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Out of Time, Out of Space, Out of Species: Deictic Displacement of the Exiled Self in Hans Sahl's "Der Maulwurf" (The Mole)

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Received: 19 January 2018; Accepted: 2 February 2018; Published: 8 February 2018

Abstract: In Hans Sahl's poem "Der Maulwurf" (The Mole), only the title gives an indication about the speaker's species affiliation. The speaker of the poem suggests that he was transformed from a human into an animal. This metamorphosis is not only physical, but also seems to have had an impact on the position of the speaker regarding his position in time and space. In this article, I analyze temporal, spatial, and physiological changes in the poem, and I argue that they are indicative of a theme of displacement that is embodied in animal existence in the text. Specifically, these shifts construct an exiled lyric identity whose transformation from human to animal creates an experience of displacement on every plane of existence.

Keywords: animal narration; Hans Sahl; lyric poetry; mole; space; time; species; metamorphosis; transformation; exile

"Lohnt es sich noch, für den Menschen zu sein, nachdem er uns schon so lange enttäuscht hat?" (Sahl 1991a).

(Is it still worthwhile to be in favor of humankind, since it has been disappointing us for such a long time?)¹.

1. Introduction

Hans Sahl (1902–1993) was a German author of literary criticism, poems, short stories, plays, and a novel—some say the novel of exile (Martini 1976; Kellenter 1982).² In 1933, he was forced to flee Germany because of the fascist Nazi-regime, as he was Jewish and associated with the political left. After the end of World War II, he remained in New York City and became a US-citizen, but he still considered it exile, although the immediate political threat was over. In several essays, he discussed the complication that exile did not end for him, and that it was impossible for him to return to his home country and start over.³ He returned to Germany only for the last few years of his life. I therefore contend that a major theme of Hans Sahl's writings is the experience of a perpetual state of exile, even if it is not explicitly mentioned in every piece.⁴

¹ All German-to-English translations in this article are mine.

² As with many exiled authors, researchers focus much more on Sahl's biography than his literary output, because the primary goal of scholarship was to track the personal histories and make the writings accessible for a long time. Of those who do consider his writing, most studies concentrate on his novel *Die Wenigen und die Vielen* (1959; *The Few and the Many*), written between 1942 and 1945 and on his late autobiographical works *Memoiren eines Moralisten* (1983; *Memoirs of a Moralist*) and *Das Exil im Exil* (1994; *Exile in Exile*). Only very few scholarly works take Sahl's poems into account, e.g., Andrea Reiter (Reiter 1998), who also wrote a comprehensive biography (Reiter 2007); especially the late ones are barely recognized, even though they are an essential part of his oeuvre. For more about Sahl's identity see (Reiter 2004).

³ E.g., *Das Exil nach dem Exil* (*Exile after Exile* (Sahl 1987)) and *Gast in fremden Kulturen* (*Guest in Foreign Cultures* (Sahl 1964)).

⁴ For a broader study on exile in Sahl's work see (Hess 2006).

This article focuses on Sahl's poem "Der Maulwurf" (The Mole (Sahl 1991b)). It was first published in a magazine in 1988, and later included in a collection of poems entitled *Wir sind die Letzten/Der Maulwurf* (1991; *We Are the Last/The Mole*). Even though the second part of the collection is called "Neue Gedichte" (New Poems), and many of them were written in the 1970s or 1980s, they focus on the Second World War, exile, and related subjects.⁵ "Der Maulwurf" is one of the poems that seems not to be related to exile, at least not at first glance. But the speaker of the poem is a migrant, albeit an unusual one. He⁶ appears to be the titular mole, although that assumption is not confirmed conclusively in the poem, since it is voiced in the first person without an external introduction or description of the focalizing speaker.⁷ Yet, taking the mole for the speaker complies with the conventional reading of a role poem, which means that the voice of the poem is also a character that speaks from its point of view.⁸ One can presume, however, that the speaker has not been a mole for his entire life, because he mentions that he once lived among human beings. This suggests that the speaker changed his species affiliation and transformed from a human being into a mole. He moved from human society to the realm of animals and plants, it seems, not entirely voluntarily, and thus addresses the structures of exile in figurative ways. That leads to questions, such as: How does the transformation from human into animal affect the world shown in the poem? Is the physiological appearance of the speaker connected to his position in space and time? Are there any signs of displacement? What does the image of a mole add to the scenery of the poem? In order to answer these questions, this article will focus on the three categories of space, time, and physiology before reflecting on the choice of a mole for this poem.

