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JOHN IRONS, WATERSHIP DOWN IN CONTEXT

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WATERSHIP DOWN in context
by
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This essay attempts to place a new best-seller, WATERSHIP DOWN by Richard Adams, in context, firstly by referring to the possibilities and limitations of using animals as protagonists as exemplified in the long tradition of animal stories, secondly by examining three predecessors to Adams' book, using the degree of humanisation found in each as a more accurate gauge of the nature and scope of Adams' contribution to the genre.

When *Penguin* books publish a book which has won both the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian award for children's fiction first as a *Puffin*, then also as a *Penguin*, then they know where the market lies. When *Watership Down* (1) then joins the best-seller list and stays there for six months, and already has begun to be translated (2), then the market can be said to be appreciative.

Why should an animal story, or, more precisely, the adventures of a group of rabbits, turn out to be a best-seller? That good animal stories often do is fact: *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) (3), *Tarka the Otter* (1927) (4), *Winnie the Pooh* (1926/8) are modern examples; *Æsop's fables* and *Reynard the Fox* historical examples. The latter were among the first books ever printed in Britain (1484, 1481 respectively), the only two which Locke without reservation could recommend for child consumption.

The answer has always been that animals in books are not simply what they appear to be. Authors have not, until *Black Beauty* appeared in 1877, been trying to portray animals as animals. Their attention has been focussed on the effects which can be gained by using animal rather than human protagonists. The original purpose was that of moral instruction and/or satire. [This tradition in English literature is continued in Mrs. Trimmer's robin family of the 1780–1820 moralist backlash period, and is also found in *Volpone* (names only) and in *Gulliver's Travels*,

book IV, where Swift reverses values to achieve his satire: here there is a polarisation of the rational (the supremely human characteristic) in the Houyhnhnms and of the bestial in the Yahoos, whom Gulliver, mistakenly, identifies with his own species.] Since one recognizably human characteristic (e.g. greed, cunning, pride, nobility) could be displayed in the behaviour of an animal, it was possible to show up human weaknesses, foibles, vices, or even virtues, in the interaction of animals, either in pairs, or in a cross-section of society. This method often enabled a disguised attack on contemporary society, where a direct attack might have led to unpleasant reprisals. Such tales go way back, to the *Pañcatantra* of India, to the *Anansi* of Africa and the West Indies. Mostly the animals behave as animals, since their symbolic function is clear from the outset; the author is free to play off two facets of his protagonists against each other: the impossibility for the reader of judging animals by exclusively human standards; the constant invitation to regard these animals as human types. This depriving the reader of a sure standard of judgment is often linked to the conflict which arises between two codes of behaviour — the animal and the human. If a fox kills a rabbit, for example, the reader will not see the animal as representing a human characteristic, but let a mouse reward a lion for an earlier act of clemency and the moral lesson will immediately be applied.

The kind of identification made by the reader is always linked to the author's view of animal vis à vis human behaviour. Should the author view human (here read: rational) behaviour as superior to animal (read: bestial), then he will avoid or tone down killings. If the symbolic level is absent this can weaken an animal story. Consider, for example, Egner's *Klatremus og de andre dyrene i Hakkebakkeskogen* (1953) (5), where by a democratic vote the animals reject their own code "That's how things have always been, animals eat each other and that's that." and adopt a non-aggression pact "All animals in the forest are henceforth to be friends and to refrain from eating each other. [...] Maybe it is tasty with a little meat once in a while, but it's perfectly possible to do without." (6)

Should the author view human (read: affected, unnatural) behaviour as inferior to animal (read: natural, innocent behaviour), then the result is often the creation of an animal world which

the author finds utopian (e.g. Kipling's wolf-pack in *The Jungle Books* (7), Grahame's leisured class in *The Wind in the Willows*. This Rousseauistic dream has its most eloquent spokesman in K. Grahame:

Every animal, by instinct, lives according to his own nature. Thereby he lives wisely, and betters the tradition of mankind. No animal is ever tempted to belie his nature. No animal, in other words, knows how to tell a lie. Every animal is honest. Every animal is straightforward. Every animal is true — and is, therefore, according to his nature, both beautiful and good. (8)

Should the author attempt to portray an animal, or animals, entirely on its/their own terms, then the human code of behaviour exists only as a shadow cast by the "otherness" of the animal code.

