PAPER

Only Donkeys Survive Tyranny and Dictatorship:

Was Benjamin George Orwell's Alter Ego in *Animal Farm*?

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This paper examines the representation of Benjamin, the donkey in Orwell's Animal Farm *– the novel and later radio and dramatic adaptations. It places this study in the context of Orwell's ambivalent fascination with animals and his handling of animal themes in many of his writings. In addition, the paper considers the position of the donkey in the broader culture and whether Benjamin served as Orwell's alter ego in the novel. George Orwell constructed the original prose of* Animal Farm *with an omniscient voice writing in the third person. When he had the opportunity to adapt the novel for BBC Radio in 1946, with transmission in early 1947, he chose not to focalise the narrative structure through any of the characters. This paper argues that this was the correct decision in terms of style and the representation of Orwell's politics.*

Keywords: *Animal Farm*, Benjamin, donkey, radio, dramatisation

A WRITER WHO LOVED ANIMALS

The success of *Animal Farm* (1945) depends to a large extent on the anthropomorphic representation of the animal characters and the extent of sympathy and identification that human prose readers and radio drama listeners have for them. The quality of animal characterisation could be due to Orwell's love of animals, which is well recorded in Orwell's oeuvre as well as in his biography and criticism.[1]

In Burma, serving with the Imperial Police Force from 1922-1927, when he was known by his real name, Eric Arthur Blair, he kept a menagerie, as recalled by Roger Beadon who 'was surprised to find Blair's house in a mess, with "goats, geese, ducks, and all sorts of things floating about"' (Wadhams 1984: 24). Moreover, animals seemed to animate Orwell. This is evident in archive images of him. Peter Davison, referring to a picture of him in the company of a

dog and cat in Southwold (Davison 2006: 236), described him as to be in 'a surprisingly relaxed mood' and 'looking unusually fit and healthy' (ibid). Orwell looks even happier nursing a pet rabbit in the garden of Francis and Mabel Fierz's home in the 1930s (Stansky and Abrahams 1979: 51). Throughout his life Orwell's sympathy with the animal world is marked by an investment of affectionate characterisation. Orwell's favourite goat at his cottage in Wallington was called 'Muriel' who was a valuable source of milk. It had such an important role in his life that in his diary entry for 15 April 1939 he thought it important to note that Muriel was 'behaving as though on heat' (Orwell 2010: 139). Muriel would be accorded the honour of having a minor part in *Animal Farm*. His dog, described as 'a very friendly and intelligent animal, a medium-size, grey, unclipped poodle' (Wadhams 1984: 118) was named 'Marx' and on the hottest day for 70 years, 12 April 1939, Orwell recorded in his diary: 'Tried Marx with a live baby mouse. He smelt & licked it but made no move to eat it' (Orwell 2010: 139). Orwell was more adept at training Marx to hunt rabbits (Rodden and Rossi 2012: 73).

Orwell had an intense curiosity about the natural world and the creatures within it even when killing them as a teenager with a catapult at Eton. Sir Roger Mynors co-edited with the younger Orwell a magazine called the *Election Times* at Eton. However, his strongest recollection of their friendship was about their passion for unorthodox biology: 'One day Eric Blair killed a jackdaw with a catapult on the roof of the college chapel, which was entirely illegal, and we then took it round to the biology lab and dissected it (Wadhams 1984: 19). Slitting the unfortunate bird's gall bladder produced a dreadful smell. Many years later Orwell was photographed looking deadly and aiming a catapult in Morocco in 1938 (Davison 2006: 240) though the target was not included in the camera frame. He was also pictured milking a Moroccan goat with great concentration (ibid).

As Adam Stock argues: 'An abiding love of the natural world permeates all of George Orwell's writing' (Stock 2012: 46) and he further suggests that his 'complex conception of "nature" was bound up with his aesthetic sensibility, his politics, as well as the darker aspects of his character' (ibid). Orwell's intellectual and political curiosity extended to the animal world even in the midst of disaster and life-threatening situations. In 1947, during the notorious Corryvreckan whirlpool incident off the Isle of Jura (when Orwell with family members almost drowned), his niece Lucy Dakin (now Bestley) remembered that after their boat's engine had been sucked into the treacherous waters and they were dependent on her brother Henry using the oars: '…at that point a seal popped its head up and looked at us. And Eric said: "Curious thing about seals, very inquisitive creatures." And I thought: "I honestly don't

think this is the sort of time to be talking about seals"' (Wadhams 1984: 190-191). After being upturned, nearly drowning and finding themselves marooned and soaked on a nearby island, she recalled Orwell tramping off in search of something to eat and returning half an hour later saying: '"Extraordinary birds, puffins. They make their nests in burrows." And then on the subject of food he said: "I did see some baby seagulls, but I didn't have the heart to do anything about it"' (ibid: 191-192).