2. Shifts in Space, Time, and Physiology

Before analyzing space, time, and physiology, I will introduce the poem itself. It is dominated by an I ("ich" (Sahl 1991b, l. 7)) whose utterances are organized around a temporal structure of past, present, and future, as well as the distinction between the space of realm of earthworms ("das Reich der Regenwürmer" (Sahl 1991b, l. 6)) below the surface of the earth ("unterirdisch[]" (Sahl 1991b, l. 35)), which is full of plants and animals, and the world above, the community of humans ("die Gesellschaft der Menschen" (Sahl 1991b, l. 37)). For a better understanding of the following analysis, here is the full poem:

Der Maulwurf

- 1 Hügel aufwerfend,
nicht wissend, was draußen vorgeht,
wo das Unbeständige beginnt,
das Verdorren und Verdursten,
5 das Verblühen—
Aber hier, im Reich der Regenwürmer,
in das ich mich zurückziehen mußte,
ist alles noch Keim, Hoffnung, Ahnung,
Urzustand der Dinge, darauf wartend,
10 Gestalt anzunehmen, sich selbst
zu formulieren—
Da liegen die Larven und träumen von dem Gesicht,

⁵ E.g., "Denk ich an Deutschland in der Nacht" (Thinking of Germany at Night), "Charterflug in die Vergangenheit" (Charter Flight into the Past), "Befragung des verlorenen Sohnes" (Questioning of the Prodigal Son).

⁶ The speaker is not gendered. I call him "he" to avoid the pronoun "it" for animals in accordance with the grammatical gender of the mole in German, which is masculine.

⁷ As is often the case in poetry, no distinction between the homo-diegetic first-person speaker and the protagonist is possible because of "the contrived congruence of voice and focalization" (Hühn and Sommer 2014, p. 423).

⁸ For poetic forms, especially the role poem, see (Ryan 2012, pp. 204–5).

das sie annehmen werden,
 die Körper von den Gliedern, die sie
 15 fortbewegen sollen, die Wurzeln
 von den Baumstämmen, die sie
 festhalten müssen—
 Hier unten werden die wunderbaren Blumen
 entworfen, die Säfte für die
 20 Äpfel und Birnen und Pflaumen vorgeschmeckt.
 Hier gibt es nur Anfänge,
 und wehe mir, wenn ich sie nicht
 erkenne, wehe mir, wenn der Hügel,
 den ich mir errichtet habe,
 25 zusammenstürzt—
 Wenn ich von den Launen und Einfällen, die mir
 zur Verfügung stehen, keinen Gebrauch
 machen kann,
 das Schlummernde nicht aufwecken,
 30 dem Schweigen nicht einmal das Zirpen
 einer Grille entlocken kann
 oder der Einöde den blauen
 Rausch der Fliederbäume—
 Wehe, wenn ich das mir selbst auferlegte,
 35 unterirdische Tun nicht mehr zu ertragen
 vermag, wenn ich des Treibens unter Tage
 müde werde und die Gesellschaft der Menschen,
 der ich entlief,
 zu entbehren beginne,
 40 wenn ich aus dem Reich des Werdens
 in das Gewordene,
 aus dem noch Ratenden
 in das Ungeratene
 desertiere,
 45 entschlossen, nicht mehr zurückzukehren,
 es nicht noch einmal zu versuchen,
 mit dem Kopf unter der Erde,
 Hügel aufwerfend,
 kratzend, grabend, wühlend,
 50 blind in der blendenden
 Helligkeit des
 Nochnicht. (Sahl 1991b)⁹

Narratological concepts will help determine the speaker's position in the poem more closely.¹⁰ The focalizing voice, as Peter Hühn and Jörg Schönert say, shares its "perceptual, psychological, cognitive and/or ideological perspective" (Hühn and Schönert 2005, p. 8) with the reader. Throughout the poem, the reader's orientation is guided by deictic expressions (Hühn and Schönert 2005, p. 8). These are expressions that cannot be understood without context, because they only unfold their

⁹ The full poem is printed with permission. No English translation of the poem exists; for the context of this article, all pertinent lines of the poem will be translated throughout the close reading.