Göte Klingberg has rightly suspected that there are dangers inherent in the lumping together of all animal stories for children in one bracket, and has attempted to integrate such stories in his genre classification, although some are grouped together in a chapter called *Tales of humanised animals* (9). The danger inherent in Klingberg's method in this instance is that the inclusions and exclusions from such a chapter tend to seem arbitrary and to blur similarities which do exist between different animal stories. Included are *Black Beauty* (1877), *The Jungle Books* (1894/5), *The tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901) by Beatrix Potter, *The squirrel, the hare and the little grey rabbit* (1929) by Alison Uttley, excluded are (3) (*Tales of mythical worlds*), *Winnie the Pooh* (*Nonsense literature*) and *Tarka the Otter* (*Text-books*).

Another critic, John Rowe Townsend, would prefer to consider all these books under the unifying theme *articulate animals*, and examine the degree of humanisation present in each (10). This, I feel, can be a fruitful means of enquiry.

If one considers *Tarka the Otter* (which Townsend would, I suspect, call 1/10th humanised), *The Jungle Books* (half-humanised) and *The Wind in the Willows* (9/10ths humanised) as examples

of differing degrees of humanisation, then there seems to be most variation as regards: the means of communication between animals, the experiencing of emotion, group solidarity, an animal mythology, the presence of evil, and the attitude towards death.

The author of (1), Henry Williamson, wishes to observe accurately and portray truthfully — by which he means the scrupulous avoidance of attributing human characteristics to members of the animal world. He rejects the use of the first-person animal hero found in *Black Beauty* (since this implies a rational consciousness), and, for the same reason, any form of human speech. His animals communicate by means of differing forms of behaviour, often accompanied by cries: *yinny-yikker, tiss, ic-yang* are, for example, graphic representations of how an otter sounds when threatening another animal. Sometimes the author will explain the significance of such a cry (e.g.p.81), otherwise the context is to provide sufficient information as to the cry's import. Other cries are those of alarm (*iss-iss*), welcome (*hu-ee-ee-ic*) and a flute-like mating-call. This is the limit of an otter's verbal utterances. It is not all that can be said about animal language however. Williamson does at four points in the book imply that there is an animal language which has a semantic content, thrice in dealing with the significance of names — Tarka (*little water-wanderer*, or, *wandering as water* [p.22]), Babu (*terrible* [p.104]), the fox called fang-over-lip — and once in his interpretation of the cry *iss-iss-ic-yang* (an old weasel threat: Go away, or I will drink your blood! [p.361]). Further, it is not possible to avoid the naming of emotions when describing animals. Williamson manages to restrict himself to using words like: gladdened, delight, overjoyed, boisterous with joy, instant joy, and to stressing the spontaneous nature of these emotions when compared with man's mode of reacting to his environment: "as in all wild animals, his emotions were as intense as they were quick" (p.88), "how was he [the farmer] , his natural senses dulled by civilization, to have known that" (p.122). The animals' world is cruel but not evil; the animals kill frequently and Williamson neither shrinks from nor overemphasizes these killings (e.g.pp. 17, 34, 49, 87). Otters after all *do* crunch fish-heads and drink the hot blood of their prey. But the author does not introduce the concept of sadism or evil in these killings; this is reserved for the killing of animals by humans:

Weakened by starvation, she was not able to fight for long, and as the farmer said afterwards, it was not even necessary to waste a cartridge, when a dung-fork could pin her down and a ferreting bar break her head (p.121)

or the punishment of animal behaviour which the human master cannot understand. The farmer's dog, for example, is "kicked in the ribs", "banged on the head with the stag's horn handle of a hunting whip", "flogged with its head wedged in the door" for barking at the otter outside the house at night.

