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Author(s): J. M. Coetzee

Source: *MLN*, Vol. 96, No. 3, German Issue (Apr., 1981), pp. 556-579

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2905935>

Accessed: 05-12-2018 16:22 UTC

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Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"



J. M. Coetzee

Kafka's story "The Burrow" begins: "I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful."¹ The position in time of the speaker, the creature whose life has been devoted to the building of this perfectly secure hideaway, seems to be clear: he speaks (or writes) from a moment after the completion of the burrow but not so long after it that final judgment on its success can be given. Further information in the next few pages help to situate the fictional *now* of his utterance as belonging to "the zenith of my life" (p. 325), when he is nevertheless "growing old" (p. 326), "getting on in years" (p. 327).

The time encompassed by his act of storytelling, beginning at this moment, is not, however, simply the time that might be taken to utter the thirty-five or so pages of the text: although there are no typographical breaks to mark breaks in the time of narration, there

¹ *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nathan Glazer (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 325. The translation is by Willa and Edwin Muir. Because the Muir translation is the standard one, I use it throughout in this essay except at points where the Muirs, perhaps baffled by Kafka's unusual tense sequences, attempt to smooth out the time structure by silent emendation. All departures from the Muir translation are marked by footnotes. The German text used is that edited by J. M. S. Pasley in *Der Heizer. In der Strafkolonie. Der Bau* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1966). Pasley's text is based on a fresh reading of Kafka's manuscript and improves on the text given by Max Brod in Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V (New York: Schocken, 1946). For a cautionary word about Pasley's text, however, see Heinrich Henel, "Das Ende von Kafkas *Der Bau*", *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 22 (1972), 22-23.

is at least one point (p. 343) where the narration is interrupted by sleep. As for the time depicted by the narrative, all I shall say as a first approximation is that, aside from passing references to a faroff time of apprenticeship (e.g., p. 357), it appears to cover life in the burrow (which it depicts largely as dominated by habit), to include and pass beyond the moment at which the first words of the text are uttered, and to continue as far as the moment at which the last words are uttered, a moment at which the time of narration and the time of the narrative are identical.

But the relations between the *time of narration* (the moving *now* of the narrator's utterance) and the *time of the narrative* (referential time) turn out to be far more complex and indeed baffling, the more closely we read the text. The first approximation to a reading of time-relations I give above glosses over the problem of fitting the pattern of habitual life in the burrow into a temporal continuum; and attempts to refine the approximation bring us face to face in the end with not only a narrative structure but also a representation of time which cannot be compressed into a rational model. There are numerous passages in Kafka's fictional works and notebooks that reveal a preoccupation with the metaphysics of time. It is above all in the stories "The Country Doctor" and "The Burrow", however, that we have *representations* of an idiosyncratic feel for time. As we might expect, such stories necessarily bring Kafka into conflict not only with the time-conventions of fictional realism (which rest on a Newtonian metaphysics) but also with the conception embedded in (and, in the Whorfian view, propagated by) the tense-system of his language.

In this essay I am concerned to explore the relations between the verb-system of German (which, in the features I shall be commenting on, is very close to the verb-system of English), the narrative (and narratorial) structure of "The Burrow", and the conception of time we can postulate Kafka held in 1923. In the first part of the essay I attempt little more than to persuade the reader that the task of laying out the events of the narrative in sequential temporal order is riddled with difficulties. In part II I discuss the work of two scholars who have recognized these difficulties and attempted to overcome them. In part III I outline a distinction between two features of the verb, tense and aspect, that are often confused, and suggest how upholding the distinction may aid us in our reading. And in part IV I attempt to explain the time-scheme that "The Burrow" represents, in both senses of this ambiguous phrase.

I

There is nothing in the first three long paragraphs of the text to conflict with the time and tense conventions of retrospective first-person narration. But with the fourth paragraph it begins to become more difficult to situate the *now* of the act of narration in time. Let us take up this paragraph in some detail.

In the Castle Keep I assemble my stores . . . The place is so spacious that . . . I can divide up my stores, walk about among them, play with them . . . That done, I can always . . . make my calculations and hunting plans for the future, taking into account the season of the year. There are times when I am so well provided for that in my indifference to food I never even touch the smaller fry that scuttle about the burrow . . . (p. 328).

The present here is an iterative, habitual present, with a cycle of seasons and even years.

. . . It sometimes seems risky to make the Castle Keep the basis of defense . . . Thereupon I mark off every third room . . . as a reserve storeroom . . . or I ignore certain passages altogether . . . or I choose quite at random a very few rooms . . . Each of these new plans involves of course heavy work . . . True, I can do [it] at my leisure . . . But it is not so pleasant when, as sometimes happens, you suddenly fancy, starting up from your sleep, that the present distribution of your stores is completely and totally wrong . . . and must be set right at once, no matter how tired or sleepy you may be; then I rush, then I fly, then I have no time for calculation; and although I was about to execute a perfectly new, perfectly exact plan, I now seize whatever my teeth hit upon and drag or carry it away, sighing, groaning, stumbling . . . Until little by little full wakefulness sobers me, and I can . . . return to my resting place . . . (p. 329).

There is no question that this episode too is iterative, typical, recurrent, and that the *now* out of which the narrative is uttered is situated within these recurrences: episodes of panic are part of the life of the creature, they have occurred in the past, they are expected to recur.

Then again there are times when the storing of all my food in one place seems the best plan of all . . . and so . . . I begin once more to haul all my stores back . . . to the Castle Keep. For some time afterwards I find a certain comfort in having all the passages and rooms free . . . Then I usually enjoy periods of particular tranquility . . . until at last I can no longer restrain myself (*bis ich es nicht mehr ertrage*) and one night (*eines*

Nachts) rush into the Castle Keep, mightily fling myself upon my stores, and glut myself . . . (pp. 329-331).

Here we see that narrative with difficulty sustains the illusion of an iterative present when the actions that recur are impulsive, unforeseen, and unforeseeable, when the speaker is at the mercy of forces he cannot control or predict. Thus the following sentence strikes us as bizarre and perhaps ungrammatical:

(1) Every month I impulsively run about the streets naked.

Contrast it with:

(2) Every month I run about the streets naked.

