

Rose's powerful criticisms of neo-Kantian legacies, which tend to create fractured binaries and impose solutions by fiat. This can be extended to the legacies of the Frankfurt School, as Rose did, but also to the prevarications and tensions of Rose's own project.

If we do not overcome these limits and these fractures we will be left with the broken middle of our contemporary moment. This involves the celebration of the mystical and the marginal, as with the figure of Simone Weil, described by Rose as an 'angry angel' in *Judaism and Modernity*. Today Rose herself is slotted into the role of Weil: a tragic figure of the philosopher embracing an act of religious conversion in the face of suffering and death. On the other side to the mystic we have the Stalinist

image of an orthodoxy that is insufficiently self-critical and unable to come to terms with its own violence, as we find in Domenico Losurdo's *Stalin*. We live in a version of Koestler's choice between the mystical yogi and the Stalinist commissar. While it is possible to identify Lukács as a disguised figure of the Stalinist commissar we would want to suggest that his realism offers a way to mediate and transcend this impasse. Rose was right to point us to the antinomies which structure our thinking and the false solution of the holy city, the mystical or religious, as solution. Beyond Rome and Jerusalem lies a communism that can achieve a properly worldly resolution of the contradictions of the present.

Harrison Fluss and Benjamin Noys

Screwball tragedy

Aaron Schuster, *How to Research Like a Dog: Kafka's New Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024). 344pp., £27.00 pb., 978 0 26254 354 5

Life is merely terrible; I feel it as few other do. Often – and in my inmost self perhaps all the time – I doubt whether I am a human being.

Franz Kafka to Felice Bauer, July 7, 1913.

One cannot not live, after all.

Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*

In *How to Research Like a Dog: Kafka's New Science*, Aaron Schuster compels us to return to the nuts and bolts of Kafka's work, asking us to relearn our Kafka 'ABCs'. This formula becomes a running refrain throughout the book that alerts us to the crux of Kafka's structural dialectic. Although Kafka is often viewed as a non- or even anti-systematic thinker, it is the wager of the book that if one reads Kafka from the point of view of his fictional philosopher – the dog in Kafka's *Investigations of a Dog* – one sees delineated a contradictory dialectic differentiated from but proximate to a dialectic of contradiction. If we tarry with this contradictory dialectic, we discover Kafka's new science whose ambition is not to become the Queen but 'the demon of the sciences'. The adumbration of this science promises to be a '*folisophie*' (a follysophy) as Lacan has quipped.

Rereading Kafka from the point of his *folisophie* shifts

the accent in how we understand the dogmas of Kafka-dom. If Kafka's work is usually associated with the 'obscure and unassailable powers' of a 'godless modernity', 'an obscure agency lying beyond this world (the unreachable Sovereign, the inaccessible Law, the absent God, the larger-than-life Father)', Schuster's book demonstrates the problem in Kafka does not lie in a transcendence that confounds but 'the subject's failed insertion into the social world': his characters' inability to assume their symbolic place within the world. The subject is this very 'botched entry', which Kafka in a diary entry describes as 'a hesitation before birth.' (In chapter 3, Schuster offers a brilliant interpretation of this diary entry in terms of Plato's Myth of Er and Freud's account of the 'choice of neurosis' [*Neurosenwahl*].) Kafka's characters are not just victims of circumstance, determined by inexorable social forces (bureaucracy, the state, the family, capitalism, etc.) beyond their control. Rather Kafka depicts the ways in which his heroes 'self-sabotage', implicating themselves in structures that allow them to encounter the obstacles that drive them, never allowing them to settle into a comfortable place. As Kafka's dog will discover: 'My questions only serve as a goad to myself.' By

realising that philosophy ‘*is the disturbance that it seeks to eliminate*’ and by ‘cultivating and elaborating the disturbance itself’, Kafka’s dog becomes exemplary of the way that ‘all Kafka’s characters ... nurture their derangements and enjoy their symptoms.’ *Folisophie* as the demon of the sciences does not seek resolution but disturbance.

