

ANTHONY CURTIS ADLER

# Unmusical: The Politics of Music in Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann" and Kafka's "Josefine"

## Unmusical

Writing to Milena Jesenská, his translator and lover, Kafka relates his dream from the previous night. Overtaking the letters just sent, he suddenly travelled to Vienna to see her. Milena knew of his arrival, and, waiting for her to come meet him, he's surrounded by a small group of his own people, there as if to second him in a duel. Yet rather than supporting him with their presence, they talk among themselves, most likely about his affairs, and he hears only a murmur: "I could not and did not want to understand anything."<sup>1</sup> When finally – but only after first appearing ghost-like behind her husband – he and Milena find themselves alone, there begins "an insanely quick conversation ... all short sentences; it went *bang bang* and lasted almost without interruption throughout the dream."<sup>2</sup>

In the middle of recounting his dream, Kafka makes a parenthetical confession: "Do you know that I am completely unmusical, more completely than anyone I have ever known."<sup>3</sup> This is not the first time Kafka had mentioned his unmusicality to someone – Max Brod indeed discusses

<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 49.

<sup>2</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 49.

it at length in his biography – yet in the context of this “horrid” dream, unfolding in the most musical of European capitals, it acquires a deepened significance.<sup>4</sup>

For while the dream starts with a typical anxiety-inducing situation – arriving somewhere with an important purpose in mind – it is not the physical encounter with Milena that eludes him but something else: understanding, or, more specifically, the immediate understanding possible through living speech, conversation.<sup>5</sup> Hence the curious anxiety attached to overtaking his own letters – the letters that, throughout their affair, raced back and forth from Prague to Vienna and whose successful arrival occasioned so much worry. Overtaking his own letters means not only preempting a single act of communication but written communication as such; subordinating written communication – conditioned on the absence of the one to the other, indeed on the impossibility of shared immediate mutual understanding – to the immediate, fulfilled understanding that speech promises. Having lost faith in writing, the letter becomes a mere means to secure a liaison; a glorified, long-winded visiting card. The dream’s underlying anxiety is not that he won’t meet her but rather that he will; that, meeting, they’ll talk face to face – without understanding. It’s the anxiety that words will become a murmur or a staccato *bang bang*

<sup>4</sup> Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, 115–16.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Turner (1963), in an early study on Kafka’s relation to music, draws attention to the connection between music and understanding, suggesting that his relation to music mirrored his fear of meaninglessness and incomprehension. More recent work has also continued in this direction, while focusing more on the political than the existential. Especially significant is the work of Benert, who reads into Kafka a critique of Wagner’s political aesthetics, centered around a “cultic notion of musical community, according to which the Volk reconstitutes itself as such not through their active, collective participation in musical performance, but through their passive reception of the medium’s auratic message.” Colin Benert, “Notlagen’: Kafka’s Intervention in Wagner’s Musical Politics,” 125; see also Ido Lewit, “‘He Couldn’t Tell the Difference between *The Merry Widow* and *Tristan and Isolde*’: Kafka’s Anti-Wagnerian Philosophy of Music.” Such readings resonate with Deleuze and Guattari’s discovery in Kafka of a “a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words – a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 6.

*bang*; insanely quick, lacking the right tempo and measure, thus eluding understanding.

Kafka's unmusicality, his dream suggests, involves the incapacity for an understanding grounded in the immediacy and reciprocal presence of speech. Musicality is the deep foundation for the understanding belonging to the spoken word. Sensing everything at stake, Milena must have been taken aback by this confession. In a subsequent letter, Kafka reassures her that unmusicality, while definitely "a general human misfortune" like being unable to cry or to sleep, is, for him, not such a misfortune as it might seem. Inherited from his forefathers on his father's side, it's something tangible that connects him to them. Moreover: "understanding people who are musical means almost the same thing as being unmusical."<sup>6</sup> If musicality is the condition of the immediate understanding of speech, and hence of a politics anchored in the charismatic potency of the voice, unmusicality makes it possible to understand musicality, and thus to understand a politics that, in the very presupposition of the possibility of immediate understanding, cannot in fact understand itself.

## Aesthetic Education

Ubiquitous and desacralized, music is now everywhere – not as standalone entertainment, but as pleasure, an anodyne, a lure attending quotidian activities. It serves the commodity or has become a commodity: a signifier of prestige, affluence, hipness. Yet for a tradition tracing back to Plato, if not earlier, music is not only synonymous with human culture broadly conceived but has everything to do with the cohesion of the political community. As the mysterious, ambiguous power – think Dionysus, Arion, the Sirens – to create and destroy communities, it's essential to an education that, in equal parts moral and political, forms the bodies and souls of children as members of the polity.<sup>7</sup> In ancient Greek, being μουσικός

<sup>6</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, in both the *Republic* (424 b–c) and the *Laws* (700–701), attributes great political significance to music, forbidding musical innovations in the ideal republic

(*mousikos*) means having a nature receptive to, and graced by, the gifts of the nine muses, “a votary of the muses,” “a man of letters and accomplishment”;<sup>8</sup> of these nine, only Terpsichore is concerned with something approaching music in the modern, narrow sense. The one who is *mousikos* is not just “musically gifted” but cultured, educated, skilled, even scholarly.

