

Article

# Narrative Transformed: The Fragments around Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy"

Doreen Densky

Department of German, New York University, 19 University Place, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10003, USA; doreen.densky@nyu.edu

Academic Editor: Joela Jacobs

Received: 7 February 2017; Accepted: 6 April 2017; Published: 10 April 2017

**Abstract:** Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy", in which the ape-turned-human Rotpeter provides a narrative account of his life, has been scrutinized with regard to its allegorical, scientific, and historical implications. This article shifts the focus toward the narrative set-up by closely reading the transformation that can be traced in the sequence of several narrative attempts found in Kafka's manuscripts. Analyzing the fragments around this topic, I show how Kafka probes different angles—from a meeting between a first-person narrator and Rotpeter's impresario and a dialogue between the narrator and Rotpeter, via the well-known "Report" itself, on to a letter by one of Rotpeter's former teachers—that reveal a narrative transformation equally important as the metamorphosis from animal to human. The focus on the narrative constellations and on the lesser-known constitutive margins of the "Report" help to better understand, moreover, the complex relationship between immediacy and mediation, the ethnological concern of speech for the self and the unknown animal other, and poetological questions of production, representation, and reception.

**Keywords:** animal narrators; human-animal studies; Franz Kafka; manuscripts; speaking-for; narrative representation; literary representation

## 1. Introduction

Franz Kafka's famous text narrated by an ape who has become human, "A Report to an Academy" ("Ein Bericht für eine Akademie"), was penned one hundred years ago, in 1917 [1–5]. It is one of the few texts that the Prague author prepared himself for publication, first in the periodical *The Jew (Der Jude)*, along with "Jackals and Arabs"/"Schakale und Araber", under the title "Two Animal Stories"/"Zwei Tiergeschichten") in 1917, and together with twelve other pieces in the collection *A Country Doctor (Ein Landarzt)* in 1919/1920. In this report or monologue, the former ape Rotpeter provides a narrative account to a learned society about his life. He was shot and captured by a hunting expedition in the West African bush, transported to Europe in a cage on a ship, where he finds himself without the ability to move freely, and where he learns to imitate the habits of the crew. When he arrives in Hamburg, he needs to choose between a life in the zoo or as a variety show artist. Deciding for the latter, he systematically learns to become human with the help of several teachers, but he also loses the memory of his experiences as an ape.

While the "Report" has been studied extensively with regard to its anthropomorphic-allegorical, scientific, and historical implications [6], it is striking that Rotpeter's speaking abilities as such and the complicated narrative set-up find less attention. In this article, I propose to take seriously questions surrounding animal voice, human knowledge, and poetological implications by following those scholars who are not only looking at the "Report" itself but also at the fragments in Kafka's known manuscripts that speak about or feature Rotpeter, such as Gerhard Neumann [7,8] and Annette Schütterle [9]. After all, the published version of the report or monologue includes only

two parts of altogether five known narrative segments mentioning or featuring Rotpeter. Spread out over two octavo notebooks (D [4] and E [5]), Kafka probes several narrative constellations that alter who speaks for whom, with whom, or to whom. As a matter of fact, he is even foregrounding these largely formal questions in the lesser-known pieces. Preceding the “Report” in the notebooks (and thus written before it), there are a first-person narrator’s account of meeting the former ape’s impresario (segment I) and a conversation between this visitor and Rotpeter himself (II). Following the segments in the manuscripts that Kafka would later publish under the title “A Report to an Academy” (III and IV), we find a short reader’s response (written after the well-known “Report”) in the form of a letter by one of Rotpeter’s teachers (V).

I argue that the thematic metamorphosis from ape to human is accompanied by an equally important formal, narrative transformation, which is akin to the poetological structure of literary production, representation, and reception. This progression can be traced alongside of the sequence of the five narrative segments in the manuscript, including the three lesser-known ones that frame the “Report”. Three issues are therefore at stake. The first issue is the relationship between immediacy and mediation, as well as between nature and culture, or *Fürsorge* (here meant as immediate, physical care for another) and *Fürsprache* (a mediated cultural speaking-for someone or something before another person or institution). The second issue concerns the unusual ethnological approach of blurring speech for the self and for the unknowable (animal) other. The third issue relates to core questions for literature itself, because the former ape’s unique *presentation* (the “Report”) is framed by questions of preparation or *production* and *reception*. In short, the performative aspects of the report become even more forceful in their narratological, ethnological/anthropological, and poetological implications when the sequence of fragments is read closely and chronologically as the research by a narrator-character (I and II), the sheer presentation of the former ape (III and VI), and a reader’s reaction (V).

## 2. Before the Report: Impresario and Narrator (Segment I)

In the middle of a productive writing phase, Kafka used a pencil as writing utensil and blue, small octavo notebooks common in schools (16.4 cm and 9.8–9.9 cm), not the usual larger quarto notebooks or loose leaves ([4], p. 169). Several of the altogether twelve known octavo notebooks allow us to trace Kafka’s complicated writing process that repeatedly shows his struggles with finding narrative beginnings and ends, as well as his strategies of re-writing topics in order to find the narrative perspective he deemed worthwhile publishing. In addition to “A Report to an Academy” these texts include “The Hunter Gracchus” (“Jäger Gracchus”) and “An Imperial Message” (“Eine kaiserliche Botschaft”), among others. The focus in the following four parts of this paper is exclusively on those segments directly talking about or featuring Rotpeter, not those before, in-between, and after that have connected motivic complexes, as Schütterle has shown in great detail, following the *critique génétique* [9].