The contradictory dialectic, driven not by resolution but impasse, is sustained by Kafka’s imaginary effort to recast the function of myth (and thus story telling) through a displacement of its form. (Schuster will subsequently argue that Kafka ‘fulfilled the program set out in ‘The Oldest System Program of German Idealism’, inventing a rational mythology for the twentieth century’.) This is particularly clear in Kafka’s stories that rewrite classical mythology. Kafka’s reversal, fissure, estrangement and derailment of ‘the old myths’, as Schuster writes, ‘creating an unprecedented mythology oddly conflicted about its mythicality’, exemplifies Kafka’s approach to the story. Kafka’s strategy of neuroticising myth – creating stories, fables, parables that unfold through impasse – serves to locate the birth of a comically tragic subject, making Kafka the inventor of a new genre: the ‘screwball tragedy’. This subject and the oddity of its freedom is the ‘impossible object’ of ‘Kafka’s New Science’: odd and impossible since the freedom at issue is unfree. This new science of unfreedom studies the ways in which the subject trips into being over its own nothingness. Its subsistence and even ‘success’ consists of a persistent failing that cannot but lead to the failure of this new science. Yet this failure is but the failure of the science of failure and thus a strange success. If Schuster’s book is understood as an effort to found a new science, then it is a failure. However, by drawing attention to this persistent failing, the book succeeds in constituting its impossible object. In this sense, Schuster’s book is a truly elaborate joke at its own expense. By taking Kafka’s ‘dog’ as its object – or strictly speaking, the simile ‘like a dog’ – Schuster elaborates an elaborate wisecrack that hinges on a dog whose *sophia* lies in having ‘a good nose for cracks’ (another of the book’s repeated refrains).

This is what it means to be ‘a champion of the impossible’, as Schuster suggests in a wonderful reading of Kafka’s fragment from 1920. The story describes the return home of an Olympic champion swimmer who broke the world record. However, while delivering his victory

speech in front of an adoring crowd, he confesses with ‘the uncanniness of true candor’ (to borrow a phrase from Walter Redfern) that he cannot swim. He has done it; he has broken the record, but it remains nevertheless impossible, for he cannot swim. The story is the purest distillation of what Kafka tells his friend Max Brod: ‘You want the impossible, while for me the possible is impossible.’ In Kafka, doing and having done – the act – does not make possible. Rather its achievement, amplified by success, serves only to magnify the impossible place of any accomplishment. No victory, no success, no achievement can nullify the impossible. There is no way to escape one’s former inability: ‘the subject is the irrepressible memory of its anterior impossibility.’ To paraphrase an entry in Kafka’s notebook that opens Schuster’s second chapter, ‘Kafka Swims’: despite being able to swim ‘like the others’, Kafka is unable to forget his former inability to swim, so this mere capacity is of no help to him; he cannot swim. To research *like a dog* is a matter of sniffing out this logic, or better, its illogic; Kafka’s illness being the leitmotif of the book. According to Schuster, he is the most sublime of obsessional neurotics.

As one can already fathom, Schuster’s book is extremely ambitious and very fun, as serious as it is playful. He asks us to read Kafka with an eye to how Kafka swims. Whether one knows one’s Kafka or has just dabbled around the edges, this book compels us to unknow Kafka, asking us to read Kafka while remaining attached to not having read Kafka, and thus requiring that we repeat our Kafka ABCs. Like the late David Lynch, Kafka is an artist whose ambition lies in his dogged effort to repeat the world otherwise, installing the reader within a universe that is not just ordinary but utterly ordinary and not just odd but inveterately so: utterly ordinary and persistently, insistently odd. Dogged in its oddity. Kafka writes the normal with such insistence and persistence, so doggedly, that it loses its normality, shedding in turn its veneer of sanity: the sense of things is loosened if not vacated. As we learn in a chapter dealing with the pleasure of copying, addressing Kafka’s relation to Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Kafka likens writing in a diary entry from 1920 to the act of hammering on a table:

the wish to hammer a table with painfully methodical, technical competence and simultaneously not to do it,

and not in such a way that people could say, 'Hammering a table is nothing to him' but rather 'Hammering a table is true hammering and at the same time nothing to him', whereby the hammering would surely have become still older, still more real, and if you will, still more insane.

