kafka with an awareness of his male perspective rather than be bullied or seduced into the allegedly usual acceptance of his stories as real representations of the world. These readings have their place, but it would, I think, be difficult to accept any of Kafka's male protagonists as real men, any more than we can accept his women as real women. One could certainly argue that his male characters are just as much "false constructs, projections of male fears and fantasies, idealizations and demonizations of 'man.'" I don't believe we read Kafka to find "real representations of ourselves," be we men or women. Beck seems to be beating a dead horse here. By focusing on characterization, rather than theme, plot, rhetoric, or discursive strategy, and by waving as a talisman the always-problematic banner of realism, she falls into the same trap that she identifies as the snare of Kafka's humanist—that is to say, male-centered—critics. She implies that Kafka, so often referred to as the artist of the human condition, humanity's existential plight, the inner darkness of the soul, the true prophet of the twentieth century, fails at these tasks,

which amount to carrying the realistic project of literature farther than ever before, because, in short, he is a man, writes as a man, thinks as a man, etc. But what is this “universality” that Beck misses, and that other critics have found over the years in Shakespeare, Goethe, or other superstars of the literary canon, if not a projection of fears and fantasies by the reader onto the texts of the tradition? It is the concepts of universality, the human condition, and represented reality which are in question here, not Kafka’s ability or inability to meet someone’s standards.

In dealing with the short fiction in recent years, I have noted a peculiarity, one that has been often overlooked by critics, perhaps because of its obviousness. Among the overwhelming number of protagonists that are male in Kafka stories, there are also two females: one is a bridge who bears traffic, the other is a mouse who sings. Perusing these two tales can add to the current discussion of Kafka and women and provide perhaps yet another feminist approach to Kafka which may throw a different light on some of the feminist questions and provide a different sort of answer.

In a recent article, I developed the notion of Kafka’s story “The Bridge” as a parable of a woman’s writing.¹⁷ At the start of the tale, the bridge has already fallen. She is no longer a bridge and thus begins to tell her own story. She is speaking from the ground, from her fallen position. The story that she relates shows that while she was a bridge, she was willing to serve the needs of men. Like other female characters in Kafka, she was an object by which man could reach his goal or destination. The bridge of this tale is the metaphorical Kafka woman as described by many of the critics I have mentioned above. She existed even before the man in the story attempts to cross her as the beautiful object of the masculine gaze of the stonemasons who looked up at her. It was she who made traffic possible, and as the passive object that makes commerce possible, the bridge is the perfect female. But this female is not content to be merely an object; she desires to see, rather than to be seen. She wishes to gaze upon her crosser, to take up the traditional male perspective. And in turning to see, she falls. The bridge returns to her mother, the cold ground, and is now useless as a bridge. She has taken herself out of circulation, out of traffic, out of the male economy, and in so doing has finally found her voice. Paradoxically, she becomes herself by ceasing to be a bridge. Her failure as a bridge-woman enables her to emerge as a writer, her “fallen” state. It is as if Kafka had decided for one brief moment to try on the guise of woman writer. The bridge who writes her story is very different from any other Kafka woman in the short fiction because her voice is heard. She writes instead of being written. Whatever else this short tale of Kafka may mean, this

particular reading of it can enrich and deepen our understanding of the Kafka text as a whole. However, as I have indicated, there is yet another story of Kafka’s that has a female as its protagonist. I am speaking of “Josefine die Sangerin oder das Volk der Mause,” and in this story, it is the female voice that is central from the start. However, unlike the bridge, it is central as object, not as subject. Josefine is the protagonist of the story and not its narrator.

The first paragraph of “Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk” sets the tone for the whole story. It contains the entire plot, such as it is, within it. It is like an overture with all the tunes of the work already included or alluded to, or like an introduction to a song, presenting the main melody. It has six sentences, all of which are negated or contain negations with the exception of the opening sentence—“Unsere Sangerin heit Josefine” (193).¹⁸ Within the negative tone of the paragraph are couched three positive statements: 1) Josefine is the name of “our singer”; 2) the mousepeople have a certain practical slyness; and 3) Josefine loves music. This is not much of a plot, but it could sum up what the narrator goes on about for the length of the narration. Even Josefine’s final disappearance is prepared for and alluded to in the last sentence of this first paragraph—“mit ihrem Hingang wird die Musik—wer weit wie lange—aus unserem Leben verschwinden” (194). Like so much of Kafka’s short fiction, this tale is not long on plot. The impact lies in the telling.