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, this Platonic tradition is recast on the new basis of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*), which derives the judgment and experience of the beautiful from the free play of the representative faculties of the mind. No longer primarily mimetic, music – in its political, ethical, pedagogical function – will now be understood more specifically in terms of a play of sensations.<sup>9</sup> Yet one can also point to another nearly contemporaneous source. In the seventh walk of *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*),

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and blaming them for the emergence of a life of “excessive liberty.” Likewise in the *Politics* (1340b–1342b), Aristotle defends musical education, carefully restricted to the “ethical” modes and excluding “professional” instrumental training. However, such views about music were not merely the specialized opinions of philosophers but reflected the importance the ancient Greeks attached to music and dance. As Werner Jaeger remarks: “Poetry and music had always been the foundations of the education of the mind, and had involved religious and moral education too. Plato thinks this idea of the power of poetry so natural that he never tries to find the exact reasons for it.” Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 213–14.

- <sup>8</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 520.
- <sup>9</sup> Kant describes the role of “free play” in the representation of the beautiful in the following passage: “Thus the state of mind in this representation [i. e., the representation of the beautiful object] must be that of the free play of the powers of representation in a given representation for a cognition in *general*.” Aesthetic pleasure, he further argues, is nothing else than the “consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers in the case of a representation through which an object is given,” and this pleasure, which itself has a “causative power,” inclining us to “linger over the consideration of the beautiful,” is the ultimate *a priori* ground of the judgment of taste. This is the kernel of the complex argument of Kant’s account of beauty, and alone accounts for the paradoxical nature of the judgment of taste: its subjective universality. Kant’s attitude toward music itself is complex: in his ranking of the arts, it comes right after poetry, yet if judged according to the culture it provides for the mind, it would come in last place. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 102, 107, 201–6.

Rousseau describes the pleasures afforded him by his botanical research. For Rousseau, botany would be, in Kantian terms, a fundamentally aesthetic pursuit, aiming not at practical knowledge of plants' medicinal properties but at the rapturous, ecstatic contemplation of nature in its rich tapestry of colors and forms.<sup>10</sup>

Within the German tradition, Schiller first brings the connection between musicality, broadly conceived, and politics into a clear light. While sharing Kant's criticism of music's predominately sensual nature, and while still regarding poetry as the highest artform, he also appreciates the deep connection between music and aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in a letter to Goethe, written March 18, 1786, and cited by Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*), he remarks that his poetic compositions begin with a musical mood.<sup>12</sup>

More sensual than poetry, since its material – sound – is an object of immediate perception and lacks rational content, music, this implies, nevertheless comes closest to a pure representation of the aesthetic state as such, the playful accord of the faculties of cognition. It is in this context that we might understand the following remarks from Kafka's diaries:

Schiller somewhere: The main thing (or something like that) is “to transform affect into character ...”<sup>13</sup>

Even more, I believe something is happening in me that is very close to Schiller's transformation of affect into character ...<sup>14</sup>

The passage invoked by Kafka comes from Schiller's “Über die Verbindung des Animalischen und Geistigen in dem Menschen [On the Connection between the Animal and Spiritual Nature of Man].”<sup>15</sup> Though written in 1780, Schiller, around twenty-one at the time, already anticipates the

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 202.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritischen Studienausgabe*, 1:43.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Diaries*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> See Friedrich Schiller, “Über die Verbindung des Animalischen und Geistigen in dem Menschen,” in: *Sämmtliche Schriften*, 1:171.

most important thesis of the aesthetic works written in the wake of the French Revolution: the concept of aesthetic education. In his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (*Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*), he will argue that the ultimate goal of politics – replacing an arbitrary political order formed by violence and chance with a rational political order – is only possible through an education cultivating each individual's aesthetic disposition.<sup>16</sup> Characterized by the anarchic yet harmonious play of the faculties, the aesthetic disposition mirrors an ideal political order where cultivated inclinations of the multitude freely unfold without creating chaos. While such transformation of affect into character is already implicit in Aristotle's understanding of habit as second nature in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is crucial to Schiller's notion of aesthetic education.<sup>17</sup>

Kafka's diary entries are from November 9, 1911, and December 8, 1911 – not quite a year before the beginning of his epistolary affair with Felice Bauer and the composition of his “breakthrough” work, “Der Urtheil [The Judgment].” Near the beginning of his journal, Kafka spends several pages – apparently, several aborted drafts beginning with a similar phrase – reflecting on the harm done to him by his own education.<sup>18</sup> His reproach touches not only his teachers or his parents but some of his relatives, houseguests, writers, girls from dancing lessons, a swimming master, an usher, a school inspector, people met only once on the street, and even a cook, who, in fact, seems the focus of special attention.<sup>19</sup> He ends with a striking image:

I should have been the little ruin dweller, hearkening to the cries of the jack-daws, flown over by their shadows, cooling off under the moon, burnt by the sun, which, streaming through the rubble, would have shone for me from all sides on my bed of ivy, even if at first I would have been a little weak under the pressure of my good qualities which would have had to grow in me with the power of weeds.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*.

