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FROM TRUMP TO MANGY-DOG: NOTES ON BEASTS, HUMANS AND OTHER (IN)VERSIONS

Nazir Ahmed Can



The exploitation of difference through law, science or art has long been one of the safest ways to exercise oppression. Penetrating daily life to the extent that it can seem spontaneous, this practice produces a “structure of feeling” (1) whose effects are perverse and enduring. With the rewriting of old rules and the creation of new ones, we are seeing today the resurrection of the space of exception in the form of the “camp”, as well as other liquid and mobile spaces that we could call “concentration seas”. New walls are being built (2) on top of which sit leaders observing the continued agony of suffering people with no legal or political power. Confined to unfamiliar territories or stuck in uncertain processes of movement, the various “others” of our contemporary moment experience not only stigmatization, but explicit threat. Among the technologies which ensure these people’s status as abject, animalization is one of the most effective. Thanks to some in power, and with the complacency of others - including international organizations who should mediate conflicts and resist combat attacks on human rights - the situation in the 21st century is only getting worse.

Donald Trump is President of the country which has, in the past few decades, most frequently invaded foreign territories. He is proud of his government’s policies: “You can’t believe how bad some of these people are [...] they’re not people, they’re animals”. The images of the children of immigrants locked in cages in North American airports are familiar. In Brazil, the highest authority of the Republic recently compared indigenous peoples with animals in zoos. Adopting the classical *ethos* of the liberator, in the no less classical manner of someone entirely uninvited to liberate, Jair Bolsonaro argued in 2019, in his first speech at the UN, that some organizations turn the Indian into a “caveman”, and that he, the President, would put an end to that. Also in Brazil, Wilson Witzel has defended the “slaughter” of people who disturb the peace in the State of Rio de Janeiro. To leave no doubt as to the target of his words, the Governor accompanied a Civil Police operation and recorded a video from a helicopter flying over a favela and gunning people down from the air in Angra dos Reis. “We will put an end to banditry”, he said.

In 2016, Binyamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, asserted his country’s willingness to “surround the whole country with a fence” to protect it from “wild beasts”. Roszque, in Hungary, became notorious when, in 2015, 150 refugees fought over bread that was thrown into a fenced area where they were being held waiting for food. Because they were “unable to form orderly queues”, a local official explained, they were attacked with tear gas and jets of water. In Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos, refugees protested in October 2019 against the filthy conditions to which they were subjected in what is now the largest camp in Europe. According to media reports, approximately thirteen thousand people now live in a space that was designed to host three thousand. “Only animals are treated like this”, said one of the protesters. Going back to the beginning of the century, Boris Johnson wrote that “if gay



marriage was OK – and I was uncertain on the issue – then I saw no reason in principle why a union should not be consecrated between three men, as well as two men, or indeed three men and a dog” (3). These are just a few examples of an endlessly renewed practice: the animalization of the enemy. Enemies are constantly reinvented according to contexts, protagonists and interests. It would be disingenuous, therefore, to locate the inspiration for this only in the 20th century, in the figure of the *untermensch*, the sub-human imagined by German fascism. The animal metaphor that underpins racial supremacy has functioned as a filter for alterity in all eras. It is persistently re-enacted by public figures who draw on a long-standing and contiguous populist ideology (4).

The literary field, naturally, has also been affected by a way of seeing the world as a hierarchy between human beings and all other species. The opposition between Greeks (civilized) and barbarians (animalized) is obsessively repeated in Ancient Greek texts, just as the division between “us” and “them” characterizes many pre-modern artistic periods and forms. But such a separation acquired structural form when the process of Western expansionism begins. In this continuing context, during which narratives of colonization and travel began to emerge, we can highlight the importance of Joseph Conrad’s work. *The Heart of Darkness* is possibly the most important novel in this field. It has played a role in forming readers and writers across the world since its publication in 1902 (5). It is notable for its formal cohesion, its ambiguous veiling and unveiling of meanings, its effective elision of narrative unity and the narrative voice’s fragmentation, its unusual hero and unusual territory, and its vacillating indistinction as it moves through direct, indirect and free indirect discourse. The novel opened up new paths for Western literature. As well as these elements, the novel possesses a trope of irony that scrutinizes, among other things, the European presence on the African continent. Perhaps for these reasons– contrary to Edward Said’s (6) and Chinua Achebe’s (7) interpretations - Conrad is still read today as a leading anti-colonial writer. However, such an analysis ignores at least two aspects: the general tendency of Conrad’s literary project, that openly cooperated with the expansionist project; and the novel itself, which is in many ways so unbalanced.

