

Kafka's Last Pipes

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The Burrow
and
*Josephine the Singer,
or the Mouse Folk*

John P. Anderson



Universal Publishers
Boca Raton Florida

*Kafka's Last Pipes:
The Burrow and Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*

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Table of Contents

Section I: Introduction..... 11

Fear and Love: Taking and Giving	11
Pipes	11
Kafka as the Pied Piper	13
Kafka's Last Pied Pipes	15
Personal Pipes	16

Section II: *The Burrow* 19

Opus One	19
Pipes of Worry	20
In the Burrow Where You Live	22
Me and My Hissing Shadow	23
As Time Goes By	23
I Got Plenty of Nothing.....	25
The Echo of Your Fear	25
Cape Fearless.....	26
Inside Out.....	26
I Still Haven't Found What I Am Looking For: Talking First Person.....	28
Talking Verbs	29
Kafka Primer	31
The Eternal.....	32
The Sound and the Worry.....	33
Identity	34
Style	35
Kafka Himself.....	35
The End	37
Metaphysics of the Construction of This Story	38
Text of the Burrow.....	39

Section III: *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*.....117

The Last Pipe 117
Title..... 119
Either/Or 120
What We Learn..... 121
Truth, Individual and Collective 123
Narrator 123
Josephine..... 125
Mouse House Entropy 127
Whistling: Officer Mice and
 Enlisted Mice 130
Soul Tests..... 132
Soul Unification 135
Staying Alive but Small 137
Give and Take..... 138
Donor Music 139
Indestructible 140
Old Joseph..... 140
Kafka and Josephine 144
Modern Josephine 146
Point of Story 147
Two J's 150
Basic Questions 152
Ways and Means 153
Pipes 154
Ending..... 155
Art and Artiste and the Narrator..... 156
Text..... 157
The Lesson of J..... 221

Section IV: Sources 223

Appendix One..... 225

Section I: Introduction

Fear and Love: Taking and Giving

In these two stories, two of the last he wrote, Kafka spotlights fear and love, the most basic human issues. Fear and love in the lives of a mole-like creature alone in a burrow and mice in a crowded colony. In stories with no humans, Kafka teaches us what is most important in being human.

The Burrow examines fear-based isolation of a mole-like creature living all alone in his underground burrow. The only connection with others is fear-based taking, taking by claws and teeth. You are either dinner or the diner, never a guest or host. You are alone but not independent because fear eats your life possibilities independence could give.

Josephine the Singer features love-based giving through art, Kafka's last word on the purpose of art. Like a loving parent giving to her child, the artist mouse Josephine attempts to inspire independent individuality in other mice in the colony through the example of her unique and spontaneous singing. This she gives free of charge. Because of fear of survival stoked by the colony leadership, the rest of the mouse collective hears her singing as a mouse but not as an individual. They remain in fear-based group think with reduced life possibilities.

In both stories, the issue is the effect of fear or love on independent individual identity and life possibilities. For Kafka, this is the important human issue.

Pipes

First an introduction to pipes, a device whose characteristics Kafka uses in both stories as a metaphor.

A pipe for this purpose is any column of air enclosed by a structure, such as an organ pipe. For more examples: a burrow in the ground is a pipe; a singer's throat is a pipe; a female sex organ is a pipe. All god's children got pipes, open pipes.

Kafka's Last Pipes

And as one of god's orphaned children, Kafka blends together many references to pipes and the frequencies they can produce as a metaphor for life possibilities.

A pipe with just one end open is called a closed ended pipe and a pipe with both ends open is called an open-ended pipe. A pipe with both ends closed is not a pipe at all.

Two pipes of the same type on the same frequency and near each other cancel each other out:

From PhysicsBuzz:

In 1877, English physicist Lord Rayleigh observed that when two almost identical organ pipes are played side by side, something strange happens. Rather than each blaring their own tone, the two pipes will barely make a whisper. But put a barrier between them, and they [that is each] sing [sings] loud and clear. ***

[Later in a confirming experiment] Abel saw that the two pipes influence each other as they are played, via the air between them. Even if initially tuned to slightly different frequencies, the two pipes change subtly until they sing exactly the same note, but vibrate the air exactly the opposite of each other. The two out-of-synch sound waves cancel almost perfectly, resulting in near silence.