Orwell always had a fundamental sympathy for animals and their suffering and he was prepared to admit that it took greater priority over his concerns for the plight of human beings. On his sojourn in Marrakech (1938-1939), he wrote:

> Yet I suppose I had not been five minutes on Moroccan soil before I noticed the overloading of the donkeys and was infuriated by it. There is no question that the donkeys are damnably treated. The Moroccan donkey is hardly bigger than a St Bernard dog, it carries a load which in the British army would be considered too much for a fifteen-hands mule, and very often its pack-saddle is not taken off its back for weeks together. But what is peculiarly pitiful is that it is the most willing creature on earth, it follows its master like a dog and does not need either bridle or halter. After a dozen years of devoted work it suddenly drops dead, whereupon its master tips it into the ditch and the village dogs have torn its guts out before it is cold. This kind of thing makes one's blood boil… (Orwell 1971a: 431).

It could be argued that this observation and experience in 1938 may well have informed the depiction of the role of donkeys in the natural world through *Animal Farm*'s irascible old Benjamin. Intriguingly it is the horse Boxer who is worked to death and despatched to an ignoble end in a knacker's yard van, whereas Benjamin is the donkey who lived a very long time. When Benjamin was given the line: 'None of you has ever seen a dead donkey' (Orwell 1998: 19) there may well have been an Orwellian internal irony operating here in that he had seen far more than he cared to.

Orwell's love of animals even extended to those that despised him, particularly when he had been looking at the hindquarters of a gazelle and 'thinking of mint sauce': 'The gazelle I was feeding seemed to know that this thought was in my mind, for though it took the piece of bread I was holding out it obviously did not like me. It nibbled rapidly at the bread, then lowered its head and tried to butt me, then took another nibble and then butted again' (Orwell 1971a: 427).

Orwell revealed that it was his experience of country living in Wallington where he kept animals and ran a small provisions shop

that helped conceptualise the idea of *Animal Farm* as a combined beast fable and political satire. He explained in his preface for the 1947 Ukrainian edition of the novel:

> I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat (Orwell 1998: 113).

As he explained in his essay 'Why I Write' (1946): '*Animal Farm* was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole' (Orwell 1969: 104-105).

Orwell could always find a political and social angle when writing about animals and birds.[2] In his essay 'The English People' (1947), he observed it would seem that only in England during the Second World War could one find '"Animals" A. R. P. (Air Raid Precautions) Centres, with miniature stretches for cats, and in the first year of the war there was the spectacle of Animal Day being celebrated with all its usual pomp in the middle of the Dunkirk evacuation' (Orwell 1971b: 18). In 1946, in his celebrated essay 'Some thoughts on a common toad', he wrote of being delighted to 'have seen a kestrel flying over the Deptford gasworks, and I have heard a first-rate performance by a blackbird in the Euston Road. There must be some hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of birds living inside the four-mile radius, and it is rather a pleasing thought that none of them pays a halfpenny of rent' (Orwell 1971c: 173).

In Orwell's world, animals were given human names and vice-versa. His first wife, Eileen, signed herself off in correspondence with friends as 'Pig' (Davison 2006: 65) which Davison found ironic given that 'Eileen's pet name should have been that of the animals Orwell pilloried in *Animal Farm*' (ibid: 68). Pigs certainly did not get a particularly good press in *Animal Farm*. Even the heroic Snowball is depicted with corrupt and exploitative tendencies; a significance Orwell was anxious to emphasise in a discussion he had with Julian Symons:

> He pointed out to me that Trotsky, who in the book was Snowball, was potentially just as big a villain as Stalin, who was Napoleon, although he was the victim of Napoleon, because the first note of corruption was struck, Orwell said – and this is so if you look back at the book – when the pigs secretly have the cows' milk added to their own mash. And Snowball consented to that first act of inequality (Wadhams 1984: 150-151).

