

STRANGE PRESENCE

THE ANIMAL WHO COULD BE ABSENT

ARASH POORAKBAR

"I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life...

It is bound to be a failure, every book is a failure, but I know with some clarity what kind of book I want to write...

And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality."

George Orwell: *Why I Write*

When facing different readings of a literary work, especially an allegory, it is very usual to see a one-to-one decoding game happening there. A game that not only is simple to understand, but also deprives literature of any strangeness. In such a scheme an allegory seems to be a straightforward way of writing. Where, for example, instead of referring to a real character one would just make up a fictional character like an animal. It even gets to the point that, for example, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is considered as an allegory for having "a point-to-point correspondence with the events of Russian history from 1917 to 1943".¹ One can question this prospective and the readings based on it, here I will try to show the problematic inherent in such understanding of allegory. It may

¹ Matthew Hodgart "Animal Farm as Satire, Fable, and Allegory". In *George Orwell's Animal Farm*, Edited & with an Introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006) 39.

seem useful to do a more precise study on animal as such and see how animals are present in (literary) world. Heideggerian perception of animal based on Uexküll's zoological studies seem to be fit for such an endeavor which could make a link between animal as such and the (literary) world and ultimately provide us with a new perspective on allegory.

An allegory seems to be a straightforward way of conveying a meaning. But then why shall one attempt to use an allegory? The problematic starts here. In his study on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin pointed out that a genuine understanding of allegorical has been obscured by the late Romantic aestheticizing of symbol and also by a tendency to conceive the allegorical negatively in its contrast with this devalued, aesthetic concept. So in his endeavor, it is possible to discover an authentic understanding of allegorical by recovering a theological concept of symbol.² This is the point where everything gets more complicated, even for Benjamin himself, when there could be no redemption; no theology or at least one without redemption.

One way to overcome this problem is to study the allegory as it is, in its own logic, not as a medium to convey another meaning. When it comes to allegories, animals are present in most cases. Thus, to encounter this problem, it is worth studying a modern animal story. The first example for any reader would be *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. A modern writing that has always been received with pedagogical side effects, which reach to the point that the author would blame readers of mistaking his message.³ This has made almost any reader argue over the writer's intentions and be reluctant to accept that the writer has lost his control of the allegory⁴ right after the moment he created the literary world of *Animal Farm*. Moreover, critics tend to forget that the author himself praised his writing for having some profound "moment" in it, not because of the criticism of Bolsheviks or even defending status quo.

Thus, we will forget about all these pedagogical side effects which end up in decoding who is represented by each character or better to say animal. This reading will attempt to go for the story itself forgetting about the easy job of one-by-one character decode. By this, one can see how radicality is rooted in some moments in the story, which are the result of allegory's inner logic. This radicality is not the result of the decoding game.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 160-163.

³ quoted in V. C. Letemendia. "Revolution on *Animal Farm*: Orwell's Neglected Commentary". *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 18. No. 1. (1992), 127-37.

⁴ Ibid.

Let this moment be the scene when Squealer defends pigs' theft of milk and apples according to Orwell's own reading,⁵ or another one to which we may return later. We will try to see what really exists in an allegory which charges it with radicality, rather than the decoding game frequently played.

So many things are present in *Animal Farm*. So many are absent as well; a bloodsucker Dracula for example, or a crazy rocket scientist wishing to destroy the whole planet. But these examples seem irrelevant and no one will try to analyze the story based on the absence of Dracula and the scientist. So, one may start to read the story and find what relevant things are absent in this story. This may make us sure that the absence is really working in this allegorical writing, or so to say the absence is very present in this piece or probably any other one.

The absence occurs or is present in this story in different ways. The most obvious absences in the work are the absence of characters. Snowball – the pig leading the opposition against the notorious one called Napoleon – does more to the course of the narrative after he is expelled and absent in the story. The real force of Snowball's character is charged on him in the narrative mode, by its absence. His absence is contributing more to the story than his presence and even others' presence. The mill could be made by a crowd of animals but could be destroyed easily by the absent Snowball. Even though we know that Snowball is a made-up reason for the mill's destruction by Napoleon. But in the narrative itself, it is Snowball who is bringing that big destruction. Remember we decided to go for the allegory as it is, not the side-effect like interpretations.