Notice the influence, changing frequency slightly to cancel each other out. Think of the crowd of Nazi supporters, mothers and dentists and coal workers, shouting Sieg Heil in unison, the enthusiasm drowning out diversity.

Now for those nodes in the sound at the bottom of a closed end pipe: From the Physics Classroom:

As has already been mentioned, a musical instrument has a set of natural frequencies at which it vibrates at when a disturbance is introduced into it. These natural

frequencies are known as the harmonics of the instrument; each harmonic is associated with a standing wave pattern. *** . . . a standing wave pattern was defined as a vibrational pattern created within a medium when the vibrational frequency of the source causes reflected waves from one end of the medium to interfere with incident waves from the source in such a manner that specific points along the medium appear to be standing still. *** That is, at the closed end of an air column, air is not free to undergo movement and thus is forced into assuming the nodal positions of the standing wave pattern. Conversely, air is free to undergo its back-and-forth longitudinal motion at the open end of an air column; and as such, the standing wave patterns will depict antinodes at the open ends of air columns.

Remember the node or frequency cancellation effect when we come to analyzing the hiss the creature hears in his burrow.

In a closed end pipe, the sound produced at the open end is different from the sound produced at the closed end. Nodes cancel frequency possibilities at the closed end. *Burrow* shows reduced possibilities in life at the closed end and *Josephine* increased possibilities at the open end.

Kafka as the Pied Piper

We all have heard of the pied piper who could pipe away rats.

From Wikipedia:

In 1284, while the town of Hamelin was suffering from a rat infestation, a piper dressed in colorful red clothing appeared, claiming to be a rat-catcher. He promised the mayor a solution to their problem with the rats. The mayor in turn promised to pay him for the removal of the rats, (according to some versions the promised sum was 1000 guilders.) The piper accepted

and played his pipe to lure the rats into the Weser River, where all but one drowned.

Despite the piper's success, the mayor reneged on his promise and refused to pay him the full sum (reputedly reduced to a sum of 50 guilders). The piper left the town angrily, vowing to return later to take revenge. On Saint John and Paul's day while the Hamelinites were in church, the piper returned dressed in green like a hunter playing his pipe. In so doing, he attracted the town's children. One hundred and thirty children followed him out of town where they were lured into a cave and never seen again. Depending on the version, at most three children remained behind: One was lame and could not follow quickly enough, the second was deaf and therefore could not hear the music, and the last was blind and unable to see where he was going. These three informed the villagers of what had happened when they came out from church.

Another version relates that the Pied Piper led the children into following him to the top of Koppelberg Hill, where he took them to a beautiful land and had his wicked way,^[2] or a place called Koppenberg Mountain,^[3] or that he made them walk into the Weser as he did with the rats, and they all drowned. Some versions state that the Piper returned the children after payment, or that he returned the children after the villagers paid several times the original amount of gold.

The pied piper Kafka can be heard in both these stories. With his art, Kafka tries to lead the rats away and protect still impressionable souls from the evils of economic and political realities.

Kafka's Last Pied Pipes

Both of these two late stories blow the pipes of humanity and art. Pipes and piping provide major metaphors for both. Fear of survival provides a hissing base line for both.

In *Burrow*, the burrow itself, a hole and series of tunnels in the ground, is literally a closed end pipe with one opening and several closed ends, and spiritually the creature in the burrow is like the closed end of a closed end pipe. His frequencies and possibilities are limited because he operates in fear, lives alone and is selfish and without regard to others. By contrast, Josephine acts like the open end of the same pipe. She sings outdoors and is generous. Freed by individuality, she can sing all frequencies. We will find her listeners stuck at the closed end.

The creature's burrow is his pipe, and he eventually hears a hiss in his pipe. Alone in his burrow and seeking a closed life, he hears his own pipe hissing. The hiss the creature hears in the burrow is his own undercurrent of fear, selfishness and hostility towards others.

