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Franz Kafka A Report to an Academy

Gentlemen, esteemed academicians!

You do me the honour of inviting me to submit a report to the academy on my previous life as an ape.

I am unfortunately not able to comply with your request as it was put to me. Almost five years separate me from the time of my apedom, not much perhaps in calendar terms, but an eternity to have had to gallop through as I have done, variously helped on my way by persons, advice, applause and orchestra music – all of them excellent - but essentially always alone, because those who helped me, to pursue my metaphor, remained resolutely on the other side of the rails. My achievement would have been impossible if I had selfishly clung to my origins and to memories of my early youth. And it was precisely the renunciation of self that was my project; I, a free ape, willingly accepted this burden. Whatever memories I might have had closed themselves off from me more and more. While a way of return might once have been open to me – had the humans wished it – under the great arch that the heavens create over the earth, this became ever lower and narrower, the more I was driven forward on my course; I felt myself increasingly well and increasingly sheltered in the world of men; the tempest that blew after me from my past abated; until today, it is no more than a mild breeze that cools my heels; and the distant hole from which it comes and through which I myself once came, has become so small that, even if I had sufficient willpower and strength to run back so far, I would have to scrape the hide from my body to get through it. To speak plainly – much as I like florid language to speak plainly: your apehood, gentlemen, inasmuch you have something of the sort behind you, cannot be any remoter from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone who walks the earth feels this little tickle at his heel; from the little chimpanzee to the great Achilles.

But in the most circumscribed sense. I may be able to respond to your invitation, and seek to do so now with great pleasure, The first thing I was taught to do was to shake hands; a handshake betokens frankness; today, at the height of my career, let us have frank words in addition to, and in the spirit of, that first frank hand-clasp. What I have to say will not be anything substantially new to you, gentlemen, and it will fall far short of what you look to me for, and what, with the best will in the world, I am unable to provide – still, let it

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be an adumbration of the course on which a one-time ape entered the human world and established himself within it. But even the little that follows I would not be able to articulate, were I not utterly sure of myself, and had my status on the great variety stages of the civilized world not cemented itself to the point of utter unshakeableness;

I come from the Gold Coast. For accounts of my capture I am obliged to refer to the reports of others. A hunting expedition by the Hagenbeck Company – with whose leader I have incidentally shared many a fine bottle of claret since – was lying in wait in the scrub by the riverbank one evening, just as my companions and I were coming down to drink. Shots were fired; I was the only one hit; and was hit twice.

Once in the cheek; a scratch; but it left a bald red scar that got me the disgusting, and wholly unsuitable, sobriquet – really, it might have been invented by an ape – Red Peter, as if that red mark on the cheek were all that distinguished me from the recently deceased, uncertainty celebrated, trained ape known as Peter, This by the by.

The second shot hit me below the hip. That was a more serious injury, as a result of which I still walk with a slight limp today. Not long ago, I read an article by one of the ten thousand bloodhounds who follow me through the press, to the effect that my apish nature has not been altogether suppressed; the proof of which was that when I receive visitors, I still like to take down my trousers to show them my wound. The fellow deserves to have the fingers of his scribbling hand shot off one after the other. I, I may take off my trousers before whomsoever I please; there is nothing there beyond a well-groomed coat of fur, and the scar left following – let me here choose a certain word for a certain purpose, which I don't want to be mistaken – the scar left following a criminal assault. Everything is in the open; there is nothing to hide; where it's a matter of the truth, any high-minded nature will drop the refinements of behaviour. Now on the other hand, if that scribbler were to pull down his pants in front of a visitor, that would have quite another aspect, and no doubt it is much to his credit that he refrains from doing so. But in return, let him kindly spare me his fastidiousness!

Following those shots, I came round – and it is at this point that my own memories gradually take over in a cage in the steerage of the Hagenbeck steamship. It was not a four-sided mesh cage; rather, three of its sides were made fast to a wooden crate; the crate thereby constituted the fourth wall. The whole thing was too low for me to stand up in, and too small for me to sit. I therefore squatted with knees drawn up and shaking, and, as I probably wanted to remain in the dark and not see anyone, facing the crate, while behind me the bars cut into my flesh. Such accommodation for wild animals is thought to be suitable during the initial period, and, after my own experience, I cannot deny its efficacy from the human standpoint.