Josefine—the name defines her being, her essence. It is the feminine form of Joseph, Kafka’s protagonist in “The Trial.” In other words, it is Joseph with an appendage, a tail, if you will—a something extra that makes her feminine. Although the something extra usually defines the male, with mice it is different. The appendage-tail turns her from a man named Joseph into a female mouse. Of course, Joseph was also a patriarch of the Hebrews. As Moses led the Exodus out, Joseph led the Eisodus in before him. If, as Brod and other critics have suggested, the mousepeople are the people of Moses, the “ine,” the supplement, the tail, could be seen as being caught between the two biblical patriarchs Joseph and Moses. The title, as Kafka finally revised it—“Josefine die Sangerin oder das Volk der Mause”—reflects this. It is this name—Josefine—that lets the readers know that the singer of note here is female. The text portrays the mousepeople as a patriarchal society. Their attitude toward Josefine is paternal. In this society she, most of all, is the different one. She stands out, not only by virtue of her name, but because of her actions. As they patronize her, protect her, keep her in line, i.e., *father* her, she believes that by bringing them together, she protects them, saves them, gives them strength, dominates them, i.e., *mothers* them. The name becomes the semantic indicator of difference—that which makes Josefine Josefine—the other, the mother of her people.

As Ursula Mahlendorf has suggested in her incisive article on Josefine: "We must keep in mind that Josefine is only one aspect of Kafka as a writer. She is his musical self, the irrational, his primary process, his inspiration, his muse. And since in Kafka's and our culture we designate these states as female, Josefine is female."¹⁹ The fact of Josefine's femaleness, not to say femininity, becomes unimportant in most readings of the story. Except for a few passing remarks—for example like the following by Politzer in *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*: "Josefine is driven by an ambition as boundless as the Hunger Artist's: but being a woman and a 'frail creature' at that, she depends even more than he on the public's recognition,"—Josefine's womanhood is never an issue.²⁰ Considering that she is one of two female protagonists in Kafka's oeuvre, this is surprising.

There is no doubt that Josefine is a female, and a female with a voice as well. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous talks about women and women's writing. Understanding herself as a woman who writes, that is, a woman with a voice, and as such one who struggles "against conventional man" and who desires to give other women a sense of "their meaning in history," Cixous calls for other women to write and speak, because the writing of women is woman, is the self, and thus writing and speaking are political acts of power.²¹ She writes:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. . . . Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic of her speech. . . ." In a certain way she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned that they have in speaking. Her speech, even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectified," generalized: she draws her story into history.²²

Uncannily, in this passage on women's writing, Cixous has re-presented us with Kafka's Josefine. In the first part, Cixous delineates the nature of the woman "doer"—a transgressor whose words "fall almost always upon the deaf male ear." Josefine, according to the mouse-narrator, believes she is singing to deaf ears whenever she appears in public. Her stance is described by the narrator: "Schon steht sie da, das zarte Wesen, besonders unterhalb der Brust beängstigt vibrierend, es ist, als hätte sie all ihre Kraft im Gesang versammelt, als sei allem an ihr, was nicht dem Gesange unmittelbar diene, jede Kraft . . . entzogen" (197). The "trembling body"

and "all of her" passing into her voice manifest Josefine's femaleness. Certainly, if we can believe anything in Kafka's story, we can believe that Josefine's song is not simple, and it very often takes on the form of a political gesture. Her story does become history—a small episode, but nonetheless, history—the narrator tells us this at the end of his tale. Cixous continues:

In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us—that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. You don't build walls around yourself, you don't forego pleasure as "wisely" as he. Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from "mother" (I mean outside her role functions: the "mother" as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink.²³

Once again, Cixous could have used Josefine as an example of the woman speaker or writer she has in mind. Josefine's voice, her song, touches in the way Cixous depicts women's writing. Once it permeates its listener, it retains the power to move. At the outset the narrator tells us: "Es gibt niemanden, den ihr Gesang nicht fortreißt" (193) and, as we shall see, in the end, the memory of her song will still have this power—"first music from the first voice of love . . ." *Urmusik* from the *Urmutter*. Josefine's song is powerful, even violent—it can tear away and daze—*fortreißen*. This, says the narrator, is a great tribute, "was umso höher zu bewerten ist, als unser Geschlecht im ganzen Musik nicht liebt" (193). *Geschlecht* is one of those wonderfully ambiguous words in German—the universality of which is always assumed—*Geschlecht*, of course, means species, kind, or race, *but* it can also mean gender or sex. Music is a female, not a male pleasure. Silence is masculine—the strong, silent type—"Stiller Frieden ist uns die liebste Musik" (193). Josefine, however, loves music. She is the exception, the *Ausnahme*—set apart in a masculine society, a masculine system of representation, in which she is struggling for self-definition. To this society Josefine attempts to transmit her love, her music. She knows how to transmit it—"sie zu vermitteln"—she is an intermediary, an agent, a path, a pontifex, a bridge between music and her people. She is female. She serves this need.