¹⁰ For the potential gain that lyric analysis can derive from narratological theory, see (McHale 2009; Hühn 2011).

meaning with a point of reference. They relate directly to the speaker and his speaking position, and change reference points as soon as somebody else is speaking. This referentiality is especially important regarding the axes of person, space, and time. The speaking “I” is “here” and “now.” These are the fix points for references such as “you,” “there,” and “later.” They are only relatable when provided given by a specific speaker. In this poem, for instance, there are deictic words for space, like “outside” (“draußen” (Sahl 1991b, l. 2)) and “here” (“hier” (Sahl 1991b, l. 6)), as well as for persons, such as “I” and “my” (“ich”, “mir” (Sahl 1991b, l. 26)). On the level of presentation, the grammatical subject is located at the center of the I-here-now-deixis. Since the deictic *origo*, the reference point of the deictic axes, is flexible, meaning that it adjusts to the speaker’s position and relates to his specific context, it is impossible for the speaker to leave the deictic center. Yet a closer look at the deixis in the poem reveals a transformative shift of on every deictic axis. The speaker in “Der Maulwurf” seems to be displaced from his previous spot in respect to space, time, and physiology. The only location from which he is not moved is the grammatical level of the I, which remains the deictic center. In order to trace the shifts of the speaker on each axis, I will now examine the spatial, the temporal, and the physical structure of the poem more closely.

2.1. Spatial Structure

In the category of space, the poem describes a change of the spatial position of the speaker. He introduces a deictic distinction between the inside and the outside. These two spatial dimensions, the outer and the inner, are semantically identified with an existence on and beneath the surface of the earth, respectively. The position of the speaker is down in the soil (“unten” (Sahl 1991b, l. 18)), subterranean (“unterirdisch[.]” (Sahl 1991b, l. 35); “unter Tage” (Sahl 1991b, l. 36)), with his head beneath the ground (“Kopf unter der Erde” (Sahl 1991b, l. 47)). According to the poem, there has been a move of the speaker from the outside towards the inside, from above the earth to below (Sahl 1991b, ll. 6–7, 34–38). While many texts that depict migration or exile use the metaphor of losing their homeland and being rootless,¹¹ this poem creates an alternate image: its subject moves from above ground into the soil, literally to the plants’ roots (“Wurzeln” (Sahl 1991b, l. 15)). It is a dialectic image, as it combines with contrary movements: the speaker migrates to a foreign habitat that is separated from his former living environment, yet at the same time he seems to stay in his ‘native home’, that is, he migrates to his own roots deep down in the soil. One could also describe this shift as a move to a terrain beyond all distance (“eine Landschaft jenseits aller Ferne” (Sahl 1991c, l. 2)), like it says in “Strophen” (Verses), another poem of the collection.

The speaker is cut-off completely from his former home. Since he moved, he does not know anymore what is happening outside (“nicht wissend, was draußen vorgeht” (Sahl 1991b, l. 2)). The change of place thus also entails a cultural and social change which is the price the speaker paid for his escape from human society (“Gesellschaft der Menschen,/der ich entlieft” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 37–38)). He left the human world to live in a non-human world, i.e., the realm of the earthworms (“Reich der Regenwürmer” (Sahl 1991b, l. 6)). It is not clear in the poem whether there would be a way to return above ground, though it is also not explicitly excluded. Yet, longing to return above ground seems itself to be a problem, since the speaker does not dare formulate it as an explicit wish, but rather expresses it indirectly in the form of warning and lament: “woe is me, if I cannot bear the self-imposed underground activity anymore” (“wehe mir, wenn ich das mir selbst auferlegte,/unterirdische Tun nicht mehr zu ertragen/vermag” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 34–36)). This does not suggest that the move underground is final; rather, it shows that there is great necessity for the speaker’s existence in this spatial sphere, and that the above and below follow different rules that are decisive for his wellbeing.

It becomes clear that the speaker left his position above ground and his usual habitat to find a new place to live. This movement underground also places the speaker in a different social realm,

¹¹ For the motif of plants and roots in exile literature see (Bischoff 2015).

in which small animals and plant roots become his companions instead of human beings (Sahl 1991b, ll. 6, 12, 15, 31). This sphere below seems to be a parallel world to the human one, yet it is out of reach of human perception, or even an exchange of information and experience. The position of the speaker after the migration is therefore not just a move on the spatial axis, but seems to be no longer on the same spatial axis whatsoever. He has moved to a different space from his pre-migration-world and hence been utterly displaced from its former living space.

