

# His Master's Missing Voice<sup>1</sup>

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This may seem like a trivial matter in comparison with all the changes taking place in contemporary language use with respect to gender and sexuality, but at present, though it's still acceptable to say "good boy" or "good girl" to one's dog, there is no longer a good word to refer to *oneself* in relation to one's dog. In English, the options are pretty much "master," "owner," or, somewhat embarrassingly, "mommy" and "daddy." In German, the traditional term is *Herr* (or the feminine *Herrin*), a word also used, of course, to refer to the ultimate lord and master. Stray dogs are referred to as *herrenlos*, dogs lacking a master. The vague discomfort many now feel with all these words suggests that the historical attenuation of the traditional figure of the master has come to infect inter-species relations. Dominion over animals is simply no longer admissible.

Among the most creative and generative responses to this situation has been Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. There Haraway, who calls herself a "caninist" rather than "humanist," proposes,

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<sup>1</sup> Although my approach to Kafka is different, I have profited enormously from Aaron Schuster's work on Kafka's "Researches of a Dog." He gave a talk on the story at the University of Chicago a number of years ago, published short versions of his research in journals, and has now brought together his years of thought on the story in a remarkable new book, *How to Research Like a Dog: Kafka's New Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024).

if only in passing, the word “guardian” as a possible placeholder for the gap left by master-owner-mommy, a term that sustains the asymmetries that of necessity color the companionship between dogs and humans, the significance of the significant otherness—Haraway’s term—constitutive of the species relation at issue. I’ll return to Haraway’s exhilarating text later in the discussion (Haraway 2003).

In the following I’d like to offer some remarks on Franz Kafka’s late, unfinished prose work, *Forschungen eines Hundes*—in English, *Researches of a Dog*—which is, at some level, a thought experiment concerning the prospect of a fully *herrenlose Hundeschaft*, or at least one in which the name of the master has been fully foreclosed without, or without yet, returning in the real as an emergent companion species demanding the invention of new names all around.

## 1

The story is presented as a kind of memoir of an aging dog reflecting on his choice as a young dog to pursue the life of the mind, one dedicated to research, to a certain kind of theoretical activity, rather than sharing in the common life of dogs. He confesses that this choice set him on a difficult path: “Why won’t I behave like the others, live in harmony with my kind, silently accept whatever disturbs that harmony, overlook it as a little mistake in the great reckoning, and turn forever toward what binds us happily together and not toward what, time and again, irresistibly, of course, tears us out of the circle of our kind?” (Kafka 2006, p. 133; Kafka 1994, p. 50)<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, the narrator-dog seems to realize that such

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent references are made in the text with the page number of the translation first (Kafka 2006), followed by the page number of the original (Kafka 1994).

disturbances to the harmony of dogdom, of *Hundeschaft*, point not to contingent and determinate errors, but to a more fundamental errancy grounded in a structural glitch in the constitution of the species: “on closer scrutiny I soon find that something was not quite right from the beginning, that a little fracture [*eine kleine Bruchstelle*] was in place.” He notes that “a slight uneasiness,” *ein leichtes Unbehagen*, would come over him not only amid the collective but also in more intimate settings, indeed that the mere sight of another dog could throw him into a sense of helplessness and despair (p. 132; p. 48). Call it *Unbehagen in der Hundekultur* (with a touch of canine self-hatred).

He goes on to recall the event that first set him on the course of his canine studies career. It was an encounter with a group of seven dogs who engage in a kind of dance set to a piece of clamorous music that seems to come from nowhere, a music *ex nihilo*. “They did not speak, they did not sing, in general they held their tongue with almost a certain doggedness [*mit einer gewissen Verbissenheit*], but they conjured forth music out of the empty space.” He recalls “the way they raised and set down their feet, certain turns of their heads, their running and their resting, the attitudes they assumed toward one another, the combinations they formed with one another like a round dance” (p. 134; pp. 51–52). At a certain point the music becomes overwhelming: “you could attend to nothing but this music that came from all sides, from the heights, from the depths, from everywhere, pulling the listener into its midst, pouring over him, crushing him, and even after annihilating him, still blaring its fanfares at such close range that they turned remote [*in solcher Nähe, daß es schon Ferne war*] and barely audible” (p. 135; pp. 52–53). The young narrator-dog retreats to a pile of wooden planks and from his hiding place observes how the performance takes a new and horrifying turn; the seven dancing dogs “had truly cast off all shame” and stood upright on their hind legs. “They were exposing themselves and openly flaunted their nakedness, they prided

themselves on it, and whenever they obeyed their better instincts for a moment and lowered their front legs, they were literally horrified, as if it were a mistake, as if nature were a mistake, and once again they rapidly raised their legs, and their eyes seemed to be asking forgiveness that they had had to desist a little from their sinfulness [*daß sie in ihrer Sündhaftigkeit ein wenig hatten innehalten müssen*]” (p. 136; pp. 54–55).