In real life, there is no evidence that Orwell liked pigs very much. The main trade at the village shop he began to run in Wallington, near Royston, in April 1936, with Eileen was sliced bacon. Moreover, Orwell's son Richard has a somewhat traumatic memory of the Barnhill pig's demise: 'I knew something awful was going to happen and that it had something to do with the pig. A little later I heard terrible shouts and awful squeals. There was a lot of drama that day. Then, once the pig was dead, we ate it quite cheerfully. We had it smoked for bacon. It fed us for quite a long time (ibid: 194). Orwell's dislike of pigs is also indicated in the 1939 largely autobiographical novel *Coming Up For Air* when the central character, George Bowling, is frightened by an apparent herd of galloping pigs, though the 'huge flood of pig-faces' turned out to be 'schoolchildren in gas-masks' (Meyers 1975: 132).

There is certainly more evidence that Orwell's 'love of animals' was not universal. Avril Blair's future husband, Bill Dunn, recalled an incident when Orwell 'known as being very gentle to animals' (Crick 1992: 525) stamped his boot on to the neck of a huge adder snake, 'got out his penknife and … just ripped it right open … quite deliberately' (ibid). Dunn was surprised that such 'a very gentle, kindly sort of man' (ibid) could be capable of such violence. But Crick observed there 'was this sadistic streak in Orwell's character – which usually he mastered' (ibid). The future BBC producer of Orwell's radio adaptation of *Animal Farm*, Rayner Heppenstall, knew it well. He shared a flat with Orwell in Kentish Town in 1935 and when returning home drunk and disorderly one night was beaten up by his older flatmate who set about him with a shooting-stick: 'I looked at his face. Through my private mist I saw in it a curious blend of fear and sadistic exultation' (ibid: 275). Orwell also administered corporal punishment with harsh authoritarianism when teaching at a private school in Hayes in 1933. Former pupil Geoffrey Stevens recalled getting 'six of the best': 'I remember I couldn't sit down on it for at least a week. They were really bad bruises. I had a job to sit in the bath' (Wadhams 1984: 53-54).[3]

George Orwell himself became known as 'Donkey George' because of what Davison described as his 'reputation for being "gloomy" and forbidding' (Davison 2006: 236). Davison argues that friends called him that after 'his grumbling donkey, Benjamin, in *Animal Farm*' (ibid). One of Orwell's biographers, Bernard Crick, attributes the nickname to Celia Kirwan and her twin sister Mamaine: 'Thinking of wise old Benjamin in *Animal Farm*, she and Mamaine used to refer to him as Donkey George' (Crick 1982: 483).

ANIMAL METAPHORS AND REPRESENTATION IN ORWELL'S LITERATURE

Richard Lance Keeble has written of the great amount of humour in Orwell's writing: 'One of my favourite pieces of Orwellian journalism,

which never fails to amuse me, is his essay "Some Thoughts on the Common Toad" of 1946' (Keeble 2016). Keeble appreciates Orwell's 'gentle, witty dig at Anglo-Catholics' when he says that 'after his long fast, the toad has a spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent' (ibid). Keeble highlights Orwell's rumination about the spawning of toads: '…because it is one of the phenomena of spring which most deeply appeals to me, and because the toad, unlike the skylark and the primrose, has never had much of a boost from the poets' (Orwell 1971c: 173).

Orwell recalled in 'Why I Write' that his first poem written at the age of four or five was 'a plagiarism of Blake's "Tiger, Tiger"' (Orwell 1969: 99) and he continued to write 'bad and usually unfinished "nature poems" in the Georgian style' (ibid). His first published poem at the age of 11 appeared in the *Henley & South Oxfordshire Standard* on 2 October 1914 and was a patriotic call to arms 'Awake! Young Men of England'. Significantly, the first two lines: 'Oh! Give me the strength of the lion, The wisdom of Reynard the fox' (Orwell 2015: 1) pay homage to the tradition of the beast fable.

Richard Rees, the editor of *Adelphi* magazine, was both an admirer and friend and believed Orwell's highest ambition was to be a great poet. It is may also be very significant that he recalled the importance of the mythological use of the anthropomorphic donkey in the poem 'On a Ruined Farm near the His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory' that he agreed to publish in his magazine in 1934 (Orwell 2015: 34-35). Rees recalled:

> He looked at the past with horror for its record of injustice and cruelties, but always with a certain nostalgia as well. And he looked to the future with misgivings. He compared himself to Buridan's ass: 'Between two countries, both-ways torn / And moveless still, like Buridan's donkey / Between the water and the corn' (Wadhams 1984: 50).

