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Blumenberg

Sample translation by Shaun Whiteside

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Blumenberg had just picked up a new cassette to put into the recorder when he looked up from his desk and saw it. Big, yellow, breathing; indubitably a lion. The lion was looking over at him, it was looking at him from the reclining position, because the lion was lying on the Bukhara carpet, a small distance from the wall.

It must have been an elderly lion, perhaps no longer in full possession of all its powers, but gifted with the remarkable power of existence. Blumenberg recognised that at least at second glance, while still fighting to keep his self-control. Just don't lose your composure, in this case of all cases, Blumenberg said to himself, perhaps the sentence was less correct than that, even though Blumenberg made sure to maintain an iron discipline when finding sentences in his head, because he had accustomed himself to assembling sentences in an orderly rather than, for example, a hasty fashion, almost in as orderly a fashion as his normal speech, whether he happened to have a primed recording device in front of him or the ears of a child.

Blumenberg knew straight away that there were many wrong things to be done here and only one right one: to wait and maintain his composure. He also knew that he was being granted an extraordinary honour in the form of the lion, that an honour of the higher kind had been communicated to him, prepared well in advance and granted to him after extensive examination. It was plainly assumed that Blumenberg, at his already quite advanced age, would easily be able to deal with it.

The only curious thing was that the lion emanated nothing indistinct, blurred, mixed-lion-and-air-atom-commingled; its outlines did not quiver in the back and forth of Blumenberg's wave-crossed thoughts; no lion-headed mirror neurons flashed and seethed around the crystalline flicker of a hallucination. The lion was there. Tangible, furry, yellow.

Even though he exhorted himself to present an unshakeable model of calm, his heart was racing. A lion! A lion! A lion!

Of course he wasn't afraid of it. It didn't look like an escaped circus lion. On the one hand Blumenberg was protected by the big heavy writing-desk that he sat behind, on the other this lion lay there completely calmly, by no means behaving like an unsettled runaway beast or even like a nervous Christian-eater.

Blumenberg felt like saying: I'm Catholic, go ahead and eat me, but he chose to keep that frivolity to himself and now he in his turn sat with a face that was supposed to signal expectant politeness, but which instead became a little too curious, about the lion. Perhaps it was having an inflammatory effect on the lion, the way he was looking at it, Blumenberg thought, because he was aware of his piercing gaze.

The lion's beer-coloured eyes studied him fixedly with collected leonine calm, that is to say, they didn't really study him, it was more that they looked through Blumenberg at something that was behind him, perhaps behind the wall of books, perhaps behind the wall of the house, perhaps behind Altenberge and the City of Münster in 1982, far away in time.

His heart was still thumping like a little out-of-control machine.

Blumenberg was not practised in conversing with a lion. Hitherto there had been no opportunity to do such a thing. Talking to his beloved Axel, his white-haired collie, was something that Blumenberg had always found easy. Axel had followed on his heels wherever he went; running his hands through his long, ample fur and scratching his neck had been a pleasure for Blumenberg, and while doing so he had talked to the dog quite naturally, almost like a childish lover, like a madman, although – compared to other dog-lovers – with remarkable correctness.

Blumenberg doubted whether a conversation would even be possible with the lion. He wasn't about to get up, run his hand through the lion's mane and take it for a nice walk. The lion didn't seem in any way to be in need of affectionate treatment. Although he felt no fear, Blumenberg's respect for the animal was great.

The lion came to me because I'm the last philosopher capable of appreciating it, thought Blumenberg. The thought made him feel suddenly queasy, and for a moment he had to close his eyes against such greatness casually set in front of him, a challenge to the night, late, a quarter past three, as a glance at his watch confirmed when he opened his eyes again.

No smell, unpleasant or otherwise, emanated from the lion, the lion had a proper smell of lion, perhaps still just perceptible to the nostrils of someone who loved lions and was trying to call to mind the smell of lion after a visit to the zoo. Admittedly Blumenberg could claim with justification to be a lover of lions, but he had not until now considered the smell of lions. The bold yet fleeting, hovering sharpness of the smell which was beginning to fill his cell, and which drifted in with one intake of breath and vanished again with the next, excited Blumenberg's senses. Thoughts assailed him powerfully, with a vividness he had never known before; it was as if all the drawers of his iron-clad filing-cabinet had sprung open and the thirty-six thousand six hundred and sixty type-written index cards had come spraying out, not in their cardboard form, however, but as tiny scraps of pictorial skin, freed from letters and annotations and forcing their way into his head.

