

Music and Knowledge in Two Texts by Franz Kafka

An Honors Thesis Presented  
by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of

Bachelor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Germanic Languages and Literatures

University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Defense held at Universität Augsburg  
Augsburg, Germany  
July, 1998

Thesis Advisor: Professor Clark Muenzer

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people (in no particular order) for making this project possible:

Professor Clark Muenzer for his careful proofreading, his helpful suggestions, his kind words of encouragement, and making the arrangements to have the defense at the University of Augsburg,

Professor Post of the University of Augsburg, for making the preparations on the Augsburg side, grading my presentation, and the use of his computer to finish typing the paper,

Professor Ashliman, for grading my presentation even on his trip to Germany in the summer and for his helpful comments and corrections on the paper,

Sandy Macurak, for mailing all of the necessary documents and drafts on such short notice.

I would also like to extend a special thanks to the Brackenridge family, Dean Stewart, and the University Honors College of the University of Pittsburgh for the generous financial support. I wrote this paper with support from the Brackenridge Summer Research Fellowship 1997. Without financial support projects like these would be impossible. I hope that the UHC can continue to support students interested in serious academic attainment for semesters to come.

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## I. Introduction

Franz Kafka portrays two characters in “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” (1917) and *Forschungen eines Hundes* (1922) respectively, who are faced with a lack of knowledge, and therefore lead problematic lives. I will show how Kafka uses contradiction and paradox in the domain of music to find a certain knowledge of existence in both of the narratives. Each text differs in the knowledge that its protagonist gains and in the role which music and sound play.

Odysseus in “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” is confronted with the destruction of his existence by the Sirens. The knowledge that he lacks is the means to outwit the Sirens. The paradox lies in the undecidability, or the *Unentscheidbarkeit*, of whether or not Odysseus hears the silence, and it arises from the self-referential nature of the text. Odysseus finally gains his knowledge of existence in that he finds a way to outwit the Sirens, namely the process of searching for the means. From this point on I will use the process of searching for the means as synonymous with the process of searching for a consistent interpretation of existence. Both are actually the same thing, since Odysseus must find a successful interpretation of the means to outwit the Sirens in order to survive.

Kafka shapes the problem somewhat differently for the *Forscherhund* in *Forschungen eines Hundes*. The investigating dog, who is also the first person narrator of the story, is confronted with the problem of finding a consistent interpretation of his existence and surroundings, since he was born with the unstoppable drive to interpret, “den Drang zu fragen.” The knowledge that the dog lacks is manifest in the many contradictions that he stumbles upon in his environment. These include contradictions in his relationship to dog society and his neighbor, contradictions in his perception of himself, as well as contradictions in dogdom itself. With successive phases in his life, the dog revises his interpretation to account for the new contradiction. Throughout this process, the dog’s methodology goes through its own development. The paradox is that he cannot find a consistent interpretation or understanding, of his existence. The dog finally gains this understanding after acknowledging the impossibility of

absolute truth and after becoming conscious of the process of searching for an interpretation.

The dog wins his new consciousness through *hearing*.

## II. Kafka and Music

Kafka's personal relationship with music provides insight in the two selected texts. Kafka lacked any special talent for music, which he regarded with fear and lack of understanding. In letters and conversations Kafka compared the chaotic power of music to the endlessness of the sea. He uses this comparison again in "Das Schweigen der Sirenen," which is set somewhere in the endless expanse of the sea. Perhaps more significant is the music that Kafka experienced with the Yiddish Theater Troop from Warsaw, where music was not only a medium but also a common motif. Kafka's active interest in the Yiddish Theater Troop provides a clear autobiographical context for reading the *Forschungen eines Hundes*.

Kafka was generally unmusical, as he admits repeatedly in his letters and journals. In the June 14, 1920 letter to Milena Jesenska he writes, "In diesem Zusammenhang fällt mir ein: weißt Du eigentlich daß ich vollständig, in einer meiner Erfahrung nach überhaupt sonst nicht vorkommenden Vollständigkeit unmusikalisch bin?"<sup>1</sup> Max Brod agrees in his biography of Kafka:

Hier sei eingefügt, daß Kafka, wie zum Ausgleich für die besondere Gabe seiner musikalischen Sprachkunst, der eigentlichen Musikbegabung ermangelte. [...] Kafka spielte kein Instrument. Einmal sagte er mir, er könne die 'Lustige Witwe' nicht von 'Tristan' unterscheiden. Daran stimmt jedenfalls so viel, daß er sich um Kennenlernen hoher Musik nie sehr bemüht hat. Aber ein natürliches Gefühl für Rhythmus und Melos fehlte nicht. [...] Ich schleppte ihn öfters zu Konzerten, gab es aber bald auf, da seine Eindrücke bei ihnen rein visueller Art waren. 'Die gehörte Musik zieht natürlich eine Mauer um mich,' schreibt er im Tagebuch über ein Brahms-Konzert, 'und meine einzige dauernde musikalische Beeinflussung ist die, daß ich, so eingesperrt, anders bin als frei.' (Brod 103)

Kafka's mention here of the visual nature of his impressions is important to note, since at times he seems to favor the visual in his writing, including his use of theatrical elements.<sup>2</sup> Klaus Wagenbach agrees that Kafka was unmusical, but notes that Kafka did try to learn piano and

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, eds. Jürgen Born and Michael Müller (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1983) 65. Hereafter cited as (Kafka Briefe page). In 1986 a softcover version of this same text was printed.

<sup>2</sup> I am considering theatrical devices, such as gesture for example, as visual elements, since they rely on the spectator's vision to receive the image of a performer on stage.

violin while at the Gymnasium (Wagenbach 36). Wagenbach explains that this is why music always appears as something distant and unfamiliar in Kafka's works.

Kafka did not let his lack of musicality bother him to any great degree, however. On June 25, 1920, he writes to Milena: "So zweifellos ist es nicht, daß Unmusikalität ein Unglück ist; zunächst ist es für mich keines, sondern ein Erbstück der Vorfahren [...] und gibt mir einigen Halt, ja Verwandtschaft bedeutet für mich viel, dann aber ist es doch ein menschliches Unglück, ähnlich oder gleich dem Nicht-Weinen-, dem Nicht-Schlafen-können. Und musikalische Menschen verstehn bedeutet ja schon fast Unmusikalität" (Kafka Briefe 79). Here Kafka indicates that he recognizes his lack of musicality, but accepts it as inevitable because of his ancestors.

Despite this lack of musicality, Kafka did have feeling for music in literature, which connects music to water and fear.<sup>3</sup> On August 28, 1920, he writes to Milena:

Die Übersetzung des Schlußsatzes ist sehr gut. In jener Geschichte hängt jeder Satz, jedes Wort, jede - wenn's erlaubt ist - Musik mit der "Angst" zusammen, damals brach die Wunde zum erstenmal auf in einer langen Nacht und diesen Zusammenhang trifft die Übersetzung für mein Gefühl genau, mit jener zauberhaften Hand, die eben Deine ist. (Kafka Briefe 235)

Here Kafka is writing about Milena's translation of *Das Urteil* (1913), which was published late in 1922 with the title "Soud" in the magazine *Cesta*. Kafka draws a connection between music and fear in this letter. Between 1920 and 1923 Kafka makes a similar remark to Gustav Janouch:

Die Musik ist für mich so etwas wie das Meer. Ich bin überwältigt, hingerissen zur Bewunderung, begeistert und doch so ängstlich, so schrecklich ängstlich vor der Unendlichkeit. Max Brod ist ganz anders. Der stürzt sich kopfüber in die tönende Flut. Das ist ein Preisschwimmer. (Janouch 84)

Allison Turner points out that music is understood here in terms of drowning, fear, and lack of understanding (Turner 268). Max Brod can swim so well because of his natural love of music,

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<sup>3</sup> Franz Grillparzer's *Der arme Spielmann* was one of Kafka's favorite stories for example. In this story the violinist is killed in a flood, in *einer tönenden Flut*.

whereas Kafka may sink because of his lack of understanding. This imagery offers some insight into “Das Schweigen der Sirenen,” which was written in October 1917, only a few years before the remarks to Janouch. The image of drowning appears again in the August 17th, 1920, letter to Milena:

Mir ist manchmal als hätte ich solche Bleigewichte, daß es mich in einem Augenblick ins tiefste Meer hinunterziehen müßte und der welcher mich fassen oder gar “retten” wollte es bleiben ließe, nicht aus Schwäche, nicht einmal aus Hoffnungslosigkeit, sondern aus bloßem Ärger. Nun das ist natürlich nicht zu Dir gesprochen, sondern zu einem schwachen Schein von Dir. (Kafka Briefe 217-218)

We note that Kafka writes here of *Rettung* and *Schein*, both of which appear in “Das Schweigen der Sirenen.” Kafka writes again on the 29th of the same month: “Liebe Milena so unbeherrscht, so hin- und her geworfen in einem Meer, das nur aus Bosheit einen nicht verschlingt” (Kafka Briefe 238). Although these letters do not contain any direct reference to “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” they do demonstrate that Kafka saw chaotic power, lack of understanding, and fear in the image of the sea and in music, both of which have a role in the parable.