Written before the “Report”, the first two segments show the complex interplay between notions of mediacy and immediacy to relate the phenomenon and story of Rotpeter. It appears as though Kafka was carefully approaching the topic by first letting two humans speak about Rotpeter in his absence and then staging a dialogue between a human and an ape before giving full narrative agency to Rotpeter in the “Report” itself. Both in the storyworld (segment I) and in terms of narrative representation (segment II) these fragments transgress human and animal behavior and speech.

The first segment begins: “We all know Rotpeter, just as half the world knows him” ([1], p. 259). (“Wir alle kennen den Rotpeter, so wie ihn die halbe Welt kennt” ([3], p. 384)). Rotpeter himself is thus preceded by his high degree of popularity, because “we”—the narrator and the reader—have presumably heard of him, as much as every other person. The entire first segment, which encompasses about four octavo notebook pages and slightly less than two print pages in the German critical edition, will not feature Rotpeter and not mention his former ape-hood at all. Instead, the first-person, homodiegetic narrator [10] recounts his grotesque meeting with Rotpeter’s professionally accomplished impresario, Herr Busenau, which bears semblance to slapstick:

Hardly had he caught sight of me—me the unknown, the unimportant guest—when he, possessor of highly distinguished medals, king of trainers, honorary doctor of great universities, jumped up, shook me by both hands, urged me to sit down, wiped his spoon on the tablecloth, and amiably offered it to me so that I might finish his omelet ([1], pp. 259–60).

Kaum erblickte er mich, den fremden bedeutungslosen Gast, sprang er, der Besitzer höchster Orden, der König der Dresseure, der Ehrendoktor der großen Universitäten, —sprang er auf, schüttelte mir die Hände, nötigte mich zum Sitzen, wischte seinen Löffel am Tischtuch ab und bot mir ihn freundschaftlichst an, damit ich die Eierspeise zuende esse ([3], pp. 384–85)

Kafka added the comparison “like a bendable figure” (“wie ein Gummimännchen” ([4], pp. 82–83)) to the act of jumping up, but he crossed it out. The unexpectedly personal act of offering his own meal to the visitor, combined with the unnatural, comedic motion, turns into the even more personal and physical act of attempted feeding: “He would not accept my grateful refusal and promptly tried to feed me. I had some trouble calming him down and warding him off, as well as his spoon and plate” ([1], p. 385). (“Meinen ablehnenden Dank ließ er nicht gelten und wollte nun anfangen selbst mich zu füttern. Ich hatte Mühe ihn zu beruhigen, und ihn mit Teller und Löffel zurückzudrängen” ([3], p. 385)). This nurturing attempt is a means of intimate care: a kind of *Fürsorge* in the apt German. *Fürsorge* is here understood as actively caring for someone who needs help or support [11], but with a particular focus on forms of physical care. The last third of the first fragment, which is related in the impresario’s direct speech, is equally concerned with appreciation for the guest’s kind arrival and questions of care, but for the sensitive nature of (the absent) Rotpeter, who does not want to be approached. The impresario stresses that “[s]eeing people is often repugnant” to Rotpeter ([1], p. 260) (“es widersteht ihm oft Menschen zu sehn” ([3], p. 385)), including the own impresario, who needs to withdraw after the performance while Rotpeter drives home alone.

The comical, even absurd, physical encounter between two grown men who talk about Rotpeter as a sensitive artist, hints at an important relation in all segments at scrutiny here and in some other animal stories by Kafka: The relation between natural, physical care—a type of *Fürsorge*—and cultural, spoken support—*Fürsprache* or speaking-for. *Fürsprache* is here meant as the communicative scenario in which someone speaks for someone or something in front of another (a person, a group, or an institution)—a crucial concern in Kafka’s oeuvre [12,13]. The impresario’s name is a case in point for the interrelation between immediate care for another and mediated speech: If taken as a telling name (“Busen” means bosom), Busenau reveals maternal care and physical nourishment, while the title impresario denotes the verbal and business promotion of an artist.

The word that best captures this first textual segment in relation to the “Report” is *before* (“vor”) in both the temporal sense and the spatial sense. The impresario is speaking before Rotpeter appears as a speaking subject on the pages of the octavo notebook (in segments II, III, and IV) and on the stage within the storyworld. The word “vor” itself comes up in several compound constructions throughout the segment. Perhaps coincidentally, but noteworthy regardless, the meeting between the first-person narrator and the impresario happens before noon (“Vormittag” ([3], p. 384)), even though the impresario is already wearing his evening suit for the performance (“Vorstellung” ([3], p. 385)). Less coincidental appears to be the location of their meeting in the “anteroom” ([1], p. 259) (“Vorzimmer” ([3], p. 384)) of Rotpeter’s apartment (all emphases mine).

Kafka’s first fragment on the topic of Rotpeter is fully in the human world, with a first-person narrator and human characters. There is only one subtle hint that Rotpeter, about whom the text speaks, was or is an animal: His impresario is, among other things “king of trainers” (“der König der Dresseure”). Kafka is eroding the boundaries between animal and human not in terms of narrative discourse, but through the impresario’s attempted feeding of the guest within the storyworld. The impresario is also not speaking *for* Rotpeter, but *about* him, setting the stage, as it were, for the appearance of the famous performer. At the end of the first fragment, he describes how Rotpeter wants

to be left alone after each performance yet how he, as his trainer, always keeps an eye on him: “But I, who of course dare not let him out of my sight, always rent the apartment opposite his and watch him from behind curtains” ([1], p. 260). (“Ich aber der ich ihn natürlich nicht ohne Aufsicht lassen darf, miete immer die gegenüberliegende Wohnung und beobachte ihn hinter Vorhängen.” ([3], p. 385)). Although in the guise of protection here, the omnipresent gaze at Rotpeter (as well as at numerous other Kafka protagonists including Karl Roßmann, Josef K., and K. in the novels), is ultimately a power tool to discipline behavior.