2.2. Temporal Structure

The spatial descriptions in the poem are closely connected to the temporal ones. When the speaker describes his position beneath the ground, it seems that he leaves the present tense of the I-here-now-deixis. Instead, the speaker steps outside of the linear historical timeline to a place that is *before* time, where everything is still in the process of becoming (“ist alles noch Keim” (Sahl 1991b, l. 8)); or as “Strophen”, another Sahl poem of the volume says, it is like slowly stepping out of time, toward a future beyond all stars (“Ich gehe langsam aus der Zeit heraus/in eine Zukunft jenseits aller Sterne” (Sahl 1991c, ll. 6–7)). This seems to be a temporal pane in which everything is preparing to enter the deictic time axis. Above ground, everything is transient, destined to pass away in the end. The words used to describe this ephemerality are all semantically connected to vegetation: above begins the impermanence, where one dries up, dies of thirst, and withers (“wo das Unbeständige beginnt,/ das Verdorren und Verdursten,/ das Verblühen” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 3–5)). Using the fragile life of flowers as an exemplification of an existence above ground shows the vulnerability of living beings in the outside world. From a socio-historical perspective, plants played an important role in the process of human civilization, as knowledge about plants and their annual cyclical rhythm of life allowed humans to settle (Deußer and Nebelin 2009, p. 9). So, there is a close connection between plants, human history, and time. The sociologist Norbert Elias sees time as a symbol that allows humans to relate different occurrences to one another and to circulate them in social contexts. Hence, time is not objective, but related to the human perception and therefore part of the human world, the above (Elias 1988, pp. XVII–XVIII). In Elias’ view, the conceptual differentiation of time ran parallel to the process of civilization, so that time became second nature of humankind (Elias 1988, pp. XVII–XVIII). In line with this idea, the speaker of Sahl’s poem “Die Zeit” (Time) asks whether time originated with the stars or was invented by humans (Sahl 1991d, ll. 1–3). Leaving human society could thus also be understood as leaving the human concept of time behind. This is what happens when the speaker moves to a sphere before time in the poem. Time, meaning historical time, has no part of the non-human world of the text.

Despite this rejection of human concepts, the poem also contains references to the religious motifs. Moving underground means for the speaker to leave the world of being—which is also described as ‘the damnation of completion’ (“Verdammnis der Vollendung”, (Sahl 1991e, l. 23) in “Das tägliche Pensum” (Daily Workload), another of Sahl’s poems—and enter the world of becoming, where only beginnings exist (“Hier gibt es nur Anfänge” (Sahl 1991b, l. 21)). It is the territory of germ, hope, and premonition (“Keim, Hoffnung, Ahnung” (Sahl 1991b, l. 8)), where things are in their primordial state (“Urzustand der Dinge” (Sahl 1991b, l. 9)), waiting to take shape (“wartend,/ Gestalt anzunehmen” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 9–10)) and to formulate themselves (“sich selbst/zu formulieren” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 10–11)). This seems to align with Genesis and imagine a prelapsarian state of becoming, of complete harmony and immortality. Transience first came with tasting the fruit of knowledge, because knowledge and eternal life were incompatible in the Bible (Krauss and Küchler 2003, p. 71). The speaker seems to have moved back to a position of the ‘not yet’, which is before the ‘now’ of the post-paradisiacal time, the usual deictic center. Again, the speaker’s position cannot be located on the deictic axis of time that existed pre-migration. It is therefore a state even *before* identity, because it has not yet been articulated what the parameters of that would be. This means, it is a state *before* definition through human language and a logocentric image of the self.

This position *before* is neither present, nor past, nor future, but a state of continuous preparation, akin to a primordial time, in which beings are preparing to come into existence. Some scholars, like Anette Streek-Fischer, compare prelapsarian existence to the early stages of the development of the human self (Krauss and Kuchler 2003, p. 93; Streek-Fischer 2014, pp. 12–13). According to a psychoanalytical perspective, the process of becoming a conscious person means setting boundaries. At a young age, an infant cannot differentiate between him- or herself and surrounding objects, or as Sigmund Freud would say, between ego-libidio and object-libidio (Freud 1975, p. 66). When toddlers learn to differentiate between the self and the other, they learn to see themselves as separate from their environment. In a similar way, Genesis tells the story of establishing boundaries and separation (Krauss and Kuchler 2003, p. 93). Therefore, this time *before* designates both the state of an individual before self-awareness and the time *before* humankind was banned from Eden.

The unusual phrase of “formulating oneself” (“sich selbst/zu formulieren” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 10–11)) highlights the fundamental role of language in the process of becoming and defining, in the conceptualization of the self and the development of the human self. This is not only the case because it occurs in a poem and the speaker would not exist without words, but because language also affects the (symbolic) order of the non-fictional world. Julia Kristeva says,

The symbolic order—the order of verbal communication, the paternal order of genealogy—is a temporal order. For the speaking animal, it is the clock of objective time: it provides the reference point, and, consequently, all possibilities of measurement, by distinguishing between a before, a now, and an after. If I don’t exist except in the speech I address to another, I am only *present* in the moment of that communication. (Kristeva 2000, p. 255)

Within the poem, on the level of events, the speaker is cut off from the present in a pre-linguistic state and is thus outside of the symbolic order and also outside of a logocentric order of humankind. This is the case even though the speaker is a textual subject on the level of presentation, as it is voicing the poem and presents itself in language.