Josefine, like Cixous' woman, has no defenses, and her name, as we have seen, is merely a patriarchal trope. She is not more, not less than her song. When she sings, she sings herself: When she ceases to sing, she must herself disappear. But in her song, the song that is so enigmatic for the narrator, there is that so-called "white ink," that sustenance of her people. Can it be that Kafka's mouse is not only a female, but also a feminist?

Just as we as readers know that Josefina is female, we know that the mouse-narrator is male. This is obvious. But what is it in the text that makes it so clear? How do we know that the narrator is male, once we dismiss the notion that the narrator is Kafka? Does he think and thus write like a man? The answer is purely and simply, yes! The male perspective of his narration is striking. First, from the start, his style is that of a possessive *spokesman* of his people: "Unsere Sangerin heit Josefina." ". . . als unser Geschlecht im ganzen Musik nicht liebt," ". . . unser Leben ist schwer" (193). He is speaking from the standpoint of a center and this center is always man. It is Josefina who is set against the group, who is decentered, peripheral, a satellite, a moon. Each of her characteristics is set within a context of being different. Often in the course of narrating, he suggests he is part of a community: "Im vertrauten Kreise gestehen wir einander offen . . ." (194); "bei solchem Anblick pflegen wir angeblichen Gegner uns zu sagen . . ." (197), etc. Even though this is a thinking mouse, an intellectual mouse, a writing mouse, he is still part of a body of mousepeople, part of the same, whereas Josefina, even when she agrees, is different: "wir bewundern an ihr das, was wir an uns gar nicht bewundern; brigens stimmt sie in letzterer Hinsicht mit uns vllig berein" (195). Another aspect of the male perspective in the narration is the narrator's self-conscious inability to comprehend Josefina. She seems to remain an enigma to him, one which he can never solve. He wants to grasp her meaning and, in so doing, gain control of her. He follows all possible ways of understanding and describing her, but he cannot define her essence.

Throughout the tale, there is also an undercurrent of desire. Josefina fascinates the narrator. She is a creature of marvel, just as the girl on the tram is for the narrator in Kafka's short piece by that name. There, the narrator studies in great detail a girl he sees, taking in her clothing, her features, right down to "the whole ridge of the whorl of her right ear." Finally, he wonders: ". . . Wieso kommt es, da sie nicht ber sich verwundert ist, da sie den Mund geschlossen halt und nichts dergleichen sagt?"²⁴ The mouse-narrator finds Josefina just as fascinating. So obsessed with defining her, he is clearly smitten by her—must see her, finds her delicate, and thinks: "brigens hat Josefina, wie in ihrer Gestalt, un-leugbar, auch in ihrem Denken manchmal etwas recht Grazises" (207). In short, his is an obsession of desire. And like all desire, his stems from triangulation. He wants her because the mousefolk want her. She is the object of all their desire, and in the narrator's attempt to capture her being in words, Josefina becomes, at the same time, a unified and self-contradictory concept. Because the mouse-narrator desires all things in her, she is finally obliterated from the text.

Furthermore, the whole moral rhetoric of "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk" is scientific. The narrator

is speaking from a privileged position as chronicler of this nation of "no historians." The justification for the entire exercise seems to be for a more complete understanding of this phenomenon known as Josefina and how she and her art fit into the history and structure of the mousefolk. Thus, the narrative is not merely a personal obsession, but stands in the service of higher ends—a social scientific study, full of a kind of impersonal language which some might call phallogocentric, that suggests it is truer than any merely personal statement could be. An example of this impersonal, "scientific" language of "truth" is the narrator's excursion into nut cracking: "Eine Nu aufknacken ist wahrhaftig keine Kunst, deshalb wird es auch niemand wagen, ein Publikum zusammenzurufen und vor ihm, um es zu unterhalten, Nsse zu knacken. Tut er es dennoch und gelingt seine Absicht, dann kann es sich eben doch nicht nur um bloes Nusseknacken handeln" (195). This is a truth, or so it would seem. Another example of the narrator's scientific tone is his description of the mousepeople: "In unserem Volke kennt man keine Jugend, kaum eine winzige Kinderzeit. Es treten zwar regelmig Forderungen auf, man mge den Kindern eine besondere Freiheit, eine besondere Schonung gewahrleisten, ihr Recht auf ein wenig Sorglosigkeit, ein wenig sinnloses Sichherumtummeln, auf ein wenig Spiel, dieses Recht mge man anerkennen und ihm zur Erfllung verhelfen; . . ." (201). The narrator's is a language of control. He understands the nature of his society and elucidates it for the reader. There is no more "realistic" prose style than that of the social sciences, and yet isn't this prose simply a tool of illusion?

