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Animal Phenomenology: Metonymy and Sardonic Humanism in Kafka and Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract: Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes inspiration from Franz Kafka’s metonymic animal literature to develop his concepts of *institution* and “sardonic humanism.” Metonymy is a literary device, an *instituting* dimension of language, that allows us a lateral access to animality and expression. Kafka’s dog story enacts a radical reflection, a critical phenomenology parodying human life. Kafka puts forward a philosophy of generative openness to the animal, against social alienation. This reading comes with Merleau-Ponty’s existential redeployment of Sigmund Freud’s concept of the unconscious as expressive passivity or *institution* of adulthood. As *instituting–instituted*, we are always between preserving and surpassing the past, though different compartments and institutions can dogmatically or openly take up these possibilities. Kafka’s (struggle through) metonymic animal literature reminds us that philosophical truth is expressive, that unconscious desire animates language, and that the oppressive silencing of the generative past, the feeling child and the other animal, is at the root of society’s institutionalized oppression. *Institution* offers a literary method of phenomenologically resisting, of creative critique.

Keywords: Kafka; Merleau-Ponty; phenomenology; metonymy; institution; language; animality; humanism

And surely this instinct of the dog is very charming;—your dog is a true philosopher.

Why?

Why, because he distinguishes the face of a friend and of an enemy only by the criterion of knowing and not knowing. And must not an animal be a lover of learning who determines what he likes and dislikes by the test of knowledge and ignorance?

–Plato, *Republic II* (Plato 1888)

Kafka’s real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its haggard element. Kafka’s writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that they had to become more than parables. . . . Though apparently reduced to submission, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it.

–Walter Benjamin, “Reflections on Kafka” (Benjamin 1968)

Metaphors are one of the things that makes me despair of literature.

–Franz Kafka, *Diaries*¹

Animality and humanity, like childhood and adulthood, are in a dynamic *instituting–instituted* relationship, to employ Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s radical concept of synthesis from his 1954–1955 *Institution and Passivity* lectures, a concept developed on the basis of a reading of both Franz Kafka’s “Researches of a Dog” and rethinking of Sigmund Freud on the passivity of the unconscious, where one developmental phase or time of life displaces the other without negating it, a differing that preserves by giving (or blocking) another life in it, in new future expressions and dimensions of sense. We can turn to an expressive medium to give this phenomenon voice: literature and the curiously *instituting* structure of metonymic



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language as the originary dimension of speech, one that is still chiasmatically linked to the body, to the *institution* of perception and animality that *institutes* self-consciousness and humanity. *Institution* comes from Edmund Husserl's idea of *Stiftung* or inscription where, instead of merely undergoing formative events, this receptivity or passivity is in the first place active or creative, an ambiguous happening that displaces itself in the call for more development or experience, insofar as institution is a developmental temporality where the past calls for its own deepening by suggesting "questions" or opening possibilities in the lived field: the past endures and is preserved in this very call to surpass itself; neither displacement nor identity: *instituting–instituted* growth. Through our encounters with our preverbal nature in animals and our inner child, a primordial (pre)human *institution* is reanimated, brought to life through intercorporeal *recherche* Merleau-Ponty uses this concept to radicalize the practice of philosophical reflection, and which he adopts from Kafka's animal literature. Kafka's 1922 "Researches of a Dog"² is the autobiography, the auto-philosophy, of a dog (and, *surely*, Kafka himself) who, never fitting into the pack, takes us back through a matrix of decisive experiences that will have become formative for the sense of their life. Kafka's reversible portrayal of the philosopher as human and dog enacts an uncanny interspecies phenomenology at the level of interbodily affectivity, desire, and co-perception. Metonymy cuts under representation and condensation in the symbol to a more primordial vital order of perception prior to symbol and self-consciousness, of the linkage of sign to sign and sound to sound, and thus reveals a way that radical literatures can give creative expression to questions of being, self-identity, and social critique.

Merleau-Ponty's decisive use of Franz Kafka's hysterical story about a dog philosopher can, as inspiring the concept of *institution*, be understood as more than just a trope but rather a cue to another way of expressing this curious and playful difference, a sardonic comportment to human affectivity and intercorporeality that opens a critical phenomenology of the repressive character of speech, understanding, and the animal origins of human *institutions*. This reading offers not only a new understanding of the human–animal relation but also of our repression of our own nature in childhood and under techno-capitalism, illuminating Merleau-Ponty's rearticulation of Freudian psychoanalysis as the *instituting–instituted* relation to our animality, natality, and infancy as existentially generative. Kafka's critical phenomenology illuminates our displacement of the animal, repression of the child, and subjugation of the lived field of experience to logics of representation and domination. Metonymy is a literary device that gets beneath these logics, because it functions at the level of desire, displacement, and a generative ontology between sounds/bodies/times. Merleau-Ponty's metonymic ontology, and its expression through Kafka's literature, can be particularly clarified psychoanalytically and semiotically through Jacques Lacan's definition of metonymy as an originary *instituting* of language, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's account of metonymy as intensive literary assemblage. Kafka's philosophy is a "thinking from below", a kind of immanent reflection or *recherche* where metonymy serves to reanimate our expressive, intercorporeal relationship with literature and, through it, our own generative past.³ Animal literature and existential phenomenology, or animal phenomenology and literary existentialism, are methods particularly suited to capturing the logic of *institution*, that is, in giving expressive answers to questions of metaphysics, psychology, and politics. The dog is not a representation of us, but rather a cue to the preverbal experiences that haunt, animate and block the possibilities of our present; the dog calls us toward a radical approach to psychoanalysis through *institution*, to critical phenomenology through intercorporeal agency, and to a musically interspecies, expressive way of taking up the question of being.

