JOOST DAALDER

Dogs and Foxes in D. H. Lawrence and W. H. Auden

In writing “The Fox” and Kangaroo (both of them first published by Martin Secker in 1923), Lawrence was much preoccupied with the mentality of what one may roughly call “meddlers” and “authorities” on the one hand, and the fate of their victims on the other; the first group, described collectively, are “dogs” (or mongrels, etc.), the second “foxes”. As we shall see, Auden was interested in Lawrence’s dichotomy and the bestiary images, but, in adapting it for his own purposes, he gives it a significantly different twist, showing his partial disagreement with Lawrence’s values and attitudes.

It will be simplest to turn to Kangaroo first, because Lawrence is more discursive and explicit in that than “The Fox”. For our purposes, the relevant part of the book is Chapter XII, “The Nightmare”. This Chapter presents Lawrence’s description of his protagonist’s recollections of the way he was treated by military authorities, and other unpleasant people around him, during World War I. Lawrence’s hero, Richard Lovat Somers, has a great deal in common with his creator, and the Chapter is largely autobiographical; at the very least, we may feel confident that Lawrence strongly identifies with Somers.

Somers’s enemies are first introduced as dogs on p. 216 of the Heinemann edition of Kangaroo (London; repr. 1970), at the beginning of Chapter XII, where his feelings are not confined to military authorities, the government, or awkward individuals, but are aimed particularly at the “criminal mob” in England “after Asquith fell”; it is society as a whole which, Lawrence suggests, has become a threat to one’s “independent soul” and wishes one to “hunt” with the crowd: “A man must identify himself with the criminal mob, sink his sense of truth, of justice, and of human honour, and bay like some horrible unclean hound, bay with a loud sound, from slavering, unclean jaws.” In political terms, it is important to realize that Lawrence is trying to safeguard the rights of the individual (as he sees them) not only against the forces of the Right (e.g. the military authorities), but also against those of the Left (the “mob”, and e.g. the labour member who formed part of the coalition cabinet after the demise of Asquith’s purely liberal government in May 1915). Indeed, his right-wing sympathies are characteristic of his writings at this stage of his career, as is obvious, not only from a careful reading of “The Fox” and Kangaroo, or “The Ladybird” (1923), but also — and more obtrusively — from Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychoanalysis of the Unconscious (1923). We do well to relate all of these works in our reading, as Auden did, who knew all of them, and whose general debt to the Fantasia and Psychoanalysis is beyond dispute. Auden himself acknowledged the extent of Lawrence’s influence on his early work in such remarks as the one that he made when working on The Orators, in August 1931, “In a sense the work is my memorial to Lawrence; i.e., the theme is the failure of the romantic conception of personality”
(cf. Edward Mendelson, ed., *The English Auden*, London: Faber & Faber, 1977). It is not my intention to suggest that Auden simply “imitated” Lawrence — only to contend that Lawrence was of importance to him, and that the relationship between Auden’s work and Lawrence’s deserves more attention than it has so far received.

Auden remembered the “Nightmare” Chapter from *Kangaroo* when he wrote “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (February 1939; cf. *The English Auden*, p. 241ff.), in particular in the composition of the following stanza:

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate.

The word “nightmare” itself is most logically traced back to the title of Lawrence’s chapter, which moreover is full of barking dogs. Although, in the poem as a whole, Auden’s attitude is more “left-wing” than Lawrence’s, one may, with due respect to both authors, suggest that their “dogs” need not be seen, by us, as belonging to any particular faction. Auden, like Lawrence, seems to allude to dangerous people who meddle where they ought not to, who may belong to a mob as well as to a government, and who are ready to destroy valuable individuals. I mention merely a few of the many places in the “Nightmare” Chapter which must have lingered in Auden’s memory, italicizing crucial words: “But in another carriage the men sang all the time, or hounded like dogs in the night” (p. 219; Lawrence is writing about men called up for World War I, while Auden’s stanza of course refers to World War II); laisser-aller of the “well-bred, really cultured classes” is “as guilty as the actual, stinking mongrelism it gives place to” (p. 221; detectives are called “mongrels” on p. 254); “It was at home the world was lost . . . at home stayed all the jackals, middle-aged, male and female jackals. And they bit us all” (p. 221); the word *canaille* is used many times with reference to both the military and the masses (cf. e.g. p. 228 and p. 255).