But back then I didn't think of that. For the first time in my life, I had no way out; at least none in front of me; because in front of me was the crate, its boards stoutly nailed together. There was admittedly a crack running between them, which, the moment I first saw it, I greeted with a blissful howl of incomprehension, but that crack wasn't enough to push a tail through, and it was beyond an ape's strength to make it any wider.

Observers have subsequently told me I made unusually little noise, leading them to conclude that either I did not have long to live, or else, if I succeeded in surviving the critical first phase, I might turn out to be exceptionally responsive to training. I survived the first phase. Dull sobbing, painful flea-hunting, desultory sucking on a coconut, banging my head against the crate in front of me, putting out my tongue when approached by anyone – those were my diversions, early on in the new life. And in everything the feeling: no way out. I know that what I felt at the time as an ape I can only describe in human words and so I do, but even if I am unable to reach the precision of the old ape truth, it is broadly correct, there is no doubt about that.

I had had in my previous life so many ways out, and now I had none at all. I was run to a standstill. If I'd been nailed down, my liberty could not have been more attenuated. Why that? Why you have an itch between your toes, you won't know a wherefore for that. Press yourself against a bar behind you till it almost slices you in half, you won't find a reason for that either. I had no way out, but I had to find one, for without it I wouldn't be able to live. Pressed against the wall of that crate – it would inevitably have been the end for me. But at Hagenbeck's, the place for apes is against crate walls – well, and so I quite simply ceased being an ape. A clear, a beautiful thought that I must have conceived in my belly, because apes think with their bellies.

I worry lest my hearers fail to understand what I mean by way out. I use the term in

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its ordinary and fullest sense. I quite deliberately do not say freedom. I don't mean the great feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape I may have known such a feeling, and I have met people who yearn to have it. As for me, I demanded freedom neither then nor now. And, incidentally: freedom is all too often self-deception among people. Just as freedom is among the most exalted of feelings, so the corresponding deception is among the most exalted of deceptions. Often in variety shows, before my own appearance, I have watched couples practicing on the trapeze. They swung, they climbed, they leapt, they floated into one another's arms, one gripped the other by the hair with his teeth. 'All that too is human freedom,' I thought, 'self-delighting movement.' The travesty of sainted nature! I tell you, gentlemen, apes would set up such a gale of laughter at the sight, no building could withstand it.

No, it wasn't freedom I was after. Just a way out; to the right, to the left, wherever it might be; I put no further demands; even if the way out proved illusory; my demand was modest, the disappointment could be no greater. To progress, to progress! Anything but stopping still with raised arms, pressed against a crate wall.

Today I can clearly see: without the greatest inner calm, I could never have managed to escape. Quite possibly I owe everything I subsequently became to the calm that came over me after those first few days on board ship. And my calm in turn I owe to the people on the ship.

They are good people, in spite of everything. I still like to recall the sound of their heavy footsteps, as they used to echo in my half-sleep. They were in the habit of doing everything extremely slowly. If someone wanted to rub his eyes, he raised his hand as if it had a weight attached to it. Their jests were crude but not unkind. Their laughter always tipped over into a nasty-sounding but finally insignificant cough. They always had something in their mouth that they had to spit out, and they didn't care where they spat it out. They were forever complaining of catching fleas from me; but they didn't take it out on me; they understood that fleas prospered in my fur, and that it is in the nature of fleas to jump; and they got on with it. When they were off work, a few of them would often gather in front of me in a semicircle; barely speaking, but grunting to one another; smoked their pipes, stretched out on crates; smacked their thighs whenever I made the least movement; and every so often one of them would pick up a stick, and scratch me where I liked it. If I were to receive an invitation today to travel on this ship again, I'm sure I would refuse, but I'm equally sure that I would have not only unpleasant memories if I betook myself to the steerage again.

