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Modernism’s Particulars, Oscillating Universals, and Josefine’s Singular Singing

1 The Universal in Modernity: Lost and Found

And it really was kind of the moon to shine on me, too, and out of modesty I was about to place myself under the arch of the tower bridge when it occurred to me that the moon, of course, shone on everything.

– Franz Kafka, “Description of a Struggle”

Without a doubt, Kafka’s works have a universal feel about them. The very short stories include rewritings of ancient Greek myths; others are set in distant lands (distant from a German-speaking, European audience, at least) or in past times. References to concrete places are few: Laurenziberg, the hill in Prague, Riva in Italy, and the United States (although this is an imaginary country, where the Statue of Liberty carries a sword and Oklahoma is spelt “Oklahoma”). Neither are Kafka’s narratives temporally located; they never begin, for example, “In 1903” or “At the end of the previous century” or even “Many centuries ago.” In several stories, characters go unnamed and are referred to otherwise, such as by physical characteristics (“a small woman”), role (“doorkeeper,” “father of the family”), or profession (“village schoolmaster,” “starvation artist,” “trapeze artist”). In The Trial [Der Process] and The Castle [Das Schloss], each protagonist is designated only by the initial “K.” Animals speak in some stories, which gives them the quality of fables.

In certain ways, then, Kafka’s texts seem to eschew particulars, despite the detailed and meticulous quality of the writing. Adorno, following Benjamin, considers Kafka’s works to have the attribute of parables. But as Adorno also percep-

tively notes in his *Aesthetic Theory*: “Artworks have no power over whether they endure; it is least of all guaranteed when the putatively time-bound is eliminated in favor of the timeless.” Kafka’s abjuring of the time-bound is not, therefore, what affords his works their enduring power; neither, I would argue, is it what gives them their universal quality. Adorno continues: “It was out of Cervantes’ ephemeral intention to parody the medieval romances that *Don Quixote* originated.” Analogously, I would postulate, it was out of Kafka’s (often parodic) rejoinder to modernity and modernism, and precisely to its concern with universals and particulars, that *his* enduring works originated.

Kafka’s texts respond to prevalent aspects of modernity: increased urbanization, isolation, and enlarged state bureaucracies. Both the novels and short stories are concerned with hierarchical institutions and with oppressive relations within institutions, including the family. Of course, Austro-Hungarian society had always been hierarchical, and the bourgeoisie family patriarchal, but, in early-twentieth-century Europe, entrenched authoritarian structures and apparently natural spheres of control were fundamentally questioned. What had previously been regarded as universal forms of knowledge, social structures, and power relations came under scrutiny. The ways in which these apparently universal—yet actually quite contingent and particular—structures and relations nevertheless permeate our being and our bodies is something Kafka spiritedly attests to and explores. Many of his texts portray what Bourdieu will come to depict as the “*habitus*,” the system of non-conscious social dispositions we inculcate, including at the bodily level. Others demonstrate what Foucault will refer to as “*capillary*” power, the decentralized, defining, and intricate power that invisibly extends its tentacles into the thinking, discourses, and minutest practises of our lives.

In “The Metamorphosis” (“Die Verwandlung”), even after waking to find himself transformed into an insect, Gregor’s main concern is to go to work. An elderly father’s condemnatory words in “The Judgment” (“Das Urteil”) impel his son to commit suicide. The story “In the Penal Colony” (“In der Strafkolonie”) literalizes the idea that language is inscribed upon the body (subsequently psychoanalytically elaborated by Lacan) through an apparatus invented precisely for the purpose. The very short story “Fellowship” (“Gemeinschaft”) recounts five friends who live together simply because they had exited a house in succes-

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sion and stood before it, and people noticed them having done so. Based on this simple, arbitrary event, they become a community and are displeased that a sixth person wishes to join them and intrude on their fellowship – even though this fellowship has no intrinsic basis.

Many of Kafka’s works delineate forces of convoluted and labyrinthine origins and directions. In “The Refusal” (“Die Abweisung”), the narrator tells of a town so far from the frontier that to reach it one must cross desolate highlands and wide fertile plains. It is unlikely anyone from the town has ever been to the frontier, for “to imagine even part of the road makes one tired, and more than one part one just cannot imagine.”6 Even further than the frontier is the capital, but the town humbly submits to it. The town’s highest official is from the capital. He consistently refuses petitions; these assured refusals are something the town seems to need, however, though they allegedly are not a formality. The narrator explains: “Time after time one goes there [to the official from the capital] full of expectation and in all seriousness and then one returns, if not exactly strengthened or happy, nevertheless not disappointed or tired”7 – despite one’s petition having been refused. Like many of Kafka’s texts, “The Refusal” depicts the tangled formations and the remote and obscure origins of power – power that shapes bizarre practices and even more bizarre understandings.