What we are confronted with is the fact, not merely that Auden uses similar words and expresses similar ideas with regard to the political and social situation of a world war, but also, and very intriguingly, the circumstance that his own personal situation in January—February 1939 is strikingly akin to the one which Lawrence describes in his “Nightmare” chapter. Both men are contemplating a world war and its circumstances; but both men are also — and at the same time of the year — considering their own personal feelings (if we assume that “Somers” really means “Lawrence”), not just about war, but in particular about the possibility of leaving England behind them and making a fresh start, of sorts, in America. Characteristically, Lawrence reveals his personal feelings far more than does Auden, but Auden’s feelings are perhaps (by implication and unintentionally) in part explained to us by the older author, whose plight must have seemed to Auden so much like his own.

Auden left Britain for America on January 19, 1939, and wrote his poem soon after Yeats’s death on January 28. It is not surprising at all that he should have seen a resemblance between his own situation and that of Lawrence who, although writing in Australia, is re-living past experience in such words as the following (many of which should be compared with Auden’s in his poem):

It was January, and there was a thin film of half-melted snow, like silver, on the fields and the path . . .

A man culminates in intense moments. This was one of Somers’ white, death-like moments, as he walked home from the tiny post office in the hamlet, on the wintry morning, after he had posted his passports asking for visas to go to New York. It
was like walking in death; a strange, arrested land of death. Never had he known that feeling before: as if he were a ghost in the after-death, walking a strange, pale, static, cold world. It almost frightened him. "Have I done wrong?" he asked himself. "Am I wrong, to leave my country and go to America?"

It was then as if he had left his country: and that was like death, a still, static corporate death. America was the death of his own country in him, he realised that. (pp. 229–30)

As it turns out, the Foreign Office does not return Somers’s passports, but when Asquith is replaced by Lloyd George, Somers feels he must go away “from everywhere”, listening to a voice saying: “It is the end of England. It is the end of the old England. It is finished. England will never be England any more.”

Auden, whose feelings about England and America were complex and variable if seen over a period, wrote in 1939 (The English Auden, p. xx), “I never wish to see England again.” We can hardly doubt that, for all the differences there may have been or clearly were, the Kangaroo passage mentioned above is of the greatest significance in any attempt to analyze Auden’s feelings circa January 1939 and the genesis, poetically and otherwise, of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”. And it is not irrelevant to remember that Kangaroo ends with the departure of Somers for America.

The desire to escape from England is also felt by the hero of “The Fox”, Henry, when, in frustration with his rival for March’s love, Banford, he goes outside “into the frosty December night . . . looking for something to shoot” (p. 35 in Lawrence’s The Short Novels, Vol. 1; London: Heinemann, repr. 1963). The following are the paragraphs that were particularly in Auden’s mind (cf. p. 36):

As he stood under the oaks of the wood-edge he heard the dogs from the neighbouring cottage up the hill yelling suddenly and startingly, and the wakened dogs from the farms around barking answer. And suddenly it seemed to him England was little and tight, he felt the landscape was constricted even in the dark, and that there were too many dogs in the night, making a noise like a fence of sound, like the network of English hedges netting the view. He felt the fox didn’t have a chance. For it must be the fox that had started all this hubbub.

Why not watch for him, anyhow! He would, no doubt, be coming snuffling round. The lad walked downhill to where the farmstead with its few pine trees crouched blackly. In the angle of the long shed, in the black dark, he crouched down. He knew the fox would be coming. It seemed to him it would be the last of the foxes in this loudy-barking, thick-voiced England, tight with innumerable houses.

Although Henry proceeds to shoot the fox, we must realize that Lawrence is using the fox as a positive symbol, not a negative one. The fox must die because Henry (the reality) must replace the creature that has represented many of his qualities so far (as a symbol). Lawrence does not appear to disapprove of the killing of the fox, but, in this passage, uses him to show to us how the victims of the “dogs” (symbolizing something like “meddlesome, life-stifling people”) are entrapped and constricted — the way Henry is by Banford, or the way Lawrence himself must have felt more than once in “this . . . England”.