Hammering a table is supposedly a sane thing to do, at least for a judge to bring order to the court, but it quickly loses this veneer if the act exceeds a threshold, if it is done too vigorously, too persistently, if it goes on too long, if it is done too death. Kafka writes, 'Beyond a certain point there is no return. This point has to be reached.' Hammering becomes true hammering and thus 'nothing to him' when it is done with and without a point. The act of hammering becomes all the more pure, but all the more insane. One persists without having a reason to. Persisting without reason is the core conundrum of the Kafkaian subject, quintessentially distilled in *Investigations of a Dog*.

Schuster's book is not only itself an investigation of how Kafka writes with a hammer, he himself becomes a little *like a dog*, doggedly hammering away at *Investigations of a Dog* until the point is lost. This is not a criticism. For the point of the book, the persistence in which Schuster hammers away at his concern, is not simply to provide an interpretation of Kafka's story. He does so brilliantly and exhaustively, chasing after the enigma of the tale as a dog chases after its own tail. Rather the pursuit of this story is itself a strategy or device that allows Schuster to pursue the tale by not reaching the point. Like a dog, he does not reach the tip of its tail. As he tells us in the penultimate chapter:

The dog is not so much the subject matter of this book as its formal axiom, its rule of the game—the means for constructing a labyrinth from which I've tried to find a way out ... The dog serves as the absent center that brings together a certain constellation of philosophy, psychoanalysis, art, and literature.'

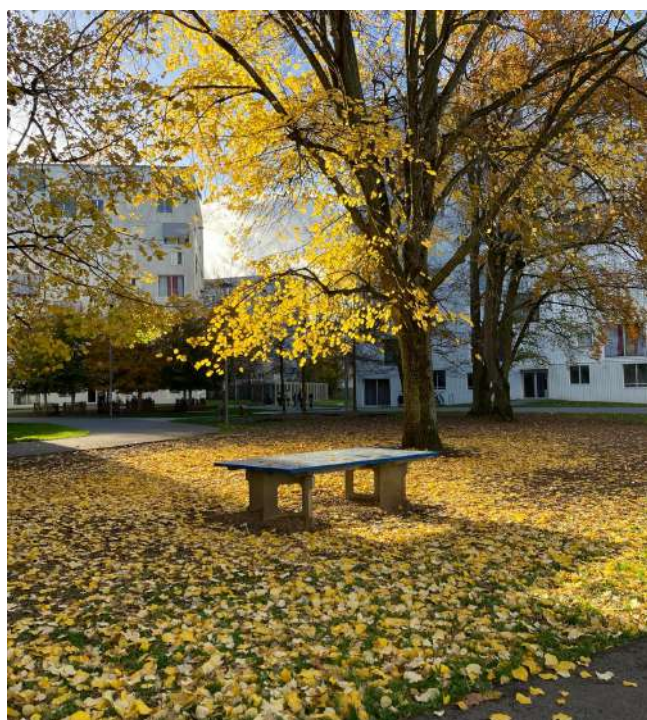
In terms of Oulipo's literary practice, which Schuster avows, the dog is Oulipian, which is to say, like a rat 'who must build the labyrinth from which [it] propose[s] to escape.' By amplifying one's unfreedom, one frees one relation to the 'un' of one's freedom, becoming a champion of the impossible. For Schuster, the failure of his *Investigations* to arrive at or reach a point is to the point, since this is what it means to go back to basics, to one's Kafka ABCs, to grapple with what Schuster with Lacan

calls the thing-like quality of Kafka's writing, the manner in which it courts and thwarts interpretation, 'stifling the search for meaning it incites.'