The only way to domesticate (1) is to read it as a generalization about behavior over past months, culminating in the present moment at which the sentence is uttered (“Every month for the past x months I have impulsively run about the streets naked”). It is most bizarre when it is read as uttered within an iterative present (“My habit is impulsively to run about the streets naked every month”). The cause of conflict is of course that for a speaker to take up his stance within an iterative present means, to the listener who, so to speak, unrolls the cycle of the iterative on to a past-present-future continuum, that the speaker not only makes a generalization about his past behavior but also predicts his future behavior; and the act of prediction conflicts with the notion of the impulsive.

Kafka does not unequivocally provoke this contradiction in the passages I have quoted. Nevertheless, both when the burrowing creature starts out of his sleep and rushes and flies (*eile*, *fliege*) to relocate his provisions, and when “one night” he rushes (*stürze*) into the Castle Keep to glut himself, the verbs carry connotations of the impulsive, the uncontrollable, the unpredictable, and therefore sit uneasily in a narratorial framework of iterated time.

There are two alternative ways of explaining what is going on here. The less radical explanation is this: German, like English, lacks a specific morphological form to signify iterative action. The non-iterative (punctual) sense of the verb is the semantically unmarked form, in contrast to the marked form of the iterative sense. (This is perhaps no more than a consequence of the relative infrequency of the iterative sense.) Therefore unless a sequence of verbs is systematically interspersed with iterative modifiers (*sometimes*, *every day*, . . .) or (in English) is given with an appropriate modal (*will*, *used to*, . . .), the verbs tend to be read as unmarked, i.e. non-iterative. In other words, it requires a continual pressure of emphasis in the writing to maintain iterative time. Of course, the more

this emphasis has to be repeated, the clumsier it sounds. So rather than maintain the emphasis throughout, Kafka sometimes (for example, in the last two passages quoted) *dramatizes a typical event* from the iterative cycle and so permits the reading to slip back for a while into the unmarked, non-iterative mode.

This *rhetorical* explanation thus interprets the problematic verb-sequences in terms of the pragmatics of “what works” for the reader, as manifestations of the writer’s artfulness. There is no doubt that this explanation can be “made to work” for the sequences I quote and for others I mention below. My reservations about explanation along these lines will become clearer later in this essay, when I argue that, rather than being an obstacle to understanding, the problematic sequences embody a conception of time that is central to Kafka’s enterprise. For the moment let me simply observe that, “success” in writing, like beauty, being essentially undemonstrable, it requires some rhetorical coaxing and/or intimidation from the critic himself to establish *any* argument that a particular strategy in a text “works”, that it is “successful writing”, indeed that it is a “strategy of writing” at all.

The second and more radical explanation is that the time-conception that reigns in “The Burrow” is truly aberrant, that it can be domesticated only with a degree of rhetorical violence that amounts to traduction, and that it is better understood as the reflection of a time-sense which does not draw a line between iterative and non-iterative senses of the verb, or does not draw the line in the usual place. This is the explanation I will be exploring. However, before doing that let me indicate the pervasiveness of difficult tense-sequences. I quote in leapfrog fashion to highlight the verbs.

To regain my composure after such lapses I make a practice of reviewing my burrow, and . . . frequently leave it. . . . It is always with a certain solemnity that I approach the exit again . . . [for] it was there that I began my burrow . . . Should I reconstruct this part of my burrow? I keep on postponing the decision, and the labyrinth will probably remain as it is. . . . Sometimes I dream that I have reconstructed it, . . . and now it is impregnable . . . [The] nights on which such dreams come to me are the sweetest I know . . . So I must thread the tormenting complications of this labyrinth . . . whenever I go out . . . But then (*dann*) I find myself beneath the mossy covering [of the entrance] . . . and now (*nun*) only a little push with my head is needed and I am in the upper world. For a long time I do not dare to make that movement . . . I then cautiously raise the trap door and slip outside . . . (pp. 331-333).

The time of utterance of the first paragraph here is clearly the same as at the beginning of the story: a present time after the completion of the burrow, a point from which the creature looks back to a cycle of habitual past behavior and forward to a future in which the burrow will probably not be rebuilt. But again, when he enters into closer description of his iterative excursions from the burrow, the *now* of narration shifts and becomes *the* moment (though what the status of that moment is we have yet to decide) at which he leaves the burrow. This becomes particularly clear in the paragraph that follows.

. . . I know . . . that I do not have to hunt here (*hier*) forever, . . . so I can pass my time here quite without care . . . or rather I could, and yet I cannot (*vielmehr, ich könnte es und kann es doch nicht*). My burrow takes up too much of my thoughts. I fled from the entrance fast enough, but soon I am back at it again (*schnell bin ich vom Eingang fortgelaufen, bald aber komme ich zurück*). I seek out a good hiding place and keep watch on the entrance . . . At such times it is as if I were not so much looking at my house as at myself sleeping . . . In all my time I have never seen anyone investigating the actual door of my house . . . There have been happy periods in which I could almost assure myself that the enmity of the world toward me had ceased . . . The burrow has probably protected (*schützt*) me in more ways than I thought (*gedacht habe*) or dared think while . . . inside it.² . . . Sometimes I have been seized with (*bekam*) the childish desire never to return to the burrow again, but to . . . pass my life watching the entrance . . . [But] what does this protection which I am looking at here from the outside (*die ich hier beobachte*) amount to . . . ? . . . No, I do not watch over my own sleep, as I imagined; rather it is I who sleep, while the destroyer watches. . . . And I leave my post of observation and find I have had enough of this outside life. . . . But I have never (*nicht*) been able to discover . . . an infallible method of descent. In consequence . . . I have not yet summoned the resolution to make my actual descent (*ich bin . . . noch nicht in den wirklichen Eingang hinabgestiegen*³), and am thrown into despair at the necessity of doing it soon. . . . I tear myself free from all my doubts and . . . rush to the door, . . . but I cannot. . . . The danger is by no means a fanciful one, but very real . . . If [an enemy] were actually to arrive now . . . , if [it] were actually to happen, so that at last . . . I might in my blind rage leap on him [and] . . . destroy him . . . but above all—that is the main thing—were [sic] at last back in my burrow once more, I would have it in my

² The Muir translation reads: “. . . while I was inside it.”

³ I follow the Brod text here. The Pasley text is in error—cf. Henel, p. 23.

heart to greet the labyrinth itself with rapture; but first I would . . . want to rest . . . But nobody comes . . . (pp. 334-337).

