



out to transform impressions, flashes of memory and loose words into an act of narration one may be led to avert the aleatory, the accidental, in order to knit a succession of events readable/understandable by his audience. This may not be true of some story-tellers committed to the revels of imagination or to exposing the arbitrariness of human existence; but for others, driven by a sense of urgency, bringing some kind of order to the world becomes the cornerstone of their literary undertaking. Autobiographic writing may serve such a purpose, but one cannot expect the writer's hand to reenact the same movements of the body and of the soul without displacement and distance, i. e., without creating a gap between *story* and *narration*—a separation which entails the redimensioning of the narrator's perceptions, the reassessment of his attitudes and their subjection to the mechanics and the dynamics of the textualization process. And it becomes all the more interesting if he is willing to derive from the narrative a lesson about either his own moral nature or that of those around him. In that case, he is called on his ability to detect in the anecdotal centre of the story the presence of those values and principles which buttress his very *ethos* and which render the text an exemplary episode. The author needs to be, at the same time, inside and outside the story: he must still build his own textual existence through the act of narrating despite his illusory claim that «it actually happened to *me*». The way to assign some consistency to that existence across several layers of meaning is to create a contrast of feeling between that very same entity and that of the *other*. That this *other* should assume the form of animals is characteristic of some of Orwell's novels and essays, and is symptomatic of his need to find a narrative interlocutor pulling him away from an egocentric appropriation of reality, as well as from an ideologically centered viewpoint. Animals, too, are inside and outside the story: they are part of the narrative but are never to be tamed by it, their full symbolic charge always escaping the writer's attempt at some sort of closure. That animals played an important role in Orwell's writing is a fact attested not only by their pervasive presence in many of his writings, but also by some of their titles: «Shooting an Elephant» (1936), *Inside the Whale* (1940), *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), and, obviously, *Animal Farm* (1945).

Two early texts, written by an Eric Blair at odds with the whole sham of imperialism, illustrate this dialogue between man and beast, between the word and the unsayable. In the first of these, published in the *Adelphi* in August 1931 and entitled 'A Hanging', the ex-police officer recalls an episode disclosing the rottenness of the imperial system of which he believed to be but a cog-wheel. The narrative proceeds without hesitation. The main character is never at a crossroads, for his mission requires no decision-making: his conscience is safeguarded by the technical character of the event—everything is regarded as an extension of a prior judicial decision. The order of events of this story follows, as it were, a rectilinear path as if shaped by the inexorability of fate (in this case, it is the very ruthlessness of men's laws that dictates the inevitability of death). A native prisoner is taken to the gallows and executed. Blair is part of the procession and acts dutifully, despite his reflections on the nature of life and on the miscarriages of justice:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. (...) He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less. (CEJLI: 68-9)

Here one of Orwell's narrative strategies becomes evident: the lesser absurdities of life are pulled into the story and magnified—he came to the previous reflection simply because the prisoner stepped aside to avoid a puddle—so as to extract from them all their potential meanings and build his own moral edifice, even though he cannot but admit to being inextricably involved in that sordid affair. The same narrative strategy is at work when the procession of warders escorting the prisoner was halted by 'a dog, come goodness knows whence, (...) bounding among us with a loud volley of barks, and leapt round us wagging its whole body, wild with glee at finding so many human beings together.' (*CEJLI*: 67) Human beings, indeed, but whose humanity was long lost, as they acted mechanically in a death ritual to which the dog lent a mythical overtone. As a matter of fact, it reminds us of Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the entrance of Hades. The 'dead man walking' is not the only one about to meet death. His escort—the hangman, the warders, the superintendent, the magistrates, in fact, the whole apparatus of imperialism—also parades before the animal and enters the realm of death. The Empire, corseted in its rigid formality, crosses the Styx and steps into the depths of the Hades. The boatman, Charon, does well to warn the incautious in Virgil's *Aeneid*: 'Know this, the realm of night—the Stygian shore:/My boat conveys no living bodies o'er'.(A6382-3; Trans. Pope)