Although the performance of music had little effect on Kafka, he was very sensitive to sounds and noise. An example is the sketch “Großer Lärm” (1912), which he wrote in his third “Tagebuchheft.” Allison Turner points out a letter to Brod in relation to the threat of noise to Kafka’s work:

For one who termed himself unmusical, Kafka seems to have had an extraordinarily acute sensitivity to noise. His preoccupation with the problem of disturbance through noise runs like a leitmotiv through his letters, in particular those of June and July 1922. In one to Max Brod he writes: ‘Und das Schreiben? (das übrigens hier untermittelmäßig weitergeht, sonst nichts, und immerfort von Lärm gefährdet).’ (Turner 273)

Turner’s description here of the later Kafka is very similar to the Kafka of 1911, when he wrote the sketch “Großer Lärm.” In both the sketch and the letter Kafka describes the noisy conditions under which he must write. The chaotic noise poses a threat to his work.

The turning point for Kafka in regard to music occurred in the years 1911-1912 during his involvement with the Yiddish Theater Troop from Warsaw. Numerous journal entries and



letters document the tremendous influence of the troop, which Evelyn Beck describes in detail in *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater*. Beck points out that the Yiddish Theater coincided with a major change in Kafka's writing before his literary breakthrough in 1912 with *Das Urteil* (Beck 6). Kafka began to employ dramatic techniques of the Yiddish Theater, such as gesture, focus on actions of characters, and tension through visual means (Beck 7-8).

Music is characteristic of the operetta-like Yiddish Theater. Kafka not only employed techniques of the Yiddish Theater, but also themes and motifs of music. Beck points out,

Music, as a symbol of the Absolute, plays a central role in the dog's experiences (in the "Forschungen") (as also in the life of Gregor and Josefine the Singer). The significance given to music in "Investigations of a Dog" and "Josefine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" reminds us that music was an essential component of the Yiddish plays. Kafka himself was moved by the power of this music, although he considered himself generally unmusical. A critic present at a New York performance of *Bar Kokhba* in 1885 describes the impact that the music of the Yiddish plays could have [...] 'But underlying the whole narration, and vivifying even the dullest portions is the music-which swells sometimes into a chorus of tearful and tender lamentation. [...] It creates an illusion stronger than would be possible by the most deft arrangement of ordinary dramatic materials.' Not only the music which accompanied the performances, but also the theme of music as symbol of the Divine or Absolute within the plays can be related to Kafka's work. (Beck 203-204)

Beck goes on to analyze particular similarities between Kafka's themes and the themes of the Yiddish plays *God, Man, and Devil*, *David's Violin*, *The Savage One*, and *The Slaughtering*. She also connects the theme of nourishment to Kafka's experience with the Yiddish Theater:

As it happens, food holds a dominant position in the Jewish household, even among assimilated Jews like Kafka's family, and serves as an important symbol of group cohesion. Jewish holidays are based on food images. This emphasis on food must have been strongly impressed upon Kafka both in his home and through the Yiddish plays, which reflected Jewish culture. (Beck 201)

In fact, Beck notes that the Yiddish plays include many Jewish idioms that are based on food (Beck 210). Thus there is a direct connection between the Yiddish plays and *Forschungen eines Hundes*, which has as its two major themes nourishment and music.

Hartmut Binder in his *Motiv and Gestaltung bei Franz Kafka* (1966) also draws parallels between *Forschungen eines Hundes* and the Yiddish plays. Binder sees the episode with the

musical dogs as nothing other than Kafka's meeting with the Yiddish Theater Troop (Binder 13). Binder lists numerous similarities, but I will only mention a few here. First, no one took the Yiddish actors and Kafka's involvement with them seriously, just as the other dogs did not take the narrator and his description of the musical dogs seriously. Second, the experience with the musical dogs inspired the narrator to begin his investigations of dogdom in much the same way that the Yiddish Theater inspired Kafka to begin his investigations into Judaism. Third, the indecency of the actors is similar to the lack of shame of the dancing dogs. Lastly, Kafka turns to the Jews of the Yiddish Theater Troop for teaching and wisdom in the same way that the *Forscherhund* turns to others for answers. Binder argues further in his article "Kafkas Hebräischstudien" that the *Musikwissenschaft* in *Forschungen eines Hundes* is symbolic of Kafka's attempts to learn Hebrew.

In summary, the Yiddish Theater Troop provides insight to the subject matter of the *Forschungen*. Binder argues convincingly that the investigating dog is really Kafka investigating his Judaism after his awakening with the Yiddish Theater Troop. But Kafka's distance from music, and his fear of it, are also manifested in the incomprehensibility of Odysseus's existence in "Das Schweigen der Sirenen." Letters, diary entries, and conversations offer detailed testimony of Kafka's relationship to music and the Yiddish Theater.

### III. “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” (1917)

In “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” Kafka demonstrates through the example of Odysseus that insufficient means can be sufficient for survival. Odysseus tries in vain to comprehend his contradictory existence in the face of the Sirens and his uncertainty about them. His efforts are futile, in fact, and the narrator makes clear to us that Odysseus has no prospects for survival, because nothing helps against the Sirens’ silence. Yet Odysseus’s “Mittel” is not the wax and chains, but rather his search for a means to outwit the Sirens, which I will demonstrate. That is, Odysseus affirms his existence in his attempt to understand his existence with a consistent interpretation. Although no interpretation can be sufficient or absolute, Odysseus finds meaning in the search. He discovers knowledge in the incomprehensibility of his existence through his search for a consistent interpretation, i.e. his search for the means to outwit the Sirens.

I will discuss the following topics in detail to show that Odysseus does find knowledge (*Entschlossenheit*) when confronted with his own contradictory existence. The self-contradictory nature of Kafka’s text gives rise to a new type of knowledge and certainty within uncertainty, which in turn is intricately connected to music and existence. Furthermore, there is tension between the overwhelming acoustic power of music and the visual aspects of the story, which we perceive in the allusions to the Perseus myth. The contradictory nature of the text complicates this tension and becomes the most important element of the story. We see contradiction in Kafka’s first sentence, in the description of the piece as a proof, and in Kafka’s usage of myth, as well as in the tension between sound and silence. This development climaxes in a contradiction to the law of the excluded middle. Kafka achieves a contradiction to the law of the excluded middle through self reference. Within this context of paradox, it becomes undecidable whether or not Odysseus hears the silence of the Sirens or not. Therefore it becomes undecidable whether or not he survives. Despite the hopelessness of his situation, however, Odysseus finds salvation (*Rettung*) in this in-between state. He finds certainty within his search. This leads to the core of my paper: Odysseus’s search is the means to his survival.

I will first describe how Kafka creates tension between the acoustic power of music and the visual aspects of the story, which we see in the allusions to the Perseus myth. The overwhelming power of music and sound is apparent throughout the text. We see that the song (or lack thereof) was so powerful that it could travel over great distances, penetrate anything, and could be resisted by nothing on this earth. The narrator states in the beginning of the story that the Sirens can lure sailors even at a great distance: “[...] außer denen [Reisenden], welche die Sirenen schon aus der Ferne verlockten,” implying that the song of the Sirens and its power to tempt can span great areas.<sup>4</sup> The song is also unstoppable within short distances: “Der Sang der Sirenen durchdrang alles” (Kafka II 40). This “alles” includes a handful of wax. The resulting passion of the sailors could break *more* than chains and mast. One must wonder to what this “more” refers (Samuel 54). The narrator calls attention to the tremendous power of silence, which is also a sound, “Es ist zwar nicht geschehen, aber vielleicht denkbar, daß sich jemand vor ihrem Gesange gerettet hätte, aber vor ihrem Schweigen *gewiß* nicht” (Kafka II 40). In fact, nothing on earth can resist the resulting “Überhebung.” This comment would place Odysseus above humans, if he could survive the Sirens, since nothing human (“nichts Irdisches”) can resist them. The power of the song also points to the power of aural perception, for only something as powerful as the song could receive the song.

The Sirens have been associated with the power of song and problematic textuality in other contexts as well. Bettina Menke points out the important etymology of the Sirens:

Der verlockende ‘nichtssagende Klang’ wird im Bild der Sirene, in dem seine Gefährlichkeit und insofern die Verlockung durch die Stimme emblematisch wurde, Bild für die falsche, ins Verderben führende, das heißt, von der Bedeutung der Worte ablenkende Rhetorik. (Menke 134)

Menke (150) also calls attention to Siegfried von Rachewiltz’s research: “The emblem of the Siren was associated with the art of typography during the Renaissance, and in many cases became the emblem of the printed book. [...] The Siren over the course of her long history often

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<sup>4</sup> Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente Band II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1992) 40. Hereafter cited as (Kafka II page).

has been associated with various forms of problematic textuality. [...] Given this tradition it is not surprising that the Sirens should be associated with the art of printing” (Rachewiltz 231-234).<sup>5</sup> The relevance of problematic textuality will become apparent later. The Sirens also romantically became the emblem of the power of song (Menke 143).

Kafka makes several references to the Perseus myth, in much the same way that he refers to the complicated history of the Sirens. “Schauriges Haar” recalls the image of Medusa’s face and her hair of snakes. The attack of the Sirens is similar to the attack of Medusa in terms of their effect: the attacked is silenced forever. Medusa turns people into stone, while the Sirens lure the sailors into the rocks, or large stones. Similarly, as David Wellbery points out, the Gorgon face can be no more looked at than the silence can be heard. The mention of shield at the end of Kafka’s parable reminds us of Perseus’s shield (Wellbery 174). In Kafka’s story Odysseus uses his eyes, as a type of shield, to reflect an image that captures the Sirens: “Sie wollten nicht mehr verführen, nur noch den Abglanz vom großen Augenpaar des Odysseus wollten sie so lange als möglich erhaschen” (Kafka II 41). Exactly what the eyes reflect, however, remains unclear. Even Odysseus’s gaze has the effect of a shield: “Bald aber glitt alles an seinen in die Ferne gerichteten Blicken ab” (Kafka II 41). The “alles” must include the silence of the Sirens.