The young narrator-dog’s obsession with this for him deeply enigmatic, not to say, traumatic, encounter is what ultimately alienates him from dogdom and sets him on his course as a researcher with the aim of, as he puts it, solving it “absolutely by dint of research, so as finally to gain a new view of ordinary, quiet, happy, everyday life.” As he then adds, “I have subsequently worked the same way, even if with less childish means—but the difference is not very great—and I persist stubbornly to this day” (p. 138; pp. 57). Be that as it may, the dogged pursuit of a sort of absolute canine knowledge begins with questions close to hand, questions pertaining to the most basic needs of canine life. “I began my investigations at that time with the simplest things... I began to investigate what dogdom took as nourishment” (p. 138; pp. 58). The research concerns the question of the source of food, namely where food comes from. Does it come from the earth? Does it come down from the sky? Can dogs influence the appearance of food? Though these are questions that have apparently concerned canine scholars for generations, our young researcher, admitting the limits to his capacity for proper scientific study, pursues such questions more or less on his own without consulting the authoritative, call them *caninical*, sources. A first conclusion would have it that dogs’ main foodstuff indeed comes from the earth but that, for still unknown reasons, the earth needs dogs to help with its production: “we find this food on the ground, but the ground needs our water.” He adds that the appearance of food has been known to be accelerated by means of “certain incantations, songs, and movements” (p. 139; p. 59). Later in the

story, our canine researcher entertains an opposing opinion, one seemingly supported by empirical evidence, that food comes not from the ground but rather from above and is only brought down to earth by way of said canine rituals (p. 151; p. 77).

At this point in the story if not much sooner, the reader recognizes its fundamental conceit, namely, that the dogs live amid human beings, who for some reason remain invisible to them. Put another way, the dogs live as if human beings did not exist and are thus forced to contend with a multiplicity of phenomena that must remain enigmatic to them or can be explained only by way of empirically noted regularities: dogs pee; dogs find food on the ground; dogs bark, howl, moan (so-called incantations); dogs find food on the ground. The story's conceit becomes completely obvious when the narrator-dog, discussing the odd variety of occupations in which dogs are employed, mentions the air dogs, the *Lufthunde*. This term, adapted from *Luftmensch*, the Yiddish expression for a dreamy, impractical person with no visible means of subsistence—a kind of redoubling of the drift of diasporic life—clearly refers here to small lapdogs who instead of being walked are carried around by their invisible masters. Known to the narrator only by hearsay, he expresses his incredulity that “There was supposed to be a dog, of the smallest breed, not much bigger than my head, even in advanced age not much bigger; and this dog, naturally a weakling, to judge by appearances an artificial, immature, overcarefully coiffed creature, incapable of taking an honest jump—this dog, the story went, was supposed to move about most of the time high in the air while doing no visible work” (p. 143; p. 66). In hindsight, it becomes clear that the encounter that set him on his path as a researcher was with a group of trained dogs performing, perhaps in a park or public square, to the accompaniment of human musicians. We feel confident that the answer to that first enigma, namely “Who was forcing them to do what they were doing here?” (p. 136; p. 54), is a straightforward one: their human trainers and masters.

What remains unclear is whether such enigmas are shared by the lapdogs and dancing dogs, who seem to be fully integrated into the world of humans. Does our narrator-dog belong, perhaps, to a separate order of canines, that of *stray dogs*, dogs abandoned by human masters, dogs without papers, undocumented, “stateless” dogs, as it were? Be that as it may, from the perspective of our first-person—or first-canine—narrator, *Herrenlosigkeit* is an ontological determination of *Hundeschaft*, one that is constitutive of the “canine condition” as such. It is not just that the significance of the significant otherness of human beings has changed but rather that this dimension of otherness is fully foreclosed. For the dogs, it would seem, the Lord and Master is dead.