Reality in literature, as we have learned from Roland Barthes, is an effect, or more specifically an effect of language which leads in a variety of ways toward that plausibility that Aristotle prized so much. In order to evoke reality, one must perform the most artificial of tasks, namely to manipulate a number of preexistent discourses which define and delimit what may be plausibly said on any subject whatsoever. At the highest level of realistic literature, the professional writings of the law, medicine, psychology, and the social and natural sciences, etc., the discourses are rather clearly defined and carefully monitored. There are no flat earthers at a geological conference. At the other end of the spectrum of realistic representation we find the banal but overwhelming language of common sense, the popular discourses on various subjects. As I have suggested elsewhere, this banal language of common sense, without which we cannot confront or represent reality, is the stuff of proverbs, and the nature of a proverb is to give rise dialectically to a contrary proverb. To live proverbially would be to experience a paralyzingly self-contradictory reality, even if the bizarre occurrences of Kafka's "A Common Confusion," the story which seems to stress this proverbiality most strongly, did not occur.²⁵

Common sense and proverbiality, in order to retain their authority as predictive representations of reality, must account for opposite results.

This brings us back to the discourses of Josefine. Josefine is a semantic intersection, nothing more, nothing less. It is this intersection of discourses which constitutes whatever we readers may experience as reality, as that which may be interpreted. As we read the excellent critical literature on "Josefine," we note that one critic finds a discourse on the artist, another a discourse on the Jews, another on society and the individual, and so forth. In examining the discourse on woman, I do not mean to deny or disparage any of the other discourses which meet in Josefine's name or the critical examinations which they have elicited.

Ursula Mahlendorf has emphasized the psychoanalytic allegory contained in "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk," an allegory in which, on the one hand, the trinity of the human soul, ego, id, and superego, are impersonated effectively by the narrator, Josefine, and the mousepeople, while, on the other hand, the two fundamental languages of the human soul, the irrational primary process and the more housebroken secondary processes of thought are represented by Josefine's song and the narrator's representative prose. This approach is excellent and casts a great deal of light on the story. It illuminates the discourse on music very effectively by demonstrating the fundamentally Schopenhauerian aspect with which Kafka endows music and helps us readers to understand the story within an extremely plausible framework of early twentieth-century thought which happens to coincide with the life of the author. The allegory which I am proposing here is rather designed to bring out different strands of the text, but it is by no means unrelated to the romantic allegory that Mahlendorf has created. If we look at the nature of the id, as Freud describes it, we find in brief that it is a thing which cannot say no, which affirms everything, desires everything, and attempts to drive the soul of which it is a part to the self-destructive conclusion of unlimited desire. Furthermore, the primary process is, in effect, the logic and language of such a creature affirming, at one and the same time, contradictions, illogic, impossibilities, and unable in any way to deny. Against this must be posed the power of ego which makes use of the respective powers of id and superego, in most selective ways through a powerful censoring process as Freud describes it, which lets very little through into the secondary processes. If I may allegorize as the French linguists always do with Freud, we find an id, Josefine, indeed the spirit of music itself, representing the self-contradictory, illogical, primary, subtextual, all-constituting discourse which creates meaning in the secondary processes of human thought and enunciation only after a selective censoring process has been exerted. What does all this mean? It means that insofar as Josefine is

the id and the representative of primary process, she is precisely what may not be grasped and represented by the ego and secondary process in discourse. At least not without a tremendous loss which is clearly not acceptable to the rather obsessive ego narrator of "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk."

It is the literary feminization of musical primary process which remains to be established here and which I think is inescapable in our culture and in Kafka's. Music, of course, is associated with muses and muses are feminine. The spirit of music as Kleist describes it in one of his tales is St. Cecelia. Furthermore, in Eduard Mörike's poem about the power of music in a religious service to raise the hearts of the congregation, to fill the heart of the narrator with innocent joy and a sense of the ineffable sublime, the singer involved is not only a *Sängerin*, a female singer, she is also named "Josephine." By an ancient topos, woman is music, while man is poetry, woman ineffable, man articulate; the discourse on woman is a near relation to the discourse on music.

