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Writing and Reading (with) Polar Bears in Yoko Tawada's *Etüden im Schnee* (2014)*

Wir betraten tatsächlich ein Sphäre, die sich zwischen der
der Tiere und der der Menschen befand.
(*Etüden im Schnee* 129)

In 2016, the Kleist Prize was awarded to the Japanese-born Yoko Tawada, a writer well known in both Japan and Germany for her questioning of national, cultural, and linguistic identities through her distinctly playful style. To open the ceremony, Günter Blamberger reflected on Tawada's adaptations of themes in Heinrich von Kleist's work. Blamberger specifically praised both authors' creation of liminal beings who not only pass through, but make obsolete the "Grenzen zwischen Sprachen, Schriften, Kulturen, Religionen, Ländern, zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart, Mensch und Tier, Leben und Tod" (4). He then highlighted a sample of Tawada's art of transformation, her 2014 novel *Etüden im Schnee* (translated as *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* in 2016), which features the narrative voices of three polar bears, much in the style of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (1819) and Franz Kafka's "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" (1917). Upon considering Kleist's use of the bear in his texts, Blamberger simply characterized Tawada's bears as friendly animals who want to understand—and not eat—their human companions. For Blamberger, Tawada gives voice not just to these three border-crossing bears and their "Bärensprache," but more generally to "Misch- und Zwischenwesen" in practicing her own migrational literary theory of culture and communication (4). The resulting "Poetik des Dazwischen, der Zwischenzeiten und Zwischenräume" foregrounds the metamorphic, even evolutionary, process at work in moving between languages, spaces, cultures, and forms (5).

In the nearly two decades of scholarship on Yoko Tawada's multilingual body of work, critics have homed in on her literary figures' various metamorphoses across national and linguistic borders (Anderson, Esselborn, Hakkarainen, Ivanovic, Slaymaker), her attention to the power of language to shape the perception of world and self (Anderson, Slaymaker), and her emphasis on the inauthenticity of an "original mother tongue," and even of language itself (Anderson, Esselborn, Krauß). Despite this recognition of Tawada's recurrent exploration of the "foreign," her work has been considered only once within the field of literary animal studies, a discipline

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crucially concerned with deconstructing the opposition between human “self” and its nonhuman “other.”¹ In this paper, I draw upon Tawada’s reflections on language and metamorphosis in order to argue that the polar bears in *Etüden im Schnee* complicate literary animal studies’ tendency to locate the continuity between human and nonhuman animals in their shared *bodily* vulnerability. Instead of using language as a mere springboard into theorizing embodiment, as do several recent approaches within literary animal studies, Tawada highlights humans’ and nonhuman animals’ shared capacity to think and speak, which has traditionally been employed to separate humans from animals. Indeed, Tawada’s polar bears not only read and write but *play* with language and the distinctly “human” spaces and genres in which language has traditionally been employed. They perform philosophical interludes on the significance of the bike in the German national economy, write human and polar bear (auto)biographies, criticize Kafka’s ape for being “zu äffig” (66), and learn to use the first-person when talking about themselves. As I suggest throughout this paper, the bears’ games with language throw into relief how *specifically lingual* spaces, and in particular literature, can both border off human from nonhuman *and* collapse that very border. *Etüden im Schnee* builds upon Tawada’s years of theorizing language through nonhumans to become her first fictional work to spotlight the ways animal figures move in and between human-constructed borders like nations and languages. I propose that Tawada’s speaking, thinking, reading, and writing polar bears ultimately articulate a rich theory of language that draws on a German tradition of both theories of language and literary animals. With the grandmother polar bear’s critical reflections on Kafka’s animal stories as my point of departure, I ask how Tawada engages with German literary animals in identifying the border separating human from nonhuman as a process of reading, writing on, and therefore linguistically categorizing bodies.

The Letters of the Alphabète²

Throughout *Etüden im Schnee*, three generations of polar bears reflect on how bodies are written on and read in their respective societies, while their own bodies circulate through historically contingent processes of exile and migration, and even celebrity and export. In the first chapter, the speaking and fully literate grandmother polar bear leaves Soviet Russia for literary exile in West Berlin and later settles into her political exile in snowy Canada. The second chapter spotlights her daughter Toska, a classically trained dancer, who immigrates to East Germany and travels the world with her bear trainer Barbara. Their circus act concludes with “der Todeskuss,” an animal-human merging which elicits different, culturally specific interpretations wherever they perform it. In the third chapter, Knut, the son Toska abandons in infancy, is raised by his human “männliche Mutter,” Matthias, in the Zoo Berlin (233). An international celebrity, Knut sees further iterations of “nicht-Knut” in the dizzying range of Knut memorabilia available in post-Wall Berlin and exported around the world.

The significance of Tawada's polar bears emerges when set against the backdrop of the Western philosophical human-animal distinction. Aristotle contends that humans, animals, and plants should be thought of within a naturalistic schema, with the lower life forms at the service of the higher life forms. Plants (possessing life) are at the bottom, animals (possessing life and perception) in the middle, and humans (possessing rationality) reign above plants and animals. From an Aristotelian point of view, the distinguishing trait which bestows upon humans the power to employ animals and plants as they wish is rationality, or *logos*—the faculty of discursive, as opposed to intuitive, language as well as reason. The father of modern Western philosophy, René Descartes, also denies animals critical and lingual capacities. Although animals possess life and the capacity for sensation, for Descartes they belong in the category of reactive, rather than conscious, automata. Only relatively recently have these variations on an anthropocentric theme begun to receive serious critical attention. To summarize this turn: contemporary theorists like Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, and Donna Haraway challenge the very notions of a clear distinction between “human” and “animal.”³ By collapsing Western philosophy's comfortable distance between human and nonhuman animal, these theorists open up new possibilities for defining the human in a closer and more ethical relation to his fellow animals.

