

The Myth of the Native Language

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I always think that one of the purest emotions is that of the banished man pining after the land of his birth. I would have liked to show him straining his memory to the utmost in a continuous effort to keep alive and bright the vision of his past, the blue remembered hills and the happy highways, the hedge with its unofficial rose and the field with its rabbits, the distant spire and the near bluebell. . . . But because the theme has already been treated by my betters and also because I have an innate distrust of what I feel easy to express, no sentimental wanderer will ever be allowed to land on the rock of my unfriendly prose.

SO WRITES Sebastian Knight, the eponymous hero of Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, articulating the classic view of the exile's nostalgia for his homeland even as he punctures its sentimentality. But though Nabokov was every bit as hard on sentimentality as the hero of this, the first novel of his to be written in English, he himself was just as nostalgic for the Russia and the Russian language he had lost, even if a little more sophisticated in his rehearsals of it. English, he always felt, was a straightjacket into which he had been forced by history, and while he was proud of the way he had mastered it, he never lost the sense that by having to forgo his native Russian he had been deprived of a tool that allowed him to express the richness and complexity of the world in a way English never would. This had nothing to do with the innate characteristics of the two languages, of course, but rather with the belief that an acquired language can never match a native one.

At the time, 1940, when Nabokov was coming to terms with the sad realization that if, as seemed probable, his fate was to live in England or America for the rest of his life, and that therefore he would have to force himself to write in English, to the eternal impoverishment of his

work, a far worse fate was engulfing an eight-year-old Jewish child in central Europe. In a video film by Nurith Aviv, made in 2012 toward the end of his life, the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld explained, very slowly, as the camera panned over a forest:

I was born in Czernowitz. My mother tongue was German. With my grandparents we spoke Yiddish. With the servants we spoke Ruthenian. Czernowitz was in Romania and the official language was Romanian. When World War II broke out the idyll of speaking Yiddish was shattered in an instant. My mother was killed. I was separated from my father and sent to a camp. I decided to escape. I was blond and looked like a Ukrainian child, and the world of thieves adopted me. In 1946, at fourteen, I immigrated to Israel. I was without parents, without a language. I had so much inside me, so many experiences, that I could not speak. For a long time I was silent. Little by little I acquired Hebrew. It was not a language that grew within me, it was like a duty. And when I began to write other languages sprang up unbidden into my mouth, but I had to repress them if I wanted to write at all.

The camera settles on a small man in a cap, with a round, kindly face and big glasses, standing outside a low house. The voice goes on:

Every immigrant carries within him two languages. In Israel in those years there was an ideology: Forget the past. Make a new self. German was my native language but it had been contaminated for me forever by what had happened. But Hebrew too was a hard language in my ears, a language of orders, of commands. I studied Yiddish. It was an act of piety for a lost civilization. Today Hebrew is my natural language, but I have to work at it and every day I am afraid I will lose it. So I go on. . .

One hears it everywhere in the memoirs of German-speaking Jews who survived the war: the Nazis corrupted the German language, after them I can no longer use it. Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, the French translator of Peter Handke, who was born and grew up in Germany, recalls in his memoir, *The Fist in the Mouth* (*Le Poing dans la bouche*),

that deadly administrative jargon which had replaced the German language in those years. A jargon made up of words joined together, *Jungvolk* for the members of the Hitler Youth, *Kinderlandesverschickung*, children's summer camps, *Jugendbewegung*, youth movements, and other monstrous verbal constructions of the same sort. It was a language which sat like a weight on one's back, a criminal language that contaminated the entire German language. That icy and artificial Nazi language, we had been obliged to speak it at school, we spoke only of *Fahmenspruch*, the language of allegiance to the flag, of *Volksgemeinschaft*, that ethnic community from which I had been excluded without understanding why.

Undoubtedly true as this is, it must be remembered that a sense of alienation among German-speaking Jews from the only language they had, the feeling that German could not convey what is most meaningful to them, long antedates the Nazi era. On 24 October 1911, Franz Kafka noted in his diary:

Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no "Mutter," to call her "Mutter" makes her a little comic (not to herself, because we are in Germany), we give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but forget the contradiction that sinks into the emotions so much the more heavily. "Mutter" is peculiarly German for the Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with the Christian splendor, Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called "Mutter" therefore becomes not only comic but strange. Mama would be a better name if only one didn't imagine "Mutter" behind it.