In "Josefine" the narrator cannot speak of any subject without invoking at every turn the elements of a preexisting language referring to that subject—defining it and legitimizing any statements about it. To be sure, Josefine is an intersection of discourses, as we have said before, but the road most heavily travelled is the discourse on her gender, which, in fact, is hardly explicitly invoked at all. However, in virtually every statement, elements that unmistakably pertain to the topoi of woman are mentioned. Normally, we would describe a certain woman in a certain way—good, evil, beautiful, ugly, charming, cruel—create an image of a simple or a complex individual, perhaps containing an occasional paradox and contradiction; this is all part of how the reality effect is manufactured. But in order to be realistic, that is to say plausible—*vraisemblable*—one must be selective—a certain woman must have certain characteristics. Therefore certain traits must be invoked and not others. In "Josefine" however, the narrator finds in his obsessive desire to capture and to express the nature of this creature, to represent, that is to say, her reality, her essence, finds himself swamped by the linguistic materials with which he must work to create her representation. The narrator, her alleged opponent, as we shall see, is increasingly captured not by Josefine's art, like the other folk, but rather by the materials of his own art. In saturating his discourse on Josefine with all of the elements of the discourse on woman, the subject at last disappears. The discourse has self-destructed, and Josefine loses and gains. What she loses is precisely what the discourse existed in order to grant her—her identity, her being apart. What she has gained is "in gesteigerter Erlösung vergessen [zu] sein wie alle ihre Brüder" (209).

Whatever is proverbially said about woman, the opposite is, for the most part, also said. Equivocating about woman is the nature of the discourse on woman. But one idea is unequivocal—woman is always different, both from man and from herself. To be more specific, the western discourse on women consists in effect in maintaining that women are both more and less, better and worse, higher and lower than men; women are the bridge-link between man and beast on the one hand, and man and angel on the other. At least since the Middle Ages, the double-edged topoi of woman as the daughter of Eve and the sister of Mary has formed a mode—one among an indefinitely large number of exempla—of this discourse.

When we examine the text of “Josefine” closely, we see many contradictory characteristics ascribed to Josefine. On the one hand, we are made to believe at the start that her singing is special: “Es gibt niemanden, den ihr Gesang nicht fortreißt, . . .” (193), but in the next paragraph, we are told that “. . . Josefinens Gesang als Gesang nichts Außerordentliches darstellt” (194). The narrator remarks upon her delicacy, yet in the same paragraph, he describes her as being “geradezu gemein” (196). Josefine wants things on her own terms, yet this includes all disturbances being very welcome to her—“Da kommen ihr denn alle Störungen sehr gelegen” (196). She is capable of a “piping sound that despite all rehearsal was still very tentative” (“. . . das trotz aller Routine immer noch schüchterne Pfeifen . . .” [196]) yet in the same paragraph she strikes up “triumphal notes.” When she sings, it appears “. . . als könne sie, während sie so, sich völlig entzogen, im Gesange wohnt, ein kalter Hauch im Vorüberwehen töten” (197), yet if she does not get things her own way, “. . . dann freilich wird sie wütend, dann stampft sie mit den Füßen, flucht ganz unmädchenhaft, ja sie beißt sogar” (198). The narrator continues in this manner. He compares Josefine to a child “. . . vielmehr ist das durchaus Kindesart und Kindesdankbarkeit” (199). Yet, in times of trouble, the mice all come together, huddle close to each other around Josefine; “es ist, als tranken wir noch schnell . . . gemeinsam einen Becher des Friedens vor dem Kampf” (200). More like a mother than any child, Josefine sustains her people in perilous times. This dimension of her character is shown again when the narrator describes the mice at her concerts in times of stress: “Hier in den dürftigen Pausen zwischen den Kämpfen träumt das Volk, es ist, als lösten sich dem Einzelnen die Glieder, als dürfte sich der Ruhelose einmal nach seiner Lust im großen warmen Bett des Volkes dehnen und strecken” (203). Josefine’s concerts are like a brief return to the womb for the mice people. She takes on the role of a kind of *Urmutter* in whose music her people find something of their childhood: “Etwas von der armen kurzen Kindheit ist darin, etwas von verlorenem, nie wieder aufzufindendem Glück . . .” (203).

