

JOSEFINE, OR LIVING IN DISCOURSE

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1. Kafka's Josefine and the Uncertain Power of Song

First conceived by Franz Kafka as the main character of his last short story—"Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse" (1924)—, Josefine the singer is also a central figure in Roberto Bolaño's "El policía de las ratas," posthumously published in 2003. In the following pages, I will first propose some remarks on Kafka's text and then I will try to discuss the modes and meaning of its character's second life in Bolaño's short story.¹ A not-so-surprising conclusion, as regards the general theme of the afterlife of literary characters, will be that the return of a character from one work to another can entail the return, but with variations, of themes and narrative devices that were associated with it.²

Kafka's text can be described as an enquiry on Josefine, her people, and the relationship between them. As with the other texts of the same collection—*Ein Hungerkünstler* (1924)—, we are not told a story with a clearly structured plot. Instead, we follow the homodiegetic narrator's considerations on Josefine's singing—for he is a fellow mouse who attended her recitals—and on what her singing means to him and their people. The narrator's discourse does not follow the development of a story determined by Josefine's and the other characters' actions, but its own logic of questions and answers, statements and doubts, hypotheses and counterhypotheses—a discursive logic, rather than a story logic in a strict sense—and Josefine's and the other characters' actions, which are usually evoked in the iterative form, are subject to this discursive logic. In this sense, Josefine is not so much a creature of actions and events, for us readers, as a creature of discourse.³

The interrogative attitude that marks the discourse of the narrator is due to his uncertainty about the power of Josefine's singing, its status as art, and the mouse folk's ability to understand it. This uncertainty, which also brings about a tone of perplexity, mirrors the contradictory judgements of the mouse folk. At the very beginning, the narrator apparently recognizes the

¹ Josefine is also the main character of a novella by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Josefine und Ich* (2006), and I wonder if Leo Lionni thought about her too in creating his picture book *Frederick* (1967), but in the present paper, due to space constraints, I will not extend the discussion to these works.

² This could be viewed as an implication of what James Phelan (1989) describes as the relationship between the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of characters.

³ The same remarks could also apply to other Kafka texts from other collections, of course, and especially to other animal stories such as "Forschungen eines Hundes" ("Investigations of a Dog") or "Der Bau" ("The Burrow").

power and status as art of Josefine's singing, by claiming that "Wer sie nicht gehört hat, kennt nicht die Macht des Gesanges"⁴ (Kafka 1946: 268). But afterwards this initial recognition is undercut by the reported doubts and irony of the mouse folk, who question, at times, whether Josefine's singing is really art, after all, and whether it is really *singing*. The narrator uses the word *Gesang* ("singing"), in fact, but he also uses the word *pfeifen* ("whistle," or "pipe") and he states that Josefine possibly pipes a little worse than the other mice, for her piping is weaker.

As it turns out, yet, the other mice's attention—for mice are undoubtedly captivated by her singing and they unfailingly rush to her recitals—might be captured precisely by this ordinary nature or even mediocrity that prompts their doubts and irony. Giorgio Agamben, who writes about this short story in a brief essay on the act of creation, remarks that Josefine sings by her inability to sing (Agamben, 2014: 52). She has not the power to sing, Agamben suggests, and this causes an interruption in the operation of singing that makes the power of singing evident in its absence, we might say—and we already observed that Josefine is somewhat absent from the scene, as she does not *act* before us, but still she is present and alive in discourse.

But Agamben also suggests, in elaborating this point, that poetry makes language work in such a way that its communicative and informative functions are cancelled (Agamben, 2014: 59). This sends us back to Russian formalists' and French structuralists' attempts to define literary language as intrinsically non-pragmatic and opaque: brilliant and fruitful attempts, as we know, that nevertheless did not achieve their aim of grounding literariness in language structures and in an interruption of the relations between the text and the world. We can certainly spot "symptoms of the aesthetic," to use Nelson Goodman's words (1976), but these symptoms typically concern the relations that *we* establish between art symbols and the world or between symbols and other symbols, and this is not due, even in the latter case, to any intrinsic property of those symbols, but to the way we use them, or maybe *play* them. In this view, the foundation of aestheticity, and hence of literariness as a kind of aestheticity, is pragmatic, which is to say that the language of literature is not intrinsically different from the language we use in other contexts. This might be the reason why the narrator of Kafka's story says that "Pfeifen ist die Sprache unseres Volkes, nur pfeift mancher sein Leben lang und weiß es nicht"⁵ (Kafka 1946: 282): with Molièresque irony, the narrator remarks that there is no difference between the piping everyone uses everyday and the piping of the artist.⁶

⁴ "[A]nyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song" (all the translations of Kafka's text from German to English are mine).