1. Kafka's Animal Phenomenology

By proceeding retrospectively through a series of formative events that displace and transform the dog's life, Kafka's (dog) autobiography reminds us of sense as emergent, of the impact of decisive transformations of sense in our lives. The dog's precise inability to explicitly understand metaphor, incantation, and the abstract methods of science is so

pronounced in this story and reminds us that its existential search happens in a more primordial terrain. The dog's formative encounter with the musical dogs is ambiguous and raises the sense of the human–animal encounter from the other side. The dog's experience is overwhelmingly sensuous and musical in a way that simultaneously draws them in and holds them in a space of philosophical hesitation (Aumiller 2021, p. 25). Is the dog perceiving human beings here as variants of themselves? How can we take up our past in ways that might displace our experience in ways that allow interspecies encounters, awareness of trauma and repression, or open other modes of listening and dynamic comportment? Merleau-Ponty reminds us of this kinship in ignorance, this apprenticeship in falsehood, in his 1948 radio lectures *The World of Perception*:

Centered on the animal is what might be called a process of “giving shape” to the world; the animal, moreover, has a particular pattern of behaviour. Because it proceeds unsteadily, by trial and error, and has at best a meagre capacity to accumulate knowledge, it displays very clearly the struggle involved in existing in a world into which it has been thrown, a world to which it has no key. In so doing, it reminds us, above all, of our failures and our limitations.

(Merleau-Ponty 2008, p. 76)

The animal's very presence stirs a question in the perceptual field. Kafka makes hilarious mockery of the idea that we look at animals as dumb, jesting that our own repressive displacement of the animal is equally a silencing of ourselves and that dogs in their world have similar kinds of interspecies bias and ignorance that we do: “I see that dogdom is in every way a marvelous *institution*. Apart from us dogs there are all sorts of creatures in the world, wretched, limited, dumb creatures who have no language but mechanical cries; many of us dogs study them, have given them names, try to help them, educate them, uplift them, and so on” (Kafka 1971, p. 279). Kafka presciently sees the repressive displacement of the other in his society, foreseeing the violence to come in a perceptive psychoanalysis of history. He writes in blood with the suffering of a child who was never heard, who is haunted by a childhood that remains repressively displaced, and qua pathological *institution* cannot be surpassed.

Kafka's dog describes how other species only incidentally flock together behaviorally but that dogs have an ontological being-together, a lawfulness not where all exist in a heap but a seriality through which each exists as a variant of the other (Kafka 1971, p. 280). Each person is subjugated to speech and must speak for themselves and address their desire to the terms of the adult world. This law of adulthood, John Russon reminds us through his semiotic reading of the unconscious in Freud and Lacan, comes as a reminder that growing up into language has an alienating character, though one that never fully assimilates the desire that animates speaking, pointing to an “immanent reason” prior to speech.⁴ What makes the strange dogs so difficult for the narrator is their refusal to obey this law of speech, their lack of exhibiting conventional behavior, perhaps like a child marveling at the adult world that hushes them, or traumatized and haunted by this world: “Dogs who make no reply to the greeting of other dogs are guilty of an offense against good manners which the humblest dog would never pardon any more than the greatest. Perhaps they were not dogs at all?” (Kafka 1971, p. 282). Kafka's writing is a waking dream, a lived imaginary paradox because, at some level, he was never heard, was never afforded an ontologically secure niche in domestic life. The dog's quest to be heard embodies the silence between human and animal, it reminds us of the limits of our own understanding even as the ones who can speak, and it animates a critical awareness of the past, whether our repression of animality, our violent displacement of preverbal experience and trauma, or the cruel and inhuman engulfment of the individual by technological society that Kafka so keenly foresees.

Max Brod interprets this melancholically as his friend's atheism, where the divine lies beyond the reach of human faculties, imperceptibly orienting our lives, yet driven by the logic of an impossible experience. The dog's experience cannot quite conceive of the human, yet experiences us as an inconsistent variance of their own world, of other dogs:

... in his melancholic travesty of atheism, “Researches of a Dog”, Kafka portrays how man has become imperceptible, unimaginable to the dog. One could formulate Kafka’s basic religious conviction in the following statement: “The divine is here, but it is incommensurable with our human faculties.” Exceptions aside, there very often arises a murky refraction of originary divinity in human sensibility.

(Brod 1959, p. 7)

On the other hand, the animal is a vector of escape from crushing humanist institutions, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remind us, just as we evade the superego or system of language in metonymic desire, or how we revolt against conventional religiosity or social order:

To the inhumanness of the “diabolical powers,” there is the answer of a becoming-animal: to become a beetle, to become a dog . . . rather than lowering one’s head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge, or judged. All children build or feel these sorts of escapes, these acts of becoming-animal.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 12)

We encounter other animals from within our own embodiment in creative ways, but also through our mutual alienation under capitalism and modernity.

In his commentary on *The Trial*, written just after or even during “Researches of a Dog”, Iain Macdonald reminds us in his “Unfettering the Future” of Kafka’s protagonist’s encounter with impossible experiences but critically defines this impossibility as blocked possibility, as social repression:

[U]nder late capitalism, estrangement has become pervasive, both imposed from without and self-inflicted, such that there are few vantage points from which we can recognize estrangement as estrangement . . . Consequently, estrangement—or the suffering caused by theoretical and practical tensions between individuals and existing social institutions—has become perennial, a well-established and seemingly incontestable second nature . . . In this way, the subjective experience of estrangement in “decadent” modernism becomes the metonymical placeholder for a society unable to overcome its failings, thereby condemning itself to become a distorted picture of its own future, which is reduced to the mere repetition of the bad state of affairs that currently holds sway.

