CHAPTER ONE

Monkey See

CALL ME PETER. I have been adrift in a sea of words for more than thirty years, and if you are hearing this it is because we tread the same waters. If you are reading this, I might be lost already. This is all that remains or will remain or could remain, a voice, a thought, a current.

In moving water a current has no fixed boundaries yet it is a thing, perfectly individuated when we want it to be so. As its name suggests, it is as much about time as it is space. It means now, currently, there is a force in this direction. So, too, is the subject, though perhaps even less individuated. Modern metaphysics and the ethics that follows would have us believe otherwise. To claim for us a fixed identity is to claim for us the ability to speak and the right to speak. It is simultaneously to claim that nonhuman animals lack subjectivity and voice. Without words, the animal mind—the possibility of animal mind—dehydrates and never comes to be. But listen.

From the start, we ought not confuse thought with descriptions of thought. The most typical way for you to describe your thoughts to me is with words, though this is not the only way. You could paint something or do an interpretive dance. When we are in face-to-face communication, you could stand up and walk out of the room. Or kick me under the table. I would, in varying degrees, get the message. All language is no different, really, from art. Every phrase is a metaphor, every word evokes a thousand other words in other contexts and other moments. The fact that we cannot describe with any certainty the thoughts of what we call animals, and that they cannot describe their thoughts to us, suggests to many that animals do not have thoughts. I am not so sure that animals cannot describe their thoughts to us, but even if they can't, we ought not confuse thought with descriptions of thought.

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What, then, of words? Words do not reach out and touch objects for their meaning, anchoring themselves like labels stuck to things. Words are linked in intricate webs of self-reference and in hermeneutic streams of endless repetition. Words begin and end in repetition, meaning something new with each utterance. This is the paradox of language: words mean everything they always have meant, and they mean something new. T. S. Eliot is right to claim that each new work of art changes all those that have come before. But we can say more: language is art; and each word that is uttered anew makes reference to every past utterance even as it changes those past appearances of the word by virtue of this one new appearing. When I say "cow," for instance, the word has meaning not because it reaches out and touches (denotes) some actual object in the world. When I say "cow," it means everything it has always meant. Immediately, the word appears with the echo of all of its past uses and utterances: the family cow, the cow that jumped over the moon, a living sack of milk, a purple cow, meat-in-waiting, a mad cow, the cow on the bottle of milk I used to drink as a child, the cursed cow referenced by Shakespeare as the cow who received short horns and the twice-cursed cow without any. When I say "cow," all of this comes along: this is what it means to say that a word has meaning. But in saying "cow" now, I add something new and in so doing change all of these past utterances and the possibility of future utterances as well. When I use words, I am, in a certain sense, mimicking others. But this is a creative act.

What will be controversial in such a claim is the thought that language remains mimicry. Most will agree that language is learned through mimicry—in the human, the ape, the parrot, the raven, the bee. There is thus always an aesthetic judgment to all initial linguistic acts. The speaker chooses the sounds to mimic; not everything is responded to. To speak is to have been impressed with having been spoken to.

And here speaking is like all the other activities in which we animals engage. When a human baby is born, he cannot focus on anything more than eighteen inches from his newly opened eyes; but when a face comes close to him—when a mother reaches down to bring him to nurse, when a father moves in close for a kiss, when the family dog carefully approaches for a whiff and a lick—the baby is programmed to lock eyes and make an attempt to mimic the expression he sees.[1] The blank clearing of the newborn's face quickly becomes a mirror of the Other; but this is not something that ends in childhood. Throughout life we smile back when smiled at, frown when met with a grimace, pucker up to receive a lover's kiss. Mouth mirrors mouth, forehead mocks forehead, lips mimic lips. To have a face is to have been looked at in the face by another face.

There are those who find the raven's face foreboding—raven calls, perhaps, even more so. Bernd Heinrich tells stories of ravens imitating the flushing

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sounds of portable toilets or the crashing of an avalanche, wondering how and why the birds chose such sounds to repeat.[2] The choice is aesthetic; the act is linguistic. And this we share with all creatures who participate in language. It is not something relegated to the learning of language; it is at the heart of all linguistic acts. Mimicry is often thought to be mindless. To ape or to parrot something is to repeat without thought or intention. But mimicry is not only the highest form of flattery; it is the basis of *logos* itself.

