

# Kafka in a Nutshell

## A Close Reading of *Eine Kreuzung*

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Les paroles seules comptent.

Le reste est bavardage.

Ionesco

»Eine Kreuzung,« a brief short story about the narrator's relationship with a hybrid animal, is a delicious treat for Kafka scholars. Whether the reader attempts a religious, a linguistic, a Freudian, or a Cultural Studies reading, this rich morsel feeds a multitude of interpretational appetites. What sets »Eine Kreuzung« apart, what makes it stretch so far? I argue that this narrative assumes a special position among Kafka's fables, aphorisms, and parables because of its extreme degree of rhetoricity.

Clayton Koelb, in his book *Kafka's Rhetoric*, defines rhetoricity as a discourse's openness to radically divergent interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Rhetoricity has its origin, in part, in what Stanley Corngold calls Kafka's »linguistic imagination.«<sup>2</sup> Kafka's texts are brought into being through the consideration and reworking of other written works, not through his direct confrontation with the »real world.« Similarly, Malcolm Pasley analyzes Kafka's writing act: »...Kafka's relevant or important experiences had already been digested, transformed, combined with other elements, even mythologized and intertwined with his dreamlike inner life ...«<sup>3</sup> Building upon this scholarship, I contend that in »Eine Kreuzung,« Kafka generates a high degree of rhetoricity through short sentences, ambiguous words, and the omission of context from potentially rhetorical discourse, thereby en-

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1 | Clayton Koelb: *Kafka's Rhetoric: The Passion of Reading*. Ithaca/London 1989, p. 10.

2 | Stanley Corngold: *Kafka's Die Verwandlung: Metamorphosis of the Metaphor*. In: *Mosaic* 3 (1970), pp. 91-106.

3 | Malcolm Pasley: *The Act of Writing and the Text: The Genesis of Kafka's Manuscripts*. In: Mark Anderson (Ed.): *Reading Kafka. Prague, Politics, and Fin de Siècle*. New York 1989, pp. 201-214, here p. 206.

dowing the text with its dreamlike and weightless quality and opening it to a virtually unlimited variety of readings.

The title »Eine Kreuzung« already triggers numerous semantic associations. *Wahrig's Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*<sup>4</sup> gives three definitions for the word »Kreuzung:«

1. Schnittpunkt zweier oder mehrerer sich kreuzender Verkehrswege
2. Das Kreuzen von Tieren oder Pflanzen
3. Das Produkt einer Kreuzung

Furthermore, there are the multiple meanings of the verb »kreuzen,« an older form of the verb »kreuzigen« (crucify) or »sich bekreuzigen« (making the sign of the cross). The phrase »Unsere Ansichten kreuzen sich« can be translated as »our opinions differ, go in different directions.« Other related terms are »Kreuzer« (silver penny), »Kreuzgang« (religious procession), and »Kreuzverhör« (cross-examination).

Kafka's titles frequently have multiple meanings. »Prozess«, for example, means both »process« and »trial,« a detail lost in translation. »Schloss« can mean both »castle« and »lock.« In Middle High German, »Schloss« also meant »conclusion.« The etymology of Kafka's titles opens up new ways of looking at the entirety of Kafka's texts. All three of the »Kreuzung« definitions yield clues to possible interpretations.

After reading the enigmatic title, the first word introduces the reader to the narrator and, as usual, it is an »Ich-Erzähler.« We assume that he is male, but the text does not qualify his gender. He/she does have nurturing characteristics conventionally and traditionally associated with women. First, there is the feeding of the young animal: »Ich nähre es mit süßer Milch, sie bekommt ihm bestens.« The narrator evokes the sentiment of a young mother, delighted by her baby's feeding on breast milk or formula. This mothering theme is sustained in the narrator's devotion to neighborhood children. Gathering a flock of young neighbors around him is an unusual activity for a business *man*. »Ich habe das Tierchen auf dem Schoß und die Kinder der ganzen Nachbarschaft stehen um mich herum.« A helpless, juvenile animal is curled up safely and comfortably on the narrator's lap. »An mich geschmiegt, fühlt es sich am wohlsten.«

Regarding the nature of this creature, the narrator claims: »Ich habe ein eigentümliches Tier, halb Kätzchen, halb Lamm.« The reader may recall the first sentence of Kafka's »In der Strafkolonie«: »Es ist ein eigentümlicher Apparat...«<sup>5</sup> Both the animal and the apparatus are characterized as »eigentümlich« which can be translated as »strange.« In its origin, however, »eigentümlich« meant »als Eigentum zugehörig.« With this older meaning in mind, the first sentence

4 | Gerhard Wahrig: *Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Munich 1978, p. 478.