Kafka’s figures and narrators generally seem less like individuals than like illustrations and embodiments of forces with which all humans must contend, and which, insofar as we contend with them, become constitutive. Kafka’s characters hardly exhibit the defiant and critical hyper-consciousness of Dostoyevsky’s singular underground man. They are more likely to manifest the clichéd (and prejudicial) thinking of Schnitzler’s Lieutenant Gustl, of the eponymous novella that appeared at the opening of the twentieth century. Lieutenant Gustl was the first German-language literary work to present a character’s “stream of consciousness.”8 Schnitzler’s restriction of his text to inner monologue nonetheless paints an expansive social scenery, each brushstroke adding detail to a recognizable landscape: the Austrian world of the “k. und k.” (“kaiserlich und königlich,” or “imperial and royal”), the defining ethos of the Austrian-Hungarian empire.

8 Approximately two decades later, the interior consciousness of individuals became key to the works of high modernism: Joyce’s Ulysses, Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, and (later on) Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury. Individual subjectivities were portrayed as containing and revealing something universal – including the loss of universal truths or universally accepted social understandings.
Gustl’s particular, innermost thoughts disclose a broader, more universal (albeit hollow and crumbling) social world. Literary modernism seemed to respond to the erosion of traditional beliefs systems, the loss of putative social cohesion, and experiences of individual isolation by focussing on the perspective of one or more characters.

The idea that the universal can be gleaned through the particular is something Kafka mocks in his brief story “The Top” (“Der Kreisel”), in which a philosopher believes that he can grasp the universal by grasping the particular: “For he believed that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top, for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things.”9 Part of the story’s humour, of course, is that when the philosopher grasps the top, it stops spinning, that is, it ceases to function as a top and becomes a “silly piece of wood.”10 More generally, the tale questions whether one can ever grasp a particular, or whether by “grasping” it one simultaneously isolates it and hence loses it.

Literary modernism tries not to isolate the individuals upon whom it focuses but rather to keep them moving, and in this way simultaneously to illustrate the social vista that emerges in and through such individuals. In response to a modern world that seems increasingly fragmented and fragmentary, a point of view that presents a particular perspective is considered a more illuminating and ultimately more truthful form of representation. Pirandello illustrates this in Six Characters in Search of an Author. The play’s clichéd characters are more universal, because they are eternal and unchanging, whereas the actors, who are individual and sometimes inconsistent, are more true. Literary modernism suggests that particular perspectives and individual subjectivities provide both an apt sense of experience in modernity and a propitious way to access the modern world. In general terms, literary modernism can be said to approach or investigate the universal through the particular.

Kafka’s works, I would argue, go further. They not only seek to access the broader, more universal social world through individual thinking and experiences; they also depict the ubiquitous nature of social and institutional power, its reach and its vagaries. Moreover, Kafka’s works suggest that we can never know how far and how deeply power and convention permeate us, or the ways and the extent to which they constitute and affect us. In “Unhappiness” (“Unglücklichsein”), a child-ghost blows into the protagonist’s room and converses with him. Soon, however, the protagonist has had enough of the fractious ghost and leaves the room. He then encounters a neighbor who does not believe in ghosts. The

protagonist says that he does not believe in ghosts either, but that he cannot see how his not believing will help him. The neighbor explains that if one does not believe in ghosts then one need not “be afraid any more if a ghost really turns up.” The protagonist responds that such a fear is only a secondary fear: “The real fear is fear of the cause of the apparition. And that fear sticks.” Kafka’s humorous, imaginative, and expressively rich story concludes with the protagonist becoming suddenly panicked that the neighbor will steal his ghost. The ghost could represent the protagonist’s loneliness or fear of loneliness—a fear that could be experienced by anyone. For if the ghost can be stolen by the neighbor, the protagonist’s “fear of the cause of the apparition” may not be a particular fear, but one potentially shared by others. To the contrary, the ghost could represent the protagonist’s intimate personal anxieties (including sexual ones); thus, his becoming incensed at the possibility that his ghost might be taken from him could be understood (psychoanalytically) insofar as some neurotics cling to their neuroses. What is important, in my view, is that the conclusion remains ambiguous: universal fears may have induced the presence of the conversing apparition; or, the protagonist may have highly particular, idiosyncratic fears that lead to his being visited by a talking ghost.

