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Parrhesia

Kári Driscoll

Red Peter, the protagonist of Franz Kafka's "A Report for an Academy" has been summoned by the titular learned society to give an account of himself, or rather of his "previous life as an ape [*äffisches Vorleben*]" (Kafka 2007, 76). As he is quick to point out to the "esteemed gentlemen," however, it is also *their*, i.e., mankind's, simian prehistory:

To speak frankly [*offen gesprochen*], as much as I like to employ figurative images for these things, to speak frankly [*offen*]: Your apedom [*Affentum*], gentlemen, to the extent that you have something of the sort behind you, cannot be more remote from you than mine is from me. (77)

Whereas Red Peter had described his transition from ape to man in the form of an elaborate, extended **metaphor** of human evolution as a horserace, now that he has reached the finish line, so to speak, it is important to speak frankly, lest the assembled scholars abrogate his hard-won post-simian status. In order to justify his inability to acquiesce to the Academy's request, he thus explicitly sets aside metaphor, and hence rhetorical embellishment, and instead stylises himself as someone who can – is able and permitted to – speak frankly or openly.

Red Peter is thus making use of *parrhesia*, the ancient Greek practice of frank speech, whereby the speaker, addressing an

86 authority figure, issues a critique in the form of the unadorned truth about himself or another, at significant personal **risk**. Because the *parrhesiastes* is always in an inferior position to his interlocutor, who may be hurt or angered by the truth, *parrhesia* must be predicated on a sort of agreement or “contract,” whereby the sovereign, “who has power but lacks the truth” (Foucault 2001, 32), promises not to punish the speaker, who does not, strictly speaking, have the authority to speak the truth with impunity, unless the sovereign grants it to him. There is always a risk that the sovereign will renege on this agreement, however, in which case he reveals himself to be a tyrant. *Parrhesia* is thus always a “game” (17) between the one who speaks the truth and the one who has the power to punish. Hence, in the most extreme case, *parrhesia* is a “‘game’ of life or death” (16). Thus, although *parrhesia* is cast as antithetical to rhetorical persuasion (12), and Red Peter constantly disavows any rhetorical embellishment in his speech, the report is rhetorical through and through, precisely in the way in which it establishes the speaker *as a subject* and demands that the sovereign body to whom the report is addressed recognise him as such. This performative aspect of this parrhesiastic contract is clearly evident when Red Peter, following his demurral, begins the account of his transition from ape to man by recalling his first lesson: “The first thing that I learned was to shake hands; the handshake signifies openness [*Offenheit*]. Now, today, at the high point of my career, let frank speech [*das offene Wort*] be coupled with that first handshake” (Kafka 2007, 77). The emphatic repetition of “*offen*” finds an echo in the ascription of “*Affentum*” to the gentlemen of the Academy – a phonetic contagion that recurs thematically later on when Red Peter mentions, as an aside, that one of his first teachers had become apelike even as he himself was learning to become human (83). Thus, Red Peter’s transition from animal to human is figured by a vocalic shift from *A* to *O*, “*Affentum*” to “*Offenheit*,” but in laying claim to openness in this privileged sense, his ape(n)ness (animality) begins to haunt the text, attaching itself metaphorically to everyone else: from the

members of the Academy, whose “apedom” Red Peter invokes in his own defence, to the “monkey” who gave him his “repulsive” name (78), and the hack journalist [*Windhund*, lit. whippet] who had dared to question whether Red Peter’s “ape-nature” is truly fully “suppressed” (78), citing the latter’s habit of pulling down his trousers to reveal the wound he suffered during his capture. The *parrhesiastes* not only tells the truth about himself and others, he also shows himself “in his natural nakedness” (Foucault 2010, 287). This nakedness is linked to a valorisation of animality, which is “taken up as a challenge, practiced as an exercise, and thrown in the face of others as a scandal” (Foucault 2011, 265). In exposing himself, the *parrhesiastes* challenges others to do the same, and to consider their own relationship to the truth. In the case of Red Peter, this is especially evident in his insistence that “I have the right to lower my pants in front of anyone I like; there is nothing to see there ... Everything is open and above board; there is nothing to hide; where it is a question of truth, every large-minded person casts off the fanciest manners” (Kafka 2007, 78).