It is not difficult to see a parallel between the fox (or Henry), and the Lawrence of the “Nightmare” chapter, and, ultimately, Auden, who, presumably, felt similarly persecuted by the “dogs of Europe” when he left England. In fact, it is extremely difficult to make much sense of Auden’s stanza without reference to relevant passages from Kangaroo and “The Fox”. However, Auden also, as I said in my first paragraph, gives a significantly different twist to Lawrence’s dichotomy and the beastly images.

Although Auden does not actually adopt the image of the fox, we can assume that he has Lawrence’s basic contrast between “dogs” and their victims in mind. Auden’s
fascination with the notion of “dogs” as persecutors and “foxes” as their victims is apparent from “Get there if you can” (1930; cf. The English Auden, p. 48), where he asserts that “Lawrence was brought down by snut-hounds...” There does not appear to be any reason for believing that Auden did not, like Lawrence, see himself as being in the position of a “fox” and similarly abhorred “dogs” around him, the essential dichotomy, in both authors, being between “life-stifling people” and “the lover, the artist” (etc.). This dichotomy assumes special importance for both authors within the context of a world war and their feelings about England and America. But, crude though my distinction is, I would nevertheless see Lawrence as belonging to the Right and Auden as belonging to the Left. This difference emerges for one thing from the context within which Auden places his “Laurentian” stanza. In the February 1939 version, the stanza about the “nightmare of the dark” comes immediately after a stanza which is one of three that Auden later discarded, and which shows him willing to forgive “Kipling and his views” and to pardon Paul Claudel “for writing well”. (The fact that, strictly, Auden makes time the agent of forgiveness does not do away with the fact that he undoubtedly was trying to convince himself of the need to concentrate on the merits of other writers as writers rather than because of their ideologues.) Lawrence by implication becomes one of several writers — of whom Yeats is chief — with whom Auden wishes to come to terms despite his obvious disagreement with their political views.

With respect to his treatment of the fox in his story, Lawrence makes things rather hard for himself and the reader by on the one hand using the fox as a symbol for supreme values while yet, on the other hand, Henry is allowed to kill the fox. This, despite the artistic success of the story, is an illogicality which Auden steers clear of. Insofar as an image of a fox is implied in Auden, we can feel consistent sympathy with the fox against the dogs. Of course, Auden does not in fact mention a fox at all; this by itself eliminates the Laurentian contradiction, though one may complain that the reader who does not remember the Laurentian passages might have done so, and might more readily have understood the reference to the “dogs of Europe”, if the image of a fox had been retained.

Auden certainly did not forget it, or Lawrence. His mixed attitude to Lawrence is obvious from the New Year Letter (with the parenthetical addition “January 1, 1940”), where Lawrence is presented as one of the “Devils” — a potent and valuable influence, but ultimately an extremist whose views cannot be totally endorsed (cf. the magnificent Laurentian speech on pp. 94—95 of the Collected Longer Poems, London: Faber & Faber, 1968). The fox turns up again, not as an image for Lawrence, but as a victim, in “Jumbled in one common box” (1941):

Silence sets on the clocks;
Nursing mothers point a sly
Index finger at a sky,
Crimson in the setting sun;
In the valley of the fox
Gleams the barrel of a gun.

The last two lines are obscure without reference to “The Fox”. Auden alludes to Henry’s shooting of the fox, an act which he here clearly condemns. Auden totally parts company from Lawrence in his view of violence and of the “survival of the fittest” philosophy which underlies “The Fox” — a tale which sanctions the murder, first of the fox, and then of Banford. A civilized person like Auden, writing during
World War II, was of course bound to reject Lawrence's defence of violence and his right-wing views. Auden perfectly understood Lawrence's feelings about the "dogs of Europe" (or England), about America, and about the need to protect Henry against Banford, or such values as life and love (both Henry's values) against those who would destroy them. The major difference is that Auden, unlike Lawrence, realized that one cannot protect the sanctity of life and love by murdering those whom one feels like eradicating while one is pursuing one's personal happiness.