

Designating an Animal Victim: Violent Sparagmos in Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*

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Abstract: Sparagmos is a Greek word meaning an act of rending, tearing apart or mangling a living animal usually in a Dionysian context and the animal is sacrificed by being dismembered. Orwell's essay is a story of victimhood and an elephant falls under the cycle of violence and counter-violence. In the British-Burmese conflict in the essay both groups are human and tend to designate a victim whereupon they converge on the victim and immolate him. But Orwell exhibits the sinister conjunction of mocking laughter (of the Burmese) and scapegoating slaughter (of the elephant).

Keywords: victimhood, violence, sacrificial ritual, sparagmos, imperialism

Orwell's autobiographical essay "Shooting an Elephant" was published in 1936 and the essay must be read against the backdrop of Anglo-Burmese relations in particular. There are several articles and essays on Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and each and everyone concentrated on different issues hidden in the text. But there is no doubt that it is a political piece and fascism, socialism, capitalism and obviously colonialism are the major themes. The brief review of already existing scholarship on this particular text will help me to locate my purpose of writing this essay. My focus will be on the purpose of killing elephant in the text. The greek concept 'sparagmos' (the frenzied dismemberment and the consumption of victim) of the elephant is the alternative version of the animal slaughter that is the harm-joy 'schadenfreude' of the native resulting in the appeasement of the counter-violence and hatred. James A Tyner in his article argues that Orwell's essay is primarily concerned with the building up of the self within a colonial landscape and thereby provides insight into the processes whereby human subjectivities interact with space and structures. Tyner focuses on the imbrication of landscape and literature. Peter Marks concentrates on the different aspect of the text and discusses "Shooting an Elephant" as an example of "eye-witness" literature, in which Orwell, as narrator and witness, should be considered unreliable. The examination of text like "Shooting an Elephant" suggests a complex picture of a writer sometimes sure-footed, sometimes stumbling in his efforts to accommodate the demands of politics and literature. Moreover, by allowing the 'eye-witness' to recoil upon itself as a textual component, the boundaries between language and reference, fiction and autobiography, become problematic. Stewart compares Orwell to another Indian-born English writer, Rudyard Kipling. Both wrote essays on killing elephants, though Kipling used more humor in his account. In contrast, Orwell often took himself too seriously. Thomas Bertonneau in

his article discusses Orwell's text in an anthropological and non-political way. Kenneth Keskinen in his article examines in depth Orwell's style and structure. According to him Orwell describes the wearing of any mask that keeps us from recognizing that there are human needs, human strengths, human failings and feelings that we all share "off duty" in a world where the white and colored, the Negro, the African, and the Burmese are not political entities but human beings. Shefali Rajamannar in her book *Reading the Animal in the Literature of British Raj* writes that 'shikar' served as a site of difference, functioning as a sport of the highest social prestige that allowed an exhibition of control over both animals and natives. Her words are worth quoting:

The colonizer, a victim of his self-ascribed role of being at the top of the pecking order, is frozen into a hollow posing dummy constantly needing to enact his authority. (Rajamannar, 2012)

What I want to interrogate in my article is the purpose of killing the elephant. Elephant is the object of victimization. Elephant is the object of anger and hatred. Shooting the elephant means placating the resentment and pacifying the anger. Various senses of anger, revenge and hatred pervade "Shooting an Elephant," from the beginning to the end. The narrator as a stranger master finds himself, "for the only time in [his] life," automatically "hated by large numbers of people." This hatred takes the form, in its non-crisis mode, of "an aimless, petty . . . anti-European feeling . . . very bitter," expressed in opportunistic and hateful acts like spitting betel juice on the dress of a European woman crossing the bazaar, or deliberately fouling a European player during a British-Burmese football match, while a Burmese referee conveniently turns his back. The fouled player is the narrator himself, whose misfortune on the playing-field occasions what he calls the "hideous laughter" of the crowd. This laughter recurs at important junctures of the narrative. From the very outset we see there creates an atmosphere of hatred, resentment and revenge and that lead to a hideous laughter. Such laughter constitutes the unanimous vocalization of a crowd polarized around a unique victim. The victim here is a foreign ruler. He serves as an individual, actual, and arbitrary token of the foreign power in the abstract. The structure of this laughter is unanimity-minus-one. The "British Empire" is never present in and of itself, because it is an abstraction, a system; it only appears through its agents. Anger and revenge being mimetic, or imitative, phenomena (you punch me, I punch you back), the narrator naturally experiences a gut-level response of his own. Despite that fact that he regards the Empire that he serves as "evil" and proposes to throw off his job as soon as the first chance offers, the narrator would nevertheless fondly like to "drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts" on account of the fact "the young Buddhist priests were the worst of all ... none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans." Spitting, laughing, hooting and jeering are, in this context, related gestures. They are all outburst of hatred and anger. They designate a convenient scapegoat (ironically colonial ruler is the victim) for the expression of pent-up feelings of anger and revenge. Too severe a