The temporal transformation on the level of events is mirrored on the level of presentation.¹² The voice begins to speak in the present tense (Sahl 1991b, ll. 1–21), talking about the underground world that is connected to the *before*. In the middle of the poem, the speaker switches to the subjunctive mood (Sahl 1991b, ll. 22–44), asking what would happen if it could no longer bear staying underground and would leave the realm of becoming (“Reich des Werdens” (Sahl 1991b, l. 40)) in order to return to the realm of that which has become (“das Gewordene” (Sahl 1991b, l. 41)). But toward the end of the poem, the speaker decides that he will never return, never try again, that he will stay with his head below ground and remain blinded in the dazzling brightness of the “not-yet” (“entschlossen, nicht mehr zurückzukehren,/es nicht noch einmal zu versuchen,/mit dem Kopf unter der Erde,/ [. . .] blind in der blendenden/Helligkeit des/Nochnicht” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 45–52)). This sphere of the “not-yet” cannot be located on a linear time axis but remains in a sphere that is beyond the measurement of time, that is before its beginning. The speaker is at a point of time undoing itself “Zeit, die sich aufhebt” (Sahl 1991f, l. 5), as it says in Sahl’s poem “Der Schnittpunkt” (Point of Intersection).

2.3. Physiological Structure

Based on these movements, a third shift emerges: the textual subject has not only moved to a different world and left linear time, but it has changed species designation, too. The speaker’s characterization is vague, as not many details about the identity of the voice are given. In addition, there is no explicit addressee; no sign of an audience within the poem. The poem is constructed as the monolog of a diegetic animal, which is an animal that has an actual place in the diegetic universe

¹² Hühn and Schönert state that in lyric poetry, as well as in narrative texts, there is a “fundamental distinction between the level of events and the level of presentation—between incidents which we take as the primary, basic material and the way in which they are mediated in the text” (Hühn and Schönert 2005, p. 4).

and is not only used in a metaphorical way (Borgards 2016, p. 226). Taking the mole as the speaker of the poem gives him a voice, specifically the first-person individuating I. It is possible to read the mole as an allegory for the estrangement from the world through migration, displacement, and exile. Yet, the poem also depicts an actual metamorphosis from a human being into a mole when taken literally.¹³ There is evidence that a change of species took place, when the speaker reports that he had to hide himself away underground because he had to escape the human world (“die Gesellschaft der Menschen, der ich entließ” (Sahl 1991b, l. 37)). The verb “entlaufen” in German is used for pets that escape from their owner, so the choice of words suggests that the speaker has actually left humankind. Also, human beings are not able to live under the earth like animals and plants can. From a human standpoint, the ground is reserved for burying the dead; it is the place for one’s final rest. This is probably one of the reasons why moles are associated with death in popular belief; even more so as molehills resemble burial mounds (Bies 2006, p. 55). But at the same time, soil is associated with fertility. Especially for vegetal life, it is the place where life begins. This corresponds once more with the prelapsarian image, in which life and death meet. For the speaker it is a place to start a new life. In order to survive, his spatial migration requires a physiological assimilation. That means that the speaker has to modify his bodily functions, as well as the everyday routines and habits, to survive in these non-human surroundings.

Becoming a mole and converting to the animal world is a fundamental change of the deictic *origo* by transforming the “I” that presumably centered around a human speaker once. This metamorphosis is not only an external phenomenon, but has an existential impact on everyday life. The speaker lives underground in the characteristic habitat of a mole and does mole-typical things like raising mounds, clawing, grubbing, and digging (“Hügel aufwerfend,/kratzend, grabend, wühlend” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 48–49)). This confirms that the mole is a diegetic textual animal, not only a semiotic textual animal, meaning that in the logic of the text the mole appears to be a real animal, not a human person metaphorically designated as a mole. These behavioral depictions strengthen the notion of the actual biological being and problematize a reading of the mole as merely an emblematic metaphor or allegory. Also, there is no word of comparison that would give a signal for a simile, unlike in Sahl’s poem “Die Auster” (The Oyster), in which the speaker addresses an oyster with the phrase: “To be like you” (“So sein wie Du” (Sahl 1985, p. 148)), before the speaker describes their potential life as an oyster; or Sahl’s novel *Die Wenigen und die Vielen* (*The Few and the Many*), in which the narrator describes an exile who lives *like* a mole (“Er lebt wie ein Maulwurf” (Sahl 1959, p. 169)).¹⁴

