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# Aping the Ape: Kafka's "Report to an Academy"

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## Aping the Ape: Kafka's "Report to an Academy"

### **Abstract**

The "Report to an Academy" narrates a curious situation: an ape presents (or rather, performs) a report to an academy. What he presents is an autobiography. Like so much in Kafka, the "Report" is a parable about writing in general and about the writer's identity in particular. This essay attempts to address these issues through a close reading of Kafka's text against Blanchot's *L'espace littéraire*. Central to this endeavour is an analysis of the ape's use of the first-person pronoun as someone who fashions himself while, at the same time, presenting a theatrical autobiography featuring the self in question. My reading then moves on to analyze the act of writing as a negotiation of the passage between self and other, framed as it is by the theatrical context of Kafka's parable.

## Aping the Ape: Kafka's "Report to an Academy"

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This essay is an attempt at reading Kafka's "Report to an Academy" in light of the following quote from Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*:

Writing is the interminable, the incessant. The writer, it is said, gives up saying "I." Kafka remarks, with surprise, with enchantment, that he has entered into literature as soon as he can substitute "He" for "I." . . . If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who consents to sustain writing's essence loses the power to say "I." And so he loses the power to make others say "I." Thus he can by no means give life to characters whose liberty would be guaranteed by his creative power. The notion of characters, as the traditional form of the novel, is only one of the compromises by which the writer, drawn out of himself by literature in search of its essence, tries to salvage his relations with the world and himself. (26-27)

There are, to this end, three initial assumptions on which this reading is based. First, it is assumed that the "Report" is a parabolic investigation of the situation of the writer in general and of the writer in the first person in particular. Second, that this writer is Kafka himself, although the name ought, perhaps, to be placed in quotes. Third, that the space of this parable is the locus of a certain de-metaphorisation whereby the figurative is made literal. In parable, therefore, an ape speaks. The "Report" traces the development and subsequent (but necessary) failure of an identity. Blanchot's starting-point is with the move from first to third person as *sine qua non* for the production of writing. The concern of the "Report," on the other hand, is with the

converse procedure, with writing in the first person after having started in the third.<sup>1</sup> The ape's situation as a performer is the parabolic equivalent of the situation of the writer. The ape epitomizes, in his act, the impossibility of saying "I" without qualification, and consequently the utter impossibility of writing an autobiography. Caught in such a situation, the only possible relation to the self is performative: one cannot say "I" or locate "I" with any certainty; one can only enact "I," quote "I," recite "I." In so doing, one runs into and is trapped in the clash between two opposing visions of the self, of which some paired variants can be described as the continuous and discrete self, past and present self, empirical and transcendent self, narrated and narrating self, I<sub>then</sub> and I<sub>now</sub>.<sup>2</sup> The ape's identity is caught in the gap that separates each of these like a reflection trapped in two opposing mirrors. The self thus forged is permanently doomed to this oscillation.

There are, in this context, two components to the vector of the ape's self, the formative and the performative. They are mutually dependent; neither without either could or would obtain. The first is located in the ape's observation of the sailors through the bars of his cage and his taking them for his specular doubles. This tendency towards mistaking humans for himself is continued in the parallels he draws between himself and his audience during his performance. The second is played out in the performance itself and in the necessary repetition of this performance on future occasions. As we watch, or read, Kafka's ape, we bear witness to the presentation of the self in a timeless universe, a self that only exists at the moment of its presentation before an audience.<sup>3</sup> The ape's relationship to himself is theatrical: he cannot say "I," he can only play it. In tracing the development of this performed identity, I would like to proceed in stages, first establishing the parallels between the ape and the writer, second, turning to the "mirror stage" that enables and forms the crux of the ape's self-presentation, and finally examining in detail the dynamics of the performance and its consequences.<sup>4</sup>

### A Portrait of the Artist as an Ape:

In principle, the final consequence of the metamorphosis of "I" into "he" is the formation of an (auctorial, written) identity. The act of writing, the extended trope by which first person becomes third, is to a certain extent an obsessive return to the mirror stage wherein the self is made, constructed both as self and other simultaneously, and where the necessity of the lacking self as requisite condition for self-(re)production is discovered.