The comparison with the Medusa story calls attention to the tension between the visual and the aural in Kafka’s text. In the case of Perseus the sight of the opponent brings destruction, while in the case of Odysseus the sound of the opponent is deadly. The tension between the visual and the aural can be seen in other aspects as well. One example lies in the fact that Odysseus defeats the Sirens using his eyes and appearance. The Sirens are captured by the reflection of his eyes, which they, in turn, want to catch (capture). Odysseus’s appearance,

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<sup>5</sup> For a very detailed account of the history of the Sirens see de Siegfried Walter Rachewiltz, *De Sirenibus: An Inquiry into Sirens from Homer to Shakespeare*, diss., Harvard U, 1983. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1989. 8322330. One very pertinent observation is, “Already in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Sirens appear to suggest a danger not only to Odysseus, but to Homer’s poem itself – whether they represent the lure of lyric, or of an alternative, more Iliadic form of epic, or simply the danger that the narrative will be diverted from its course by its own self-indulgent tendency to mirror or echo itself along the way” (Rachewiltz 233).

although *scheinhaft*, is effective, “[so] daß der Anblick der Glückseligkeit im Gesicht des Odysseus [...] sie allen Gesang vergessen ließ” (Kafka II 41). We thus see a creature of song and aural power defeated by visual means. After the narrator announces that the Sirens did not sing, the appearance of the Sirens is described in detail. Menke notes, “Eine Verschiebung ins Optische findet statt” (Menke 149). What Odysseus sees at that point is nothing other than the movements required to make song: “Flüchtig sah er zuerst die Wendungen ihrer Hälse, das tiefe Atmen, die tränenvollen Augen, den halbgeöffneten Mund” (Kafka II 41). Günter Samuel points out that these are the organs of sight and voice: *Augen* und *Mund* (60).<sup>6</sup>

After the tension between the visual and the aural, the contradictory nature of the text immediately comes to the reader’s attention. One of the strongest impressions of the text is its contradictory nature. The story seems to run into itself, to cast doubt onto itself. Already the first sentence presents a paradox: “Beweis dessen, daß auch unzulängliche, ja kindische Mittel zur Rettung dienen können” (Kafka II 40). The means are described as “unzulänglich.” Yet if they can accomplish the task of saving Odysseus, as the sentence claims, then they really are sufficient. Furthermore, in this very same sentence, the means are referred to as “kindisch,” which seems to characterize them as insufficient again. This has a trivializing effect by giving the impression that the means are not so important. In reality, however, the means are everything but trivial. They make the difference between life and death. One cannot help but to think of the statement from *In der Strafkolonie* “Das ist keine Schönschrift für Kinder,” by which the speaker suggests that the matter in question is a serious one. There the officer and traveler are talking about the very plans of existence on the island. But here Kafka says the opposite, as if existence were not at stake. The means are trivialized again as “Mittelchen” and “unschuldig,” which reinforce the thought of children, or at least immaturity.

Such tension and contradiction between certainty and uncertainty is an essential element of Kafka’s text. We see this in his description of the piece as a “Beweis.” The word “Beweis”

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<sup>6</sup> “Filmischer Großaufnahme analog heftet sich der Blick an Hals, Augen und Mund, die Organe von Stimme und Blick, um ihrer ungehörten oder unerhörten Exaltation die qual der Lust abzulesen.”

reminds us immediately of a mathematical proof and its absolute certainty, yet Kafka repeatedly uses the subjunctive and phrases like “sagt man,” “um es so auszudrücken,” and “vielleicht” to imply uncertainty. The narrator scientifically describes a phenomenon and offers several explanations for what he has observed. In this enlightened tradition, the narrator makes the claim that he is presenting a proof. This claim implies a high degree of certainty, which unavoidably dissolves in the paradox of the text, which lies in the contradiction to the law of the excluded middle. At certain moments, in fact, it seems doubtful that we are dealing with a proof here at all. Wellbery points out that “den obigen Scheinvorgang” refers to the described event as well as the text. Kafka can thus cast doubt on the proof: it seems to be a proof, but is really not, it is just an apparent proof, *ein scheinhafter Beweis*. Since Max Brod gave the text its title, it would seem that the title should have been the first sentence, as it appeared in Kafka’s notebook: “Beweis dessen, daß auch unzulängliche, ja kindische Mittel zur Rettung dienen können” (Kafka II 40). His very first word is *Beweis*, and through this the text places itself in the more general category of proofs. But Kafka’s proof dissolves within its own uncertainty and cannot be called *Beweis* in any traditional sense. The placement and category of the text thus also become contradictory and problematic.

Proof presupposes the existence of an axiomatic system in which the proof can occur. This means a sophisticated system with certain fundamental axioms that one cannot doubt. In this context “kindisch” suggests the opposite to the sophistication, or in Wellbery’s reading, “kindische Mittel [...], die die Schulung des logischen Denkens noch nicht durchgemacht haben” (Wellbery 164). The axioms of such a system would be completely *fest*. “Odysseus ließ sich am Mast *fest*schmieden,” means he was tightly (*fest*) bound to something *fest*. This could be read as placing the proof within a well-founded order or system. In the sentence “die Leidenschaft der Verführten hätte mehr als Ketten und Mast gesprengt,” *mehr* could refer, in this context, to the entire axiomatic system.<sup>7</sup> The “alles *fort*reißende Überhebung” has the power to tear

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<sup>7</sup> This is one answer to Günter Samuel’s question which I cited on page 12: one must wonder to what this “more” refers.

Odysseus away (*fort*) from this something that is solid (*fest*). In a certain sense, moreover, “fortreißen” echoes “festschmieden,” as they both are verbs, they both begin with f, and they both have the same number of syllables, and the same number of letters in the prefix. This tension within the similarities between *fest* and *fort* demonstrates the difference between certainty and uncertainty, as well as presence and absence. The *fest* means the solid basis of here as opposed to the uncertainty and the unknown of *fort*.

We can further see the contradictory nature of the text in Kafka’s usage of the myth, which is tentative. “Eingangs zitiert Kafka den Mythos in einem Satz, um ihn jedoch sofort zu verfremden und dementieren” (Kremer 128). Kafka makes the familiar text foreign by changing a few details of the well known myth, whereas well known means “der ganzen Welt bekannt” (Koelb 301).<sup>8</sup> Samuel points out that Kafka modifies the myth in three important points. Firstly, the goddess Circe is not mentioned. In the traditional myth she predicts the event, tells Odysseus what means to use as an escape, and puts the wind in the sails of the ship (Samuel 52). In Kafka’s version Odysseus seems to have thought of the wax and chains on his own. The only mention of wind in his story is “Sie [...] ließen das schaurige Haar offen im Winde wehen und spannten die Krallen frei auf den Felsen” (Kafka II 41). Secondly, the companions are not mentioned at all. There is only the anonymous person who ties Odysseus to the mast (Samuel 52). Thirdly, Odysseus uses both the wax and chains on himself, whereas Homer’s myth describes Odysseus as having been chained and only the companions as having been fortified with the wax in their ears (Samuel 52). There are other differences as well. The myth clearly states that the song of the Sirens is destructive. Kafka, on the other hand, says exactly the opposite. It is not the song that is powerful, but the lack of song, the Sirens’ will to silence.

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<sup>8</sup> Clayton Koelb, “Kafka and the Sirens: Writing as Lethetic Reading,” *The Comparative Perspectives on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, eds. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 301. Here Koelb argues that Kafka challenges the reader by changing the premises of the well know Odysseus myth. Koelb argues further that the parable is really about reading. He compares two approaches to reading that were proposed by Jacques Derrida in his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” The first humanist approach is associated with Levi-Strauß, Freud and Plato. The second interpretation of reading is associated with Nietzsche. See his above essay as well as the following for further details. Koelb, Clayton. “The Margin in the Middle: Kafka’s Other Reading of Reading.” *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance: Centenary Readings*. Ed. Alan Udoff. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. 76-86.



The Sirens do not die as they do in the myth, but as Politzer suggests “verschwimmen im Zwielficht der Ungewißheit” (*Das Schweigen der Sirenen* 16).<sup>9</sup> Kafka thus takes the familiar myth, makes a few changes, and then confuses the reader as to what is real and what is not, thus casting doubt on the myth. According to Kremer, “Die Metamorphose des Mythos funktioniert über eine Reihe von Stilfiguren, die in Kafkas Prosa insgesamt bestens ausgewiesen sind. Sie verschieben die narrative Festigkeit des Mythos ins Vage” (Kremer 129). The fact (*Festigkeit*) of the myth is pulled away (*fort*) into uncertainty.