This was a period in Kafka's life in which he was trying to find his voice as a writer and thinking and writing with excitement about the Yiddish theater which had come to Prague with its leading actor Yitzhak Löwy, who had, for him, come to embody true Jewishness. He concludes his remarks on Jews and the German language: "I believe that it is only

the memories of the ghetto that still preserve the Jewish family, for the word ‘Vater’ too is far from meaning the Jewish father.” No wonder his own father, Hermann Kafka, who had struggled his whole life to escape the clammy confines of the ghetto and the shtetl and who was determined that his children should benefit from a good German education and put their shtetl past behind them, was appalled by Kafka’s consorting with this Yiddish actor and made his feelings known to his son with the horrifying aphorism, duly noted by Kafka in his diary: “He who lies down with dogs picks up fleas.”

But that did not deter Kafka; it only added to his guilt at not turning out to be the son his father so desired. Three months later, on 18 February 1912, he introduced an evening of readings of Yiddish literature by Löwy with a passionate, an almost mystical encomium of the Yiddish language. “Before we come to the first poems by our Eastern Jewish poets,” he begins, “I should like, ladies and gentlemen, just to say something about how much more Yiddish you understand than you think.” You do not realize it, he goes on, but your relation to Yiddish is one of dread: “You are so frightened of Yiddish that one can almost see it in your faces.” That, he goes on, is perfectly natural, but it needs to be understood. “Our Western European conditions,” he proceeds, “if we glance at them only in a deliberately superficial way, appear so well ordered; everything takes its quiet course. We live in positively cheerful concord, understanding each other wherever necessary, getting along without each other whenever it suits us, and understanding each other even then. From within such an order of things who could possibly understand the tangle of Yiddish—indeed, who would even care to do so?”

After this strange opening he proceeds to give an account of the history and nature of Yiddish, to explain that it is a bastard language, made up of foreign words, that it originated in the period when Middle High German was mutating into Modern High German, and so on. Then he comes to the evening’s program and introduces the poems Löwy is going to read, before returning to his opening theme: you may think you don’t know Yiddish, you may be a little afraid of

it even, but “there are active in yourselves forces that enable you to understand Yiddish instinctively.” If you push it away from you, it will not give itself to you,

but if you relax, you suddenly find yourselves in the middle of Yiddish. But once Yiddish has taken a hold of you and moved you—and Yiddish is everything, the words, the Chassidic melody, and the essential character of this Eastern Jewish actor himself—you will have forgotten your former reserve. Then you will come to feel the true unity of Yiddish, and so strongly that it will frighten you; yet it will no longer be fear of Yiddish but of yourselves. You would not be capable of bearing this fear on your own, but Yiddish instantly gives you. . . a self-confidence that can stand up to this fear and is even stronger than it is. Enjoy this self-confidence as much as you can! But then, when it fades, tomorrow or later—for how could it last, fed only on the memory of a single evening’s recitations—then my wish for you is that you may also have forgotten the fear. For we did not set out to punish you.

What an extraordinary little speech this is. Almost evangelical in its uplift and earnestness, yet not without humor either, and of course about much more than just language. Like Appelfeld a century later, Kafka sees the access to Yiddish as a return, for Jews, to their roots. *This* is their native language, not the German they learned at school, and by rediscovering it they will rediscover their *real* selves. The German-speaking Jew, for Kafka, is exiled from his native country, which is the country of Yiddishkeit. For Appelfeld things are more complicated: German, the language he grew up speaking, has been irrevocably tainted by the Nazis, but in any case now he has had to learn another alien language, *ivrit*, the modern Hebrew of the state of Israel. In this language, he feels, he will have to find ways of recalling the lost, the missing, the Edenic language, or at least exploring the ways that language/culture was destroyed—by the Nazis, but also, for Appelfeld as for Kafka, by the desire of assimilated Jews before the coming of the Nazis to deny and repress that native language—the language of the grandparents, as he puts it.

But as we have seen with the example of Nabokov, this is not a specifically Jewish story. Is it even a twentieth-century story? So far my examples suggest that it is, but I want now to introduce another, complicating example, an example not from the twentieth or even the nineteenth century, but from the thirteenth and fourteenth. I am referring to Dante.