This might seem to imply a lack of objective portrayal, but in fact the author strives to give a balanced picture of the human world, with a kind man returning an otter-cub to the litter, and playing a flute to calm the mother, and by contrasting certain farmers who are indiscriminate killers with certain landowners who seek to protect the animals. At this point (p.163) Williamson cannot resist the temptation to flay the inhuman humans:

For the animal they [i.e.the farmers] hunt to kill in its season, or those other animals or birds they cause to be destroyed for the continuance of their pleasure in sport — which they believe to be natural — they have no pity; and since they lack this incipient human instinct, they misunderstand and deride it in others. Pity acts through the imagination, the higher light of the world, and imagination arises from the world of things, as a rainbow from the sun. (p.163)

The family life of otters is with one exception never sentimentalized (Tarka is said to be 'in love' with White-tip [p.88]). A mother will forget the existence of a lost cub after one day (p.64); will stand by and see her male-offspring attacked as rivals by a potential mate (p.82); Tarka's new 'mother' takes him for her new mate (p.90). Group solidarity is kept down to its natural level.

Finally, there is no mythology — the otters are not myth-makers, as are primitive peoples, but simply creatures that have evolved. The author contents himself with giving us their evolution (pp. 31–2) and this then explains why the otters have to conquer

their fear of the water (pp.32–3) and why they seek land when death is imminent (p. 235).

Kipling, in the Mowgli stories of (2), despite a similarly accurate portrayal of the physical conditions of life in the jungle for certain animals, has largely replaced the animal psyche and code of behaviour with a human one. There is animal speech which is apparently a *lingua franca*, though differing from that of humans (Mowgli has to learn human speech — he is, of course, an excellent linguist [(2, II) p.61]); there is an organisation of jungle life according to a law (the Law of the Jungle), accepted by all except the monkeys, the *bandar-log*, who are social outcasts. This Law, the oldest in the world, has through time evolved into something almost perfect (II, p.7), never ordering anything without good reason (II, p.11). It is based on the differing roles and needs of the jungle's inhabitants, and its aim is the common good, which in Kipling's case turns out to be the maintenance of the *status quo*, the preservation of a hierarchy, where the strong, especially the aged—strong, take pride of place. Thus Hathi, the oldest of the elephants, is Master of the Jungle (II, p.15), it is to him that Baloo must go to learn the Master—Words (p.34), which give immunity among strangers or enemies. This Law operates across natural boundaries and is at its strongest among the wolves, who, when under a good leader, show an unnatural (?) degree of social cohesion and adherence to discipline. Their central tenet is this:

Ye may kill for yourselves, and your mates, and your cubs as they need, and ye can;

But kill not for pleasure of killings, and *seven times never kill Man*. (II, p.25)

This is also a general tenet and may serve as an example of how Kipling operates in terms of humanisation. The Law "forbids every beast to eat Man, except when he is killing to show his children how to kill" (p.11). Kipling, who is always ready to point out the common sense of the Law (e.g. "if you think for minute, you can see that this must be so" [p.15]), makes here an important distinction:

The real reason for this is that man—killing means, sooner or later, the arrival of white men on elephants, with guns, and hundreds of brown men with gongs and rockets and torches. Then everybody in the Jungle suffers. The reason the beasts give among themselves is that Man is the weakest and most defenceless of all living things, and it is *unsportsmanlike* to touch him. (p.11; my italics)

This concept of 'unsportsmanlike' (also used on p.73) is alien to animals, as are marriage (p.14), murder (p.15), politeness (p.31), love (p.43), humility and vanity (p.43). Neither do animals form friendships across natural boundaries as Kipling's animals do. Further there is a whole chapter devoted to a narration, with animals as protagonists, of the Fall, and a creation myth, which has an almost exact parallel in *Watership Down*:

In the beginning of the Jungle, and none know when that was, we of the Jungle walked together, having no fear of one another. [.....] And the Lord of the Jungle was Tha, the First of the Elephants. He drew the Jungle out of deep waters with his trunk; and where he made furrows in the ground with his tusks, there the rivers ran; and where he struck with his foot, there rose ponds of good water; and when he blew through his trunk, — thus, — the trees fell. (II, p.16)

Kipling portrays the top animals adhering to a code which is not unlike a Victorian upper—class morality. Mowgli is given a private tutor, who inculcates this code, and, should Mowgli slip, gives him six of the best (p.56), this being defended à la Thomas Hughes (11) by the 'short sharp shock' argument ("One of the beauties of Jungle Law is that punishment settles all scores. There is no nagging afterwards." (p.57). The strict discipline of Jungle Law is held up by Kipling for our admiration, especially since the *bandar-log*, who flout it, are shown to be beneath contempt, "vain, foolish and chattering". The code of Men (N.B.Indians) is almost entirely negatively portrayed — seek your own good, even to the detriment of your neighbour. (Only Mowgli's foster—parents stand out against this code.) Thus they are shown as being inferior to the animals who keep the Jungle Law, equal only to the *bandar-log*. "Men are blood—brothers of the *bandar-log*" concludes Mowgli (II, p.55).

Why should Kipling give us such a biased portrayal of humans and such an idealized and humanised picture of animal life in the jungle? Part of the answer is probably to put forward a possible human code, a static hierarchical set of values. This many critics suspect. But also, perhaps, to strengthen the central theme of the book — the uncertainty in Mowgli's heart as to where his true allegiance lies.

The animals are right in rejecting Mowgli, since he undermines Jungle Law. His means of gaining acceptance and eventual mastery (II, p.97) are non-animal, he uses his power to force all animals to lower their eyes, he uses fire, he uses knowledge gained from humans (e.g. about Hathi's past). Bagheera is forced to conclude to Baloo "there is more in the Jungle now than Jungle Law" (II, p.47). Mowgli upsets the balance, he is not *primus inter pares*, as was Hathi, but of a different kind.

Bagheera (p.21) and Akela (II, p.164) sense that Mowgli must finally return to the world of men and Mowgli, for all his hatred of men, senses that the pull is stronger than he would like to admit. He shows mercy for the kindness shown him by Messua (p.75), he finds himself unable to take human life (II, p.62). His hatred is linked to the fact that men, Indians at least, represent all that the Jungle Law abhors: "They are idle, senseless, and cruel; they play with their mouths, and they do not kill the weaker for food, but for sport." (II, p.64)

What answer is there to Mowgli's dilemma of the two Mowglis? Kipling himself supplies it. Mowgli finally leaves the jungle at the age of seventeen. This is probably linked to his (unconscious) longing for a mate — though of course Kipling would never have expressed this directly; even his she-wolves tend to be mother-figures rather than sex-objects. All we are told in (2) is that "years afterwards he became a man and married. But that is a story for grown-ups" (p.76). Fortunately, Kipling wrote that story. It is called *In the Rukh* and first appeared in 1893 (12).

Here Mowgli emerges from the forest, garlanded, like a wood-god, finally to accept Government service under Gisborne of the Woods and Forests. The White Man's code, as exemplified by Gisborne, and by his boss, Muller, provides the home Mowgli

is looking for — together with the daughter of Gisborne's fat Mohammedan servant. To Gisborne Mowgli seems to have magical powers over animals, to the experienced Muller he is a miracle:

Dis man haf lived, and he is an anachronism, for he is before der Iron Age, and der Stone Age. Look here, he is at der beginnings of der history of man — Adam in der Garden, und now we want only an Eva! No! He is older than dot child-tale, shust as der *rukh* is older dan der gods. (13)

Mowgli is pre-Fall, from a world which knows no evil. This contrasts with the humanised animals' own mythology.