provocation will entail a punitive response, so the practical spite must be held in check at the level of annoyance. Orwell as author, his protagonist as narrator, and indeed the crowd all try to anthropomorphize, attribute human characteristics, to the elephant. But the elephant, of course, is well-known for its high level of intelligence, a fact which raises it out of the merely animal category; and the social structure of Burmese society under the British tends to underscore such quasi-human status. The animal is a working animal and to do work is to engage in a recognizably social activity; the animal belongs, as Orwell later discloses, to an Indian, a person below the British in the local hierarchy but above the Burmese, a person of some wealth, for the elephant is the equivalent of “a huge and costly piece of machinery” in the local economy. The elephant, like the human overlords of the place, can therefore function as an object of resentment, a safer one (in fact) than any actual person, because offending him entails little chance of official reprisal. Moreover, the elephant has “destroyed somebody’s bamboo hut, killed a cow, and raided some fruit-stalls,” and he has trampled to death “a black, Dravidian coolie.” The quasi-human animal has committed a quasi-criminal act, one involving deadly violence, which places him in jeopardy of a quasi-legal and fully lethal response. The ambient resentment of Moulmein, the town where the action occurs, suddenly possesses a center around which it can safely polarize, around which a fierce unanimity-minus-one can abruptly form and find satisfaction for its hitherto blocked resentment and tendency to revenge.

Orwell carefully recounts the fusion of the crowd’s Dionysiac passion; at the same time, he gives us a sharp-eyed description of generic crowd-behavior, which is inevitably persecutorial, focused on a victim. As the narrator waves his elephant gun, “practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses” to follow him. Previously, they showed only a lethargic interest in the career of the rogue animal, but now, with an execution in the offing, everyone sharpens his appetite for the event. The narrator too, despite his conscience, will be swept into the lethal consensus: “I had no intention of shooting the elephant,” he says; “I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him”; “I did not in the least want to shoot him.” Yet “it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you,” for the crowd, in its collective presence, exerts a coercive influence. After all, the narrator knows that the crowd expects him to kill the elephant, and that the people have suspended their usual annoyance against him only because the elephant has transiently assumed his place as the object of their invidious animation. Disappointing the crowd would cancel the suspension of its ire against him, with the potential result of a lynching. In the midst of a mob, with no hostile witnesses, the urge to gain revenge on one of the foreign masters would be hard to restrain. When the narrator sees the “sea of yellow faces” concentrating on him and feels “two thousand wills pressing [him] forward,” he understands that he will “have to shoot the elephant.” This scene resembles certain other scenes central to the Western tradition, specifically to the Judaeo-Christian strain of that tradition, which Orwell

has earlier evoked by describing the trampled Dravidian as “crucified.” Pilate does not want to execute Jesus, but the crowd does, and Pilate bows to the will of the crowd. Captain Vere, in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, does not want to execute Billy, but must bow to the imagined pressure of British naval law and carry out the death sentence which the situation technically, if not morally, demands. Human beings are imitative creatures—this is their glory and their damnation—who follow the examples set, often quite accidentally, by others, or by tradition accepted without criticism. Orwell's narrator can no more resist the crowd than Pilate can; he can no more resist the tradition of lynching than Captain Vere can. “A sahib has got to act like a sahib.” But the narrator knows that, in this case, he is not a “sahib,” a foreign overlord; he is, rather, “an absurd puppet” assimilated to the crowd against his will, imitating its convergent desire—that the elephant should die—without the power to resist. To spare the creature would be “impossible,” as “the crowd would laugh at me.” Orwell has already exhibited the sinister conjunction of mocking laughter and scapegoating violence. It is no coincidence, then, that *hooting* and *shooting* should turn out to be stages in the same escalation, like *laughter* and *slaughter*.