The Turing Test asks for a computer to mimic human communication so that the outside observer believes in the humanity of the respondent. There are, it seems, endless variations on this test in the analytic artificial intelligence literature. At heart, the desire is for more than mimicry. Suppose, so goes one version, we place a page with a question written in Chinese into a slot on one side of a large box and a few minutes later another page emerges from a slot on the other side of the box bearing an answer. Suppose that inside the box is a man who does not know Chinese, but has a large reference book in which he looks up symbols on the left hand page and then copies the corresponding answer-symbols from the right hand page onto the piece of paper. To an outside observer, the being in the box would be thought to know Chinese, but in reality he would be only copying the book, mimicking the knowledge of others. Suppose, continues the story, the man memorized the reference book. He could then carry out his duty quickly and without any external aid, but would still not *know* Chinese. I suppose we could add to this that the man could leave the box, study how to pronounce the signs he has memorized rather than just draw them, take a trip to China, converse with everyone he meets, and come home to America having no idea what anyone said or what he said to them in return. He would be something like a zombie, a cyborg, a Pavlovian parrot. And here, then, is the root of the mistrust of the animal. Even if an animal offers sounds that seem to be responses, they will never be anything more than mimicry. The animal cannot *know* what he is saying, just as the man in the box did not know, just as computers still do not know, and—supposedly—quite unlike the way I am knowing right now just what these words I am using mean.

It seems to me that this updated Turing Test is so riddled with problems that it ought not convince anyone of anything, but it is taken seriously by so many that it is worth a moment of our time. Our first question ought to be: Can you tell us more about this Chinese reference book? It is, after all, not a dictionary. It is a guide for conversation; and as such, it is a fiction. If one believes in a static world in which objects combine to form states of affairs, *pace* Wittgenstein, and a static realm of language in which words mirror objects and words combine to form propositions that mirror states of affairs, then such a book might be possible. But this is not the case. For most questions that I might ask you, there is not a right answer. Those who think there is something to

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learn from this Turing Test metaphor typically think that the key to making the scenario work is in making the reference book complex enough—complex enough to recognize which possible answer to a question might be most appropriate; complex enough to deal with the fact that the context of words can carry meaning, that words can be meant ironically, longingly, angrily. But the model for language here is all wrong.

It is interesting to note that the goal of proving that another being has a grasp of language is achieved through a test of conversation, not soliloquy. We most want to converse with the Other, not read her diary. We want to toss out a query and hear the response. The response we want is one that makes sense to us, one that sounds similar to—harmonizes with—what we just said. This can take place in nonconversational writing. We can see in the author of a good novel answers to questions we didn't even know to ask, declarations about our shared world that separate us in time and space even as they pull us together. But it is conversation that best proves the Other's humanity. And in conversation, we—together—are the author of the dialogue. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that ideas can arise in conversation that are neither yours nor mine, but rather are ours. But this is true, in fact, of all dialogue, even that which does not seem to author new ideas: the result is always an intersubjective, aesthetic, joint accomplishment. *We* create conversation. When I say that you are not holding up your end of the conversation, I am saying that there is too much me in the we. At times, the Socratic dialogues fall into this, when Socrates speaks at length and is met only with a listener who says from time to time "I see" or "Yes" or "Of course, Socrates; by the gods, you are right!" This is why it is hard to have conversations with insurance salesmen and telemarketers. They are not interested in real dialogue. And so, what is the Turing Tester interested in? What agenda does the inquisitor of animals have?

If I do not begin with the acknowledgment that you and I are equals, there will be no conversation.[3] The scientist counters that he cannot begin with such an assumption, for to assume that whatever is in the box has a mind would be to beg the question of artificial intelligence research and cognitive ethology. It is inappropriate, though, to go looking for a kind of subjectivity—a kind of mind—that does not exist. The scientist is looking for a monad, a radically individual, isolated, self-interested, self-supporting, self-contained liberal self. He will never find that in the box. Animals aren't put together that way. And neither are you or I. Our nature is intersubjective: we constitute each other just as we jointly constitute our conversations. If I assume otherwise, I will never hear you.

Heinrich's raven friend Duane says "Duane, Duane, want to go outside." The bird is taken outside and happily flies all around. Heinrich wonders if he really wanted to go out, if the words really had meaning.

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What more do we want from language? If a human child accomplished this we would get out the camcorder and make a record of baby's first words. Yes, it is a mimicry of what has been heard in the past. And it asks for mimicry back. All language, as not only Narcissus learned, is a request for an Echo, for imitation. When Heinrich coos back at his baby ravens in their roost beneath his bedroom window to say goodnight, when we moo at cows out the car window and bark at dogs at night, we, too, are caught up in this. As I am caught up in it now, here with you. But if I do not begin with the initial assumption that this is language, then there is only sound, signifying nothing.