Firstly, *The Heart of Darkness*’s irony in relation to the European occupation of the Congo - itself reduced to the “heart” (that is, the centre) “of darkness” (that is, Africa) – is directed fundamentally at other Europeans. Its main targets are the Belgians who represent the policy of Leopold II (“They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force–nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others”, p.28), the French (“In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop,



would go one of the six-inch guns” p.49), Company men from various countries (“to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe”, p.66), the Danish (“he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly” p.30-31) and other European travellers and businessmen who, like Kurtz, represent the dark side of the endeavour. We are given to understand that, for Conrad, the British empire is, after all, the best of a bad lot.

Yet only Western people are granted a dimension of humanity. That humanity can be degraded through contact with the “savage” continent, or extended through travel. Africans, without exception, are depicted only to confirm the unavoidable savagery of their blasted continent. In this way the local population is read reductively, and their physical and socio-cultural difference is invariably inscribed through the metaphor of bestiality. For instance: “While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone” (p.45); “That fool-helmsman, his hands on the spokes, was lifting his knees high, stamping his feet, champing his mouth, like a reined-in horse” (p.88-89); “A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns—antelope horns, I think—on its head” (p.121).

Some might say that Conrad’s transgressive genius lies exactly in this: the construction of a narrative in which the imagination of the author functions as the inverse of what the characters and narrators say. But, if that were to be the case, we would need to find a (single) textual indication of this horizon of possibility. And there isn’t one. Therefore, any reading of this type breaks the “fictional pact” (8) imagined by the author himself. Even when such a horizon of possibility seems to open up, it enables, through a double negation, an idea of degeneracy: “No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it - this suspicion of their not being inhuman.” (p.74-75). Black people from the darkness need to be taught to do the most basic of things: “He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. [...] He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed” (p.76). The novel founders on that most basic guiding principle of art: seeing the other.



Excessive comparison with the animal world (which fixes what is alien) and excessive use of adjectives (which indicates a lack of familiarity with what is narrated) also undermine the idea that this text can renew the genre of the novel (9). After all, polyphony and dialogism, two central elements of modernist aesthetics, are absent from the book. Inhabiting a mortified and pre-historic world, Africans are not invited to participate in a chorus of voices which only includes part of the novel's society. Africans are physically gigantic, but psychologically infantilized and animalized. They are read as lazy, dirty, promiscuous and superstitious. They are the necessary counterpoint to the civilizational appeal of the imperial powers. As such, the Africans invented by the canonical literature of adventures, like in Conrad, or in the aesthetically limited Portuguese colonial literature, differ little from the people displayed in human zoos in the colonial exhibitions of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Character, time and space: these three branches of representation undergo a vast process of stereotyping which symbolically legitimizes invasion, ritualized violence and territorial domination. If we turn to the work of African writers in Portuguese, we find a response elaborated along these three branches even before national independence. The local populations cease to be seen as a uniform block and parade an unabashed diversity. Their humanity is presented in motion, embracing contradiction. For this very reason they move from being a secondary element – as they were in colonial aesthetics (10) – to being protagonists. In this process, we can highlight the role of animals. Firstly, they have a decisive function that relates to oral literatures – not only African ones – in which animals reveal human destiny. Secondly, they invert one of the principle imperial myths; there the human being is animalized, here the animal is humanized.

Even in the titles of foundational literature from Cape Verde, Mozambique and Angola we find authors overturning this history: “O galo cantou na baía” [The cock sung in the bay], by Manuel Lopes, 1939; “A estória da galinha e do ovo” [the story of the chicken and the egg], by Luandina Vieira, 1963; “Nós matámos o cão-tinhoso” [We killed Mangy-Dog], by Luís Bernardo Honwana, 1964. After independences, in works that contest new and old pedagogies of power, the symbolic and material exchange between animal and human continues to work as a driving force of creativity. For instance, the destiny of the pig Carnival da Vitória overlaps tragically with the paradoxes of the young Angolan nation in *Quem me dera ser onda* [I wish I were a wave] by Manuel Rui. Or we could note the geographical, historical and emotional transformations which work through Peptela's *O Cão e os Caluandas* [The Dog and The Luandans] (1985) and *Parábola do Cágado Velho* [The Parable of the Old Tortoise] (1996). Or the fight between the snake and the lion which are spread through the body of Leónidas Ntsato across the territory of Mozambique to restrain the national project in *As duas sombras do rio* [The two shadows



of the river] (2003) by João Paulo Borges Coelho. These are just some of the many examples that show the complementarity between the two spheres.