Kafka’s works go further than modernist works that approach the universal through the particular, further than works that focus on the particular to disclose the disintegration of the universal, and even further than works that contrast the two. Many of Kafka’s texts question whether and to what extent one can even distinguish universal from particular. This is an explicit theme in the story “Conversation with a Supplicant” (“Gespräch mit dem Beter”), which also appears as part of “Description of a Struggle” (“Beschreibung eines Kampfes”). At one point in the story, the supplicant relates to the narrator his overhearing a conversation between his mother and another woman:

“When as a child I opened my eyes after a brief afternoon nap, still not quite sure I was alive, I heard my mother on the balcony asking in a natural tone of voice: ‘What are you doing my dear? Isn’t it hot?’ From the garden a woman answered: ‘Me, I’m having my tea on the lawn.’ They spoke casually and not very distinctly, as though this woman had expected the question and my mother the answer.”

This particular yet completely ordinary conversation baffles the supplicant.\textsuperscript{14} At this point, fairly late in the story, the supplicant’s response may not seem especially surprising, for he has already indicated that he experiences many ordinary things as insubstantial. But the narrator, too, seems to consider the conversation “a most remarkable incident,” stating that he cannot “make head or tale of it”\textsuperscript{15} yet also noting that he does not believe the incident is true. By the end of the story, however, the narrator seems to have grown weary of the garrulous supplicant, and seeks to disengage himself from their conversation by retracting his earlier comments. He tells the supplicant that he does not, in fact, find the story of the conversation so remarkable, that he has heard many such stories and has even participated in some, and that it was “quite an ordinary occurrence.”\textsuperscript{16} The supplicant appears unconvinced by the retraction, however, referring to the narrator’s earlier statement as a “confession.” Kafka’s “Conversation with a Supplicant” implies that what seems universal and ordinary may actually be particular and peculiar – or at least that one should not easily presume to differentiate them. Kafka’s works go beyond the quest to illuminate the universal (including its disintegration) through the particular, suggesting that they may, in fact, be indistinguishable.

2 Hegel, Kafka, Derrida

And so long as you say “one” instead of “I,” there’s nothing in it and one can easily tell the story.
– Kafka, “Wedding Preparations in the Country”\textsuperscript{17}

I put on my gloves, sighed for no good reason, as one is inclined to do at night beside a river.
– Kafka, “Description of a Struggle”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Vivian Liska analyzes the importance of this passage, including its staggering significance for Ilse Aichinger and probable influence on Aichinger’s story “Doubt about Balconies.” See Vivian Liska, \textit{When Kafka Says We: Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature}, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2009, 193–199.

\textsuperscript{15} Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 34.

\textsuperscript{16} Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 36.


\textsuperscript{18} Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 14.
Do you think you’re the only one who can shut doors? [spoken by the ghost]
– Kafka, “Unhappiness”\textsuperscript{19}

The longer one hesitates before the door, the more estranged one becomes.
– Kafka, “Home-Coming”\textsuperscript{20}

Hegel’s \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} explores the conceptual and historical oscillation between the universal and the particular. The opposition of subject and object, of universal and particular, is introduced into the broader socio-historical context in the chapter on “Spirit.” Unsurprisingly, Hegel opens his discussion of societal Spirit by turning to ancient Greece. Somewhat surprisingly, Hegel draws not upon the many and influential ancient Greek philosophical works, but upon a work of literature: Sophocles’s \textit{Antigone}. Therein Hegel sees a concern not unfamiliar to modernism: the fragmentation of an apparently harmonious whole – although in this case, the schism involves only two parts: state and family, or man and woman, or human and divine. In the tragedy, Antigone comes into conflict with Creon, king of Thebes, by burying her brother Polynices. This brother had been a traitor to the polis, and consequently Creon decreed that his body not be buried; Antigone buries him nevertheless and is condemned by Creon.

For Hegel, what is significant in the tragedy is that Antigone and Creon each believe her- or himself to be acting ethically and, more important, to be acting on the basis of a higher, universal law. Antigone states that, as a woman, her duty is to the family and hence to her brother; in short, according to immemorial custom, it is the duty of women to perform funeral rites and bury the dead. Creon believes it his duty as ruler to punish anyone who betrays the polis, even if this entails proscribing burial rites; also, he believes it is his further duty to condemn anyone who disobeys his prohibition. On the face of it, Antigone represents something smaller and more particular (the family, the sphere of individual, biological relationships and attachments), whereas Creon represents something larger and more universal (the state, the realm of wider social commitment and political action). But the family, by performing religious rites for the dead, insists upon both the value of the deceased to the community and the meaning of the deceased’s existence and memory. In this way, the family ethically enacts a law – namely, divine law – that is higher than the law of the state. The family is particular in relation to the more universal law of the state; divine law, however, is ultimately higher and more uni-

\textsuperscript{19} Kafka, “Unhappiness,” 16.
versal than state law. Moreover, there are many states, as Hegel notes; Thebes is only one, which renders Creon's decree a particularity. To summarize: Antigone represents the particularity of the family and familial relations, but she also represents the universality of divine law; Creon represents the more universal state law, which is nevertheless the law of only a single state and therefore particular. In Hegel’s reading of Antigone, universal and particular can be said to oscillate.