The legend of Buridan's ass has been pervasive as a metaphor for the destructive dilemma of conflicting choice since the Middle Ages. It satirises the moral determinist philosophy of Jean Buridan where there is the paradox of a donkey or ass dying when placed midway between the temptations and vital sustaining needs of hay and water. The metaphor constitutes the final verse of Orwell's poem and it could be argued it sets up the prescient problem of paradoxical double-think in political action and speech in the troubled context of the twentieth century. The characterisation of Benjamin in *Animal Farm* would place the sagacious donkey in the unbearable stasis of knowing and predicting and at the same time failing to act on his wisdom and intelligence. However, unlike Buridan's ass, Benjamin was clearly intelligent enough to help himself to the hay and the water.

Orwell successfully fused political writing with literary art to great effect in his 1936 anti-imperialist essay 'Shooting an Elephant'. It is assumed that the essay is a documentary prose account of a personal experience that deeply resonated with somebody so sympathetic to the dignity and life-force of so great and noble creature as an elephant that has to be executed for the banal expedience of sustaining colonial hierarchy.[4] Orwell wrote poignantly when contrasting the rifle he used as 'a beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights' (Orwell 1969: 30) and the dreadful impact it had on the morale of his victim which undergoes 'a mysterious, terrible change. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old' (ibid). The elephant is transformed after the third shot, his death symbolising the oppression of the Burmese people under British imperialist rule:

> …in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upwards like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skywards like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay (ibid: 31-32).

George Woodcock observes: 'The elephant, like a rock, like a tree, becomes identified in that splendid, trumpeting moment of downfall with the whole world of nature, and its crash shivers the solidity of the very earth on which its killer lies' (Woodcock 1970: 69). Woodcock also examines Orwell's use of animal allegory in his first novel *Burmese Days* (1934) written many years before *Animal Farm* was conceived: 'Orwell's feelings for the world of non-human beings (which must have provided at least one link of sympathy with Buddhist Burma) was thoroughly exemplified … where animals appear not only as images, but also as unconscious participants in the action of the novel' (ibid: 81). Woodcock analyses the novel as providing a literary 'conspiracy of the land whose agents, in animal forms, intervene at crucial moments to help determine the fates of the human characters' (ibid).

Orwell provides a vivid and poetic description of the central character Flory's unsuccessful attempt to shoot a pariah dog keeping him awake in the middle of night in a pack baying the moon on the maidan. This draws Woodcock's observation: 'The pariah dog, distrusted by its fellow animals, has no place in the other world of men. Flory, the solitary, distrusted by his fellow white men, has no place in the other world of animals and the Asians who resemble them' (ibid: 83).

Woodcock was also impressed that Orwell did not change sides at any point during the plot of *Animal Farm* (ibid: 157). The narrative voice or point of view of the reader was 'always nearest to that

of the unprivileged animals, and perhaps nearest of all to that of Benjamin, the sad and cynical old donkey who sides with no factions and always says that "life would go on as it had always gone on – that is, badly"' (ibid). Woodcock is, therefore, confirming that Benjamin was in some way a manifestation of an aspect of Orwell that the author's friends so affectionately recognised. But Woodcock argues that Benjamin was not the novel's driving narrative point of view. He was only saying that as a character the cynical donkey came closest to being so. This means that Orwell may well have intended to deploy Benjamin with a dramatic story-telling purpose that could have chimed with the personal political epiphanies he had undergone when joining the poor and down-and-outs in London and Paris (1927-1929), the working class miners in Wigan (1936) and the anarchists and socialists of the POUM militia fighting Franco's Fascists during the Spanish civil war (1937).

John Rodden praises Orwell's ability to present a variety of political viewpoints to specific families of the animal kingdom. He argues: 'If the sheep represent blind conformity and the high-strung hens are easily agitated, then Boxer the horse stands for the hard work, endurance and patriotic loyalty of the working-class' (Rodden 2007: 141). Rodden is another significant critic who equates Benjamin the donkey with Orwell's political attitude: 'Though equally tenacious, [he] remains stoically apart from all utopian ideas. There is perhaps a touch of Orwell himself in this creature's timeless scepticism' (ibid).