<sup>17</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a.

<sup>18</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 7–13.

<sup>19</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 8–9.

<sup>20</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 9.

This fantasy of an impossible natural upbringing – almost a caricature of Rousseau’s educational philosophy – goes hand in hand with an aesthetic-moral reform; an aesthetic-moral reeducation seeking to remedy a nature ruined by bad education. Such an education, moreover, has a clear end: marriage, children. In an entry from November 14, 1911, he writes: “It seems so awful to be a bachelor ...”<sup>21</sup> Marriage is not yet a political relationship – the *polis* is different in kind from the *oikos*. Yet as the simplest and most fundamental but also most absolute and difficult relationship, it counts as the precondition of all politics; if even in marriage the self cannot exist in relationship to others without either dominating or being dominated, then we are doomed never to leave the natural condition, where political relations are governed by coercion. Marriage, as it were, is the prelude to all true partnership. Yet if, conversely, marriage cannot be understood as a mere contract, governed by a principle of equitable exchange, then social-contract theory, the basis of liberalism, also cannot offer a solution to the conundrum of politics.

Kafka intuited the deep connection between music and aesthetic education; he recognized that the capacity for music is at the root of the aesthetic capacity; that music presents the very schema of an anarchic but orderly relationship of faculties. And, at the outset of his literary career, he sought his own aesthetic education or re-education, forming affect into character. An affective reform would make possible not only his own private happiness but a happy marriage. When, seven years before his letter to Milena, he confesses to Felice Bauer his incapacity to appreciate flowers, adding that this incapacity “is associated to some extent with my inability to appreciate music, at least I have often sensed a connection,” he senses nothing less than his own unreceptivity for the purely aesthetic experience first envisioned by Rousseau.<sup>22</sup> Being fundamentally unmusical means lacking the capacity for the aesthetic education by which one could become a member of a harmonious whole without sacrificing one’s individuality. For the unmusical, indeed, even the simplest union, marriage, could not be possible; there can only be struggle.

<sup>21</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, 218–19.

Yet his remarks to Milena suggest that while being unmusical prevents ordinary understanding – the understanding possible in the immediacy of being together and speaking together – it also allows another kind of understanding. For those who are musical, and who understand each other in the immediacy of presence, can never really understand themselves, since this would require stepping outside the circle of immediacy. Thus unmusicality, while banishing one from the project of aesthetic education, might allow the thinking of another politics – a politics based on another kind of understanding, another kind of community. Perhaps it is a question of understanding the limit to understanding – that which immediate understanding can never grasp. Moreover, though, and this is our more immediate concern, unmusicality becomes the condition of a new kind of literature.

### The Poor Musician

In one of his letters to Milena, Kafka includes a copy of Franz Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann [The Poor Musician]" "not because it means so much to me; although it once did years ago."<sup>23</sup> Yet even this apparent indifference, he remarks in a postscript to another letter, is a feint. He was only being cautious in saying it didn't mean anything to him; in fact, he's ashamed of the story, as if he'd written it himself.<sup>24</sup> He then goes on to list "a number of defects, ridiculous moments, dilettantish features, and deadly affections (which are especially noticeable when read aloud, I could show you where)."<sup>25</sup> Yet even these criticisms, peculiar and exaggerated as they are, seem to arise, as Brod suggests, from his "exaggerated self-identification with the author."<sup>26</sup> Grillparzer's story touches Kafka so intimately that he can only regard it as his own work, subjecting it to a criticism all the more exacting – as unrelenting as the criticism that he exerted on

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<sup>23</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Brod, *Franz Kafka*, 223.

himself and his works – despite all his affection for it. For there can be no doubting the deep meaning Grillparzer’s novella had for Kafka. In a diary entry dated August 9, 1912, Kafka, who has just read “The Poor Musician” aloud, records his “recognition of what is manly about Grillparzer,” and goes on to list, among other things, the “calm command over himself. The slow pace that neglects nothing. The immediate readiness, when it’s necessary, no sooner, for he has long seen everything coming.”<sup>27</sup>

“Der arme Spielmann” begins with the narrator walking through Brigittenau, an outlying district of Vienna, on the first Sunday in July after the full moon. This Sunday, this year as every year, is a “proper folk festival [*Volksfestival*], if ever a festival has earned the name.”<sup>28</sup> For indeed the entire people (*Volk*) has assembled – and even the more elevated members of society, like the narrator himself, are only present in their capacity as members of the people. As such a folk festival, it involves the people coming together to celebrate itself. While ostensibly celebrating the anniversary of some local churches, the apparently worldly, profane nature of the festival, bereft of special liturgical significance, suggests that, rather than celebrating the church as the hierarchical institution guiding the people toward God through the spiritual authority of the priesthood, the people are in fact subverting its sacralization. By repeating the consecration through a celebration of its anniversary, thronging in mass to the site of the consecration, they are returning the church to its origin in the people; as if recalling that every church is in essence an *ekklēsia*, a gathering of the people. The people gathers around itself, first becomes present and visible to itself, brought to itself through its spontaneous desire for sociality. Thus, it repeats the original, anarchic genesis of the people, preserving the people through such repetition.