The contradictory nature of sound, silence, and song has drastic consequences for the text, since it is undecidable whether Odysseus hears the deadly silence or not. The wax protects him from the song by subjecting him to a silence that is the absence of sound. The Sirens are producing a different kind of silence, however, by willing it. The silence that Odysseus perceives (*wahrnimmt*) is also willed, but willed by him. Consequently two different silences come into question depending on whether the source or the recipient wills it. Further, it remains undecidable which silence Odysseus hears. As the narrator points out, “Vielleicht hat er, obwohl das mit Menschenverstand nicht mehr zu begreifen ist, wirklich gemerkt, daß die Sirenen schwiegen” (Kafka II 41-42). If Odysseus heard the deadly silence, then he surely would be destroyed, according to the statement of the narrator: “Es ist zwar nicht geschehen, aber vielleicht denkbar, daß sich jemand vor ihrem Gesang gerettet hätte, vor ihrem Schweigen gewiß nicht” (Kafka II 40). The narrator did not just write “nicht”, but rather “*gewiß nicht*.” Therefore one silence promises death, the other silence promises life. Since it is undecidable which silence Odysseus hears, it is undecidable whether he live or dies. Wellbery argues that we have to understand this undecidability as the basis of Odysseus’s survival: “Kafkas Odysseus überlebt, aber im Tode, hält inne zwischen Leben und Tod, als bewohnte er die Zäsur. Ist das Rettung oder Untergang? Unentscheidbar, und in dieser Unentscheidbarkeit schwebt der narrative Sinn”

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<sup>9</sup> “Sie [die Sirenen] stürzen sich nicht von ihrem Felsen in den Abgrund, sondern verschwimmen im Zwielficht der Ungewißheit.”

(Wellbery 175). Wellbery means here that Odysseus pauses between life and death and accepts his existence in that in-between state.

Actually, it is even undecidable whether or not the Sirens choose their silence willfully: “Und tatsächlich sangen [...] die gewaltigen Sangerinnen nicht, sei es, da sie glaubten, diesem Gegner konne nur noch das Schweigen beikommen, sei es, da der Anblick der Gluckseligkeit im Gesicht Odysseus [...] sie allen Gesang vergessen lie” (Kafka II 40-41). We see here the possibility that Odysseus made them forget their song. If they had forgotten their song, then their silence would not have been willed.

Finally Kafka adds another twist to the contradictory nature of the text and sound. This is the self-reference of his text. Self-reference often leads to paradox, which I take to mean more than contradiction. Kafka’s paradox, I want to argue, involves a contradiction to the law of the excluded middle. This law has various formulations. One formulation states that every statement is either true or false. Another states that each thing either has a certain property or lacks that same property. It cannot both lack and have a certain property. Let us define having property B as having property A and define having property C as lacking the property A. We are working here under the assumption that property B is distinct from property A, otherwise the definition of B is meaningless. I mean that A is not defined by having property B, i.e. that property A is independent of property B. Properties B and C depend on the presence or lack of A. The law of the excluded middle thus states that “Each thing cannot have both property B and property C at the same time, nor can the thing lack both properties at the same time.” Call the following statement “Statement X”: “This sentence is false.” Statement X is an example of a contradiction to the law of the excluded middle for the following reasons. If we assume it to be true, Statement X claims its own falsity. If we assume it to be false, then Statement X claims itself to be the opposite of false, namely true. Thus, it is both true and not true (false), and it contradicts the law of the excluded middle.<sup>10</sup> Here we are looking at statement A as “the thing

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<sup>10</sup> Kurt Godel used a very similar statement in the proof of his Incompleteness Theorem (1931), which is one of the major accomplishments of twentieth century mathematics. The theorem shows that any consistent axiomatic system strong enough to embrace number theory is incomplete. Consistency means that the axioms do not lead to any

is true,” so that the statement has both property B and property C. The well known problem with Statement X is that it refers to itself. It makes a statement about its own content. This self-reference leads to the paradox.

Kafka’s “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” references itself similarly in the “Anhang.” The “Anhang” is still part of the text proper. It is not a footnote, nor under a separate title. The “Anhang” offers a sort of commentary on the text (itself). It offers an interpretation of Odysseus’s actions, “Vielleicht hat er [...] wirklich gemerkt, daß die Sirenen schwiegen” (Kafka II 41-42). This interpretation is built upon another piece of knowledge, the source of which is unclear: “Odysseus, sagt man, war so listenreich, war ein solcher Fuchs, daß selbst die Schicksalsgöttin nicht in sein Innerstes dringen konnte” (Kafka II 41). The “sagt man” indicates that the origin of this piece of knowledge is uncertain. If the “Anhang” were not included at all, then we could be sure that Odysseus did not hear the deadly silence and that he did survive, as the statements, “Odysseus, um es so auszudrücken, hörte ihr Schweigen nicht,” and “So aber blieben sie, nur Odysseus ist ihnen entgangen,” suggest (Kafka II 41). The codicil points back to these statements and casts a shadow of doubt on them. It becomes undecidable whether Odysseus heard the silence or not only after consideration of the codicil. This contradicts the law of the excluded middle. Therefore it is a paradox. Wellbery notes, “Kafkas Praxis des Zitierens stellt eine Konfiguration her, die durch Selbstreferenz und Unentscheidbarkeit gekennzeichnet ist. Diese sind Eigenschaften des Paradoxens” (Wellbery 164). It is in this sense of paradox that the text and Odysseus’s existence become contradictory and problematic. It is

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contradiction. Incomplete means that there exists at least one meaningful statement in that axiomatic system which is neither provable nor disprovable using the fundamental axioms. To prove the theorem Gödel *embedded* the axiomatic system into whole numbers. This means that he assigned to each symbol, formula, and proof a unique whole number. Then he constructed an assertion G that says “the statement with the number m is not provable.” The trick is that he constructed the assertion G in such a way that *its number is m*. Thus G claims of itself that it cannot be proved. At this point we are in the same situation as with “Statement X.” If G is provable, then it asserts that is unprovable. So this cannot be the case. If G is unprovable, then the statement G affirms that. It is in this way that Gödel demonstrates the existence of at least one meaningful unprovable statement in the axiomatic system at hand and the axiomatic system is thus incomplete. It is interesting to note that only 15 years after Kafka experimented with self-reference in “Das Schweigen der Sirenen,” Gödel used self-reference to throw mathematics into a state of crisis in 1931, which mathematicians have still not resolved by the turn of the century.

therefore fitting that Kafka chose the figure of the Sirens, since the Sirens have often been associated with problematic textuality, as was pointed out by Rachewiltz earlier.<sup>11</sup>

Odysseus gains knowledge (“Entschlossenheit”) and accepts (“Er vertraute [...]”) his existence in this in-between state. The music, sound, and lack thereof are exactly what get him into the predicament. His entire behavior was caused by the song. We can now view the parable’s *Mittel* as the process of searching for a means to outwit the Sirens, which involves finding an internally consistent interpretation of existence in that moment. The *Mittel* is then the process of choosing between pretending to not hear the silence or actually not hearing the silence. Either alternative requires rational argumentation. Which one Odysseus chooses, or if he even chooses, remains undecidable. If it is undecidable, then it is also incomprehensible. It is exactly in this incomprehensibility (“nicht mehr mit Menschenverstand zu begreifen”) of his contradictory (“unzulänglich”) state (“Innerstes”) and choice that Odysseus finds knowledge of existence, i.e. the “Beweis” and “Rettung.”

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<sup>11</sup> See the bottom of page 12 and note 5 for the full quote.

#### IV. *Forschungen eines Hundes* (1922)

In the same way that Odysseus survives through his act of interpretation, the *Forscherhund* of *Forschungen eines Hundes* discovers that his only means of survival are the process of interpretation. The dog interprets because he was born with the *Drang zu fragen*. Throughout the story the dog proposes several interpretations of his environment, and then experiments with each interpretation. In this respect Odysseus and the investigative dog differ. Odysseus does not perform any experiments or formulate a particular interpretation. Both characters however gain a new acoustic awareness through their endeavors. This is the strongest similarity between the two texts.

I will now give a summary of what I intend to show. As the protagonist narrator of the *Forschungen* stumbles through life, he comes across many contradictions. These contradictions cause him to question his existence and world. Through his questioning, the dog strives to impose an interpretation onto the world. The dog's process of finding a coherent interpretation of the world, which he never can accomplish in the same way that Josef K. cannot write his *Lebenslauf*, is the subject of *Forschungen eines Hundes*. The dog's conflicting drives to interpret and to silence interpretation become manifest in his search. His methodology goes through its own development, moreover, from the musical dogs to the experiments concerning the nature of nutrition, culminating in the hunger episode. These experiments are, in turn, symbolic of the hermeneutic process. Ultimately the dog gains knowledge of existence in his struggle to interpret. I will discuss all of these topics in detail, beginning with the contradictions in the dog's world.

The dog's description of himself and his surroundings is filled with contradictions, which I will treat in the following paragraphs. Kafka's story about the dog seems to run into itself in the same way as "Das Schweigen der Sirenen." The dog makes a statement and then says the opposite only a few lines later. The *Forschungen* begins with a paradox in a way similar to "Das Schweigen der Sirenen": "Wie sich mein Leben verändert hat und wie es sich doch nicht verändert hat im Grunde!" (Kafka II 423). The exclamation claims two things that stand in

opposition to each other. In one breath the speaker asserts that his life has changed and has remained the same. This exclamation is a paradox in the sense that it goes against the law of the excluded middle. The introduction could also indicate the narrator's inability to decide whether or not his life has changed. It is also possible that the narrator lacks the means to discern whether or not his life has changed. Already we can see that the narrator is uneasy in his current state, of which even he is not certain.