The greatest difference between the two books now outlined and (3) is that the animal/human tension has entirely disappeared in Grahame's book. We are shown but one world, where animals and humans talk the same language, eat the same sort of food, wear the same sort of clothes, carry if necessary the same sort of weapons, use the same sort of money. The world is, then, an enclosed reality, utterly different from our world, and, since a form of society portrayed in it is obviously idealized, Klingberg would call it a tale of a mythical world. Within this world various forms of existence are portrayed and these are clearly linked to geographical *milieux*. Besides life underground, there is life on the river bank, life in the Wild Wood and life in the Wide World (p.16). The river has a symbolic function — it can tell of Life; for the wind plays a song of Life in the reeds (the original title was *The wind in the reeds*), the echo of Pan's song can be heard, to be lost again in oblivion, so that the listener can re-adapt to an imperfect world (p.141). Men either live far from the river, or are impervious to the message it brings (e.g. the bargewoman). This clearly relates to the superiority of the animals over humans evident in the earlier Grahame quotation.

It is, however, to the different *social milieux* that the critics have paid most attention. The animals who live by the river bank lead a life independent of toil — the 'good things in life' can be purchased with money. This group, with its unnatural friendship

of a toad, a water-rat, a badger and subsequently a mole, is typified by its class solidarity. This extends from helping a friend in need to the use of force, either for legitimate ends (the recapture of Toad Hall) or for the subduing of Toad, the bringing into line of a member who is 'letting the side down'. From the moral persuasion used on Toad it is clear that, as far as the group is concerned, Toad's crime is not so much that of squandering his money, or of risking the lives of himself and others, as of risking ridicule for the group from other animals outside the group:

you're getting us animals a bad name (.....). Independence is all very well, but we animals never allow our friends to make fools of themselves beyond a certain limit; and that limit you've reached. (p.112)

the thing had to be done. This good fellow has got to live here, and hold his own, and be respected. Would you have him a common laughing-stock, mocked and jeered at by stoats and weasels? (p.251)

At all costs the group's standing in the animal world must be maintained. It is clearly being threatened by the stoats and the weasels of the Wild Wood, who may be typified by their lack of social cohesion and mutual trust (p.244). However, if we interpret the animals as an upper-class reactionary group threatened by a restless up-and-coming middle-class nouveau riche (or even, perhaps, a proletariat, if one is to judge from their accent) then we over-simplify. The animals of the Wild Wood are not all bad, just less reliable (pp.16, 81). Such an interpretation also fails to take the humans into account. The humans we see, (apart from those who take part in the satirical picture of justice at Toad's trial), are a pretty average lot, some showing kindness, others not. They are even sentimentalized in their pre-Christmas homes (chapter five). Their function is not to serve as a contrast in terms of conflicting codes of behaviour; they simply co-exist with the animals. What could be of importance is that they represent a transient, nomadic form of existence, whereas the animal kingdom is permanent:

People come — they stay for a while, they flourish, they build — and they go. It is their way. But we remain.(p.80)

But Nature is not in the raw, tooth-and-claw. There are no killings in the book, just a little cudgelling and fisticuffs.

Grahame's real contribution to the animal story is in his character-studies. Consider the central group. Badger and Mole value the peace and security, the guaranteed predictable way of living found underground; but there is a basic difference between them. Mole is a character who leaves this world in search of a different style of living, returning to it only when he feels the need of a sheet-anchor; Badger leaves only when some danger is threatening the values he holds to be sacred, and he leaves to return as soon as that threat has effectively been dealt with. Mole is dynamic — we see him *acquiring* certain insights in his quest for self-realization; Badger is static — we see him *exercising* those qualities which he has from the outset of the book. Mole is an individual, and stands for himself only; Badger is a type, even an archetype (see C.S. Lewis' remarks below) and can be interpreted symbolically.

There is a similar basic difference between Water Rat and Toad. Water Rat is also on some sort of quest as a poet and it is he who comes nearest to some eternal truth (chapter seven), Toad is static, his personality is fully developed from the start.