Music must play a vital role here. Belonging to the people, never standing *outside* or *apart from* the people, the musician nevertheless gains a certain distance from the people and, through this distance, is able to play *to* them, guiding them into a certain more orderly, cohesive, harmonious

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<sup>27</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 224.

<sup>28</sup> Franz Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 7.

formation. For the people becomes present to itself through hearing and understanding a common music giving voice to its own feelings, passions, yearnings. Neither a special technical facility nor inborn talent, musicality, in this radical sense, is precisely the ability of the musician, without ceasing to belong to the people, to take distance from the people through the accomplished exhibition of that which belongs most intimately to the people itself.

As a dramatist, the narrator is the spiritual descendent of musicians – Ancient Greek tragedy, after all, originated with the chorus. Thus it is no surprise that he too, as a “passionate lover of human beings [*Menschen*], especially of the common folk [*Volkes*]” finds the “unbridled applause of an overstuffed theater ten times more interesting, indeed instructive ... than the cleverly contrived judgments of a literary matador, crippled in body and soul, swollen like a spider from the blood of exsanguinated authors.”<sup>29</sup>

But while drawn to the gathered throngs, the narrator never ceases to distinguish himself from them, imagining that his own *anthropological* impulse, as he puts it, were somehow different than the people’s desire to witness and be surrounded by and gather around itself. And indeed, as musician, the narrator must somehow be able to believe this. But if the narrator is drawn to the festival to learn from the people, and thus to refresh the musicality that he as a successful dramatist must surely possess, what he finds there, at the threshold to the festival – causing him to lose interest in the festival, and the people, and turn away – is something different: an unmusicality more captivating than any music.

For following his preamble, the narrator recalls a curious incident from the festival two years earlier. Just about to enter the fairgrounds surrounding the Brigittenau church, he passes through a place where a few hapless musicians, among them a peg-legged invalid and a crippled boy, were busking, hoping to glean the first fruit of the crowd’s generosity as it swarmed into the festival grounds.<sup>30</sup> One, in particular, commands the narrator’s entire attention: a bald, hatless man, perhaps already in his seventies, dressed in a threadbare but clean overcoat and playing an old

<sup>29</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 9.

decrepit fiddle. He keeps the tact not only with his foot but through an extravagant movement of his entire body:

But all these efforts to bring restraint into his performance were futile, for what he played seemed like an incohesive sequence of tones without tempo and melody. Yet he was entirely immersed in his work: his lips twitched, his eyes were rigidly fixed on the sheet music in front him – yes, genuine sheet music!<sup>31</sup>

The hats of the other musicians, playing by ear and memory, overflow; his, pitched in front of his music stand, remains empty. Even so, he continues to play for a while more, and then, to the narrator's surprise, mutters some words of learned Latin – *sunt certi denique fine* – packs his violin and music stand back up, and carves his way, as if returning home, through the masses streaming into the festival grounds.<sup>32</sup> Filled with “anthropological ravenousness,” intrigued and perplexed by so many contradictions – his “wretched yet noble figure, such undefeatable cheerfulness, so much artistic passion alongside such ineptitude” – the narrator follows him through the crowds, loses him, and eventually finds him again, playing before of a group of rude boys who, unhappy with his waltz, walk off scolding and cursing.<sup>33</sup>

His conversation with the musician only confirms these contradictions. Asked why he left so early, depriving himself of the chance for greater profit, the musician remarks that, while he plays the whole day for “the noisy people [*die lärmende Leute*],” the evening belongs to him and his art; “then I play from imagination, thus for myself without notes. Fantasizing, I believe, the music books call it.”<sup>34</sup> Visiting the musician in a single room shared with two apprentice craftsmen, the narrator discovers that his evening playing is even odder and less musical than his public performance.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 17.

Some light is cast on these mysterious contradictions, however, when the musician recounts his own life story. Born to a prosperous and powerful family – his father was a *Hofrat*, an imperial councilor who “under the modest title of a bureau chief exerted an enormous [*ungeheuren*], almost minister-like influence” –, the second of three brothers, he lagged far behind them in his studies.<sup>36</sup> Despite his father’s machinations, he failed the school exam – bungling an answer to a question given to him in advance.<sup>37</sup> His father then stops speaking to him, though letting him still live at home and eventually engaging him as a copyist in his chancellery.<sup>38</sup>

Sitting in his father’s house at dusk one day, lost in his own thoughts, he hears a song “so simple, so stirring, with the emphasis so rightly placed, that one hardly needed to hear the words.”<sup>39</sup> When he tries to sing it, however, he finds that he lacks the voice to hold the melody. It is at this moment that he discovers his old violin, abandoned from his youth, though still in tune – a servant, it seems, played it in his absence.<sup>40</sup>

As I led the bow across the strings, lord, it was as if God’s finger had touched me. The tone pressed into me and then back out. The air surrounding me was as if pregnant with drunkenness ... I kissed the violin and pressed it to my heart and played on and on.<sup>41</sup>

The source of the entrancing song, he later learns, is an unpretty girl, the daughter of a baker, who would come to the chancellery during lunch to hawk her goods.<sup>42</sup> She promises to have a client of her father’s, an organist, write down the notes of her song for him, but when he comes by some weeks later to retrieve the sheet music, he is spotted by one of his father’s

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<sup>36</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 23–24.