Before I discuss other contradictions, I would like to point out other similarities in the introductory sentences of the two texts. The introductory sentences of both pieces allude to a problematic existence. In "Das Schweigen der Sirenen" the allusion is contained in the word *Rettung*, which can mean rescue or salvation.<sup>12</sup> Both meanings imply a previous dejected existence. In *Forschungen*, *Leben* is synonymous with existence.<sup>13</sup> Thus the word *Leben* contains the allusion to a problematic existence. The tension between the previous existence and the present existence is immediately brought to the reader's attention in the first sentence of both texts.

Returning now to the contradictions in *Forschungen eines Hundes*, I note that the dog's position in and relationship with dog society remains unresolved. He lived "inmitten der Hundeschaft" yet felt "ein leichtes Unbehagen [...] selbst in vertrauten Kreisen" (Kafka II 423). He goes on to qualify this: "Ja manchmal, nein, nicht manchmal, sondern sehr oft," as if he were unsure of his judgment (Kafka II 423). His close relationship with dogdom was only *Schein*. The dog remarks, "Wenn ich jetzt zurückdenke [...] finde ich bei näherem Zusehen doch, daß [...] eine kleine Bruchstelle vorhanden war" (Kafka II 423). This "näheres Zusehen" calls attention to the visual element as well as to the investigative scientific lens. The dog's refined eye could pierce directly to the heart of the matter. The mere sight of his fellow dog cast him into a state of despair, as he admits, "daß der bloße Anblick eines mir lieben Mithundes verlegen, erschrocken, hilflos, ja mich verzweifelt machte" (Kafka II 423). The visual element

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<sup>12</sup> "Beweis dessen, daß auch unzulängliche, ja kindische Mittel zur Rettung dienen können." (Kafka II 40).

<sup>13</sup> "Wie sich mein Leben verändert hat und wie es sich doch nicht verändert hat im Grunde!" (Kafka II 423).

appears where the dog describes his relationship to his fellow dog, suggesting that his interaction with others had a visual characteristic until this point. We see then that the dog does not completely live “inmitten der Hundeschaft.” He is not sure where he lives. At one point the dog describes his condition as “zurückgezogen und einsam” and at another point he admits that he actively participated in dog society, “teilnahm an allem” (Kafka II 423-424).

The investigating dog is torn in his relationship with his neighbor, which is yet another contradiction. They communicate with each other often by calling out in a way similar to messengers: “Wir rufen einander oft zu” (Kafka II 453). Despite this frequent *Verkehr*, the dog never visits his neighbor (Kafka II 453). In fact, he is not even sure if he can classify his neighbor as “seinen Artgenossen” (Kafka II 453). The neighbor is both familiar and unfamiliar: “Wenn er fern ist, kann ich zum Spiel mit Zuhilfenahme aller Phantasie manches mich verdächtig Anheimelnde an ihm herausfinden, steht er dann aber vor mir, sind alle meiner Erfindungen zum Lachen” (Kafka II 453). He explains further, “So nah wie mit ihm verkehre ich schon seit langem mit niemandem, ich bin froh, daß ich ihn doch noch leidlich ertrage, und wenn er fortgeht, schreie ich ihm die freundlichsten Dinge nach, freilich nicht aus Liebe, sondern zornig auf mich, weil ich ihn [...] doch wieder ganz abscheulich finde” (Kafka II 453-454). The narrator cannot decide about his neighbor. Sometimes he mocks him, sometimes he praises him. Despite this, the narrator is certain of his unease.

We must take a closer look at the dog’s perceptions of himself, which are often incomplete or inconsistent. He describes himself as “zurückhaltend” and “ängstlich” but then later “fragend” (Kafka II 424). His shyness and nervousness stand in direct opposition to the curiosity he displays in actively pursuing the truth. The dog describes himself as “einen zwar ein wenig kalten, zurückhaltenden, ängstlichen, rechnerischen, aber alles in allem genommen doch regelrechten Hund” (Kafka II 424). “Rechnerisch” immediately conjures up images of mathematics, exactitude, and precise science. “Regelrecht” associates the dog with a strong sense of respect for the rules or laws, the right procedure, and social obligations. This will be apparent in the scene with the dancing dogs.

The nature of dogdom has its own inconsistencies. All dogs have the urge to question and to be silent. The narrator explains, “Jeder Hund hat wie ich den Drang zu fragen, und ich habe wie jeder Hund den Drang zu schweigen. Jeder hat den Drang zu fragen” (Kafka II 445-446). This “Drang zu fragen” is the urge to interpret and to make sense of the world. The “Drang zu schweigen” is the refusal to give or accept an explanation or interpretation. The dog strives after this unreachable confession of knowledge: “Das eine, was man vor allem erreichen wollte: Eingeständnis des Wissens, das bleibt versagt” (Kafka II 442). Our dog is no different, “Nun also, warum machst du den anderen ihre Schweigsamkeit zum Vorwurf und schweigst selbst?” Leichte Antwort: Weil ich ein Hund bin. Im Wesentlichen genau so wie die anderen fest verschlossen, Widerstand leistend den eigenen Fragen, hart aus Angst” (Kafka II 443). This silence is the opposition to the urge to interpret, “Wir widerstehen allen Fragen, selbst den eigenen, Bollwerk des Schweigens, das wir sind” (Kafka II 444). On the one hand dogs have the desire and need to interpret, but on the other they refuse any interpretation.

Now that I have listed many of the inconsistencies in the dog’s description of himself and his surroundings I will return to the theme of interpretation. The dog’s struggle to make sense and to find an interpretation is really the subject of the story, just as the title indicates. As Michael Ossar points out, the interesting question is the “one of the procedures by which the dog makes sense of his world, that is, the operations he performs on the world *qua text*” (Ossar 326). These “procedures” are the methods of interpretation that the dog employs. His methodology goes through its own development as it moves from strictly asking questions (in the scene with the musical dogs) to actually acting on the environment and testing his theories (interpretations) in the form of experiments. I will trace this development in detail in the following paragraphs. The investigations are important for the dog’s life and he terms them “unentbehrlich” (Kafka II 424). In the starvation scene the dog is willing to risk even his life for the sake of science (interpretation). This indicates the significance of the procedures to the dog himself.

The scene with the musical dogs gives insight to the early stage of the dog’s process of interpretation. This episode inspires the young dog to investigate the question of nourishment, as



the dog remarks “Mit jenem Konzert begann es” (Kafka II 435). At this early stage, the dog’s *Forschung* consists mainly of the shock, questioning, and rational attempts to answer his own questions. At first the dog thinks the musicians are using their calmness. But he then further observes to test his conclusion: “Freilich erkannte ich jetzt aus meinem Schlupfloch bei genauer Beobachtung, daß es nicht so sehr Ruhe, als äußerste Anspannung war, mit der sie arbeiteten” (Kafka II 430). Similarly he considers the explanation of their behavior as fear, but then takes back his original thesis: “Es konnte nicht Angst wegen des Gelingens sein, was sie so erregte; wer solches wagte, solches zustande brachte, der konnte keine Angst mehr haben. --Wovor denn Angst? Wer zwang sie denn zu tun, was sie hier taten?” (Kafka II 430-431). The dog’s explanations only run into more questions. Finally he decides to ask the musicians themselves rather than consider on his own: “So rief ich durch allen Lärm meine Fragen laut und fordernd hinaus. Sie aber -- unbegreiflich! unbegreiflich! -- sie antworteten nicht, taten, als wäre ich nicht da” (Kafka II 431). The dogs are silent. They refuse to answer him.

The silence shocks the narrator because it goes against what he has learned until this point in his life. Their behavior contradicts customs and laws.

Hunde, die auf Hundeanruf gar nicht antworten, ein Vergehen gegen die guten Sitten, das dem kleinsten wie dem größten Hunde unter keinen Umständen verziehen wird. [...] Aber warum durfte es nicht sein, warum durfte denn das, was unsere Gesetze bedingungslos immer verlangen, diesmal nicht sein? Das empörte sich in mir, fast vergaß ich die Musik. Diese Hunde hier vergingen sich gegen das Gesetz. Mochten es noch so große Zauberer sein, das Gesetz galt auch für sie, das verstand ich Kind schon ganz genau. (Kafka II 431)

The dog is so shocked at this blatant disregard for law and custom, “gegen die guten Sitten [...] gegen das, was unsere Gesetze bedingungslos verlangen,” that his anger nearly causes him to forget the music (Kafka II 431). We can see respect for the law in his indignant reaction, which immediately reminds us that the dog described himself as “regelrecht” early on in the story.

The dog states a new theory concerning the silence of the musical dogs, which relies on their disregard for law and custom. In this way his knowledge of the musical dogs is connected

with guilt. We immediately think of the fall from grace or a loss of innocence through knowledge. The investigator's explanation is the following:

Sie hatten wirklich Grund zu schweigen, vorausgesetzt, daß sie aus Schuldgefühl schwiegen. Denn wie führten sie sich auf, vor lauter Musik hatte ich es bisher nicht bemerkt, sie hatten ja alle Scham von sich geworfen, die elenden taten das gleichzeitig Lächerlichste und Unanständigste, sie gingen aufrecht auf den Hinterbeinen. Pfui Teufel! Sie entblößten sich und trugen ihre Blöße zur Schau. (Kafka II 431-432)

Standing upright is the ultimate crime against the customs of dogdom. The investigating dog turns to these musicians for explanation and enlightenment, yet only finds that they turn a deaf ear to the most basic of dog laws.