INFLUENCES OF ANTHROPOMORPHIC LITERATURE AND THE CULTURAL ROLE OF THE DONKEY

Animal Farm has been constantly compared to *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift. Orwell's friend Malcolm Muggeridge said the 1945 beast fable satire was worthy of Swift: 'It is a masterpiece. You can't flaw it. That book, like *Gulliver's Travels*, will always be of interest to people. It's beautifully worked out. I think George was better writing about animals than about human beings, because the people in his novels aren't really convincing – but the animals were perfectly convincing! I think he had sympathy with them' (Wadhams 1984: 151-152). In fact, Orwell had read *Gulliver's Travels* at least seven times throughout his life and his devotion to the text began the night before his eighth birthday (Stansky and Abrahams 1972: 35). *Gulliver's Travels* had centre stage in his 1946 essay 'Politics vs. Literature' (Orwell 1971c: 241-261) in which he wrote that Swift was 'a Tory Anarchist, despising authority while disbelieving in liberty, and preserving the aristocratic outlook while seeing clearly that the existing aristocracy is degenerate and contemptible' (ibid: 253). His concluding sentence: 'The durability of *Gulliver's Travels* goes to show that if the force of belief is behind it, a worldview which only just passes the test of sanity is sufficient to produce a great work of art' (ibid: 261) could be said of *Animal*

Farm itself. It was the third and fourth books of *Gulliver's Travels* that gave Orwell the model of Swift's 'brilliant reversal of the role of horses and human beings' (Rodden 2007: 135). He was able to fashion the dipsomaniacal Farmer Jones as one of Swift's Yahoos, symbolising the decadent Czarist regime that neglected the repressed and rebellious serfs – shown as starving beasts of burden.

John Rodden and John Rossi acknowledged the childhood influences of Orwell's early reading: 'Late Victorian and Edwardian England produced a rich collection of such animal stories as Kipling's *Jungle Book*, where the boy Mowgli could speak to the animals. Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, featuring the eccentric Toad of Toad Hall and his friends, appeared while Orwell was a schoolboy' (Rodden and Rossi 2012: 74). Orwell's childhood friend and kindred literary spirit Jacintha Buddicom recalled that the young Eric Blair 'particularly liked' Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Pigling Bland* (of 1913) in which pigs walked upright (ibid) and read it over and over again. Rodden argues that Orwell's inspiration was drawn 'as much from the vogue of animated cartoons in the previous decade, featuring Mickey Mouse, Porky Pig and Donald Duck, as from any literary source' (Rodden 2007: 134-135) though the fables of Aesop or La Fontaine offered the model of 'brief parables attached to pointed morals' (ibid). Orwell's biographer Gordon Bowker argues that Orwell would have been influenced by his studies of Aristophanes' fables at Eton, and 'Another likely source of inspiration was Thurber, with whose political fables he was familiar' (Bowker 2003: 308). The tale of 'A Very Proper Gander' who is expelled from a farm by 'malign rumour-mongers' was a case of 'slippery' language control being turned to 'cruel political ends' (ibid).

Orwell is also likely to have been influenced by the literary legend conceived by William Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the character Bottom has his head converted into that of a donkey. Orwell also referred to *Don Quixote* by Cervantes in some of his critical essays (Orwell 1971b: 321) and would have undoubtedly appreciated the role of Sancho Panza's loyal and heroic donkey Dapple. The exquisite melancholy of Eeyore in A. A. Milne's *Winnie The Pooh* first appeared in book publication in 1926. Moral values and the qualities of wisdom are associated with the donkey through Biblical fables such as Balaam's ass. Donkeys also feature in cross-cultural traditions of carnival throughout the world where they often perform a mocking and subversive role of power reversal.

THE ROLE OF BENJAMIN IN *ANIMAL FARM* AS PROSE AND AUDIO DRAMA

Orwell created two literary forms for *Animal Farm*: the prose novella and the radio dramatisation script for the BBC's first broadcast in 1947. They are different forms of literature and offer different

textures of narrative and dramatic representations of his animal characters.

Orwell was no novice in the art of radio dramatisation. He was a confident and assured radio playwright and had two years' experience as a producer of dramatic and cultural programming at the BBC between 1941 and 1943 (Crook 2012: 198-200). He had significant practical experience of adapting prose literature for the sound medium and had theorised about the relative merits of narrative voice and dialogic drama in published criticism of BBC programmes such as Louis MacNeice's *The Rescue*, in 1945 (ibid:104 and Crook 2015: 202-203). *Animal Farm* was written with an almost daily soap opera ritual of reading and listening with his wife Eileen when she was still producing *Kitchen Front* programmes for the BBC. This exchange operated like an active radio drama workshop as Eileen's Ministry of Food colleague Lettice Cooper recalled: 'He read it aloud to her every night in bed as he was writing it – the piece that he'd done that day. … And she used to tell us about it every morning, and she would quote bits out of it when we were having our coffee at Selfridge's across the road from the office' (Wadhams 184: 131).