Should he merely test the elephant to confirm his sense that it has passed its “must” and is now in a peaceable mood, and should the elephant against his expectation charge him, “those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill.” Whereupon he, too, would be humiliated and crucified. The narrator now becomes the designated executioner on behalf of the crowd. When he pulls the trigger, the crowd's vocal approval, earlier a mere “aimless” *Schadenfreude*, now becomes a single “devilish roar of glee.” A parallel incident from the literary tradition might be the cry of “*Hic est nostri contemptor!*” or “There is the one who mocks us!” uttered by the Bacchantes just before they converge on, murder, and dismember Orpheus, who has trespassed into their territory. The “devilish roar of glee” is the lynching cry. As for the victim of this paradigmatic victimary scene, the poor elephant, in death he becomes more human than ever: “He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old . . . he sagged flabbily to his knees . . . You could see the agony of it jolt his body.” Not yet dead—“he was dying very slowly and in great agony”—the elephant lies in a panting mound, his breath “very rhythmical with long rattling gasps.” The narrator tries to end the creature's suffering with his sport rifle (having used all of his elephant cartridges), but to no avail. “I could not stand it any longer and went away.” To complete the sacrificial ritual which this crowd-scene comprises, the narrator records how the crowd were closing in on the moribund beast “bringing dahs and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon.” As in the murder of Orpheus, the scene concludes with a *sparagmos*, the frenzied dismemberment and consumption of the victim.

Shooting an Elephant depicts a cycle of revenge and violence. Obvious is the fact that, in oppressing the Burmese, the British incur their righteous

wrath, that is in part colonial power. Orwell spares little in his picture of the imperial order. A colonial policeman sees “the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who have been flogged with bamboos.” The Empire has “clamped down . . . upon the will of prostrate peoples.” A humiliated people understandably hates its *contemptor* and seeks the means to return the disfavor of conquest; absent a direct means, indirect means must suffice, as when the anger that the crowd feels towards the narrator as an agent of empire gets deflected to the elephant. But is Orwell condoning the crowd's behavior, or his own, pressured by the crowd?

No, no more than he condones the British Empire's behavior in its Asian dominions, or his own behavior in the service of the Empire. If the British presence, enforcing itself by violence against the Burmese, is unjust, violating the intuitive rules of universal humanity, then the Burmese persecution of individual Europeans is no less unjust according to the same criterion. The most that one can say in mitigation of Burmese cruelty is that it is a response to British cruelty, but cruelty is never, under any circumstances, just. Justice consists in the opposite of imitative violence: It consists in restraint, consideration, compassion, and tolerance, none of which is exhibited by either side in the British-Burmese conflict. The key to the moral content of “Shooting an Elephant” lies in a chain of identifications made by the narrator, beginning with his identification of the trampled Dravidian with the victim of the crucifixion. The dead man is truly an innocent victim whom the elephant, in his rogue career, has charged and trampled; he has humiliated the man in the root-sense of the word by grinding him into the *humus* or mud. It is a senseless, undeserved death. When the narrator pulls the trigger, the elephant collapses into the mud, making the image of him congruent with the image of the dead Dravidian. Overcome by the wounded animal's suffering, the narrator identifies, empathizes, with it, and having authored the creature's misery, he tries to end it. All of these identifications (Dravidian with Jesus, elephant with Dravidian, narrator with elephant) come together with an earlier image, that of the humiliated Burmese in the Imperial jail, the “prostrate peoples” victimized by Empire. Readers should not forget that the narrator, too, has been humiliated, tripped up on the soccer-field and made the focus of cackling scorn. No group in “Shooting an Elephant” holds the monopoly on victimhood; every group is capable of persecution.

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