The calm I learned in that circle of people above all had the effect of keeping me from making any attempt to escape. From the vantage point of today, it seems to me I at least sensed that I had to find a way out if I were to remain alive, but that this way out was not at all the same thing as escape. I don't know if escape would have been possible, but I imagine it would; an ape is probably always able to flee. With the state of my teeth today, I have to be careful even when cracking a perfectly ordinary filbert, but back then, over time, I'm sure I could have gnawed through the padlock on the door. I did not do so. What would have been the benefit, in any case? As soon as I poked my head out of the door, I would have been caught, and locked away in an even worse cage; or I might have been able to flee unnoticed to some of the other animals in the vicinity, for example the giant snakes, and breathed my last in their coils; or I might even have been able to steal up on deck, and jump overboard, in which case I would have bobbed about on the ocean wave for a little while, and then drowned. Acts of sheer desperation. I did not calculate in the human way but, under the influence of my surroundings, I behaved just as if I did.

As I say, I was not calculating, but I did observe calmly. I saw these people going back and forth, the same faces, the same movements; often I had the sense it was all just one man. So he or they could walk in peace. A lofty goal shimmered in front of me. No one promised me that if I were to become as they, my bars would be pulled away in front of me. Promises are not made on seemingly impossible conditions. But if one satisfies the conditions, then the promises appear, as it were retrospectively, and in exactly the place where one had earlier looked for them in vain. Now there was nothing intrinsically attractive to me about these people. Had I been a devotee of the just-described freedom, I should certainly have thrown myself upon the ocean wave as my way out rather than the unappealing prospect of these people. In any case, I had been observing them for a long time before my thoughts turned on such matters, yes, in fact, I think it was the pressure of my observations that pointed me in that direction.

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It was so easy to copy them. I could spit within a very few days. Then we would spit in each other's faces; the only difference being that I would then lick mine clean, while they didn't bother. Before long I could smoke a pipe like any old-timer; and if I tamped at the bowl with my thumb, then the whole of the steerage would yelp with delight; only it took me a long time to grasp the difference between a filled and an empty pipe.

I had the most trouble with the rum bottle. The smell tormented me; I did everything to force myself; but still weeks passed before I overcame myself. Oddly, it was these inner struggles that the people seemed to take more seriously than anything else about me. My memory doesn't distinguish among the people I knew, but there was one who kept coming back to me, either alone or with comrades, at all times of day and night; he would stand in front of me with the bottle, and give me lessons. He didn't understand me, he wanted to solve the riddle of my existence. He slowly drew the cork out of the bottle and then looked at me to see whether I had understood; I admit, I looked at him with wild, exaggerated attentiveness; no human teacher anywhere in the world will be able to find a human pupil as I was; after he had taken the cork out, he raised the bottle to his mouth; I followed his movements down to his throat; he nods, he's pleased with me, and sets the bottle to his lips; I, ravished by gradual understanding, scratch myself all over my body, squealing; he is delighted, takes the bottle and drinks from it; impatient and desperate to follow suit, I soil myself in my cage, which in turn seems to delight him; and then, holding the bottle out in front of him, and raising it to his mouth in a wide arc, he drains it, leaning back in an exaggeratedly pedagogical posture, at a draught. Exhausted by so much need, I am no longer able to follow, I hang weakly on the bars, while he ends the theoretical part of the lesson by rubbing his belly and grinning.

Only now does the practical part begin. Am I not exhausted, following so much theory? It's true, I am absolutely drained. Such is my lot in life. And, nevertheless, I reach out my hand as well as I am able, in the direction of the proffered bottle; tremblingly I draw the cork; fresh strength comes to me following the success of these initial moves; I raise the bottle, barely distinguishable from the original; put it to my mouth – and with revulsion, yes, with revulsion, I hurl it to the floor, even though it's quite empty, and contains no more than the smell of its previous contents. To the chagrin of my teacher, to my own, even greater chagrin; nor do I make him or myself feel any better by not forgetting, having thrown the bottle away, to rub my belly and grin in the most exemplary fashion.