As the mouse-narrator progresses in his tale, the pace of Josefine’s double-edged attributes intensifies. At one point he tells us: “sie spricht . . . wenig, sie ist schweigsam unter den Plappermäulern . . .” (199). But later when he relates that Josefine wants to be excused from daily chores, he remarks that till now she has waged her battles only with words: “. . . sie [hat] ihn [den Kampf] bisher nur durch Worte geführt . . .” (206). Although the title has told us the story is about Josefine, the singer, he later explains that the mouse-people listen to her precisely because she is “no singer.” In the same paragraph he talks about Josefine’s intuition about herself, but then in the same sentence, “. . . pfeift sie sich über diese Ahnung hinweg” (201). She is described as a pacifist opiate: he quotes her followers, “‘wie könnte man anders den großen Zulauf, besonders unter unmittelbar drängender Gefahr, erklären, der schon manchmal sogar die genügende, rechtzeitige Abwehr eben dieser Gefahr verhindert hat’ ” (203). But in these times, Josefine becomes a coward, takes cover and disappears. The narrator comments that “[s]ie immer im Besitz des sichersten Plätzchens war und unter dem Schutze ihres Anhanges sehr still und eiligst als erste verschwand” (203-4). But Josefine can do what she pleases. In other words, she is irresponsible, and yet “she will be forgiven for everything.” The law is for others, not for Josefine. She is beyond it. Josefine, we are told, wants exemption from all daily work. Her argument is that “she has to exhaust her strength completely” in working and singing, yet to try and get out of work, “dafür scheint sie unbeschränkt viele [Kräfte] zu haben . . .” (205). Immediately after telling us what Josefine has said, the narrator affirms that what Josefine really wants is not what she puts into words: “Nun ist es ja klar, daß Josefine nicht eigentlich das anstrebt, was sie wörtlich verlangt” (205). Her language must be interpreted by those who understand her better than she does herself. And this kind of “paternal care” is extended even to protecting her from herself. After all, she is clearly paranoid: “Hätte sie wirklich Feinde . . . Aber sie hat keine Feinde . . .” (205).

The narrator’s last few paragraphs pile attribute upon attribute. Trying to account for Josefine’s behavior, the narrator inserts the idea of Josefine’s age as a factor, which he himself immediately dismisses: “Für sie gibt es kein Altern und keine Schwächen ihrer Stimme” (206). She uses “the most unworthy methods.” In other words, he finds her bold and sneaky, yet he says, “Übrigens hat Josefine, wie in ihrer Gestalt, unleugbar auch in ihrem Denken manchmal etwas recht Graziöses” (207). She changes her mind, for instance when she cuts out the grace notes, then reinserts them, then removes them again, yet, says the narrator, “Josefine aber gibt nicht nach” (207). For all her changeability, she is steadfast. Finally, shortly before her disappearance, Josefine gets up to sing, feigns illness, is carried onto the stage by her followers—her *Anhang*—and bursts “inexplicably into

tears," yet at the end of her performance, she measures her audience ". . . mit kalten Blicken" (208). The narrator finds her "mistaken . . . in her calculations" and "clever," but raises the possibility that she may be driven on by destiny.

In his narration of Josefine, the mouse-narrator has created a character who is extraordinary and not extraordinary, delicate and vulgar, particular and easy-going, frail and strong, a child and a mother, quiet and loud, a singer and no singer, exhaustible and inexhaustible, aging and ageless, sneaky and charming, changeable and steadfast, emotional and calculating. A character who is both more and less than herself. A small, frail little mouse with a voice that makes her larger than life.

Kafka's "Josefine" then, is about the discourse on women. It is not a story on a subject, but rather a discourse on a discourse—a metadiscourse. One constant of the discourse on woman is that women are creatures of being and that men are creatures of doing. Women are, men do, and women cannot do without ceasing to be. In "The Bridge," when the bridge turned—when she *did*—she ceased to be a bridge, she ceased to be what she was. In "Josefine," the general tenor of the narration is that the singer appears to *be* and *do* at the same time, which is impossible. When the narrator begins, he assumes that Josefine seems to do what she seems to be—a singer, an artist. But because he speaks from within a discourse on woman and knows this is impossible, he raises the question of the mysterious nature of this problem that is a problem of meaning. He is puzzled: how does meaning arise from an *ipso facto* contradiction? She is a singer, but what she produces is not song, or is it? From the beginning the narrator looks for the real answer: "Ich habe oft darüber nachgedacht, wie es sich mit dieser Musik eigentlich verhält" (194). In pondering this mystery, he has deflected the argument from Josefine's being to her doing. It is what she does that is really in question, because females do not do. She *is* Josefine—she has a name—that is clear from the first line of the story, but it is her doing that is suspect—that which takes away her status as a woman.

Josefine is and she is not, does and does not, as the text makes perfectly clear: "Josefine behauptet sich, dieses Nichts an Stimme, dieses Nichts an Leistung . . ." (200). Josefine's being, emblemized by the fact that she bears a name, a word in which various significations may congregate, is an effect of language, that is, of the various discourses which constitute this existent Josefine. But because these discourses preexisted this existent Josefine and all possible existent mouse-singers, she was there and they were there before her appearance in the text of the mousepeople, and she will be there (and they will be there) after her disappearance from the text of the mousepeople. Josefine, in effect, symbolizes for

us readers the subtext of the mousepeople—the effect of which makes everything possible.