The possibility that what seems universal may actually be particular and vice versa is wittily presented in Kafka's short work “Poseidon.” Kafka depicts Poseidon, God of the Sea, as a discontented administrator who spends his days in his palace at the bottom of the ocean, sitting at his desk and reviewing accounts. What most annoys Poseidon is the wholly inaccurate image people have of him supposedly “dashing over the waves with his trident.”21 In fact, Poseidon has barely seen the oceans; he is counting on a quiet moment just before the end of the world to “make a quick little tour.”22 Kafka amusingly portrays Poseidon as a universal administrator chained to his desk; whenever Poseidon is able to take leave and go somewhere, he visits his brother Jupiter (usually returning in a rage). On the one hand, Kafka’s Poseidon seems little different from a high-level bureaucrat of today who has never travelled to the places where his international institution does business, or from a colonial administrator of Kafka’s time who has never seen the territories he controls. Poseidon also differs little from a sibling who continues to frequent a more powerful, more respected sibling even though the visits are enraging. Thus, Poseidon loses his singularity as God of the Sea and becomes the universal bureaucrat and family member. On the other hand, however, Kafka’s Poseidon also becomes more particular, more like an actual individual, insofar as he is overwhelmed with paperwork, occasionally visits his family (where there are constant tensions), and intends to travel at some future, unspecified date. The universal image of Poseidon riding the waves, trident in hand – the classical image familiar from sculpture, painting, and literature – is shown to be general and idealized. In the end, Kafka’s Poseidon, the busy administrator, is both more universal and more particular than the Greek God of the Sea.

Kafka’s “A Starvation Artist” (“Ein Hungerkünstler”) and “Eleven Sons” (“Elf Söhne”) can also each be interpreted in terms of ambiguity and oscillation between universal and particular. “A Starvation Artist” is a story of self-deprivation, which is itself a universal phenomenon found in countless cultures and

throughout various historical periods; yet the starvation artist seems singular in his ability to fast for lethal lengths of time. He is so dedicated to his art that he objects when his manager forces him, after forty days, to cease fasting. At the story’s conclusion, when the starvation artist has finally managed to fast for well over forty days, he reveals the real reason he ceased eating: it was simply because “I could not find the food I liked.”23 The artist seems to be confessing that he is far less talented than he had suggested, that he is hardly the artist he had seemed, and that his unique fasting ability does not render him so singular. He is simply like everyone else who eats the food they like. But surely almost any food would taste good to someone starving; thus, the starvation artist’s inability to find a food he liked is truly singular. Preferring to eat what one likes is universal; not being able, even when starving, to settle for any other food is quite singular.

Similarly, Kafka’s “Eleven Sons” depicts either a completely universal tendency or a very particular, singular disposition. In this story, a parent, apparently the father, describes his sons, one by one. Even when this father begins by lauding a particular son, he ends up finding fault with him. Each son is rendered as a particular, an individual (the descriptions are not repetitive), but each is ultimately portrayed as flawed. This tendency to find fault in others, regardless of their positive qualities, may be universal, and the tendency of fathers to be critical of their sons may be fairly common. The story’s title, however, evokes the biblical Jacob and his remaining eleven sons after his favourite, Joseph, has (as his other sons allege) been killed by a wild animal. Jacob may be inclined to find fault with his surviving sons, because he (consciously or unconsciously) faults them for not having protected Joseph, or possibly because he (consciously or unconsciously) wonders if something about their story is amiss. “Eleven Sons” could be illustrating a universal phenomenon or evoking an exceedingly particular event.

This returns us to Antigone. As noted, both Antigone and Creon believe they are acting on the basis of higher universal laws. Each believes that her or his own personal inclination plays no role in decisions and subsequent actions. Yet Creon’s punishment of Antigone is excessively harsh. Although rulers are supposed to condemn traitors and to expect that their decrees will be obeyed, Creon’s behaviour is despotic. And although Antigone claims to be acting only based on her familial obligation and duty as a woman, her sister, Ismene, acts differently (initially, at least), a juxtaposition that makes Antigone’s behaviour seem peremptory. Creon’s disproportionate retribution and Antigone’s intractable self-will each disclose particularities. They both claim to be acting according to higher, universal laws; nonetheless, each is more singular than either would admit.

