

## NOT BEING ABLE TO LIVE OTHERWISE. KAFKA, THE ANIMAL, THE ARTIST

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It is said that the father introduces us to the world of the Law. My father, on the contrary, presented me the world of animals, in the open sea and at the circus. In part because he spoke to animals. In part because, as a man, he also fished them; soon regretting it. Indeed, how was it possible to speak to them and kill them? And so he stopped. He also stopped taking me to the circus. No one killed anyone at the circus, so it seemed. But this is not completely true. It is a different death, it is the endless sadness of living life in a cage.

I can remember the last time we went to the circus. I was only a few years old, it was a big American circus, famous for its swimming pool with a shark and a diver. To be honest, my childhood dilemma was ‘who wins the battle between a shark and a whale?’ A sort of Spinozian dilemma: the relationship between potencies – evident in part IV of Spinoza’s *Ethics* [1675], but above all, in Spinoza’s passion for spiders and their battles. It was not the shark, however, that captured my attention and that of my father. And not even the trapeze artists, which were many and skilled. No, it was the lion, kept in a cage that was smaller than its own body. The lion was in so much pain it was howling. Howling, shedding fur, and yelped, slowly. My father said to me ‘he looks like a little man crying. A little man just like yourself. We’re never coming back here’.

This episode from my childhood resurfaced many years later, reading and re-reading Kafka. Obviously, it was *A Report to an Academy* (Kafka 1971 [1917]) and more in general the short stories in which the protagonists are animals. Animals in Kafka are always indicators of becoming. Be it jackals, mice, horses, monkeys, insects: animals speak in the place of humans, humans are beasts, beasts find a way to escape by becoming human, artists are animals, and so on. And again, with Spinoza we can say it is potencies, combining and coming apart, increasing and decreasing. It is a completely different ontology. Let us discover it.

### **A way out**

The academic report of the monkey (*A Report to an Academy*), is about the ‘anthropological machine’. Man’s descent from apes does not belong to a forgotten past, rather, it repeats itself. One becomes human experiencing capture, captivity, wounds, a cage that presses everywhere

and shapes our body, the habits inhabiting it. We learn to speak imitating words and gestures. Or better, we imitate actions speaking, it could not be otherwise, and we speak only because we imitate the actions we see. Our neurons embody the simulation of what we do when we speak, of what we say when we act: this is how we become human, leaving behind the infant and the monkey. But the monkey imitates – Kafka tells us – because it wants to break free of the cage.

No, it is not exactly an escape. Nor is it freedom, which ‘radiates in every direction’, of which the monkey does in fact have a memory. Monkeys know the freedom that humans can only long for. Those who are almost able to attain the freedom of a monkey, who can almost touch it, are the trapeze artists. In *First Sorrow* Kafka clarifies: the art of a trapeze artist is among the greatest (Kafka 1971 [1922]). If in this story the trapeze is a habit become tyrannical, here, in the *Report*, the trapeze artist seems to be free, or almost. Perhaps freedom is the way of living, of an artist, in which one cannot help living the way one lives? Combining the two short stories, it seems that the answer is yes. Where necessity is strongest (the trapeze artist never comes down from the trapeze), also freedom is strongest (the trapeze artists, though not succeeding, are akin to monkeys). Spinoza again: what the artist is displaying is indeed an ethics, and an aesthetics (of the self).

The limit of the artist, in a mathematical sense, is the monkey in its environment. Before the wound, captivity, the cage, the ship sailing whoknows where. It is difficult not to think of slavery, of the massive trade of black men and women, from the plantations in Africa to the plantations in North America. The anthropological machine is indeed also a racist machine, a colonial one, ‘primitive accumulation’ of capital. The same way this machine repeats its origin, so do the other machines; the same way anthropogenesis is never acquired once and for all, so capital always needs to re-enact primitive violence – enclosing, hunting, impoverishing, creating hierarchies, segregating, etc.