Etymologically, *parrhesia* derives from *pan*, meaning “everything” and *rhema* or *rhexis*, “word, statement, or utterance,” and means “to say everything.” Hence, the *parrhesiastes* is “someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse ... The word *parrhesia*, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says” (Foucault 2001, 12). This relationship is characterised by a series of correspondences, first and foremost between the speaker’s life (*bios*) and his words (*logos*). *Parrhesia* is thus linked to the art of living and the care of the self, of constructing a “straight life” (Foucault 2011, 265) or *bios philosophikos* in which *bios* is in complete harmony with *logos* – almost to the point of the radical honesty and openness attributed to the non-linguistic animal, which “conceals nothing and at every instant appears wholly as what it is” (Nietzsche 1997, 61). In the context of Red Peter’s report, it is interesting to note that the first element in the word *parrhesia*, i.e., *pan*

88 (“everything”), is also the name of the Greek god of nature, Pan, who is typically depicted as half-human, half-beast, and it is for this reason that “*Pan*” is also the name of the taxonomic genus that includes chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) and bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) (see Tyler 2006). Hence, given the taxonomic confusion at work in Kafka’s text, one might be so bold as to read *parrhesia* (Pan-rhesis) as “chimp-speak.” This is particularly important given the link between *parrhesia* as self-care and as a response to the Delphic imperative to “know thyself” – which, as Giorgio Agamben notes, was the original species marker for man in Linnaeus’s *Systema naturae*. The “knowledge” implied in *Homo sapiens* is thus a veiled imperative: “man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human” (Agamben 2004, 26). In asking the members of the Academy to recognise him as one of their own, Red Peter effectively hijacks the “anthropological machine” – which is a device for producing the recognition of the human through the inclusionary exclusion of the animal (33–38).

Parrhesia forms a nexus for the three fundamental axes of Foucault’s philosophical endeavour, namely truth, power, and the subject. Furthermore, it stands at the root of the “critical tradition” (Foucault 2001, 170), precisely because it calls the subject into question, and, in this respect, represents one of the arts of “not being governed quite so much” which Foucault (2007, 29) defines as the basic gesture of the critical attitude (45). This is linked to “virtue” (43) – telling the truth, about oneself and about others, and specifically having the courage to position oneself as someone who tells the truth, is a virtuous (and in this sense *critical*) act of “desubjugation” (47), which does not imply total freedom from any coercion, but rather a critical re-assessment of the fundamental question of what I can become, given the “contemporary order of being” (Butler 2005, 30). This is why Red Peter is so adamant about the critical distinction between “freedom” and a “way out” (Kafka 2007, 79–80): in seeking a “way out” of his confinement, the best he can hope for is not to be governed “like that, not for that, not by them” etc. (Foucault 2007,

44). In this sense, *parrhesia* represents a critical repositioning or reconstitution of the self within the reigning discourse of power, which, in turn calls that discourse into question. Hence, *parrhesia* involves “problematization” (Foucault 2001, 170), and, conversely, new opportunities for frank speech become available in moments of crisis, when certain forms of knowledge/power/subjectivity have become problematic, as was the case with the category of the human as the *zoon logon echon* at the time when Kafka wrote this text. In having Red Peter assert his ability and right to speak openly, the text in turn opens up an indeterminacy about who can speak in the first place – an indeterminacy which is of course inherent in the very history of *parrhesia*, since the freedom of speech it originally granted applied only to natural born male citizens; not women, children, immigrants, and certainly not animals. This is why it is impossible to separate *parrhesia* from rhetoric and performativity, since in claiming the right to speak freely, one presupposes the ability to speak and be heard, and, what is more, one obliges, by means of the *parrhesiastic* contract, the sovereign (in this case, man), to listen. The “risk” thus reveals the inherent precarity of everyone’s right to speech – not only that of the *parrhesiastes*, the “beast,” but that of the sovereign as well.

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