

The Birth of Self and Society: The Language of the Unconscious in Richard Adams's *Watership Down*

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In Richard Adams's *Watership Down*,¹ a "family" of rabbits, suddenly and traumatically displaced from their homes by the development of the land, must search the surrounding countryside for a new "warren." In order to survive their democratic pilgrimage from innocence to experience, their mythic search for a brave new world, their initiation into humanhood, so to speak, the rabbits have to learn the signs and signifiers of humanity's world, the discourse of humanity's dealings. As a dynamic organism, the little band of rabbits grows in size and savvy, ultimately surviving through a combination of their innate instincts and the emerging self-knowledge derived from their anthropomorphic authorization. Adams's rabbits symbolize the individuation of the self as it attains actualization through language.

This thrilling adventure story of rabbits fighting for their survival corresponds to the dual quest of conscious beings for social and psychic identity within the cosmological scheme of things. During a seemingly peaceful late afternoon sil-flay (feeding), a little psychic rabbit named Fiver, upon seeing a sign that a real estate developer posted in the field, envisions the ground soaked with blood and warns Hazel, his older and larger friend, that imminent doom approaches. Although the signpost of man and its attendant horrific visions for Fiver prompt their flight, all those who leave the Sandleford warren are displeased and displaced and ready to leave regardless. A totalitarian state, Sandleford imposes its order and meaning upon everyone there. While it may have been designed to protect them from the dangers of man and elil (predators), the cloistered warren denies them freedom, free will, and the opportunity for self-fulfillment and self-consciousness. Their individuality is compacted in conformity. The only outlet for their repressed desires is Fiver, the voice of the unconscious. From the moment of Fiver's premonition, their innocence is permanently and irrevocably shattered. As in Yeats's "Second Coming," Fiver predicts that "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

Fiver signifies the id, the source of intuitive direction and psychic energy, Hazel the ego, and their union the symbolic representation of the emerging consciousness both of the individual and an organically natural, yet democratically free society. When Fiver tells him of the impending approach of man, Hazel overrules his own stubborn voice of reason, and listens to and believes his unconscious; nonetheless, his rational, egotistical Chief Rabbit has no faith in Fiver, in the unconscious, and perfunctorily dismisses them and their apocalyptic vision.

¹ Richard Adams (b. 1920) has written numerous novels including *Shardik* (1974), *The Plague Dogs* (1977), and *The Girl in a Swing* (1980); *Watership Down* (New York: MacMillan, 1972) was his first novel.

They are not without support, however, for the massive and strong Bigwig completes this psychic triad as the superego, their conscience, enforcer, and externalizer of standards and attitudes.

"The Owsla's privileges didn't mean all that much to me. Lettuce-stealing isn't my idea of a jolly life," says Bigwig (23). The true Emersonian transcendentalist, Bigwig does not capitulate to badges and dead institutions, instead adhering to the principle of self-reliance, the view that "a strong rabbit could always do just as well by leaving the warren" (23). One's conscience, it would appear, must be heard and heeded. Nonetheless, while all individuals in the maturation process must recognize and learn to assimilate their conscience with their developing ego, most experience an extended period of adjustment to their superego. Hazel is not initially receptive to the emergence of his conscience in the person of Bigwig. "It crossed his mind that although Bigwig would certainly be a useful rabbit in a tight corner, he would also be a difficult one to get on with. He certainly would not want to do what he was told—or even asked—by an outskirter," thinks Hazel (23).

Three rabbits in one, the psychic trinity—along with some assorted friends-as-philosophies—leaves the womblike warren to be born into the unknown darkness on its quest for unity and completion, both individually and as a society. In this act of self-creation, the rabbits structure themselves and their strategy of action through language, through Bakhtin's "dialogic." Concerning the polemical theory of language and consciousness, Bakhtin wrote that dialogue "is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already extant character of a person; rather, in dialogue individuals not only show themselves outwardly, they become for the first time that which they are, not only for others but for themselves as well. To be means to communicate dialogically."² The instinctive voice of desire, the unconscious Fiver, urges: "We ought to go at once," and Hazel, the leader, the emerging ego defining himself, agrees: "Yes, the time's come now, all right" (30). Adams informs us that his rabbits are like "primitive people" who "before [they] can act together, a kind of telepathic feeling has to flow through them and ripen to the point when they all know that they are ready to begin" (25). They have expressed themselves through their dialogic and now, as in the Emersonian sense the "currents of the universal being" pass through them, they organize their flight and leave the warren. In fact, Adams credits their behavior to "the current that flows (among creatures who think of themselves primarily as part of a group and only secondarily, if at all, as individuals) to fuse them together and impel them into action without conscious thought or will" (26). This language of their instincts creates them, for they do not exist independently outside the linguistic, social operations of their emergent dialogue. Their every exchange is constitutively intersubjective and dependent upon the aspirations of the others. Hazel thinks of himself as "the one—as a Chief Rabbit ought to be—through whom a strong feeling, latent throughout the warren, had come to the surface" (194). They are a "we," not an "I." A "we" motivated, impelled, indeed, defined by the inevitable urgency of their psychic birth.

² Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R.W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973) 47.