This positioning opposite of Rotpeter is picked up in the second segment, but in the form of a narratological decision that brings the reader a step closer to the animal mind: It is an interspecies dialogue between the guest and Rotpeter, who speaks for the first time. The narrative stage is thus newly arranged directly after the words “behind curtains” (“hinter Vorhängen”) and following a graphic analogue to heavy draperies that both close and open in the manuscript in the form of multiple penciled lines across the page.

### 3. Opposite of Rotpeter: A Conversation (Segment II)

The second fragment, or Kafka’s second known attempt to find a suitable narrative configuration for the topic surrounding Rotpeter, encompasses slightly less than eight octavo notebook pages. While the first segment is marked by a temporal and spatial *before* or *in front of* (“vor”) the speaking Rotpeter, it is now that of *opposite of* (“gegenüber”) the phenomenon at hand. Narratologically and thematically, this segment gives a stronger sense of immediacy to convey Rotpeter’s life than the previous one. A further transformation will occur in the following two segments—part of the “Report” itself—, in which the former ape directly writes or speaks *to* (“an”) or, more precisely, *for* (“für”) an academy. In the fifth and last known textual segment, the narrative perspective changes again to a reader of the “Report”, who addresses Rotpeter from a distance.

Formally, the second segment bears resemblance to a drama, as a conversation between Rotpeter and an interlocutor that begins *in medias res*. The verbal exchange had been going on for an indeterminable amount of time and there is no mediating impresario in the storyworld and no heterodiegetic narrator. Although it not directly said, one can assume that the interlocutor is the first-person narrator from the first segment, who has now been received by Rotpeter himself, after the preparatory conversation with the impresario. The segment begins with him saying:

“When I sit opposite you like this, Rotpeter, listening to you talk, drinking your health, I really and truly forget—whether you take it as a compliment or not, it’s the truth—that you are a chimpanzee. Only gradually, when I have forced myself out of my thoughts back to reality, do my eyes show me again whose guest I am.”

“Yes.” ([1], p. 260)

“Wenn ich Ihnen, Rotpeter, hier so gegenüber sitze, Sie reden höre, Ihnen zutrinke, wahrhaftig—ob Sie es nun als Kompliment auffassen oder nicht, es ist aber nur die Wahrheit—ich vergesse dann ganz, daß Sie ein Schimpanse sind. Erst nach und nach, wenn ich mich aus den Gedanken zur Wirklichkeit zurückzwingen, zeigen mir wieder die Augen wessen Gast ich bin.”

“Ja.” ([3], pp. 385–86)

This verbal exchange establishes that Rotpeter is an ape, even though his speaking abilities—the dialogue partner is “listening” to him “talk” and Rotpeter’s striking “yes” is both his answer and the first word we read from him—obscure this fact. For the interlocutor, it is only the visual perception and the perceived “reality” that makes this clear. A sense of immediacy is set in scene because there are no stage directions or other narrative frames. Instead of quotation marks, which typically assign words to the storyworld and set them apart from the discourse world, Kafka used lines across the

octavo notebook page to offset the speaking parts, offering the impression of a direct verbal exchange from two speaking agents sitting opposite of one another.

In their conversation, an element from the previous segment—a meal as source of care—is brought up when the interlocutor asks: “Is something wrong? Shall I call the trainer? Perhaps you’re in the habit of taking a meal at this hour?” ([1], p. 260). (“Fehlt Ihnen etwas? Soll ich den Dresseur rufen? Vielleicht sind Sie gewohnt um diese Stunde eine Mahlzeit einzunehmen?” ([3], p. 386)). Eating is now described in human terms for Rotpeter, which stands in ironic contrast to the impresario’s attempt to feed the human guest—an action reserved for animals and babies. Moreover, the topic of Rotpeter’s aversion to human beings and the issue of immediate physicality come up, but here they are expressed by Rotpeter himself (not related by the impresario or performed by him with the human guest), when Rotpeter says: “Sometimes I’m overcome with such an aversion to human beings that I can barely refrain from retching” ([1], p. 260). (“Manchmal überkommt mich ein solcher Widerwille vor Menschen, daß ich dem Brechreiz kaum widerstehen kann.” ([3], p. 386)). He goes on to explain that it is not about the individual, but about human beings in general. The human smell that mixes with the smell of his former self nauseates him in particular. As proof, he asks his opposite to not only trust his words as verbal mediators, but to test immediately on his body, inviting him to merge human conduct (to listen) and animal behavior (to smell for himself): “Here, on my chest! Put your nose deeper into the fur! Deeper, I say!” ([1], p. 261). (“Hier auf der Brust! Tiefer die Nase ins Fell! Tiefer, sage ich.” ([3], p. 386)). The closeness to the chest—subtly prefigured in the first segment with the impresario’s name “Busenau”—serves as a means toward both empathizing with the animal experience and being estranged from it.<sup>1</sup>

Not only is the primal sense of smell foregrounded, but also the sense of vision when, in another intimate physical interaction, Rotpeter offers to show the site where the second bullet entered him (the first being on the visible cheek): “I’ll take my trousers down so you can see that scar, too” ([1], p. 261). (“Ich werde die Hose ausziehen, damit Sie auch diese Narbe sehn.” ([3], p. 387)). Immediate olfactory and visual perceptions add to the verbal explanations, even though the fully cultural, civilized, and town-dwelling interviewer needs to counter with regard to the first that he has lost parts of a natural sense of smell.