In *Josephine*, Josephine sings or pipes freely like the open end of a closed pipe. She pipes to others, to mice in a large and totalitarian mouse community, that is mice at the closed end. She pipes or sings outdoors, spontaneously and gratuitously. Her music is an artistic presentation of the freedom and truth and many possibilities in her individuality. She tries by the inspiration provided by her music to share her free condition in order to liberate members of the timid and collectively oriented mouse community. Despite her efforts, the mice remain at the closed end and do not hear all the possibilities.

The size and shape of a pipe, the container, determines the sound it makes, the contained. The soul determines the life you lead, is the life you lead. Fear guides the burrow creature and love for all mice motivates Josephine. Love and fear, the basics, Kafka's key signatures for these stories.

Personal Pipes

Clayton Koelb on these two stories:

These stories are personal. That they were intensely personal for Kafka himself is evidenced by the fact that “Josefine die Sangerin” and “Der Bau” present as their central characters artists who are animals with a human consciousness. This amalgam of the animal and human is one of Kafka’s most frequent themes, and it is also one of his most personal concerns. The very idea of the animal-human combination arises from the circumstances of Kafka’s personal life, the linguistic accident that made the name of an avian animal (the crow or jackdaw — Czech *kavka*) the name of his family. On top of this was the peculiar fact that his parents had given him the Hebrew name Amschel, a word commonly associated among Central European Jews with another black bird, the *Amsel* (“blackbird”). Franz/Amschel Kafka, a person highly sensitive to language, could not avoid noticing that language had dubbed him an animal, and this not once but twice. It was an essential element of his being, and it is hardly surprising that it ends up a leading motif in his fiction (see Koelb 18–20).

Nor is it surprising that this motif comes into particular prominence at the end of Kafka’s career. While contemplating what it meant to be who he was, he could hardly have come up with a more fitting fictional image than the insecure animal-artist living on the edge of oblivion, a description that fits both Josephine, the mouse-singer, and the builder of the burrow. *Well aware that he was himself near the edge of the abyss, Kafka felt the need to consider what it was about his work that kept him so immersed in it even under such grim circumstances.* [emphasis added]

In my view, Kafka wanted what Josephine wanted, to continue to realize his soul potential by giving of his unique art to readers who could “hear” it and by inspiration be blessed by stronger independent individuality in the process.

Kafka wrote *Josephine* in 1924, shortly after *The Burrow* and just months before he died. It was apparently the last work Kafka finished. Kafka wrote these stories while living in Berlin away from his family home in Prague and living in love with Dora Diamant, his last love. The post-WWI German depression and chaos raged all around as Franz the literary benefactor gave us these two marvelously focused and ordered gifts. Both gifts help unwrap each other.

Section II: *The Burrow*

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Opus One

The Burrow features a clawed creature living all alone in a hole, his burrow. He dug the hole just for himself. His attitude is the subject of the story. He cares only for numero uno. His attitude will be familiar to humans, even those living above ground.

With no family, friends or even visitors allowed, he lives alone in his burrow. Any little creatures he randomly sired do not get to share the burrow and deserve no memory or Christmas gift.

Our creature, never identified as to exact kind, has a burrow mentality to go with his hole. His mentality is fear-based hunker down in the hole. His rule is kill or be killed. Fear is his only companion. He obsesses on threats and dangers. Dwelling endlessly on his own worries and fearful thoughts dissipate his energy and potential happiness.

In his hole, our fearful creature just repeats repeats repeats the same old old old devices for reducing risk. He is old older oldest in the hole. With this conservative program he tries to control his own destiny and seeks silence as his solace from fear.

But fear always returns as he obsesses on the dangers. The new and different, which thrive in the noisy uptop world out of the burrow and which would distract him from dwelling on dangers, is in his view something to be avoided.

In this stay in the hole process, the creature eventually takes on the characteristics of and becomes one with his bur-

row. He is in and of his hole. His potential to be whole is lost in the hole.

After a particularly extended and stressful visit uptop and out in the dangerous open, worrying about going back in [a vulnerable moment] and finally going back in the hole, he hallucinates and hears his own fear; he processes the sound as coming from an outside source that is also in the hole. Just as in hallucinations people “see things,” here the creature “hears things.” He hears himself as a hiss at the closed end of his burrow.

The hiss is always in the same intermittent pattern [on, off, on, etc], on the same frequencies and at the same volume. These characteristics remain the same regardless of his listening position.

