

Guest Editorial

by Lorna Tracy

When, preparing this issue, I came to read Anita Jackson's story, *The Wildlife Park*, I was reminded of an exhibit in a New York City zoo a number of years ago. Visitors were invited to SEE THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE WORLD. The exhibit consisted of a mirror.

A searching essay by Tony Rudolf in the last issue of *Stand* cites some of the recent genocides that evidence just how dangerous, how savagely dangerous, to itself and others the human animal is. We seem, indeed, to grow *more* savage as our period of civilisation extends and with it our devilish capacity for mass destructions. Rudolf finds in the witness of some who were treated so inhumanly by their own kind that they were, or nearly were, *in extremis*, instances of the power of language to rekindle those guttering lives. A few human words, alone; a lone human word, even, can have that power.

On such ground the human animal at its worst and at its best, in its moral depths and its highest art, encounters itself and sometimes survives the encounter.

None of the life-saving lines of poetry in Rudolf's case histories was a religious text or referred to any deity. I was very struck by that. Most atrocities have been and still today are being

committed in the name of some religion or other. To have evidence that secular human language in its unforgettable, most concentrated form, poetry, has the power we still tend to attribute only to a god or to the miracles of a god, seemed to me about the most hopeful thing I knew. The human animal having the power to work its salvation out of the very deepest hells it can create for its fellow human animals to suffer in, means there can be transcendence without invoking the agency of anything supernatural. We are exceedingly dangerous animals but within us is a counter-vailing defence against our own cruellest potentialities; a defence that is capable of disabling even the worst effects of that cruelty: human language.

Tolstoi distinguished between two kinds of good art – there is religious art, whose ultimate significance lies beyond the aesthetic sphere and there is good non-religious art whose main task is to infect (Tolstoi's word) the reader with good human feelings and above all with a sense of human kinship. According to Prince Mirski, Tolstoi's late story *Hadji Murad* is perfectly of this second kind, 'an art universally intelligible and calculated to kindle feelings of mutual understanding and brotherhood.'

At first I thought: If fiction can do *that*, that is not nothing.

But then I thought, no, there is something condescending about Tolstoi's view that makes me want to give it a kicking. Perhaps it is the passivity imputed to the readers, that they must be infected (a favourite word: Tolstoi employs it often). As publishers, are we, with Tolstoi, to say 'Here is a needle full of beneficial bacilli. I am going to stick it into you, dear reader, and it will do you good.'

I was wrong insofar as I was failing to acknowledge what

Rudolf's case histories attest to: that in extremity, when one's life has been so nearly evaporated that passivity is all one has left, words can still rescue us. Tolstoi would say that only words imbued with religious meaning can save us, whatever our condition, and that this has nothing to do with the triumph of the human spirit. Jon Silkin put it this way, writing about his Salome sequence: 'the timbre of these poems, and their preoccupations are ... connected with a different possibility of growth and happiness, and in doing this, in a poem, it may both contain and focus them in reciprocity. That at least is a working theory, and the containment of them in a poem is a way of transmitting their value to our needs ... for such a close response may help one in turn to mediate between oneself and the world.'

The harm the human animal can do is a strong theme in this issue's diverse collection of contemporary stories but it was not deliberately selected for and it is not the only theme. Nevertheless, it is true that the twelve stories, which have never met before, which chance has brought together in these pages, have been placed in a sequence we took some care over.

They are holding up a mirror. Look, or look away.

Thanks go to the team of readers who helped in the selection process for this special issue:

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