The question of first-person narration is thus complicated by the path traced by this grammatical transformation leading to the self through the other. To say "I" is, as we have seen, to create an illusion, to pretend that there is a stable entity that can be localized in the constant oscillation between narrator and narrated entity. Kafka's "Report" would have us believe that such an entity has been created, that the ape has succeeded in producing a (temporally, grammatically) stable "I." Ostensibly he has re-traced the steps that once led to the formation of his mirror image by narrating his autobiography, ostensibly he returns to the framework of a subject whose self-designation follows the arrow of time forward, from past to present, an entity driven by an overcoming of its past. The past has not been overcome, however, and this is where the comic element enters: what the ape represents is a grammatical rather than a physical mirror stage. He does not see his real specular double/himself. He incessantly disavows his corporeal reality. The ape's *mauvaise foi* functions as a motor that drives his entire project and serves as a basis for his claims as a subject, which could be listed as follows: I am I; I am not I, I am he; I have an ape's body but am not an ape since I have a human mind (*cogito ergo sum*), I am now essentially but not apparently human, a Middle European cast in an early twentieth century mould.<sup>5</sup> Or, in shorter form: I was what I was; I am what I am (and will continue to be so) and hereby declare (proclaim, narrate) that to be the case.

Thus we see the ape's situation closely parallel that of the writer as described by Blanchot: ostensibly, he transcends his own individuality in order to lose himself in universals, adopting the style of an "average" Middle European in the process. Ostensibly, too, he speaks in the style of the academy; ostensibly he says "I." There is, however, a certain inescapable falsity about it all, a falsity of which the ape is himself only too well aware. This falsity also proves necessary if he is to succeed in being himself before his learned spectators. He is not, after all, one of Hagenbeck's typical drinking partners, as he implies. The ape is doomed to the failure occasioned by the disjunction between his essence and his appearance. This failure is, however, central to the production of authority, both of the speaker and of the writer. The process of moving from third to first person and the separation from oneself (whereby other becomes Other and I becomes nobody) is catalyzed to initiate a process of re-connection so that "I" becomes, in a literal sense, the other.

## His Body, His Other, His Self

The ape's mirror stage can be broken down into three important phases, as it were: the negation of his body, the discovery of the human specular double and, finally, the formation of his "self."

The ape invokes the "Red Peter" incident within the first two paragraphs of the account of his capture. He resents the name because it is strictly corporeal. It does not take into account the internal change that puts him miles ahead of the "performing ape Peter, who died not long ago and had some small local reputation" (248).<sup>6</sup> The ape also undertakes a special effort to display and disavow his body simultaneously, as though the display of his bullet wounds (and the concomitant display of his body) were standard operating procedure in the service of the truth. The ape makes a case for himself by displaying the evidence as represented by the so-called wanton shot that made its mark on his well-groomed fur. Despite his polite protestations to the contrary, our hero is quite sensitive to human efforts at inscribing the signs of domination on his body, and insists on making frequent mention thereof: the bars of the cage cut into his flesh, when he thinks he thinks with his belly, and when he urges his listeners to understand his situation he admonishes them to scratch themselves raw between the toes. It is remarkable that all these instances involve the removal of his "well-groomed fur," the one sign of corporeality that stands between him and the world of men. When his first mentor tried to vent his rage at the ape's *Affennatur* he tried to burn his fur off. His formation as a thinking entity starts with that inscription; his cogito depends as much on an awareness of his body, albeit tinted with the stain of disavowal, as it does on a perception of his mind.

The ape's transformation from an animal into something more developed depends on his body, or rather on *a* body. Our hero undergoes his formative experience with the image of a human body rather than the body of an ape before him, gazing at the sailors through the mirror that was the bars of his cage. The first trick that he learns, the human handshake, marks the culmination of something that has been in the making ever since his days on the Hagenbeck steamer. His understanding of freedom further confirms his corporeal obsession as well as his choice of a specular double. To him the epitome of human freedom is represented by the flying trapeze, "movement that masters itself (250)" 'selbstherrliche Bewegung,' (175) precisely because, like him, it is conceptually trapped in the space of the body. The paragraph's closing sentence seals the coupling between ape and man, between the

performer and his audience: "Were the apes to see such a spectacle, no theatre walls could stand the shock of their laughter" (250) 'Kein Bau würde standhalten vor dem Gelächter des Affentums bei diesem Anblick' (171). Indeed the laughter of the apes echoes the laughter of his own audience, a laughter provoked by the sight of one species aping the other, with the difference that what humans perform on the level of the body, the ape performs on the level of the mind. Being blind to one's own limitations as well as to that which delimits and defines the self is for him part and parcel of being human. This helps explain his valorization of the term *Ausweg* as against freedom; the former stands for the passage from one such aporetic identity to another.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the ape's linguistic perception of his human would-be doubles is quite telling. The sailors on board the steamer are seen on a strictly corporeal level, their gestures approximate the behaviour of animals rather than men: they do everything slowly, they spit when and wherever possible, their laughter is canine. Eventually the ape sees them through the same filter of anonymity through which most humans view apes: in much the same way that every performing ape is called "Red Peter," the ape points out that in his eyes, "it seemed that there was only one man" (250). Seeing the sailors move further emphasises the example set by the trapeze artist; both are examples of humans moving unimpeded. Once the mirror image has been established in this way, it is recognized as such, whence the conception of his project: "A lofty goal faintly dawned before me" (251).