That psychic birth catalyzes in the moment of recognition that the powers of reason, as embodied by the Chief Rabbit, have proven inadequate to satisfy their dual sense of reality and self. As Morse Peckham notes in "Toward a Theory of Romanticism": "The truth can only be apprehended intuitively, imaginatively, spontaneously, with the whole personality, from the deep sources of the fountains that are within."³ The wellspring of that truth, the vehicle for their transportation toward it, and their epistemological orientation all find their adaptation in a philosophic transcendentalism with its organic roots in Romanticism. Having begun their night journey, the rabbits represent the cosmological shift from the Augustan/Newtonian configuration of world-as-machine to the Romantic/Darwinian configuration of world-as-organism. The drive toward self-creation becomes their will-to-power and generates their escape from inside the Sandleford warren, where law and reason reign, to outside, where the creative imagination will be their primary tool of survival. Their departure is, in fact, inevitable, for, as Michel Foucault has shown, the will to power is indelibly superimposed upon the will to knowledge. Posits Foucault, "if it is true that at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least in potential, a strategy of struggle."⁴ That struggle achieves a physical actualization at the moment of psychic birth when Bigwig attacks Holly. A clash of superegos, each represents his own group's conscience, each in charge of rewards and punishments, but Holly as the deterministic watchdog over the repressed unconscious and Bigwig as the emancipating force of free will to power.

Now, thrust into the unknown, they travel in the Imaginary state, through a landscape of objects and sounds for which they have no names, "doing everything that came unnaturally to them" (33). This forced adaptation actually parallels the same impersonal and invariable force of nature that dictates life's terms to all living organisms. As rabbits, their actions may be unnatural, but as emblems of an emerging consciousness and a developing society, their withdrawal and search, their journey from certainty to doubt, their necessary quicksilver shifts from evasiveness to inquisitiveness, the condensation of their time and the displacement of their space, mirror the process toward self-actualization that any individual psyche or group of human beings experience in questing for a harmonic gestalt.

After their birth into the unknown world of humankind, this psychic group of rabbits survives—just as every individual personality thrives or perishes—on the strength of their gestalt, on how cohesive their individual parts become. Their process of becoming is, as Gestalt theory teaches, phenomenological in that what they "see" is what appears to the seer rather than what may actually be there. For example, when they arrive at the river (that universal symbol of the unconscious), Adams tells us that "to the rabbits it seemed immense," though in reality it was only twelve to fifteen feet wide (39). Fiver desires and demands that they cross it. Bigwig, as the guiding conscience, scouts out the other side. But Hazel cannot make

³ Morse Peckham, "Toward a Theory of Romanticism," *PMLA* 66 (1951): 240.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in his *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed., H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982) 225.

sense of what they have to do, for neither Fiver nor Pipkin can swim. At this point, when the psyche is lost and groping for direction, philosophy comes to its aid in the person of Blackberry. He sees, lying on the bank of the river, "a piece of flat wood." Empirically, he perceives the wood to be an object, something physical. Phenomenologically, he sees it not simply as an object by itself but in terms of what it could become. Rationally and pragmatically, he reasons what use it could be put to. Through his philosophic powers, Blackberry conceives a plan for the wood in terms of its possibilities, even though "Hazel had no idea what he meant" (45). Thus, we have the tripartite division of personality at a loss without the final piece necessary to actualize the will to knowledge, to philosophy. Only through knowledge can the intelligent organism orient itself in time and space. For, as Morse Peckham notes, "The disparity between the orientation and the experience lies in the fact of our ignorance—a notion easily demonstrated—not in the fact that we are faced with a corrupt world. Man is naturally part of that order; the moral task is to restore his originally perfect adaptation by exploiting his civilization and knowledge. Since the natural order grants perfect adaptation, what has been lost through ignorance can be regained through knowledge."⁵

In the rabbits' case, as in man's case, life's journey becomes self-fulfilling. Throughout the entire novel, the rabbits as emerging psyche and society grow at once, paradoxically, more self-reliant and interrelated. They learn to identify the signs of man and to beware his *hrududil* (cars and trucks). They learn to trust their intuition—as Fiver's visions prove correct time and again. They learn to moderate the careless urges of their egos, as Hazel's stunt to single-handedly free the hutch rabbits teaches him not to be, as Fiver calls him, a "show-off" (212). They learn to trust and abide by their *superego*, as Bigwig's courage, integrity, and strength consistently emerge triumphant.

Perhaps the ultimate bridge to meaning between this rabbit tale and humanity's present position on earth rests in its symbolism. In Egyptian mythology, The Great Hare was considered the animal artificer of the world. In the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the hare is a determinative sign which defines the very concept of being. And in Chinese myth, the hare is symbolic of the Ying force in life.⁶ On this human-dominant earth, the Yang humans need the Ying animals to effect a balance or harmony. At the story's conclusion it is, after all, a female human, young Lucy, who rescues Hazel and returns him to the Down, thus completing the four-quarter structure of the novel which is so aptly represented by the sign of the compass rose on the dust jacket. That compass rose, with the four directions of NSEW intersecting at a shared center within its enclosing circle, "is symbolic of the final stage in the process of individuation . . . [when] all earthly desires (represented by . . . monsters and wild beasts) [such as the dog and Woundwort] have been eliminated for the sake of concentrating upon the achievement of Oneness and a vision of Paradise."⁷

Toward an appreciation of the role that language plays in the achievement of psychic oneness, let us recall Jacques Lacan's famous formulation that "the uncon-

⁵ Peckham 252.

⁶ J.F. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbolism*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971) 139.

⁷ Cirlot 128.

scious is structured like a language."⁸ Like a language, the unconscious is unstable, organic, always in the process of becoming. The formation is never complete, for each individual psyche instinctively desires to reproduce the process just as the rabbits' instinctive desire is for self-reproduction. Meaning, then, like psyches and societies, is endlessly displaced and continuously represented along the continuums of time and space.

Adams concludes his tale with these words: "Underground, the story continued" (472). The story always continues, for language is structured to forever represent the objectification and actualization of desire. Hazel has successfully assimilated his unconscious and his superego and thus has attained his fullest potential on Watership Down. Watership. A boat, a vehicle which carries its passengers across the river of unconsciousness to the safe shore of understanding.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 20.