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Kafka's wonderful ape: Identifying Red Peter

GREGORY RADICK



“Peter, Chimpanzee, Here. Smoking a Cigar as He Came Down the Gangplank of the Philadelphia”, announced the New York Times on August 1, 1909. This ape, a star of the European stage – the Folies- Bergère in Paris, the Palace Music Hall in London – was in New York to launch an American tour. With his nautical suit and yachting hat and strikingly human habits (smoking, shaking hands, putting pencil to paper as if to take notes), he wowed them at the pier. Over the next months, the newspapers remained full of his doings: riding in a taxi, drinking beer, visiting Harvard.

The year 1909 marked an anniversary for Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* had been published fifty years earlier, and who would himself have been a hundred. The theme of Peter as missing link was irresistible. “Darwin Was Thinking of Me” ran one of the advertisements. What caught the eye of the psychologist Lightner Witmer was the claim that Peter had been “born a monkey and made himself into a man”. Based at the University of Pennsylvania, Witmer was the founder of a new clinic there, dedicated to assessing the mental abilities of children. After watching Peter’s performance at Keith’s Theatre in Boston, Witmer persuaded Peter’s trainers to bring him to the clinic for testing.

Witmer published the impressive results in the December 15 issue of the clinic’s house journal, under the title “A Monkey With a Mind”. Again, the press brought much wider attention to Peter’s achievements. The New York Times featured “A Monkey with a Mind:

Peter, the Chimpanzee, and Why Professor Witmer Thinks He May Be the Mental ‘Missing Link’”. An accompanying image showed Peter in suit and tie at a table, reading the evening newspaper, a glass and a bottle of wine beside him. Others showed a padlock that he had worked out how to open and a few letters of the alphabet he had written after dictation by Witmer. In Witmer’s judgement, Peter was an extraordinary animal, much further along the path to typically human abilities than any ape before him.

Might Peter be the model for the most famous variety-stage-turned-scientific ape in literature, Franz Kafka’s Red Peter? In “A Report to an Academy”, published in November 1917, Red Peter addresses a learned audience. Invited to talk about his old ape life, he explains that, although it was only five years ago, he can no more remember it than his listeners can remember theirs, such has been the immense distance travelled. Instead he tells them about how he came to undertake the journey: his capture in Africa, where a hunter’s bullet left him with a scar (hence “Red”); his confinement aboard ship, in a cage whose bars sank painfully into his flesh; the bored, drunk crew members who made cruel sport with him; the moment when he understood that imitating humans could be his way out; and the hard work that gradually transformed him into the betrousered and cultivated fellow now so at home in the human world.

He is even bitchily amusing. That hunter’s bullet, though wounding him only slightly, left, he says, “a large, naked, red scar which earned me the name of Red Peter, a horrible name, utterly inappropriate, which only some ape could have thought of, as if the only difference between me and the performing ape Peter, who died not so long ago and had some small local reputation, were the red mark on my cheek. This by the way”. (Willa and Edwin Muir’s translation.)

So, is Peter our (ape)man? I have not been able to find anything on Peter’s death. On the matter of that “small local reputation”, however, Peter did perform in Kafka’s home city of Prague. In the latter half of 1913, a Prague German-language newspaper, *Bohemia*, carried a succession of notices about the performances of “the wonder chimpanzee” (Wunderschimpanse) Peter, as part of the programme at the Variety Theatre. Whether Kafka attended, or passed by the theatre and saw the publicity, or read about Peter elsewhere, is anybody’s guess. Maybe he just made the whole thing up.

Consider how loosely Kafka drew on the facts of entomology in inventing the beetle-ish monstrosity that Gregor Samsa becomes in “The Metamorphosis” (1915). In several ways, “The Metamorphosis” and “A Report to an Academy” are a complementary pair. The further along that Gregor and Red Peter travel in their transformations – Gregor away from humanhood, Red Peter towards it – the less they can remember of what it was like on the other side. For both, moreover, transformation offered escape from a situation of intolerable pressure, Gregor from the cage of his regimented life, Red Peter from a literal cage. Escape into what? As Red Peter stresses, “a way out” is not at all the same thing as “freedom”. Gregor and Red Peter exchange one kind of unfreedom for another.

Those 1913 performances are especially intriguing because they come after Peter’s encounter with Witmer, and so potentially throw light on why Red Peter is, of all things, reporting to an academy. Even before Peter was scientifically famous, however, he had a Prague reputation, and not a small one either. His 1908-9 appearances at the same theatre, where he performed under the name “Konsul Peter”, are well known to Kafka scholars. “Peter is back”, declared *Bohemia*’s theatre correspondent in April 1909, going on to say that the other Peters of

Europe – the sickly Peter I of Serbia, the Viennese journalist Peter Altenberg (who actually wrote about the chimpanzee Peter) – were bound to feature little in Prague conversations over the next days, thanks to the arrival of “the most popular man in Europe ... the respectable ape, who is almost human”, whose wine-pouring, cigarette-smoking, cycle-riding feats had to be seen to be believed.