The dog is so baffled and horrified by their behavior that he can no longer just watch. "War die Welt verkehrt? Wo war ich? Was war denn geschehen? Hier durfte ich um meines eigenen Bestandes willen nicht mehr zögern, ich machte mich los aus den umklammernden Hölzern, sprang mit einem Satz hervor und wollte zu den Hunden, ich [...] mußte sie abhalten vor weiterer Versündigung" (Kafka II 432). The dog's entire understanding of the world comes crashing back upon him, and he must act. He does this mainly for self-preservation, "um meines eigenen Bestandes willen", but is quickly stopped by the *Lärm*. We must take a closer look at what the dog does here. He jumps out of his wooden cage "mit einem Satz". Here Kafka takes advantage of the many meanings of *Satz*. The most obvious meaning is sentence or statement. With this meaning in mind, we can interpret that the dog makes a command to stop, asks another question, offers an explanation, or even a claim of some sort. *Satz* could even refer to his exclamation "So alte Hunde, so alte Hunde!", which the dog makes at the same point of the text. *Satz*, moreover could also be understood in its mathematical or scientific sense as a theorem or rule. This interpretation would agree with the dog's scientific tendencies. In this way the dog would combat the irrational *Lärm* with rational argument and statement. *Satz* is also the term used to describe a musical movement. In this sense the dog has found his own musical voice to reply to the *Lärm* with his own song. This is the most significant meaning of *Satz*, for it indicates that the dog has undergone a transformation during the experience of the musical dogs.

He has become aware of his own musical voice. In his early years he lacked every form of this awareness.

Whatever meaning we attribute to the word *Satz*, the fact remains that the dog acted only for the sake of self-preservation, only to protect his naive world view. The dog did not act on his own surroundings to test a hypothesis. It is in this respect that the hound's early methodology is distinct from the later means of investigation. In the later scenes he acts upon the environment to test his hypothesis, as opposed to the mere questioning of the early stages.

There is still much more to the dog's method than asking questions, however. The dog also attempts to take things apart, to separate the big problem into manageable smaller problems:

So wie ich damals nicht aufhörte, jenen Vorfall [...] laut zu besprechen, in seine Bestandteile zu zerlegen [...] nur immer mit der Sache beschäftigt, die ich lästig fand genau so wie jeder andere, die ich aber - das war der Unterschied - gerade deshalb restlos durch Untersuchung auflösen wollte, um den Blick endlich wieder freizubekommen für das gewöhnliche, ruhige, glückliche Leben des Tages. Ganz so wie damals habe ich, wenn auch mit weniger kindlichen Mitteln [...] in der Folgezeit gearbeitet und halte auch heute nicht weiter. (Kafka II 435)

The "kindliche Mittel" here remind one immediately of "die kindischen Mittel" from *Odysseus*, even though *kindlich* and *kindisch* have different meanings. The dissection of a problem into its component parts is a method that the dog employs throughout his life. This dissection is also a general technique of western science and thought. Despite this fact, the dog has no intention of involving himself with traditional science or using its methods: "Es fällt mir nicht ein, mich in die wahre Wissenschaft zu mengen, ich habe alle Ehrfurcht vor ihr, die ihr gebührt, aber sie zu vermehren fehlt es mir an Wissen und Fleiß und Ruhe und -- nicht zuletzt, besonders seit einigen Jahren -- auch an Appetit" (Kafka II 437). This lack of appetite is reminiscent of the *Hungerkünstler*, who would have eaten, had he only found the food he liked. Another aspect of the dog's technique is his independence:

Ich habe wenig gelernt, denn ich kam frühzeitig von der Mutter fort, gewöhnte mich bald an Selbständigkeit, führte ein freies Leben, und allzu frühe Selbständigkeit ist dem systematischen Lernen feindlich. [...] außerdem aber ist Selbständigkeit, mag sie für das Lernen ein Nachteil sein, für eigene Forschung ein gewisser Vorzug. Sie war in meinem Falle um so nötiger, als ich nicht die eigentliche Methode der Wissenschaft befolgen

konnte, nämlich die Arbeiten der Vorgänger zu benützen und mit den zeitgenössischen Forschern mich zu verbinden. Ich war völlig auf mich allein angewiesen, begann mit dem allerersten Anfang. (Kafka II 445)

Here again we see that the dog does not want to associate himself with the traditional science and methods. He relies on himself instead. Moreover, it seems that the dog had no choice in this matter: “als ich nicht die eigentliche Methode der Wissenschaft befolgen konnte” (Kafka II 445). This is partly because he lacked the knowledge and determination as noted above, but also as a result of his unwanted alienation from his peers. His ambivalence toward his fellow dog manifests itself in his attitude toward traditional science.

There is however evidence of western science in the dog’s early methodology. Lewis W. Leadbeater draws convincing parallels between Kafka’s investigative dog and the character of Socrates as portrayed in various works from Plato. Both the dog and Socrates are consumed in their investigations and withdraw from general society (“Platonic Elements in Kafka’s ‘Forschungen eines Hundes’” 105). Our dog admits to feeling rejected by the rest of his species, not unlike Socrates and his fellow Greeks. Each pursues his questioning, despite great annoyance to his peers. The dog does not lay claim to any authority or expertise in much the same way that Socrates did not claim to be a scholar (Leadbeater 107). Deprivation appears in the lives of both. It is poverty in the case of Socrates and tremendous fasting in the case of the dog (Leadbeater 113). These comparisons are found in Plato’s *Apology*, which is also a first person narrative describing an investigative life (Leadbeater 107).

Leadbeater goes further to point out similarities in the dog’s methodology and objectives as compared to those of Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. The dog’s objective is dogdom itself, just as Socrates is interested in all that is human (Leadbeater 108). The dog’s objective becomes clear at several points in the narrative. The dog remarks, “Erst mit Hilfe der Hundeschaft begann ich meine eigenen Fragen zu verstehen” (Kafka II 441). Even more specific is his sarcastic remark and question: “Mich kümmerten nur die Hunde, gar nichts sonst. Denn was gibt es außer den Hunden?” (Kafka II 441). The dog’s goal is the knowledge of dogdom: “Alles Wissen, die Gesamtheit aller Fragen und aller Antworten ist in den Hunden enthalten” (Kafka II

441). Leadbeater points out secondly that the relationship between the I and the All, the particular and the universal gains primary importance (Leadbeater 108). The dog illustrates this when he describes the necessity of all dogdom in his research:

Ich verstehe sie [die Hundeschaft], ich bin Blut von ihrem Blut, von ihrem armen, immer wieder jungen, immer wieder verlangenden Blut. Aber nicht nur das Blut haben wir gemeinsam, sondern auch das Wissen und nicht nur das Wissen, sondern auch den Schlüssel zu ihm. Ich besitze es nicht ohne die anderen, ich kann es nicht haben ohne ihre Hilfe. - Eisernen Knochen, enthaltend das edelste Mark, kann man nur beikommen durch ein gemeinsames Beißen aller Zähne aller Hunde.<sup>14</sup>

In this move from the particular to the general, the dog analyzes things into their constituent parts (Leadbeater 108). This is apparent in his careful dissection of the performance of the seven musical dogs as well as his attention to the many different classes of dogs (Leadbeater 108). The dog remarks, “Kein Geschöpf [...] hat so viele, gar nicht übersehbare Unterschiede der Klassen, der Arten, der Beschäftigungen” (Kafka II 426). The dog describes his correlation of the particular to the general, “Aber ich habe viel gesehen, gehört und mit vielen Hunden der verschiedensten Arten und Berufe gesprochen und alles, wie ich glaube, gar nicht schlecht aufgefaßt die Einzelbeobachtungen nicht schlecht verbunden” (Kafka II 445). Leadbeater concludes, “There is in fact a clear recognition on the part of the Dog that there is a direct correlation between constituent particulars and universal dogness, or that which is doggish” (Leadbeater 108). I intend to show later that the investigative dog takes this correlation between particular and general much further in his experiments.

The dog’s favorite example of a marvelous activity or occupation is the *Lufthund*. His investigation of the *Lufthunde* provides insight to the middle stage of his methodology. Throughout the secondary literature, different meanings have been attributed to the *Lufthunde*. Heinz Politzer argues that the word *Lufthund* is an allusion to the Yiddish *Luftmensch*, an expression for swindler (*Parable and Paradox* 319). John Winkelman on the other hand takes as

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<sup>14</sup> This quote was not part of the original “Hungerkünstlerheft,” in which *Forschungen eines Hundes* was originally contained. The quote belongs to a section which Kafka later inserted between “[...] wahrhaftig nicht mehr,” and “Mit meinen Fragen [...],” on page 443 of the *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente Band II*. The inserted section can be found on pp. 358-360 of *the Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente Band II Apparataband*, ed. Jost Schillemeit. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1992.

his starting point the assumption that the dogs can in no way perceive human beings (Winkelman 204). In Winkelman's interpretation the *Lufthunde* would be nothing other than lap dogs who soar through the air because they are carried by invisible human beings (Winkelman 209). In this sense the *Lufthunde* would serve as a link between dogs and men (Winkelman 209). I will not attempt to attribute any particular symbol or meaning to the *Lufthunde*. The *Lufthunde* pose a problem to the investigating dog, no matter how we interpret them. How the dog works around the problem of the *Lufthunde* is of more importance for my investigation of his method.