To return to the main question the narrator-dog pursues, namely, where food comes from, the story would seem to suggest that the *Bruchstelle* or fracture in the constitution of dogdom is connected to the lack of a concept of *providence*, that is, that food is *provided for them* by human beings, that they are, in their species-being, tied, by way of linked evolutionary histories, to the *oikos*, dependent on their masters for care and nurturance. One might think of it as a thought experiment: what happens when a region of being is foreclosed from one’s picture of the world? I want to propose that Kafka is revealing the sorts of uncanny enigmas and paradoxes that emerge once divine being—once revelation—has been foreclosed from human life, no longer figures as a central point of reference and orientation in the world, once man himself becomes in this radical sense *herrenlos*. The texture of ordinary life comes to be ruptured by a series of impossible questions that, as it were, hound human life without hopes of “domestication” by either the natural or human sciences. One might think in this context of the perplexity Freud expressed in *Unbehagen in der Kultur* with respect to the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Neighbor-love appears as bizarre and mysterious as the spectacle of the seven dogs dancing to music that seems to come from nowhere, as the

appearance of food for a dog whose “ontology” has no place for the being of human being and who barks and howls into an empty sky, *einen herrenlosen Himmel*.<sup>3</sup>

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As I've noted, the narrator-dog in Kafka's story considers himself poorly trained and without special talent for the research he undertakes (he later speaks of his “lack of propensity for science, scant intellectual power, poor memory and, above all, inability to focus consistently on a scientific goal” [p. 160–61; p. 92]). Nonetheless, he devises a series of experiments meant to grasp the causal chain that leads to the appearance of food, to catch it in action, as it were. After several efforts with uncertain outcomes, he decides to undertake a more radical experiment: to withdraw from the society of his fellow dogs and, more importantly, to fast, as if only the

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<sup>3</sup> In the second chapter of his *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith, one of the towering figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, seems to suggest that political economy is born with the “insight” that the institution of the division of labor can no longer be thought by way of appeal to divine providence but only by way of two options: as an invention of human wisdom (Smith rejects this option) or as a self-organizing system emerging in the course of human history on the basis of the “propensity in human nature ... to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.” (Smith 1979, p. 17) Immediately after this famous pronouncement, Smith goes on to deny such a propensity not just to animals in general but seemingly to dogs in particular who, precisely as that species of domestic animals kept as pets, stand in such close companion species relations with humans. Providence is famously brought down to earth and transcendence is rendered immanent, as a spectral supplement to the intentional life of human beings: the hand invisibly, uncannily guiding economic self-organization. Max Weber, for his part, famously argued that the invisible hand is only a faint, haunting remnant of the true *spirit* of capitalism that entered human life through a radical religious reformation. The energies of that spirit pertain not to the pursuit of self-interest but rather to the Christian's ceaseless devotion to the amplification of God's glory on earth. For Weber, modern capitalism was not so much egological as doxological.

most radical ascetic practice—starvation—could clear the space for true knowledge about what keeps dogkind alive.<sup>4</sup> At the point where our canine *hunger artist*—Kafka wrote the story bearing that title the same year he wrote *Researches*, 1922—has reduced himself to a minimum of bare life—we might say, to life in the neighborhood of zero—he awakens to find himself confronted by another dog who demands that he remove himself from the area. In the course of the dialogue that ensues, the strange dog declares his breed—“I am a hunter” (p. 158; p. 89)—and continues to insist that our narrator-dog is interfering with his work and must leave. At a point of stalemate something remarkable occurs that, though the narrator-dog will later attribute it to his “overstimulation at the time,” “nevertheless had a certain grandeur and is,” he adds, “the sole reality, even if only an apparent reality, that I salvaged and brought back into this world from the time of my fast” (p. 159; p. 90). It was a moment of ecstasy, of *Außer-sich-sein*, accompanied by “infinite anxiety and shame” produced by a second encounter with music *ex nihilo*: “I noticed through intangible details ... that from the depths of his chest this dog was getting ready to sing” (p. 159; p. 89–90). Though the hunting dog appears to remain silent, music emerges nonetheless: “What I seemed to perceive was that the dog was already singing without his being aware of it—no, more than that: that the melody, detached from him, was floating through the air and then past him according to its own laws, as if he no longer had any part in it, floating at me, aimed only at me” (p. 159; p. 90).

By this point in the story, the reader is already clued in, already prepared to attribute the music not to the narrator-dog’s hypersensitivity brought on by fasting but rather to human hunters blowing their hunting horns (it’s worth noting that the

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<sup>4</sup> I’m alluding here, of course, to the Brecht-Weil song “What Keeps Mankind Alive?,” which would be sung some six years later at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. The German title is “Ballade über die Frage: Wovon lebt der Mensch?”



hunting dog identifies himself not as a hunting dog, a dog in the service of a master, but as a hunter in his own right). And though this musical epiphany remains empty of content, the narrator-dog, as already noted, nonetheless registers its uncanny force as an interpellation addressed to him only, now as a kind of overwhelming Orphic voice (one is here reminded, perhaps, of the man from the country standing before the law, *Vor dem Gesetz*, the gates of which, as he learns in his last moments of life, were meant only for him): “I could not resist the melody that the dog now quickly seemed to adopt as his own. It grew stronger, there may have been no limits to its power to increase, it was already on the verge of shattering my eardrums [*schon jetzt sprengte sie mir fast das Gehör*]. But the worst of it was that it seemed to be there for my sake alone, this voice, whose sublimity made the woods grow silent, for my sake alone” (p. 159; p. 90).