The tense sequence is itself labyrinthine. The Muirs try to follow its twistings and turnings, but there are unavoidable moments when they have to choose between progressive and nonprogressive English forms (*die ich hier beobachte* becomes “which I am looking at here” rather than “which I look at here”) and between perfect and preterite (*bin fortgelaufen* becomes “fled” rather than “have fled”). There is no way, in fact, of translating the passage without committing oneself from moment to moment to an interpretation of its time-structure, in particular of the situation in time of the moment at which the narrator speaks: are the events beheld from the perspective of the *now* of the first sentence of the story—“I have [now] completed the construction of my burrow”—which would make of the present tense here a so-called historical present, or has the moment of narration shifted decisively, for the time being, to a time out in the fresh air where the burrowing creature waits indecisively, unable to venture the descent back into the earth? In fact this passage puts the question most starkly. “Ich bin . . . noch nicht in den wirklichen Eingang hinabgestiegen,” says the creature. If the moment of utterance of this sentence is the moment of utterance of the text, then the creature is *now* literally trapped out in the open.

This lengthy quotation should be enough to show that the detailed progression of tense-sequences indeed raises puzzling problems. Without quoting at quite such length, let me point to further passages in which the problem is unavoidable.

The creature is “now” outside his burrow. “For the present . . . I am outside it, seeking some possibility of returning . . . , confronted by that entrance over there (*dort*) which now (*jetzt*) literally locks and bars itself against me” (pp. 339, 340). The deictics emphatically mark the moment of narration as a moment outside the burrow. “And then . . . I approach the entrance [and] . . . slowly descend” (p. 341). The *now* of narratorial time shifts with the *now* of narrated time: time elapses in both the progress of the text and in the world outside the entrance to the burrow, and “now” entrance is achieved. The earlier irresolution and incapacity to descend are overcome by sheer exhaustion. “Only in this state [of exhaustion] . . . can I achieve my descent” (p. 341). But the return to the burrow rejuvenates him. “It is as though at the moment when I set foot in the burrow I had (*hätte*) wakened from a long . . . sleep.” He sets

about transporting the spoils of his hunting to his Castle Keep. When this task is completed “a feeling of lassitude overcomes me” and he sleeps (pp. 342-3).

Though there is no break in Kafka’s manuscript at this point,⁴ there is a gap in narrated time. “I must have slept for a long time” (*Ich habe wohl sehr lange geschlafen*), the narration continues.⁵ This second part of the story concerns the mysterious whistling noise that the creature hears in his burrow. Again the *now* of the narration seems to be cotemporal with the *now* of the action; but again there are unsettling passages in which the *now* seems to reveal an iterative face.⁶ On the other hand, the noise is unambiguously described as something “that I have never heard before” (*was ich nie gehört habe*) (p. 347)—an iterative return of the noise seems to be ruled out.

When the first researches into the origin of the noise fail, the creature revises his plans and speaks of a future of intention: “I intend now to alter my methods. I shall dig a . . . trench in the direction of the noise” (p. 348). But this new plan brings no solace, for “I do not believe in it” (p. 349). The reason for this mistrust of “reasonable” future projections would, in an iterative time, be that their failure has already been experienced. In the, so to speak, blinkered present of the text the cause of his own hopelessness remains obscure to the narrator.

Even if we read the entire second part of the story as linear and non-iterative, there are iterative cycles within it.

“Sometimes I fancy that the noise has stopped . . . ; sometimes such a faint whistling escapes one . . . one thinks that the whistling has stopped forever. I listen no longer, I jump up, . . .” (p. 350).

If, on the other hand, we read this part as iterative, then the sequence I have quoted becomes part of the iterative present: neither German nor English would appear to have a mechanism at the level of structure of the verb phrase for indicating iterative cycles within cycles.

“It may happen (*kann . . . geschehen*) that I (*man*) make a new

⁴ See Henel, p. 7.

⁵ Though the Muirs translate the next few verbs as preterites, they are present in form in the German.

⁶ For example: “In such cases as the present it is usually the technical problem [of tracking down the noise] that attracts me” (p. 344); “often already I have fallen asleep at my work” (p. 348); (when he begins to shovel soil) “this time everything seems difficult” (p. 350).

discovery" (p. 351): that the noise is growing louder. The shift from *ich* to *man* is maintained for much of the rest of the paragraph, in conformity with the new hypothetical mode of the narrative. It seems impossible to square this mode with a non-iterative understanding of the narrative unless one grants to the narrator the effective position of a fictional creator, someone toying with sequences which may or may not be inserted into the narrative. While this possibility cannot be dismissed absolutely, there is nothing else in the text to support the notion that the operations of writing are being so radically unmasked. On the other hand, if one understands the narrative as iterative, then the hypothetical sequence fits in as one which may or may not occur in a given iteration.

As the creature moves about his burrow investigating the noise, new ideas, new plans, new conclusions occur to him, all in turn abandoned as useless. Why does he not remember them from previous iterations, why does he entertain them again if they are proved ineffective, why does he experience surges of hope and despair? The answer, at one level, is that he is in some sense *condemned* to these iterations, and that part of being condemned (as the example of Sisyphus might teach) is that the torments of hope are part of the sentence. What should interest us particularly in an investigation of tense and time, however, is that the inability to learn from past failure is a reflection of the fact that the iterations are not *ordered*: none of them being earlier in time than any other, no iteration encompasses a memory of an earlier one.

"Nothing . . . approaching the present situation has happened before; nevertheless there was an incident not unlike it when the burrow was only beginning" (p. 355); and the creature digresses into a past-tense account of an episode from his "apprenticeship". The temporal perspective has reverted unambiguously to that of the opening of the story: a *now* in the time of narration with a linear past behind it and a linear future before it.

The last pages of "The Burrow", after this episode, are resigned, valedictory in tone. The creature retires to his Castle Keep, to his store of food, and awaits "the beast", dreaming of the peace of "the old days" (p. 358). Perhaps it is possible that the beast has never heard him, in which case there is hope. "But all remains unchanged" (p. 359).

II

The extraordinary time structure of "The Burrow" has been commented on by numerous scholars. I should like to discuss two of the more perceptive of these commentaries.