Orwell's problem with his BBC adaptation was that his producer, Rayner Heppenstall, had no faith in the style of his narrative-linked script which he later described as having 'a certain lameness' (Orwell 1998: 122) and Orwell's biographer, Bernard Crick, described as 'a very stilted version' (Crick 1992: 493). When Heppenstall commissioned Orwell, he asked for 'as complete a dramatisation as possible, "with connecting narrative reduced to little more than statements of time and place"' (Orwell 1998: 118). Orwell resisted because, as he later wrote to Heppenstall: 'I must say I don't agree about there being too much narrator. If anything I thought there should have been more explanation' (ibid: 121). Heppenstall set about hacking at Orwell's radio drama script as though he were displacing revenge for his friend's previous 1935 attack on him with the shooting stick. Davison calculated that the producer excised 490 lines, 253 of which had been spoken by the narrator (ibid: 120). Davison observed: '…it is significant that the script was cut quite sharply to less than the full time allowed for the broadcast. About 150 lines more than necessary were cut' (ibid).

There is no evidence that Heppenstall had given his writer the courtesy of consultation. Rather, Heppenstall defied Orwell's artistic intention to add dialogic lines in his radio dramatisation that politically and artistically clarified a key turning point in his satire – the decision by the ascendant pigs, including Snowball, to appropriate the cow's milk and harvested apples. Daniel J. Leab, in *Orwell Subverted*, described this as censorship and as much of a perversion of the integrity of Orwell's original novel as the distortion

achieved in the notorious Halas and Batchelor cartoon released in 1954 that had been funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency (Leab 2007: 139). Demonstrating the skill of a radio playwright who could write realistic and effective dialogue, Orwell had added the following exchange:

> Clover: Do you think that is quite fair to appropriate the apples?
>
> Molly: What, keep all the apples for themselves?
>
> Muriel: Aren't we to have any?
>
> Cow: I thought they were going to be shared out equally. (Lines 259-262, Orwell 1998: 153).

Davison comments: 'The significance of these lines was lost on the BBC producer, Rayner Heppenstall' (Orwell 2001: 233). In fact, Heppenstall was so determined to prove his point about the alleged inadequacies of Orwell's adaptation that two years after his death, he commissioned Peter Duval Smith to write a version with minimal narrative engagement that he further revised for broadcast in 1957 (Crick 1992: 648, note 29). The *Observer*'s radio critic, Giles Romilly, thought the Duvall Smith/Heppenstall version was 'sensitive, respectful and just' (*Observer* 1952). But he did complain that, with so much more dialogue than the original book, it rendered the characterisation of Napoleon as 'too much of a stadium martinet: he lacked insinuation and would have been ousted by even the stupidest horse' (ibid). He also thought the script had 'cut away some of the hard political skin of its original' and 'regretted the absence of the cat, one of Orwell's most animal animals' (ibid).

In 2013, the award-winning BBC Radio Drama department director, Alison Hindell, produced a new dramatisation of *Animal Farm* from Orwell's original adaptation script. The success of the production vindicates Orwell's decision aesthetically to balance narration with dramatic dialogue in order to fuse his original political and artistic purposes. The 2013 BBC version cast a female-voiced narrator and demonstrated that the balance of telling and showing the story enabled the essential deployment of irony that lies at the heart of the fable. Having a voice outside the characters and dramatic action gives the listener and, indeed, the original reader the chance to appreciate the dislocation of knowledge and observation between the diegetic world of the characters and the non-diegetic world of the audience.

There is also the opportunity to point the audience to indirect focalised meaning when the narrator can describe in the third person some aspect of a dialogic character's interiority and point of view. The original 1947 Orwell scripted radio dramatisation had been a success. Despite the liberties in editing exercised by the producer, Orwell was able to report that his domestic listening

group at home in Canonbury Square, Islington, north London, 'all seemed to think it was good' (Orwell 1998: 120), and there had been good press notices. A critic and sinologist present grasped the intentions of the satire within the first few minutes. And the *Manchester Guardian*'s radio critic said the production had been splendid: 'One does not remember having heard a "fantasy" which took so strong a hold of the imagination' (*Manchester Guardian* 1947).