By becoming human, as we were saying, the monkey is not escaping, nor is it regaining its past freedom. The request is reasonable: a simple ‘way out’. To find a way out of the cage, therefore, means firstly to act speaking and speak acting (to break the silence and open a bottle, you cannot do one without doing the other). Less than freedom, more than slavery. But what can the monkey do once it has acquired the human posture? Get back into the cage, in the zoo. An ‘educated’ cage, at the centre of the urban gaze of a tourist, of a happy family, of a curious child. Or, it can become a variety show artist. To become one, to be rid of the nature of a

monkey, it must learn. But you learn ‘when you’re looking for a way out; you learn with no holds barred’ (Kafka *Ein Landarzt* 1971 [1919]). So the monkey tries and tries again, following the instructions of the teacher, and its apish nature comes tumbling out ‘so fast’. It tumbles out of the monkey and into the teacher, who in turn becomes a monkey. Or who goes back to being the monkey he was. The animal is no longer only the origin or the limit, it is a transition, a relationship, a contagion.

‘To slip off into the bush’: this is the expression the monkey uses to describe its entrance into civilization, into the ‘education of your average European’. To become human, to become an artist, to get away: an act of resistance to slavery, misery, violence.

### **Living only in her song**

What does Josephine do? She whistles, nothing more. For her folk, the mouse folk, whistling is a common and peculiar ability, a ‘characteristic expression of our life.’ Everyone, each and everyone, do nothing other than whistle (the language of mice). Only Josephine, however, is a singer. Despite being only a whistle, which perhaps stands out for its weakness, hers is something more than a whistle. Josephine’s enigma, the enigma of the artist. To understand, to grasp the song in her whistling, it is not enough to listen to her, it is also necessary to see her. Seeing her, and in particular seeing the way a spot beneath her breasts vibrates distressingly, the mice are carried away by her beauty, warmed by her force. Dreams resurface, and for a moment the folk can escape the harshness of everyday life; it is a moment of freedom.

Kafka explains: nut-cracking is not an art. But what if someone is able to attract an audience by cracking nuts? Well then everything changes. What is apparently a common ability suddenly becomes a form of art. Is it only the audience that turns it into art? In part. The audience, in fact, gathers for a specific reason, for the artist. So it is a matter of understanding what, precisely, the artist does. Kafka writes about Josephine:

the delicate creature [...] it is as if she has concentrated all her strength on her song, as if from everything in her that does not directly subserve her singing all strength has been withdrawn, almost all power of life, as if she were laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good angels, as if while she is so wholly withdrawn and living only in her song a cold breath blowing upon her might kill her.

Kafka *Ein Hungerkünstler* 1971 [1924]

If mice whistle the way they walk or breathe, without thinking, Josephine lives singing: she cannot help it. In her singing all strength is concentrated. We must remember, however, that her whistle is weaker than that of the other mice. So what, precisely, does the artist do? An artist interrupts the distraction of mastery, of automatism: living only in a common ability, an artist displays its ripple.

Duns Scotus, a Franciscan, his thought a sophisticated one, worked tenaciously on a decisive ontological notion: singularity. Which is to ask oneself: what makes this mouse exactly *this* mouse and not another? The answer, to cut it short, is as follows: singularity is ‘the last reality of the form’ (*Ordinatio* II, d. 3, p. I, q. 6, No. 180: 479). Instead of form we could say essence, or better still, ‘common nature’. The situated and changing actualization of a ‘characteristic expression of life’, to combine the lexicon of Scotus and that of Kafka, is what allows to tell one mouse from another. The problem, however, remains: how can we tell the difference between a single mouse and Josephine? Tripping elegantly where others walk swiftly; joyfully stuttering when everyone else is pronouncing, monotonously, every single syllable; whistling a weak whistle, while no one else has difficulty using the right ‘tone’, which is the usual one: by actualizing in a clumsy way our common nature, the artist is also making it visible.