5 | Franz Kafka: *In der Strafkolonie*. Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag 1919, p. 5.

involves a redundancy which could be read as an emphasis: »I own/have an animal in my possession.« The narration occurs in the present tense, which creates the effect that the Ich-Erzähler and his possession of the animal are ongoing, somehow suspended in time. The beast from »Die Kreuzung« and the machine from »In der Strafkolonie« have two decisive things in common: they are both hybrids and they are both »unmöglich,« that is, in spite of detailed descriptions, they are unimaginable beyond textual hermeneutics.

The existence of the kitten-lamb creature outside »Eine Kreuzung« is impossible for a number of reasons. On the biological level, there are at least two insurmountable obstacles to the existence of such a hybrid: animals of different species cannot reproduce and, even if there could be such a paring, it would not occur between a lamb and a kitten, but between a sheep and a cat since these are the designations for sexually mature specimens. Strangely, the hybrid animal is more evocative of a botanical hybrid (»Pflanzenkreuzung«). Plants are considerably easier to combine than mammals through the process of grafting. Kafka's creature could have been engineered, à la Dr. Frankenstein, by grafting one animal's body parts onto another animal. This constructed creature, however, would consist of two absolutely incompatible components: a lamb and a kitten, a larger herbivore and a smallish carnivore, both prey and predator. The kitten-lamb bears such a diametrical opposition within its own nature that it was bound to be sterile and useless as either a cat or lamb (»Vor Katzen flieht es, Lämmer will es anfallen« ... »Miauen kann es nicht und vor Ratten hat es Abscheu.«) It identifies neither with one nor with the other half of its two essences. (»Manchmal bringen die Kinder Katzen mit, einmal haben sie sogar zwei Lämmer gebracht. Es kam aber entgegen ihren Erwartungen zu keinen Erkennungsszenen.«) So as to further underline the paradoxical status of the animal, the narrator leaves it unnamed. He/she does not resort to a hybrid word, such as lamb-cat, or kitten-lamb. By refusing to choose a name, the story not only emphasizes the impossibility of such a creature but also assigns the interpretative responsibility to the reader.

The animal's origins remain unclear as well. The narrator only informs the reader that he came into its possession through a paternal inheritance: »Es ist ein Erbstück aus meines Vaters Besitz.« This detail is hardly helpful if one attempts a more literal reading of the narrative. It adds yet another impossibility: the apparent immunity of the strange baby animal to the effects of time. Instead of aging, or maturing, it moves laterally, toward a different kind of becoming; not from young to old, but from lamb to kitten: »...früher war es viel mehr Lamm als Kätzchen. Jetzt aber hat es von beiden wohl gleich viel.« The animal's nature is not stable and finished, but becoming, and what it is becoming cannot be represented. On the instable process of being, Henri Bergson writes in his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*:

We instinctively tend to solidify our impressions in order to express them in language. Hence, we confuse the feeling itself, which is in a perpetual state of becoming, with its permanent external object and especially with the word which expresses this object.<sup>6</sup>

Kafka's narrator counteracts that tendency toward solidification. He/she creates a becoming referent that does not exist as an external object. Furthermore, he/she refuses to name it into existence. If the first-person narrator were to assign the hybrid a name describing its physical nature, he/she would have to use something like »Das Katzenlamm« or »Die Lammkatze.« Either one of these choices would indicate that it was inherently more one than the other, thereby negating a simultaneousness and equal coexistence of the components. Also, the need to specify a gender, albeit grammatical, would present itself, which is more information than the narrator is willing to provide. The signifier »Kreuzung« is kept unattached to preserve the gaping openness of the discourse, its rhetoricity. It is up to the reader to link this story to a meaning outside of its textual boundaries. The openness is underlined phonetically, by the central vowel of both component animal names, Katze und Lamm: [a]. The [a] is the widest opening possible for the phonetic apparatus.