Quiet, please. Level-headedness. You only reach the nerve of a picture, the nerve of a problem, when you set the individual image, the individual problem calmly in front of you and examine it closely. Who was the lion? Because of the resistance

that he had to build up against the flood of images, Blumenberg felt slightly overwrought.

Agave's false lion. The fable of the Lion's Court. The lion of the psalmist, roaring. The lion that vanished forever from the Land of Canaan. The symbol of St Mark the Evangelist. Mary of Egypt and her lion companion. The pious beast of St Jerome in his Study. Who was the lion?

His memory needed to trawl through the Bible at breakneck speed, as the lion had its various place-markings in it, permanent and otherwise; Blumenberg ordered himself to do just that. But he had to admit that his memory, which normally functioned impeccably, better than the memory of anyone he knew, was incapable right now of thoroughly addressing the lion problem.

Even though only a few moments had passed since the appearance of the animal, Blumenberg had begun to trust the lion; even though it was as yet impossible to say what kind of relationship would develop between them, whether it would be a lasting one or not. Astonishing that I already see the hope germinating within me that our relationship might endure, thought Blumenberg. For a moment he imagined that the lion, whose mouth had only opened slightly, was smiling.

Its age? The lion was old, even ancient, certainly older than a lion would ever live to be in the wild. Blumenberg established this with regret. The animal's mane, which might have been magnificent in youth and middle-aged, looked scruffy now. Its spine protruded and sagged slightly, long, dark tear-tracks led sideways and down from the lion's eyes; the very way it breathed, its belly twitching each time as though it were suffering a little cramp, was cause for concern. Surely the lion can't have come to end its days on my carpet? Blumenberg thought, dismayed. Someone on high wanted to tease him and had sent him this dud lion with that end in view. As quickly

as it had twitched to life, the thought vanished again. No, Blumenberg felt sympathy for the lion, and in admitting this to himself, he immediately relied to the knowledge-boosting power of sympathy.

All of a sudden he felt enwrapped in a cosy self-warmth, a feeling only slightly different from hubris. He was the exemplary ascetic, who had earned his lion. Working night after night after night, Blumenberg said to himself proudly, and the reward now blossoming for him here was the lion.

There was no way that he could feel like Mary of Egypt. The desert was missing, and the revelries and extravagance to which that very special Mary had once devoted herself, and of course then the turnaround. Blumenberg had never dedicated himself to such extremes of the flesh, he had never had to make that turn, and he was not a woman. Nor was he keen on the idea of lying in the desert with dusty bones, a lion above him guarding his grave.

Agave? Nonsense! Mistaking your own son for a lion and tearing him apart in Bacchic frenzy, the only one who could be so enraptured would be a woman raised in savage Greece, or more precisely: the summit of woman: the mother of ancient times.

Although the lion there in front of him was certainly not dreaming, and its broad-nosed head was doubtless genuine and not, for example, secretly the head of a cat (and this lion kept staring further and further through him), a calm Jerome's-Study feeling gradually took hold of the philosopher. He recalled Dürer's famous engraving. Admittedly his, Blumenberg's, cell, lacked the hour-glass with the sand running through it, it lacked the lectern, it lacked the bull's-eye panes and the death's-head on the window-sill, and instead of the warm wood panelling there were bookshelves and carpets to the ceiling, but it remained a cell amazingly apart from the other parts of the house. And besides, it was night-time. The hours of radical renunciation of

worldly activities, in which only a few insomniacs roamed, if anyone, and only a very few attended to their labours.

None the less, Blumenberg had doubts. If he closed his eyes quite tightly now and counted to sixty – he had become used to performing this ritual with a little jerking motion of his fingers – and then opened his eyes again, the lion might perhaps have disappeared. An illusion, nothing more.

Blumenberg actually did close his eyes, but in his confusion he counted not to sixty but inadvertently only to fifty-eight, finding it hard as he did to keep his eyes pressed shut for so long.

Eyes open. The lion was there.

Blumenberg felt the desire to get up from his seat at his desk. Outside, the moon was shining. Outside, the tall windows the black skeletons of rose-bushes could be seen. Perhaps he should open a casement and thus escape outside with everything.

Might the lion, in spite of its current benignancy, do something to him, was it dangerous to turn his back on it? Blumenberg wondered as he got up from his chair almost in slow motion, half-circled his desk and slowly, much more slowly than usual, walked to the window.