This form of absence could be traced in so many characters and narrative elements. It may worth going briefly through these and then see what it could mean for an animal to be absent and finally find our way back to the presence of the author and writing itself. This may show us how strange the presence could be in an allegory, both for human and animal, both for author and writing itself.

Moses the raven, in ironic contrast to his name, is absent from the Farm. On some occasions he shows up and provides animals with some stories. He is an absent character haunting the farm. There are just his stories present. He works as a literary device which is present just when it aims at an audience and then it disappears. His role is as powerful as literature which any camp may use. But finally, there is a true radicality in it. The

⁵ V. C. Letemendia. "Revolution on Animal Farm: Orwell's Neglected Commentary", 134.

autonomous forms of this absent literature bring about the idea of something alternative, if not impossible.

Men are also absent in two different sense. One is being kicked out of Manor Farm later called Animal Farm. In this sense, men start playing their biggest part in the narrative when they are kicked out of the scene or in other words forced to be absent. Man's power in the story is understood when he is absent, when he is not in the scene, rather when he is not in the farm. Their real role also appears when they are not present anymore. One may feel this strange presence in the narrative.

There is another sense of how men are absent in this novel. Men as the creators of the allegory, or the literary world of animal farm, are absent. The author leaves no trace of his subjectivity in the story while everything has in fact popped out of his subjectivity. This is probably the most problematic absence alongside one of the literary devices namely the narrator to which we may return.

The hardworking horse, Boxer, just pushes more and carries heavier stuff. By the time he gets to the edge of death/absence he plays his narratological role. The time he is taken to knackers is the time things happen. The time for his greatest influence. All his great efforts were nothing in comparison to the impact he made on animals when he was dead and his corpse was taken to the knackers in front of all animals who expected for him a peaceful retirement.

But what does it mean for an animal to be absent? Is it possible for an animal not to be present? Then where is the line between man and animal? If an animal could be absent, then we are facing a strange presence in its case.

Our animals in the farm have a special environment or space. The space they are living in is totally special in the sense that it is different from all other farms, and more importantly, it is a space in a story, a kind of narrative space, not merely an objective space. Thus the space-environment is a key point to start with. Jakob von Uexküll the famous zoologist did many studies on the animal environment. This time the real animals in real world or labs not the ones in literary world. Uexküll differentiates between two concepts, *Umgebung* as the objective space in which we see a living being moving, and *Umwelt* as the environment-world that is constituted by a more or less broad series of elements that he calls "carriers of significance" (*Bedeutungsträger*) or of "marks" (*Merkmalträger*).⁶ The carriers of significance are the only things that interest

⁶ quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Translated by Kevin Attell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 40.

the animal. So for Uexküll, the first step to take is to determine an animal's *Umwelt* which is made possible by a study of the relations in the *Umgebung*.

Heidegger gives the name "disinhibitor" (*Enthemmende*) to what Uexküll defined as carriers of significance and "disinhibiting ring" (*Enthemmungsring*) to what Uexküll called *Umwelt*. The animal is closed in the ring of its disinhibitors. For this, "when [the animal] comes into relation with something else, [it] can only come upon that which 'affects' and thus starts its being-capable. Everything else is a priori unable to penetrate the ring around the animal" Heidegger writes.⁷

Heidegger defines the mode of being for animal in relation to its disinhibitor as captivity, which can never open itself to a world. For him the animal can never suspend its relation to its *Umwelt*, always captivated in the ring of disinhibitors. But it is the human as a being who can suspend this relation and get out of the captivating ring. It is worth paying attention to the fact that ultimately the human *Umgebung* is itself an *Umwelt*, just much more complicated than the one for the animal. Also one may remember Uexküll's own controversial example of a tick living for 18 years in a laboratory in Rostock in complete isolation from its *Umwelt*. Then we may need to reconsider the concept of space with the idea that it is always problematic to define a space. Is a space of isolation for tick or any other being an *Umwelt* or is it even possible to talk about any disinhibitor and its suspension in such timeless space? Moreover what if an animal lives in a space which literally lets him suspend his relation to it, as in the case of the animals in the Manor Farm?