(Macdonald 2018, pp. 143–45)

We are “fettered subjects” in the sense that society repressively displaces or “blocks” emancipatory possibilities, and, indeed, fetters our bodily affect and experience, as Macdonald reminds us that Joseph K is “hounded” by the law, noticing his last words “‘Like a dog!’” (Macdonald 2018, p. 169). The issue is that society can no longer *institute* the possibilities of self-understanding that would allow for a social transformation, possibility is blocked, and repressive structures are compulsively repeated, the past *constitutes* the future.

The dog narrator faces the challenge that the most enigmatic other dogs they meet, even wondering if they are dogs at all, will not or cannot reply to their questions. The silence of the animal other, the absence of direct speech, shifts our phenomenological register to the vital structures of behavior and melodic of intercorporeal form, particularly evinced through Kafka’s figures of these mysterious singing dogs. This oblique attunement to the strange dogs’ music reminds us of the childhood marvel and confusion, humiliation and discovery, at apprehending human speech from below:

We are the dogs who are crushed by the silence, who long to break through it, literally to get a breath of fresh air; the others seem to thrive on silence: true, that is only so in appearance, as in the case of the musical dogs, who ostensibly were quite calm when they played, but in reality were in a state of intense excitement; nevertheless the illusion is very strong, one tries to make a breach in it, but it mocks every attempt.

(Kafka 1971, p. 297)

The dog's encounter with the trans-canine (or trans-species) music is a lasting *institution* of eros, wonder and philosophy, thus offering reprises, deep resonances with past fields of meaning in the present: "In itself it was nothing very extraordinary, for I have seen many such things, and more remarkable things too, often enough since, but at the time it struck me with all the force of a first impression, one of those impressions which can never be erased and influence much of one's later conduct" (Kafka 1971, p. 280). Formative philosophical experience destabilizes the dimensions of sense of the past, working against convention and centuries of received wisdom about what being a dog means, working to uncover the wounds of repressive displacement so that a less pathological *institution* of possibility, a transformative displacement of the past, will have become possible. The dog laments that other dogs around them would like to leap to their feet but have the weight of centuries of tradition on their backs (Kafka 1971, p. 299).

2. Metonymy or Desire, the Intercorporeal Expressive Chiasm

Language is a self-displacing *institution*, a transformative sedimentation of sense through whose gaps and possibilities new and distinctive other fields of sense open. Metaphor represents meaning through a transference or condensation of sense from one symbol to another and remains installed in the domain of consciousness. Metonymy taps into a deeper sense without sublating it in symbol but rather by grounding it in a contiguous embodiment, a resonance of sense between beings in the world, an auto-figurative difference speaking itself. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Poetry and Imagination", thus speaks of metonymy as a kind of vibrant kinship between all forms, linking nature and the intercorporeal productive imagination as the *instituting* ground of reason and consciousness: "Nature itself is a vast trope, and all particular natures are tropes. . . . All thinking is analogizing, and it is the use of life to learn metonymy. The endless passing of one element into new forms, the incessant metamorphosis, explains the rank which the imagination holds . . ." (Emerson 2010, pp. 7–8). Metaphors are potent and symbolic; they express our ability to transcend context. They rely on lightning flash symbolism and translingual sublation, they turn water into wine, heavy rain into cats and dogs. Metonymy, which is often not spoken of in the plural, perhaps bespeaking its dimensional and intersectional character, also functions by a transfer and uncanny juxtaposition of sense. Invoking Paul Valery, Merleau-Ponty identifies metonymic *institution* as the origin of language, the yoking of sign to sign: "language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 155). Metaphor meaningfully represents where metonymy resonates with a sense of intercorporeal kinship or relationality that precedes and grounds representation. Metaphor is a species or *institution* of metonymy.

In Jacques Lacan's 1957 "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud", given as a lecture in the handful of years between Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Institution and Passivity* lecture course and *The Visible and the Invisible*, we find an account of metaphor as repression, drawing on Roman Jakobson's reading of Sigmund Freud, insofar as the original meaning becomes nonmeaning, that in a flash of sense a new meaning stands in for it, and thus the sign functions as a substitute for a desire that is blocked or sublimated (Lacan 2006, p. 431). Metaphor is repressive displacement because it condenses into symbol, whereas metonymy is a more playful generative mode of expressive displacement that says without transcending or repressing the contexts that animate symbolic speech. Metonymy, as a yoking of sounds, signs and things is the original corporeality of language that, however surpassed, remains preserved and never transcended. Kafka's utter metonymy, his dissolution of the metaphor, bespeaks the pathological *institution* of his psyche and society. We might distinguish repressive versus generative displacement as two ways of reading Merleau-Ponty's concept of pathological *institution* and healthy, though he does not himself use that term, *institution*, or rather two tendencies intrinsic to any *institution*: one that closes possibility, the other that opens it generatively. Metonymy, by retaining the connection of both signs and their bodily, messy resemblances and linkages, remains

operative at the level of desire. Where metaphor condenses, metonyms displace and exist only as a play of differences, as a sense that is distributed across a field. Metonymy marks an original level out of which language is *instituted* through this transcendental semiotic affinity of all words, of all speech acts, and of the diachronic bodily life out of which words are spoken: “I shall designate as metonymy the first aspect of the actual field the signifier constitutes, so that meaning may assume a place there” (Lacan 2006, p. 421).