Dante is normally seen as representative of the High Middle Ages, just as Shakespeare is of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and Goethe of the Germany at the cusp of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If Kafka is sometimes invited to join them, then it is only as the representative figure of our broken and fragmented modern world. Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe, on the other hand, are seen as supremely self-confident, their individual genius both drawing on and contributing to the self-confidence of the societies they represent. Yet Dante and Kafka are curiously aligned in their attitude to language.

Dante was not only the greatest poet of the Middle Ages, he was also the first comparative philologist. His early Latin treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is an attempt to chart the relation to each other of the burgeoning Romance vernaculars: French, Provençal, and Italian. He undertakes this task for a very personal reason. Throughout the Middle Ages Latin had been seen as the language of courts, of the law, and of high literature. The people could produce ballads and lyrics in the vernacular, but for the serious poet there was only one language, Latin. Besides, if you wrote in the vernacular you would be writing in a language that was constantly changing, as well as in a language that could only be understood by a small minority, those who spoke Provençal, for example; whereas if you wrote in Latin you would not only be following in the steps of Virgil, you would also be reaching a *European* audience, and you would ensure that the language you wrote in would never change. How was the poet who saw himself as the descendant of Virgil and a spokesman for Christian Europe to write in any language other than in Latin?

And yet against this perfectly reasonable argument for Latin there raged another in Dante's breast. In both *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and his unfinished philosophical treatise, the *Convivio*, he makes a

powerful case for the primacy, not just in time but in importance, of the native language, what he calls the language of *mamma* and *babbo*. Were it not for this language, the language learned at the mother's breast, he argues, perhaps tongue in cheek, my parents would not have been able to converse, and if they had not been able to converse they would not have discovered they were in love and so they would not have married and I would not have been born. The native language, he goes on in the *Convivio*, verging on blasphemy in his excitement, is like a familiar house to be entered with pleasure, like a table laid for a banquet, a new life, a new sun; it is the fire that warms our frozen limbs, it is the bread of life.

Dante was an innovator here as in so much else. It is, he began to think, not only possible for the ambitious national poet to write in his native language, it is imperative that he do so. Though Petrarch, fifty years after Dante, would write *his* epic in Latin, the drift of history was with Dante—no one reads Petrarch's epic, *Africa*, written in Latin hexameters, though Petrarch's lyrics, written in the vernacular, are still very much alive. This is not just because no one reads Latin any more; it is—and this is the real thrust of Dante's argument—because only by opening yourself up to your native language can you open yourself up to what are the deepest roots of your being. Therefore, to write in Latin is to cut yourself off from the wellsprings of your creativity.

This is all well and good, but it doesn't answer the question of the limited reach of a work written in, say, Provençal or Tuscan. Perhaps more important, it doesn't answer the question whether, since vernacular languages change in time, a work written in one of them is doomed to extinction. The words the poet seeks to align, if he turns his back on Latin,

strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still,

as Eliot, Dante's modern heir, was to put it in his own meditation on this issue, the *Four Quartets*.

There are no "answers" to such questions—only the individual quests of individual writers to resolve the issue for themselves, from the time of Dante to our own. Dante had, from the beginning, been recognized in his circle of Florentine poets as special. His early collection of love lyrics to the woman he called Beatrice, organized into a narrative by means of linking prose passages and named *La Vita Nuova*, *The New Life*, had at once marked him out as an artist of superabundant talent and ambition. But he was dissatisfied with what he was doing, and in the following years sought to understand the nature of his gift and to clarify how best to use it, by undertaking a series of prose works of a philosophical, critical, and political nature, some written in Latin—his treatise on language, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, his essay on good governance, *De Monarchia*—and some in the vernacular, such as the *Convivio*, ostensibly a gloss on a series of his own poems but in effect a philosophical meditation on many subjects. Most of these remained unfinished. And the reason for this, he came to understand, was that he had to start with what he felt, not what he could understand, and gradually work toward the clarification of those feelings. Thus, he came to realize, only poetry, and only an extended narrative poem, would truly satisfy him. And so he embarked on the *Commedia*, the story of a man lost in a dark wood in the middle of his life. This would be a poem that was not only written in the vernacular, but also would not avoid the common and the childish—the language of *mamma* and *babbo*—and would integrate this with the most complex and exalted language. And in so doing, it would forge a vernacular that would be capable of withstanding the changes that are a necessary part of all languages, not by acting as a bulwark against such change, as Latin had been, but by somehow being flexible enough to accept and encompass it. A quixotic ambition, perhaps, but one that has been vindicated by history. Though speakers of Italian may find Dante a little harder to read than the latest novel in their language, he still remains, with a slight effort, perfectly readable, for he was the forger of modern Italian.