Orwell made the right decision not to adopt any of the animal characters as the omniscient narrative voice.[5] Orwell harnessed the potential of the effective double vision in animal allegory very effectively. As Ellen Leyburn argues, the form provides the writer with 'the power to keep his reader conscious simultaneously of the human traits satirized and of the animals as animals' (cited in Lee 1969: 107). If Benjamin had been the all-seeing, all-knowing narrator and audience confidante, the dramatisation would have lost the animal allegory's potential to prescribe 'two levels of perception which interact to purvey the irony in comparisons and contrasts' (ibid). Benjamin is the cynic of the farm and as Robert A. Lee observed: 'In his cynicism, Benjamin will come to see but be incapable of changing the reality of the revolution' (ibid: 111).

Foisting Benjamin with the function of narrative voice in a fable as subtle and politically allusive as *Animal Farm* would have also dissipated the integrity of his allegorical role. He would have had to have been more than the morose, pessimistic and indifferent bystander. Dramatisations of *Animal Farm* in other forms have lamentably failed to harness or express Orwell's aims and purposes. The 1954 Halas and Batchelor film not only substituted an alternative ending, but deracinated the animal characters of any human dialogue thus defeating the entire purpose of the original satirical fable (see Leab 2007). Peter Hall's 1984 theatrical dramatisation drained the original story of its exquisite irony, introducing an insipid and risible boy narrator who continually told the audience what it could already see. Hall's subversion of Benjamin's original characterisation with the ludicrous line: 'I shall protest. For the first time in my life I shall protest. (He confronts the PIGS.) You pigs have gone far enough' (Hall 1993: 59) before the sheep begin bleating 'Four legs good, two legs better!' defeats the entire purpose of developing Benjamin as the indifferent cynic who intervenes too late when his friend Boxer is about to be sent to his slaughter.

In the novel, Benjamin is first characterised by narrative description as 'the oldest animal on the farm, and the worst tempered' (Orwell 1998: 2). He was cynical, and never laughed because there was nothing to laugh at' (ibid). In the radio dramatisation, Orwell skilfully introduces the donkey's first vocalisation with the word: 'Fleas' in answer to Major's peroration on 'Tell me, comrades,

what is the worst enemy that we animals have to contend with?' (ibid: 128). This is an elegant characterisation of Benjamin's selfish preoccupation with using his tail to keep the fleas off him while the old Berkshire boar is trying to inculcate his animal comrades with the idea that their worst enemy is *Man*. Benjamin is developed as a character unimpressed with political change; even revolution: 'I think that donkeys live a long time' (ibid 135) and: 'Everything happens sooner or later. On the other hand nothing ever changes except names' (ibid: 136). He lives by the motto that he is a survivor because 'None of you has ever seen a dead donkey' (ibid).

WAS BENJAMIN ORWELL'S ALTER AGO?

As the revolution decays into gradual exploitation, dictatorship and disillusionment, Benjamin can only contribute cynical observations such as 'Quite a coincidence, is it not?' (ibid: 156), and: 'You know I never meddle in such matters' when he can read how 'animalist' commandments are changing. Moreover, he is convinced that the only reason donkeys live a long time is 'that they never talk politics' (ibid: 174). While the witty all-knowing cynicism of Benjamin could represent Orwell's personal bitter-sweet experience of the abuse of political power, Orwell cannot be dismissed as an apolitical bystander who intervened and protested too late. Orwell as an individual had the political courage to speak out even to the extent that it undermined his relationship with his first publisher Victor Gollancz and made him a hate figure for many on the political left. But it is the horror and carnage of the show trial confessions and bloody executions at Animal Farm where Benjamin is shown physically ineffectual and politically irresponsible. He becomes the time-honoured passive bystander keeping silent for his own survival and wellbeing. It is the Benjamins of this world that Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller addressed with his poem that started: 'First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Socialist' and ended: 'Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me' (Stein 2003: cover).

Orwell's characterisation raises a wider political metaphor about choice and the dilemma for Buridan's ass is, therefore, not hay or water but impartiality or activism. Orwell presents Benjamin as a symbol of political defeatism. The poetic and desperately pessimistic observation that 'things never had been, nor ever could be much better or much worse – hunger, hardship, and disappointment being, so he said, the unalterable law of life' (Orwell 1998: 87) is a complicity in the apolitical that will condemn him to tragedy and shatter his golden heart when the Pigs arrange for his devoted and broken friend Boxer to be converted into dog meat. His cry and call for action: 'Fools! Fools! Don't you see what is written on the side of that van?' (ibid: 180) is too late. The playful irony of animal fable darkens into the political tragedy and Orwellian 'heinous sin of irresponsible intelligence' (Lee 1969: 124). As Lee confirms: 'We

know too much about Orwell's social beliefs from other contexts to assume that Benjamin speaks for Orwell' (ibid) and all of Orwell's political writing and activism counter the posture of 'assuming that only the very worst is inevitable in life, that change for the better is a delusion, and that the only alternative is a retreat into a social self-pity' (ibid: 124-125).