And so he imitates, but what is truly striking is his lucidity regarding the very object of his imitation. The ape apes not just men as a species but rather men and their aporia, the things that make them so typically *menschlich* and more than a little grotesque. One of the biggest problems, he tells us, was the one posed by the schnapps bottle. In what is otherwise a relatively disinterested narrative tone there is a change of scale once the ape addresses his drinking problem. In relating his rehearsals he never fails to mention his disgust at the bottle; it is the only part of the performance that he could not master (he even remembered to rub his belly and grin, like his model). *Qua* ape, he is disgusted by the taste of the schnapps. His disgust betrays his *Affennatur*, intruding as it does onto his facade of recognizably human antics. This is what separates the final performance from its precedents: by hiding his disgust, the ape manages to make it all look natural and feign that most human of attributes, the lack of self-perception.

To a certain extent, his mastery of the bottle underlines a further transformation even more important for his purposes. Before he addresses the issue of the bottle he describes his early attempts at yet another addiction, the pipe. It took him a long time, he tells us, to learn the difference between an empty bottle and a full one. Later, as he describes the revulsion that the schnapps causes him, he remarks that the feeling persisted despite the bottle's emptiness. As well it should have. Part of what the ape masters is the idea of consumption and assimilation, and during his groundbreaking performance on board he acts as though his digestive system appreciated receiving the contents of a bottle of schnapps. Part of what he learns on the day of his first "Hallo!" is the difference between an empty bottle of schnapps and a full one. He learns, moreover, that a full bottle of schnapps can leave one intoxicated: it is hard to tell whether he speaks out of drunkenness or out of delight, but the prefatory gesture (tossing the bottle away like an artist) leads us to believe that he has been separated from himself slightly, that the human equivalent of his first "Hallo!" would have been an intoxicated dance on the table. Kafka's parable of evolution could be summed up as the formation of a human subjectivity as a direct result of an ape's intoxication.

## Performance

Thus the first step leading out of the cage involves the ape's staging himself before the sailors, as he will continue to do before his audiences later on. They see an ape speaking, ostensibly in his own name, an ape who says "I" and who in so doing declares himself to be a former ape. He never declares himself to be human; his evolution is not a metamorphosis in the strict sense.<sup>8</sup> As a former ape in the world of men, his condition is predicated on and regulated by the aforementioned solitude so crucial to the execution of his endeavour. His project, existentially speaking, can be summed up as the will to present himself before an audience and thus be validated. His status as a performer is bound inextricably with his situation as an erstwhile ape. His task would otherwise prove senseless: "I could not risk putting into words even such insignificant information as I am going to give you if I were not quite sure of myself and if my position on all the great variety stages of the world had not become quite unassailable" (246).

This raises the question of how his reputation at the variety was formed. One would assume that he acquired this position through the imitation of men, by engaging in what would, after all, be sophisticated

circus tricks: it is no accident that the two earlier versions of the "Report" took the form of an interview with the trainer. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the "Report" itself falls into the category of variety showpieces; something standard, recited, learned by heart and delivered.<sup>9</sup> This in no way detracts from its remarkable character: most circus tricks are nowhere near as intricate, as meticulously worded or executed. Spectacle or not, the ape does speak, and in his own name at that. And yet his self-proclamation depends in no small part on his disavowal of the better part of his *Affentum*.<sup>10</sup> The trick he turns is to map the opposition between animal and human onto one between past and present and then to disclaim the past by claiming an alibi (the present "I" was not there, I was an ape). His disavowal, as we have seen, founders on the wandering rocks of corporeality: if the ape's discourse provokes a few bemused smiles it is because there is a sense that he tries to take the same quantum leap with his body as he did with his mind. There is method, if not necessity, in his failure, however: how else is he to enact the incessant comings and goings between the boundaries of the oscillating wave function of the self, between animal and human, past and present,  $I_{\text{then}}$  and  $I_{\text{now}}$ ?