Let us try to understand a little better what Dante's achievement in the *Commedia* implies, which is another way of saying: let us try and understand what the *Commedia* is saying, for the argument of the narrative and the triumph of language go together. As he emerges from the dark wood the protagonist finds that a guide has been sent to help him on his journey, one who is none other than his great mentor, the Latin poet Virgil. He is guided by Virgil down the spiral of the first canticle, the *Inferno*, where he meets a great variety of sinners, those who never repented even at the last minute. "As I was then so am I now" is the burden of their refrain, however diverse the stories they have to tell. Dante is often moved by these stories and has to be pushed on by Virgil toward his destination, which is first down to the pit of Hell and then up to the top of Mount Purgatory, where Beatrice will take over and guide him through the spheres of the heavens. He is sorry for these people, and they are sorry for themselves. Nostalgia is the prevalent emotion here, but as we see it at work in the terraces of Hell we realize both how natural it is to human beings and how dangerous—for these people are in love with their former selves, and this is in a sense why they are in Hell in the first place: they have never been able to let go of their older, sinful ways. What the pilgrim—and, through him, the reader—has to learn is that we must both accept our childish selves *and* learn how to put them by, if we are to develop our full potential. This is a hard lesson, but it is also a joyful one. Dante is the great poet of joy, which is what distinguishes him from the theologians whose works form the backbone to his thinking—Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, St. Augustine. Any development, too, the poem teaches us, is always tentative, and never more so than in the final beatific vision. This we can never grasp, only follow that journey toward it, not because it is forever out of reach but because it is ever out of our powers to formulate it.

So as we approach the end he warns us: "Now will my speech fall more short, even in respect of that which I remember, than that of an infant who still bathes his tongue at the breast" (*che d'un fante / che bagna ancor la lingua alla mamella*). He sees, or thinks he remembers seeing, the image of the Trinity within the pure circle, but then, he

confesses for one last time, “my wings were not sufficient for that, save that the mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it. Here power failed the lofty fantasy; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.” Even the syntax keeps us wheeling, for we think at first that the subject is “my desire” only to find at the last that it is in fact “love,” as those key words, played with and worked on throughout the length of the poem, *amore* and *muovere*, to love and to move, appear for one last time.

ma già volgeva il mio disio e'l velle,
 come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
 l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

Thus ends this extraordinary poem, which began in a way we can all understand, with a man waking up alone, in the middle of his life, lost in a dark wood, only to arrive at this exalted place. In the course of it Dante has touched on just about every aspect of fourteenth-century life and the human psyche both then and now. Like Nabokov and Appelfeld, Dante was an exile, not, it is true, from his native language but from the city that had given meaning to his life. In his exile he came to understand that there will always be a homeland and a language of babyhood to which we long—with good reason—to return, that this longing must not be brushed aside as sentimental, but it must not be indulged in either; rather, it must be harnessed to something which lies ahead, which has to be worked for rather than longed for, and he, the poet, the *poietes*, the *maker*, does indeed work for it—and for us.

What he does, in the course of this poem, in effect, is to make us understand that that elusive “native language” is perhaps not so much something that we must forever seek to return to, but that it is rather where we must seek to arrive. And that, we will see, is precisely the lesson that my three exemplary modern writers, in their different ways, also come to understand. But before I return to them I want to introduce a bit of personal history.

The myth of the native language is not merely as a question of academic interest to me. For just as Nabokov, Appelfeld, and Kafka each had good reason to lament the loss of this language, so I have had good reason to doubt its validity. To explain, I was born in Nice in the south of France to Jewish parents who both came from families settled in Egypt. Very nice, you might say, and so it would have been had the year not been 1940. Anyway, we survived the war, and at its end my mother returned with me to Egypt where I attended an English school before, at fifteen, going to England to finish my schooling and go to university. Eventually I got a job teaching English and comparative literature at the newly formed University of Sussex, where I remained for the course of my working life.