Orwell acted and intervened. He was agitational when undercover with the poor and homeless, observing Lancashire miners and their work and fighting against Fascism in the Spanish civil war to the extent of taking a bullet in the neck. In his essay 'Inside the Whale' (1940) about the American novelist Henry Miller, he wrote: 'In the world of 1935 it was hardly possible to remain politically indifferent' (Shelden 1992: 239). He had been told by Miller that going to Spain was 'sheer stupidity' and had found the novelist's selfishness shamelessly irresponsible (ibid: 274), so much so that he would later characterise Miller's position 'as a "willing Jonah" comfortably riding out storms in the warm belly of the whale' (ibid: 275). Benjamin might live a long time, but his conscience will be forever troubled. Knowing without action is the delusion of the fool. Politically, *Animal Farm* is about a society that cannot control its own language and Orwell says it is 'doomed to be oppressed in terms which deny it the very most elemental aspects of humanity' (Lee 1969: 127). Benjamin understands, but raises the issue so late his intelligence only serves to write his own epitaph.

CONCLUSION: MUCH MORE THAN JUST A 'LITTLE BOOK'

Animal Farm is much more than Orwell's self-deprecating descriptions of it as his 'little book' (Orwell 2006: 110) or 'little squib' (Wadhams 1984: 111). The ironic ambiguities also meant, as William Empson warned, that it had a huge capacity for being misunderstood: 'It is a form that inherently means more than the author means, when it is handled sufficiently well' (cited in Crick 1992: 492). Orwell was so surprised that it was being placed in the children's section of bookstores, he patrolled them personally to reposition the title on its proper shelf (Rodden and Rossi 2012: 79). The Queen, though, was able to obtain a copy by sending her footman to an anarchist bookshop (ibid).

Orwell properly retained authorial narrative focalisation away from his characters in his prose and audio-dramatic forms. Giving Benjamin the centre of consciousness would have distorted the complexity of Orwell's many political and artistic purposes. As John Newsinger concludes, up until his death Orwell retained political hope of a third way independent of both Russia and America, despite a considerable pessimism about the future (Newsinger 1999: 153-154). Benjamin exists more powerfully as the witness who does not speak; a metaphor for the journalist who tells lies by omission and politicians in power who look away.

NOTES

[1] Orwell said in his 1947 essay/memoir 'Such, Such Were the Joys' that: 'Most of the good memories of my childhood, and up to the age of about twenty, are in some way connected with animals' (Orwell 1971c: 395-396)

[2] Bernard Crick was also impressed with how Orwell could fuse powerful sociological writing with animal metaphor. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell juxtaposed his memorable description of seeing from his train 'the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery' catching his eye with 'the most desolate, hopeless expression' he had ever seen with the image of two crows 'in a bare patch beside the line' courting and copulating (Crick 1992: 287)

[3] In 'Such, Such Were the Joys' Orwell describes the humiliating abuse of beatings he received while at St Cyprian's preparatory school in Eastbourne which began at the early age of eight over bed-wetting (Orwell 1971c: 379-384). It is also intriguing that he should observe approvingly later on in the essay that by 1947 'Beating, too, has become discredited, and has even been abandoned at many schools' (ibid 418)

[4] Crick has always been equivocal about whether 'Shooting the Elephant' was documentary truth or fiction (Crick 1992: 165-166). In a later revised edition of his biography he devoted several more pages of analysis to new research accounts continuing 'the elephant question' debate (ibid 586-589)

[5] I, however, was so convinced that Benjamin was the authorial voice or Orwell's alter ego that I decided to make the donkey the main narrative voice and point of view of a radio dramatisation for UK independent radio in 1988. My decision, I now realise, was creatively, artistically and politically flawed. I had been inspired by the ironic potential of a recording I had acquired of a donkey braying loudly. The sound seemed to symbolise an ambiguity of perception. I felt I could be listening to an agonising cry of deep existential despair, or ecstatic hilarity

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