All too often, this was how our lessons went. And to the credit of my teacher: he did not lose his temper with me; of course, he would sometimes hold his burning pipe against my skin till it started smoldering in some place that I found hard to get to, but then he would put it out again with his giant kindly hand; he wasn't angry with me, because he could see that we were both fighting on the same side against the ape characteristics, and that the brunt of it, in any case, was for me to bear.

But what a triumph it was then, for him and myself alike, when one evening, before a large gathering of spectators – perhaps there was a party or fête, there was a gramophone playing, an officer was strolling about among the crew – when that evening, briefly unsupervised, I reached for a bottle of rum that had been carelessly left in front of my cage, and then, under the growing attention of the company, drew the cork in the approved fashion, set it to my lips, and, without hesitating, without making a face, like a studied drinker, with round bulging eyes and bobbing Adam's apple, really and truly emptied it; threw away the bottle not in despair but as a consummate master; forgot to rub my belly; but instead, because I couldn't help it, because I felt compelled to, because my senses were befuddled, called out the word 'Hallo!', broke out in human speech, with that cry leapt into the community of humans, and felt their echoing response: 'Listen, he's speaking!', as something in the nature of a kiss pressed against my whole sweat-dripping body.

I say again: I had no desire to imitate humans; I imitated them because I was looking for a way out of my predicament, and for no other reason. Nor was much achieved even by that small triumph. My voice gave up on me immediately; it only came back months later; my aversion to the rum bottle was if anything stronger than it had been. But my course was set now, once and for all.

When I was delivered to my first trainer in Hamburg, I was quick to realize that there were two possibilities open to me: zoo or variety theatre. I didn't hesitate. I told myself: do everything in your power to get into the variety theatre; that's your way out; the zoo is nothing but a different barred cage; if you land up in there, you're doomed.

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And so, gentlemen, I learned. Oh, if you have to learn, you learn; if you're desperate for a way out, you learn; you learn pitilessly. You stand over yourself with a whip in your hand; if there's the least resistance, you lash yourself. The ape left me in leaps and bounds, so much so that my first teacher went almost ape himself, and was forced to give up my tuition, and had to be taken to an institution. I am happy to say he emerged from it again after a while, apparently none the worse.

But I got through numbers of teachers, often indeed several at once. When I had become a little more certain of my gifts, and the public began to take note of my progress, when the future glittered ahead of me, then I engaged my own teachers, had them sit in a suite of five connecting rooms, and learned from them all simultaneously, by running ceaselessly from room to room.

The progress I made! The way the beams of knowledge penetrated my awakening brain from all sides! I can't deny I was delighted by it. But at the same time I would insist: I never overrated it, not then and much less today. By an exertion without parallel in the history of the world, I have reached the level of cultivation of the average European. In and of itself that might not mean anything, but it does mean something, because it got me out of my cage, and gave me this particular way out, this human way out. There is a wonderful German idiom: to light out; and that's what I've done, I've lit out. I had no other way open to me, always assuming that I wasn't going to choose freedom.

When I look back over my progress and the goals attained thus far. I am moved neither to lament, nor to complacency. With my hands in my trouser pockets, a bottle of wine on the table, I half sit, half lie in my rocking chair, and gaze out of the window. If a visitor calls, I receive him politely. My manager is sitting in the anteroom; if I ring, he comes and listens to what I have to say. In the evenings, I generally have shows, and I celebrate triumphs that probably cannot be trumped. When I come home late at night, after banquets, from learned societies, from social get-togethers, I have a little semi-trained lady chimp waiting for me, and I let her show me a good time, ape-fashion. By day, I have no desire to see her; she has the perplexity of the trained wild animal in her eye; I alone recognize that, and it is unbearable to me.

All in all, I have achieved what I wanted to achieve. You can't say it wasn't worth the effort. Besides, I seek no man's approval, all I want is to spread understanding, all I do is report back, and what I've done this evening, my learned friends and academicians, has been simply to report.

(Translation: Michael Hofmann)