Peter does not have the field to himself, however. Another candidate for the role of Red Peter inspiration is called Consul, sometimes Konsul. The briefest of online searches will reveal that, in Europe and beyond, “Consul” was, from the 1890s onward, a cultural phenomenon, less the name of an individual chimpanzee (there were several) than an international brand, betokening an elegantly turned-out, cycling and smoking star of stage and screen, with a sideline in merchandizing. (“Konsul Peter” was an attempt to trade on the fame of the established ape act.) In the very month, April 1917, when Kafka first began the notebook sketches that grew into “A Report to an Academy”, Consul was the subject of an item in the youth magazine supplement of another German-language Prague newspaper, the Prager Tagblatt. It purports to be Consul’s diary, recounting the unedifying tale of his journey from happy jungle ape to unhappy variety-stage performer.

With Consul, then, we have a chimpanzee with variety-stage fame but, aside from some standard hyping as the Darwinian missing link, no scientific fame. The second alternative candidate I want to mention gives us the reverse. Sultan was the most accomplished experimental subject reported on by the psychologist Wolfgang Köhler in his book *The Mentality of Apes*, published in German in 1917. There Köhler described the results of learning experiments at a station in Tenerife. Sultan and the rest were set various tasks, most famously that of figuring out how to stack up crates in order to reach fruit suspended from above. Köhler took the chimps’ success to show that they are capable of at least a limited kind of reasoning, which he called “insight”. And the funding for the experiments came from a scientific academy, the Prussian Academy of Sciences.

As with Consul’s diary, so with Köhler’s book: there is no evidence that Kafka knew about it, let alone read it. But the interest of this proposal goes beyond the question of its correctness. For one thing, it was made by a fictional character, the elderly Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello, in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) by J. M. Coetzee, later republished as part of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). For another, Costello’s aims in making the claim are, like everything else in Coetzee’s work, far from straightforward. Red Peter comes up during a public lecture she gives at an American college. She is reporting to an academy – as Coetzee was: *The Lives of Animals* derives from his Tanner Lectures at Princeton. To the consternation of her (and, no doubt, his) audience, she has decided to talk not about novels but about animals and our relationship to them. For Costello, behind the widespread indifference to the systematic killing of animals for food lies a failure of “imaginative sympathy” with them.

By way of damning contrast, she holds up Kafka’s “Report” as a triumph of the sympathetic imagination. It should not, she advises, be read as an allegory, as though Red Peter was a stand-in for something else, such as the assimilated Jew – the most common allegorical reading, from Kafka’s day to our own. It should be read, just as billed in Martin Buber’s journal *Der Jude* – yes, *The Jew* – and in accord with Kafka’s wishes, as one of “Two Animal Stories”. (The other story, “Jackals and Arabs”, was published the previous month.)

In championing her literal interpretation, Costello marshals what she terms “scholarly speculations, backed up with footnotes”, on “the origins of Red Peter” – and here she argues her case for Sultan. But she manages at the same time to convey a sense that she regards all such arguments as fundamentally misplaced. Her main theme in the lecture is that, when it comes to understanding animals from the inside, the power of reason – scholarship’s mode – has been exaggerated. She indicates her discomfort with the academic setting from the very beginning, comparing her position before her audience to that of Red Peter before his. A little later she comes back to the comparison, after a sceptical survey of the history of Western philosophy as the reason-revering discourse par excellence:

Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking. And if this is so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers? I ask the question and then answer it for you. Or rather, I allow Red Peter, Kafka’s Red Peter, to answer it for you. Now that I am here, says Red Peter, in my tuxedo and bow tie and my black pants with a hole cut in the seat for my tail to poke through (I keep it turned away from you, you do not see it), what is there for me to do? Do I in fact have a choice? If I do not subject my discourse to reason, whatever that is, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey of myself?

Only in her subsequent talk – a seminar on poets as guides to the inner lives of animals – will she provide answers to these questions. The rejection of reason, she will try to show, is not at all the same as giving up on the possibility of knowing animal sensibilities. The choice is not reason or nothing. For there is another kind of knowing, not rational but not irrational either. It is the sort of knowing that comes from poems whose words can induce a sympathetic identification with animals. But for now, in this lecture on the philosophers and animals, she contents herself with casting aspersions on reason and its pretensions.

It is as part of that endeavour that she offers up Sultan. She argues her case not because it is an important case to argue but, she intimates, because she expects that her audience expects some case-making, some reasoning, from her. The origins tale she tells is her gesture towards a kind of discourse of which she is, on the whole, deeply suspicious. Readers who share little of her unease with reason in general may nevertheless feel, as they contemplate the prospect of the further scholarship needed to settle the matter of the real-life Red Peter (Flaubert’s parrot has nothing on Kafka’s ape), that she has a point. This by the way.

[n.b. this essay is a corrected version of the one published in the TLS in the 1 March 2019 issue]