Lacan makes the semiotic field of metonymy a condition of possibility for metaphors, whereby metaphors can “assume” a meaning. Lacan’s distinction derives from Roman Jakobson’s reading of Saussure’s *General Course in Linguistics* in his 1957 “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” and the notion of language as a bipolar structure between metaphor and metonymy, or between a syntagmatic axis of contiguity and a paradigmatic axis of substitution or similarity. Jakobson’s insight is that in aphasics that one of these axes is suppressed or blocked entirely, resulting in sequentiality without substitution (Jakobson 1987, p. 110).⁵ The dog’s is a world without syntagms, a world of diachronic contrasts that remain horizontal, without synchronic condensation, without the vertical plane of substitutive transcendence. In many ways, our dog philosopher manifests the symptoms of an aphasic who has lost the sense of the paradigmatic axis, who speaks through contiguity and cannot effect metaphoric/symbolic substitution, “a deterioration of metalinguistic operations . . . Metaphor is alien to similarity disorder” (Jakobson 1987, p. 9). For Kafka, this space of impossible communication is no metaphor, but rather the impossible world of his childhood where he had no sympathetic figure, no listening ear, and wrote out (of) his pathologically *instituted* childhood suffering whose phantom aphasia is preserved hauntingly without possibility of being truly surpassed.

Kafka struggled to live and express himself in and through this gap, as Alice Miller explains in her analysis “Literature: Franz Kafka’s Suffering” in *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society’s Betrayal of the Child*. Kafka writes out of a frustration because he is trying to find understanding in a world where every organ of communication fails (Miller 1998, p. 241). Kafka’s writing does not directly express or offer a metaphor but rather teasingly resonates with his childhood shame, with his ontological hunger to be understood:

Since it is difficult for children to tell anyone about what is being done to them, all the psychological cruelty they experience remains a well-kept secret. How great, how irrepressible must have been Kafka’s *Hunger* for a sympathetic ear in childhood, for someone who would respond genuinely to his questions, fears and doubts without using threats or showing anxiety, who would share his interests, sense his feelings, and not mock them.

(Miller 1998, pp. 255–56)

For Miller, Kafka’s writing is not in the first place the result of his neuroses but, like his neuroses, is an expression of his impossible, preverbal suffering, such that through his writings we detect the silenced voice of the unconscious, “looking at his symptoms not as undesirable or wrong forms of behavior but as visible links in an invisible chain” (Miller 1998, p. 273). Kafka has no metaphor for his childhood, it is not represented in, yet resonates all throughout, his works: “Kafka was not able to tell about his childhood relationship with his mother, but he was able to portray situations that express so clearly his early childhood despair, impotence, and rage, his quiet, passive struggle, that many readers see their own experiences reflected in them—perhaps also without quite realizing it” (Miller 1998, p. 297). Kafka cannot speak or represent certain things; they are not metaphors but a primal urge, a preverbal yearning in the face of a silencing world. Metonymy rattles this chain of sedimentation in the unconscious, inviting us into these gaps, the space of the dog’s self-probing, self-displacing *recherche*. Jakobson, quoting *The Golden Bough*, furnishes us with the term “contagious magic”, as opposed to “homeopathic” or “imitative”, to describe Kafka’s lateral approach to signs, to animals, and to humanism. Lacking the substantive and explanatory power of the metaphor, metonymy resists interpretation, and

this often results in misinterpreting metonymy as metaphor, of understanding prose realism through poetic devices, and of analogizing about animality (Jakobson 1987, pp. 113–14).

Metaphor belongs to the domain of symptom or repression because its substitution is not without unconscious remainder. Metonymy relies upon unconscious linkage or divergence through kinship; it is marked for Lacan by a logic of displacement or desire, where one sense pivots into another without losing the original sense or the jointure, such that Lacan interprets metonymy in Freud as a way of the unconscious skirts censorship (Lacan 2006, p. 425). Here, we can follow Glen Mazis in distinguishing symbolic metaphors from originary poetic metaphors, the latter which I take to be metonymy, as characterized by lateral relations, reverberations, imaginal deepenings (Mazis 2016, p. 294). Drucilla Cornell argues that metonymy can subvert metaphor as difference can subvert identity and that a poststructural critique of patriarchal institutions requires not reinforcing identities but continually unmasking them, revealing the critical phenomenological potency of metonymy:

Metonymy . . . since it is inevitably bound up with contiguity, would show us the context-bound nature of our statements about Woman and thus show us how all such statements involve prejudice and limitation within the context of gender hierarchy. . . . metonymy is favored because it enacts the genealogical effort to uncover the structures of power that produce Woman. Genealogy unmasks, and indeed gives us a process of continual unmasking which would seem consistent with the postmodern critique of identity.

(Cornell 1999, p. 167)

Metonymy is not animated by a logic of exchange, of alienation, but by desire, by seeking differences from within, and thus Kafka's dog can be seen as creative return to the preverbal roots of experience and philosophy, and not some symbol of them.

Glen Mazis demonstrates that poetic metaphor, what I take to be metonymy here, functions not by mere symbolic substitution of a subjective sense, but by resonating and along the flesh between words between imaginative intercorporeal structures of behavior:

Merleau-Ponty's idea of the metaphor is as the expression of the dimensionality of all beings that is a manifestation of their interconnectedness. Poetic metaphor is central to the ontology of the flesh for it expresses the promiscuity of being that comprises the flesh. If one is to express the ongoing encroachment of each being with each other, a use of language that draws on the physiognomic imaginal to bring forth this nexus in the depths of each being is essential.

(Mazis 2016, p. 290)

In Kafka's dog literature and Merleau-Ponty's logic of *institution*, there is a way in which the prelinguistic sense of embodiment cannot be represented, a layer of vital perception prior to symbolic consciousness, but can be engaged as kinds of melodic, resonant sense through embodied perception.