Water Rat and Mole develop as individuals, they discover the true value of their tried and trusted way of existence, but with now a new dimension or perspective. Toad fools all the others, but is the lovable hero, and joins the numerous ranks of the outwitters, those animals who, although mischievous tricksters, remain true to themselves. Thereby he conforms to Grahame's earlier claim.

Badger is, according to C. S. Lewis, yet more:

that extraordinary amalgam of high rank, coarse manners, gruffness, shyness and goodness. The child who has once met Mr. Badger has ever afterwards in its bones a knowledge of humanity and of English social history which it could not get in any other way. (14)

If you can accept this, then the perspective can be widened even further, for Lewis claims:

I believe these [i.e. giants, dwarfs and talking beasts who act humanly] to be at least (for they may have many other sources of power and beauty) an admirable hieroglyphic which conveys psychology, types of character, more briefly than novelistic presentation and to readers whom novelistic presentation could not yet reach. (15)

This provides us with a link to tales of mythical worlds, enclosed 'other' realities such as those of Tolkien and Tove Jansson.

Adams' book *Watership Down* has a superficial resemblance to Williamson's: all rabbit behaviour (customs, habits, rites, etc.) is based on observations made by the naturalist R.M. Lockley, acknowledged by Adams as his source of knowledge. There is a real identifiable geographical milieu, with maps provided (as in the latest editions of (1)). But here the resemblance ends. Lockley's information serves only as a point of departure; while adhering to observable behaviour, Adams tells an adventure story with animals which are part-human. It is my purpose to ascertain the degree of humanisation and to assess the implications and advantages of Adams' method.

The rabbits not only have their own language, with rabbit terms used liberally in the text (e.g. *silflay*, *fu inlé*, *hrair*, *hraka*), but have a sophisticated feeling for language. They have proverbs (pp.123, 186), lampoons (p.53), and spontaneous group-quotations (pp.27, 263, 294, 392, 472); they are even capable of lyrical poetry (N.B. this is only found in the two other rabbit societies portrayed). Rabbit language is different from other animal languages, but a *lingua franca* exists, a form of hedgerow patois, which enables the rabbits to converse with mice and Kehaar, the gull, (pp.153, 189) albeit brokenly, since Adams registers non-standard lapine language by heavy foreign accents: the mice speak Italian-style ("Is a good a days, a hot a days. You like? Plenty for eata, keepa warm is a no trouble." [p.411]), Kehaar German-style (Kehaar to Bigwig: "You like, Meester Pigwig? I pring you nice liddle pit, ya?" [p.265]).

The animals have an almost human range of emotions. For example, Hazel is "frenzied with distress" (p.120), Holly "was crying uncontrollably" (p.148); laughter, however, is unnatural to them (p.90). Adams stresses, like Williamson, that emotions are more spontaneous and direct than for humans. He takes this one stage further and likens animal feelings in their directness to those of primitive humans:

Yet, as with primitive humans, the very strength and vividness of their sympathy brought with it true release. Their feelings were not false or assumed. (p.169)

Another link with primitive peoples is the clearly defined roles of the various rabbits in the group. They appear as types: Hazel is the reluctant-hero leader (characterized by courage, mischief and diplomacy), Fiver the seer, Dandelion the story-teller, Bigwig the impulsive warrior, Bluebell the jester, Blackberry the thinker. Adams uses similar terms himself "a seer or instinctive rabbit" (p.17), "a good story-teller" (p.17), "Bigwig's strength, Fiver's insight, Blackberry's wits, Hazel's authority" (p.131).

But the most important link is that there is a pre-Fall, amoral, quality about primitive peoples which distinguishes them and animals from civilised man, and the central issue of (4), as of (2), is the clash between a pre-Fall and a post-Fall code of behaviour.