The writer Joshua Cohen likens the difficulty of writing about Kafka to 'being asked to describe the Great Wall of China by someone who's standing next to it. The only honest thing to do is point'. This honest act is itself a metonymic procedure. In pointing to the wall, one points to a point, to the bricks and mortar, not to the wall as such (the thing itself, *die Sache selbst*) but to a part that stands in for it. Faced with the wall of Kafka's corpus (not to mention the heap of interpretive detritus amassed at its base), Schuster begins by pointing to one of its most enigmatic partial objects – the story *Investigations of a Dog* – and then doggedly pursues what this act of pointing initiates with this metonymic displacement, pursuing it as an analysis and freely associates, as a dog chases after its tail. Constantly returning to this tale, Schuster allows himself to get distracted along the way, to be driven off course. This metonymic procedure is a form of entrapment that nonetheless frees the drives to deviate and drift. Given that the book's 'theoretical' concern is the 'drive' (which Lacan proposed on occasion to translate as *dérive*) – the

drive to think, to philosophise, to write – the book approaches its ‘object’ (which happens to be the impossible object of dog science) in the only way that is faithful to its true character: i.e., through deviation and digression. Only by following these *Umwege* can we catch its drift. The paradox of this methodological procedure consists in pointing to a point, which turns out to be no point at all. More akin to Leibniz’s monad, this point includes within its closure, within its constraint, a potential infinity of forking paths. And this makes for a very generous book. There are as many passages through it as pages.



Yet, Kafka’s cosmos is not that of Leibniz whose faith in a benevolent master had not been shaken. Leibniz inhabits a world in which the principle of sufficient reason reigns supreme. Faith in reason entails a perfect metaphysical architecture in which the infinity of deviations ultimately converge towards a foundational *Klarheit* that renders the parts compossible with a whole, grasped by a mastermind whose benevolent intentions cannot be ill. Kafka’s divine comedy is, as Schuster puts it, ‘more vicious.’ To borrow a lovely formula that Schuster utilises from the Belgian Germanist Herman Uyttersprot, Kafka’s universe is one of *Verwirrung innerhalb der Klarheit* (confusion within clarity).

If ‘the gods died from laughter’ as Nietzsche suggests, when they heard ‘an old grim-beard’ declare himself to be the one and only God’, Schuster writes, ‘What could be

funnier, and more lethal, than for the gods to find themselves transformed into office managers, and the heavens turned into a gray realm of bureaucratic administration?’ Kafka does not announce, however, the death of God but his demotion to the ranks of upper, or even worse, middle management. In the age of management, of capital’s infinite bureaucratisation, ‘[a]uthority becomes murky and diffuse, decentered and ungraspable’. The masters of the universe – addled or outfit in comical fatigues – are themselves slaves to an officialdom they only appear to rule over, their office inseparable from the banalities of the ‘office comedy.’ Schuster writes,

The universalization of servitude (‘I too am a slave’) takes place at the same time that service is separated from the servant, rather than being assigned or guaranteed by a master. Kafkian servants are servants in search of service, workers looking not just for work but for a status or position – a symbolic place – that eludes them, in a world that works by keeping them out of place.

In such a scenario, the figure of the dog becomes the cipher of a problem: what is a dog, at least in the classical sense of ‘old faithful’, if not devoted to its master? And what is a dog to do not only if there are no good masters but no masters at all? What is one to do in the age of universal abjection, wretchedness, servitude? In an age in which there are no true or good masters, the classical dog’s devotion becomes an object of envy. ‘Old faithful’ holds onto the place of the good and the true. A good old dog if it was to encounter such a master would be able to recognise him by his scent. Yet, Kafka’s dog is no ordinary dog, or least he is utterly ordinary and thus totally odd, for he begins to investigate the absence of mastery as such without assigning it a place, sniffing without knowing what it is sniffing, encountering its drive to sniff, its drive to investigate. The dog’s nose is no longer directed toward an absent presence (the missing master) but an all-too-present absence (there are no masters). Such a dog – Kafka’s dog – is forced to develop a new nose, a nose for the gaps and the cracks. This dog sniffs out the missing, querying its presence, without know *what* is missing. This dog is driven not by what it is searching for but by the search and the research. It begins to research *like a dog*, doggedly returning to a missing place. Kafka’s dog becomes ‘like a dog’, because he is no longer a dog having become dogged in his search and research.