Even though it is useful to situate symbols and metaphors within their traditional range of interpretations, one has to step lightly and be mindful of Kafka's dislike for conventions. Karl-Heinz Fingerhut aptly refers, for example, to Kafka's animal figures as »Rätselbilder, die zu einer Lösung auffordern, ohne einen Schlüssel dazu bereitzuhalten, so daß sie vor der Vielzahl möglicher Interpretationen wieder in den Bereich des Unfaßbaren zurücktreten.«<sup>7</sup> It is, however, still useful to look at the traditional significations of the »Tierbilder« in »Eine Kreuzung.« They provide clues for inching toward an understanding since they are the very material Kafka manipulates.

The first and most obvious reading follows the generally acknowledged religious tendency in Kafka's writing. According to Max Brod, all of Kafka's stories were religious.<sup>8</sup> The title already contains the word »Kreuz,« which, of course, is the single most important symbol of the Christian faith. The vocabulary of the story further supports Brod's argument: »Göttlich«; »heilig«; »Lammesseele«; »Erlösung.« The lamb is an ancient religious symbol of enormous importance. Through every stage of development, Mediterranean civilizations regarded lambs as a manifestation of the power of renewal and of the victory of life over death. The lamb symbolized the Children of Israel who belonged to God's flock.

6 | Henri Bergson: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. Trans. by F.L. Pogson. Oxford: George Allen 1910, p. 130.

7 | Karl-Heinz Fingerhut: *Die Funktion der Tierfiguren im Werke Franz Kafkas*. Bonn 1969, p. 106.

8 | Clayton Koelb: *Kafka: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London 2010, p. 5.

The lamb is also the sacrificial victim such as in the Jewish Passover or the Christian Easter celebration.<sup>9</sup>

The cat is a powerful spiritual symbol, as well. Superstition has caused a large number of people all over the globe to fear black cats. In Japan, all felines are held to be beasts of ill omen. In Buddhism, cats, along with snakes, are accused of being the only creatures unmoved by the death of Buddha. The Kabbalah is oddly at one with Buddhism in associating the cat with the snake as an emblem of sin.<sup>10</sup>

The hybrid creature in »Die Kreuzung« strives to add another animal to its being: »Nicht genug damit, daß es Lamm und Katze ist, will es fast auch noch ein Hund sein.« It is attempting, in vain, to become a trinity of lamb-cat-dog, an imitation (or mockery?) of the holy trinity.

The animal in »Eine Kreuzung« is a combination of the pure and the impure, the holy and the unholy, the good and the evil. The creature's suffering has its origin in this unbearable union of good and evil within one immature body. The narrator is tempted to put it out of its misery (»Vielleicht wäre für dieses Tier das Messer des Fleischers eine Erlösung«), but he cannot follow through since the lamb is a precious heirloom from his father's estate, almost like a sacred relic. A religious interpretation of »Eine Kreuzung« is further supported by the Sunday performance reminiscent of a Church service:

Sonntag Vormittag ist Besuchstunde. Ich habe das Tierchen auf dem Schoß und die Kinder der ganzen Nachbarschaft stehen um mich herum. Da werden die wunderbars-ten Fragen gestellt, die kein Mensch beantworten kann.

During prayers, believers may also ask God questions that will not be answered, such as »Why did this child have to die?« or »Why did I get cancer?« Likewise, neither the »Kreuzung« nor the protagonist is capable of providing the children answers to their questions. Both remain mute throughout the Sunday ceremony. The questions are »wunderbar,« which means they are miraculous, springing from a different reality much like the hybrid itself.

Just as obvious as the religious elements are the fairy-tale elements. Fingerhut writes:

Neben der Vermischung des Tierischen mit dem Menschlichen sind für die phantastischen Bausteine der Kafkaschen Erzählwelt auch Deformationen von Tieren und hybride Zwischenwesen charakteristisch, wie sie sonst nur im Märchen und in mythologischen Erzählungen vorkommen.<sup>11</sup>

**9** | Jean Chevalier/Alain Gheerbrant: Dictionary of Symbols. Cambridge 1994, p. 585.

**10** | Ibid., p. 162.

**11** | Fingerhut, Die Funktion der Tierfiguren im Werke Franz Kafkas, p. 106.

One of the similarities between the hybrid animal and the fairy-tale animal is the suspension of time. When human characters are magically transformed into animals in folk tales, they do not age or mature. In the Grimms story of »Brüderchen und Schwesterchen,« for example, the brother is changed by witchcraft into a fawn. While the sister grows into a woman, the brother remains an animal. Another example is the tale of »Das Lämmchen und das Fischlein.« An evil stepmother puts a spell on a boy and a girl, transforming them into a lamb and a little fish. Again, neither one of the animals matures.