In another no less impressive account, published five years later, Orwell narrates that which he calls «a tiny incident», when he realized something that, in his own words, «gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism—the real motives for which despotic governments act»(*CEJLI*: 266). Unlike the former account, this time he was given the chance to decide the course of events. One morning he is called out to deal with a mahout's elephant «which had gone 'must'» and was rampaging through the bazaar of Moulmein, in Lower Burma, destroying bamboo huts and killing people. Due to the seriousness of the situation he decided the beast must die. Blair eventually found him but when he was about to give the *coup de grace* he faltered. The elephant was now feeding quietly in the paddy fields, his attack of 'must' having passed off. An utilitarian Blair paused to think it over. Not only did killing a working elephant represent the destruction of a productive force, but it also would amount to a futile, pointless act for which he would have to answer later. In the meantime, a crowd, two-thousand strong, had gathered in the rear, watching him, waiting for the gun to go off. The narrator goes on:

[...] suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here I was, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives' and so in every crisis he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him. (*CEJL 1*: 269)

The elephant had now ceased to be a menace to institutionalized order. As a matter of fact, in spite of his might and wildness, of his power over human lives and over human imagination, he had been reduced to the part of the sacrificial lamb in a morbid ceremony whose participants were engaged in a silent tug-of-war for the white man's soul. But unlike

any other sacrifice, this lamb was not to be forgotten, his long agony being indelibly imprinted on the mind of the unwilling priest who performed the ritual. And the less humane the paladin of imperial order was to become, the more human the animal turned out to be: 'I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with a preoccupied *grandmotherly* air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be *murder* to shoot him.' [my italics] No wonder, for the elephant was, in the narrator's words, the only 'actor' who stood outside the irrational logic of imperialism, watching a 'play' in which colonizer and colonized alike had given up their freedom to make way for their hatreds, entangled in a spiral of mutual *recriminations*, *incriminations* and *discrimination*. Before shooting him, Blair was forced to dissect the animal mentally, so as to avoid much suffering:

I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one should shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought therefore, as the elephant was sideways on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole; actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be further forward. (*CEJLI*: 271)

He failed to read the animal's anatomy the same way he failed to understand the anatomy of freedom. Killing the elephant was, after all, a statement of powerlessness, of coward abidance by the rules of the game, of abdication from his true, righteous self. He was about to shoot that which represented the driving force behind every literary endeavour, *viz.*, the freedom to challenge institutionalized thinking, to counter the expected, to believe in oneself, rather than in the dominating ideologies. As he admitted later in 1946, in an essay where he discusses the ascendancy of totalitarianism over literature, 'imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity' («The Prevention of Literature»). But it seemed that shooting the animal was needed after all. It was the only way to shake him out of his imperial dream. The last traces of faith in the Empire abandoned him as he watched life pour out of the beast's mutilated body.

In both «A Hanging» and «Shooting an Elephant» we are before grisly descriptions of death rituals to which a layer of political and moral considerations was added by an autodiegetic narrator visibly ill at ease with the major flaws of the main character. And this is something he would have concealed from his reader were it not for his capacity to assimilate the past in order to try to solve his conflicting relation with the present. It becomes clear that the artist painting this alleged self-portrait does not identify himself with the model, who stubbornly upholds the old, stale values and who is very reluctant, if not unwilling, to abandon his status of protected victimizer. As each of the narratives nears the end, the Eric Blair depicted in them remains one of the middle-men operating on behalf of the ruling class and whose main task is to carry out the dirty jobs without questioning the legitimacy of their commands. In «Shooting an Elephant», selfishness seems to be Blair's last refuge: 'I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient *pretext* for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.' (*CEJLI*: 272) In 'A Hanging', on the other hand, that selfishness is entangled with a cold, cruel indifference, which contaminates the final lines: 'We went through the big double gates of the prison, into the road. "Pulling at his legs!" exclaimed the Burmese magistrate suddenly, and burst into a loud chucking. We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably. The dead man was a hundred yards away.' (*CEJLI*: 71). This Eric Blair was no

doubt on the wrong side of the barricade and, apparently, only animals allowed him a glimpse of what stood yonder.