Literature has served as a vehicle for reflecting upon what it means to be human by employing not just human literary figures, but nonhumans as well. Indeed, animals have been the subject of fables and fairytales, epics and poems, romances and stories for as long as literature has existed. From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Kafka's “Die Verwandlung,” stories about animals can play with human self-definition by imagining the crossing over from human into nonhuman, or vice versa, and thereby suspending the categorical distinction between them through the metaphorical nature of language. Perhaps even more interestingly, literature as a distinctly lingual—i.e., human—activity theoretically serves to separate human and animal, whereas literature told from the perspective of animals may confuse this separation (Ortiz 1, 5). In so exploring human relationships with animals, literary works on animals evidence an investment in imagining what science, economics, and politics choose not to: the real-world distance humans have forged from animals in detaching themselves from the knowledge of their own animal nature, a separation that is tied to modernization and urbanization, and consequently obscures the ways humans eat, experiment on, and otherwise benefit from their use of nonhuman animals (Ortiz xi). In sum: a literary practice of anthropomorphizing animals appropriates animal bodies as stand-ins for human characteristics or means of reflecting on ontological, ethical, and social problematics, etc. Rather than closing the gap—or questioning the separation, for that matter—between human and animal by focusing on nonhuman experiences, anthropomorphic literary practices perpetuate the distance between human and animal with real-world ramifications.

Almost 400 years after René Descartes penned the words “cogito ergo sum,” Tawada's grandmother polar bear raises her hand at a conference to utter “Bitte,”

and then “Ich” and “denke,” whereupon the human reader of Tawada’s book is expected to finish the rest of her statement: “... also bin ich” (9). This move calls the reader into the polar bear’s diegetic world and the polar bear into the reader’s world through their shared capacity for thinking and their shared knowledge of Western philosophy. Perhaps even more importantly, the way the borders are crossed through reading about a thinking polar bear enacts a literary metamorphosis that is central to Tawada’s goal of destabilizing boundaries. It is no accident that the opening scene of the newborn grandmother polar bear’s discovery of her body quickly gives way to the adult grandmother’s meditations on memoir-writing, which in turn makes space for reflections on her body, as the other (presumably human) conference attendees stare at her. Crucially, Tawada does not stop at polar bear embodiment but pushes the grandmother into human embodiment by transforming her furry “Pfotenhände” (5) into a “Hand” the moment the polar bear wishes to voice her opinion—that is, to take her place at the table as a being also possessed with the faculty of *logos*.

More than simple word choice, grammar plays a decisive role in this passage. In bringing her polar bear onto the other side of the human-animal divide, Tawada switches the grandmother’s first-person, subjective pronouns to the impersonal, objective “man” as the grandmother explains how one speaks at a conference: “Um eine Meinung zu äußern, muss man vom Vorsitzenden gesehen werden. Dafür muss man seine Hand schnell heben, schneller als die anderen” (8). This rationalizing register is connected with the surreal scenario presented to open up the word “man” as a site for rethinking its ostensible neutrality. If a polar bear can raise her hand in accordance with civilized procedures and then rationalize in the same language as her human interlocutors, what about “man”—or really, humans—distinguishes “man” from a conference-going polar bear? Tawada turns this question around when the grandmother is asked if she loves to express her opinion, whereupon the grandmother counters that the expression of opinions is the foundation of democracy. But one day, the polar bear decides that her hand-raising is a reflex, rather than an act of free will. The sudden return to the word “Pfotenhände” underlines the anthropocentric division of human knowledge versus animal instinct. Whether classified as knowledge or instinct, the polar bear is nonetheless capable of meta-reflection. If this is not a marker of *logos*, what is?

What might it mean for a polar bear to think and, therefore, to be (constructed within the human reader’s mind)? And how does attention to the materiality of language reveal the restriction by one species of what constitutes language in order to dominate other species? Language is key for Tawada, more often than not functioning as her entryway into problematics like “artificial” language’s power to classify beings and structure their relations. In her short prose piece “Von der Muttersprache zur Sprachmutter,” the narrator, a female Japanese immigrant to Germany, remarks that she only realized the relationship between herself and her pen was lingual upon transitioning from writing with an “Enpitsu,” a Japanese

pencil, to a “Bleistift” (*Talisman* 9). The narrator later discovers the ultimate stakes of employing language to categorize and, thus, partition nonhumans from humans when a female colleague rails against her broken pen: “Ihre Macht bestand darin, daß sie über den Bleistift reden konnte, während der Bleistift stumm war” (*Talisman* 10).