Thus, it seems that in a literary world (*Umwelt*) the absence which renders beings as strangers works vitally. The point here is that the Heideggerian understanding of being and specifically animal as being captivated in the ring of its disinhibitors, or so to say, understanding of being by its relation to disinhibitor seems to be faulty. This may be soothed by manipulation in the Heideggerian scheme, so the being-animal could also be understood as disinhibitor itself. Both the animals in laboratories and animal in the literary world also play their ontological role as disinhibitor. In nature simply an animal could manifest itself as the disinhibitor to another one, also in the literary world. This then means that the absence of the animal itself has a meaning even more radical than its presence. The only point is that an animal's absence could apparently influence the presence of others. Just like the case of the tick in the lab in lack of any disinhibitors, or

⁷ Ibid, 51.

as the animals of Manor Farm when they are literally absent but play their biggest roles in the narrative.

All these animals as we saw play their part with their strange absence. Also, all other literary devices do so. For example, the narrator is absent in a strange way. We are listening to him. We are getting the whole story and all its devices via him. He is using other being-animals to establish an allegory and to talk to us. He represents all of them as literary devices that could be spent in the price of making a literary world. But where is he himself in this world? How he relates to all those beings as disinhibitors and how he himself is the disinhibitor to this literary world? Something crucial is missing in the logic of allegory. Someone hypocritically hiding himself in a world which he himself is a vital part. Just like forgetting about oneself as disinhibitor in Heideggerian scheme; forgetting that one is also captivated in a ring bigger than the others as it may seem to be the case for Heidegger. This time, in the case of narrator, he pretends to be absent, while he is totally present. Moreover, everything can get more complicated asking the same question about the author, not the narrator. How does the author relate himself to this *Umwelt*? The only thing that is clear is that the literary *Umwelt* created by the author is not a normal *Umwelt*, for the author can hide his own presence. In such case one may be suspicious of the author, the creator. One may think that the author needs to kill anything in his literary *Umwelt*, so that he can hide himself and manipulate it. It seems that we are ultimately facing taxidermized animals in a fake *Umwelt*. The Author needs to kill all these animals and even the narrator to be able to establish the allegory. Moreover, the author had previously told us that he “had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts” and he “felt that this created a sort of private world” in which he could get his own back for his failure.⁸ He also has told us, in his preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, that he liked animals and the ultimate class struggle was, as he perceived, the one between man and animal. Then how ironic could it be killing animals and then resurrecting them via a literary *Umwelt* for the sake of just making a space?

It may seem so cruel on the side of the author to do so. Why does one have to kill a being to give it life again? But this is what art and god do. God had to kill the son in order to revive him. That is the resurrection which is going to render the whole space meaningful. That is death which makes it possible. Also for the case of the artist. The

⁸ George Orwell, *An Age Like This 1920-1940: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 1.

artist needs to kill what he wants to represent, before being able to represent them. To put it in other way, the artist has to kill what he wants to use as a representative (signifier). This is the reason why affiliation on the side of the author is always problematic. Imagine an author who wants to stand for the proletariat. Any kind of literary representation of the proletariat is like killing them rather than giving them a life or a new space. The only way out of this dilemma is to kill things and make them alive again, in order of making a new space, a new meaning, that the suppressed could no longer BE as suppressed in that space. One may need to kill the son and sacrifice to have the beloved redeemed. Or simply an idea of redemption.

Let's turn our attention to an always-already absent figure of our story, Benjamin. He was the cynic donkey in the farm and oldest of the all animals who was not interested in their affairs and always kept his distance. Since he is always absent it is not surprising to see that he has a very significant impact on whole narrative. He is the one who makes the most important "moment" of the narrative possible. In the last pages of *Animal Farm* we read:

Benjamin felt a nose nuzzling at his shoulder. He looked round. It was Clover. Her old eyes looked dimmer than ever. Without saying anything, she tugged gently at his mane and led him round to the end of the big barn, where the Seven Commandments were written. For a minute or two they stood gazing at the tatted wall with its white lettering.

"My sight is failing," she said finally. "Even when I was young I could not have read what was written there. But it appears to me that that wall looks different. Are the Seven Commandments the same as they used to be, Benjamin?"

For once Benjamin consented to break his rule, and he read out to her what was written on the wall. There was nothing there now except a single Commandment.

It ran:

ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL
BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL
THAN OTHERS

After that it did not seem strange when next day the pigs who were supervising the work of the farm all carried whips in their trotters.⁹

⁹ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009), 191-193.