<sup>38</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 29.

servants.<sup>43</sup> Suspecting him of disgraceful behavior, his father casts him out from the house.<sup>44</sup>

Not long after, a series of disasters befall the family; one brother dies, the other is forced to flee the country, and when his father, harried by his enemies, finally succumbs to a stroke, the hapless middle son is left sole heir.<sup>45</sup> He eventually renews relations with Barbara, the baker's daughter, and is on the verge of getting engaged to her – he now has her father's blessings – and opening his own copying business when he discovers that his entire fortune, naively entrusted to the chancellery secretary, had been swindled away.<sup>46</sup> Barbara marries the butcher that had been wooing her, and, his marriage plans shattered, he decides to dedicate his life, with the little money remaining to him, to music.<sup>47</sup>

The poor musician's harrowing story teaches that unmusicality, far from being a simple absence, a lack, not only has its own constitutive structure but is more fundamental, more originary – as if musicality itself were founded in unmusicality, were characterized by the absence of unmusicality, rather than vice-versa. The positive essence of unmusicality is a receptivity to the people's voice, experienced as something divine – *vox populi, vox dei* – together with the absence of a voice answering to this voice, copying it, repeating it. It is the experience of a voice not only distanced from itself but incapable of hearing and understanding in the immediate proximity of speech. Or indeed, the very capacity to break from the immediacy of the people in its immediate self-presence without ever ceasing to hearken to the people, belonging (*gehören*) to them in their constitutive longing.

If the people's voice is the voice of God, this is so only from the distance that unmusicality first discovers. When the voice is heard without a voice answering to it, a two-fold mediation becomes possible: the mediation of the instrument, substituting for the absent voice, and the mediation

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<sup>43</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 33–37.

<sup>44</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 38–39.

<sup>46</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 53–54.

of writing, compensating for failed memory, or even for the very impossibility of grasping the sung notes such that they could be repeated. The people's divine voice, interrupted, makes possible the touch of the divine hand. It is only from this unmusicality, which first introduces a fissure into the immanence of the people, that musicality becomes possible. Musicality, so understood, *masters* this double mediation, restoring a semblance of the broken immanence. The essence of such musicality is virtuosity.

By birth, the poor musician belongs to the most elevated rank of the people: those commoners who, by mastery of the apparatus of governance, have been taken into the confidence of kings. Since ancient times, such mastery has depended on writing – the first bureaucrats, indispensable for the disposal of royal power, were scribes. While the poor musician is slow, a poor student, he, far from being illiterate, is, in a way, *too literate*, too much bound to the written word. His predicament is a literacy without virtuosity opposed to the virtuosity without literacy that characterizes the naive folksongs through which the “genius of the people” finds expression. Whereas his “brothers leapt around like antelopes from peak to peak in the objects of study,” he couldn't skip over anything; missing even one word, he had to begin anew.<sup>48</sup> It is as if he could find no way back from writing to smooth, flowing speech. Indeed, when he fails his school exam, it's not just that he forgot the lines of Horace; he even failed to hear the repeated promptings of the schoolmaster.<sup>49</sup>

Telling, in this regard, is his manner of playing: what most eludes him, whose very lack he can't even comprehend, is the semblant continuity that the virtuoso elicits as he passes from writing back to fluent speech, from the written note to the performed sound. But just this incapacity brings him closest to divine harmony:

His interpretation differentiated only two things: the consonance [*Wohlklang*] and the dissonance [*Übelklang*], of which the former pleased,

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<sup>48</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 24.

delighted him, whereas he, as much as possible, avoided the latter, even when it was harmonically justified.<sup>50</sup>

Rejecting the subtle interweaving of consonance and dissonance, a *chiar-oscuro* allowing music to conjure forth subtle nuances of a fallen world, he tries to seize on the harmony as if it could appear alone, in its purity – an absolute presence bereft of all dialectical intrigue. Musical virtuosity, mastering the double mediation of language and instrumentality, demands forgetting this positive and absolute harmony. Taking the place of a pure consonance, unmediated by dissonance, is an infinitely mediated relation between harmony and dissonance, melody and harmony, tone and rhythm, content and form; all that which is, in fact, the essence of musicality.