In her 1968 essay, “Kafka’s Eternal Present”, and again in her book *Transparent Minds* (1978), Dorrit Cohn discusses peculiarities of time and tense in Kafka.⁷ Since her comments on “The Burrow” in the essay are absorbed into the book, I will quote only from the latter. Cohn writes:

... The animal—midway through the story—seems to “forget” the iterative nature of his account and begins to tell of . . . the appearance of the hissing sound. Up to this point the animal has described his habitual subterranean existence in durative-iterative present tense. . . . [After this point] the static time of the first part of the story . . . becomes an evolving time, its durative tense a punctual tense . . . The speaker who surveyed his sovereign realm in durative present tense [is] transformed into a monologist who simultaneously experiences bewildering events and articulates them in a punctual present tense.

... This [temporal] structure corresponds exactly to Kafka’s paradoxical conception of human time, which is based on a denial of the distinction between repetitious and singular events. For him, as he once affirmed aphoristically, “the decisive moment of human development is everlasting”. “The Burrow”, by exploiting the ambiguities of a discourse cast in the present tense, reflects this paradox in its language as well as its meaning. If the crucial events of life happen not once, but everlastingly, then the distinction between durative and singulative modes of discourse is effaced: the durative silence always already contains the hissing sound, and the destruction it brings lies not in a single future moment, but in a constantly repeated present (pp. 195-7).

The discussion of pp. 334-7 of “The Burrow” above should make it clear that Cohn’s division of the story into a first part in which “tense” is durative-iterative and a second part in which it is punctual, is too neat: shifts occur too frequently for her generalization to hold. Consequently, while she is right to characterize Kafka’s time-conception as “paradoxical [and] . . . based on a denial of the distinction between repetitious and singular events”, she goes too far when she claims that this distinction or opposition creates a *structure* in any meaningful sense. There is no clear correspondence between, on the one hand, durative-iterative tenses and life before “the decisive moment” (the start of the hissing), and, on the other, the arrival of “the decisive moment” and singulative tenses. Where Cohn does point in a fruitful direction is in identifying the ambiguities of present-tense verb forms as the formal field whose exploitation makes the higher-level paradoxes of “The Burrow”

⁷ “Kafka’s Eternal Present: Narrative Tense in ‘Ein Landarzt’ and Other First-Person Stories”, *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 144-150; *Transparent Minds* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1978).

possible. But there is a certain flaccidity in the argument that Kafka's "denial of the distinction between repetitious and singular events" is simply "reflected" in the language of the story. For "The Burrow" does not "efface" the distinction between "durative and singulative". The most we can say is that at certain points in the text where we would expect the one form we encounter the other, and vice versa. If the distinction were indeed effaced, and durative and singulative forms were used interchangeably, the result would very probably be nonsense. The problem is precisely that intuition (which may mislead) suggests that there is system behind the aberrant usage; and our critical task is one of probing intuition by analysis. The conclusion I come to in this essay happens to be quite close to Cohn's: the story is indeed dominated by "a constantly repeated present." To reach that conclusion, however, requires not only a tighter scrutiny of the text but a principled understanding of the use one may make of privileged insights such as the aphorism of Kafka's that Cohn quotes.

In a study based on a more minute examination of tense sequences in "The Burrow" than Cohn's, Heinrich Henel arrives at a similar characterization of the temporal situation of Kafka's creature: that it is "an endless condition".⁸ Henel recognizes from the start the particular hermeneutic problems posed by a text in which so elementary a linguistic category as tense, not easily reduced to other terms, becomes the object of the writer's play:

What kind of present occurs at a given point is determined by tone and context; but what tone is appropriate and what context is perceived depend on how one understands the present (p. 5).

In Henel's reading, the story falls into two main parts with a short linking middle passage. In the first part the use of the present is indeterminate:

Often it sounds as if a unique moment in the here and now is intended, yet the dominant impression is of the iterative . . . Past definite and non-recurring events are reported in the preterite, but for the most part earlier and now melt into an endlessly expanding condition (pp. 5-6).

In the second part

the meaning of the present tense changes. Past is clearly distinguished from present, and the thoughts and activities of the beast proceed in temporal order . . . The narrator now keeps step with the events repre-

⁸ Henel, p. 6.

sented, and the present tense he employs denotes at each point of the narration a different, later present. While the present of the first part fuses with an untranscended past, the present of the second part moves consistently forward and merges into an indefinite future. The effect is in both cases the same: an eternal condition is represented (p. 6).

Thus, like Cohn, Henel is concerned to smooth out, by an act of generalization, the difficulties presented by the tense sequences. In his reading the time of the first half of the story is, by and large, iterative, the time of the second half is not. But, we can ask, is the mode of generalizing from the totality of data the correct mode of argument to employ here? Are we concerned to formulate laws that cover most of the data—i.e., statistical generalizations—or laws that explain detailed variations, laws whose models would be rules of grammar?⁹ My aim in this essay is to elucidate the temporal system of the story on the basis of usage which, despite its appearance of aberrance, I must start by assuming to have some kind of intentional unity. For this reason I do not find it enough to say, as Henel does, that the present tense in “The Burrow” “fills no less than five distinct functions” (p. 4) without carrying the analysis further.¹⁰ This classificatory step is only a stage in analysis, with no explanatory power in itself. The more important stage is the one at which the question is answered: Is there a coherent time-system in which these five functions can be said to participate? In other words: Is there a temporal coherence to the story, or does the mind behind the story shift from one temporal subsystem to another?

⁹ The cases I cite in footnote 6 above are enough to indicate that Henel's conclusions are generalizations rather than laws, in the sense in which I use the terms. His generalizations are further weakened by a habit of selective quotation. For example, he writes of a “wholly new, hitherto never before grasped resolution” at which the creature arrives, “nämlich von dem Leben im Freien ‘Abschied zu nehmen’, ‘niemals mehr zurückzukommen’, und der ‘sinnlosen Freiheit’ auf immer den Rücken zu kehren” (p. 6). The paradox Henel does not face here is that even this decisive-sounding resolution is given in a form wholly compatible with an iterative time, as fuller quotation reveals: “Und ich habe Lust, Abschied zu nehmen . . . und niemals mehr zurückzukommen . . . Gewiß, ein solcher Entschluß wäre eine völlige Narrheit, hervorgerufen nur durch allzu langes Leben in der sinnlosen Freiheit” (pp. 121-2 in Pasley; pp. 335-6 in the Muir translation). It is the *content* of the phrases Henel quotes that leads him to think of the resolution as making a break in the cycle; but the paradox is precisely that in this story every irruption into the cycles of time is so ambiguously presented in temporal *form* that it seems at least capable of being absorbed into the cycles.