Tawada’s aim is nothing less than interrogating the lingual and social practices which have muted the pen. She creates literature out of the “Zwischenraum der Sprachen” (Esselborn 255), whether that be Japanese and German, “self” and “other,” human and nonhuman, or oral and written communication. Her poetics are predicated on the movement between categories, on the revealing and destabilizing and reassembling of identities—in short: on metamorphosis. In a 2005 interview, Tawada described her poetics in terms of an anagrammatic, metamorphic reshuffling of the body of the alphabet:

When I was introduced to European culture and its modern concepts of identity, I noticed that there is an unrelenting search for one single identity. I, however, could not work with that idea. I started searching, unconsciously, for realms in which different types of identities are represented. I looked in all kinds of different areas: in classical mythology, in fairy tales, in old Asian pre-literary myths, in African legends, in all kinds of places where elements were reshuffled again and again. In tales from these various sources, images, bodies, and actions are taken apart and come back together again. There are also many hybrid creatures in these tales; there are, for example, some that are part animal and part plant, and they constantly change, they fall apart and take on a different shape. Poetically speaking, anagrams are intriguing in this regard as well, especially complex anagrams, where words—sometimes even whole sentences—are taken apart and put back together. (11)

Seven years prior to this statement, Tawada wrote a series of three lectures entitled *Verwandlungen*, which, until the publication of *Etüden im Schnee*, constituted the foremost explication of her poetics in terms of the metamorphic entanglement of humans, nonhumans, and language. In the lectures, Tawada orients herself around the literary motif of metamorphosis to reveal the arbitrary anthropocentric mechanisms at work in human language. As she writes in her second lecture, “Schrift einer Schildkröte, oder das Problem der Übersetzung,” pulling apart meaning by closely observing the materiality of alphabetic letters reveals that the letter exists separately from meaning. This separation becomes especially apparent in a foreign language, as “der Schriftkörper” makes itself known not as an in(di)visible conduit of meaning, but as a body composed of alphabetic parts and, therefore, a body which can easily break and fall apart. Tawada writes that, the longer one approaches language at the level of letters, the more the body of language comes to life and threatens to metamorphose into an animal. The letters of the alphabet are “unfaßbare Phantasietiere,” they are “Einzelwesen” who, free of meaning, only produce understandable words through combination with their fellow beings (30). For Tawada, birthing a letter means bringing an alphabetic body into the world without reflecting on its limitless potential to metamorphose as readers encounter and interpret this body. By extending the notion of the body to that which is written upon and read, Tawada employs language not to partition

human from nonhuman but to identify the bodies of animals, humans, and language itself as subject to processes by which these bodies are made to mean.

Throughout *Verwandlungen*, she extends the capacity to produce language to animals—what’s more, she considers the link between bird tracks and the invention of the ideogram to suggest that animals are not only capable of communicating via signs, but they were able to do so before humans, who cannot understand the letters of such an animal alphabet. In her first lecture, “Stimme eines Vogels, oder das Problem der Fremdheit,” Tawada provides examples from Teutonic mythology, Märchen, German Romanticism, and Paul Celan’s poetry to shed light on a distinctly German tradition around the powerful, and often mystical, voice of birds. Upon comparing the various types of “Vogelzwitsern” to human languages and dialects, Tawada brings humans’ and birds’ various types of “Stimmen” under the same umbrella of a Darwinian attempt at assimilation in a given society (7–8). Like Celan, whom she praises for translating incomprehensible, inaudible “Stimmen” into human language (12), Tawada gives voice to the nonhuman—this time: to birds. The lexical switch from “Vogelgesang” to “Vogelstimme” and “Vogelsprache” creates space within what are revealed to be anthropocentric concepts for bird dialects, languages, and voices. Underlying these competences is birds’ rational operation of their own communication systems in constructing meaning as individuals within their communities. Tawada ends by demonstrating how birds can access what humans can only attempt to access through birds. Perhaps the most striking example Tawada provides in this regard is that of composer Olivier Messiaen eavesdropping on birds and notating their songs. While the composer’s endeavor is destined to fail because birds sing in smaller intervals than the piano can reproduce, Messiaen’s desire to catalogue and musically mimic birdsong reflects the larger practice of humans mimicking animals to forge human civilization. Tawada thus asks how human systems of conceptual organization—e.g., the alphabet, “Stimme” and “Sprache,” and musical notation—fail to account for the nonhuman such that nonhuman capacities which exceed the human are muted, or otherwise made illegible and invisible.

In *Etüden im Schnee*, baby Knut wishes he could sing like the “Flügelwesen” at the zoo (240), and he imagines that were he simply given the chance, his “ehrwürdigen Krallen” would enable him to play the guitar better than his human keeper Matthias (221). Knut’s musical aspirations notwithstanding, *Verwandlungen*’s postulation of lingual spaces which build, collapse, and question the border between human and animal is more richly articulated in *Etüden im Schnee* through Toska’s relationship with her human trainer Barbara. When Barbara contemplates her lifelong affective connection to animals, she remarks that the thoughts of animals are written on their faces, as if with an alphabet. Unfathomable to her is that other humans cannot read this “Schrift,” much less see it (128). Through the character of Barbara, Tawada lays bare how interspecies encounters are fundamentally processes of reading and writing. When animals think, they write their thoughts on their faces, and humans must then read their faces to learn (what) they are thinking.

With Barbara's emphasis on the illegibility and invisibility of animals' thoughts for most humans, one may conclude that animal faces are written pages which may be erased when not read. Barbara does, indeed, use the ideas of animals writing and humans reading to describe her communicative experiences with Toska: "Ich konnte ihre Gedanken lesen, sie waren klar, als hätte man sie mit einem weichen Bleistift auf ein Zeichenpapier aufgeschrieben" (131). The medium of "Zeichenpapier" locates their connection within an open and fragile system of meaning-making. Drawing paper is by definition employed in the activity of drawing, not writing, and is characterized by an absence of straight lines which would facilitate the writing of alphabetic letters. In contrast to a medium upon which linear, alphabetic writing occurs, drawing paper's characteristic nonlinearity opens up possibilities for expression and interpretation. Similarly, and in a moment reminiscent of Tawada's birds (whose tracks are ideograms' predecessor), Barbara observes that polar bears write their lives not on paper like humans, but on snowfields.