Wilhelm Emrich maintains that the hybrid animal, like other animal figures in Kafka's text, is »Bild des undefinierbaren, sich allen Bestimmungen entziehenden Selbst des Menschen.«<sup>12</sup> According to Walther Sokel, the components of the hybrid are »Bilder seelischer Triebkräfte, die in auswegloser Verstrickung die Notwendigkeit ihres Verschwindens demonstrieren.«<sup>13</sup> In the case of »Eine Kreuzung,« either one of these interpretations is plausible.

Other critics who try to link Kafka's texts with his biography maintain that the hybrid creature is the author himself, torn between his Löwy and his Kafka heritages. The dead father who looms large over the text and influences the first-person narrator's actions might well be an autobiographical element. The hybrid is one of the few things in the narrator's life that still bears a connection to the father (»Ich habe nicht viel von meinem Vater geerbt, dieses Erbstück aber kann sich sehen lassen«). It bears repeating that this sentence is not as semantically obvious as it might appear at first sight. In common usage of modern German, the phrase »kann sich sehen lassen« describes a person or object of delightful appearance or great value. Since it has none of the properties of its component animals, the Katzenlamm is neither useful nor valuable, since it cannot reproduce. (We are informed of this fact indirectly, through the children's question: »...warum es keine Jungen hat...«) »Kann sich sehen lassen« must be therefore understood literally as »can be gazed upon,« as is, indeed, the Sunday practice: »Sonntag vormittag ist Besuchstunde.«

One biographical element could be Franz's vegetarianism, which always caused him problems with his carnivorous father. He detested his son's way of life and hated to watch him eat his rabbit food, masticating slowly, conscientiously, and repulsively. Another biographical element in the hybrid creature is the »animal nature« of Kafka's name. His Hebrew name Amschel was associated with the German word for blackbird – Amsel. His last name, curiously, resembles the Czech word kavka, which also means blackbird. Koelb writes:

The fact that words like »Kafka« and »Amschel«...can be understood in two radically different ways establishes a tension of sameness and difference that teases the ima-

**12** | Wilhelm Emrich: Franz Kafka. Frankfurt a.M. 1970, p. 138.

**13** | Walther Sokel: Tragik und Ironie. Munich 1964, p. 295.

gination. It does so all the more when it is proposed (by a pure linguistic coincidence) that the tension exists within the confines of a single self.<sup>14</sup>

There is a quasi-sacrilegious connection between Kafka's Jewishness and his name designating an unclean bird. Koelb suggests that, »there is not supposed to be this degree of kinship between a verminous creature ... and a nice Jewish boy. The very word of God commands that they be kept apart.«<sup>15</sup> Such a tension between sameness and difference, between purity and impurity, is also represented in the creature. While the differences are obvious, the similarity, such as the restlessness, surprises both the reader and the narrator: »Es hat beiderlei Unruhe in sich, die von der Katze und die vom Lamm, so verschiedenartig sie sind.« Here, the narrator describes the creature in the plural, as a double. The kitten is the double of the lamb, but, in their united hybridity, they are the double of the narrator who is unable to tell whether it is he who is crying, or the creature:

Einmal als ich, wie es ja jedem geschehen kann, in meinen Geschäften...keinen Ausweg mehr finden konnte, alles verfallen lassen wollte und in solcher Verfassung zuhause im Schaukelstuhl lag, das Tier auf dem Schoß, da tropften, als ich zufällig einmal hinuntersah, von seinen riesenhaften Barthaaren Tränen. – Waren es meine, waren es seine?