Adams stresses the similarity between rabbits and primitive peoples (e.g. pp.28, 169, 326 [the will to die, similar to that of the Australian aborigines]) and the dissimilarity between rabbits and civilised man (e.g. pp.55, 115):

He (Strawberry) spoke very well about the decency and comradeship natural to animals. "Animals don't behave like men", he said. "If they have to fight, they fight; and if they have to kill, they kill. But they don't sit down and set their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them. They have dignity and animality". (p.245)

The above quotation indicates where the dissimilarity lies. Man is not simply the destroyer of the countryside (p.138), he is the indiscriminate master of the environment — which includes the animal kingdom. He can sadistically and methodically plan destruction. It is, however, left open in (4) whether man in his present state is evil, or indifferent; what is clear is that he is 'other', his code of behaviour violates the animal code:

[Fiver] "There's terrible evil in the world."

"It comes from men (said Holly). All other elil [i.e. animals hostile to rabbits] do what they have to do and Frith [i.e. the creator of the world] moves them as he moves us. They live on the earth and they need food. Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals." (p.159)

Bluebell had been saying that he knew the men hated us for raiding their crops and gardens and Toadflax answered. "That wasn't why they destroyed the warren. It was just because we were in their way. They killed us to suit themselves." (p.165)

The animal code has its roots in an oral story-telling tradition which the rabbits have handed down unchanged from one generation to another:

"Our stories haven't changed in generations, you know. After all, we haven't changed ourselves. Our lives have been the same as our fathers' and their fathers' before them." (p.111)

Over ten per cent of the entire text is exclusively devoted to this rabbit mythology, which gives vital insight into the rabbit psyche.

The first story is that of the creation, where Adams' description resembles Kipling's, both in the manner of creation and in the mutual friendship which first existed:

"Long ago, Frith made the world. He made all the stars too and the world is one of the stars. He made them by scattering his droppings over the sky and this is why the grass and the trees grow so thick on the world. Frith makes the brooks flow. They follow him as he goes through the sky and when he leaves the sky they look for him all night. Frith made all the animals and birds, but when he first made them they were all the same. The sparrow and the kestrel were friends and they both ate seeds and flies. And the fox and the rabbit were friends and they both ate grass. And there was plenty of grass and plenty of flies, because the world was new and Frith shone down bright and warm all day." (p.37)

Among those first animals was Elil—Hrair—Rah, or El—ahrairah (the Prince of a Thousand Enemies). This first leader disobeyed Frith's command to curb the expansion of the rabbit population and so Frith took his revenge by granting a gift to the animals, giving to many the desire to hunt and kill rabbits (hence El—ahrairah's name). But in his mercy Frith also had a gift for El—ahrairah: "Be cunning and full of tricks and your people will never be destroyed" (p.40)

Thus El—ahrairah is the father of tricksters. He is what Robin Hood is to the English, John Henry to the American Negroes (p.35). Adams links him twice to another lapine hero, Brer Rabbit, who in Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus; His Songs and his Sayings* (1881) is shown constantly outwitting Brer Fox (pp.35, 463). The rabbits "rest secure upon Frith's promise to El—ahrairah" (p.169), for the latter has passed on his gift to all succeeding generations of rabbits:

(.....) from that day to this, no power on earth can keep a rabbit out of a vegetable garden, for El—ahrairah prompts them with a thousand tricks, the best in the world. (p.110)

This trait is found even in the 'bunny branch' of lapine literature, in A. Uttley, and in B. Potter — to the constant discomfort of Mr. MacGregor the gardener.

"Rabbits will always need tricks", says Buckthorn (p.111), but trickery is not simply a gift as far as the rabbits are concerned, it is a way of life. It is proof of one's 'rabbitness' that one's response to a threat or a challenge is to find a means of outwitting one's enemy; it is a test whereby the rabbit can be sure that he is remaining true to his own nature. Throughout the book Hazel and his followers are faced with the problem of adapting to the demands of a new situation or environment whilst remaining true to themselves. What Adams does, with great skill, is to show us the response made by a pre-Fall group of rabbits to two false societies, one of which is dominated by a totalitarian dictator, Woundwort, the other of which has, to use human terminology, sold its soul to the devil.