So what does that make me? I have an English passport and I write in English, but I don't feel particularly English and, like Appelfeld, I realize I have only a very frail hold on the English language. I was born in France and only spoke French till I was five, but I don't feel in the least French or have any nostalgia for the French language. I did most of my schooling in Egypt, but in those adolescent years I always felt that I was a stranger in the country, with only a slight command of Arabic. In my thirties, like so many people, I began to be conscious of my roots and learned enough biblical Hebrew not to feel a complete fraud when I started to teach a course at Sussex on The Bible and English Literature. I eventually wrote a book on the Bible as narrative. I have none of the nostalgia of Kafka and Appelfeld for a lost world of Yiddishkeit. Indeed, it seems as alien—though fascinating—to me as the world of Englishness that I imbibed from my childhood reading of the Just William and Biggles books.

To me, then, the idea of a maternal language, learned at the mother's knee and as life-giving as the eucharist is to the Christian, is completely alien. As is the nostalgia of Nabokov for his native Russian and of Kafka and Appelfeld for a Yiddish that was the language of their grandparents. Am I an aberration then? Am I the last person who should be writing about the subject? Fortunately for me, there is another writer whose upbringing mirrors mine and who has articulated

this condition better than I ever could, and that is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In the slim book he has devoted to the subject, a book with the typically obscure title of *The Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida explains how he grew up in Algeria before the war, French speaking but with a strong sense of not belonging to France, unable to speak the Arabic of those who surrounded him, aware of not being a Catholic or a Muslim but a Jew, yet ignorant of both Hebrew and Jewish tradition. This condition of being outside everything—outside France and the French language, outside Algeria and the Arab language, outside Judaism and its languages—was the mainspring, the book suggests, for his lifelong attitude of confrontation with French culture, French philosophy, and French education, even as he had no wish to substitute *something else* for it—Yiddishness, Judaism, and so on. This is the reason, perhaps, for the development of his critical spirit and for his ideas about deconstruction, which is simply the attempt to dethrone essence from its place in our culture—the essence of language, of culture, of human beings. An attempt he has carried through on every single topic he has been faced with and that, in this book, he carries out against the notion of the native language.

“I have but one language,” Derrida repeats throughout this book, “and it is not my own.” We do not *have* a language, he insists, we *speak* it. The first language does not exist, he argues, it is a lure and a temptation. In one sense, of course, he is plainly wrong: Nabokov had a first language, which, he felt, had been taken from him by the Revolution. Dante had a first language; the question was whether he had to reject or embrace it if he wanted to be a major poet. But perhaps Derrida’s peculiar position, more radically alienated from *any* language than even Kafka and Appelfeld, allowed him to see something that the others had only intuited. And perhaps that is true for me as well.

It remains for me to sketch in how the modern writers I began with themselves came to recognize the truth of these claims, even if they never articulated them—indeed, even if they went on mourning the loss of the native language to the end of their lives, as they all did, in their different ways.

Appelfeld’s best novels explore what happens when the Jews of Europe turned their backs on their Jewish roots in the mistaken belief

that they would be able to blend in more easily with their hosts, or when the Israelis decided that they must ape the physical fitness and disdain for the intellect of the Nazi and Communist regimes they had fled, if they were to prosper in their new home. He shows, in a novel like *The Healer*, how those who sought, in the thirties, to heal their ills by a return to the pure life of ancient Jewish communities were whistling in the dark as much as those who turned their backs in disdain on such communities. In other words, he uses fiction to sketch in a lost wholeness only by showing people who have, for one reason or another, lost it, never by unambiguously glorifying it. His work may be a moving epitaph on European Jewry, but it triumphs precisely because it recognizes it is an epitaph.