⁵ "Piping is the language of our people and some pipe all their lives without realizing it."

⁶ Needless to say, the issue of the definition of literature widely exceeds the limits of the present discourse. For an introduction, see Lamarque 2009.

Immediately after that, though, the narrator adds that “hier aber ist das Pfeifen freigemacht von den Fesseln des täglichen Lebens und befreit auch uns für eine kurze Weile”⁷ (Kafka 1946: 282) and elsewhere he recognizes that, for the mouse folk, Josefine’s singing is “einen Becher des Friedens vor dem Kampf”⁸ (Kafka 1946: 277). These remarks evoke the well-known idea that, in assuming an aesthetic attitude, we distance ourselves from the purposes and obligations of everyday life.⁹ This liberation, as momentary as it is, allows us to re-establish a deeper contact with ourselves and our world, or a deeper understanding of both, and maybe some kind of communion with the rest of the audience.¹⁰

The narrator, in sum, is concerned with the problem of the function and functioning of art and literature in relation to the needs and obligations of pragmatically oriented everyday life. And it is not surprising that Josefine’s art seems so idle to the other mice, as long as they are occupied by everyday life, with all its tasks and duties, but then its importance is recognized, when those same mice experience its liberating power: “Wenn man vor ihr sitzt, versteht man sie. . . . wenn man vor ihr sitzt, weiß man: was sie hier pfeift, ist kein Pfeifen”¹¹ (Kafka 1946: 272). Nor is it surprising that the relation between Josefine and the mouse folk is ambiguous:¹² on one side, the artist lives in a condition of marginality and art seems to be bound to some kind of “maladjustment”—to use a word Eugenio Montale once used for himself (1951: 570)—as regards that pragmatically oriented, everyday life her audience are immersed in (one might recall that the hunger artist of “Ein Hungerkünstler” does not eat because he cannot find anything he likes, while the acrobat of “Erstes Leid” lives removed from his audience, under the big top). But, on the other side, that same audience perceives the value of the artist’s work, so that the artist, while remaining in her or his marginality, becomes the object of the people’s cares:

⁷ “[H]ere piping is released from the chains of everyday life and it releases us too for a while.”

⁸ “[A] cup of peace before the fight.”

⁹ In *this* sense—if we speak about language *use*, rather than language *structures*—, we can say that in literary contexts language typically works differently from the way it works in everyday communication. I would also argue that some Russian formalists were more inclined to this view than most French structuralists: think of Viktor Shklovsky, or of Roman Jakobson until the early 30s, in comparison with Roland Barthes’s *Critique et vérité* or the later Jakobson himself.

¹⁰ This general idea can be specified in different ways, of course. On my part, I agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer, who emphasises, in *Wahrheit und Methode*, the importance of conceiving the detachment from everyday life granted by the experience of art as the premise for a deeper continuity within the life of the receiver (Gadamer 1975: part I. “Freilegung der Wahrheitsfrage an der Erfahrung der Kunst”).

¹¹ “When you are before her, you understand her. . . . when you are before her, you realize that her whistling is not whistling.”

¹² Emil Sattler wrote in 1977 that most scholars would agree on interpreting Kafka’s short story as a “statement on the role of the artist in society” (Sattler 1977: 410). I would not use the word *statement*, but I do agree on the importance of the theme.

Manchmal habe ich den Eindruck, das Volk fasse sein Verhältnis zu Josefine derart auf, daß sie, dieses zerbrechliche, schonungsbedürftige, irgendwie ausgezeichnete, ihrer Meinung nach durch Gesang ausgezeichnete Wesen, ihm anvertraut sei und es müsse für sie sorgen; der Grund dessen ist niemandem klar, nur die Tatsache scheint festzustehen.¹³ (Kafka 1946: 275)

To Josefīne’s mind, though, she is the one who saves her people from their misfortunes, or at least helps them bear those misfortunes, so that ultimately she feels misunderstood by them: “auf wirkliches Verständnis, wie sie es meint, hat sie längst verzichten gelernt”¹⁴ (Kafka 1946: 273). The mouse folk do not give explicit recognition to the actual function of her singing and her role as she conceives them, nor they satisfy her request to be exempted from working. This is not to say that the mouse folk are unfair. Their judgements and actions, in fact, can be interpreted as instantiations of an idea that recurs throughout Kafka’s works and whose beginnings can be grasped in the 1919 *Brief an den Vater*: the idea of a law that is grounded in necessity, rather than in fairness. But Josefīne does not accept or even understand this necessity and hence she feels misunderstood and mistreated. The ambiguity of her relationship with the mouse folk, therefore, is also a source of conflict and resentment, though it cannot be reduced to that. In changing the title of the story from “Josefīne, die Sāngerin” to “Josefīne, die Sāngerin oder Das Volk der Māuse,” Kafka noted that titles using *oder* are not quite refined, but that *oder*, in this particular case, would convey a peculiar meaning, as if it were a “scale” (Kafka 1996: 395). It is an image that evokes the theme of justice and the law, again, but also a way to conflate contrast and identification by means of the ambiguous logical function of *oder*.