At this point it is hard, at least for me, not to hear in this voice resonances with the debate between Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem concerning the status of “revelation” in Kafka’s writings. The central point of contention between the two friends concerns the status of theological trace elements in Kafka’s work. Scholem insists that Kafka’s work is suffused with the radiance of revelation, but a revelation, as he puts it, “seen from the perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness” (Scholem 1992, p. 126, letter of July 17, 1934). Scholem will later characterize this “nothingness of revelation” as “a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance [*in dem sie gilt, aber nicht bedeutet*],” a revelation “reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak” (ibid., p. 142, letter of September 20, 1934).<sup>5</sup> For Kafka, what I said with respect to Freud’s

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* provides an entire series of “worst words” for what Scholem was after, for example: “Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least.” (Beckett 1996, p. 106)

relation to the commandment of neighbor-love needs a slight but significant revision. A divine commandment is one that only truly carries force for a person of faith, for someone who recognizes the word of God in the commandment. Kafka seems to offer another possibility, namely, that it is possible to register the force of a commandment the content of which approaches zero.<sup>6</sup>

The canine version of this *Nichts der Offenbarung*, this “nothing of revelation” conveyed by a disembodied voice, a floating signifier of transcendence (that could nonetheless take up residence in a particular dog, become the music of the Other in it), leads to a new turn in the researches of the narrator-dog. After this second musical encounter of the story—call it a *Musiktrauma*—he feels new life entering his body and, more importantly, a new sense of his proper vocation, a call to engage in a new branch of scientific research: musicology, *Musikwissenschaft als Beruf*. More importantly, he finally realizes that the science of nutrition and the science of music overlap at a crucial juncture, one about which he already had some inklings at the time of his first musical encounter: “Of course, there is some overlap between the two sciences [*ein Grenzgebiet der beiden Wissenschaften*] that even then aroused my suspicions. I mean the doctrine of the song that calls down food from above” (p. 160; p. 92). Again, the straightforward reading would be that the various sorts of vocalizations produced by domestic animals can move their masters to feed them. The mystery here is, of course, that it is a mystery for the dogs how this works once the domestic sphere has become *herrenlos*. These last thoughts about the border zone of the two sciences lead immediately to the narrator-dog’s concluding words that repeat the theme of his lack of talent for proper science. But now, at the very

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<sup>6</sup> In a brilliant lecture on Heidegger, Dieter Thomä argued that Heidegger’s entire philosophical project could be understood as a series of attempts to distill into a pure imperative, into a pure call without content, the force of Being in history. See Thomä 2015.

end of his autobiographical reflections, he seems ready to fully embrace this lack as rooted in an instinct for a different mode of inquiry, for the development of an entirely new kind science, a kind of *new (canine) thinking*: “It was my instinct that, perhaps precisely for the sake of science but a different science than is practiced today, an ultimate science, led me to value freedom above all else. Freedom! Of course, the freedom that is possible today—a stunted growth [*ein kümmerliches Gewächs*]. But nevertheless freedom, nevertheless a possession” (p. 161; pp. 92–93).

At the conclusion of his inspiring reading of Kafka’s “caninical” text, Mladen Dolar suggests that it was Kafka’s neighbor, Freud, who had already begun to develop the warp and woof—hard not to say woof-woof—of this ultimate science of at least a kind of freedom, a freedom rooted in that border territory where nutrition and music, food and voice, seem to converge and diverge at the same time, where the locus of nutrition—mouth, tongue, teeth, throat—become, by a kind intermittent fasting, the locus of the articulation of sounds (as every child is taught, one shouldn’t speak with one’s mouth full). Giving a psychoanalytic twist to Deleuze and Guatarri’s characterization of this “deterritorialization” of the mouth, Dolar puts it this way: “By speech [the] mouth is denaturalized, diverted from its natural function, seized by the signifier (and ... by the voice, which is but the alterity of the signifier). The Freudian name for this deterritorialization is the drive... Eating can never be the same once the mouth has been deterritorialized—it is seized by the drive, it turns around a new object which emerged in this operation, it keeps circumventing, circling around this eternally elusive object.” (Dolar 2006, pp. 186–87) Our efforts to reterritorialize this object, to integrate the alterity of the voice into our life in the space of meaning never comes off without a remainder. As Dolar puts it, “[b]ut this secondary nature can never quite succeed, and the bit that eludes it can be pinned down as the element of the voice, this pure alterity

of what is said. This is the common ground it shares with food, that in food which precisely escapes eating, the bone that gets stuck in the gullet.” (Dolar 2006, p. 187)<sup>7</sup> According to the conceit of Kafka’s story, we might say that here the drive functions as if human life had absorbed into its own flesh the negative theology that had formed the horizon of a previous form of life, as if the unnamable object of that theology had now entered into the life substance of human being. Apophantic theology thereby becomes the psychotheology of everyday life, in which our satisfactions always leave something to be desired, they remain, at some level, a dog’s breakfast.