The case of Nabokov is a little different. As Michael Wood pointed out in his fine book on the novelist, Nabokov always had a tendency to be precious, perhaps even self-satisfied. He knew from the start that he was something extraordinary, a magician of language almost unrivaled in the modern era. But that leads, in his early Russian novels as in his late novels written in an English he by then felt he had wholly mastered, to a kind of narcissism: capable of creating whole worlds out of words, he ceases to look at the world but looks, preeningly, only at what he has made. The exception to this are the novels he wrote as he was struggling to write in English, to master English—*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Invitation of a Small Guest*, *Invitation of a Small Guest*, *Invitation of a Small Guest*, *Invitation of a Small Guest*. This last, it has been said, is the record of Nabokov's love affair with the English language. It could perhaps more accurately be called his unrequited love affair with the American way of life and with American English. With the popular success of *Lolita* he was able to retire back to the old world and spend his last years in a grand Swiss hotel.

Lolita is a tragedy, and what it describes is the impossibility of holding onto that of which you dream—a young woman, a language. It is also a novel of wonder: it is the otherness of the young woman, of the language, that is both the source of wonder and of frustration. The book opens with Humbert mouthing the syllables of his beloved's name: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth, Lo.Lee.Ta." The tragedy, for Humbert, for Lolita, comes from his trying to realize in actual

life the sensation of pure joy that saying the name creates inside his mouth.

Beckett, Nabokov's contemporary, was more clear-eyed about the issue. Unlike the other writers I have invoked, he was an exile who chose to leave his native country and his native language precisely because he obscurely felt that attachment to it would destroy him, as a man and as a writer. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, his most autobiographical work, he too has his hero turning a word voluptuously over in his mouth. But that word is "spool"—the reel of tape he puts in his machine which will play back to him his thoughts, recorded in past years. "Spooool," he utters, drawing the vowel out as long as he can, "spooool." And it does not escape the constipated speaker, or the audience of a play called *Krapp's Last Tape*, that the word is only one letter away from "stool." You think you are coming here to have an insight into the truth of life, Beckett seems to be saying to the audience, well, here it is, life is *crap*, and any attempt to express that crap is crap. Yet he loves the crap, he cannot give it up. So he has to find ways of both going on speaking and destroying what he is saying even as he speaks.

Let me end with a little story Kafka wrote in his middle period, after the horrors of *Metamorphosis* and before the bleakness of late stories like "The Hunger Artist." This is the period when he seems to have come to terms with the fact that we have longings which can never be assuaged; we cannot go back and we cannot go forward and upward. What we can do is articulate this situation, and that brings a modicum of peace. Instead of dreaming of a Yiddishness which would lift him into a radiant world quite other than that of his sordid existence with a brutal father and an acquiescent mother, he writes, in "A Report to an Academy," about an ape who, captured in the African forests, understands that his only hope of a decent life lies in his ability to master the language of his captors. Here he is then, at the height of his fame, lecturing to the academy about his life.

"Honored Members of the Academy!" he begins. "You have done me the honor of inviting me to give your Academy an account of the life I formerly led as an ape. I regret," he goes on, "that I cannot comply with your request to the extent that you desire. It is now nearly five

years since I was an ape, a short space of time, perhaps, but an infinitely long time to gallop through at full speed.” But when he does begin he is quite clear as to what was involved: “I could never have achieved what I have done had I been stubbornly set on clinging to my origins, to the remembrances of my youth. In fact, to give up being stubborn was the supreme commandment I laid upon myself; free ape as I was, I submitted myself to the yoke. In revenge, however, my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more.” And this magnificent opening paragraph ends: “To put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, in so far as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the smallest chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike.”

Though only two or three years have passed, how far we are from Kafka’s impassioned plea to the audience at Löwy’s Yiddish evening to recognize the Yiddish in themselves. There is here a realism no less painful for being, at this stage in the lecture, expressed so humorously. But by the end the cost of the transformation is made plain, and it is all the more heartrending for being expressed so coolly and precisely in Kafka’s mellifluous German:

Nearly every evening I give a performance, and I have a success which could hardly be increased. When I come home late at night from banquets, from scientific receptions, from social gatherings, there sits waiting for me a half-trained little chimpanzee and I take comfort from her as apes do. By day I cannot bear to see her, for she has the insane look of the bewildered, half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it. On the whole, at any rate, I have achieved what I set out to achieve. But do not tell me it was not worth the trouble. In any case, I am not appealing for [sic] any man’s verdict, I am only imparting knowledge, I am only making a report. To you also, honored Members of the Academy, I have only made a report.