I can treat language as sound. We all know how to do this. I could say to you "Ching chang chung" and you would hear me mocking Chinese. I could say "Ah mon mee, jatem je sui" or "Vonklossen den Gegenwartstein" and you would recognize French and German stripped of their linguistic content and reduced to noise. My wife, a native Venezuelan, taught me her linguistic culture's mockery of English: it goes something like "Washa washa washing." It doesn't sound anything like English to me, but I suppose this is the important philosophic point. For the fish, water is never a theme. And so what if I said to you: "Neigh!" or "Ooo ooo ooo ooo eee eee eee!"? I surely have not spoken horse and I have not spoken monkey, but would you recognize them as such, as on the way toward a foreign language?

Analytic sense data epistemologists misdescribed experience and the phenomenologists rightly corrected the problem. We do not experience patches of color and infer that there is an apple out there; we do not hear noise, interpret the noise to be part of a word, combine the noises and cross-check them with a list of known words, access that word, and then arrive at the meaning. No, we experience apples straight-on, and we experience the meaning of words, not words themselves. As these words right now are reaching you, you have their meaning immediately. In calling up all they have ever meant, words make present what is absent, they open horizons. You see through them immediately as your eyes move across the page; you hear through them immediately as your silent mind speaks them. But perhaps in our haste to overcome the sense data approach, we have not paid enough attention to the sound itself. Alliteration, for instance, is enjoyable because it pulls us back into the phonic presence of words, it calls attention to the presentation as well as the meaning. But this is just the sort of dichotomy that phenomenology should be challenging: there is no stark division between the how and the what. We can create such a division, but it is always an afterthought.[4] There is a deeper debate here about the supposed division of philosophy from literature, but without addressing it now we can at least admit this: if the *how* can become the *what,* if the means of presentation can be at least part of the meaning, if the medium is the message, and language begins and ends in mimicry, then it might behoove us all to begin mooing at cows.

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Augustine, perhaps, knew this—though moved in a different direction. Wondering about the origin of all language in *de Dialectica,* Augustine returns to the sound, to the animal, to mimicry:

> . . . [Y]ou should seek the origin [of a word] until you arrive at the point at which the thing coincides harmoniously in some similarity with the sound of the word, as when we say . . . the "hinnitum" [whinny] of a horse, the "balatum" [bleating] of sheep, . . . [f]or you see that these words make a sound such as the very things which are signified by them.[5]

All words, Augustine continues to reason, are onomatopoetic; yet more than merely existing as sounds, words exist as an attempt to mimic sound, to mimic the world, to mimic the way things appear to consciousness. To come to language is thus to sound out the being of the world. Mooing is one path; there are always others.

> [S]ince there are things which do not make sounds, it is the effect which forms the similarity, e.g., whether they impinge harshly or softly on the senses, the harshness or softness of the sound as it affects our hearing gives them names. . . . It is soft to the ears when we say "voluptas" [pleasure] and harsh when we say "crux" [cross]. So that the sense of the words (the feel of the words) and the things themselves have the same effect. "Mel" [honey], as sweetly as it affects the taste, just as softly does it touch the hearing with its name.

The things themselves. Caught, as always, between pleasure and the cross. Mimicking the world which mimics the word which mimics the world. Dripping, as always, with honey.

We have been privileging the animals that speak, but there are other paths to language. In the patterns of the dancing bee, on his way to that soft sweet taste, we know that there is an indication of distance, direction, and quantity of the source of food—and we should not have been surprised when researchers recently announced that there seem to be qualitative elements to the dance as well: suggestions of how good the food is, suggestions that can only be made in light of comparisons to past food or other good things, suggestions that call to mind what is absent, what has gone before, what shows itself in the silence (or more accurately, the stillness) of the dance. Here there is even double absence, for the nectar that is being reported on is not directly present. It stands at some distance away in space. And the other nectar to which it is being compared

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stands some distance away in time. Language is a way of making these things present. For a bee to wiggle that the new nectar is very good means that the bee is hyper-wiggling that the new nectar is better than some other old nectar. The hyper-wiggle calls forth that old nectar, making it absently present for the rest of the hive, setting it out against what is reported about the new nectar. What more could language be asked to do?