Certainly, the figure of the animal is as old as literature, whether oral or written. It has acquired a vast field of forms and functions, and to synthesize them would be a fool's errand. But we can perhaps set out the following hypothesis: through the recurrence of effects of inclusion, of symbolic interdependence, and of verisimilitude, and through the transversality of its thematic concerns, African literatures can contribute to a shifting of paradigms. In fact, we struggle to find in other literary fields a form of representation that is as widespread and diverse (structuring, even) as that of the animal sphere. The singularity of such representation has to do with the fact that these literatures (regardless of the language they appear in) would never have accepted the mechanical separation between the human and the animal, nor have connived in the extinction of the sources of knowledge which oral intertextuality offers. It was indeed partly based on such positions that writers and poets – both before and after independence – articulated culture and revolution.

We must finish this brief essay, however, with the words of the author of one of the most radical propositions of recent years, the late Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, whose work was unhappily curtailed by his early death in 2010. He wrote: “We are all together, all in the same boat, all people, and everything that exists in the universe. And if other universes exist, they too would be with us in the same boat. God is not an entity... It is the totality of a creative, indecipherable process of becoming. Each of us – person, animal, stone, grass, star, asteroid, wind, breath, sigh, misery, pain, euphoria and glory – are an integral and irreducible part of it (11).

(1) Edward Said (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, New York.

(2) A recent report by the journalist Jamil Chade on the celebrations of 30 years of the fall of the Berlin wall gives some facts about the multiplication of walled frontiers in the world. According to Chade, who uses studies done by the Transnational Institute and the University of Quebec, the countries of the European Union currently maintain walls that amount to six times the length of the Berlin wall. The justification, almost always, is combatting illegal immigration. At the same time, between 70 and 75 walls are being built or have just been constructed. In 1989 there were fewer than 15. According to Chade, “if all the walls in the world were lined up, they would cover 40,000k, enough to circle the globe.” Chade, Jamil (2019), “Cada um no seu quadrado”, [UOL](#).

(3) Johnson, Boris (2001), *Friends, Voters, Countrymen: Jottings on the Stump*, London: Harper Collins.



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- (4) It is important to note that some of these public figures who denounce the most basic of human rights call, in an opportunistic and disarticulated way, for the rights of animals. For instance the extreme right in Spain, Hogar Social Madrid, or Matteo Salvini in Italy, who recently revealed a plan to create laws for the protection of dogs and cats. Animal rights are a highly popular social cause, especially in the emerging middle classes, so the issue is used in a strategic way by conservative movements.
- (5) For this text I used the following edition: Conrad, Joseph (2008), *No Coração das Trevas*, translated by José Roberto O’Shea, São Paulo: Hedra. I would draw attention, however, to the edition published by the Companhia das Letras, also in 2008, which includes an excellent, extremely complete postface by Luiz Felipe de Alencastre.
- (6) Said, Edward, *Orientalismo* (2003), translation by Pedro Serra, Lisboa: Cotovia.
- (7) Achebe, Chinua (2012), *A educação de uma criança sob o protetorado britânico*, [The Education of a British-Protected Child]. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- (8) Eco, Umberto (1994), *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Cambridge: Harvard U.P.
- (9) Curiously, the excessive use of adjectives is a feature that connects imperial literature with the “romantic” literature of today: the less one knows about something, the more adjectives one applies to it.
- (10) On the relations between colonial texts and contexts see, for instance: Chaves, Rita (2002), “Colonialismo e vida literária no império português”, *Literatura e Sociedade*, v. 6, p. 200-211; and Noa, Francisco (2002), *Império, mito e miopia. Moçambique como invenção literária*, Lisboa: Caminho.
- (11) Carvalho, Ruy Duarte (2010), “Decálogo neo-animista”, [Buala](#).

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