In her own efforts to theorize the ontological mongrelization of every life form, the symbiogenetic constitution of every species in its relation to multiple others (including the millions of microorganisms that populate macroorganisms), Haraway herself indicates that at least part of the otherness at stake in the significant otherness constitutive of all companion species relations escapes the sciences of both nature and culture, and perhaps, even, those pertaining to the exemplary species of what Haraway, blurring the boundaries between the two seemingly independent realms, calls “natureculture”: the cyborg. At a certain point in her manifesto, Haraway indicates that the dimension at issue may be irreducibly theological or at least that one might need theology to keep it in view, to attend to it, be observant of it in the relevant ways. One thinks here, perhaps, of Walter Benjamin’s famous allegory in which a nineteenth-century orientalized cyborg, the mechanical chess player who, in the allegory, stands in for historical materialism, wins each match only insofar as he is manipulated by a hidden dwarf who represents, for his part, the resources of theology. As Benjamin puts it, “[t]he puppet, called ‘historical materialism’ is

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<sup>7</sup> The “anal” complement to this “oral” object might be characterized as the indigestible remainder that we always at some level retain whether we want to or not.

to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight” (Benjamin 2003, p. 389).<sup>8</sup>

To pick up the thread of the discussion, I’m suggesting that, for both Haraway and Kafka, theology becomes relevant in its perhaps most *kümmertlich* form, that of negative theology. But this is a negative theology that has now migrated into and constitutes the amorous flesh of companion species relations:

The recognition that one cannot *know* the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationships, is the key. That is true for all true lovers, of whatever species. Theologians describe the power of the “negative way of knowing” God. Because Who/What Is is infinite, a finite being, without idolatry, can only specify what is not, i.e., not the projection of one’s own self. Another name for that kind of “negative” knowing is love. I believe those theological considerations are powerful for knowing dogs, especially for entering into a relationship, like training, worthy of the name of love. (Haraway 2003, p. 49.)<sup>9</sup>

### 3

Foucault’s last lectures at the Collège de France were dedicated to, among other things, an attempt to think through the legacy of the “courage of truth” associated with ancient Cynicism. The Cynics, whose name, whatever its real origin, was understood in relation to *kunikos*, a word signifying “doglike,” became important to Foucault because of the way in which they shifted

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<sup>8</sup> Instead of small and ugly, *klein und hässlich*, one might insert Kafka’s characterization of modern freedom as *ein kümmerliches Gewächs*.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps those absent trainers of the dancing dogs, lap dogs, and hunting dogs in Kafka’s story were not yet capable of love, of entering into a relation with the significant otherness of their companion species, and thereby lost their own significance for the dogs.

the locus of *parrhêsia*—forthright truth-telling, frankness, free-spokenness—from that of true discourse and knowledge to that of the true life. The Cynics, by the very way they lived, insisted on “the permanent, difficult, and perpetually embarrassing question,” namely, “that of the philosophical life, of the *bios philosophikos*” (Foucault 2011, p. 234). Whereas “all philosophy increasingly tends to pose the question of truth-telling in terms of the conditions under which a statement can be recognized as true, Cynicism is the form of philosophy which constantly raises the question: what can the form of life be such that it practices truth-telling?” (Ibid., p. 234) The radical nature of the answer given by the Cynics was sufficiently scandalous that their efforts to conduct what they took to be the true life, the *bios philosophikos*, acquired, to resort once more to my hopefully not too annoying pun, *caninical* status. Paraphrasing an ancient source on the *bios kunikos* of the Cynics, Foucault writes,

First, the *kunikos* life is a dog’s life in that it is without modesty, shame, and human respect. It is a life which does in public, in front of everyone, what only dogs and animals dare to do, and which men usually hide. The Cynic’s life is a dog’s life in that it is shameless. Second, the Cynic life is a dog’s life because, like the latter, it is indifferent. It ... is not attached to anything, is content with what it has, and has no needs other than those it can satisfy immediately. Third, the life of the Cynic is the life of a dog, it received the epithet *kunikos* because it is, so to speak, a life which barks, a diacritical (*diakritikos*) life, that is to say, a life which can fight, which barks at enemies, which knows how to distinguish the good from the bad, the true from the false, and masters from enemies. ... Finally, fourth, the Cynic life is *phulaktikos*. It is a guard dog’s life, a life which knows how to dedicate itself to saving others and protecting the master’s life. Shameless life, *adiophoros* (indifferent) life, *diakritikos* life (diacritical, distinguishing, discriminating, and, as it were, barking life), and *phulaktikos* (guard’s life, guard dog’s life). (Ibid., p. 243)