It is on the snowfields and icebergs of shared dreams that Tawada situates Toska and Barbara's spoken encounters. In a total of three dreams, Toska and Barbara discuss a number of topics, from the disappointments of their childhood, to the impact of their mothers on their lives, to the parallel evolutionary mechanisms humans and polar bears employ, such as roaring. The first description of their shared dream announces the dreams' function of staging Tawada's poetics of metamorphic reshuffling in ultimately creating a space of interspecies legibility dependent upon the fragility of that metamorphic reshuffling.

Ich sah die schwarze Flamme in Toskas Pupillen flackern. Es wurde hell um mich, so hell, dass es mich blendete und die Trennlinie zwischen der Wand und der Decke verschwand. Ich empfand weiter Angst vor Toska, aber die Atmosphäre um sie mutete fürchterlich an. Ich befand mich bereits in einem Bereich, den niemand betreten dürfte. Dort in einer Finsternis, verloren die Grammatik verschiedener Sprachen ihre Farbe, sie schmolzen, mischten sich, froren wieder ein, trieben auf dem Meer, zu den Eisschollen, die auf dem Meer trieben. Ich saß auf derselben Eisscholle wie Toska und verstand jedes Wort, das sie mir sagte. Neben uns schwamm noch eine Eisscholle, auf der ein Inuk und ein Schneehase saßen und miteinander unterhielten. (123)

In order to be transported into the world in which an Inuk chats with his own animal interlocutor, Barbara must first look deeply into Toska's eyes. The blinding light which erases the divisions ("Trennlinie") constituting her surroundings signals their entrance into a space partitioned by neither language nor nation, nor by an anthropological divide, but by floating icebergs. A major facet of Tawada's poetics of metamorphosis, water appears as a reminder of the constant metamorphic process seemingly stabile entities undergo, which includes the very materiality of a book and one's reading of that book. In this passage, the grammatical bodies of different languages lose their colors, forms, and integrity; one grammatical body melts and intermixes with another; this grammatical conglomeration is then frozen in its new hybrid state and carried into the sea, where it joins the icebergs upon which the Inuk and snow hare, the circus trainer and bear talk.

By situating Toska and Barbara's conversation on the same iceberg, one which has emerged from the breaking and reassembling of languages, Tawada highlights how "language" is predicated upon divisions which consequently impede communication. Fittingly, Tawada never clarifies whether Barbara and Toska speak in human, bear, or a hybrid language in their dreams, nor does she pin down the language in which Barbara reads Toska's thoughts. Tawada is interested, instead, in what results when the grammatical and semantic structures which give body to languages are taken apart and reshuffled. In my reading, the violent, erotic coalescence of languages is paralleled by the humans and animals who also experience the disintegration of their own embodied and lingual borders. While Barbara laments that she cannot speak to Toska outside of their dreams because they lack a "gemeinsame Sprache" (133), they nevertheless communicate in both their shared dreams and diegetic reality by moving towards each other to the point that they mirror each other and, as I will describe shortly, become one voice.⁴ But Tawada suggests this union is by no means comfortable or stable. Based on Barbara's renewed fear of Toska upon arriving at the borderless non-place, she understands that the experience of metamorphosing with Toska is one that will endanger her bodily integrity. The iceberg can melt and once again join the sea, the words written "mit einem bleichen Bleistift" can be erased, the wind can blow away the polar bear's tracks, and the polar bear and her human trainer can unite only after having each been dissolved.

The two best examples of Barbara and Toska's metamorphic merging specifically occur through reading and writing. First, in conducting research for Barbara's circus act with Toska, both Barbara and her husband, Markus, learn of the mercilessly predatory initial human encounters with polar bears. Not knowing the danger posed by humans, polar bears became easy prey and hunting polar bears became a popular sport. Upon reading this, Barbara "schnaufte aus Wut wie ein Tier" (117). The couple then reads accounts by natives of the northern polar region detailing polar bears' supposed left-handedness and application of snow to wounds, whereupon they wonder how people would react if they were to realize the intelligence of bears. This moment of self-reflexivity demonstrates that the characters, author, and reader operate within the same system, which functions through reading to make and remake meaning. After Barbara expresses her fury "wie ein Tier," the diegetic and extradiegetic readers learn that animals are not embodiments of pure wildness and carnality, but rather exhibit rationality and creativity. Tawada thus draws attention to a process of symbolization in which the implied meaning of figurative expressions involving animals ignores the reality of the animal subject in a given expression.⁵ In this sense, the "wie" in "wie ein Tier" is a levelling gesture, underlining Barbara's own status as an animal, and raising the question of how Barbara *is* an animal insofar as she is *like* an animal or is acting *as* an animal. In so doing, Tawada closes the gap between Barbara and Toska in preparation for their union, while also recalling a long-forgotten kinship between humans and bears.

The best example of Barbara and Toska's metamorphic bending towards each other occurs during and as a result of "der Todeskuss," a circus act in which Toska makes an extremely deep bow to Barbara and both stretch out their tongues to exchange a sugar lump. Long before they perform "der Todeskuss," however, Barbara offers to write Toska's biography so that her animal life may not be forgotten. Barbara spends much of the chapter reflecting on her own life in the process of writing Toska's and, in a striking interlude not contextualized as a dream, she apologizes for having set out to write Toska's biography, only to write her own:

"Ich habe dir versprochen, deine Lebensgeschichte aufzuschreiben. Bis jetzt habe ich nur meine eigene geschrieben. Es tut mir leid". – "Es ist in Ordnung. Zuerst sollst du deine eigene Geschichte in die Buchstaben umsetzen. Dann wird deine Seele aufgeräumt, sodass ein Platz für eine Bärin entsteht". – "Hast du etwa vor, in mich hineinzutreten?" – "Ja". – "Ich habe Angst." Wir lachten einstimmig. (171–72)

This passage centers on the act of biography writing to explore its two resultant metamorphoses: that of life transformed into letters and that of one being transformed into another. Similar to Barbara's fear of Toska when they first share dreams, the anxiety that ensues in these metamorphoses reflects humans' fear in closing the distance between human and animal. To be sure, a human being's acknowledgement of her status as a member of an animal species equates to a rejection of a definition of humanity that has dominated for centuries.