## Conclusions and Consequences

We are now ready to re-evaluate the situation of the ape as an entity whose subjectivity is invented through its performance. It is clear that, in addition to making the claim of no longer being an ape, the speaker adds an extra set of quotation marks to his speech. On a first reading, if one were to judge by the content of the story, the ape narrates himself and distances himself from other apes (Peter and his wife) as well as from his own past in the animal kingdom. At the same time he distances himself from the human community: he never, it merits repeating, says that he has become human, but merely that he has established a reputation as a performer, as a player of parts, or rather of one part, namely himself, the ape caught between *Affentum* and humanity. As part of this narrative he narrates the founding moment, the one where his identification with the (human) other came to a head and where, in a fit of self-overcoming, he left himself to become the other. There is no more convincing way to present this crossing-over to the audience and to render realistically the extent of the distance crossed except by being a speaking ape, thus presenting both past and present selves simultaneously. His presentation of the two sides of himself, his lucid disavowal of one and valorization of the other has its uses, too. In

issuing such (presumably legitimizing) statements as, “your life as apes [ihr Affentum], gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me,” (245) he mirrors back to his audience a very real image of themselves. He shows them the ethos of disavowal that makes them what they are (in his eyes at least): a species of actors.<sup>11</sup> As the ape narrates himself, he transposes the human/animal opposition onto one between present self and past self, but proceeds to undermine the very existence of this past through his claims regarding the unspeakability of his *Affentum*, due, allegedly, to a faulty memory. Everything attains a performative textual status with the ape: since his days of *Affentum* do not agree with that sort of approach, their very facticity will be called into question. If there is anything about him that does lend itself to narration, it is only because it has been dragged into the compass of the present. The animal side is now re-inscribed as a subset of the human. He does not do much more than delimit himself, than say, “I am here and now, casting myself in the form of a fiction.” And yet, it is the inscription of one phase within the boundaries of the other that sets his project apart. If he *is* at all, it is only as an *erstwhile* ape on a pedestal before an audience.

The end of the ape’s speech attempts to create the illusion of a stable identity, but ends up re-confirming the division that drives its utterance. The ape, presumably, will go back to his wife, sit in his rocking chair and await his visitors. And yet the ape’s life is not quite as staid as all that. The very next day he will have to re-present himself elsewhere. His being hangs by the thin thread of acceptance and reception, depending entirely on the presence of a human audience. If the variety stage provided the way out that he so desperately wanted (and he is very explicit on this point: “do your utmost to get onto the variety stage,” [252] ‘setze alle Kraft an, um ins Variété zu kommen; das ist der Ausweg’ [175]), it is also as much a trap as the cages to which he opposed it. In both places his being is on display. Furthermore, his being depends in no small part on what the audience applauds if and when they do: his frankness *qua* former ape, his skill as someone who represents their alienated condition (as an actor *tout court*), or his cleverness as a present-day ape who represents man’s angst-ridden state so well. The division that he represents, the division that he is, tends in all three directions equally. Our ape is an aberration, a two-headed monster: he is himself, an other, and the gap in between—a fact that helps explain the half-crazed gaze that he sees in his wife’s eye. It

is obviously the projection of a paranoid self-conception, but what matters is that it is there. In seeing himself through his wife, the ape sees his divided status. He sees himself, the loneliness of the creature who stands and speaks for two entities at the same time, the "I" and the "he" who are also "I" and "I." He sees the inevitable frustration of his efforts as he continually makes himself before a human audience, only to see the web undone by the mere sight of his wife.

Thus the ape, in presenting himself, is caught in a rather unseemly double bind. As he struggles with the presentation of a necessary alienation to his audience, he finds that the more his project succeeds the more it is doomed to failure. As an alienated entity, he cannot proclaim both his current state and the state in relation to which he is estranged. He cannot present both sides of the mirror, as it were. Not, that is, unless he were to pose as and play himself, the speaking ape.

This is a tale about failure, a failure inherent in the written gesture of self-designation. The ape spends a great deal of time going over and re-enacting the gap that separates his temporal self from his a-temporal self: he narrates his historical origins but takes care to separate them from his new, improved, stellar self. The only trouble is that the ape's performing self can perform nothing other than the history from which he is trying to distance himself. In this context, saying "I" refers to neither one nor the other, but to the impossibility of saying either one, to the necessity of putting "I" in quotes, of living up to the ape's final claim of having only reported himself to the honored members of the academy.