¹⁰ “As present proper, it describes an occurrence achieving itself in the *now*; as historic present an earlier occurrence; as iterative present a present occurrence which has happened in the same way or a similar way fairly often; as progressive present likewise a present occurrence which extends into an indefinite, perhaps endless future; and finally the present can serve as a form of inner monologue” (p. 4).

III

Hitherto I have used the word “tense” rather loosely to designate the element of verb inflection that marks time-relations. I must now refine the notion of tense by distinguishing between the *two* elements of verb inflection with temporal functions: tense and aspect.

The theory of the verb on which I shall be basing my discussion of “The Burrow” is the description first outlined by Gustave Guillaume in *Temps et verbe* (1929) and subsequently developed in his published lectures of 1948-9. A Guillaumean description of the English verb system has been given by W. H. Hirtle.¹¹ (I am not aware of any comparable study for the German verb.)

In Guillaume’s theory, it is not possible to describe the system of tense and aspect in terms of a single model of time, namely the familiar unidirectional arrow of infinite time of Newtonian physics. The verb system instead rests upon two simultaneous and complementary ways of conceiving time: (a) as *universe time*, a limitless linear time along whose axis any event can be situated; and (b) as *event time*, the span of time that an event takes to achieve itself. Though in theory event time can be infinitesimal, i.e., the event can be purely punctual with no interval between beginning and end, this state is rarely reached in the human world.¹²

Verbal *aspect* is a system of representing event time. Once this mental representation has been achieved, in Guillaume’s theory, the system of *tense* serves to combine the representations of event time and universe time.

How does aspect represent event time? It conceives of the event as taking place in two phases: a *coming-to-be* phase extending over successive instants, followed by a *result* phase during which no further development or actualization of the event can take place. Depending upon at what point of the temporal continuum the verb intercepts event time, different aspectual results are achieved. In English, the primary aspectual opposition is between (a) intercepting event time at some instant (which may be the final instant) of the coming-to-be phase, and (b) intercepting it during its after-

¹¹ Gustave Guillaume, *Temps et verbe* (Paris: Champion, 1929); *Leçons de linguistique*, I, ed. Roch Valin (Quebec: Laval, 1975); W. H. Hirtle, *Time, Aspect and the Verb* (Quebec: Laval, 1975).

¹² For discussion of this point, see Bernard Comrie, *Aspect* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976), pp. 42-3.

math. The two aspects which result are, respectively, (a) *immanent* and (b) *transcendent*.

A diagram (figure 1) may elucidate these concepts.

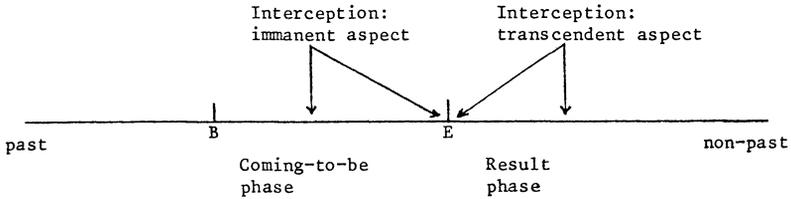


Figure 1

Here the continuum extending infinitely from past to non-past represents universe time; and the section BE represents event time, from beginning to end, with a coming-to-be phase and a result phase. Depending on whether event time is intercepted during the former or the latter phase, we have verb forms of immanent aspect (“he is running”, “he runs”, “he ran”) or verb forms of transcendent aspect (“he has run”). (We see from these examples that aspect is independent of the past-present tense distinction.)

How are iterative verb forms—forms whose iterative meaning is signalled by non-syntactic means—represented in such a scheme? Here the important thing to recognize is that, though an iterative form may be thought of as shorthand for a succession of single events each with a beginning and an end (e.g., “he runs [every day]”), it does not intercept the result phase of any of these single events, and at most may or may not intercept only the result phase of their totality. Thus in figure 2, where each B_i and E_i represent the beginning and end of a typical iterated event i , the forms “he runs/ran [every day]”, “he is/was running [every day]”, represent an interception in the coming-to-be phase of event i , while “he used to run [every day]” represents an interception in the result phase of the totality of the iterated events, i.e., after E_n .

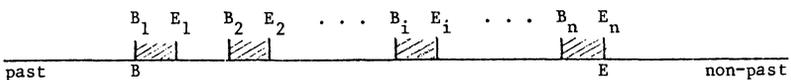


Figure 2

Therefore without loss of generality we can condense figure 2 to figure 3, in which the iterated events are represented without individual result phases:

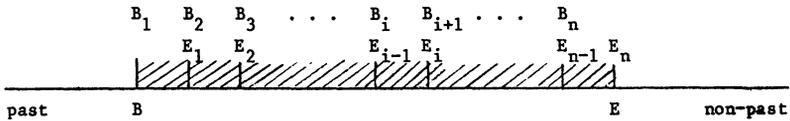


Figure 3

There is one further point to recognize about iteration. Though in the diagrams thus far I have represented the event that is iterated as a single event (e.g. “I run”), in “The Burrow” it is more often a sequence of events of some length (e.g. “I must thread the tormenting complications of this labyrinth . . . whenever I go out, and I am both exasperated and touched when, as sometimes happens, I lose myself . . . But then I find myself beneath the mossy covering . . .” [p. 333]). It is the *whole* of this sequence of sub-events (going out, threading, losing myself, being exasperated and touched, finding myself, . . .) which is iterated and which is represented in figure 3 by the event (B_i, E_i) .

Now within the total iterated event (B_i, E_i) , morphological means of time-specification are more impoverished than under normal (non-iterated) circumstances. This is because what is under normal circumstances a tense marker with a secondary aspectual function (e.g., the null morpheme \emptyset of *run*, which normally marks the verb as present in tense and only marks iterative aspect when syntactically reinforced, as in “I run every day”), is now charged primarily with marking iterative aspect, so that time-relations have to be specified by syntactic means. In the passage quoted above, the relative order of sub-events is represented (a) iconically, by the sequence of the signifiers (“I lose myself . . . then I find myself”), and (b) by the logic of syntactic relations (“I am . . . exasperated . . . when . . . I lose myself”), rather than morphologically.