After having exorcized some of the ghosts of his past, humans and animals become less distinguishable after Orwell's conversion to socialism. That holds good not only in relation to *Animal Farm* (and, up to a certain point, to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) but also to some of his political essays. In *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, for instance, first published in 1941, he reaffirms his belief in the ingrained patriotism of every Englishman by portraying it in terms of analogy between the laws of the animal kingdom and the human collective unconscious: 'there can be moments' says Orwell 'when the whole nation suddenly swings together and does the same thing, like a herd of cattle facing a wolf.' (*LU*: 51) There is no question as to what the wolf stood for, the same way there is little doubt about the powerful symbol of communal strength provided by the simile of the herd capable of arresting the growing menace coming from the outside. Orwell never envisaged such patriotism as a conservative force. On the contrary, he maintained that only true patriotism, regarded as the most important feature of the English character, would open the doors for a much needed left-wing revolution on British soil. In order to accomplish that, however, one would have to counter the single-mindedness of the masses, who 'did the wrong thing in perfect unison' in the 1931 General Election; and for that reason he sees in them the Gadarene Swine, possessed creatures, which, as we know, jumped off a cliff after being ordered to do so by Jesus of Nazareth (Math.8:28-34). Swine, according to Orwell's bestiary, are dangerous, treacherous animals and therefore always to be looked upon with suspicion. Further ahead, in the same essay, they reappear to incarnate the ruling class. As he discusses the hardships and sacrifices of wartime and their impact on the general standard of living of the British working class, the moneyed classes are referred to in less than eulogistic terms: 'The one sure earnest of [a better life] is that when [the workers] are taxed and overworked they shall see that the rich are being hit even harder. And if the rich *squeal* audibly, so much the better.' (*LU*: 86) [My italics. Mark the word *squeal*: not coincidentally, one of the pigs in *Animal Farm* was called Squealer.]

As early as 1941 Orwell was already using swine as a synonym for privilege and power. And such negative semantic investment was to be magnified in his controversial satire of post-revolutionary societies, *Animal Farm*, published in 1945. Pigs, 'the most intelligent animals on the farm' (*PCNGO*: 18), were at the same time the planners and the driving force behind the whole revolutionary process. But they also subverted the ideals and the principles they had preached before the Rebellion so as to ascend and accommodate themselves to a position of power: 'No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon' says Squealer 'that all animals are equal. He would be too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be?' (*PCNGO*: 33). The contradiction is too obvious to be missed. In fact the spokesperson of the regime is a master of what Orwell would later call 'doublethink', viz., 'the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them' (*PCNGO*: 865). Sometimes, however, not even this manipulation of language is enough to keep pigs in power and when the time comes, as during the quarrel with which the narrative comes to an end, they all relapse into a state of savagery:

Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which. (*PCNGO*: 66)

One might argue that the fable as a literary convention does well without this attempt to unmask the workings of personification. Orwell needs not tell us that all the animals are in fact grotesque caricatures of human types, and he knows that. His message is somewhat different. Throughout the whole novel, men were simply another class of animals which stood for the *ancient régime* and the forces of capitalism, the same way pigs represented socialism corrupted. The quarrel between men and pigs proves how much alike are all the ones engaged in the pursuit of that which Bertrand Russell calls 'naked power', regardless of their ideological or political origins. In other words, man, when left to act of his own accord, trampling on the rights of others for the sake of his petty, egoistical interests, is still very much a bestial, violent creature devoid of affection and humanity. No wonder, therefore, that the members of the Inner Party in Orwell's last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are classified as 'swine' (*PCNGO*: 817) by a woman who understood the perversity of the regime only too well.

In Burmese mythology, *nads* were intermediary beings set between the gods and men. They were believed to be former human beings whose lives had been brought to an end in a violent or unjust way. Despite being invisible, they could assume a human or animal shape, if so they pleased. In a way, we feel tempted to interpret Orwell's animals as apparitions of such *nads*, eroding our self-confidence and self-esteem, questioning our assumptions and revealing the darkest side of human nature.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Orwell, George: *Collected Essays in Journalism and Letters*. 4 vols.. London: 1993.  
*The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and English Genius*. London: 1982.  
*The Penguin complete novels of George Orwell*. London: 1983.
- Crick, Bernard: *Orwell and the business of biography*. Austin: 1996.
- Fowler, Roger: *The language of George Orwell*. Basingstoke: 1995.
- Newsinger, John: *Orwell's politics*. Basingstoke: 1999.
- Young, John Wesley: *Totalitarian language: Orwell's Newspeak and its Nazi and Communist antecedents*. Charlottesville, London: 1991.
- Zwerdling, Alex: *Orwell and the Left*. New Haven, London: 1974.