This idea of language becoming animal, enjamming itself into new methods and questions, of ideas becoming sensible, and a dissolving of hierarchical distinctions (*de-territorialization*) resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's reading of the hound philosopher in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*:

Kafka deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. . . . It is no longer a question of a resemblance between the comportment of an animal and that of a man; it is even less a question of a simple wordplay. There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities. Instead, it is now a question of a becoming that includes the maximum of difference as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier . . . The animal does not speak "like" a man but pulls from the language tonalities lacking in signification; the words themselves are not "like"

the animals but in their own way climb about, bark and roam around, being properly linguistic dogs, insects, or mice.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 22)

Kafka's dog philosopher on the search for the foundations of sense in their world is not a symbol of the human but rather a reminder that philosophy remains rooted in corporeality.

Metonymy does not involve the abstract truth of metaphor, the equation of disparate senses that transcends their original meanings. Our dog philosopher does not claim to have an abstract and synthesizing truth: "For all the senseless phenomena of our existence, and the most senseless of all, are susceptible to investigation" (Kafka 1971, p. 295). This *recherche* discloses a reversible *instituting–instituted* relation, or presence of the animal and human in each other, a relation that is *both* togetherness *and* displacement, where human and animal mutually transform, or *institute*, and give expression to each other:

We must conceive animal temporality as being already open to a future (domestic animals), therefore providing an image touching on the human, an image of the human who does not understand, weak human. [Therefore] the gentleness of the superego towards him, the humor of animality as parody of humanity. Thereby [think] not the animal-human, not the human-animal, but truly one being the alter ego for the other, because we do not have the one *inside* time and the other *outside* of time. The surpassing preserves. Kinship of finitudes. Our displacement onto the animal reflects the animalization of the human by the animal.

(Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 20)

In the space of these few powerful pages in the *Institution and Passivity* lectures, Merleau-Ponty explains how "the first difference" between animal and human is already paradoxically a mix of identity and difference, kinship and displacement, where human and animal mutually modify but cannot quite surpass each other. Our animality is already communicatively, symbolically mediated, but this mediation does not transcend expressive embodiment, such that the human symbolically surpasses the animal while preserving it, not transcending it but varying from within its own deepened relation to the past: "Human institution is still the integration of the past into a new signification . . . It is the past becoming a symbolic matrix" (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 19). This "first difference" is thus not one between externalities, or essential forms, but rather the opening of an *institution* or register, a field where potential for new sense-events emerges, where these terms will have come to have made sense through mutual expression: "The surpassing preserves. Kinship of finitudes. Our displacement onto the animal reflects the animalization of the human by the animal" (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 20). This difference that is not yet, or will have been, a difference is a space that is opened through the intercorporeal creation it will have *instituted*. There is a transpatial, transtemporal organic possibility, a future anterior, a subtle gap and opening which we can comport ourselves to through listening, musicality, intercorporeal touch, dance and mutually expressive exploration (*recherche*).

This symbolic matrix and inter-animal space is an imaginative, oneiric one (Mazis 2016, especially Part III) where we discover the passivity of our animal and childhood dimensions through playful methodologies, literatures, and creative co-explorations, through shared *recherche*:

The first imprint is a "symbolic matrix," that is, it resurrects chain reactions not only at some given moment, not only by means of mechanical reactivation at puberty, but also [then] a {*recherche*} that distances it, if need be, from itself. Not simply reproduction, but the getting underway of a {*recherche*} in Kafka's sense: the image sensitizes itself.

(Merleau-Ponty 2010, pp. 18–19)⁶

Recherche takes up the movement from nonsense to sense, the way that the present and past enjambe each other and pose new questions, generating new possibilities of expression and meaning. This wild, preverbal unconscious openness that underlies and animates convention is brought home a page later in the lectures by Merleau-Ponty's invocation of

Freud, and a radical interpretation of the unconscious preverbal past expressively alive in the present.

It is hard to get over our humanistic illusions, like Kafka's dog searcher who muses that death might be the only release from this need for self, interrogation, "born as I am a citizen of falsehood" (Kafka 1971, p. 312). Kafka's critically ironic phenomenology of the impossible reflects the repressive displacement of the child by adult, the animal by the human, the preverbal by speech and understanding, and the individual by a cruel, oppressive society. On the other hand, this critical phenomenology aims to give voice to the frustration of these blockages, to a regenerative passivity in our relation to the past. Here we cannot but sense Kafka's own yearning to reopen his childhood wounds; like the dog reflecting on the course of its own life of being misunderstood, Kafka animalizes himself, his reader, to find a sympathetic ear to what can be felt but not known explicitly. The constant deferral of metonymy, of desire, defers an ideal unity of meaning, but in so doing captures the *musically* self-displacing sensibility of all meaning, the embeddedness of ideality in sensible matrices, of humanity in its humbler animal and earthly roots.

3. Sardonic Humanism: Merleau-Ponty's Interspecies Ethics of Ambiguity

Merleau-Ponty shakes us out of our humanist conceits in his 1948 radio lectures called *The World of Philosophy*, reminding us that philosophical dualisms often signal the existence of power relationships, instead reminding us of the humbling and comical ways that our animal companions *animalize* us, taking up the ambivalent reductive-animative character of modern *constitution* of animality. Literature plays a critical role here, and Merleau-Ponty discusses speculative work from Voltaire where a super-intelligent giant alien visits the earth and looks with derision on human custom, and discusses how instead of this superhuman vantage point, that the twentieth century in its political alienation calls for these interrogations from below:

Our era is destined to judge itself not from on high, which is mean and bitter, but in a certain sense from below. Kafka imagines a man who has metamorphosed into a strange insect and who looks at his family through the eyes of such an insect. Kafka also imagines a dog that investigates the human world which it rubs up against. He describes societies trapped in the carapace of customs which they themselves have adopted.