At first the hound is in a state of disbelief because of the *Lufthunde*. He describes this feeling as follows: "Als ich zum erstenmal von einem hörte, lachte ich, ließ es mir auf keine Weise einreden. [...] Nein, solche Sachen mir einreden wollen, das hieß doch die Unbefangenheit eines jungen Hundes gar zu sehr ausnützen glaubte ich" (Kafka II 446-447). This disbelief is much like the disbelief the dog experienced in regard to the seven musical dogs. The young dog stumbles upon something or some information that does not fit with his current interpretation of the world, and he enters a period of shock. After this shock, he molds his interpretation, his *Weltbild*, to include a place for the former contradiction, whether it be the *Musikerhunde* or the *Lufthunde*:

Dann aber sah ich die Musikerhunde, und von der Zeit an hielt ich alles für möglich, kein Vorurteil beschränkte meine Fassungskraft, den unsinnigsten Gerüchten ging ich nach, verfolgte sie, soweit ich konnte, das Unsinnigste erschien mir in diesem unsinnigen Leben wahrscheinlicher als das Sinnvolle und für meine Forschung besonders ergiebig. So auch die Lufthunde. Ich erfuhr vielerlei über sie, es gelang mir zwar bis heute keinen zu sehen, aber von ihrem Dasein bin ich fest überzeugt und in meinem *Weltbild* haben sie ihren wichtigen Platz. (Kafka II 447)

What was previously considered "unsinnige Gerüchte" finds an important place in the dog's *Weltbild* after he finds out more about the *Lufthunde*. Here we see that his interpretation also relies on belief. The dog has not actually seen a *Lufthund* but is, nevertheless, "fest überzeugt" with regard to their existence. The dog places more trust in the rumors that he has heard than in what he has actually seen with his eyes.

The most intriguing problem for our dog concerning the *Lufthund* is their silent purposelessness, their lack of a justification.

Aber viel wunderbarer ist für mein Gefühl die Unsinnigkeit, die schweigende Unsinnigkeit dieser Existenzen. Im allgemeinen wird sie gar nicht begründet, sie schweben in der Luft, und dabei bleibt es, [...]. Aber Warum, grundgütige Hundeschaft, warum nur schweben die Hunde? Welchen Sinn hat ihr Beruf? Warum ist kein Wort der Erklärung von ihnen zu bekommen? (Kafka II 447-448)

The dog searches for an explanation, a meaning, but finds none. This lack of meaning disturbs him terribly. He is dissatisfied with the usual explanation “daß sie [die Lufthunde] zur Wissenschaft viel beitragen” (Kafka II 449). At this point the dog does what he always does when he cannot understand something. He decides to just tolerate the *Lufthunde*, even though he does not recognize their *Lebensberechtigung*: “Und vielleicht ist es auch gut, nicht allzu hartnäckig zu sein und sich zu fügen, die schon bestehenden Lufthunde nicht in ihrer Lebensberechtigung anzuerkennen, was unmöglich ist, aber doch zu dulden” (Kafka II 449-450).

The dog notices that no one really knows where the *Lufthunde* originate. He suggests two theories and scientifically explores each one. First the dog considers whether or not *Lufthunde* reproduce. To this end he considers if they have the strength or power to reproduce and if they even have the opportunity. Secondly he wonders whether or not some dogs choose to become *Lufthunde*, “Wenn sie sich aber nicht fortpflanzen, wäre es denkbar, daß sich Hunde finden, welche freiwillig das ebenerdige Leben aufgeben, freiwillig Lufthunde werden?” (Kafka II 450). Only after these careful considerations does he conclude that neither explanation is sufficient: “Das ist nicht denkbar, weder Fortpflanzung, noch freiwilliger Anschluß ist denkbar” (Kafka II 450). Here the dog equates insufficient with “nicht denkbar.” The emphasis on the intellectual investigation is apparent. At this middle stage in the program of his methodology the dog still relies solely upon thought experiments and thought explorations. As discussed above, this is very similar to the methods of Socrates. The willingness to perform physical experiments marks the turning point away from this middle stage of thought experiments.

The dog’s investigation culminates in the question of nourishment, ultimately leading to the starvation scene. His scientific methodology reaches its highest form in the physical

experiments. The dog tests interpretations in these experiments. In the first experiment the dog tests the traditional scientific interpretation of the dance rituals. Traditional science teaches that the dance rituals are done primarily to give the ground strength to attract the nourishment from above. The contradiction is that the dogs direct the dance rituals toward the sky (Kafka II 462-463). This contradiction is the starting point for the first experiment (Kafka II 463). If the dance rituals only effect the ground, the dog hypothesizes, then the nourishment from above should still fall, even if the rituals were directed entirely to the ground.

Von der Betonung dieser Widersprüche ging ich aus, ich beschränkte mich [...] völlig auf den Boden, ich scharfte ihn im Tanz, ich verdrehte den Kopf, um nur dem Boden möglichst nahe zu sein. Ich machte mir später eine Grube für die Schnauze und sang so und deklamierte, daß nur der Boden es hörte und niemand sonst neben oder über mir. Die Forschungsergebnisse waren gering. (Kafka II 463)

Although the results of the experiment are unclear, the dog can conclude that the traditional scientific explanation is insufficient. The dog then sets up his own interpretation: “Die Bodenbearbeitung dient meiner Meinung nach zur Erzielung von beiderlei Nahrung und bleibt immer unentbehrlich, Spruch, Tanz und Gesang aber betreffen weniger die Bodennahrung im engeren Sinn, sondern dienen hauptsächlich dazu, die Nahrung von oben herabzuziehen” (Kafka II 462). The dog traces his interpretation back to an uncontrollable urge:

Meiner unerschütterlichen Meinung nach, ist wenigstens eine gewisse Bodenbearbeitung immer nötig und, selbst wenn die Ketzer, die es nicht glauben, recht hätten, ließe es sich doch nicht beweisen, da die Bodenbesprengung unter einem Drang geschieht und sich in gewissen Grenzen gar nicht vermeiden läßt. (Kafka II 464-465)

Here we can see that the dog’s opinion has become a solid (*unerschütterlich*) interpretation, which takes on even a religious meaning. This is clear in the quote when the dog describes his opponents as “Ketzer.” The dog concludes from the first experiment that the traditional explanation is not valid.

The experiments are symbolic of the hermeneutic process of going back and forth between a text and its interpretation.<sup>15</sup> In the dog’s case his surroundings are the text he

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<sup>15</sup> For a theoretical hermeneutical approach to the *Forschungen*, see Jayne, Richard. *Erkenntnis und Transzendenz: zur Hermeneutik literarischer Texte am Beispiel Kafkas Forschungen eines Hundes*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag,



interprets. The story *Forschungen eines Hundes* is about the dog's quest to find a coherent interpretation of his world. The experiments serve as a test of the coherence of his interpretation. The experiment is a second, more detailed reading of his environment with the interpretation in mind. After the experiment the dog returns to the interpretation, corrects the discrepancies discovered in the experiment and strengthens weak points. Then the dog performs another experiment to test the improved interpretation. This process is what is meant by the back and forth movement between the text and its interpretation.

The starvation experiment is a test of the dog's interpretation that nourishment follows him. The claim that food follows him is only one interpretation because traditional science advances another: the ground draws the food at an oblique angle (*schräg*) and even in spirals. The hound states his intent clearly:

Ich glaubte der wissenschaftlichen Entwertung meines Experiments nicht, aber hier hilft kein Glauben, sondern nur der Beweis, und den wollte ich antreten und wollte damit auch dieses ursprünglich etwas abseitige Experiment ins volle Licht, in den Mittelpunkt der Forschung stellen. Ich wollte beweisen, daß, wenn ich vor der Nahrung zurückwich, nicht der Boden sie schräg zu sich herabzog, sondern ich es war, der sie hinter mir her lockte. (Kafka II 466)

In this statement the dog differentiates between science and belief. Science relies on proof, belief does not: "hier hilft kein Glauben, sondern nur der Beweis." Here again the proof is a process, a development: "den [Beweis] wollte ich antreten." The verb *antreten* is used in a way similar to setting off on a journey, "eine Reise antreten." The proof, i.e. the journey, is the *process* of the entire starvation episode.

Through the starvation journey the dog arrives at a new type of knowledge completely different than that which he set about to gain. This happens because fasting is not just an experiment on the environment, but also an experiment performed by the dog on himself. The hunger scene is the first point in the story where the dog performs an experiment on his own body.

The dog pushes his body to the limit through starvation. This limit is what makes starvation such a powerful tool.

Denn das Hungern halte ich noch heute für das letzte und stärkste Mittel meiner Forschung. Durch das Hungern geht der Weg, das Höchste ist nur der höchsten Leistung erreichbar, wenn es erreichbar ist, und diese höchste Leistung ist bei uns freiwilliges Hungern. (Kafka II 470-471)

It remains unclear here, where the path through fasting leads. It could be Gregor Samsa's "Weg zu der ersehnten unbekanntem Nahrung" or the truth in the art of the *Hungerkünstler*. Once the dog reaches his bodily limit, he becomes conscious of new knowledge in his visionary state:

Ich hörte überall Lärm, die während meines bisherigen Lebens schlafende Welt schien durch mein Hungern erwacht zu sein, ich bekam die Vorstellung, daß ich nie mehr werde fressen können, denn dadurch müßte ich die freigelassene lärmende Welt wieder zum Schweigen bringen, und das würde ich nicht imstande sein, den größten Lärm allerdings hörte ich in meinem Bauch, ich legte oft das Ohr an ihn und muß entsetzte Augen gemacht haben, denn ich konnte kaum glauben, was ich hörte. Und da es nun zu arg wurde, schien der Taumel auch meine Natur zu ergreifen, sie machte sinnlose Rettungsversuche. (Kafka II 473-474)

The dog gains knowledge through starvation and becomes aware by hearing. This aural knowledge is similar to the sudden awareness the dog had once experienced with the *Musikerhunde*.

