

Beyond Satire: Richard Adams's *The Plague Dogs*

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In 1977 Richard Adams, the popular author of *Watership Down*, published his third novel, *The Plague Dogs*, which, although not so successful as his famous book on talking rabbits, soon became a well-known narrative among British and American readers.

Once more, with *The Plague Dogs* Adams shows that his is a continuous experimenting stance: after his novel about rabbit heroes and a second book with human protagonists living in an almost prehistoric civilization (*Shardik*, 1975), the popular English writer comes back to animal characters but with a different purpose in mind: *The Plague Dogs* is a socially committed novel where the unnecessary experiments which humans impose upon animals are under continuous attack. In order to fulfil his critical aim, Adams uses a number of technical devices which cover up a more profound level of the narrative: on the one hand, the novel presents a fierce satirical view of the scientists, politicians, and reporters; but, on the other, it is also the mythic tale of a hero's quest, that of Snitter and Rowf, the two dogs who, after having escaped from A.R.S.E. (Animal Research, Scientific and Experimental), try to find a proper master who may take care of them.

In order to develop the story along this double direction Adams makes extensive use of his omniscient narrator, a very playful and restless figure in the fashion of Tristram Shandy. At the same time, Richard Adams offers us the existence of two opposing worlds; the first is one of fantasy, inhabited by talking dogs who possess their own beliefs about life and have a world view which clashes with the human one. In some scenes of the book Adams satirizes different aspects of human society: realistic descriptions, parody, ironic comments, and names (Harbottle, Ann Mossity, Dr. Boycott, etc.) are elements which the author continuously uses to attack scientists, politicians, and newspapermen. Comments such as the following one are all too frequent in *The Plague Dogs* "and so [they] came to the pregnancy-testing unit, where the urine of young women was injected into mice, so that they (the young women, not the mice) might learn (by the reactions of the mice), a little earlier than they would otherwise have learned, whether they had been impregnated as well as imprudent, and incautious as well as incontinent."¹

Meanwhile in other scenes of the book and running parallel to Adam's criticism, Snitter and Rowf are party to an adventure which the narrator relates in a very different manner, aiming here to bring the reader closer to the animal protagonists. The scenes in which the narrator tells of the dogs' adventure are an adaptation of the popular motif of *the magic flight*² powerful forces (scientists and politicians) hunt the heroes thinking that they have contracted bubonic plague, and the dogs have to overcome a number of obstacles to avoid capture. However, since the story-teller wishes us to identify with Snitter and Rowf and their sufferings, he uses a device which had already proved very successful in *Watership Down*: the narrator shows the external world from a dog's point of view, working mainly through the most developed sense the animal has. Let us consider, for example, the way in which Snitter realizes that his friend's cage has been left open:

¹ Richard Adams, *The Plague Dogs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978) 31. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

² See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (2nd. ed., Bollingen Series XVII. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 196-207. Also Vladimir Propp, *Morfología del Cuento* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1974).

"nostrils, ears and eyes all continued to affirm nothing but what they had originally conveyed. First, he had perceived that the source of the tobacco smell left by Tyson's fingers . . . was in slight but unmistakable movement. . . . Next, his ears had caught the well-nigh inaudible, higher-than-bat's-pitch squeaking of the concentric hinges as they pivoted a quarter of an inch back and forth in the draught. Lastly, he had made out the moon-light moving on the wire as it might on a spider's web" (21).

All along the novel we find in Snitter a madness which has been provoked by surgical operation on his brain but we also find in the narrator a restlessness based on his satirical purpose. Lack of seriousness and an experimental stance come together in paragraphs such as the following one, in which the locomotive noise is simulated by the novelist's pen: "Rattle and bump and clanking of wheels and puff puff puff from somewhere in front. Coal smoke and steam blowing back through the sliding doors of the little carriage. Chatter of water and hollow rumble over a bridge and a peat-brown stream below" (420). However, despite his menippean attitude the narrator never mocks at the dogs. On the contrary, forcing the reader to perceive the world from the dogs' point of view the writer builds up a second, deeper level in *The Plague Dogs* which transcends his satirical criticism and involves us in the nature of the quest itself.