The play with the dynamics between mediation and immediacy is most prominently shown in the passage in which Rotpeter begins to tell the story of his capture in a cage, without any way out, after showing his wounds.. Although Kafka crossed out the most revealing parts, I include them:

~~“Here then was where the bullet entered; this was the severe, decisive wound. I fell from the tree and when I came to I was in a cage between decks. Sir, you have never been an ape and you have never been in a cage, so I cannot make anything of this comprehensible for you.”~~

~~“Difficult fate.—I can commiserate with you even as a none-ape.” ([1], p. 261 and my translations)~~

~~“Hier also war der Einschuß, das war die entscheidende schwere Wunde, ich fiel vom Baum und als ich aufwachte war ich in einem Käfig im Zwischendeck. Mein Herr, Sie sind niemals Affe gewesen und waren nie in einem Käfig, ich kann Ihnen also davon nichts begreiflich machen.”~~

~~“Schweres Schickal. Das kann ich auch als Nichtaffe mitfühlen.” ([3], p. 387; [4], pp. 96–97)<sup>2</sup>~~

<sup>1</sup> This transgression between human and non-human experience in the storyworld is akin to the process that Lars Bernaerts et al. posit for animal narratology, namely “as the result of a *double dialectic* of empathy and defamiliarization” ([14], p. 69; see also part 4 of this paper).

<sup>2</sup> Please note that parts of the block quote are strike through (as they are in the octavo notebooks).

When the human calls himself, and is seen as, a non-ape, the limits of understanding another (animal) being's concerns are expressed. At the same time, the interlocutor feels empathetic and thus stresses an aspect of immediacy. The continuation of this passage similarly underlines the restrictions of fully immersing oneself in the experience of another species. The human interlocutor exclaims: "In a cage! Between decks! It's one thing to read your story, and quite another to hear you tell it!" ([1], p. 261). ("Im Käfig! Im Zwischendeck! Anders liest man davon und anders faßt man es auf, wenn man Sie selbst es erzählen hört." ([3], pp. 387–88)). Rotpeter's reply begins: "And yet another, sir, to have experienced it" ([1], p. 261). ("Und noch anders, wenn man es selbst erlebt hat mein Herr." ([3], p. 388)). The emphatic reactions by the interlocutor lead to the center of questions surrounding different forms of narrating and mediating the transformation of the ape. The progression from reading about the issue (and the narrator-interviewer says he has "read everything that's been printed" about it, ([1], p. 261)), via direct communication with Rotpeter, on to personal experience (impossible for the interlocutor) is a progression from mediacy to immediacy. It resembles the progression from the double mediation in these first two segments (the conversation about the absent Rotpeter and the conversation with him) to the immediacy of letting Rotpeter exclusively speak for himself in the famous "Report".

#### 4. For the Academy: Rotpeter's Report (Segments III and IV)

After the abrupt end of the second text fragment, mid-sentence, and following two further short texts without any direct thematic relation to the Rotpeter topic, we find the beginning of Rotpeter's famous monologue or address. The two known fragments that became parts of the "Report" were written down in the fourth octavo notebook (D) and comprise roughly eleven and a half and thirteen notebook pages, together slightly more than nine print pages in the critical edition of the published version. About five and a half pages in the critical edition follow and these parts have not been found among Kafka's manuscripts. At least one notebook between the fourth and the fifth known ones is likely missing. In the following analysis, I will therefore refer to the published version with the title "A Report to an Academy" ("Ein Bericht für eine Akademie") [1,2].

One apparent detail, already in the title, is especially important to understand the peculiar narrative dynamics: the preposition "for" (*für* in the original German), even though "to" (*an*) seems more appropriate for many—and is rendered in the common translations into English as such. The Kafka-reader Walter Benjamin, too, writes the incorrect preposition in his own notes.<sup>3</sup> Once the focus is on the function words in the title, it is also worth mentioning that it is "a" and not "the" report (*ein*, not *der Bericht*), in line with the general tendency of indeterminacy in several stories of the collection *A Country Doctor* (*Ein Landarzt*) ([16], pp. 224–25). What does it mean to deliver a report *for* an academy—and to do this in front of an audience? Rotpeter, who addresses the audience as "Honored Members of the Academy!" ([1], p. 250) ("Hohe Herren von der Akademie!" ([2], p. 299)) speaks or writes for the institution insofar as he fulfills the request to report about the life he "formerly led as an ape" ([1], p. 250) ("äffisches Vorleben" ([2], p. 299)). He tries to show, as far as possible, "the line an erstwhile ape has had to follow in entering and establishing himself in the world of men" ([1], p. 251) ("die Richtlinie [...], auf welcher ein gewesener Affe in die Menschenwelt eingedrungen ist und sich dort festgesetzt hat" ([2], p. 300)). While there is no doubt that the genre is a report, its mode of delivery cannot be unambiguously discerned. If delivered as a speech, it would mean that the humans sitting opposite of Rotpeter would hear his literal voice—and several pathos-filled remarks, ending with exclamation points, would support such an analysis. If delivered as a written response, the recipients would not face him directly, but read his textually mediated voice—and Kafka's change of the phrase *make a report*/"Bericht [...] erstatten" to something closer to *submit a report*/"Bericht [...] einzureichen"

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin writes "Bericht an eine Akademie: hier erscheint Menschsein als Ausweg. Gründlicher kann es wohl nicht in Frage gestellt werden" ([15], p. 119).

in the octavo notebook ([4], pp. 110–11), as well as the later response by the teacher to a written version of the report (segment V), would call for such an analysis.

Whether spoken or written, the report presupposes a silently listening or reading audience. This audience is addressed directly a few more times, for example when Rotpeter exclaims “your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me” ([1], p. 250). (“Ihr Affentum, meine Herren, soferne Sie etwas Derartiges hinter sich haben, kann Ihnen nicht ferner sein als mir das meine” ([2], p. 300)). Those words signal, in a subtle manner, that Rotpeter does not only speak about and for himself, but also for those who have invited him to speak: humans and, at the same time, academics or members of an academy, and thus representatives of human knowledge.