This is, perhaps, what Donald Davidson and other critics of the possibility of animal language cannot say: to be the interpreter of another is not to reduce the Other's wiggles to data, but to see in the stillness and the dance the meaning that shows itself in image and metaphor. The bee who watches the other bee's dance need not believe that there is reference.

Even the vervet monkeys, whose alarm calls have long been known to refer to various predators—one for leopards, one for eagles, one for snakes—do not simply reference their predators as in a roll-call. These calls, instead, call up the presence of the Other, invoking the body of the predator, the fear of the past attack, the longing for safety. Of course this is the space of intersubjective truth and belief. All thought is intersubjective! This is why it makes little sense to worry about a nonhuman animal's access to objective knowledge. Objectivity is not to be distinguished from subjectivity, but is derived from it. Objective truth is a matter of making the rounds in the community, coming to see the public world as clearly as possible from the perspective of each Other, and doing one's best to forge a perspective that does justice to the whole. The notion of the generality is built in to the notion of the individual. Intersubjective truth is the meaning of objective truth. And the world is one that is shared by many creatures, each with a point of view that needs to be considered when making the rounds.

Bees, in fact, are good at this. Years after Karl von Frisch cracked the code of the bee wiggle dance, it was discovered that bees not only dance about nectar but also about the possibility of new nesting sites. They not only wiggle, but also waggle. First, scouts go out in every direction to scour the landscape in search of a new home. When they return, the ones who think they have a strong candidate for a new location begin to dance. They dance about how to get to the new site and about the relative desirability of the new site. Their sisters watch the waggle dance and go out to check the site for themselves. If they like the site, they return to the hive, abandon their old dance, and adopt the new one. If they do not like the new site, they return and continue their old dance. The process repeats over a long period of time, often with several trips and changes of dance, until a consensus is reached and the hive takes off together as a swarm. There is no monarchic, autocratic decision handed down from the queen. The beehive is perhaps the purest democracy that has ever existed; and it is the possibility of intersubjectivity that makes their communication a reality, the possibility of mimicry that leads to consensus, the buzz and the promise of community that rewards their every move.

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I am trying to learn how to speak horse and monkey. I cannot show you here my bodily rendition of a bee waggle dance (my wife insists it is cute; but I fear she may be biased). Instead I will remind us of other animals that speak without vocalizing by drawing attention briefly to the fictional account given in Ursula Le Guin's essay "Excerpts from the Journal of Therolinguistics" in which, among other things, researchers publish analyses of texts written in touch gland excretions by ants, and penguin language is decoded (as a form of "sea writing" only roughly translatable into human ballet).[6]

In the first selection of Le Guin's fiction, we learn that there is no word for "alone" in Ant and that the language has no known first person singular. The fictional researcher interprets the manuscript written on the seeds to be a declaration of individuality. The author, it is assumed, is the dead ant found with the manuscript seeds off in a tunnel all alone. She has written, in part, "As the ant among foreign-enemy ants is killed, so the ant without any ants dies, but being without ants is as sweet as honeydew. Eat the eggs! Up with the Queen!" Since *up* is where the hot sun, cold night, and enemies of the state reside, and *down* is where there is shelter, peace, and security, the researchers suggest that the final sentence here is not really a declaration of support for the Queen, but should best be translated (in terms of human meaning) as "Down with the Queen!"[7] Whether this is a manifesto or an attempt at autobiography, however, is hotly debated. Of course, in the absurdity of the debate, Le Guin calls attention to the absurdity of the dichotomy: all writing is autobiography and manifesto, carrying with it all that I am, all that we are, and all that I/we can hope to be. If the researchers are right (and are not simply projecting their own misguided desire for liberal selfhood onto the text), then even the call for radical individuality shows its absurdity the moment it is realized in language. Why do we write? To communicate; to speak to others. And thus even if this ant writes against community, she cannot help but leave a trace of her thoughts in that multitudinous and frenetic community. In writing, the author of the acacia seeds announces her individuality *as one of a community*. To want less—to want only the former, only one side of the coin, only the radical separation—is a request made absurd by its own asking, in its use of writing sent out into the community that grants being, in its picking up of words for Self that have meaning because of their use by Others.