23 Franz Kafka, “A Starvation Artist,” in Kafka’s Selected Stories 86–94, 94.
A Kafkan figure who similarly does not want to contend with his singularity in the face of universal laws is the “man from the country” in the parable “Before the Law” (“Vor dem Gesetz”). Therein, a man from the country comes seeking admittance to the law. The door to the law stands open, but the doorkeeper refuses to grant the man permission to enter, although he concedes that permission may be granted at some future time. The doorkeeper further informs the man that if he passes through the open door, he will encounter another doorkeeper, and then another, each more powerful than the last. The man from the country spends years waiting; he pleads with the doorkeeper and even tries to bribe him, to no avail. Near the end of the parable, as the man is dying, he seems to see a radiance streaming from the doorway. He forms a final question for the doorkeeper, inquiring how it is that, although everyone strives for the law, in all these years no one except him has ever asked for admittance. The doorkeeper responds that no one else could gain admittance, since this door was intended only for him (the man from the country), and that he (the doorkeeper) will now go and shut it.

Derrida interprets Kafka’s parable as suggesting that although the law may be universal, everyone encounters it in her or his own particular way. Derrida succinctly states that the law is “always an idiom.” Because the man from the country is a particular individual, he has his own particular entrance into the law (although the law in itself is not something he can ever reach, as Derrida makes clear). In other words, when the singular collides with the universal, it does so only in a particular way.

In “Before the Law,” as in Antigone, universal and particular can be said to fluctuate. The man from the country is patently singular, having his own door to the law and indeed his own doorkeeper. At the same time, this man is universal. He is all of us. We have all been “from the country” insofar as we have felt “inurban” in the face of intimidating laws into which we sought entrance. Moreover, we have all, at some time (as children or as “from the country,” for example) felt that we did not understand the law, could not grasp it – as if the law could be grasped. But the law, like the philosopher’s top, is not something that can be grasped. It must be interpreted. Derrida states: “Perhaps man is the man from the country as long as he cannot read” or assumes that the law is to be read rather than “deciphered.” Derrida later notes that “the ‘man’ is both Man and anybody, the anonymous subject of the law”:

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before the law, before the open door as if it was not his own particular entrance, he is this anonymous subject, anybody, a universal. At the same time, however, the door is for him only, a particular individual.

The doorkeeper may hardly seem particular. We do not know where he is from (is he also a man from the country, or is he from this or some other city?), and he is one doorkeeper among many. But when the doorkeeper mentions the other doorkeepers, comparing himself to them, he makes clear that each doorkeeper is distinct. Moreover, we learn details of the doorkeeper’s appearance and of his clothing – the man from the country, however, is never described. We even learn that doorkeeper has fleas in his fur collar. During the long years of waiting, the man from the country focuses more and more on this particular doorkeeper, until he “forgets the other doorkeepers.”27 Any representative of the law is bound to become more and more singular, the more time one spends with such a representative. Kafka’s story is, I would argue, as much about the doorkeeper as about the man, and Derrida is correct to refer to “two protagonists.”28 Indeed, the parable begins solely with the doorkeeper: “Before the law stands a doorkeeper”29; it ends with the doorkeeper stating that he will go and shut the door. While the man from the country waited to enter the universal law, the doorkeeper attended to the particular man. Like the man from the country, the doorkeeper is both universal and particular.

Derrida’s essay “Before the Law” (“Devant la loi”), about Kafka’s parable “Before the Law,” addresses (among many things) the question of the singularity of literature. According to Derrida, literature, insofar as it is literature, can be demarcated and defined (named) but also inherently challenges demarcations and definitions. Literature is not identical with itself. Literature, Derrida argues, unlike “a text of philosophy, science, or history, a text of knowledge or information,”30 is willing to abandon a name to a state of “not knowing” – as in Kafka’s “Before the Law,” where one knows “neither who nor what is the law.”31 Yet what is most important, I would argue, what is unique to literature, what literature is most significantly willing not to know, is whether and to what extent it is about a universal or a particular. In literature, as Kafka’s text demonstrates, universal and particular cannot even be deciphered – only construed.

27 Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” in Kafka’s Selected Stories, 68–69, 68.
Philosophy trades in universals. In Hegel (or Plato), philosophy attends to particulars, but they are eventually dialectically sublated into universals. Unlike the law, which, as Derrida notes, is not supposed to have a history or require a narrative, philosophy sometimes expresses itself in dialogues or stories – as in Plato or Existentialism or even Hegel’s *Bildungsroman* of the unfolding of Spirit. But philosophical narratives are expected to convey something universal, or something about the universal, or even the universal importance of the particular. Philosophy is not supposed to muddle the distinction. This is what literature sometimes does and, I would argue, this is what Kafka frequently undertakes. The last story Kafka wrote, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People” (“Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse”), can be interpreted as studiously muddling the distinctions between universal and particular.