The one-voiced laughter at the end of their conversation comes to fruition in the last few pages of the chapter, when a reincarnation of Toska describes the kiss Toska and Barbara shared in "der Todeskuss" as the human soul gradually passing into the bear soul (204). Born twenty years after Barbara kissed the older Toska, and arguably the hybrid being birthed in this polar bear-trainer union, the reincarnated Toska claims authorship of Barbara's biography: "Welche Bärin hat schon in der Vergangenheit geschafft, das Leben ihrer Menschenfreundin aufzuschreiben? Es war nur möglich, weil ihre Seele durch den Kuss in mich hineingeflossen war" (204). The human writing the biography of a bear was actually a reincarnated bear writing the biography of a human from a "Bärensicht" (205). As reincarnated Toska observes of humans when moving in to kiss Barbara: "Eine menschliche Seele war nicht so romantisch, wie ich mir es vorgestellt hatte. Sie bestand hauptsächlich aus Sprachen, nicht nur aus gewöhnlichen, verständlichen Sprachen, sondern aus vielen kaputten Sprachscherben, den Schatten der Sprachen und den Bildern, die nicht Wörter werden konnten" (203).

By thus revealing the (auto)biographer as the fusion of a human soul and a polar bear soul, Tawada attempts to close the gap between human and animal through a non-logocentric reconceptualization of language as life writing. If only broken pieces of language are located in the human's soul, then humans are not the rational, lingual beings Aristotle and Descartes claim. What's more, Aristotle's hierarchy is leveled through the very trait distinguishing human from animal and plant. Tawada thus moves away from *logos* and the corresponding definition of

human in favor of a movement towards *pathos*—i.e., communicating through feeling. This affective opening of language signals an attempt to account for the “Sprachscherben” as well as the shadows of languages and images which escape containment by the *logos*. And since the human soul’s “Sprachscherben” eventually do form understandable language, one may deduce that this occurs only in combination with other pieces of language and with other beings. In other words, language is inherently relational and therefore necessitates an ethics of language. And as animals operate several complex systems of communicating—from roaring to writing their lives in the snow—this ethics cannot be restricted to the sphere of human language. Rather, the *ethos* as the expression of the “I” must make space for the animal in recognition of the proximity of humans and animals as thinking and speaking, feeling and living beings.

Life Writing, Life Reading: Questioning the “I” in Autobiography

How does a thinking and speaking, feeling and living being learn that s/he is an “I” in opposition to a “you,” a “s/he,” or a “they”? On an afternoon walk around the Zoo Berlin with Matthias, Knut discovers his “ich.” In response to the Malayan sun bear’s comment on the chilly weather, Knut says, “Du bist zu dünn angezogen. Schau doch Knut an. Er hat einen schönen Pullover an.” The Malayan bear exclaims, “Du nennst dich selbst Knut? Ein Bär in der dritten Person!” This prompts rage and existential confusion in the younger bear: “Knut war doch Knut. Warum sollte Knut nicht Knut sagen?” Upon later observing that Matthias and the veterinarian Christian both use the word “ich” to talk about themselves, Knut wonders, “Warum kamen sie nicht durcheinander, wenn alle dasselbe Wort für sich benutzen?” (258) The following day, Knut approaches the moon bear, clears his throat, and speaks the word “ich” for the first time: “Ich heiße Knut, falls Sie es noch nicht wissen” (259).

What is especially significant about Knut’s discovery of his “ich” is that the initially third-person narration in Knut’s chapter mirrors his existential confusion: “Am nächsten Morgen ging ‘ich’ wieder an dem Gehege vom Malaienbären vorbei, aber er war leider nicht da. Vielleicht schlief er noch in seiner Höhle. Ich entdeckte die Kragenbärin in einem der Nachbargehege, räusperte mich zuerst und sprach dann das Wort ‘ich’ zum ersten Mal aus” (258–59). Despite having been raised by humans who speak of themselves in the first-person, it is only through a critical encounter with another bear that Knut begins to perceive himself as an “ich.” The Malayan sun bear’s “Ein Bär in der dritten Person!” refers to an allegorical model of writing and speaking about animals which denies them subjectivity. In his work on animal figures in German literature, Karl-Heinz Fingerhut emphasizes the meditated nature of animal-human relations in which every encounter is defined by the images of a particular animal created by a particular national culture. By gesturing to Heidegger’s famous assertion in *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (1929–30) that animals are “weltarm” whereas hu-

mans are “weltbildend,”⁶ Fingerhut posits that a human’s denial of an animal’s “Dasein” in favor of its representation (“So-Sein”) positions the animal on the border of humanity’s own “Dasein.” In effect, the human sees in the animal the “Spiegelbild des eigenen Ichs” (1–2). Used to instruct humans through fables, for instance, the allegorical animal becomes an embodiment of a human characteristic, whether admirable (the owl’s wisdom) or not (the donkey’s idiocy). In wearing the mask of humanity, the anthropomorphized “Als-ob-Tiere” function as a medium for the transmission of human cultural values (5–7).