We recall Kafka's words to Milena: "understanding people who are musical means almost the same thing as being unmusical." Grillparzer's novella illuminates this cryptic remark: so far as musicality is the virtuosic forgetting of an original unmusicality, restoring the semblant immanence of speech, then the understanding it commands, the glib semblance of understanding, is in fact a misunderstanding, and indeed a misunderstanding that misunderstands itself, since it can't even tell that it's not understanding – that what seems like understanding is merely the lack of interruption, the absence of breaks and gaps and caesura; mere continuity. Unmusicality understands those who are musical since it understands their own self-misunderstanding. But it is not only this: it also *hears* the irruption of the absolute, the pure voice, the original harmony. Hears and responds – *with writing*. For writing, here, is neither a supplement to speech nor an ultra-transcendental, if paradoxical origin. If, on the one hand, writing exists as its own domain, apart from the immanence of speech – the domain of the scribe, the bureaucrat – it nevertheless responds to the irruption of the voice as a divine presence shattering the calm and poise of the semblant, indeed *virtual* world of the virtuosity. Only through unmusicality can the musician stand *off* from the people

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<sup>50</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 20.

rather than getting lost in their virtuosity. And hence the formation of the people itself begins with the unmusical musician.

## Virtuosity and Repetition

It's strange that Kafka never once mentioned "The Poor Musician" to Felice herself, even though this reading, to judge by his diary, occurred just as their correspondence was flourishing. It is as if, having regarded it from the beginning as *his own* story, it represented an aspect of himself that he could scarcely admit to Felice: not his unmusicality *per se* but the meaning of this unmusicality, itself so intimately tied to his relationship with the opposite sex (it is, indeed, only to himself and girls or women that he will speak of the story). What his unmusicality means is the impossibility not only of *immediate, spoken rather than written understanding*, but of existing fully and in his truth as a member of society; hence the impossibility not of physical coitus, not of the most intimate epistolary exchange, but of a socially sanctioned, celebrated, fruitful relation with one woman: *marriage, legal paternity, children*.

But comprehending such unmusicality demands recognizing that marriage, paternity, children belong to the semblant order, the order of a virtuosic, virtual sociality that the writer, pursuing a true vocation, must relinquish – not because it gets in the way of work, not because of what it demands, but because it is so far outside the singular truth that the writer, in his unmusicality, occupies. It is perhaps only after already beginning to come to terms with the impossibility of marriage that he will speak of "The Poor Musician," though still not to Felice herself, but to Grete Bloch, serving in the strange role of an intermediary.

"The Poor Musician" is beautiful, isn't it? I remember reading it once to my youngest sister; I read it as I had never read anything to anyone before. I was so completely absorbed by it that there would have been no room inside me for an error in emphasis, breathing, intonation, sympathy, or understanding; it really burst forth from inside me with superhuman ease; I was delight-

ed with every word I uttered. This will never be repeated, I should never dare to read it out loud again.<sup>51</sup>

It's strange that Kafka becomes a perfect reader through this text, and this alone. However, it's not a virtuosic musicality that he achieves through his internalization of and identification with "The Poor Musician." An unmistakable sign for this is the impossibility of repetition. The virtuosic, like writing itself, is both infinitely repeatable and yet, as performance, is also qualitatively unique; the repeat performance will never be a perfect repetition. Indeed, *imperfection* is the very basis of repetition. What is truly perfect can never be repeated – and hence if an unmusical performance is possible, it must be perfect, perfectly unmusical – unmusical because perfect.

It is not unlike when, in *Das Schloss (The Castle)*, K. and Frieda make love for a second time:

She sought something and he sought something, raging, grimacing, boring their heads into the other's bosom they sought and their embraces and their flinging bodies didn't make them forget, but reminded them of the duty to seek ...<sup>52</sup>

Striking in its cadence and its intensity, this passage suggests the very impossibility of finding, for the second time, what offered itself with such ease and simplicity the first time they made love. A perfect union, a perfect understanding is not impossible; but it can only happen once – and, maybe, the very prospect of repetition already brings it to grief. The anaphora at the beginning ("She sought something and he sought something") employs free indirect discourse to assume both K. and Frieda's perspectives; *seeking* speaks to their inner state, not just their observable behavior. K. and Frieda are united only in that both are searching for the same thing – but, separated, they now seek this same thing in the other; their unity has

<sup>51</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, 386–87.

<sup>52</sup> Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 4:59.

already irreparably escaped them. Their gestures, crude, bestial, are the same yet opposed; they have entered the realm of semblant virtuosity – lovemaking has become a performance. There is no longer the forgetfulness of those lost in immanence but a memory that, recalling the duty to seek, becomes the compulsion to remember, to repeat.