(Merleau-Ponty 2008, p. 89)

Habits and conventions have epistemic blind spots, they foreclose some possibilities while opening others and, as in our Western institutions, they are premised on repression and violent displacement of our formative animal, childhood, and existential pasts. Because we cannot draw an ultimate line between the human and beast, we are haunted by an ambiguity, and thus Annabelle Dufourq interprets "sardonic humanism" as haunting of humanity: "Humanity haunts me at most, it is neither a positive reality embodied in this world, nor an illusion . . . it is the fluctuating and uncertain horizon of behaviors that we cannot unhesitatingly characterize as human or as nonhuman because they are . . . ambiguous" (Dufourq 2014, p. 81). Kafka's humor is generative: it opens creatively and sharedly what has been left unspoken; it heals and dissolves pride and shame into a more humble comportment. Sardonic humor probably comes from Sardinian traditions of laughing in the face of finitude, inconvenient truths and fate, and perhaps comes from gestures of laughing at death or drinking a poison that is a variety of hemlock. The sardonic approaches humanity not as privilege but through a kind of animal wit, a sarcasm without contempt, a mirth in the face of the impossible. Laughter can displace our human conceits and *institute* an opening within the silent or repressed origins of sense; it can ease us into the space of our repression, wounds, ignorance, and social alienation:

To look at human beings from the outside is what makes the mind self-critical and keeps it sane. But the aim should not be to suggest that all is absurd, as Voltaire did. It is much more a question of implying, as Kafka does, that human

life is always under threat and of using humor to prepare the ground for those rare and precious moments at which human beings come to recognise, to find, one another.

(Merleau-Ponty 2008, pp. 89–90)

Spirited investigations can benefit by a kind of self-critical humor, a kind of shame at the almost absurdity of being animal-philosophers. Instead of looking at the animal as weak, machine-like, or less than human, as did Descartes and Malebranche, we can take in an ironic view of the human from beneath, from our own animality: “Yet, as we shall see . . . this rehabilitation of the animal world requires a sardonic form of humanism and a particular kind of humor which lay well beyond their reach” (Merleau-Ponty 2008, p. 77). The philosophical dog’s life is autobiographically revealed through the foldings of phases in their own existence, through an ongoing displacement of the past through novel *recherches*, a polytemporal perspective that itself can only be intelligible as its own melody of transformative movements.

The dog’s encounter with the mysterious singing other dogs, perhaps humans, becomes a history that has posthumous productivity in increasingly animating the dog philosopher’s *recherche*; it also lays the groundwork for other kinds of experiences to become possible. This happens in an encounter with another dog like themselves, a hunting dog who, later in life, creates a moment of rapport, of breakthrough between two seeking philosophers, because the old dog affords space for a genuine encounter, the moment of “humanity.” This singing is inside and outside, and in this episode speaking is hearing, the sign of the music its own ambiguous metonymic chiasm:

He was silent, and then I thought I saw something such as no dog before me had ever seen, at least there is no slightest hint of it in our tradition . . . I thought I saw that the hound was already singing without knowing it, nay, more, that the melody, separated from him, was floating on the air in accordance with its own law, and, as though he had no part in it, was moving toward me, toward me alone.

(Kafka 1971, p. 314)

Inter-bodily experiences are moments of exposure and cross-pollination, of unprecedented experiences that *institute* new possibilities of sense from within our experience or shake the weight of oppressive *durée*, but this critical transcending does not surpass, and remains installed, like our thinking and agency, in the sensible. Our dog philosopher reminds us to be open to this exposure, this precious moment, to learn to inhabit ambiguities: “it shows me how far we can go when we are beyond ourselves” (Kafka 1971, p. 314). What ultimately distinguishes human and animal is the decisiveness of the formative *now* in human life that marks both a deeper connection to the past and openness to the future, insofar as the human is invested in this temporal relation through a deepening of animal themes in a symbolic matrix:

What defines human institution? A past which creates a question, puts it in reserves makes a situation that is indefinitely open. Therefore at once the human [is] more connected to his past than the animal and is more open to a future. The future by means of a deepening of the past: fruitful moments: acquisition of certain schemas the artist develops indefinitely.

(Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 22)

Like Kafka’s dogs who run about barking incantations for food and not understanding the workings of their human masters, Kafka reminds us of our own ignorance, of the way that our own past and repressive society hold an oppressive mastery over our experience too. Kafka’s literature illuminates the way we collectively pursue our humanity with alienated values that repress suffering and elide our expressive, ontological, and revolutionary sensibilities.

4. Sniffing out Sensible Ideas: Interspecies Listening as Ontological Affect

“Researches of a Dog” concludes with the dog intellectually sniffing out the ultimate origins of its food, posing the question of whether it falls from the sky or materializes from the ground. The dog realizes that this search is more solitary, because most dogs are not interested in metaphysics or discussing the conditions of possibility of freedom: “To such prayers, whether silent or loud, the only answers you get, even after you have employed your powers of seduction to the utmost, are vacant stares, averted glances, troubled and veiled eyes. It is much the same as when, as a mere puppy, I shouted to the dog musicians and they remained silent” (Kafka 1971, p. 290). The dog’s life takes place around this curious qualitative (if comically unanswerable) question that has no ears in a world dominated by quantitative and behavioral sciences, a question brought about by the bending of its lifetime against itself, asking whether freedom and the collective breaking of custom could be worth more than the “partial-truth of silence.” Kafka’s dog philosopher, though, critically internalizes this self-criticism with dogged irony:

the attempt is still worth the trial, since you do not desire to live as you are compelled to live. Well then, why do you make it a reproach against the others that they are silent, and remain silent yourself? Easy to answer: Because I am a dog; in essentials just as locked in silence as the others, stubbornly resisting my own questions, dour out of fear.