Assuming the sound source is outside him, he tries various theories about the nature of its source and what it means. He imagines other creatures, small or frighteningly large, making the sound but never considers himself as the possible source. But these possible interpretations of the sound do not work because his initial premise is faulty.

The hiss drives him “crazy” because he cannot find the source and can’t control it, even in his own burrow kingdom where he is Uber Fuhrer.

Pipes of Worry

Kafka uses the pattern of air agitation [certain frequencies or possibilities eliminated] in the closed end of a closed end pipe [one end open and one closed] as a metaphor for the results of this creature’s closed end life, in his hole and closed to new possibilities and acquaintances. The result of living his closed end life is to hear himself as a hiss in his burrow. The hiss has the characteristics of sounds produced by the closed end of a pipe.

Remember our lesson in closed end and open end pipes:

That is, at the closed end of an air column, air is not free to undergo movement and thus is forced into as-

suming the nodal positions of the standing wave pattern. Conversely, air is free to undergo its back-and-forth longitudinal motion at the open end of an air column; and as such, the standing wave patterns will depict antinodes at the open ends of air columns.

Consider the analog of pipes in the nature of a life lived: Closed end is without freedom, open end is with freedom. Closed end is in the burrow, open end is uptop out in the open. Open end is all frequencies or possibilities but closed end is limited frequencies or possibilities.

Kafka uses the closed end pipe metaphor to shape the nature of the hiss the creature hears in his hallucination. The hiss is a militant, adversarial sound, not a welcoming how do you do. And the hiss is the type of sound that would be produced by a nodal closed end. It is intermittent: on off on off.

In the closed end of an agitated pipe, some frequencies are on and some are off. Kafka crafts the tone the creature eventually hears as intermittent in order to connect the meaning of his hiss sound with that suggested by the closed end of the pipe. The silent pauses in the hiss mark the “off” in the “on off” frequency pattern.

The intermittent hiss continues without any change and this aspect of the hiss marks his own continuous fear [fear, sleep, fear, sleep] and his repetition of fear-based actions he performed in the past [old action, rest, old action, rest]. So continuing hisses mark his fear and repetition-based life.

Keep in mind for this discussion that his burrow, his magnificent construction in the ground, is his means of expression. By analogy, it is how he blows his own horn, his own pipe. That is why, in the Kafka interconnected world of meaning, the hissing sound is also like his burrow, where he hears it, since he is the source and he is like his burrow and his burrow has the characteristics of a closed end pipe. It has just one exit, one open end and several closed ends.

Since the creature thinks the sound is made externally, he believes he can't control it unless he finds and silences the

source, which must be external since he hears it as external. He never looks for it in the right place, in his own soul or head, and thus never gains control. He never looks inside to find the source of his problems that he hears outside. He never properly diagnoses why the hiss sound is always heard at the same volume regardless of his position.

With this result, Kafka says that this type of life, the closed-end pipe life, is inevitably self-defeating. Your life is full of nodes or limitations.

The story of our selfish creature is delivered, appropriately enough, in the 1st person. This story consists of solely his thoughts, a piping device attributable to ego. He is talking to himself. He listens to himself as the narrator just as he listens to himself as the hiss in the burrow.

In the Burrow Where You Live

As in *The Metamorphosis*, we have a lower animal creature whose thoughts are strikingly believable as human thoughts in terms of one human outlook on life, the selfish outlook.

This gives us Kafka's overriding irony in this story: What is "lower" order animal is also lower order human. This animal/human creature does communicate in human English, not in mole chirps. The creature communicates not only believable human thoughts but specifically what must have been Kafka's, as he worried about his tuberculosis.

The animal is not specifically identified as to type, as mole or otherwise. This is because Kafka's point includes the human aspect and Kafka does not want the reader to get stuck on mole. The creature is also not identified by sex, although the creature thinks more like a male, a human male that is: "Mine". Given the dual aspect of the creature, I refer sometimes to he, him or his and sometimes to heit, himt or heis.

The conservative underground life deprives life of the best it has to offer, freedom of additional possibilities. These are represented in the story by the life "uptop," life out of the burrow. Out in the open.