The reader is carried off to the world of the mole, a mythical place, where wonderful flowers are created and the juices of apples, pears, and plums are pre-tasted (“Hier unten werden die wunderbaren Blumen/entworfen, die Säfte für die /Äpfel und Birnen und Pflaumen vorgeschmeckt.” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 18–20)). The underground world is depicted as a sphere of creation and becoming that seems to be harmonious and carefree. But it is a fragile peace. The speaker formulates his worry about a collapse of this world, caused by the inability to change it; an inability to awaken the slumbering, to tease a cricket’s chirping out of the silence, or to raise the blue ecstasy of the lilac trees out of the wasteland (“kann,/das Schlummernde nicht aufwecken,/dem Schweigen nicht einmal das Zirpen/einer Grille entlocken kann oder der Einöde den blauen/Rausch der Fliederbäume—” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 29–33)). The speaker needs something to do; he needs to have an impact on his surroundings and affect change (Sahl 1991b, ll. 26–33). Furthermore, he needs to communicate with the other living beings, the plants and animals, to ensure him that he is part of a lively sphere (Sahl 1991b, ll. 29–33). Physiology is

¹³ In Sahl’s poem “Gedichte schreiben—oder was davon noch übrig blieb” (Writing Poems—or What Was Still Left of It), printed a few pages before “Der Maulwurf”, it says “Ich mache mich selbst zum Gedicht./Ich bin eine Begebenheit./Ich finde statt./Ich passiere.” (I make myself into a poem./I am an occurrence./I am taking place./I am happening. (Sahl 1991g, ll. 61–64)). That seems to be an instruction in and taking the word seriously.

¹⁴ “Der Maulwurf” is not the only literary piece by Sahl that has an animal as narrator. In *Memoiren einer Katze* (1957; *Memoirs of a Cat* (Sahl 2012)), the titular cat is the focalizing subject.

literally what keeps one alive, which is, metaphorically spoken, more than only bodily functions and physical appearance. The speaker appears to be like an obstetrician who helps bring things to life in order to ensure his own livelihood. A collapse therefore would mean a life-threatening situation (Sahl 1991b, ll. 23–25). The metamorphosis from a human being into an animal not only means a change in physiological appearance but also in psychological understanding of the I in the deictic *origo*.

Another potential reason for a collapse of this world could be the speaker's longing to go back to the human world. The unreliability of the speaker, which is given in any first-person monological stance, as Hühn says (Hühn 2015, pp. 173–74), reveals itself by showing that the identity of the voice is unclear and that the mythical underground world might not be (as perfect) as it is described. This is because there is a threat, whose consequences are not explicitly named (Sahl 1991b, ll. 22–33), and also because the speaker is not allowed to long for leaving, which turns the supposedly paradisiacal place into a prison (Sahl 1991b, ll. 34–44). In addition, the speaker does not explicitly describe what caused his flight from the human world or what might happen upon his return, so that many blind spots remain for the reader. What is clear is that the identity of the speaker is not stable and that another transformation might be possible in the fictional reality of the poem. Yet, the speaker chose to remain underground as a mole along with other animals and plants.

While other subterranean living beings in the poem, for instance the grubs, are dreaming of a transformation that will allow them to enter the upper world (Sahl 1991b, l. 12), the focalizing speaker decides not to re-enter the upper, that is the human, world. The mole stays in the animal world in order to see whether there is an opportunity for a different life that has *not-yet* come (“Nochnicht” (Sahl 1991b, l. 52)). In another poem of the volume, “Der Verwundbare” (The Vulnerable),—one that is not clearly voiced by an animal, though the speaker had to leave his kind, too—there is a similar ending, but with a differing notion. It says: “Man hat mich aus der Art geschlagen,/jetzt will ich in sie zurück und/finde sie nicht mehr”. (My kind was beaten out of me,/now I would like to return to it and/cannot find it anymore. (Sahl 1991h, ll. 12–14). This phrasing suggests that violence is involved in the process of leaving one's kind. The transformation was forced upon this speaker, not chosen, and in addition, his attempt to return fails. But in “Der Maulwurf”, the metamorphosis into another species was self-imposed (“mir selbst auferlegte” (Sahl 1991b, l. 34)), even though the speaker says that he *had* to withdraw below the earth's surface (“in das ich mich zurückziehen mußte” (Sahl 1991b, l. 7), which suggests that it was not entirely voluntary. The speaker therefore does not return and remains underground. The “not-yet” bears hope and hopelessness at the same time. It carries the bright promise of a possible return on the one hand. On the other hand, this return is delayed to an indefinite moment in time that is never to come. Even if the possibility of return is one of brightness (“blind in der blendenden/Helligkeit” (Sahl 1991b, ll. 50–51), the speaker seems to be afraid of it, since it is blinding, and the ending feels like an obituary of a lost future (“Nekrolog auf eine verschollene Zukunft” (Sahl 1991i, l. 36)), as another of Sahl's poems puts it.