(Kafka 1971, p. 291)

The dog’s own fears, implicit biases, and epistemic blind spots are on display, sardonically reminding us of our own repressed possibilities. In her reading of Jacques Derrida’s animal thinking in *Animal Lessons*, Kelly Oliver reminds us that metonymy is particularly ripe in the phenomena of nutrition, such that the “physical act of ingesting food but also the metonymical act of interiorizing symbols, language, and social codes” are modes of nutrition and growth (Oliver 2009, p. 108).

To appreciate this metonymic ontology, we can turn to Merleau-Ponty’s later invocation of sensible ideas, ideas that do not transcend but live as “lighter bodies” or horizons, dimensions of the flesh of the world:

It is too soon now to clarify this type of surpassing that does not leave its field of origin. Let us only say that the pure ideality is itself not without flesh nor freed from horizon structures: it lives of them, though they be another flesh and other horizons. . . . When I think they animate my interior speech, they haunt it as the “little phrase” possesses the violinist, . . . because they are that certain divergence, that never-finished differentiation, that openness ever to be reopened between the sign and the sign. . . .

(Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 153)

The dog–human metonym itself is a kind of sensible idea, an imaginary companion species co-philosopher, a reminder that we learn philosophically subversive things from dogs, that our experience is a mutual interrogation. Merleau-Ponty articulates the nondualism of sensibility and idea when he describes sensibility as opening its own fields of intelligibility, insofar as the *instituted* is a radical kind of expression, where perception itself articulates a new dimensions of sense from within, auto-figuratively:

With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. The idea is this level, this dimension. . . . We do not possess the musical or sensible ideas, precisely because they are negativity or absence circumscribed; they possess us. . . . There is a strict ideality in experiences that are experiences of the flesh: the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my

body with the world. Is my body a thing, is it an idea? It is neither, being the measurant of the things. We will therefore have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 151–52)

Merleau-Ponty's ontology is metonymic: we surpass the animal without leaving it behind; we are the displaced animal, and our nature is always second to us.⁷ Kafka returns us to this "first difference" or symbolic origination. Among the hyper-parodic moments of the as dog philosopher (or philosopher as dog) is its own antimony about whether food comes from the ground or sky, and confusion about why so many of its dog countryfolk act assuredly as if it comes from the sky (Kafka 1971, p. 308). Aristophanic laughter at this cloudy-mindedness is amplified by the tautological assertions of the human rationalist. The dog does not understand the workings of the human that feeds it, and we too look outward for answers of nourishment in ways that ironically miss the inner dimensionality, the affective topography, that animates the *constituted* world. Kafka's dog prefers the ground, sniffing and incanting the earth as a practical way to get food, which reveals a certain preference for materialism and a rejection of the skyward thinking of their neighbors. In the end, the dog philosopher realizes its relationship to the past is one of *institution*, the forgetting of origins as the dimensions of sense in the present, the past as the true present or generative matrix of the present. This recognition requires a kind of humility, much as we could have in the face of our own *institution* out of animality and coevolution with canines:

Our forefathers appeared threateningly before me. True, I held them responsible for everything, even if I dared not say so openly; it was they who involved our dog life in guilt, and so I could easily have responded to their menaces with counter-menaces; but I bow before their knowledge, it came from sources of which we know no longer, and for that reason, much as I may feel compelled to oppose them, I shall never actually overstep their laws, but content myself with wriggling through the gaps, for which I have a particularly good nose.

(Kafka 1971, pp. 309–10)

The dog's ultimate experience with the hunting dog reveals the impetus for their own search come from a gap or generative hunger, an inexplicable yearning, a normative demand to seek nourishment and meaning that cannot be explained or rendered under a determining norm, moralizing mentality or logical rationale: "'I must hunt.'" "I must go; you must hunt," I said, "nothing but musts. Can you explain why we must?" "No," he replied, "but there's nothing that needs to be explained, these are natural, self-evident things'" (Kafka 1971, p. 313). By the dog, this essay has become too technical; let us return to themes of music, laughter, dance and intercorporeal agency.

Philosophy grows from wonder: an ontological, bodily affect. In a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explains how philosophy is like a creative art, because philosophy and literature both reflect how being requires creativity, not simply by naming this concept, but by themselves being creative expressions of being that on the one hand critically displace us, but on the other offer new possibilities of belonging, of togetherness, and of integrating our lives anew: thus, philosophy and literature seek "adequation", which is not truth as correspondence but rather learning to live richer relations adequate to the expressive potency of our past. Philosophy is always an enterprise of the future:

Philosophy, precisely as "Being speaking within us," expression of the mute experience by itself, is creation. A creation that is at the same time a reintegration of Being. . . . art and philosophy *together* are precisely not arbitrary fabrications in the universe of the "spiritual"(of "culture"), but contact with Being precisely as creations. Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it. . . . literature . . . as *inscription* of Being.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 197)

Literature is existential research, and philosophy properly understood is an expressive endeavor. It is by reopening relations to our past, through *recherche*, that new expressions of possibility will have become possible.