We spoke of Josefine's disappearance which is already alluded to in the first paragraph of the story. Already at the start, the narrator is thinking about her death, her absence. The word he uses for death—*Hingang*—implies a "doing" on Josefine's part, even in this unavoidable event. For her death is not a "passing" but a "going there," almost like a willful act: ". . . mit ihrem Hingang wird die Musik . . . aus unserem Leben verschwinden" (194). To vanish—*verschwinden*—to disappear is a verb relating to sight, to visibility. Thus, Josefine's music must have some visibility to it. He tells us that it is necessary to see her as well as hear her to comprehend her art. Music and Josefine are one. She embodies music, just as she embodies the discourse on woman. When she goes, leaves her people, she, the music, and the discourse will all disappear, but the effects will not. Although the mouse-narrator seems to lament her future disappearance in the first paragraph, he deals with it very comfortably at the end of the tale, perhaps because he has learned that the effect is all that is important:

Leicht wird es uns ja nicht werden; wie werden die Versammlungen in völliger Stummheit möglich sein? Freilich, waren sie nicht auch mit Josefine stumm? War ihr wirkliches Pfeifen nennenswert lauter und lebendiger, als die Erinnerung daran sein wird? War es denn noch bei ihren Lebzeiten mehr als ein bloße Erinnerung? Hat nicht vielmehr das Volk in seiner Weisheit Josefines Gesang, eben deshalb, weil er in dieser Art unverlierbar war, so hoch gestellt?

Once Josefine is truly an absence, the narrator can make even her song into an absence. The memory of her song will be even stronger than her real song was—but even her real song was only a memory. He is creating a hole where there was substance, completely subverting his earlier words and decomposing his composition, but at the same time, turning the absence into a presence. The reality of Josefine, her music, and the discourse are turned into mere effect. They will not vanish, as he assumed, but be seen in the mind's eye, in the memory. Why? Perhaps because Josefine's song, her self, so to speak, the discourse on woman, is eternal—*das Ewig Weibliche*.

In 1911 the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre, and for two years, until it was returned, more people went to stare at the blank space on the wall than had gone to see the famous painting prior to that time. The absence became a presence much in the same way that the memory of Josefine's song will be louder than her song was. This becomes a kind of negative creation, or the creation of a subversive creator. In "Das Schweigen der Sirenen," another of Kafka's short tales, we are told that the sirens have a weapon more terrible than their song, "namely their silence." But when they try to attract and destroy Odysseus with it, he listens with deaf

ears, i.e., ears that have been plugged with wax. Their weapon of absence is a formidable presence which Odysseus defuses and turns into an absence on his own terms. In a similar manner the mouse-narrator defuses the power of Josefine's song in the end, when he turns it into a memory, but then declares that even while Josefine existed, her song had already been memory—it had already been an absent presence, or a present absence. He has prepared us for this, beforehand, when earlier he questions whether it is her singing that enchants the mice people so “. . . oder nicht vielmehr die feierliche Stille, von der das schwache Stimmchen umgeben ist?” (196). And later, we will be told that Josefine is a “mere nothing in voice, a mere nothing in execution.” Her absence is already present even before she disappears.

The narrator ends his tale of Josefine by redeeming her: “Vielleicht werden wir also gar nicht sehr viel entbehren, Josefine aber, erlöst von der irdischen Plage, die aber ihrer Meinung nach Auserwählten bereitet ist, wird fröhlich sich verlieren in der zahllosen Menge der Helden unseres Volkes, und bald, da wir keine Geschichte treiben, in gesteigerter Erlösung vergessen sein wie alle ihre Brüder” (209). With Josefine's disappearance, the problem of Josefine, her art, and her articulation will also disappear. In life, she is a chosen spirit—*auserwählt*. In death, her femaleness ceases to be of any importance as she joins the “numberless throng” of heroes—appendage dropped—like Joseph, she will join her brothers. Redemption is to be found precisely in being forgotten, in becoming the same. Redemption for woman can occur only once the discourse on woman has been forgotten. But her textual disappearance is not natural. It is a narrative trick—*ein erzählerischer Pfiff*—leaving the mouse-narrator as the only singer/piper of the tale at the end.²⁶

The approach I have followed here has been described by Michel Foucault in his essay, “What Is an Author?” For Foucault, an author's function is “to characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society.”²⁷ Kafka, along with Flaubert and Proust, exemplify for Foucault the writer who carefully engineers his own murder at the hand of his text. Thus, to quote Foucault once more, “the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of the subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears.”²⁸

We have reached the end of the story. Let us review the bidding, as it were. Josefine is described by the mouse-narrator as embodying a plenary discourse, that is to say, a discourse in all of its absurd and contradictory fullness. Since these discourses are the tool with which any narrator must create his representations, the narrator's puzzlement is a representational one. The more fully he grasps his subject, the more fully it evades

him. When he has grasped Josefine fully, she is entirely absent. The logical consequences of the discourse on woman have been fulfilled. But the discourse, naturally, lives on. It was always there.