In that it enables communion, in fact, Josefīne’s singing can become the voice of the people: “Dieses Pfeifen, das sich erhebt, wo allen anderen Schweigen auferlegt ist, kommt fast wie eine Botschaft des Volkes zu dem Einzelnen”¹⁵ (Kafka 1946: 278). This is the second possible interpretation (and the two are not mutually exclusive) of the indiscernibility of Josefīne’s singing from the other mice’s piping: art is an attempt at voicing human experience, made from the stuff of that experience, hence its indiscernibility from what goes on with that experience and the possibility to perceive the singing of the artist as a message from the people.

This possibility of communion and identification is further explored in the closing paragraph of the text. The narrator evokes the future of Josefīne—her future death and what

¹³ “Sometimes I have the feeling that the people consider their relation with Josefīne as entailing that this fragile creature, who needs many cares, who is somehow distinguished, or who distinguished herself, to her mind, by singing, is entrusted to us and that we must take care of her; nobody probably knows why, but that’s a fact.”

¹⁴ “It is a very long time since she learnt to give up real understanding, the way she would mean it.”

¹⁵ “This piping, that rises up where everyone else must remain silent, comes almost like a message of the folk to the individual.”

lies beyond—and says that the people will not miss Josefine and that she is bound to be forgotten by them, for they, as a people, do not record history: “wir keine Geschichte treiben” (Kafka 1946: 291). But a few pages before, in saying, in a similar vein, that “im allgemeinen vernachlässigen wir Geschichtsforschung gänzlich”¹⁶ (Kafka 1946: 277), the narrator had also recalled (not without contradiction) the sufferings that the mice folk had endured, and here too, at the end of the text, what ultimately bridges the distance between Josefine and her people is this common destiny of suffering. Therefore, released by death from these earthly sorrows that the chosen, in her view, must endure, Josefine will finally join the countless multitude of the heroes of their people (Kafka 1946: 291) and thus be reunited with them.¹⁷

Reiner Stach, in the final chapter of his biography of Kafka, suggests that, in reading this text, we are faced with a radical change in the writer’s conception of the condition of the artist and his or her relationship with society. Throughout his life, in Stach’s view, Kafka had been convinced that the artist should commit himself or herself to an individual search for truth that would necessarily divide him, or divide her, from society; “Now, at the end of the road,” Stach writes, “he seemed to move away from this position, and the battle of his life appeared in the light of irony” (2013: 550). On my part, I would not use the word *irony* and I would rather say that Kafka, in this final meditation on the function of art and the relationship between the artist and society, anticipates some kind of universal and ultimate reconciliation in surrender, pity, and oblivion. Ambiguities and conflicts are not so much resolved, as they are exceeded in a perspective that exceeds all earthly ambiguities and conflicts: the perspective of death.

In the end, therefore, we might be tempted to see Josefine as a figure of Kafka himself, and undoubtedly the story makes one think about the author’s life and his condition as he wrote the text and then reviewed the galleys, lying in his death bed. Yet, there is no reason to constrain the meaning of the text within the limits of biographical interpretations, nor to mistake the experience that gave rise to a literary work, or the contingency in which it was written, for its meaning (not after Barthes and Foucault, at least). Josefine is not Kafka, or she can be any artist and therefore she can be Kafka in that he was an artist too—by way of exemplification, to borrow another concept from Nelson Goodman—, and the narrator’s final meditation on her

¹⁶ “In general we neglect history completely.”

¹⁷ This final gaze on the destiny of the mouse folk and these reflections on suffering and endurance might be interpreted as hinting at the history of the Jew, but other passages of the text would be harder to reconcile with this interpretation. More generally, Kafka’s texts evade univocal, thorough interpretations of this kind and typically allow for more than one interpretation. The mouse folk, therefore, could be read both as a metaphor for the Jew and as a metaphor for humanity in general: both interpretations could be partly grounded in the text and both would be partly exceeded by it.

destiny concerns her creator just like any other artist approaching her or his own death: Roberto Bolaño, for example.