Penguin language makes this clearer. In the next selection, a researcher announces an expedition to Antarctica during which he will continue his work on translating Penguin. The scientist spends a good deal of time arguing against his critics and lashing out at his detractors. Penguin, it seems, is a kinetic language

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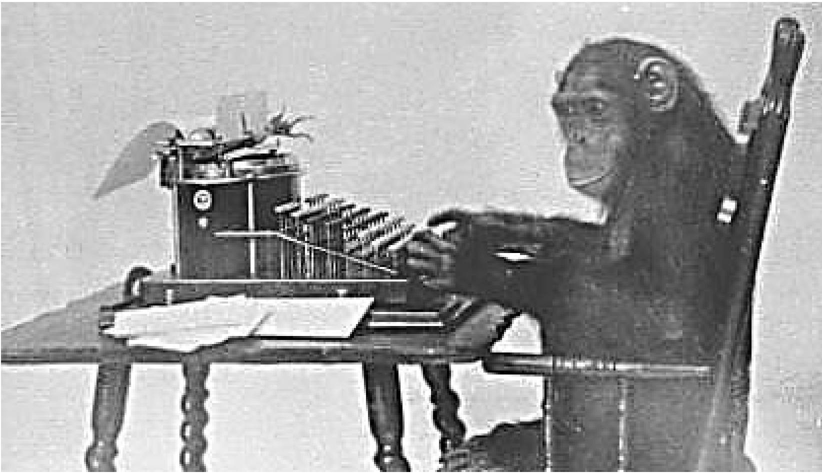

FIGURE 1.2

that is performed only by large groups of birds in the sea. The few real translations that exist are ones that take the form of ballet troupes in full chorus. The researcher, however, wishes to go off and study the dialect of Penguin that is used by emperor penguins, under the assumption that emperor penguins are individualists and will not compose chorally. Again, we have the tension between the community and the individual, the scientist and the animal, language and art. The researcher wants to discover—indeed, will only be able to hear—nonartistic language spoken by individual beings. But even as he struggles to make a case for this, his arguments are self-defeating. Though emperor penguins sit alone and immobile, they do so to protect the egg at their feet. And though they cannot hear or see each other in the blinding snow, the researcher is forced to admit that they feel the Other's warmth and make of the slight shifting of a wing by another who is far away something of a kinetic communal language. Thus, even the isolate emperor's language is intersubjective art; and in symbolic desperation and defeat, the hostile, individualistic researcher ends his report by saying: "I have obtained a sizable grant from UNESCO and have stocked an expedition [for further study]. . . . If anyone wants to come along, welcome!"

We scoff at the idea of animal language—even more so at the idea of animal writing. *It would take an infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of keyboards to come up with the text of* Hamlet. But the cliché is not true. The number would be large, not infinite. A large number of monkeys—a monkey community, a massive group of monkey playwrights—would do the task. The point Le Guin is making, of course, is that while we insist on looking for *Hamlet* in the jungle who knows

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what other great works have gone unseen. The other point to make is that it also, in fact, took a large but not infinite number of humans—a large number of monkey's uncles—before one of them came up with the text of *Hamlet*. For every human Shakespeare, there are millions of near and not so near misses.

Recently I met an anthropologist who has spent a good part of the last forty years living with the !Kung of Africa. I watched her black and white films from the 1960s, listened to the recordings of the chants that lasted all night at the shamanic healings, kept silent as she spoke of spirits and forces in the night air. At one point I asked her if it had been hard learning the language—one so different from any other known human tongue. She admitted that it took a couple of years (an incredible accomplishment, no doubt) and that the key had been realizing that the clicks in the language were not separate from the words. She had to stop hearing them as noise and come to hear them as something like strange consonants, she said. Her pronunciation pattern before had been to interrupt the words with the clicking sounds, and this caused the !Kung villagers to laugh. The clicks, she suggested, should not stand out in relief from the rest of the words; the !Kung language, she explained, is simply mimicking different animals, insects, and parts of the natural world than ours—and toward that end, the clicks are perfect.

We struggle with this. We cannot capture the language in any alphabet. We write the name of the tribe in English using an exclamation point, as if the click is an interjection, as if the !Kung are always just yelling—as we imagine the vervet monkey language is only good for yelling: snake! eagle! leopard! How easily our philosophy of language as well as our language itself allows our tendencies—racist and speciesist, the worst we have to offer—to be made manifest. These are the echoes of others in our words we must try to shout above. How hard it is to listen.

Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money of my own, I thought I would study philosophy. The process of becoming a philosopher is one that also involves mimicry—a learning what and how to think based on what and how those in our tradition have thought. My friend and colleague David Farrell Krell sometimes asks his students to write short essays on a given topic in the style of a certain philosopher: Nietzsche or Arendt or Hegel, for instance. He knows that mimicry is intertwined with *logos*.