We must now turn to the much more subtle problem of Kafka. It is clear, I hope, that I do not find it useful in this reading, to discover Kafka, or any part of him in Josefine. But what about the narrator, who has really been quite absent from the focus of our view, so far. Is he Kafka? Is he yet another sacrificer of women? And is not then Josefine another victim, immolated, redeemer and then redeemed, like Brunhilde, Well, yes and no. Certainly, if we stop at the consideration of character, whether interpreted anthropomorphically or gynomorphically, we arrive at this conclusion. As it says in the song, “It's still the same old story.” However, if we believe that there is here involved a meta-narrative which is in effect the story of the storytelling and which has its own events, then a different picture emerges, and Kafka appears as a demystifier who foregrounds for us the artificiality of his tools. It is in this sense that Kafka engineers his own disappearance as Foucault puts it, and the disappearance of the author implying as it does that authorship (or authority) is little more than an effect of pre-existing discourses, is a displacement of the disappearance of Josefine.

Once Josefine and Kafka have disappeared, hasn't the narrator suggested that he himself no longer exists, since his voice and authority are revealed to be dependent upon a discourse whose embodiment is gone? The answer is no. He makes it clear that the memory of it remains with the people as it always had, but it seems that the freshness and vivid presence of Josefine will be missed, and that for the narrator, narration itself will never be the same. If this reading seems too fantastic, laundering virtually any vestige of reality from fiction, as it does, and thus offensive to some, let's turn the question back another way: What are the politics of the story? Is it a parable of domination: male over female, narrator over subject, and thus clearly hostile to women? Certainly such a reading may be supported by focussing on character and plot. Or is it a study of the grounds of representation and a demystification of the techniques by which discourses create illusions which masquerade as reality? This interpretation puts Kafka in a rather different light, and so it seems to me, may bring us back a bit closer to Kafka's greatness, to the reason we read Kafka.

*Eastman School of Music
University of Rochester*

NOTES

1. Marthe Robert, *As Lonely as Franz Kafka*, tr. Ralph Mannheim (New York and London, 1982), p. 22.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
3. Karl-Bernhard Bödeker, *Frau und Familie im erzählerischen Werk Franz Kafkas* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 11.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca, 1962), p. 197.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
8. Meno Spann, *Franz Kafka* (Boston, 1976), p. 134.
9. Walter Sokel, *Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie* (München and Wien, 1964), p. 52.
10. Charles Bernheimer, *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure* (New Haven and London, 1982), pp. 154-155.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
12. Erich Heller, *Franz Kafka* (New York, 1974), p. 48.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
14. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (Paris, 1975), pp. 115-116.
15. Larysa Mykyta, "Woman as the Obstacle and the Way," *MLN* 95(1980): 628.
16. Evelyn Beck, "Kafka's Traffic in Women: Gender, Power, and Sexuality," *The Literary Review* 26(1983): 567-568.
17. R. V. Gross, "Fallen Bridge, Fallen Woman, Failen Text," *The Literary Review* 26(1983): 577-587.
18. *Franz Kafka: Sämtliche Erzählungen*. ed. Paul Raabe (Frank-

furt am Main, 1970). All quotations from the story will be cited in the text with the page number from this edition.

19. Ursula Mahlendorf, "Kafka's 'Josephine the Singer or the Mousefolk': Art at the Edge of Nothingness," *Modern Austrian Literature* 11(1978): 208.
20. Politzer, p. 311.
21. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Marks and Courtivron, tr. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Massachusetts, 1980), p. 245.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Kafka, "Der Fahrgast," in *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, 19.
25. R. V. Gross, "Rich Text/Poor Text: A Kafkan Confusion," *PMLA* 95(1980): 168-182.
26. For a treatment of the story that makes not only Josefine, but also the narrator disappear, see Margot Norris, "Kafka's Josefine: The Animal as the Negative Site of Narration," *MLN* 98(1983): 366-383.
27. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, tr. Bouchard and Simon (Ithaca, 1977), p. 124.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

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