2. Roberto Bolaño: The Legacy of Josefina and the Mission of the Writer

Roberto Bolaño too was sick and close to his death, when he wrote the short stories and gave the speeches which would be comprised in *El gaucha insufrible*, and the collection begins with a reference to Kafka's "Josefine," as in the exergue we find the Spanish version of the first sentence of the last paragraph of Kafka's short story: "Quizá nosotros no perdamos demasiado, después de todo"¹⁸ (Bolaño 2003a: 9). Undoubtedly, we can read the quotation as a pre-posthumous glance Bolaño gives himself, through Kafka and Josefina, and as a valedictory gesture marked by the understatement and self-irony (a *diminutio personae*, in a way) that in "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad" he displays in talking about his terminal illness. As in the case of "Josefine," however, and even if the paratextual position of the quotation allows a more direct reference to the contingency of writing, we should refrain from focusing exclusively on the author and his biographical situation. By means of this quotation, in fact, Bolaño introduces the theme of loss in general. But we will return to this theme later on. Before that, we must consider another reference to Kafka that we find, again, in "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad."

Bolaño recalls a passage by Elias Canetti in which Canetti writes that Kafka definitively accepted the destiny of writing when he spat blood for the first time because of tuberculosis (Bolaño 2003c: 141). And then Bolaño suggests that we need to go through books, sex, and travelling—to go through life and writing, we might say—in search of the *new*—just like Baudelaire suggested—, even if we know, or think we know, that all things are vain and death is unavoidable. According to Bolaño, this also meant that the flag of art should be raised even in the face of the horror we cannot defeat. Violence and horror are recurring themes in Bolaño's works and this recurrence is an enactment of the belief that art must stand before the horror—to show it and call it like it is, at least—, even if no victory is actually possible.

In this perspective, the artist can be conceived as a witness who pursues truth even if he knows that his or her defeat is unavoidable. Hence the kinship between the figure of the poet, as an epitome of this conception of the artist, and the figure of the detective, as it is exemplified by certain characters of Bolaño's narrative works, or between Pepe, the police rat who chooses to face the horror and discover the truth, even if he realizes that he will not be able to stop the

¹⁸ This is the translation from the American edition of *El gaucha insufrible*: "So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all" (Bolaño 2010).

horror and let everyone know the truth, and his aunt Josefina, the singer—for in Bolaño's short story Josefina comes back as the aunt of the main character Pepe.

This kinship between the poet and the detective is suggested by the very motivations that led Pepe to become a police rat: none of them is certain, but all of them have something to do with failure in its many guises and a desire for solitude; all of them, therefore, might have something to do with the choice—or the destiny, or the accident—of being a poet, but for one difference: the work of a policeman, or police rat, is thought to be useful, while the work of a poet is not. That is why another rat, talking about Eustaquio, a young rat who is killed later in the story, says that Eustaquio “componía y declamaba versos. . . . lo que lo hacía manifiestamente inhábil para el trabajo”¹⁹ (Bolaño 2003b: 69). As to the old female rats that make up the rat queen, they are also unfit for work because of their anomaly, but it is precisely their anomaly that endows them with the wisdom that allows them to advise their people in difficult situations. Likewise, Kafka's Josefina would not engage in productive work, but the mice folk would turn to her especially in hard times.

Right from the first lines, therefore, the kinship between Pepe and Josefina appears not only as parentage, but also as similarity, though incomplete, and this similarity is an example of the general similarity between the poet and the detective. Pepe's motivations for action, later on, give us another confirmation: when he pursues the killer and does not give up his search for truth, his motivations have something to do with fever, that is to say with sickness, or disease. The first who talks about fever is an old schoolmaster who tells Pepe that “todo es raro. . . . lo raro es lo normal, la fiebre es la salud, el veneno es la comida”²⁰ (Bolaño 2003b: 70). But fever and nausea are frequent conditions throughout the collection and they always appear as something like a normal abnormality, or an altered response to some pathogenic external circumstance. Fever and nausea prompt digressive actions, like searching the dead sewers. Once again the poet and the detective are similar, therefore, in that they both suffer from some kind of maladjustment and reveal the same inability to overlook the horror, even if this inability means their own involvement in the horror.

Apparently, the return of Josefina also implies the return of some themes that she evoked in Kafka's story, but in Bolaño's text these themes are linked not only to Josefina, but also to Pepe and other secondary characters that share some of their traits. We have recurrences with variations, in sum, and the most evident variation concerns fear. Héctor, the killer, tells Pepe

¹⁹ “He composes and declaims verse, said the friend (so he was obviously unfit for work)” (Bolaño 2010: 58).