Rotpeter, like the audience, only has access to his ape past through the narration of others (“fremde Berichte” ([2], p. 301)), i.e., reports by those who have accompanied him, and who told him how he was caught by an expedition of the Hagenbeck company and sent from the Gold Coast via ship to Hamburg. The memories of his youth, he tells the academy, had to vanish in order for him to become human. When Kafka lets Rotpeter speak or write about the time the former ape cannot remember, he unsettles the relationship between who is able and authorized to speak: former ape or man, object of study or institution of learning. The segments Kafka ended up publishing as the “Report” question who gets to speak for whom and who gets to transmit the knowledge of Rotpeter’s origin (“Ursprung” ([2], p. 299)) and, by extension, the origin of human beings. To put it differently, the transition from animal nature into human culture is not directly accessible by the one who has experienced it during his lifetime. Rotpeter has to use the past tense and the linguistic tools available to him after becoming human. Ironically, he needs to express himself in a human system of communication, which is precisely what removes him from his ape-hood. In his own words:

Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it, but although I cannot reach back to the truth of the old ape life, there is no doubt that it lies somewhere in the direction I have indicated. ([3], p. 253)

Ich kann natürlich das damals affenmäßig Gefühlte heute nur mit Menschenworten nachzeichnen und verzeichne es infolgedessen, aber wenn ich auch die alte Affenwahrheit nicht mehr erreichen kann, wenigstens in der Richtung meiner Schilderung liegt sie, daran ist kein Zweifel. ([2], p. 303)

Rotpeter does, however, recall the visceral mode of thinking that lies in the ape-nature, stating that “apes think with their bellies” ([1], p. 253) (“Affen denken mit dem Bauch” ([2], p. 304)). His full memory, he tells the academy, gradually sets in only when waking up after having been shot twice, between decks on the ship and trapped inside a cage. There he soon begins observing the crew and finds it easy to imitate their behavior. Spitting, smoking a pipe, and drinking schnapps are the first acts (with the latter a rather difficult task) toward becoming human. Rotpeter also mentions that his teacher on board realizes he has to fight against his own ape nature, although Rotpeter has, of course, the harder part ([1], p. 257; [2], p. 310). After learning the bodily gesture of the handshake, Rotpeter also learns his first word—“Hallo!”—, which is his big break “into the human community” ([1], p. 257). Following his close observations and the acts with which Rotpeter bids farewell to his ape-nature on the steamer, he has to choose between the zoo and the variety stage in Hamburg. Picking the latter (because the zoo would have only meant another cage), he continues his learning with a number of teachers and reaches “the cultural level of an average European” ([1], p. 258) (“die Durchschnittsbildung eines Europäers” ([2], p. 312)), while also performing with great success. At night, though, “a half-trained little chimpanzee” waits for him and he takes “comfort from her as apes do.” ([1], p. 159) (“eine kleine halbtrainierte Schimpanzin und ich lasse es mir nach Affenart bei ihr wohlgehen” ([2], p. 313)). The animal nature is still a part of his otherwise human life and routine.

Lars Bernaerts et al. [14], have established a framework for narratology beyond the human that helps us understand the stakes of the “Report” as Kafka’s closest attempt at conveying Rotpeter’s

animal experience. They argue that non-human storytelling should not be analyzed only through a single concept, such as “estrangement” (in Victor Shklovsky’s formalist approach [17]) or “the unnatural” (suspending the conventions of natural narrative, see Alber et al. [18]). For Bernaerts et al., we should view the phenomenon “as the result of a *double dialectic* of empathy and defamiliarization, human and non-human experientiality” ([14], p. 69). Rotpeter’s speech unsettles the human and non-human experience on the fundamental narratological level, while making the unnatural transformation from animal to human its very topic, therefore engaging the readers and listeners to a double challenge of their conception of the human. David Herman [19] discerns that acts of self-narration across species raise questions around the politics and the truth status of narrative representation. The mere fact that Kafka gives voice to the (former) ape in this text, without any human narrator or dialogue partner, after having probed these two alternative narrative constellations, demonstrates the potent reduction of external narrative intervention to present Rotpeter’s transformation to an academy as well as to the implied and real readers.

The focus on animal narratology therefore provides a foundation for the numerous suggestive angles from which the published “Report” has long been scrutinized. Allegorical interpretations focus on issues such as colonialism, conformism, the assimilation of Jews in Western society, and the values of art and education, as Naama Harel aptly surveys ([6], p. 54). Historical approaches concentrate on the treatment of apes in the name of the explicitly named Hagenbeck company at that time, which was the leader in animal trade ([20], pp. 293–301) and also involved in “human zoos” (*Völkerschauen*) [21], on the research of the zoologist Alfred Brehm, or on Wolfgang Köhler’s investigations in *The Mentality of Apes* from 1917 [22], like the fictional Elisabeth Costello in J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* [23]. Analyses with a scientific context zoom in on the special treatment of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, which Kafka had read in his youth ([24], p. 60). And possible motivic influences from the fictional art world include E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “News of an Educated Young Man” (“Nachricht von einem gebildeten jungen Mann”), which contains a letter of the educated ape Milo to his girlfriend Pipi in North America ([20], pp. 271–77; [25], p. 421).