Adams is deeply influenced by Carl Jung,³ and in his third novel the reasons which force the reader to identify with the animal protagonists are more complex than they may seem. Very soon after having escaped, Rowf establishes a first contact with a supernatural element; he summons an inner force, an ancestral power which would help the dogs to become wild animals: "It was time through which they were moving; to a place where dogs knew of men that they were enemies, to beware, to outwit, to rob and kill" (72). From this instinctual phenomenon Snitter and Rowf will end up virtually as one single being; the brains of the little terrier combine with the strength of the large mongrel in their quest for survival. Soon after that a messenger from this ancestral force appears in the figure of Tod, the fox who talks in the almost cryptic Upper Tyneside dialect and whose mission is to teach the dogs how to survive. But Tod represents something deeper; he is the aid which comes from the dogs' collective unconscious, that force which Rowf summoned up by means of his spell. Tod is also haunted by the idea of the "Dark," to which he is bound to return and which anticipates the end of the dogs' adventure. At the same time, the fox explains to Snitter that a "dark blue" which they perceive one day in the distance is "the sea" (231), and from this moment onward the sea appears as a reiterative element in the story of the dogs. When they are pursued by the soldiers, Snitter and Rowf think that the sea is their only way to escape. According to Jung's theories, the sea is a universal symbol for the unconscious, that is to say, for life beyond conscience, and through Snitter's mind we start to guess the connections this concept has with death: "'Oh, yes,' answered Snitter, with a grisly pretence of jaunty carelessness. 'but why not wait a bit? There's a flood of sleep coming to cover the houses, you know. Blue and deep - a deep sleep. I'm calling it, actually. You see -' he stopped. 'What do you mean? You mean you can -?' 'Call it? Yes, I call it the sea. The tod told me. A deep-blue sleep'" (273). Snitter perceives the coming of that symbolic "deep-blue sleep" and, in effect, after being surrounded by the soldiers, the two dogs have no choice but to rush into the sea and the reader comes to the logical end of the novel: "Cold. Sinking. Bitter, choking dark" (438). They have come back to the sea, to the place from which they, and all existing creatures, were created, and the psychic--Jungian--adventure of Snitter and Rowf finishes here, in the return to the unconscious, to the source of life.

However, Adams also wanted to add a metafictional element in his novel and he offered a second, happy ending for the dogs' adventure: the animals are rescued from the sea by two naturalists who happened to be sailing at that moment. Nevertheless, the

³ See Francisco Collado Rodríguez, *Richard Adams, Novelist: Talking to the Author of "Watership Down"* (Zaragoza: Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad, 1986) 10-12.

narrator, quoting a phrase from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, suggests that the whole thing may be nothing but a dream (455), and this possibility arises again on the book's last page; men and dogs go away and the "incoming tide . . . flows up the beach and back, smoothing and at length obliterating the prints of Snitter and Rowf . . . beyond, the lake glimmers, a mere streak of grey between invisible shores." The waters sweep away the last remains of the story, the mythical shores also disappear when night, the Dark, comes.

Due to the technique of alternating scenes with a continuous shift from the dogs' adventure to the world of the humans and also to the double character, real and metaphysical, of Snitter and Rowf's quest, *The Plague Dogs* offers a clear example of the clash of two different worlds (the real vs. the ideal) characteristic of satiric fiction. However this clash of worlds functions in Adams's novel in a multiple way: first of all, the narrator's adoption of the dogs' viewpoint forces the reader to come closer to the fantasy world of the oppressed talking animals; the humans, on the contrary, are continually satirized by Adams's pen and therefore, as a result of the narrator's restless activity, the dogs end up as the most humane characters of the book, whereas newspapermen, politicians, and scientists, distorted by satire, appear as utterly ludicrous and evil. Furthermore, the Jungian novelist makes his dogs undergo a process of return to the "other world" symbolized by the sea; Snitter and Rowf's adventure follows the same stages which according to the well-known theories of Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, many a human hero has followed in tales and mythologies. Theirs is the internal path of the mind questing for the final answer of the Jungian integration of the personality through the energies of the unconscious.