This excursus on iterativity may help us to distinguish between the structure of time in “The Burrow” and the system of tense and aspect through which, in part, that structure is realized, and thus to unravel, at least at a formal level, some of the complexities of the narrative. For exemplary closer analysis I have chosen the sequence of pages in the first half of the story between the emergence of the

creature into the fresh air (p. 333) and his descent back into the burrow (p. 341), a passage in which the time-structure is perhaps more bewildering than anywhere else in the story.

If we scrutinize these pages closely, we find an alternation between two varieties of temporal experience, and, going with each variety, a particular narrative point of view. The ground-bass of the passage is: (a) The iterative experience of emerging from the burrow, enduring the pleasures and terrors of life above, not being able to re-enter the burrow, then finally re-entering it. The iterativity of the experience is signalled by so-called present-tense (in fact iterative-*aspect*) verb forms with associated adverbials (*sometimes, usually, etc.*). In figure 3 the time-segment of this experience is (B_i, E_i) and the moment of narration from which it is described is *outside* any (B_i, E_i) , i.e., beyond E. But there are regular transitions into: (b) The time of the iteration experienced from the inside, with a past and an unknown future of its own. In terms of figure 3, it is as if the structure of (B_i, E_i) were identical to that of (B, E) , and therefore as though the iterative nature of the experience became invisible or were erased from knowledge. There are two formal devices above all that achieve transitions of this kind: (i) the occurrence of overt past and future verb-forms, which have the effect of normalizing the null morpheme \emptyset of the unmarked form as a *present tense* rather than an *iterative aspect* marker (as, for example, in the context *he ran . . . he will run, he runs* is read as a present-tense form); (ii) the emphatic use of deictics like *now, this, here*, which, since they locate the narrative relative to the time and place of its narration, serve to introduce the *now* of narration *inside* (B_i, E_i) .

The movement of these pages is thus a continual slide from an outside view of the cycle safety-danger-safety to an inside view in which danger is experienced from the inside and from which it seems impossible to reattain safety, followed by an abrupt and temporary return to the safer outside view. This back-and-forth occurs not only at the level of the narrator's experience: it is also explicitly thematized in the passage as a "problem". It is possible to minimize this thematization and read it as simply a private joke of Kafka's, a wry reflection on the experience of writing oneself into a corner. But it is also possible to read it as a bringing to explicitness of a fundamental experience of time with which the story continually wrestles at a formal level. Unable to summon the resolution to re-enter his burrow, the creature says: "For the present . . . I am

outside it seeking some possibility of returning, and for that the necessary technical devices (*technischen Einrichtungen*) would be very desirable” (p. 339). Among the most desirable devices would be, of course, a passage from the dangers of (B,E) to the safety of (B_i,E_i) (the switching power of the ∅ tense/aspect marker would be such a device). Two pages later: “And then, too exhausted to be any longer capable of thought, . . . I . . . slowly descend . . . Only in this state . . . can I achieve my descent” (p. 341). As long as consciousness has been in control, the creature has been unable to achieve this transition from above to below and has remained stuck in a condition that is not only unendurable but logically impossible: the iterative forms have already promised that ascent and descent form a cycle, therefore the creature cannot remain stuck halfway. Exhaustion and incapacity for thought are the sole means that overcome the arguments (or rationalizations) of the conscious mind which keep him from his burrow; they also constitute the absurd “technical device” that solves the problem of getting stuck during the cycle. What can be read in the mode of realism as a piece of rather inept *deus ex machina* psychologizing can also be read in the mode of text-construction as a flattening of the distance between narrator and narrated, till the adventures of the creature seeking a way into his burrow become identical with the adventures of the signifying subject seeking to find a way to keep the narrative moving. As Henry Sussman writes:

The voice of the animal is . . . also the voice of construction [of the burrow, of the text], the voice of the rhetorical constructs employed in this particular production.

. . . The reader is asked to believe in the concurrence of the text with the actions which the animal claims to be performing at the moment. If for no other reason than because these actions are mediated by a written text subject to time in different ways than the unidirectional thrust of experience, this presumption is absurd. The narrative confines itself, nevertheless, on the basis of this fictive temporal immediacy, to a now which is remarkably resistant to revisions to the past or projections into the future. The animal thus becomes the agent of a temporal paradox, that the now, capable of feeding upon itself endlessly, is wider-reaching than both the past . . . and the future . . .¹³

¹³ “The All-Embracing Metaphor: Reflections on Kafka’s ‘The Burrow,’” *Glyph*, 1 (1977), 104, 106.

Sussman is right to characterize time in “The Burrow” as paradoxical. But the ability of the *now* to feed upon itself endlessly is not paradoxical at all as long as we distinguish between a *now* of narrative time (which tracks the process of feeding) and a *now* of narrated time (that which is fed upon). The paradox lies elsewhere: in the apparent identity—if we rely upon the signals given by verb-forms—of the texture of time in the narrated *now* of (B_iE_i) and the moment of narration. It is this paradox which Kafka brings into prominence at the moment when, too “exhausted” to play any longer with the riddle itself, he cuts through the knot and puts the creature back in the burrow.¹⁴

IV

It would be foolhardy to dismiss out of hand the possibility that “The Burrow” as we have it is incomplete, and that one of the things Kafka might have done if he had completed it to his own satisfaction might have been to regularize at least some of the more bizarre tense sequences, or to create gaps in the text (“chapter-breaks”) to indicate lacunae in the time of narration.¹⁵ Nevertheless, one’s procedure as a critic must be to test the possibility that

¹⁴ In the same part of his essay from which I quote, Sussman, however, gives a characterization of narrated time in the story that ignores the complexities of time and aspect I have tried to outline, in particular the “dissolve” from (B,E) to (B_i,E_i) followed by reversion. Thus the following argument of Sussman’s, central to his reading of the story, is so much the weaker:

In having recourse only to the here circumscribed by the construction and the now in which the work of construction goes on, or at least is contemplated, the voice of the text abolishes the “subject” which is presumably its source and master. Although the ruminations of the animal are always in “self”-interest, in the absence of any subject, the self becomes the self of language, whose existence, like the concept of the animal, defines the negation of the (human) self (pp. 104-5).