The creature's only value is risk protection. This he up-dresses as being practical, a selfish value dressed as something neutral and objective, but whose real address is his own self-regard.

Only one place in the burrow served a non-practical function, a different master, and that is the Castle Keep, the main and central room in the burrow. Its design was not solely practical but also served architectural aesthetics. The Keep is the only place in the burrow where he is not subject to hearing the hiss, where art gave him an avenue out of himself, an open pipe.

The piping subject was very close to home for Kafka, this the story he completed apparently just before *Josephine*, the last one he completed. At that time he was a whizzing tubercular socked indoors. Only an author who plagued himself with his own worries about possibilities that might happen to his pipes would know how to write this story.

Me and My Hissing Shadow

The central point of this story is identifying the real enemy. The story consists of only the creature's thoughts, mostly about his potential external enemies. He does not identify his own thoughts as his own worst enemy.

As the story goes along, you will sense that this creature is his own destroyer. That identification is finally simulated in the mirror image creature he thinks is making the mysterious hiss and threatening him. He and his threatening shadow, the hissing shadow he makes himself.

As Time Goes By

For this creature, the fight or flight instinct is activated nearly all the time, and the possibilities of the present are frozen by repetition of past practices based in safety and the perceived threat of future attacks without warning. He has become an adrenaline junky.

Both the past and the fearsome future chew on the creature's present. The creature fears what can come from the powers that be, in this case ones with teeth. Why limit worry to everyday reality? Be prepared for everything. You never can tell. They are coming. They came in the past. We get the impression this creature would worry about the fact that electrons don't know exactly where they are.

The creature lives entirely alone. This is the life lived with fear as your only companion. Reducing risks does not give a sense of peace, since attention is constantly on the risks to survival rather than on enjoying yourself. The creature should be afraid of not living rather than being afraid of dying. As it is, the creature only has his whole hole, his collection of killed creatures and his constant companion fear. Fear is hard to snuggle with.

Without others, the creature is focused entirely on himself. The only possible connections to other creatures are teeth. Heit has no positive creature connections, you are either the diner or the dinner. Lacking positive emotional connections, the creature is insecure. He could be protecting rather than defending.

In terms of what we do not hear in the story, the most important is about knowledge or premonition of inevitable death. The creature does not seem to know that heit will surely die. Knowledge of this inevitability could have added chocolate and red wine to the creature's present moments.

With fear as the enemy of the value of the moment, the moment is viewed not on its own and independently but instead as the first part of a continuum to danger that may come in the future without warning. The present is too busy with that worry to have its own eternal meaning independent of time. His present is reverse mortgaged to the future.

Note that fear could be stilled with a group of creatures living together, some serving as look-outs to provide warning, a sort of security service. But that would require living with others, a social capacity our solitary creature lacks.

I Got Plenty of Nothing

The container here is the burrow. What the burrow contains is a hole; it is a negative structure of nothing. It is a void, just like the creature's life.

The contained is the creature. The burrow is his life's chief accomplishment. This is his championship trophy, his trophy wife. The burrow shapes the creature; indeed by the end of the story the creature is the burrow. The creature is bounded by the hole, shaped by the hole, is the hole. Near the end of the story, the creature tears up his burrow looking for the source of the hiss that tears himself up.

As a hole, the burrow is a reverse Tower of Babel pointing downward. It is built on fear and striving to do less rather than as with Babel built on courage and striving for more.

The Echo of Your Fear

After the creature experiences unusual stress on the outside or uptop from the new and unexpected, the fear that he previously felt internally now is heard externally.

In psychoanalytic terms, the sound would be a hallucination caused by a psychotic episode resulting from prolonged exposure to the new and different uptop. In Kantian terms that I think Kafka would prefer, his fearful soul finally distorted his perception of reality received by his senses to include a threatening external hiss.

After several incorrect guesses, our creature finally imagines the hiss is made by a creature exactly like himself, a mirror image of himself. Since the creature is his enemy, he has literally become his own enemy. This is the Nietzsche effect, the abyss coming to him.

The only place in the burrow where the hiss cannot be heard is the Castle Keep, the large room near the center of the burrow [think heart]. The extra work put into the unusual construction of this room did not serve a practical purpose. Like a church, it has a high ceiling that needed additional wall