There are some who fear that Continental philosophy produces, from time to time, Turing Test zombies: men and women who walk around and look a lot like the rest of us, but if you were to come upon two of them conversing about, say, Heidegger, you would hear them say things such as "Being's thrownness is always already a theme for *Dasein*" and you would swear that neither one of them really knew what they were saying even while holding full conversations on the topic.

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In 1996, Alan Sokal thought he pulled off the great exposure of the Continental conspiracy through an essay in the journal *Social Text* in which he mockingly aped the style of the postmodern philosopher. There are drugs, he joked, that zombify American graduate students more than the crack originating in Colombia; such drugs originate in France and they go by the names Derridium and Lacanium. And so, rather than Just Saying No, Sokal set up a sting operation. The essay, entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," was, according to the author, always meant as a hoax, written only to expose the absurdities of deconstructive discourse. By naïvely publishing what Sokal called an obvious parody filled with meaningless jargon and groundless theories, the journal—and indeed the whole school of philosophy—was meant to be shamed and silenced. But this didn't happen. If anything, it gave more fuel to the fire as metadiscussions burned about the separation of the author's intent from the meaning of a text, the limits of discourse in rational argumentation, the construction of meaning and the notion of audience. Everyone left thinking his or her side was the winner.

Le Guin's fiction works in a similar though not completely parallel way. Her mimicry of the style and format of an academic journal in the field of linguistics serves both to undermine the authority of the scientist and to draw attention to the boundary between fiction and nonfiction as it plays itself out in our culture. When we read Le Guin's "Excerpts . . . ," we hear the voice of the scientist and the voice of the author; we hear them in chorus and we think of animals and language in a new way.

In Franz Kafka's "Report to an Academy" (in which an ape mimics his human captors and tormentors until they are forced to see him as sentient and highly intelligent), the hidden parody is at work yet again.[8] Red Peter, the ape who is narrator of the story, is writing a report to a group of scientists concerning his coming to language. He tells them that he had at the start no desire to mimic men, to be like them. He did it as a way of fleeing and surviving. Once captured and packed in a crate, Red Peter is sent on a ship off to Europe. Here he learns to mimic the sailors—to spit, smoke, belch, and scratch like a man. The sailors drink as well; and though he hates it, Red Peter learns to drink. Ironically, drinking schnapps is his final imitative act before coming to language, the last thing he does before speaking for the first time. Drinking dulls or removes our rationality, that thing we most prize as human, and it slurs our speech. Here is the first hint at what Kafka is really saying: becoming-human is thus becoming-more-animal; it is to give up rationality, not to embrace it.

Margot Norris rightfully argues that all of Red Peter's actions are adaptations and imitations to stay alive.[9] We wonder how the "ape" can forgive his captors, the men who hunted him and kidnapped him. He tells us that he has laughed about it and shared many a good bottle of wine with his tormentors

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since. And the allusion to drinking reminds us of the schnapps, reminds us that this too is just an act of survival, not a true act of forgiveness.

But perhaps more importantly, the entire report—which is to say the short story itself—is an act of mimicry. Red Peter mimics the scientists (that is, *us,* the readers) by adopting the cold sterile language and the format of a scientific report. He mimics the rationality of the scientist (inseparable from the violence of the sadist) using language. Seen through this lens, Red Peter's narrative has much to teach us; but if we read "Report to an Academy" without acknowledging the camouflage at work, we have been had.

This is why Nietzsche claims that becoming human is a decadence, not a progress—why language is a sign of debility. Born of mimicry, language allows us to flee, to camouflage ourselves in a flurry of words. Rather than stand with courage, we talk our way out of things. Rather than face the animal with our hands and heart, we get together and plan and plot how to lure the animal into our trap. We humans use language as a crutch on which to lean: it is a badge of our dishonor. "The intellect," writes Nietzsche, "as a means for the preservation of the individual, develops its chief powers in dis-simulation."[10] And, to paraphrase him loosely, whatever saves us from being killed does not really make us stronger.

Here, then, is Kafka's final Nietzschean twist. Red Peter says that he cannot put into words anything about his old ape-life, his life before language, but the truth Kafka is suggesting is not that there was no consciousness, no mind before human language entered the scene. Rather, this human rationality, this fake and weak *logos,* this camouflage is inadequate to express all that could be expressed without it. Like the moth on whom evolution paints wings with large fake eyes to frighten off predators, we have developed our language. But the moth cannot see with her painted, imitative eyes. And we cannot truly think with our camouflage-limited language. The report to the academy, then, is mimicry, but it is such much more deeply than we could have imagined. If we fall for it, we are even weaker than Nietzsche feared we might be. If we teach Koko the Gorilla to sign or Alex the Parrot to count or Duane the Raven to talk and then think that we have access to the mind of the ape, parrot, and raven, we have been duped by our own camouflage. And worse yet, we will not think to go looking for real eyes, real words, real minds around us.