It is irrelevant for the moment whether the self is “the self of language” (Sussman’s thesis) or the self of narration (as I would prefer): all that concerns me here is that Sussman’s argument is not well founded.

¹⁵ In the postscript to his edition of the story, Max Brod, on the authority of Dora Dymant, writes that Kafka completed “The Burrow”, and that in the pages lost from the end the creature met his death in a fight with his enemy. However, Heinz Politzer argues cogently that there is no good reason to depend on Dora Dymant’s word and that the evidence points more strongly to the conclusion that Kafka himself destroyed the final pages, finding them unsatisfactory. See Max Brod, “Nachwort”, in Kafka, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 314; Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1962), p. 330; Henel, pp. 15-16. Kafka did not prepare the manuscript for publication. We may therefore suppose that it lacks a final revision.

the text *as it stands* is open to interpretation; only if no interpretation can be given should one fall back on the explanation that the text is in some sense at fault. What I shall be doing in this section of the essay, therefore, is to suggest how the repeatedly broken, interrupted iterative present can be understood in the context of the whole of the story.

The state in which Kafka's creature lives is one of acute anxiety (one would call it irrational anxiety if there were any reliable opposition between rational and irrational in his universe). His whole life is organized around the burrow, his defense against an attack which may come at any moment and without warning. The key notion here is *without warning*. A warning is the sign of a transition from peace to its opposite. Strictly speaking, the art of reading warnings is purely prospective, future-directed: a sign recognized retrospectively as having been a warning is no longer a warning, for it can no longer warn.

A warning is the sign of a transition. In "The Burrow", however, time does not move through transition phases. There is one moment and then there is another moment; between them is simply a break. No amount of watchfulness will reveal how one moment becomes another; all we know is that the next moment happens. Similarly, Zeno pointed out, before an arrow reaches its target it must reach half-way to its target; before it reaches half-way, it must reach a quarter of the way; and so forth. To reach its target it must pass through an infinity of states; and to pass through an infinity of states must take an infinity of time. Zeno might have added: conceiving the flight of an arrow in this way as a succession of moments, we can never understand how it gets from one moment to the next, we can never integrate its moments into a single flight.

We know that this paradox (which he did not necessarily arrive at via Zeno) preoccupied Kafka. In "The Great Wall of China" he describes the messenger who takes thousands of years and more to bring a message from the Emperor. In "The Next Village" a lifetime may not be long enough for a journey to the next village. In "Advocates" flights of stairs expand beneath the searcher's feet. The mystical correlate to the paradox is a time incommensurable with human time in which man's life occupies a mere instant, yet aeons of which can fit in the interstices between two human moments.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. the notebook entry for 11 December 1917, in which Kafka writes of the moment of expulsion from Paradise as a moment eternally repeated, yet as belonging to a time which "cannot exist in temporal relation" to human time. *Gesammelte Werke: Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (New York: Fischer/Schocken, 1953), p. 94.

Time in “The Burrow” is discontinuous in a strictly formalizable sense. Any moment may mark the break between before and after. Time is thus at every moment a time of *crisis* (from Greek *krino* “to separate, to divide”). Life consists in an attempt to anticipate a danger which cannot be anticipated because it comes without transition, without warning. The experience of a time of crisis is colored by anxiety. The task of building the burrow itself represents a life devoted to trying to still anxiety, naturally without success; for without warning “the enemy” is in the burrow. (Here I suggest that it would be naive to think that the whistling is a warning and that “the enemy” is some beast whom the reader does not get to see, rather along the lines that Dora Dymant suggests; for by the end of the story the architect of the burrow clearly recognizes that a break between before and after has arrived, the clearest sign of this being that the lead-up time that once looked innocent now looks in retrospect like a time of warning [p. 355]. This does not of course mean that there will only be a single foe, a single danger, a single before and after: in theory “The Burrow” is infinitely extensible.)

We treat the past as real insofar as present existence has been conditioned or generated by it. The more indirect the causal derivation of the present from a particular past becomes, the weaker that past becomes, the more it sinks towards a dead past. But with Kafka it is precisely the power of each moment to condition the next that seems to be in question. Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., but no backward exploration of time will reveal the cause of the accusation against him. Gregor Samsa finds himself one morning transformed into a giant insect, why and how he will never know. Between the before and the after there is not stage-by-stage development but a sudden transformation, *Verwandlung*, metamorphosis.¹⁷

A common strategy of the first-person intelligence attempting to understand the processes of time is to take up its stance in a present moment (ideally the moment of tranquillity when “I take up my pen to write”) which stands for the culmination of a certain past, in order to retrace the history that led up to this moment. Both parts of Beckett’s *Molloy*, for example, take up this stance in an explicit

¹⁷ I take the description of the derivational relationship of past to present from Roman Ingarden, *Time and Modes of Being*, trans. Helen R. Michejda (Springfield: Thomas, 1964), p. 117. On the experience of the present in Kafka, see further Max Bense, *Die Theorie Kafkas* (Köln/Berlin: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1952), p. 62; Jörg Beat Honegger, *Das Phänomen der Angst bei Franz Kafka* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1975), pp. 29-31.

way. The first sentence of “The Burrow” seems to promise a similar project: “I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful” (p. 325). But the project soon turns out to be riddled with problems. Where are we to locate this privileged moment of success and security: before, after, or during the recital of events in and around the burrow that occupies pp. 325-343 and terminates in the state of sleep from which the creature is awoken by the whistling? As I have tried to show in section I of this essay, any putative temporal ordering of events at a detailed level becomes honeycombed with inconsistencies and internal contradictions. There is no smooth course of narrative development that will lead from beginnings to the present moment of narration. Between then and now is always a break.

It is from this vantage-point that the logic of iterative narrative becomes clear. Failing to trace the present to roots in the past, Kafka’s narrator embarks on a series of projects to wrap up the past as a round of habit which includes the present and, inasmuch as it is repeated, projects into the future. “I assemble my stores . . . I can divide up my stores, walk about among them, play with them . . . That done, I can make my calculations and hunting plans . . .” (p. 328): this is typical of the creature’s discourse. The crucial move, in Guillaume’s terms, is away from universe time toward event time, away from linear past-present-future tense organization toward a cyclic aspectual organization of time.