Through their masterful language play specifically within the space of autobiography, Tawada’s polar bears reject this allegorical tradition by putting on and taking off the mask of humanity, as it were.⁷ They disrupt the ontological distinction at the very level of the human’s “I.” To be sure, if the “I” in autobiography harks back to Descartes’s “I,” even those animal stories narrated in the first-person would evidence humans using animals to create “human” literature. For this reason, Tawada approaches the genre of autobiography as an especially powerful space for theorizing human-animal relationality in which one life writes another’s life and one’s story is never solely one’s own. By metamorphosing the literary animal’s “he” into an “I” throughout *Etüden im Schnee*, she demonstrates how literature at its core implicates a “we.”

Similar to Tawada’s poetics of breaking apart and reshuffling the alphabetic body, she breaks apart and reshuffles the autobiographical body to reveal its mechanics. The novel’s opening paragraph focalizes a baby first experiencing the world in a body “kaum anders als ein Embryo” (5). Many autobiographies begin with the author’s heritage or earliest childhood memories, but Tawada begins her polar bear autobiography at the very beginning of a particular being’s life—whether one knows one’s heritage or remembers one’s childhood, every being was once an embryo. The first sentence introduces the “empty I” of the first-person narrative form, which will get filled as the narrative progresses: “Jemand kitzelte mich hinter den Ohren, unter den Achseln, ich krümmte mich, wurde zu einem Vollmond und rollte auf dem Boden” (5). Even if the reader took note of the book cover depicting white fur, the “I” which speaks is unidentifiable as one species or another. Until the narrator notes the absence of “das flauschige Fell” in the sixth sentence, the only substantial evidence as to who is speaking occurs once the narrator makes a second reference to phases of the moon. She lifts her behind and places her head under her stomach to become a “Sichelmond,” whereupon she opens up her anus to the cosmos (5). With Tawada’s poetics of metamorphosis in mind, these lunar references connect the narrator to the most famous story of bear metamorphosis: that of Callisto in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a nymph-turned-bear in mythology as well as Jupiter’s second-largest moon. Invoking the cosmic also connects the novel’s first paragraph to its last, in which Knut imagines falling snow as a spaceship which lifts him off the cranium of the earth (312). As the historical Knut was the first reported nonhuman to die from anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis (Prüss et al.), the literary Knut’s joy of snow lifting him off

the earth—and knowing how the real Knut died: away from life—suggests a circular origin story which intertwines humans (or nymphs) and bears, fact and fiction, and life and death. At the level of her body and her life story, the novel's "I" is intimately entangled in a centuries-long literary tradition in which the corporeal border between humans and animals can be crossed in revealing its own porosity. Fittingly, the grandmother ends the first paragraph by wondering whether her stumbling forward-movement could be called "Gehen," and she uses the words "Pfotenhände" and "Krallenfinger" (5). These compound nouns subvert the dichotomy between the (animal) "paw" and the (human) "hand" by fusing the ontological categories they signify, thereby suggesting that lexical hybridity as an ethical practice may be the writer's best option when describing an animal body in literature.

The narrator's description of her body as neither purely human nor purely animal is reflected in this first chapter's fluidity between her past as a caged circus performer and being a famous autobiographer. Entitled "Evolutionstheorie der Großmutter," the chapter invokes Charles Darwin's invalidation of the Cartesian paradigm of radical alterity between humans and animals in spotlighting a narrator who recalls her "animal" past within the "human" space of autobiography. The reader's sense of an overarching allusion to Kafka's "Bericht für eine Akademie" is confirmed when the grandmother enters a bookstore in West Germany and begins to read literature "aus der Sicht der Tiere" (64)—namely, three of Franz Kafka's animal stories and Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll*.⁸

The grandmother polar bear, similar to the inquisitive dog in "Forschungen eines Hundes" (1922), does not see the human hand, but understands Kafka's animal stories as autobiographies written by members of different species. Although she is initially hesitant to read about a dog, as the word "Hund" prompts her to remember a dog who frequently bit her from behind, the title impresses her: "Ein Hund konnte also einen Forschergeist besitzen. Die neue Erkenntnis milderte mein Vorurteil gegen diese Spezies" (65). Josefine in "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse" especially affects the grandmother, who, in reading, reflects on the two-legged audiences that gaped at her own performances of human activities. But it is "Bericht für eine Akademie" which stokes the grandmother's uncontrollable anger. In his address, Rotpeter describes his life as an ape before his capture on the Gold Coast and transformation into a human by imitating his captors' European behavior, i.e., drinking schnapps, spitting, smoking, and abusing a female ape. The grandmother finds Rotpeter's tale unpalatable for its postulation that metamorphosing into a human—which she defines as walking on two legs—is an "Erfolgsgeschichte" (66).