Woundwort is unnatural in his lust for domination and his crushing of individual freedom in the name of collective security:

When he had explored the limits of his own strength, he set to work to satisfy his longing for still more power in the only possible way — by increasing the power of the rabbits about him. (p.311)

He builds up the machinery of a totalitarian state in a fashion reminiscent of Napoleon in *Animal Farm*. His final absorption into rabbit mythology as first cousin to the Black Rabbit (p.477) stresses his unnaturalness — for the Black Rabbit is the inexorable henchman of Lord Frith, instigator of those deaths which must be:

"Now as you all know, the Black Rabbit of Inlé is fear and everlasting darkness. He *is* a rabbit, but he is that cold, bad dream from which we can only entreat Lord Frith to save us today and tomorrow." (p.275)

Cowslip and his society are not so much unnatural as rabbits who have betrayed their true nature. They have made a deal with Death (in the form of a farmer who is free to set his snares around their warren), have become spoiled decadents, given to dancing movements, visual art, and fatalistic poetry. They have rejected trickery and instead advocate for rabbits "dignity and above all, the will to accept their fate" (p.111). This betrayal

of their true nature is further exemplified in their lack of a leader — for the leader takes over the protective role which El-ahrairah had over his people: "for a Chief Rabbit must be El-ahrairah to his warren and keep them from death" (p.126).

What Adams has been able to do by his use of rabbits is to show us three codes of behaviour other than those of the humans in his book: that of rabbits which remain true to their (pre-Fall) nature; that of a leaderless warren of rabbits that have betrayed their true nature; that of an unnatural leader. I cannot conceive how this could have been done in any other way than by using animals, animals sufficiently humanised to be capable of interpreting their own nature, existence and death in terms of myth. Most impressive of all, Adams has given the animal story a new dimension in the creation of Fiver, who, like El-ahrairah, can pass between this world and the 'other' realm of myth, who asks the others "Where are we really — there or here?" (p.255), who delivers them from evil and helps them reach the Promised Land.

john irons, august 1975.

NOTES

1. R. Adams, *Watership Down*, Penguin 1975, now referred to as (4). All page references are to this edition.
2. Into Danish with the title *Kaninbjerget*, into Swedish with a title less enigmatic than the English, though perhaps slightly misleading: *Den långa flykten*.
3. K. Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, Methuen paperbacks 1968, now referred to as (3). All page references are to this edition.
4. H. Williamson, *Tarka the Otter*, Puffin 1971, now referred to as (1). All page references are to this edition.
5. T. Egner, *Klatremus og de andre dyrene i Hakkebakkeskogen*, Grøndahl & Søn 1971.
(Klatremus and the other animals in Hakkebakkeskogen).
6. T. Egner, op. cit., p. 46: 'sånn har det vært bestandig, man spiser hverandre og så ferdig med det!' 'heretter skal alle dyrene i skogen være venner og ikke spise hverandre (.....) Det smaker kanskje bra med litt kjøttmat en gang iblant, men man kan utmerket godt klare seg uten'. (pp.60-1)
My translation into English. (J I)
7. R. Kipling, *The Jungle Book, The Second Jungle Book, Papermac* 1968, now referred to as (2,I) and (2,II). All page references are to this edition.
8. Ed. Meigs, Eaton, Nesbitt, Viguers, *A critical history of Children's Literature*, Toronto 1969, pp.328-9.
9. *Barn- och ungdomslitteraturen*, Stockholm 1970, pp.151-7.
10. *Written for Children*, London 1965, pp.88-96. In the new enlarged edition of this book now available, published by Kestrel Books, 1974, the following fractions are omitted, See p.128.

11. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*.
12. *In the Rukh*, contained in *Many Inventions*, Rudyard Kipling The Centenary Edition, Macmillan 1949.
13. *In the Rukh*, op.cit., pp.229-30.
14. Ed. Egoff, Stubbs, Ashley, *Only connect: readings on children's literature*, OUP 1969, p.212.
15. *Only connect*, op. cit., pp.212-3.