A similar aural consciousness occurs in the scene with the hunting dog. The investigating dog cannot resist the melody of the hunting dog in much the same way that the music of the dancing dogs had exerted complete power over him.

Und ich glaubte damals, etwas zu erkennen, was kein Hund je vor mir erfahren hat, [...]. Ich glaubte nämlich zu erkennen, daß der Hund schon sang, ohne es noch zu wissen, ja mehr noch, daß die Melodie, von ihm getrennt, nach eigenem Gesetz durch die Lüfte schwebte und über ihm hinweg, als gehöre er nicht dazu, [...] sie [diese Erkenntnis] ist die einzige, wenn auch nur scheinbare Wirklichkeit, die ich aus der Hungerzeit in diese Welt herübergerettet habe, [...] aber der Melodie [...] konnte ich nicht widerstehen. Immer stärker wurde sie: ihr Wachsen hatte vielleicht keine Grenzen, und schon jetzt sprengte sie mir fast das Gehör. (Kafka II 478-479)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This hunting dog reminds us of the young visitor to the gallery in *Auf der Galerie* who cried, *ohne es zu wissen*. The soaring melody recalls the image of the *Lufthunde*: "Aber warum, grundgütige Hundeschaft, warum nur schweben die Hunde?" (Kafka II 447-48).

This is the first time that the dog lays claim to a completely new type of knowledge of which no other dog was aware before him. The aural truth is unconscious to the producer and independent of its producer, namely dogdom, as indicated in the quote “ohne es zu wissen” and “von ihm getrennt, nach eigenem Gesetz durch die Lüfte schwebte.” The receiver of the melody, namely the investigating dog, is fully aware of the song. In this scene the *Forscherhund* reaches his highest level of awareness.

As in other Kafka works, it is impossible to ascribe one particular meaning to this new consciousness. We can, however, conclude that the dog accomplishes something, despite the lack of solid results. His primary accomplishment is a new awareness, which is expressed in various ways. The most obvious awareness comes at the end of the story in regard to science and instinct. The dog learns an appreciation for the science of music and decides to extend his investigation to this area as well as to the border area of the two main sciences: “die Lehre von dem die Nahrung herabrufenden Gesang” (Kafka II 481). In this context the dog relates his scientific endeavors to an instinct and an abstract concept of freedom: “Es war der Instinkt, der mich vielleicht gerade um der Wissenschaft willen, aber einer anderen Wissenschaft als sie heute geübt wird, einer allerletzten Wissenschaft, die Freiheit höher schätzen ließ als alles andere” (Kafka II 482). The original urge or instinct leads to the abstract, ideal concept of science, “eine allerletzte Wissenschaft.” This instinct is the “Drang zu fragen,” the urge to interpret, and the drive to make sense, each of which finds expression in the dog’s thoughts and actions. The dog has come to understand his own science, i.e. his quest to make sense of his world, as a basic instinct, as a matter of survival, or *Selbsterhaltung*.

The dog’s new consciousness expresses itself in other ways as well. He becomes aware that his investigation is his only means of survival, in much the same way that Odysseus can only survive through the process of finding a consistent interpretation of his existence. The dog becomes aware of this when he compares his means of survival to the means that other dogs employ:

Aber was wollen denn die Fragen, ich bin ja mit ihnen gescheitert, wahrscheinlich sind meine Genossen viel klüger als ich und wenden ganz andere vortreffliche Mittel an, um dieses Leben zu ertragen, Mittel freilich, die, wie ich aus eigenem hinzufüge, vielleicht ihnen zur Not helfen, beruhigen, einschläfern, artverwandelnd wirken, aber in der Allgemeinheit ebenso ohnmächtig sind, wie die meinen, denn, soviel ich auch ausschaue, einen Erfolg sehe ich nicht. (Kafka II 452-453)

Here Kafka uses the *Fragen* as a name for the dog's investigation, i.e. for the dog's process of interpreting. Kafka hints again by describing the dog's *Mittel* as *ohnmächtig* that the drive to interpretation is a powerfully unconscious one. The dog is also conscious of the means, however, for otherwise he could not reflect on the idea as he does. Here I am differentiating between the means to interpret and the drive to interpretation. The dog is also keenly aware that the scientific means are insufficient, just like the means of Odysseus: "Die Wissenschaft gibt zwar die Regeln; sie aber auch nur von der Ferne und in den größten Hauptzügen zu verstehen ist gar nicht leicht, und wenn man sie verstanden hat, kommt erst das eigentlich Schwere, sie nämlich auf die örtlichen Verhältnisse anzuwenden - hier kann kaum jemand helfen" (Kafka II 454). Here the dog is describing the axiomatic system, or the rules used to arrive at truth, which is set up by traditional science. The dog also elaborates on the difficulty of working within this constraining system.

The dog becomes aware of his goal during the hallucinatory starvation episode. He ponders whether or not he wanted desolation and remarks, "Wohl, ihr Hunde, aber nicht um hier so zu enden, sondern um zur Wahrheit hinüber zu kommen, aus dieser Welt der Lüge, wo sich niemand findet, von dem man Wahrheit erfahren kann, auch von mir nicht, eingeborenem Bürger der Lüge" (Kafka II 475). The dog's goal, then, is to arrive at some truth and to escape the lie of his earthly existence. The earthly existence is deception, because the dog cannot arrive at any absolute truth in this world. There is no one from whom the dog can find out the truth. The dog is fully aware that he cannot arrive at the truth, since even he is part of this earthly deception, "eingeborener Bürger der Lüge." In this context truth and deception are two separate places. The dog is a native of the earthly world. The truth lives somewhere over and across the horizon, "da hinüber," always unattainable.

Despite the futility of absolute truth, the dog is aware in some other sense that he can feel at home in this deceptive world. In other words he can come to terms with his existence. He accomplishes this through the process of searching for an interpretation. This accomplishment is the core of the story and is contained in one key thought:

Ich kann mir schmeicheln, daß ich durch meine Fragen in diese Dinge doch ein wenig Bewegung gebracht habe. Man beginnt zu begründen, eine Art Begründung zusammenzuhaspeln, man beginnt, und wird allerdings auch über diesen Beginn nicht hinausgehen. Aber etwas ist es doch. Und es zeigt sich dabei zwar nicht die Wahrheit - niemals wird man soweit kommen -, aber doch etwas von der tiefen Verwirrung der Lüge. Alle unsinnigen Erscheinungen unseres Lebens und die unsinnigsten ganz besonders lassen sich nämlich begründen. Nicht vollständig natürlich - das ist der teuflische Witz -, aber um sich gegen peinliche Fragen zu schützen, reichs (sic) hin. (Kafka II 448)

In this section, the dog openly admits and acknowledges that the absolute truth is unattainable: “und es zeigt sich dabei zwar nicht die Wahrheit - niemals wird man soweit kommen -, aber doch etwas von der tiefen Verwirrung der Lüge.” On the other hand, the dog notes that one begins to lay a foundation or start a justification, *eine Art Begründung*. This *Begründung* means interpretation. One pieces together an interpretation that will stand up against easy objections, i.e. *peinliche Fragen*, but will never attain the status of absolute truth.

In conclusion, the dog comes to terms with his existence through the process of searching for an interpretation of his surroundings. The dog’s search is motivated by contradictions in his environment, which are often related to music. I have described in detail the contradictions in the dog’s relationship to dog society, the dog’s perception of himself, as well as inconsistencies in dogdom itself. After considering the dog’s reaction to these contradictions, I concluded that Kafka’s *Forschungen eines Hundes* is really about the dog’s quest to make sense of his world in the face of these inconsistencies. Then I traced the development of the dog’s methodology from the musical dogs, to the *Lufthunde*, to the experiments, finally arriving at the starvation episode. In the early stages the dog’s method consisted primarily of asking questions, dissecting a problem into its component parts, and independence from the traditional science. Then I drew parallels to the method of Socrates, referring to secondary literature. Throughout the story the

dog constantly revises his interpretation to make sense of new problems. The dog gains a new knowledge of existence through his interpretation, although he is well aware that he can never arrive at absolute truth. In the act and process of interpretation the dog affirms his existence and reaches a new awareness.

## V. Conclusion

Odysseus and the investigating dog find the means to survival in the process of searching for a consistent interpretation. For Odysseus the *Mittel* is the process of deciding between not hearing the silence or deceptively pretending to not hear the silence of Sirens. In this way Odysseus survives the attack of the Sirens. For the *Forscherhund* the *Mittel* is the process of constantly revising his interpretation to account for new inconsistencies in the environment. Both characters gain their new consciousness through a paradoxical aural experience. For Odysseus it is the undecidability of the song (or silence) of the Sirens. In the case of the investigating dog the paradox lies in the music of the seven dancing dogs, the music of the hunting dog, and in the relation of music to nourishment. Kafka uses these paradoxes in the area of music to find a new consciousness, which grounds survival for Odysseus and the *Forscherhund*.

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