This mocking of an evolutionary success story runs throughout Kafka's story,⁹ and yet the grandmother does not read beyond Rotpeter's words to identify Kafka's critical voice. For Rotpeter, aping the human is not a matter of evolving into a higher life form, but of finding an "Ausweg" (Kafka 325). While the grandmother misunderstands that the ape must speak in his human captor's language

in order to tell his story (Harel 63), she is disgusted by the possibility that readers will approach her own text through the ape's:

Es kam mir zu äffig vor, ein Mensch werden zu wollen und auch noch von der eigenen Menschwerdung zu erzählen [...]. Mir war übel, da ich mich erinnerte, wie ich als Kind das Gehen auf zwei Beinen gelernt hatte. Ich habe das nicht nur gelernt, sondern schrieb auch einen Text darüber und veröffentlichte ihn. Wahrscheinlich dachten meine Leser, ich wollte mit meinem affigen Erfahrungsbericht die Evolutionstheorie unterstützen. Hätte ich den Bericht des Affen früher gelesen, hätte ich meine Autobiografie ganz anders geschrieben. (66)

The grandmother's sense that readers will collapse her autobiography with Rotpeter's report is particularly threatening to her because Rotpeter does not represent Rotpeter as the individual he is, but rather as a metaphor for Darwinian evolution. Throughout the grandmother's critique, she mimetically plays with the word "affen" to poke fun at how the ape has aped his way into no longer being an ape. For her, Rotpeter is an ape-turned-human who apes human literature to produce "Affenliteratur" (Tawada 66), which ultimately does not bridge the "Menschenwelt" and "die alte Affenwahrheit" (Kafka 299: 25; 303: 24–25), as he can no longer access his "äffisches Vorleben" (Kafka 299: 4). Here again, the grandmother misreads Rotpeter, who feels neither like an ape nor like a human. Rotpeter does not desire his transformation: he emulates humans in order to survive and thereby becomes an acculturated ape, so to speak—a fact altogether lost on the grandmother.

In my reading, the grandmother's most pressing critique of Rotpeter—and the reason Tawada devotes a major part of the grandmother's critical attention to this particular text—is Rotpeter's status as a sterile interzone between human and animal. As opposed to the polar bears who fluidly cross and therefore question the traditional human-animal divide, Rotpeter's is a metamorphosis which does not question the ontological distinction. Indeed, Rotpeter is acknowledged as a thinking and speaking being only once he mimics human behavior. Rotpeter therefore demonstrates the limits of this human-animal binary and underscores Tawada's central assertion throughout the novel that animals are capable of more than being a foil for humanity. Furthermore, Tawada draws attention to the grandmother's misreading of a literary animal to demonstrate the ubiquity of anthropocentric, non-affective reading practices. If the grandmother had read beyond Rotpeter's account, if she had noticed how his affect is inscribed in his language use (e.g., his circumlocutions), then she would have read Rotpeter as a victim who subtly appropriates human language and Kafka as a writer who critically demonstrates this process. In this way, Tawada opposes two practices of reading animals: on the one hand, the allegorical tradition, as it aligns with Cartesian duality, presents no interzone between human and animal, and Rotpeter therefore demonstrates the limitations of the literary animal as a metaphor. On the other hand, the author questions literature which does not allegorize animals and may function as a human-animal interzone by highlighting relationality as it already occurs in the processes of reading and writing. To be sure, stories cannot function in the

mind of an author alone, but require recipients who read and reflect on these stories. And in turn, a report, or an autobiography, never belongs solely to the writer: it metamorphoses each time it is being read.

The end of the grandmother's chapter performs the closing of this distance between writer and reader, as well as the fundamentally metamorphic nature of writing and reading. In preparation for immigration to Canada, the grandmother reads "[d]ie Literatur der Migration" (88). Having found just the right book on the third try in the manner of Goldilocks, she switches from summarizing the first two stories' plots in the third-person to involving herself in the third story's plot as its first-person protagonist. That is to say: in the act of copying out passages from the novel, she writes herself into the novel:

Ich wollte das, was hier erzählt wurde, als meine Lebensgeschichte adoptieren und bis zum letzten Interpunktionszeichen selber durchleben. Ich las jeden Satz laut vor und schrieb ihn ab, irgendwann blickte ich aber nicht mehr auf die Buchseiten. Aus dem Buch flüsterte mir eine Stimme die Geschichte zu. Ich lauschte und schrieb. Diese Tätigkeit kostete mich viel Lebenskraft. (91)

By way of reading aloud and writing down a literary text, the grandmother's entrance into the story literalizes a general phenomenon of incorporating another's story into one's own through reading. The act of reading thus not only metamorphoses the reader but metamorphoses the text itself: the text comes to life. And Toska comes to life. Based on the text's narration of an immigrant couple's new life and the grandmother's dream of hugging a yet-unborn Toska and naming her grandson "Knut," I interpret the grandmother's expenditure of "viel Lebenskraft" as her giving birth to the novel itself as a form of life. Similar to Toska and Barbara's creation of Toska's reincarnation through the medium of life writing, the grandmother's chapter witnesses two lives which merge into one autobiography, then intertwining several lives across species lines. For the grandmother polar bear, and for Tawada, life is transformed when life is written. This is their poetics of metamorphosis.

Conclusion: A Tawadian Ethics of Writing and Reading Animals

A bear walks into a bookstore. She spots a man in a white sweater, who asks if she is looking for something in particular. An autobiography. By whom? It doesn't matter. He points to a shelf filled with books: these are all autobiographies. The bear reflects: "Es war enttäuschend zu wissen, wie viele fette Autobiografien bereits existierten. Sie füllten lückenlos alle Plätze der zehn Stockwerke eines Bücherregals. Anscheinend ist die Autobiografie eine Textsorte, die jeder, der eine Feder halten kann, schreibt" (63).