### Josefine, or Judaism and Music

There is one respect, at least, in which Grillparzer's novella could never quite speak to Kafka's situation. The work of a Christian author, it takes place in a Vienna from which Jews are oddly absent: at a Christian festival, at the verge of a church's hallowed grounds. If unmusicality is understood as having a political meaning, indeed as somehow constitutive of the people, then there can be no question that for Kafka, increasingly aware of the importance of his own Jewishness in relation to his art, the problem of unmusicality assumes a different form in relation to Jews, whose existence in diaspora, scattered amidst the peoples of the earth, renders their own existence as a people problematic. If "The Poor Musician" offers a "way out," it is one that he could never avail himself of. In Grillparzer's story, which is typically understood as representing the two sides of the author – his public persona and inner life – this bifurcation allows for unmusicality to appear as something hidden deep within the artist and his creation; an originative power that the artist taps into, struggles with, but then transfigures through his own virtuosic technique. This implies a culture that not only operates at two levels – interior and exterior, surface and depth – but that indeed achieves progress in the virtuosic, musical mastery of the semblant forms of life while never ceasing to maintain a relation to the awkward unmusical origin – the unmediated encounter with the divine.

It is significant, in this regard, that Grillparzer's novella stands under the clear influence of Goethe, and especially his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*). Eduard's uneven fluting anticipates the poor musician's off manner of playing, while Otilie's academic failures, originating in her need for *thoroughness*, her inability to leap over what

she can't understand, recalls the musician's own academic struggles.<sup>53</sup> And, like the musician, Otilie eventually becomes a scribe, a copyist – as in the remarkable scene where, making a duplicate of a lengthy contract written in Eduard's hand, her handwriting eventually becomes indistinguishable from his.<sup>54</sup>

Kafka, despite his great admiration for Goethe, will see in his style a seduction and an obstacle. In his diary, he writes:

By the power of his works Goethe probably holds back the development of the German language. Even if prose has in the meantime often moved away from him, in the end as at present it has still returned to him with strengthened yearning ...<sup>55</sup>

Goethe enables a virtuosic literature in which progress is possible, if, to be sure, only a semblant progress: a deepening virtuosity that remains tied back to the origin. It is a common thought among Jewish thinkers of this time that the Jewish people, an ancient people that has survived into modernity by holding scrupulously to old ways, exists outside the, if semblant, progress that characterizes the Christian world.<sup>56</sup>

It is significant, therefore, that in explaining his *unmusicality* to Milena, Kafka also suggests, if in somewhat ambiguous terms, that it ties him to his forefathers. That unmusicality would be something passed down, an inheritance rooted in blood, suggests that it is a political condition. Nor would it be absurd to connect it, in this regard, with his understanding of his Jewishness, and of the Jews as somehow existing fundamentally outside an *aesthetic* regime of Western Europe that they could adapt themselves to, superficially if sometimes brilliantly, without finding their truth

<sup>53</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Hamburger Ausgabe*, 257, 265.

<sup>54</sup> Goethe, *Hamburger Ausgabe*, 323.

<sup>55</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> A clear articulation of the idea is to be found in the following passage from Franz Rosenzweig's *Der Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*), published six years after Kafka's death: "A circulation, the circulation of the years, ensures eternity for the eternal people. The peoples of the world are without circulation; their life rolls forewords in a broad stream." Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 369.

in it.<sup>57</sup> Whereas the poor musician's unmusicality seems like a mysterious fate, cutting him off from his father, a subtle-minded bureaucrat, Kafka discovers in his own unmusicality a connection with his father's fathers, who, themselves, were not the subtle-minded, sensitive Talmudic scholars he found on his mother's side, but butchers.

Perhaps for the Jews, unmusicality is no longer the peculiar fate of the artist, an exceptional person who, standing off from the people, allows it to gather around itself, hearing in its own voice the voice of God. Rather, for Kafka, unmusicality is the fate of the Jewish people as a whole, or, rather, what binds them to their ancient fate, keeping them outside of the progress of other peoples, and defining the relation of the individual to the community. Perhaps Moses, who spoke face to face with God, was, with his stutter, the beginning of unmusicality, whereas Aaron's glib tongue represents the eternal temptation of idolatry, beauty, semblance and virtuosity. If a Jewish artist is possible, he could never hide behind the mask of a public persona; his awkwardness, his shame, his truth is fully exposed.

Such conclusions, extravagant as they might seem, are supported by Kafka's last work, "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse [Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse-Folk]," which appeared during his lifetime in the volume *Der Hungerkünstler* (*The Hunger Artist*). More than any other of his writings "Josephine" concerns the individual artist's relation to the people, with the peculiar double-title bringing equal attention to both elements. As Kafka's last literary testament on his own lifework, "Josephine" also presents Kafka's final answer to Grillparzer's novella. For indeed, "Josephine," like "The Poor Musician," is concerned with nothing else than unmusicality. Now, however, the whole mouse-folk is unmusical – music is too distant from their difficult lives, their favorite music is peace and quiet – but, among them, Josephine is an exception: not only is she a singer, but, through her singing, the people also come to be touched by music.<sup>58</sup> No one, it seems, can listen to her without being "carried away."

<sup>57</sup> Regarding Kafka's reception of the complex discourses surrounding the purported "unmusicality" of the Jewish people, tracing back to Wagner's 1850 *Das Judentum in der Musik* (*Judaism in Music*), see Sander L. Gilman, "Franz Kafka's Musical Diet."