As such, the ape stands (in the space of the parable) for the dilemma of Kafka trying to present himself to his audience, trying to present both his narrated and narrating selves without compromising his biographical amplitude. Kafka, unlike the ape, is not the self that he writes; he cannot display his previous self as the ape can display his body. The audience—both the ape's and Kafka's—mediates between the speaker's self and himself. The depersonalization concomitant with the status of the speaker in the first person derives from the necessarily masked intrusion of the third person into the fabric of his being, or rather of the being that he would like to present *qua* speaker before an audience. This intrusion, however, takes on a parabolic form itself, so that the ape's past (narrated) self attains a strictly textual existence that only becomes real with every performance. The parable stands in a similar relation to Kafka: rather than say "I," he must say "he" and point to the performing ape as the parabolic equivalent of

himself, as a quoted version of himself, a writer on display who necessarily becomes a performer in order to play himself.<sup>12</sup> Like the ape, Kafka must become what he sees in the mirror. This is, Kafka would have us believe (both in his tongue and in Blanchot's) the crucial step to be taken by a writer. All writing is a de-metaphorization of that step, an effacing of the border between self and other, an incarnation of the image of the mirror together with the failure that necessarily follows from such a gesture.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. To a certain extent this takes place on both narrative and meta-narrative levels: Kafka can only become himself (the writer that he is) by narrating an ape who can only become himself by narrating an ape who can. . . . The concern with the first-person and the extent or possibility of the author's implication therein constitutes the central concern of much of the *Landarzt* collection. For a far-reaching examination on the use of the first person in the collection as a whole the reader is referred to Kurt Fickert's "First Person Narrators in Kafka's *Ein Landarzt* Stories."

2. This is in a way the lot of all autobiography. Philippe Lejeune raises these issues (the exact temporal location of the referent of the first person as well as the citational component of the first person pronoun) as exceptional or attenuating constraints that delimit the field of autobiography (*Pacte autobiographique* 20-21), a model according to which the "Report" would stand at the limit between autobiography and its other.

3. The ape is not unique in this respect. Other performance-bound subjectivities permeate the *Landarzt* stories. The character of the new advocate (who was once Bucephalus) and the description of a never-ending performance with which "Auf der Galerie" opens are especially relevant here.

4. The term is, of course, taken from Lacan. In the present context, however, it is used less in a strictly psychoanalytic sense than as a designation of the moment when the grasp gained of the self as other leads to the formation of an identity.

5. Having said that, I should also point out that the ape represents these claims as part and parcel of his performed persona. There is an oscillation that parallels that of the performed self enacted on the part of the reader (or audience member) in this case, since the ape is aware of his body and makes a point of displaying his fur but goes on to discount its significance. He does

this, however, by assuring his audience that his animal state is as far behind him as theirs is behind them, which, to judge by what the audience sees, is not very far at all. Kafka, as usual, leaves his reader feeling very uncomfortable indeed.

6. Page numbers refer to *Kafka: The Complete Stories*. Where necessary, references to the original will indicate page numbers in the *Gesammelte Schriften*.

7. Or remaining true to one's vaguely defined self: if the lines that delimit that self are blurred, as they are in the ape's case, then the only way of becoming oneself is not to be oneself, to seek not freedom (which would be destructive of the peculiar brand of self-deception that drives the ape) but a way out, *Ausweg*.

8. It is, rather a crossing, a translation from one space to another, from one side of the mirror to another, a making literal of the figurative, a demetaphorization.

9. The citational format is used deliberately here, since, having established the parallel between the ape and the writer, the claim regarding the theatrical basis of the production of autobiography applies equally both to Kafka's text ("Ein Bericht für eine Akademie") and the ape's discourse.

10. Kafka's use of the term *Affentum* implies the verb *äffen* (to ape, to imitate) as well as the noun *Affe* (ape). The repudiation of *Affentum* thus connotes an end to mimicry and the advent of authenticity. The largest claim our ape makes is that he no longer mimics anyone but himself, with the proviso that he cannot simply be, he can only mimic that self.

11. In a manner of speaking, the ape constructs another mirror stage by turning the mirror around. His success in this endeavour is attested to by his first trainer's going mad and spending some time in the asylum.

12. If not on some phantasmic level, as a previous self still contained within the bounds of the present, much as every author's written self becomes part and parcel of that author (*qua* textual function).

13. The author would like to thank Ora Avni and Ralph Schoolcraft for all their help with this essay.

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