Looking at this passage, one finds a really brilliant artistic moment, a sincere feeling touching depth of your soul. But the point is that this passage is not important for introducing the famous saying "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others". What really is at work here is the picture of these two animals, who themselves have been absent, in the absence of their absent/dead peers, doing this pilgrimage toward a previously existing scripture on a wall. An absent scripture in the time of pilgrimage. What touches us, in this passage is the fact that everything is absent in it, and that's why everything is powerful in it, not the famous saying made by the author.

So, it is not strange to find such a very deep moment in the *Animal Farm*, although all animals have been already killed. This is the miracle of literature, the miracle of creation. Literature is the act of god in the sense that the autonomy of the forms of the literary *Umwelt* even makes it possible to touch the very crucial parts of our *Umgebung*. The reason that literature can be radical. While we deceive ourselves in a somewhat Heideggerian scheme, that we are not captivated in any *Umwelt* and its disinhibitors, at that very moment we are captivated by the disinhibitor of the literary *Umwelt* which is the autonomy of literary form. No matter how hard we try to show our superiority in a literary world, and how skillfully we have built a world and hidden ourselves in it, we are captivated in the ring of disinhibitors of literary *Umwelt*. A fortunate fact, since all the radical force of literature lies in it; in the autonomy of form not the subjectivity of the author.

That's the reason for such an invented allegory, easily interpreted as one-to-one political camp, that it could lead to such a moment of Benjamin and Clover to touch our reality when like two real pilgrims, they go toward the wall where the commandments are written. The wall to meet, the commandments to read. The real change in their world, and also this time in our world. This sincere moment of a made-up allegory can touch us and our world. For there has been a massacre and a resurrection before, so many strangers died for the sake of new autonomic *Umwelt* which could be the real radical.

So, it is interesting to find the power of allegory and artistic form in general in the absences, in the death of characters. The invented allegory of *Animal Farm* out of great massacre by the author, which naturally enough is widely received as a kind of one-to-one decode game, carries such radical moments in it. This radicality comes from the souls of all those killed, from the autonomy of the art forms. Probably it is clear then

that for the sake of the autonomy of artistic form lives have been sacrificed; neither just human, nor just animal lives, but the life of any represented beings. Such a sacrifice is charging art or specifically allegory with the power to even turn against its primary intended goal. That's the power of artistic form, of death, of absence, and of strangers' resurrection.

One must also remember that the tick in the lab was forced to suspend its relation to its disinhibitors, it was not a choice by the tick but something forced upon it. The death of the characters, and their absence and strangeness was forced upon them as well. It is unimaginable that the characters would choose to be dead, absent, or strange. It is forced upon them. By the cruelty of author in name of making a literary or better to say artistic *Umwelt*. But, as we saw previously, what is important is the death forced upon any object of representation in any literary or artistic form. The artist must kill the object of representation – a murder that is essential for artistic form. So, one may keep in mind that it is never a good idea to only represent what you like, or feel any attraction to. You may need to kill that as well, but what you need to do is to use this radical autonomy of form (the ghostly power of those who have been killed) in favor of those you affiliate yourself with, not merely representing them. Or in case of the farm, not only representing your beloved gullible animals, which actually means killing them, but resurrecting them with the powerful force of formal autonomy in such moments as the pilgrimage of Benjamin and Clover. That is the very moment your object of affiliation can benefit from, not the whole story when you kill them and move them as puppets or preserve them like a tick in the lab. The power lies in their soul which you can only use when you have already killed them. There is no salvation in such resurrection, but one can decide where to exert the radical force of autonomous form; whom to support in the real life before having them killed so they need to be resurrected. Not surprisingly Orwell was always trying to pick a side as well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London and New York: Verso, 1998.

- Bloom, Harold. Ed. *George Orwell's Animal Farm*. New York: Chelsea House, 2006.
- Letemendia, V. C. "Revolution on Animal Farm: Orwell's Neglected Commentary". In *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 18. No. 1. 1992. Pp 127-37
- Hodgart, Matthew. "Animal Farm as Satire, Fable, and Allegory". In *George Orwell's Animal Farm*, Harold Bloom, 2006, 39
- Orwell, George. "Why I Write" In *An Age Like This. 1920-1940: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*. Edited by Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. New York: Mariner Books, 2009.