To live the life of a dog was not only to be a martyr of truth in the sense of bearing witness to truth in the conduct of life; by embodying, by fleshing out the “grimace of the true life” (ibid., p. 227), the Cynic’s life was meant to serve as an imperative aimed at all others *to change their lives*. This demand—call it Cynicism’s tough (neighbor-)love—was encapsulated in the formula said to have been addressed to Diogenes at Delphi to “change the currency,” that is, to undertake, to put it in Nietzschean terms, a *transvaluation of values*. One effect of this transvaluation was that the Cynic could now lay claim to the title of true kingship. “The king and the philosopher, monarchy and philosophy, monarchy and sovereignty over self are frequent themes. But in the Cynics they take a completely different form, simply because the Cynics make the very simple, bald, utterly insolent assertion that the Cynic himself is king” (ibid., p. 274–75). As such, Foucault continues, “vis-à-vis kings of the world, crowned kings sitting on their thrones, he is the anti-king who shows how hollow, illusory, and precarious the monarchy of kings is” (275). As the true yet unrecognized king, as a king whose royalty remains hidden, as the “king of poverty ... who hides his sovereignty in destitution,” he becomes, as Foucault puts it, “the king of derision” (ibid., p. 278).

Though Foucault never makes the connection, it is hard not to hear in this brief account echoes of Richard’s famous speech on the Welsh coast in Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*:

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings,  
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed—  
All murdered. For within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene

To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh which walls about our life  
Were brass impregnable, and humoured thus  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall—and farewell king. (3.2.155-70)<sup>10</sup>

Foucault twice makes use of the metaphor of the broken mirror, the sort that recalls the scene at Flint Castle where Richard requests a mirror to view, as it were, the royal remains of his unkinged face:

Is this the face which faced so many follies,  
That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?  
A brittle glory shineth in this face;  
As brittle as the glory is the face,  
[*He throws down the glass*]  
For there it is cracked in a hundred shivers. (4.1.285-89)

The metaphor of the broken mirror—along with that of the derisive grimace—is meant to capture the doggedly critical stance of Cynicism toward the conventions of philosophy: “Cynicism is thus this kind of grimace that philosophy makes to itself, this broken mirror in which philosophy is at once called upon to see itself and fails to recognize itself. Such is the paradox of the Cynic

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<sup>10</sup> In his *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Robert Musil has the character Clarisse comment on a debate between her husband, Walter, and Ulrich, the “man without qualities” about the “impossible” relation between art and life. “‘And yet,’ Clarisse remarks, ‘it seems very important to me ... that there’s something impossible in every one of us. It explains so many things. While I was listening to you both, it seemed to me that if we could be cut open our entire life might look like a ring, just something that goes around something.’ She had already, earlier on, pulled off her wedding ring, and now she peered through it at the lamplit wall. ‘There’s nothing inside, and yet it looks as though that were precisely what matters most.’” We might say, the hollow crown has entered into, become “encysted” by, and “encysts” in *every body* (Musil 1995, p. 401).



life... ; it is the fulfillment of the true life, but as demand for a life which is radically other” (Foucault 2011, p. 270).<sup>11</sup>

Foucault does, indeed, make use of Shakespeare to flesh out the legacy of the Cynic conception of kingship, one that includes, as we have seen, elements of derision, hiddenness, and destitution. For Foucault, it is *King Lear* rather than *Richard II* that best displays these elements in their royal aspect, to which he adds the related themes of banishment, homelessness, and errancy. “At the point of confluence of all this you could obviously find the figure of King Lear. King Lear is ... the highest expression of this theme of the king of derision, the mad king, and the hidden king” (Foucault 2011, p. 286). Noting that the play’s point of departure is “a story of *parrhêsia*, a test of frankness,” Foucault characterizes Lear’s fate as a series of reversals. “King Lear is precisely someone who is unable to recognize the truth that was there. And on the basis of this failure to recognize the truth, he in turn is unrecognized” (ibid., p. 286). We might say that Lear’s reduction to a kind of radical creatureliness is presented as the (broken) mirror image of his kingship. The deaths with which the play ends represent, for Foucault, “the fulfillment of his wretchedness, but a fulfillment which is at the same time the triumph and restoration of the truth itself” (ibid., p. 286).