5. Conclusions

Institution is a way of doing philosophy creatively that shares a kinship with expressive literary forms. Metonymy is a literary form that embodies *institution*, insofar as it is the fabric of linguistic connections, because it straddles identity and difference, thus capturing ambiguous past–present/child–adult/animal–human/individual–social contradictions of lived experience. This way of writing animality phenomenologically is, for Kafka, a way of surviving an impossible childhood in a harsh family and bureaucratic society, but it also points the way to a generative method and a wry, earthly, expressive take on our humanity. This method reveals the Freudian unconscious, with animality, as expressive dimensions of not only experience but truth, being, and freedom. Kafka’s metonymic “sardonic humanism” anticipates a poststructural, dimensional relationship of human and animal from within their mutual activities, such as nutrition, listening, communicating, and seeking. Deleuze and Guattari capture the radical use of language in interrogating the human–animal chiasm, or assemblage, from within its generative expressions, opening up a transformative displacement of repressions. Merleau-Ponty reminds us of our own animality through reading this story as a wild displacement of representation and metaphor, as a hike through the terrain of the sign as sensible:

We are continually obliged to work on our differences, to explain things we have said that have not been properly understood, to reveal what is hidden within us and to perceive other people. Reason does not lie behind us, nor is that where the meeting of minds takes place: rather, both stand before us waiting to be inherited. . . . It is understandable that our species, charged as it is with a task that will never and can never be completed, and at which it has not necessarily been called to succeed, even in relative terms, should find this situation both cause for anxiety and a spur to Courage.

(Merleau-Ponty 2008, p. 86)

Kafka has the courage to write through a suffering so profound that it could not be represented, yet he explored it bodily and creatively. This is the courage to embody another world that could have been (or to come), for resisting and revealing a preverbal silencing that plagues our futures. Kafka’s literature and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy are undeniably yet ambiguously ethical. Philosophical courage is required to give voice to silence, to say the unsaid, to cross species boundaries and the dichotomies of analysis, to open new qualitative analyses, relations and feelings. Kafka had a kind of animal, metonymic courage that we are simply not used to reading or experiencing, yet one that resonates so deeply, that riles us like a dog.

The dog enacts a Freudian reanimation; it shows how an *expressive appropriation* of its own past through articulating its own needs, primarily its ontological affect, a hunger to be understood, is possible. This illuminates Merleau-Ponty’s existential redeployment of Freudian psychoanalysis through literature: the shift from repression–compulsion and lifelessness to one of searching, expression, and the difficult expression of intercorporeal suffering. It is hilarious to think of a dog performing eidetic reductions and high altitude thinking, and against this, it is humbling indeed to cast our own attempts at analytic mastery of sense in life in the light of this sardonic laughter at our own finitude. It is perhaps, after all, the human philosopher barking absolute, timeless truths who is the absurd figure, and our faithful companion who reminds us of a subtler truth, our originary *institution* that lives on in us because it remains yet to be said, conspicuously silenced as failed revolutions. Ideality remains a moon generating waves in our minds, a source that we sense through the murky mediations and generative gaps in our own times, across our different bodies, a generative tendency sprouting a sensibly potent ideality, a power

of resisting, of speaking differently and of listening. Expression happens bodily, prior to the symbol and the self-conscious apprehension, and metonymy taps into this sap, this dehiscence from body to body, sign to sign, and time to time. Kafka and Merleau-Ponty align in their inter-animal ethics of ambiguity, in their critical psychoanalytic narrative interrogation of *instituting* times in life like childhood and puberty, in reminding us to put a physis back in logos, not to oppose the rhetorical and rational, and to take literature seriously as creative critique. The dog's bark is said to be worse than its bite, but what is said when the bark is silenced? And what if we listened to the dog as if it could speak?

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Notes

- ¹ Quoted in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 23).
- ² Though Willa and Edwin Muir translate *forschungen* as investigation, I will substitute research to track Merleau-Ponty's sense of the term as *recherche*, resonant with Proust. I will adjust Len Lawlor's and Heath Massey's judicious translation in the lecture course *Institution and Passivity* of "investigation" to "research" here to keep the resonance with Proust and to adumbrate more of a sense of *recherche* as radical intercorporeal reflection.
- ³ For a detailed discussion of this method and its phenomenological and ecological implications, see Chapter 2, "Radical Reflection and the Resistance of Things", in *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* (Ted Toadvine 2009, pp. 50–75). Ted Toadvine explains how radical reflection gears back into the prereflective flow, the vital *institution*, of perception on its own level: "The experience of the prereflective requires a form of reflection that can take into account its own origins, a "radical" or second-order reflection that includes as part of its movement the unreflective experience from which it emerges and to which it remains indebted; it must acknowledge its origin in an unreflective and originary past" (Toadvine 2009, p. 64).
- ⁴ John Russon identifies two fundamental axes of signification, the metaphor and the metonymy, and explores how Lacan discovers how the unconscious and existential issues in human lives are rendered intelligible through semiotics: "Because desire defines itself through the other, growing up into the world requires social integration, which is the insertion of oneself into a system of normalizing relations ("the law of the father") that effectively constitute a universal language. This very system of universal interpretation, however, draws its resources for meaning from the originary propulsion of desire, which will itself never be fully assimilated by or adequately articulated in the terms of this universal order. Through and behind the regularized, "literal" language of culture, desire—the unconscious—speaks in its own language of metaphor/condensation and metonymy/displacement. The interest in an immanent "reason" beneath the surface of regularized rationality that initially defined the common terrain of Hegel, psychoanalysis, and surrealism . . ." (Russon 2010, p. 31).
- ⁵ See Chapter 5, "Syntagmatic and Associative Relations" of Sussure's *General Course in Linguistics*.
- ⁶ Lawlor and Massey make note of a choice to translate *recherche* as investigation for consistency with other translations, but note the deeper resonance with the term research, linking Kafka's sensitized image to Proust (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 76 fn. 26).
- ⁷ See Raymond J. Wilson III's interpretation of metonymy as a literary and philosophical concept in Merleau-Ponty's later works: "Since a metonymic symbol fits well into its context, this type of symbolism has no requirement for a comparison to shock readers by connecting elements from far-separated semantic fields, and thus it removes all tension between similarity and difference. . . . we can envision the reader moving through nesting levels of context, guided by the relationship of the element to the sequence to which it belongs . . ." (Wilson 2002, p. 56).

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