3 The Singularity of Josefine’s Universal Singing

Even the unusual must have its limits.
– Kafka, “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor”\(^{32}\)

In “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” Josefine squeaks or whistles in a way characteristic of the mouse people. She produces sounds universally made; and yet her squeaking or “singing” is captivating. The narrator (who seems to be male) begins his account by relating that anyone who has not heard Josefine “does not know the power of song” and that “there is no one who is not carried away by her singing.”\(^{33}\) This occurs despite the fact that the mouse people are not drawn to music; indeed, they favour “peace and quiet”\(^{34}\) – they prefer calm silence. And as Kafka notes in “The Silence of the Sirens” (“Das Schweigen der Sirenen”), silence can be a more terrible weapon than song. Since the mouse people are unmusical, it would seem that Josefine’s singing is so beautiful that it is difficult to resist, that what rings from her throat has never before been heard, is something only Josefine, “this one individual [...] and no one else,”\(^{35}\) enables people to hear. This would be the most obvious explanation, states the narrator; but he repudiates it. Were this explanation indeed true, then in the face of Josefine’s music one would have the feeling of encountering something extraordi-

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\(^{33}\) Franz Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” in *Kafka’s Selected Stories*, 94–108.

\(^{34}\) Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 94.

\(^{35}\) Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 95.
nary, yet Josefine’s singing is, he alleges, quite ordinary. Indeed, her singing may not even be singing but rather mere squeaking – the squeaking in which almost everyone engages as they go about their daily work. The narrator denies that the sounds Josefine emits are exceptional; consequently, he seeks to account for the effects of her singing, for the crowds it draws, and for its singular achievement – despite its universal quality.

He raises the possibility that Josefine’s talent lies in her performance, for she is above all a performer. In order to understand her art, perhaps one must not only hear her but also see her.36 One may remain critical at a distance, he states, but as soon as one is immediately close to her, one is forced to acknowledge that what Josefine does “really is not just squeaking.”37 But the narrator cannot point to anything singular about Josefine’s performances. She does not actually do anything outstanding. What is striking is simply that she performs. She stands up and squeaks or sings, inducing her audience to be amazed by what they should not necessarily find amazing – since they all make the same sort of sounds themselves.

Neither does Josefine’s personal charisma seem to hold the key. The narrator often depicts her in quite unflattering terms. And although he should not be trusted, of course, and although Josefine has devoted followers, their devotion to her has clear limits. When she demands exemption from other duties, to compensate for the demands of her art, no one supports her. No matter what tact she takes, her demand for release from work is flatly refused. Clearly, Josefine’s influence is limited.

Finally, the narrator adduces that Josefine brings people together and lets them dream, temporarily free themselves “from the bonds of daily life.”38 Her concerts permit people to suspend their worries and collect themselves before facing the unending struggles of their lives. The narrator explains that regardless of what one thinks of Josefine’s “nothing of a voice,” of her “nothing of an achievement,”39 her singing seeps through the silence and envelops her audience. Through Josefine, the mouse people experience a feeling of community. Her singing is a distraction that encourages them to relax and forget themselves, and to do so together. What the narrator seems to be suggesting is that Josefine is an empty signifier, a placeholder – one that fulfills a crucial function. The power of

36 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 96.
37 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 96.
38 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 103.
39 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 100.
Josefine’s singing would seem to lie in its singular effects, which have nothing to do with her actual, universal squeaking.

But if Josefine is only a placeholder, then someone or something would take her place when she disappears. This is a point I would like to stress. In “A Starvation Artist,” the public’s interest in starvation artists declines, and the artist is eventually replaced by a panther. Josefine, however, is not replaced. She simply disappears and, according to the narrator, will soon be forgotten. If Josefine’s squeaking or singing is compelling solely because of the role it fills, however, then someone or something else would subsequently fill this role. If her singing were completely ordinary, significant only because of its effect, then surely something else would emerge to produce the same or a similar effect. This does not occur, however, which suggests that there is, indeed, something singular in Josefine’s singing.

As noted, Josefine fights to be excused from work, owing to her singing and the effort it requires, but this concession is consistently denied her. As a last resort, she disappears and goes into hiding. The narrator explains that such a strategy cannot work, for the people, “despite appearances to the contrary, can only bestow gifts and never receive them, not even from Josefine.”40 This remark is exceedingly important. It implies that Josefine may have a gift to offer, even if nobody is willing to receive it. And while the German word “Geschenk” does not have the twofold meaning of the English word “gift,” which can mean both “present” and “talent,” the German word for talent, “Gabe,” contains the idea of something being given. Thus, while the narrator denies that there is anything extraordinary in Josefine’s singing, he simultaneously suggests that she does indeed have a gift, a particular talent, to give.