In the scene in which the grandmother polar bear walks into a bookstore in West Germany and searches for an autobiography, she finds herself faced with an overwhelming number of volumes holding the lives [bio-] of those who have reflected (on) themselves [auto-] through writing [-graphy]. What is especially poignant

about her statement is that the requirement for writing about oneself is not being human, famous, nor part of a literary elite, but simply holding a “Feder.” The image of the quill, as opposed to the more modern “Stift,” recalls a literary history of iconic German writers who have produced written documentation of their lives. And this “Feder” can be read literally: as a feather from a bird. Throughout *Etüden im Schnee*, Tawada foregrounds how the “human” act of writing takes place through the animal body. This prompts the reader to think of other literary uses of the animal body, ranging from book covers made from animal hide to the animal characters depicted in books. In critical opposition to an allegorical model which reinforces Cartesian duality, this novel is not a tale of a polar bear wearing the mask of a human, nor of a polar bear’s metamorphosis into a human; rather, this is a tale which uses intertextuality, narrative slippages between beings, and reading and writing polar bears to reveal that those with tails are also deserving of tales.

According to my reading of *Etüden im Schnee*, Tawada draws attention to the metamorphosis of life into words, as well as that of one life form into another, and this occurs in the processes of reading and writing. When the grandmother polar bear reads about a singing mouse, a researching dog, a reporting ape, and an ear-biting bear, Tawada prompts re-evaluation of literary animals and extends a “Pfotenhand” to those who write their lives in non-traditional ways. Indeed, polar bears who appropriate “human” language to demonstrate life as a form of writing complicate the boundary between literary animals and literate animals and, in turn, call for a definition of humanity which accommodates the importance of affect. Tawada also emphasizes the role of metamorphosis in critical and ethical reading practices through literary animals who reveal how life itself includes many processes of communication and combination. In its elegant conceptualization of language production as a fundamentally human-animal interzone, the grandmother’s “Feder” demonstrates how language, ethical relations, and writing and reading as the transmission of information are inherently collaborative processes. What if the bird were to take back its feather? What if the human did not have the bird?

Notes

¹ In her work on Tawada’s queer zoopoetics, Eva Hoffmann considers *Etüden im Schnee*’s often erotic interspecies encounters through the lens of queer and feminist theory and performance theory.

² I propose the admittedly Derridian term “*alphabeté*” in describing the asymmetry of human-animal relations in regard to accessing a certain notion of language. Rather than positing “the” human as the alpha creature, in comparison to the mere animal, Tawada melds human, animal, and language bodies together in the figure of her polar bears. In so doing, she disrupts the reader’s desire for the stability of “the” animal literary figure as separate from “the” human literary figure. Indeed, a body is not a stable signifier, and animals (if one is to take them as one indistinguishable whole, as does anthropocentric writing)

operate several complex systems of communicating, from urinating on doors to leaving tracks on the ground. Human language ossifies certain animal embodiment, which may or may not have anything to do with the animals themselves. For instance, the saying “as smart as a fox” operates within a closed system of meaning. But polar bears who read novels and newspapers, speak at conferences, and write memoirs arguably open that system.

³ Matthew Calarco’s summation of Western philosophy’s human-animal distinction has informed my brief treatment of the relatively recent turn to critiquing anthropocentrism.

⁴ After one of their shared dreams, Barbara awakes next to Toska: “Wie ihr Spiegelbild lag ich in der gleichen Körperhaltung wie sie” (159). This human-animal mirroring also occurs in Barbara’s name, which plays on “Bär” in a reference to the historical figure Ursula Böttcher [*ursus*: (Latin) bear]. One of the most celebrated female animal trainers in the second half of twentieth century, Ursula Böttcher became famous for a kiss act with a polar bear named Alaska.

⁵ Tawada is famously skeptical of metaphors and wrote in *Opium für Ovid* that an author who places importance on the materiality of the world cannot write metaphorically—if such a writer were to write that his wife is a swan, she really is a swan (30).

⁶ For more information on Heidegger’s concept of “Welt” as it relates to the ontological distinction, please see Matthew Calarco’s *Zoographies* and Krell.

⁷ In Tawada’s 2013 collection of plays entitled *Mein kleiner Zeh war ein Wort. Theaterstücke*, characters do, indeed, put on and take off the mask of humanity. In “Die Kranichmaske die bei Nacht strahlt,” for instance, a character named “Übersetzer,” along with two characters identified by their familial relations (“Bruder” and “Schwester”), continually return to the theme of human-animal metamorphosis. This porosity of the border between human and animal, self and other, story and reality, is then performed through the characters’ use of animal masks. When “Bruder” and “Schwester” tell the story of a crane and a mailwoman, “Bruder” puts on a crane mask and becomes “Bruder als Kranich,” whereupon he and the other characters pose metaphysical questions about his and their own human-animal hybridity. The ultimate difficulty of defining a stable (human) self with a stable (human) narrative comes full circle when “Bruder” asks: “Ist es möglich, dass ich ein Kranich bin? Ist es möglich, dass ich früher einmal ein Kranich war? Oder dass ich eines Tages zu einem Kranich werde? Dann werde ich aber sofort vergessen, dass ich vorher kein Kranich war, und kann wieder nicht feststellen, ob ich eine Verwandlung durchgemacht habe oder nicht. Was kann ich tun, damit ich mich später an alles erinnern kann?” (29)

⁸ I forego an analysis of Heinrich Heine’s *Atta Troll*, as the grandmother polar bear comments on it only insofar as it is indigestible, and it pertains to human rights vis-à-vis minority discourses. While Toska plays the black bear Mumma in a children’s adaptation of *Atta Troll* and criticizes its unnatural depiction of a bear mother-son relationship, the role of *Atta Troll* in the novel is best situated within the critical apparatus of race and minority studies.

⁹ For an account of Kafka’s critical devolutionary aesthetic, see Thompson.

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