This move—which I would call a ruse—is intended to capture the relation of past to present to future by trapping them all in an iterative pseudo-present. But as we have seen, the ruse continually fails. The pseudo-present of iterative/habitual aspect continually breaks down as the events signified within (B_i, E_i), the typical time-gap, persist in organizing themselves into successivity, into time, into tense, and then in collapsing in the persistent rupture of the time-order that characterizes Kafka. There is no way of getting here from there.

By talking in terms of failed narrative ruses I may give the impression that Kafka is in some sense against, above, and superior to the narrator of “The Burrow”, that if he does not know what a successful narrative strategy might be he is at least aware of the futility of the narrator’s strategy. This picture would entirely falsify the story. What we have in “The Burrow”, rather, is a struggle—not only the representation of the struggle but the struggle itself—with time experienced as continual crisis, and experienced at a pitch of

anxiety that leads to attempts to tame it with whatever means language offers. The entire linguistic construct called “The Burrow” represents the stilling of this anxiety; the major metaphor for the linguistic construct is the burrow itself, built by the labors of the forehead (p. 328). But this particular burrow, “The Burrow”, could not have been built in a language that did not provide so easy a means of gliding from tense to aspect as German (or English) does. Thus, without denying the total implication of Kafka in the story, it should be possible to recognize that the particular form the story takes rests heavily on a peculiarity of language. We can steer this course without committing ourselves to the extremism of either the Whorfian thesis that linguistic structures determine thought or the line characteristic of some Russian formalists that the literary text is in some sense predetermined by its devices.¹⁸

I can spell out my position in a different way by isolating my point of disagreement from Dorrit Cohn, whose *Transparent Minds* contains the most carefully worked out observations on the relations of time to narrative point of view in the story. Cohn recognizes the “illogical” nature of its temporal structure; but this structure, she says,

corresponds exactly to Kafka’s paradoxical conception of human time, which is based on the denial of the distinction between repetitious and singular events. For him, as he once affirmed aphoristically, “the decisive moment of human development is everlasting”. “The Burrow”, by exploiting the ambiguities of a discourse cast in the present tense, reflects this paradox in its language as well as its meaning. If the crucial events of life happen not once, but everlastingly, then the distinction between durative and singulative modes of discourse is effaced: the durative silence always already contains the hissing sound, and the destruction it brings lies not in a single future moment, but in a constantly repeated present (p. 197).

The aphorism Cohn quotes is both obscure and pregnant; but I am not sure that it lends itself to quite the point Cohn is making here. It comes from the notebook of October, 1917, and occurs after a parable whose gist we might express as follows: We die at every moment, but blindly do not recognize our death and are spat

¹⁸ See, for example, Roman Jakobson: “It is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called ‘realistic’ trend.” Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), p. 78. See also Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 195.

back into life. Kafka goes on: "From a certain point on, there is no more turning back. This is the point to be reached." And then: "The decisive (*entscheidende*) moment of human development is everlasting (*immerwährend*). Therefore those revolutionary spiritual movements that declare everything before themselves null are right, in that nothing has yet happened." The next aphorism is: "Human history is the second between two steps of a traveller."¹⁹

The passage as a whole therefore contrasts two kinds of awareness of time. The first, which we can call historical awareness, imputes reality to a past which it sees as continuous with the present. The second, which we can call eschatological, recognizes no such continuity: there is only the present, which is always present, separated from Ingarden's "dead past" by a moment of rupture, the *entscheidende Augenblick*. Hence the paradox that history is over in "a second" while the present moment is "everlasting".

To say, as Cohn does, that "the crucial events of life happen not once, but everlastingly", therefore misses the point. There are no "crucial events" as opposed to other events: there is only what is happening now, and this is always crucial.²⁰ Similarly, although the linguistic opposition of durative to singulative cannot really be effaced without causing a general collapse of language, the conceptual opposition between the two—an opposition which belongs to what I have loosely called the historical sense of time—is brought

¹⁹ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*, pp. 73-4. Quite aside from the literary-biographical problem of relating the journal entry to a story written some six years later, we should be wary of erecting large interpretive edifices upon journal entries that may be no more than fleeting, partial insights developed in greater precision by the fiction. Cohn perhaps places too much reliance on this particular entry in her reading of "The Burrow". On the qualities of the thought in Kafka's journals, see Maurice Blanchot, "La Lecture de Kafka", in *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), pp. 9-19. Blanchot writes: "The *Journal* is full of remarks that seem connected to theoretical knowledge . . . But these thoughts . . . relapse into an equivocal mode that does not allow them to be understood either as the expression of a unique happening or as the explication of a universal truth" (p. 10). Blanchot's essay constitutes a caveat against abstracting Kafka's thought from the particular density of the experience it reflects on.

²⁰ Cohn's paraphrase would fit more comfortably over Kafka's meditations, in the same notebook, on the eternal return of the expulsion from Paradise (*Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*, p. 94); that is to say, they describe a mythic present. I would suggest parenthetically that part of the reason for Cohn's failure to push her conclusions far enough may lie in her reliance on the treatment of the present in Harald Weinrich's *Tempus*. Weinrich treats the "historic present" as an "als ob" for a past time and as a component of a "Metaphorik der Tempora". It is, however, precisely the metaphoricity of the narrative present that Kafka is bringing into doubt in this story. See Weinrich, *Tempus: Besprochene und erzählte Welt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964), pp. 125-9; Cohn, "Kafka's Eternal Present", p. 149.

into doubt by a linguistic practice that steps perilously along the brink of contradiction, confusion, and nonsense. Thus by the end of the story the silence does indeed, as Cohn says, “always contain the hissing sound,” and whatever the noise signifies is indeed already here “in a constantly repeated present” (which I would rather call an everlasting present).

But this does not go far enough. What is missing from Cohn’s account is a recognition of the radical treatment that Kafka gives to *narrative* time. For the everlasting present is nothing but the moment of narration itself. Now that the narrator has failed time and again to domesticate time using strategies of narrative (i.e., strategies belonging to historical time), his structures of sequence, of cause and effect, collapsing each time at the “decisive moment” of rupture when the past fails to run smoothly into the present, that is, now that the construct of narrative time has collapsed, there is only the time of narration left, the shifting *now* within which his narrative takes place, leaving behind it a wake (a text) of failure, fantasy, sterile speculation: the ramifications of a burrow whose fatal precariousness is signalled by the whistling that comes from its point(s) of rupture.

University of Cape Town, South Africa