²⁰ “Everything is strange. . . . strange is normal, fever is health, poison is food” (Bolaño 2010: 59).

that her aunt “se moría de miedo”²¹ (Bolaño 2003b: 81) and that her audience too was scared to death, even if they did not know it. This fear Héctor talks about is an obvious departure from Kafka and it is clearly linked to the central place that violence and horror hold in Bolaño’s works: for Héctor is the voice of horror, in a way, and his murders are oases of horror in the vast deserts of boredom that make up the life of rats.²²

The same pattern of recurrence with variations appears if we compare Kafka’s Josefine and Bolaño’s Josefine, and Pepe, from the point of view of characterization. Bolaño’s Josefine, just like Kafka’s Josefine, is not so much a character who acts in the story as an absent figure, who returns time and again in the discourse of other characters who might have known her and talk about her: Pepe, an old police rat, the rat queen, and the killer Héctor, as we said. Bolaño’s Josefine too is first of all a creature of discourse and the fact that Bolaño resorts to the same form of characterization originally used by Kafka brings us back to the issue of oblivion, which we met at the end of Kafka’s short story: in Bolaño’s story, Josefine has not been forgotten. The other characters remember her and still talk about her and the very fact that Bolaño revives her in his text apparently reenacts this rejection of oblivion at the level of literary tradition. Bolaño seems to suggest that the flag of art, put down by one, will be picked up by another (since we recalled “Le Voyage,” we might recall “Les Phares” as well). Perhaps Bolaño suggests that Josefine—and Kafka, by consequence—can attain some kind of survival in art, or in literary tradition. As regards Pepe, on the other hand, his characterization is not entirely entrusted to the discourse of other characters, as he is a fully acting character throughout the story, but in the final episode he might be involved in a process of tradition too, as a younger police rat joins him in the fight against the weasels and apparently gets ready to take over from him.

A few lines before, moreover, Pepe himself pondered on the fate of the rat people—the theme that was touched upon at the end of Kafka’s text—in terms that elaborate the theme of loss first enunciated in the epigraph. Here we must recall that Héctor, the killer, is the first rat to ever kill other rats. Pepe kills him, but then he is slowly dragged down by the realization of this terrible truth, that rats can kill other rats, and he ends up considering the unavoidable fate of his people:

²¹ “She was scared to death” (Bolaño 2010: 68).

²² This famous verse from Baudelaire’s “Le Voyage”—“Une oasis d’horreur dans un désert d’ennui!” (1961: 126, VII 4)—is used by Bolaño as an epigraph to *2666* and it is quoted in “Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad” as Bolaño writes about a man who killed his wife and children and then, after committing his crime, confusedly spoke about “libertad” (Bolaño 2003c: 151), or “freedom” (Bolaño 2010: 138). Héctor too, when Pepe first sees him approaching with another mouse, is paradoxically speaking about “libertad” (Bolaño 2003b: 79).

Las ratas somos capaces de matar a las ratas. . . . Nuestra capacidad de adaptación al medio, nuestra naturaleza laboriosa, nuestra larga marcha colectiva en pos de una felicidad que en el fondo sabíamos inexistente, pero que nos servía de pretexto, de escenografía y telón para nuestras heroicidades cotidianas, estaban condenadas a desaparecer, lo que equivalía a que nosotros, como pueblo, también estábamos condenados a desaparecer.²³ (Bolaño 2003b: 84-85)

The loss is universal and inescapable, but nevertheless the detective and the poet go on to the end of their quest, which is eventually their own end.

In summary, we can conclude that the return of Josefina, from Kafka to Bolaño, entails the recurrence with variations of themes and forms. Both Kafka and Bolaño, at the end of their lives, by creating and recreating Josefina and her nephew Pepe, reflect on the mission of art and the role of the artist within society: on his living in discourse and through discourse, for some intimate need and for reasons that can be reaffirmed even before impending death.

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²³ "Rats are capable of killing rats. . . . Our capacity to adapt to the environment, our hard-working nature, our long collective march toward a happiness that, deep down, we knew to be illusory, but which had served as a pretext, a setting, a backdrop for our daily acts of heroism, all these were condemned to disappear, which meant that we, as a people, were condemned to disappear as well" (Bolaño 2010: 71-72).

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Abstract: The paper discusses Franz Kafka’s “Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse” (1924) and Roberto Bolaño’s “El policía de las ratas” (2003). Kafka’s short story is discussed in relation to its main character, Josefine, and the theme of the function of art and the social role of the artist. Bolaño’s short story, where Josefine comes back as the aunt of the main character Pepe, is also discussed in relation to that theme. In addition, the paper proposes some remarks on the issue of the afterlife of literary characters.