Bruce Lloyd and Susan Clayton report that it will not be long before we can turn Le Guin's fiction into fact. With increasing research in animal ethology and parallel work in electronic miniaturization and wireless communications, small devices might soon allow us to "sense and interpret animal activity and send our messages to [animals] in a form they can comprehend."[11] Thoughtfully, Lloyd and Clayton call for research into the ethics of interspecies communication as well, but one fears that all the monkey chatter about morality will not, in the end, keep us from proceeding, from implanting our worst qualities into the heads of animals

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along with our microprocessor chips. A miniature cell phone wired to Red Peter's brain will not get us into contact with the mind of the ape, but it might indeed make him more human: further outfit him with a laptop and a Wall Street Journal and I would, I admit, likely be unable to pick Peter—with whom I share my name—from the crowd of commuters with which I share a train each day.

I sometimes wish for a burrow of my own. Which trains cannot reach.

Kafka's apes speak and his mice pipe. His own language—his own animal writing—is perhaps the finest human camouflage. The "real" Kafka: melancholy, embarrassed, shy, afraid, awkward around women, unsure of his right to exist. Kafka, in writing, all of these things as well, and yet . . . not. *Not* precisely through these words. Obsessively writing to Felice Bauer (sometimes more than once a day) he lists his miseries, his failures, his inadequacies. To see them, face-to-face, would be to pity the man. But to read of them, read the beauty in them, is cause for hope, a reason to love, to swoon, to watch the dance and take off, swarm, toward a new home together. Franz courts Felice through letters, and—in spite of, or perhaps because of the beauty of, the words—she loves him. In his letters, words, too, construct a Felice too perfect, too beautiful to live up to the woman. Kafka loves a mirage and hates a marriage. He worries he is distracted. Their engagement is long, on-again, off-again, and the wedding never takes place. Kafka, coughing up blood from his tuberculosis, loses Felice to another man in 1919, the same year he becomes engaged to and breaks up with Julie Whoryzek, the same year Milena Jesenská writes to Kafka hoping to be his translator and ends up being his new correspondent-lover, though she is married and will never leave her husband for another man who fears becoming a husband.

Is it the law which marriage represents that Kafka sees as an impossible alternative to his freedom as a writer? David Farrell Krell knows it is not such an easy question, for writing is not really about freedom: "What has Kafka's rapport with the feminine world, his 'very ambiguous' rapport, to do with the ambiguity and instability of language and literature?"[12] In a letter to Felice, Kafka complains that he is never sufficiently alone when writing. He declares that he dreams of living in a cellar, writing all day, having food placed outside the distant door at an appointed time, fetching the nourishment in his bathrobe, and returning at once to his writing.[13] Marriage, the feminine, the food become that which is opposed to writing, to language, to life. And yet, pondering (Blanchot's) Kafka, Krell writes to us:

> Perhaps we are being invited to think that *writing* is the detour. . . . Which, then, is the diversion—the feminine world or writing, writing or living? Writing/living: they do not confront one another but engage in a ringdance of indeterminacy. Or is such indeterminacy the very incorrigible self-deception that would fascinate, even obsess, any writer? Detoured, diverted from the *writing self,* hence culpable; as

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> though the writer possessed such a centered thing as a self, a self to be protected from the oblivion of other selves; a self diverted by and toward the strange figure that seems foreign to culpability. . . . Yet in the present instance *she* is in default. Of what? Of the fault incarnate? The fault incarnated in the feminine world? Or is she herself perhaps—ambiguity prevailing to the last—*default* incarnate?. . . Perhaps she herself is a cellar or cave. . . . [14]

Or a burrow. Literally (as if there is any other way to be), Felice Bau-er is already at work in *Der Bau* (*The Burrow*). The little digging animal obsessed with his safety and solitude will make his appearance in Kafka's short story less than four years later, but the ambiguity of the boundary and thus the tension between living and writing, Self and Other, womb and woman, threat and hope is already called into question. Kafka here (as are we all) is *im Bau,* under construction—this Kafka who exists for us because his wishes to have his words burned after his death were never heeded.