The artist’s movement is indeed a double one: by falling into common nature (Josephine lives in her song), the artist displays its ripple; displaying the ripple, the artist is also showing the essence. Let’s go back to mice: they all whistle, but they do not know it. They master their ability to such an extent that they proceed in an automatic way; like breathing. So masterful that, of their common ability, they are not able to grasp what really counts. Josephine, on the contrary, coincides with her whistling. In doing so, she whistles just like the others, but also differently: her whistling is fainter, weaker. Her weak whistling – she is totally withdrawn, inspired, and all her strength is concentrated in her song – displays the essence of the whistle, the common language of mice. Exposing common nature, losing herself, she exposes herself like no one else, her singularity. A double exhibition which has the capacity of freeing the whistle from the ‘fetters of daily life’, and so, of freeing, for some time, also the mouse folk.

There is, however, an even more common nature than the common linguistic ability of the mice: childhood. Josephine is, in a certain way, a child. Childlike, among a folk that knows no youth, that hurries towards adult life, relentlessly marginalizing its own childhood. Josephine remains a child, and so she sings; she does not limit herself to whistling. Also, by singing, Josephine brings her childhood back to the forefront. By doing this she is grasping the

childhood – ‘weary’ but ‘ineradicable’ – of the mouse folk. What are the traits of the nature of childhood? Hostile to the best part of the mouse folk, the ‘infallible practical intelligence’, childhood coincides with the hitch, the ‘foolish’ or ‘squandering’, ‘generous’ and ‘rash’ behaviour – ‘only to have some fun’. Turning once more to Duns Scotus: childhood is the essence as much as it is the haecceity or ripple of this essence. Only with Spinoza, sometime after the Franciscans, does essence finally become singular (an accidental form), always in the process of actualization, ‘area of indistinction’ between potency and form. Childhood of individuals. The artist, the singer, is the only person able to grasp this childhood, to tickle it, make it emerge from the abyss.

The question remains: why, to ‘draw’ the artist, Josephine the small mouse? Why the animal? Firstly, because animals are the childhood of men and women. A chronic childhood, never completely removed, always re-emerging. Secondly, because in the generous play and in the child’s stuttering there is always, also, a mania that is similar to the mania of animals: not being able to live otherwise. The child, experimenting freely, couldn’t help it. And, as Walter Benjamin taught, only repetition innovates (Benjamin 1991).

### **Becoming an Indian, or a horse**

In the first collection of short stories published by Kafka, *Contemplation (Betrachtung)* (1971 [1913]), there is a very short one about Indians and horses. It is actually about the desire to be able to ride at such a speed, the speed it takes to become one with the horse, which in the meantime loses its head and neck. And becoming one with the horse, one also vibrates together with the vibrating ground. To the point where one conquers the ‘smoothly shorn heath’ (Kafka 1971 [1913]). A way out, no doubt. Which, also this time, is collocated in the transition from human to animal; from human to animal and to the earth. After all, what is desire if not a passage, a modification? To become an Indian, to become a horse, to become smoothly shorn heath, and so on.

Deleuze and Guattari, who more than others thought *with* Kafka, but who have been too often misunderstood, worked to clarify that: ‘becoming-animal’ has nothing to do with dreams or with spectres; it does not mean to become or imitate an animal (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Rather, it is a perfectly real process. What type of reality are we speaking of? Of the reality of transition, contagion, of composition. The Indian becomes a horse, while the horse will have only the head and the neck of the Indian; everything is on the same level of composition (or of immanence), that of the heath. Becoming concerns matter, not the

extension of bodies. It is rather a problem – Spinoza again – of latitudes or intensities: affections that modify the force of existing and acting, limiting or increasing it. The earth vibrates on the horse, which vibrates on the Indian, which pushes the horse to run, which cuts the air: combinations, variations of desire, affects. A completely different ontology, indeed.

To conclude, let's go back to my father. Who was supposed to teach me his Law. Instead he came home one evening with an Indian tipi. He had built it himself, for me and my mate D. And so we played Indians for years. We were children, we became adults. Who knows if we will ever find the way out.

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