The shift from a human to a mole is visible on the outside, but also affects the speaker's way of perception, everyday routines, and the communicational sphere. Even though it is the same I that is speaking, it is displaced on the axis of person: through the shift, something irregular happens, since it is not typically possible to have an animal in the center of a speech act, at least in an anthropocentric view. In addition to the spatial and temporal transformations, the direct effects of this change on the speaker, on his body and way of life, are powerful signs for the shifts in every sphere. Although there still are the axes of space, time, and person, and the speaker is still in the deictic center, one can clearly see that the reference points of all deictic expressions have changed. On every deictic level the speaker is displaced. Still one question remains unanswered: why the choice of a mole? In the final section of this article I will try to find an explanation.

3. The Mole Across Texts and Time

As the analysis shows, the three examined transformations regarding space, time, and species affiliation have an existential impact on the speaker. The spatial migration, leaving linear time, and

the metamorphosis into an animal locate the speaker in a different position on all deictic axes. When supposedly established categories come into motion, it causes a crack in the stable construction of the world. Carl Einstein, a fellow exiled writer, defined literature itself as such a fundamental transformation (“*dichtung als verwandlung*” (Einstein 1986, p. 26)) and art as a metamorphosis of being (“*Metamorphose des Daseins*” (Einstein 1996a, p. 247)). Bettina Englmann, who wrote about the poetry of exile, explains that art in the way Einstein saw it is able and tasked to negate and break with social conventions for the purpose of making new realities visible (Englmann 2001, p. 121). In order to achieve a new reality, which is a new image and a new form of humans and the world, one has to shatter the traditional concept of the self and the idea of stability, as well as a continuously progressing history (Englmann 2001, p. 123).¹⁵ This is exactly what the poem does when the speaker leaves the human world and transforms into a mole. Through mimetic ability, the viewer of art can, if one follows Einstein, construct unstable realities, which means that art is a potential way to generate new and multiple realities (Einstein 1996b, pp. 404–5). Art should therefore not only depict but *be* a reality (Einstein 1996b, p. 258). The refusal of consenting to the world as it is—especially given the reality of Nazi Germany—plays a crucial role in the literature of exile, as Englmann points out (Englmann 2001, p. 128). In Sahl’s poem, the profound impact of migration, displacement, and exile on a person’s life becomes clear, as it affects all aspects of existence. The following section addresses how this is specifically related to the mole.

The traditional symbolism of moles in European literature is an antitype to human self-awareness, embodying human deficiency (Stierle 1982, p. 104). Because moles stay in the dark and were wrongly believed to be blind, they have, at least since the Renaissance, symbolized the opposite of progress and knowledge, as light was associated with truth and wisdom, to enlightenment, and the dark was related to lies and lack of knowledge (Stierle 1982, pp. 105–8). But even before that, moles have been regarded not only as ignorant, but also as troublesome. Since Greek and Roman antiquity, there has been a widespread notion that moles are ravenous and responsible for the death of plants because they would eat the roots (Stierle 1982, pp. 103–4; Bies 2006, pp. 51, 61). That is why they are considered vermin or a pest in some European countries. However, there have been a few defenders of the mole in history as well. One of them was Johann Peter Hebel, who in *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes* (1817; *Treasure Chest of the Rhenish Family Friend*) included a piece that is named “*Der Maulwurf*” (Hebel 1961), like Sahl’s poem, in which he explains that not the mole but the grubs as well as other types of larvae are actually responsible for the damaged plants, while the mole is a predator who is after grubs, not roots. In Sahl’s poem it is not the mole either who is responsible for the death of plants, but linear time in the upper world (Sahl 1991b, ll. 4–5). In addition, the mole does not seem to be an aggressor, but rather the one who is threatened (Sahl 1991b, l. 7). The poem therefore does not invoke the negative image that is often associated with moles, and I am therefore turning to another aspect of the metaphorical understanding of moles.