<sup>58</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:274.

What concerns the narrator – the story itself reads like a disquisition – is the question of how the completely unmusical mouse-folk are able to *understand* Josephine’s song, or, since Josephine herself denies such understanding, to at least believe that they understand.<sup>59</sup> He rejects the most obvious answer: that the beauty of her song is so great that even the dullest senses cannot resist it. For he himself feels, and others will also admit, that there is nothing special about her song. It is hardly even really a song at all, but rather a *pfeifen* – “peeping” or “piping” – something that all mice do, and indeed a characteristic vital expression (*Lebensäußerung*).<sup>60</sup> Yet if her piping is nothing special, it seems different, though only when seen from very close. Hearing, indeed, is not enough; one must *see* it as well. And, in this way, the mice-folk “admire [*bewundern*] in her that which [they] don’t at all admire in ourselves.”<sup>61</sup> In this Josephine is fully complicit: she cannot tolerate when others call attention to the “general folk-piping [*allgemeine Volkspfeifen*]”; she does everything possible to differentiate her art from theirs. And so, too, when she performs, not a peep is to be heard.

Not only is the mouse-folk unmusical, but it also exists outside the normal relation to time; it has no youth and only the most miniscule childhood.<sup>62</sup> There are no schools; only endless streams of new generations of children.<sup>63</sup> And since the children become immediately old, the people is both childish and elderly at the same time. This too explains their unmusicality: “we are too old for music, its excitation, its upswing doesn’t suit our heaviness; we wearily wave it away.”<sup>64</sup> But it also explains the power Josephine has over them. During the concerts, while Josephine is lost in admiration of her own virtuosity, struggling to draw from herself ever more incomprehensible accomplishments, the “actual crowd – this is clearly recognized – has withdrawn from out of itself [*aus sich selbst zurückgezogen*].” In the meagre pauses amid Josephine’s

<sup>59</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:274–75.

<sup>60</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:275.

<sup>61</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:276.

<sup>62</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:284.

<sup>63</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:285.

<sup>64</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:285.

struggles, the mouse-folk dreams, as if the solitary, restless individual, its limbs relaxing, could stretch out and wrap itself into the giant, warm bed of the people. There is, in her song, "something of the poor, short childhood, something of the lost, irrecoverable happiness, but also something of active daily life, of its small, incomprehensible, and yet persevering and ineradicable cheeriness." And all this is communicated not in "great tones, but softly, whisperingly, confidentially, and at times a little hoarsely. Naturally, it's a peeping. Why not? Peeping is the language of our people."<sup>65</sup>

If at first the singing Josephine appears as an exception to the people, it becomes clear that she is hardly more musical than the rest. Her power consists in performing, in an exaggerated display, the mouse-folk's peeping language. The unmusicality of Grillparzer's poor musician is the hidden, inner truth of the artist; the relation to the divine that is too easily forgotten among so many colorful, drunken festivals, so much artistic virtuosity, so much progress of a people marching down history's broad paths. Josephine's seeming musicality does nothing else than perform the unmusical language that belongs to the people as its most essential truth, marking its exclusion from history as a progress in virtuosity.

At the end of Grillparzer's story, Leopoldstadt, where the old musician lives, has been struck by a devastating flood. When the narrator returns to visit, a neighbor recounts the musician's final act: hearing the drowning children's cries, he jumped to their rescue, saving them, along with her husband's tax books and a few guilders in paper money. Catching a cold, he soon passed away.<sup>66</sup> The old musician is thus redeemed in the eyes of society, dying a hero's death. If the flood – the story was published in 1848 – represents a revolutionary cataclysm, saving power is to be found in a simple and immediate responsiveness to the call of human suffering. No such end awaits Josephine. Redeemed from earthly suffering, happily losing herself among her people's countless heroes, she will be forgotten like all her brothers.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:287.

<sup>66</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:294.

The saving power of Western music, distinguished as it is by the rich development of polyphonic texture and hence by a dissonant harmony, is the preservation of the individual, in its individuality, within the whole. The aesthetic and the ethical, indeed, differ in the last instance only in this respect: the aesthetic order preserves the semblant individual in its sensual existence – the ethical order grants the sensuous individual membership in the “kingdom of ends” only through its self-sacrifice. And in this sense, moreover, both the aesthetic and the ethical are extensions of cognitive understanding, which involves seeing the part in its relation to the whole. While the poor musician fails to redeem dissonance aesthetically, this very failure, with his heroic death, becomes his final, ultimate success: the salvation of the ethical community. The unmusicality of the mouse folk, in contrast, suggests the ultimate impossibility of either the ethical or aesthetic salvation of the individual. Just as Josephine’s singing life remembers only the endlessly flowing life of the people, a flood in which the individual is lost, her death can have nothing heroic about it. Thus “Josephine,” Kafka’s last story, offers the most extreme testament to the impossibility of understanding – not as a personal failing or lack but as the ultimately positive cognitive, aesthetic, ethical and political condition of Jewish existence – which his unmusicality revealed to him.

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