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In his speech given on the occasion of receipt of the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, Paul Celan characterized Büchner as a poet of creaturely life, as “someone who does not forget that he speaks

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<sup>11</sup> The demand to change one’s life emerging in and through the gaze from a broken mirror brings to mind Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” the last lines of which are “... for here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life. (... denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.)” (Rilke 1984, p. 61) There the gaze emanates not from a broken mirror but rather from a broken, headless statue.

from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness [*dem Neigungswinkel seines Daseins, dem Neigungswinkel seiner Kreatürlichkeit*].” (Celan 2011, p. 409) In the speech, Celan cites various passages from Büchner’s writings that testify to this dimension, to this singular torsion of one’s being, as what is ultimately at issue in poetic creation, in *Dichtung*, in contrast to art, to *Kunst*. Art, like beauty for Kant, remains at the level of the *sensus communis*, the level of general social intelligibility, while the writing and reception of poetry are rooted in one’s singularity and in what can be revealed of and in relation to it.<sup>12</sup> Among the passages Celan cites are the penultimate lines of Büchner’s play *Danton’s Death*, in which the figure of Lucile, whom Celan refers to as *die Kunstblinde*, someone blind to art, in a suicidal gesture at the foot of the guillotine at the Place de la Révolution, cries out “*Es lebe der König!*” (“Long live the king!”). Celan characterizes this utterance as the “counterword,” *das Gegenwort*, that breaks with the theatricality, the art and artfulness, of the *political animal*. As Celan clarifies, “here there’s no homage to monarchy or to any preservable Yesterday... Homage here is to the *Majesty of the Absurd*, testifying to human presence [*die Gegenwart des Menschlichen*].” He further adds, “And that, ladies and gentlemen, has no fixed name once and for all time, yet it is, I believe ... poetry” (Celan 2001, p. 16; my emphasis). The “rhyme” of *Gegenwort* and *Gegenwart*, counterword and presence, along with the use of the verb *zeugen*, though rightly translated here as “testifying,” also signifies the act of procreation, suggests that poetry is the site of a kind of natality, an emergence to presence, of what, with respect to the rule of social classifications and statuses, can only be registered

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<sup>12</sup> Using the terms proposed by Roland Barthes in his small treatise on photography, one might say that art belongs to the domain of the *stadium*, while poetry traces and projects meridians among dispersed *puncta* (see Barthes 1982). Here one might think of meridians not only in their geographical sense but also with respect to what they signify in acupuncture: the pathways along which vital energy flows through the body.

as anarchic and “royally”—we might add, “cynically”—absurd. Perhaps most importantly, for Celan, the clearing of a uniquely human *Gegenwart* by way of a *Gegenwort* is where poetry and politics do make a kind of contact: “it is an act of freedom. It is a step” (ibid., p. 403). Or as Kafka’s Cynic put it, “Freedom! Of course, the freedom that is possible today—a stunted growth [*ein kümmerliches Gewächs*]. But nevertheless freedom, nevertheless a possession” (Kafka 2006, p. 161; Kafka 1994, pp. 92–93).

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Toward the end of Rilke’s novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, we find a scene that Celan may have had in mind when he wrote these words. In it, Rilke’s protagonist finally encounters the blind newspaper salesman he had worked so hard at not truly observing: “Immediately I knew that my picture of him was worthless. His absolute abandonment and wretchedness, unlimited by any precaution or disguise, went far beyond what I had been able to imagine. I had understood neither the angle of his face [*den Neigungswinkel seiner Haltung*] nor the terror which the inside of his eyelids seemed to keep radiating into him.” Malte registers this moment as a kind of ontological proof of the existence of God; its demonstration takes place not by argument but in and through the revelation of the *creature as neighbor*: “My God, I thought with sudden vehemence, so you really *are*. There are proofs of your existence. I have forgotten them all and never even wanted any, for what a huge obligation would lie in the certainty of you. And yet that is what has just been shown to me.” (Rilke 1990, pp. 210–211) Here Rilke brings together two aspects of what it means to be *observant*. The capacity to be truly observant of one’s neighbor qua neighbor seems here to go hand in hand with a minimal sort of religious observance. For Rilke, these two modes of being observant are brought together by a kind of *poetic observance*.

Haraway, in her own way, brings these modes of attention, of being observant, together by way of a concept that has been central to my work for many years, that of the flesh. One might say that the flesh was already there in the “real presence” that emerges at the place of the void across which the love relation—including the love of companion species—takes hold, the real presence opened by apophantic nomination. As Haraway puts it, such communion in the flesh ramifies fractally into “the imagined community that can only be known through the negative way of naming, like all ultimate hopes.” (Haraway 2003, p. 62) Haraway makes the theological legacy transmitted in her key terms explicit: “My soul indelibly marked by a Catholic formation, I hear in species the doctrine of the Real Presence under both species, bread and wine, the transubstantiated signs of the flesh. Species is about the corporeal join of the material and the semiotic...” (ibid., pp. 14–15).