From an anthropological standpoint (and specifically from that of biological anthropology, which studies the passage from nature to culture of humans), Rotpeter’s speech for the academy poses particularly intriguing questions. As Gerhard Neumann has shown, the interest of determining the boundaries between nature and culture, animal and human life (as well as between economy, politics, and administration), becomes pertinent around 1900 and is taken up from an animal’s perspective in fictional texts such as Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog” (“Forschungen eines Hundes” ([26], p. 80; [27])). According to Giorgio Agamben, who has attempted to measure the zone between naked body and social law, and who frequently refers to Kafka, “*man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*” ([28], p. 26). Rotpeter is not aping humans, which would imply that he is still an ape, but rather he needs to act and perform as human to be human.<sup>4</sup> As Rotpeter himself says, in a contradictory way: “I repeat: there was no attraction for me in imitating human beings; I imitated them because I needed a way out, and for no other reason” ([1], p. 257). (“Ich wiederhole: es verlockte mich nicht, die Menschen nachzuahmen; ich ahmte nach, weil ich einen Ausweg suchte, aus keinem anderen Grund” ([2], p. 311).

At the end, Rotpeter stresses before the members of the academy that his goal is “not appealing for any man’s verdict”, but “only imparting knowledge” and “only making a report” ([1], p. 259). (“Im übrigen will ich keines Menschen Urteil, ich will nur Kenntnisse verbreiten, ich berichte nur, auch Ihnen, hohe Herren von der Akademie, habe ich nur berichtet.” ([2], p. 313)). This explicit statement shows a strategic imitation of the linguistic and performative conventions for speaking to and for a learned society. It omits the more causal and bodily interactions that the first two segments worked

---

<sup>4</sup> The special punch line in Kafka’s published text is, according to Neumann, that it leaves open if it is mimesis (the artistic representation of aspects of the real world) or mimicry (the act of simulating the appearance of humans) that allows the ape to make his way into life as a human being ([26], p. 92).

through: the impresario's attempt at feeding the guest and Rotpeter's showing of his wounds to the interlocutor or his invitation to smell the fur. The emphasis on Rotpeter's wish not to be judged by those who listen to or read the report, though, stands in contrast to what Kafka probes in the fifth segment.

### 5. After the Report (Segment V) and the Ensemble of Segments

While the monologue or report omits any kind of reaction on the side of the academy-audience, and thus any immediate response, Kafka himself anticipated—and wrote down—an explicit reader-reaction. The last known textual segment on the topic of “Rotpeter” is the beginning of a letter, sent from a distance to Rotpeter. This distance is both temporal and spatial and can be understood in a dual sense. On the level of the material writing, and thus the dynamic writing process, it is the only known segment that is not in the fourth octavo notebook (D), but in the fifth (E). On the thematic level, the letter is a spatially distant and temporally delayed reaction to the now published report. The writer of the letter is, however, not a member of the academy, an anonymous reader, a fan, or a journalistic reviewer, but he is one of Rotpeter's first teachers, whose regressive behavior is opposed to Rotpeter's progressive becoming-human. This teacher was explicitly mentioned in the “Report”:

My ape nature fled out of me, head over heels and away, so that my first teacher was almost himself turned into an ape by it, had soon to give up teaching and was taken away to a mental hospital. Fortunately he was soon let out again. ([1], p. 258)

Die Affennatur raste, sich überkugelnd, aus mir hinaus und weg, so daß mein erster Lehrer selbst davon fast äffisch wurde, bald den Unterricht aufgeben und in eine Heilanstalt gebracht werden mußte. Glücklicherweise kam er wieder bald hervor. ([2], pp. 311–12)

Note the fluid reversal of roles as described by Rotpeter. While he gradually loses his ape nature, the teacher gains parts of an ape nature. No longer suitable in society, he is taken away to a mental institution for a short while. This stay in the sanatorium is the narrative thread that is prominently woven into the fifth segment, when the teacher responds (to quote the entire segment):

Dear Mr. Rotpeter,

I have read the report, which you have written for our academy of sciences, with great interest, indeed with increased heart rate. It is no wonder because I am, after all, your first teacher whom you remember with such friendly words. Perhaps with a bit more consideration, it could have been avoided to mention my stay in the sanatorium, but I recognize that your entire report in its marked [tone]frankness in its ruthless veracity could not have suppressed this small detail once it had randomly come to your mind while writing, even though it embarrassed me a bit. But that's not what I actually wanted to talk about here; my concerns lie elsewhere. (My translation)

Sehr geehrter Herr Rotpeter,

ich habe den Bericht den Sie für unsere Akademie der Wissenschaften geschrieben haben mit großem Interesse, ja mit Herzklopfen gelesen. Kein Wunder, bin ich doch Ihr erster Lehrer gewesen, für den Sie so freundliche Worte der Erinnerung gefunden haben. Vielleicht hätte es sich bei einiger Überlegung vermeiden lassen, meinen Sanatoriumsaufenthalt zu erwähnen, doch erkenne ich an, daß Ihr ganzer Bericht in seinem ihn so auszeichnenden [Ton]Freimuth in seiner rücksichtslosen Wahrhaftigkeit auch die kleine Einzelheit, trotzdem sie mich ein wenig kompromittiert, nicht unterdrücken durfte, wenn sie Ihnen einmal bei der Niederschrift zufällig eingefallen war. Doch davon wollte ich eigentlich hier nicht reden, es geht mir um anderes. ([3], pp. 415–16; [5], pp. 58–61)

The teacher reviews the report in a tone between curiosity and admiration, and in a zone between expostulation and retraction: He acknowledges the personal cost of Rotpeter's lack of circumspection

(i.e., to mention his time in a sanatorium), but then claims this is not the reason for writing the letter. Here again, he imitates Rotpeter, though not in his former ape-nature but insofar as both Rotpeter's report and the response-letter reflect their creators' passionate personal thoughts rather than delivering an objective response as requested by the academy or even mentioning the real reason for writing the response-letter, thereby creating irony. Kafka's deletion of Rotpeter's tone as marked by "ruthless veracity" ("rücksichtslose[] Wahrhaftigkeit") reveals that the unfiltered stream of information toward a quest for some kind of truth about himself could be tied to a regime of power over those who do not get to speak to (let alone for) the academic institution, such as the former teacher. Because the fragment ends before even the letter's main reason is announced, it is foregrounding a side concern—here the *personal* reaction to the report—and not the stakes of or a substantial response to the report. Kafka often places such side concerns front and center in his texts, and subtly directs the attention to *how* things are represented as equally important to *what* is said.