As I showed in the first section, Sahl’s collection of poems is embedded in a political and socio-historical discussion about the Second World War that is specifically against fascism. In this context, it is relevant to take a closer look at the image of “the mole” in the field of politics because its semantic history might be reflected in the poem. During the 1848 revolution in Germany, the term “*Wühler*” (literally burrower, synonym for a mole and other little burrowing mammals) was a common insult for democrats and members of separatist groups (Burkhardt 2001, pp. 59, 66–67). More and more, it was used as a stigmatizing nickname for the radical democratic left, who retaliated with the strategy of adapting the insult and turning it into an ironic self-designation (Burkhardt 2001, p. 63). Giving this strategy, one could say that the speaker of the poem even goes one step further: he not only *adapts* the designation, instead he literally *becomes* a mole. Thinking with Einstein, this metamorphosis then means that the poem is not only depicting a mole-like existence, but instead creating a mole-existence

¹⁵ Englmann refers to Carl Einstein (Einstein 1996b, p. 242).

as an inner textual reality. It becomes even likelier that the speaker might be read as an exile and member of the democratic left when taking into account the following development of the image of the mole.

German linguist Armin Burkhardt notes that the term “Wühler” lost its function as a political keyword at the end of the 19th century, and an increase of the metaphorical usage of the mole in political and philosophical writings began instead. The combination of a threatened and hidden existence, as it also appears in the poem, makes the mole a popular metaphor in critical thought. The Shakespearean phrase “Well said, old mole,” uttered in a conversation between Hamlet and the ghost of his father, was widely known and formative for the image of the mole in the German context. Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel famously refer to it, often in political contexts.¹⁶ For instance, in his analysis of the February revolution in France, Marx adapts Shakespeare’s phrase when he writes: “Brav gewühlt, alter Maulwurf” (Well burrowed, old mole! (Marx 2009, p. 196)). Marx’s *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (1852; *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*), which he wrote when he was in exile in London, contains a mole as a symbol for the revolution that does its subterranean work invisibly.¹⁷ Hegel used it in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1892; *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*) as an explanation for the spirit:

It goes ever on and on, because spirit is progress alone. Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward as Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, ‘Well done, old mole’—until grown strong in itself it bursts asunder the crust of earth which divided it from its sun, its Notion, so that the earth crumbles away. (Hegel 1974, pp. 546–47)¹⁸

One can see the revolutionary potential of the mole metaphor, which stands for radical change that is yet to come and that is in the process of becoming, inside of the existing world, mostly unnoticed. This understanding aligns with the mole in the poem, who has a self-imposed task (Sahl 1991b, l. 44) that might be dangerous (Sahl 1991b, ll. 23–25) and that works towards an event that is to come (Sahl 1991b, l. 52).

As this short exploration illustrates, the mole has often been used as a symbol or metaphor in political and revolutionary contexts, where it represents an attentive observer who has a distinct sensitivity for seismographic vibrations. Taking into account that “Wühlarbeit”, which could be translated as mole work but also as subversive activity, was used in NS-language for opponents of the regime (Brackmann and Birkenhauer 1988, p. 207), the choice of the mole in Sahl’s poem suggests, so I argue, not only the connotation of migration through transgressive shifts in space, time, and species, but that of exile. The mole’s activity in hiding invokes the notion of exile and, given the history of the trope of the mole, perhaps even subversive activity such as resistance. Sahl describes human-animal-transformations not only in this poem, but also in his memoir, when he says, “Die Asseln, die Käfer, die Regenwürmer, die Würmer, die einmal aufrecht gingen und Menschen waren wie ich, Verstoßene, Umherirrende, in der anonymen Landschaft des Exils” (The woodlice, the beetles, the earthworms, the worms that once walked upright and were human beings like me, outcasts, wanderers, in the anonymous landscape of exile (Sahl 1990, p. 13)). In Sahl’s poem, animal metamorphosis can be considered an image for going into exile, another form of migration by leaving the human world behind.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

¹⁶ For detailed analysis see e.g., (Krell 1981, Kant pp. 157–58, Hegel pp. 158–63, Nietzsche pp. 163–65), and (Stierle 1982, Kant p. 110, Hegel pp. 114–18, Marx pp. 118–20, Nietzsche pp. 121–23).

¹⁷ For a broader analysis of the mole in Marx’s writings and in the political left see (Opitz and Pinkert 1979, pp. 74–99; von Beyme 1999).

¹⁸ For a broader analysis of the mole in writings by Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche see (Krell 1981).

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