Before I further develop this idea of Josefine’s gift, I would like briefly to turn to Derrida’s discussion of the gift at the beginning of Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money [Donner le temps I. La fausse monnaie]. Derrida begins this book by insisting upon the “impossibility” of the gift. He argues that a gift, in order to remain a gift, must avoid economic exchange. The very concept of the gift, he insists, must “defy reciprocity or symmetry.”41 The gift must not circulate, must not be exchanged, must remain “aneconomic.” This becomes apparent, Derrida points out, if the receiver immediately reciprocates with something similar; in such a case, there can hardly be said to have been a gift.

40 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 107.
It is also difficult to think of there having been a gift if the receiver feels that he or she has thereby contracted a debt, if the receiver consequently feels somehow obligated to the giver. Hence, one could say that it is necessary that the receiver “not recognize the gift as gift.” When the receiver recognizes the gift, acknowledges it as a gift, he or she “gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent.” In other words, Derrida argues, merely by recognizing the gift as a gift, as being freely given, one gives back to the giver a kind of symbolic currency, which, in a sense, annuls the gift. Moreover, it is not only the receiver but also the giver who must not recognize the gift. Derrida notes that a giver who merely intends to give a gift begins “to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give.” Even an anonymous gift, therefore, would not escape the economic relationship insofar as the giver would feel affirmed through the act of giving. This is the “impossibility or the double bind of the gift.” Both receiver and giver must forget the gift in an absolute, instantaneous forgetting.

The concluding words of “Josefine, the Singer” relate that Josefine will soon be forgotten. Josefine’s singing, if it is indeed singing and not mere squeaking, if it is indeed a talent, if it is indeed a gift to the people, will not be absolutely and instantaneously forgotten – as is required of Derrida’s gift – rather, it will only soon be forgotten. But Kafka’s story, I would argue, nevertheless, suggests a conception of the gift far more radical than that contained in Derrida’s aneconomic, impossible gift. For even if Derrida’s givers and receivers must experience a sort of absolute, instantaneous amnesia, Derrida retains a distinction between giver and receiver. Such a distinction is unsettled in “Josefine, the Singer.” Indeed, Kafka’s story suggests that perhaps the gift truly retains its status as gift only when one cannot be certain who is giving and who is receiving.

The narrator opens his account by stating that Josefine has a love for music, a love she alone knows how to convey – convey to a people who are fundamentally unmusical. Without Josefine, explains the narrator, music will vanish. This suggests both that Josefine is singular in her ability to communicate her love of music, and that she is not actually able to communicate it, since what she com-

42 Derrida, Given Time, 13.
43 Derrida, Given Time, 13.
44 Derrida, Given Time, 14.
45 Derrida, Given Time, 16.
46 Derrida insists that this forgetting is more extreme than the psychoanalytic notion of repression, for displacing an event into the unconscious is, of course, a way of preserving the event.
municates will not last. The gift she has to give, even if it is only her love for
music and not her actual singing, is something that she will take with her when
she leaves. It is not clear that Josefine has given the people a gift. It may in fact
be the case that it is the people, in allowing Josefine’s love of music to infect
them (though not permanently) who have given a gift to Josefine. This is what
the narrator maintains. He also relates that the people assume a protective atti-
dude towards Josefine; they care for her “the way a father looks after a child who
stretches out her little hand.”\(^47\) This image clearly suggests that it is Josefine who
seeks something from the people. She is their ward, the one who needs their pro-
tection, although of course nobody “dares to speak of such things to Josefine”;
and yet she believes that she is the one doing the protecting, and even presumes
that her singing goes so far as to rescue the people “from grim political or eco-
nomic situations” and that “if it does not banish misfortune” it at least gives
the people “the strength to endure it.”\(^48\) Whenever the people receive bad news,
Josefine “rises up and cranes her neck and strives to oversee her flock like the
shepherd before the storm.”\(^49\) The narrator, unsurprisingly, denies that Josefine is
anything like a shepherd with a flock; he rejects the idea that she saves the people
or even gives them strength. Josefine believes that she protects and fortifies the
people; the narrator avers that it is the people who protect and humour her. Who
is protector and who is protectee is uncertain. Who is giving and who is receiving
remains unresolved.