As a way to extend my analysis and to conclude, I will briefly mention two further texts by Kafka, which probe the ways and limits of how one can speak about and for animals: "The Village Schoolmaster", published as "The Giant Mole" ("Der Dorfschullehrer"/"Der Riesenmaulwurf"), and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" (Josefine, die Sangerin oder das Volk der Mause"). I will then describe how the fragments surrounding "A Report to an Academy", as an ensemble, mirror the process of literary communication itself, and allow us to reflect on the potentials and limits of narrating the animal experience from a variety of perspectives that include literary production and reception.

In contrast to the heterodiegetic narrators in Kafka's novel fragments (who are not part of the narrated world yet undermine the events in a subtle and ironic manner), the animal stories predominantly use homodiegetic narrators: a former ape, a businessman in "The Village Schoolteacher" (talking about a pamphlet by a teacher about the wondrous appearance of a giant mole), and a member of the mouse folk in "Josephine" (talking about the titular mouse's mysterious song). They investigate, from a lay-researcher's perspective, the curious appearance of animals: the former self, a distant and rumored subject of study, or an outstanding member of the community.<sup>5</sup> The narrators claim to describe their observance-based knowledge for society, science, and art, respectively. What "The Village Schoolteacher" and "Josephine" focus on is a specific *form* of presentation: pamphlet and song. Yet what these forms precisely reveal, i.e., their content, remains largely obscure for their reader. The giant mole as an object of examination is progressively more eclipsed by a complex verbal fight about who gets to speak about it as an authority: the village schoolmaster or the narrator. And the narrator of "Josephine" makes clear that the mouse singer's aura has to be experienced and the immediate effect of her song has to be heard to be known; they cannot be mediated through narration. These stories therefore center on the limits of formally representing animals.

While Kafka gives voice to the (former) animal in the "Report", as object and subject of examination, and lets him narrate his own story as best as he can, the ensemble of fragments in the segments in the manuscripts, display different narrative perspectives to relate aspects of Rotpeter's life. Moreover, the *sequence* of segments resembles the process of literary communication itself—preparation or production, representation, and reception—, and thus gives us a glimpse at different facets of literature's potentials and limits for the author and for the recipient. Segments I and II read as though Kafka was trying to conceive of (and draft) ways to narrate Rotpeter's life, first with a human narrator and then in the dialogue between a human and the animal. Segments III and IV, as well as other lost notes, comprise the "Report" by Rotpeter, which curiously fuses the stories of humans about his youth and capture, on which he needs to build, and his own, remembered experience since the

---

<sup>5</sup> Kafka's late story "Investigations of a Dog" ("Forschungen eines Hundes"), narrated from the first-person perspective of the dog narrator who self-consciously reflects on his own life and experiences, features an animal as lay-researcher as well. The main difference to the "Report" is the lack of educational or developmental progress as a basis for the research. Instead, the dog episodically relates a few research projects that fail to make any advances in knowledge.

capture. Segment V, finally, adds the perspective of a teacher and is a first reader-reaction or reception of the report.

Most collections of Kafka's stories only publish the "Report", as Kafka chose to publish in his lifetime, not the fragments he drafted beforehand and afterwards.<sup>6</sup> Yet when compiling the (German) critical edition, the editors faced a dilemma in picking a mode of representing the connection between those texts authorized by Kafka and those found in the manuscripts, as Gerhard Neumann has detailed. "A Report to an Academy" serves as an example for Neumann to expose the tension between the creative flow of writing ("Schrift") on the one side and the idea of a finished work ("Werk") on the other side ([7], p. 3). By extension, this dilemma is the relationship between the physical, private act of writing down thoughts and the cultural act of publishing the work. Neumann argues that, from the point of view of the hermeneutic scholar, the segments across the fourth octavo notebook mesh the human self and the animal other, even make the animal an agent of speaking-for the human in front of the academy ([7], p. 6). From the point of view of the editor, the difficulty arises if the authorized (published) text is the "truth" and the peripheral texts are not, or if it is only in the discarded texts that the author truly speaks, without any distortions based on the speech of others ([7], p. 12). Ultimately, the question of who speaks for whom is one that links the problem of editorship and the concerns for the hermeneutic scholar in the texts featuring Rotpeter. Neumann even compares the role of the editor with that of an ethnologist who needs to translate the exterritoriality of a foreign sphere into the own cultural sphere ([7], p. 15). In a schema on the relationship between edition and hermeneutics, he places "intimacy" (the self, the core of literary production) and "the public" (the others, the field of reception) on the ends, and in-between "speech, conversation, diary, letter" as accompanying the production and "speech, conversation, review, interpretation" as accompanying the reception (see schema in [7], p. 21).

Those points and the process of literary communication are mirrored in the five known segments with surprising neatness. First, there is the introductory dialogue between the impresario and the first-person narrator, which foregrounds a physical, even intimate approach to the topic of Rotpeter in the encounter between two men, even though the ape himself is not yet involved directly. It follows, second, the dialogue between Rotpeter and an interlocutor, which displays the tensions between medicacy and immediacy, physicality and speech, as well as *Fürsorge* and *Fürsprache*. Both segments appear to be part of the productive probing or preparation for Kafka himself, until he found the narrative perspective he would later choose for publication: the third and fourth fragments. The "Report" restages, as a lecture or script, Rotpeter's communication with and about humans in a formal institutional setting. It is Kafka's closest attempt to represent the animal mind in the *double dialectic* of human and non-human experientiality. Fifth, the short written reaction by a witness of Rotpeter's transformation touches on the field of reception, even though the letter is not a public review, but a private response.