Dangerous? No, probably not. For a few seconds Blumenberg stood at the window and inhaled the cool night air, although with his back tensed. When he turned around again the lion was still there.

Time to open a bottle of claret. The event called for a celebration, a glass had to be raised to the appearance of the lion. Blumenberg remained on his own with his filled glass, he would have sought in vain in his study for a guest glass. Then again, the lion was not so comically domestic as to hold a glass in its paw and raise it to Blumenberg's health.

The lion which, it seemed to him, by now held its head lowered a little more than before, but went on impassively staring through him, covered sixteen, seventeen or was it nineteen? elephant's feet on the Bukhara carpet, which had been one of the few possessions from his father's inheritance to come down to him. By seeking this warming bed to lie upon, it was behaving like a domestic dog. It has a sense of symmetry, Blumenberg thought, because the lion had lain down more or less precisely in the middle, and it also seems to have an aesthetic sense. The carpet was the most precious object in Blumenberg's study, with bright elephant's feet amidst shades of burgundy and bluish-greenish-black – truly an exquisite piece.

Although there was nothing in his study to compare it to, thought Blumenberg, regretting that he didn't have as glorious a room at his disposal as the one painted by Antonello da Messina. The picture, executed by the Italian master using light and shade in the Flemish manner, summoned Blumenberg's memory, which now functioned faultlessly once again, back to it with fabulous precision: the eye falls through a stone arch, on the sill a peacock, a copper bowl, a partridge. In the magnificent interior a staircase, one, two, three steps up to a raised platform. The holy scholar in the flowing red velvet garment and red velvet cap, flicking with his long arms through a book sitting open in front of him on a kind of desk with a slanted surface. On the left a magical view from the window. A hilly landscape dotted with cypresses. And on the right, behind the scholar's podium, appearing from the darkness, a scrawny lion. No, not with lion's legs and broad paws, but with thin little racing legs like a greyhound. Antonello had probably never seen a lion in real life.

Blumenberg loved the painting. These dignified, lonely figures who managed with only a few books because they plainly studied the same ones, the Bible most of

all, of course, over and over again, their opulently furnished rooms with their jewel-like views of an orderly exterior, shifting loneliness into comfort!

The stage-like arrangement, the elevation of the visible side, served to free the scholar from the tiled floor, that artfully squandered floor, as if he were less dependent on gravity, as if his floor were not the ordinary floor of life, but a spirit-floor above which thoughts drifted far and farther. Did his red garment not indicate the elevation of the hermit-scholar's heart? What was not painted, of course, was the draught that must have prevailed between the big arch in the foreground and the window-holes in the noonday glare at the back, sending the scattered papers flying and whirling. For a moment Blumenberg imagined the merry lion as a paper-hunter, paper-catcher, but immediately interrupted the sentences on the subject as they tried to form within him, because he didn't want to subside into silliness.

Back to his own lion. In spite of the curious manner of its appearance, which had occurred only half an hour before, Blumenberg thought it appropriate under no circumstances, not even in this extreme circumstance, since his heart was still pounding in his throat, to abandon his habits. Still, the lion had thrown him into such confusion that he hadn't been able to dictate his usual quota to his secretary; that was quite enough deviation from the rule. He put the fully-recorded cassette in an envelope and – lion or no lion – refused to be diverted from writing, in a quite legible if slightly shaky hand, the address of the university, to put a stamp on it, picked up his coat and, with a fixing glance at the animal, as if he wanted to nail it to the carpet, walked through the garden door.

Outside he lit a cigarette: also breaking with the rule, because he usually covered the distance to the letter-box and back to the house at the double, smoking would only have wasted time. This time he walked excitedly down the sparsely-lit

streets – as usual at this time of night there was no one about, even the parked cars under the beams of light from the street-lamps seemed to be sleeping – but he did walk more slowly than usually in order to examine once more, in the peace of the night-time air, what had happened to him over the past hour.

I have been lured into an ambush, he thought, I have been confronted with a fundamental deception in order to test my intellectual powers.

When he came back, the lion was missing.

Blumenberg kept his hand on the handle of the now closed garden door for a long time. Had he been dealing with a fabulous lion, the *absent lion*, who did not belong to that which is the case, and hence never, ever to the world? But, but, thought Blumenberg, this quite different world-refusing lion does occur *in something* and is thus in a new and different way *the case*. The language games of the world-nominators call the lion back into existence and into life, he murmured quietly to himself.

Pleased with the phrase ‘world-nominators’, which without further ado he claimed as his own, Blumenberg went to bed.