Milena, perhaps Kafka's only lover who also proved his intellectual equal, worries about the young man's health. She writes, calls out to him, and asks how he is getting by, how he is living. And the creature replies:

> It is something like this: I, an animal of the forest, was at that time barely in the forest; I lay somewhere in a muddy hollow (muddy only as a consequence of my being there, naturally); and then I saw you out there in the open, the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen; I forgot everything; I forgot myself totally, I got up, came closer, anxious to be secure in this freedom that was new though familiar; I approached even closer, came to you, you were so good, I huddled near you, as though I had the right, I placed my face in your hand, I was so happy, so proud, so free, so powerful, so much at home—and yet, at bottom, I was only the animal, I'd always belonged to the forest alone, and if I was living here in the open it was only by your grace. . . . It couldn't last. . . . I saw more and more clearly what a sordid pest, what a clumsy obstacle I was for you in every respect. . . . I recalled who I was; in your eyes I read the end of illusion; I experienced the fright that is in dreams (acting as though one were at home in the place where one didn't belong), I had that fright in reality itself; I had to return to the darkness I couldn't bear the sun any longer, I was desperate, really, like a stray animal, I began to run breathlessly; constantly the thought, "If only I could take her with me!" and the counterthought, "Is it ever dark where she is?"
>
> You ask how I live: that is how I live.[15]

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If Blanchot demands we read Kafka's letter as written[16]—as, that is, in desperation—Krell demands we read it as written in something more than desperation: an "*intensity* . . . that subsists beneath all the thresholds, measures, and descriptions of desperation, in the throes of which there can be no secure interval, no safe distance."[17] It is such an ur-desperation that not only marks Kafka's need to write but makes his existence possible: if the subterranean menace relents, "I too cease"; if the camouflage fails, I am lost. It is, as well, the hope of all animals.

Deleuze and Guattari analyze Kafka's work as vampiric.[18] Refusing to separate his fiction from his personal writings (his letters to family, to his lovers and obsessions), Deleuze and Guattari see Kafka hungrily sending off his words to others—letters like little bats going out to retrieve blood, which is to say presence/love, to sustain their master. But this vampiric view of language is misdirected. True language does not take from the Other; it asks of the Other, even desperately. Language is always intimate in this way. Listen, again, for the faint trace of Augustine:

> [Y]ou must judge whether "verbum" [word] comes from "verberando" [echoing] or from "vero" [the true] alone, or from "verum boando" [sounding the truth] or whether we should not worry about where it comes from, if only we understand what it means.[19]

When I speak I cast my voice out into an intersubjective world (which transcends species as well). If I am tired and frightened and in need of love—like the young ravens at Heinrich's window or like the doomed Kafka writing to his doomed lover—I cast my little sounds out and await response. I await, in some sense, that echo of she who is Echo. The Other's response I truly hope for is an echo, a sounding of the truth, for it must be in line with my own utterance, my own speech, for me to recognize it as a response. Thus does every "I love you" long to hear back "I love you . . . too." Thus does Kafka send out his little love letters—not as a vampiric monster, but for confirmation that he is not a monster, but, at worst—at best—an animal of the forest. And thus does Heinrich coo and repeat what he terms "those intimate calls" of his ravens in their box near his bedroom window, for every human utterance echoes the animal language that surrounds us. This repetition, this echo, is a form of mimicry, a part of the whole, and thus on the way toward true *logos*. Mimicry need not be weak and mindless. It may be a confirmation that we are together, that Here and There are not really separate, that this is what we have right now though we long for so much more. It is a confirmation of the hope of our being together, a hope that painted eyes may one day bring us to see, a hope that keeps us afloat and turns a coffin into a boat, a hope addressed with every word I speak, human and—especially—otherwise. You ask how I live? Call me anything, but call me.

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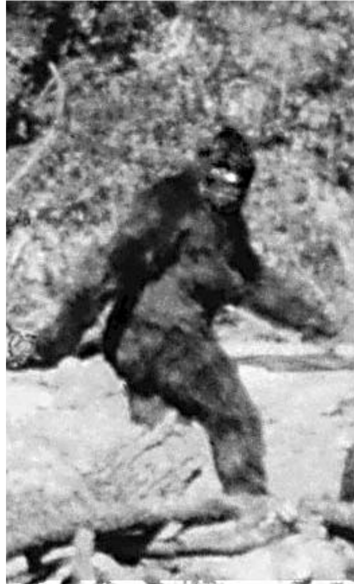

FIGURE 2.1

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