Kafka's fragments around "A Report to an Academy", in sum, offer multiple perspectives on the possibilities and limits of eroding the boundaries between human and animal other narratologically and thematically, while also exposing the process of literary production, representation, and reception. Immediate perceptions (hearing, seeing, and smelling) are juxtaposed with mediated speech, and the impossibility of fully immersing the listener or reader in the animal experience is on display. At the same time, the shifting narrative angles offer a rich source for questioning the anthropological passage from nature to culture and the poetological stakes of animal narratology.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank *Humanities'* Guest Editor Joela Jacobs for her generous suggestions, the reviewers for their valuable feedback, and the journal's editorial staff for their assistance.

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

---

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Kafka's own act of publishing the "Report" reproduces, in a sense, Rotpeter's act of speaking to an audience, here a literary one.

## References

1. Franz Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. Edited by Nahum N. Glatzer, with an introduction by John Updike. New York: Schocken, 1971.
2. Franz Kafka. *Schriften. Tagebücher. Kritische Ausgabe in 15 Bänden: Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Edited by Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002.
3. Franz Kafka. *Schriften. Tagebücher. Kritische Ausgabe in 15 Bänden: Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*. Edited by Malcolm Pasley. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993.
4. Franz Kafka. *Oxfordter Oktavheft 4. Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe Sämtlicher Handschriften, Drucke und Typoskripte*. Edited by Roland Reuß and Peter Staengle. Basel and Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 2008.
5. Franz Kafka. *Oxfordter Oktavheft 5. Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe Sämtlicher Handschriften, Drucke und Typoskripte*. Edited by Roland Reuß and Peter Staengle. Basel and Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 2009.
6. Naama Harel. "De-Allegorizing Kafka's Ape: Two Animalistic Contexts." In *Kafka's Creatures: Animals, Hybrids, and Other Fantastic Beings*. Edited by Marc Lucht and Donna Yarri. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010, pp. 53–66.
7. Gerhard Neumann. "Werk oder Schrift? Vorüberlegungen zur Edition von Kafkas 'Bericht für eine Akademie'." *Acta Germanica, Jahrbuch des Germanistenverbandes im Südlichen Afrika* 14 (1981): 1–21.
8. Gerhard Neumann. "Script, Work and Published Form: Franz Kafka's Incomplete Text." *Studies in Bibliography* 41 (1988): 77–99.
9. Annette Schütterle. *Franz Kafkas Oktavhefte. Ein Schreibprozeß als 'System des Teilbaus'*. Freiburg: Rombach, 2002.
10. Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Foreword by Jonathan Culler. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.
11. John T. Hamilton. "Procurators: On the Limits of Caring for Another." *Telos* 170 (2015): 7–22. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Rüdiger Campe. "Kafkas Fürsprache." In *Kafkas Institutionen*. Edited by Arne Höcker and Oliver Simons. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007, pp. 189–212.
13. Doreen Densky. "Speaking For Liveliness: Franz Kafka's Obituary for *Hyperion* and his Introductory Speech on Yiddish." *The German Quarterly* 88 (2015): 334–54. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck. "The Storied Lives of Non-human Narrators." *Narrative* 22 (2014): 68–93. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Walter Benjamin. *Benjamin über Kafka. Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen*. Edited by Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981.
16. Juliane Blank. "Ein Landarzt. Kleine Erzählungen." In *Kafka-Handbuch. Leben-Werk-Wirkung*. Edited by Manfred Engel and Bernd Auerochs. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010, pp. 218–40.
17. Victor Shklovsky. "Art as Technique." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Translated by Lee T. Lemon, and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, pp. 3–24.
18. Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models." *Narrative* 18 (2010): 113–36. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. David Herman. "Animal Autobiography; Or, Narration beyond the Human." *Humanities* 5 (2016): 82. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Hartmut Binder. *Kafka. Der Schaffensprozeß*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983.
21. Alexander Honold. "Berichte von der Menschenschau: Kafka und die Ausstellung des Fremden." In (Hg.): *Odradeks Lachen: Fremdheit bei Kafka*. Edited by Hansjörg Bay and Christof Hamann. Freiburg: Rombach, 2006, pp. 305–24.
22. Wolfgang Köhler. *The Mentality of Apes*. Translated by Ella Winter. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957.
23. John Maxwell Coetzee. *The Lives of Animals*. Edited and with an introduction by Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
24. Klaus Wagenbach. *Franz Kafka: Eine Biographie seiner Jugend 1883–1912*. Bern: Francke, 1958.
25. Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann. *Sämtliche Werke, Vol.2.1. Fantasiestücke in Callot's Manier. Werke 1814*. Edited by Hartmut Steinecke and Gerhard Allroggen. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Deutscher Klassiker, 1993.
26. Gerhard Neumann. "Der Affe als Ethnologe: Kafka's Bericht über den Ursprung der Kultur und dessen kulturhistorischer Hintergrund." In *Für Alle und Keinen: Lektüre, Schrift und Leben bei Nietzsche und Kafka*. Edited by Friedrich Balke, Joseph Vogl and Benno Wagner. Zürich and Berlin: Diaphanes, 2008, pp. 79–97.

27. Gerhard Neumann. "Kafka als Ethnologe." In *Odradeks Lachen: Fremdheit bei Kafka*. Edited by Hansjörg Bay and Christof Hamann. Freiburg: Rombach, 2006, pp. 325–45.
28. Giorgio Agamben. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.



© 2017 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).