He/she is detached, alienated from his/her own body to the point of not realizing his own pain. This alienation is the result of the narrator's working situation and would clearly invite a Marxist reading of the story as well. As far as the doppelgänger motif is concerned, there is a precedence in Kafka's first publication, *Betrachtung*. James Rolleston writes: »Die Ich-Gestalten dieses Buches sind eigentlich Doppelgänger für ein Ich, das Kafka-Ich, das literarisch noch nicht dargestellt werden kann.«<sup>16</sup> Both the narrator and the hybrid can be seen as representations of Kafka's ego and neither one of them is representable.

Yet another interpretation of the hybrid is somewhat autobiographical and overlaps with impulses common within Cultural Studies. I refer here not to Kafka's relationship to his father, but rather to his Judaism. As already discussed, much of the text can be seen in a religious context. The hybridity of the animal, in particular, represents, according to Fingerhut »den Gegensatz zwischen Judentum und Christentum in der Seele des Westjuden.«<sup>17</sup> In this same vein, Elizabeth Boa gives a general background on the life of Bohemian

**14** | Koelb, Kafka's Rhetoric, p. 19.

**15** | Ibid., p. 26.

**16** | James Rolleston: *Betrachtung: Landschaften der Doppelgänger*. In: Gerhard Kurz (Ed.): *Der junge Kafka*. Frankfurt a.M. 1984, pp. 184–199, here p. 185.

**17** | Fingerhut, *Die Funktion der Tierfiguren im Werke Franz Kafkas*, p. 108.

Jews and their struggles. She writes that Jews were not recognized as a nation. They were forced to choose between two language groups, German or Czech, even though they were bilingual, as was Franz Kafka. In addition, there were several other dividing lines between the Eastern and Western Jews in the Prague region: Tensions developed between well-educated Jews with social upward mobility and the non-Jewish population, as well as with the less well-off, rural Jews. The language division between German and Czech was not the only one; the Hebrew was rediscovered and revived, while Yiddish, the hybrid language of the diaspora, was under scrutiny.<sup>18</sup> On top of all these geo-cultural factors, the broad influence of Darwin's writings resulted in widespread discussions about hybridity during Kafka's lifetime. Boa comments:

The valuing of the pure over the hybrid permeated not only racist biology, imperialist anthropology, and Darwinian political science, but also literary studies and philosophy [...]. The German spoken in Prague was perceived as impoverished or hybrid, as if purity were a self-evident value, and notably Jews were held to lack the seamless fusion of the linguistic with the ethnic.<sup>19</sup>

The hybrid animal, therefore, may be understood as presenting the whole paradigm of divisions within both Kafka's divided allegiances as well as those of the Jewish population at large.

One last interpretative approach is the possibility that Kafka makes a structuralist move with his story. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the referent, or the real object, must be bracketed so that the structuralist can better examine the structure of the sign itself.<sup>20</sup> The hybrid is quite easy to bracket out. Not only can there be no such thing as a hybrid animal which is part lamb and part kitten, it is also quite unfathomable in physical form. The same is true for Gregor the bug, whose individual body parts are described in detail, but whose appearance as a whole remains shrouded in mystery.<sup>21</sup> Gregor also resembles the hybrid in his state of change and becoming; how can something that is in a state of flux be represented? (It is well known that Kafka opposed all depictions of the protagonist Gregor.) The animal inhabiting *Der Bau*<sup>22</sup> is quite obscure in its appearance, as well. We can only think of it in relation to other animals mentioned in the text. We know that he is larger than the »Kleinzeug,« the mice in his subterranean home. We also know that he is smaller than his real or imagined enemy.

**18** | Elizabeth Boa: *Kafka. Gender, Class, and Race in the Letters and Fictions*. Oxford 1996, p. 38.

**19** | *Ibid.*, p. 40.

**20** | Terry Eagleton: *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis (MN) 1996, p. 95.

**21** | Franz Kafka: *Sämtliche Erzählungen*. Frankfurt a.M. 1970.

**22** | *Ibid.*



We readers are, however, utterly incapable of imagining him according to our familiarity with the real world.

The inability to conjure up a figurative vision of Kafka's non-figurative animal characters and the frustration that this failure creates puts the reader exactly in the place where Kafka wanted him to be: at the »Kreuzung,« at the crossroads, that place where the reader, not the writer, is forced to choose a one of many possible paths to meaning.