Even the fact that Josefine is denied any exemption from work could be
regarded either as evidence of the ordinariness, the universality, of her squeak-
ing, or as evidence of the extraordinariness, the singularity, of her singing. The
narrator claims that the dismissal of Josefine’s demand plainly demonstrates
that the people realize she is not doing anything special. For the people are fully
aware that Josefine would not cease to work if her demand to be excused from
it were granted; Josefine is no shirker. What Josefine “strives for is simply the
public acknowledgement of her art, an acknowledgement that is unambiguous,
that will last for all time, rising far above everything known to this day.”\(^50\) That
such acknowledgement is steadfastly and universally refused is regarded by the
narrator as definitive proof that Josefine’s singing is not singular. But if Josefine’s
concerts are really quite ordinary, and if, as the narrator alleges, she has become
known as a singer merely because of supporters who elevate her and her squeak-

\(^{47}\) Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 99.
\(^{48}\) Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 99.
\(^{49}\) Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 99.
\(^{50}\) Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 104.
ing above everyone else, then these supporters would likely seek corroboration for their support for Josefine and would back her demand for exemption precisely as a “public acknowledgement.” Hence, the fact that the people as a whole categorically refuse Josefine any exemptions could be taken as evidence that her status and fame is the result not of brazen, uncritical fans but of some actual talent. In other words, the blanket refusal to grant Josefine any exemption can be interpreted either as evidence for her having gift or as evidence against it.

At one point, the narrator argues that the very fact that people listen to Josefine should be understood to demonstrate that she is not really worth listening to. It is often the case, he explains, that when the people assemble and Josefine squeaks or sings, the audience is actually preoccupied with more serious matters – matters so serious, he says, that if ever a “true virtuoso of song” were present at such a moment he or she would not be tolerated and the people would “unanimously reject the absurdity of such a performance.” In other words, the narrator is asserting that “the very listening to [Josefine] is an argument against her song.” Gradually however, his remorseless and inexorable insistence that Josefine does nothing beyond the ordinary leads one to wonder whether the gentleman doth protest too much. At the story’s conclusion, the reader still does not know whether Josefine is taking or receiving. It is impossible to untangle her singular singing from universal squeaking.

Secondary sources have generally considered Josefine to be representative of various forms of artists and the story to be concerned with the role of artists. Yet it should be remembered that squeaking is the universal language of the mouse people, to such an extent that not only do many squeak their entire lives without noticing, but that squeaking is “a typical manifestation of life.” Thus, this squeaking could represent the speaking of humans, and Josefine someone who gives speeches. Humans speak as they go about their lives, but few imagine that if they were to stand and speak that others would bother to listen. Doubtlessly, Kafka’s story can be interpreted as portraying artists who may or may not be underappreciated in their society; yet it can also be interpreted in light of human speechmaking. Clearly, Josefine is not a professional politician, not least as she is never exempted from other work because of her singing/squeaking. The narrator relates that people have lost their lives at Josefine’s gatherings, and that

51 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 100.
52 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 101.
53 For a fascinating discussion of the story in relation to the social, cultural and ideological importance of music, see Nicola Gess’s “The Politics of Listening,” Kafka’s Selected Stories, 275–288.
54 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 95.
her squeaking may even be what attracts the enemy. Perhaps she is an agitator. Given the pervasiveness of agitators during Kafka’s lifetime, it is interesting that the story does not clarify whether Josefine is giving something to her audience or receiving something from it.

But Josefine does not have to represent a firebrand. She may simply be someone who gives “talks” and whose talking, in the narrator’s view, differs little from what everyone else does. She may also be a writer who gives readings. The narrator begins his account by stating that it seems to him that Josefine “barely exceeds the bounds of ordinary squeaking.”55 In his view, she is someone who has nothing new to say, nothing out of the ordinary to convey. Perhaps Josefine utters platitudes or clichés. Of course, we should not necessarily trust the narrator. Indeed, Josefine may be expressing a new form of thinking or a new form of writing, such as literary modernism, that the narrator considers ordinary and unremarkable.

Philosophy frequently goes astray insofar as it generalizes from socio-historical particulars as if they were universals, naively presuming that these (sociological) truths are universal, philosophical ones. Literary works, in contrast, frequently depict eccentric, idiosyncratic, or unusual particulars; even the most bizarre characters or situations can be seen to disclose a universal – including its disintegration or illusory status. Where Kafka’s works go further is in their insistence that we cannot necessarily disengage universal and particular, cannot know how, or how much, universal forces constitute us and the particulars of our world. Kafka’s works insist that we cannot establish the universals for which philosophy strives and which literature must construe; neither can we isolate its constitutive and constituent particulars. In this way, above all, Kafka’s writings are philosophical; in this way they evince their universal quality.

**Works Cited**


55 Kafka, “Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse People,” 95.