But ultimately, as was the case for Kafka’s dog, Haraway makes use of this legacy (among others) to invent another science, a new thinking formed on the very basis of this fleshy jointure, one dedicated to the perpetual work of remodeling its apparent plasticity, work that to a large extent takes place in and through poetic speech. Here it is not so much the work of the concept as the play of tropes, or perhaps better, an activity at the jointure of both, that allows for action at the point at which—and these are the last words of the manifesto—“the word is made flesh in mortal naturecultures” (ibid., p. 98). Put somewhat differently, the negative way of naming inherited from apophantic theology is, for Haraway, really another term for the work of tropes, the way poetic figures swerve toward and around something unnamable in the object, the way in which figures serve to “encyst” (my term) the unnamable in the flesh of relation. Haraway’s own master trope is *metaplasma*, which signifies the transposition of the letters, syllables, or sounds of a word or of words in a sentence. As she puts it in the context of the companion species relation front and

center in her text, “[t]he term comes from the Greek *metaplasmos*, meaning remodeling or remolding... I use metaplasms to mean the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remodeling the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (ibid., p. 19).<sup>13</sup>

To return to Celan’s invocation of the majesty of the absurd in his own efforts to say what is distinctive about poetic speech, its capacity, namely, to produce *Gegenworte* testifying to the *Gegenwart*, the real presence of the other in the fleshly torsion of one’s creatureliness, we might say that such speech “encysts” a *surd*, a voiceless breath in the voice marking the place of an unnamable void shared by the speaker of the poem, its subject matter, and its addressee, a void opening the site of what Celan calls a *Begegnung*, an encounter. “The poem is lonely,” Celan writes; “It is lonely and underway. Whoever writes one stays mated with it [*bleibt ihm mitgegeben*]... But in just this way doesn’t the poem stand, right here, in an encounter—in *the mystery of an encounter?*” As Celan continues, the crucial dimension at issue here is that of a certain

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<sup>13</sup> While working on this text, I came upon a review of a memoir by the French anthropologist, Nastassja Martin, who was mauled by a Kamchatka brown bear while doing research on the Even peoples in Siberia. The reviewer, Leslie Jamison, who cites Haraway in her review, is more fascinated than disturbed by the ways in which Martin transforms a considerable trauma—the bear tore out a chunk of her jaw, resulting in the need for numerous surgeries—into an erotically tinged companion-species encounter, one taking place emphatically in the flesh. “Throughout her memoir ... Martin never calls this encounter an attack. Instead, she describes it as a meeting, an implosion of boundaries, a melding of forms, and most notably, ‘the bear’s kiss’: ‘His teeth closing over me, my jaw cracking, my skull cracking ... the darkness inside his mouth.’ Her word ‘kiss’ is both emotionally subversive—almost erotic—and also insistently physical. Their contact involved ‘the moist heat and pressure’ of his breath, the dark interior of his mouth. ‘His kiss?’ she writes. ‘Intimate beyond anything I could have imagined.’” (Jameson 2022, p. 27). I for my part am more disturbed than fascinated by what sounds to me like a case of companion-species discourse gone terribly awry. With Haraway’s work on cyborgs in mind, I’m reminded of J. G. Ballard’s novel, *Crash*, in which a group of people rehearse erotic relations with machines by way of car crashes.

kind of attention, that is, a poetic mode of observance mindful of existential singularity and temporal, historical contingency:

The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs its Over-against [*es braucht ein Gegenüber*]... For the poem making toward an Other, each thing, each human being is a form of this Other... This attentiveness a poem devotes to all its encounters, with its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of “quiverings” [*Zuckungen*] and “intimations” [*Andeutungen*]*—*all this, I think, is not attained by an eye vying (or conniving) with constantly more perfect instruments. Rather it is a concentration that stays mindful of all our dates. (Celan 2001, pp. 409-10)

Celan concludes this section of his speech by citing three significant others, two of whom we’ve already encountered: “‘Attentiveness’ [*Aufmerksamkeit*]*—*allow me here to quote a saying by Malebranche from Walter Benjamin’s Kafka essay*—* ‘Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul’” (Benjamin 2003, p. 410). We might add, the *Aufmerksamkeit*, the mode being of observant, that is possible today*—*a stunted growth [*ein kümmerliches Gewächs*]. But nevertheless *Aufmerksamkeit*, nevertheless a possession” (Kafka 2006, p. 161; Kafka 1994, pp. 92–93).

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