Schuster reads Kafka’s ‘Investigations of a Dog’ as

itself a setup for a joke whose punchline fails to arrive. The punchline is less deferred than simply absent – an absence that once sniffed out becomes overwhelmingly present. Although ‘the punchline is never explicitly stated’, Schuster writes, ‘as soon as one gets it it’s apparent everywhere, in the dog’s various encounters, the mysteries he confronts, his entire research program. And the punchline is this: dogs do not see human beings.’ This blindness is the ‘cause’ of the dog’s search, making the story an exemplary case of *Verwirrung innerhalb der Klarheit*. This reframing of the narrative brings us to the crux of Kafka’s ABCs.

Kafka lays out the A, B and C of his ABCs in a letter to Milena Jesenská from November 1920. In the letter, he describes three concentric circles from the innermost to the outermost. ‘A’ stands, according to Schuster, for the central authority or the unreachable sovereign, which is often conceived as radically transcendent and withdrawn: ‘an obscure agency lying beyond this world’: the ‘mysterious castle’, the ‘inaccessible law’, the ‘the ‘unreachable Emperor’; B is the representative of A that bars C’s, i.e., the subject’s, relation to A. Schuster sums it up as follows:

At its core is the master (A), who is withdrawn and inaccessible; his will is relayed to the subject (C) via an intermediary (B) whom C must ‘trust’ to be A’s reliable representative. There is no direct contact between C and A, no means of access to the inner circle of Power. The center exerts its force on the self precisely as something opaque and unreachable.

The joke of *Investigations of the Dog*, according to Schuster, is a joke at Kafka’s expense. Poking fun at himself, the joke lies in the way that Kafka profanes what at first appears to be utterly mysterious. In this reframing, the strangeness of the dog’s account becomes suddenly familiar: the ‘fantastical concert’ becomes ‘a performance of trained circus dogs’ and the miraculous dogs of the sky (*die Lufthunde*) are unmasked as lapdogs snatched off the ground by their ‘invisible masters’. Yet the ‘invisible hand’ of the Master (A) never truly appears; it can only be inferred. The dog’s own drive to search and research is juxtaposed to the reader’s knowing inference. The dog is thus placed in relation to an absent presence (the human hand) and a present absence (the actual in-

scription of this absence that drives the dog to research). What this impasse allows us to see is a drive that is not orchestrated from above but erupts from within. This is the true ‘object’ of *How to Research Like a Dog*. For it is the dog’s drive that places it in relation to a structural horizon that is incomplete. It is not the desire to know but the drive to re-search that makes the dog not just a dog but a dog that is *like a dog*.

Both dog and not-dog, Kafka’s dog is driven to locate the obstacle over which it doggedly trips. Failing to coincide with its likeness, Kafka’s dog truly lacks consistency. Literature is that practice which consists through a contradictory dialectic in which an image is formed of an impossible act. Kafka’s rewriting of Don Quixote is perhaps his most ingenious distillation of this image of impasse. For Kafka (as cited by Schuster), it is Don Quixote’s suicide that concentrates the quixotic: ‘The dead Don Quixote wants to kill the dead Don Quixote; in order to kill, however, he needs a place that is alive, and this he searches for with his sword, both ceaselessly and in vain.’ In this bit of ‘metaphysical slapstick’, we glimpse the quintessence of Kafka’s screwball tragedy. A being that is dead (and thus not a being) wants to kill itself but cannot because it lacks the life requisite to meet the act. Already dead, there is nothing to kill and thus Quixote fails to suicide. The suicidal act necessarily fails, lacking an object, but persists in and through this very failure, giving birth to a life that cannot die because it was never living. This failure to suicide binds the quixotic subject to life through its absence. ‘The quixotic suicide’, Schuster writes, ‘is a torsion of death that keeps reproducing itself as a surplus of life’. Interlocked through an impossible act and bound to himself through this failure, the dead Don Quixote, as Kafka writes, is ‘positively bouncing with life.’ The quixotic suicide lives to make life absent.

By ‘*failing to not-live*’ the Kafkian subject doggedly pursues a life that is nowhere else but here but nevertheless absent: here and elsewhere. Such a subject gives a new inflection to the ancient task of *learning how to die*. Neither Kafka nor Schuster are one, to borrow a particularly apt pun from Antony Burgess, to *let sleeping dogmas lie*. Kafka’s new science and the book that grapples tooth and jaw with its ABCs returns us to the oddity of the place from which one philosophises.

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