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Author(s): Stanley G. Eskin
Source: Italica, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Sep., 1962), pp. 189-194
Published by: American Association of Teachers of Italian
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/477070
Accessed: 20/03/2011 05:25

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ANIMAL IMAGERY IN IL GATTOPARDO

From the title to the very last sentence, describing the destruction of a stuffed dog, Lampedusa in Il Gattopardo uses animal images of all sorts to convey his themes. His style tends naturally toward the use of fairly simple, clear-cut figures of speech, emblems or symbols. So, for example, the arduous journey to Donnafugata quickly becomes for Fabrizio “the road of life” and a detailed allegory for his own life (p. 75). Personifications abound, such as this charming one describing the anti-Bourbon inscriptions remaining on the walls of Donnafugata when the Salinas enter the town: “... sulle pareti delle case le scritte di ‘Viva Garibaldi,’ ‘Viva Re Vittorio’ e ‘Morte a Re Borbone’... sbiadivano e sembravano voler rientrare nel muro” (p. 79). This stylistic tendency would lead us to expect the kind of significant pattern of imagery which the animal references in fact provide. In addition, we know that Lampedusa was an enthusiastic student of modern literature so that he must have been well aware of the symbolist techniques of twentieth-century fiction.

The comparison of men to animals in literature—which is mostly what we mean by “animal imagery”—may be divided into two general categories. One category is the use of animals to symbolize particular human traits. Thus Machiavelli recommends that the Prince cultivate the characteristics of the lion and of the fox, and Montaigne, borrowing from Plutarch, punctures human vanity by enumerating all the qualities in which various animals show themselves superior to men. The second category is reductive and usually involves the notion of bestiality: animals are symbols of the lower attributes of man to which he may sink, or simply of man’s physical nature to which he may become enthralled, if reason, will, spirit or intellect fail him. In Othello, for example, Iago’s debased outlook is indicated by his continuous references to all sorts of animals, while the curve of Othello’s fall from spiritual purity and nobility may be traced by the increasing number of animal images with which his speeches are sprinkled as he comes more and more under Iago’s domination.

Lampedusa makes use of both of these categories of animal imagery in Il Gattopardo. Since one aspect of the novel is the glorification of the aristocratic spirit, certain animals are used to symbolize the virtues of the aristocracy and the deficiencies of its enemies. Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina, is the chief, perhaps the
sole, repository of what is best in the aristocracy: its integrity, its self-possession, its disinterestedness. The beautiful and princely Gattopardo—the cheetah (not a leopard)—represented on the Salina coat of arms, symbolizes Fabrizio's noble spirit. This is a direct metaphor that imposes itself throughout the book; Fabrizio is the Gattopardo, stalking proudly and majestically through his feudal domains now in social upheaval: “... lui il Gattopardo che per anni aveva spazzato via le difficoltà con un rovescio della zampa” (p. 116). If a cheetah should prove an insufficient association, Fabrizio's character is related several times to the traditional king of the beasts, and is labelled “leonino” (pp. 121 & 271).

The admirable side of the aristocratic spirit is not only represented in the inherent qualities of these noble animals, but is further emphasized in the contrast of these animals with other baser animals symbolizing the rising new classes. About to negotiate with the up-and-coming capitalist Don Calogero, Fabrizio feels himself a Gattopardo stalking a jackal: “... si illuse di essere un gattopardo imponente dal pelo liscio e profumato che si preparasse a sbranare uno sciacalletto timoroso” (p. 149). The jackals, of course, are winning, and the irony of his metaphor does not escape Fabrizio. But this does not affect the relative values implicit in the two animals, the confrontation of which cannot but leave the Gattopardo in higher esteem than the jackal. As Fabrizio explains later to the Piedmontese emissary Chevalley, Sicily will remain static for a long time but when it changes, it will change for the worse, for the jackals and hyenas will take over: “... dopo sarà diverso, ma peggiore. Noi fummo i Gattopardi, i Leoni: chi ci sostituirà saranno i sciacalletti, le iene” (p. 219).

Jackals and hyenas are not the only animals in contrast with the aristocratic lions and cheetahs. The deplorable qualities of the bourgeois spirit—its acquisitiveness, selfishness, narrowness and crudeness—are embodied in Don Calogero and symbolized by a series of undistinguished animals with which he is associated. When Don Calogero is compared to an Elephant, the awkwardness of that animal is no doubt meant as a contrast to the gracefulness of the Gattopardo: “Egli procedeva nella foresta della vita con la sicurezza di un elefante che, svelando alberi e calpestando tane, avanza in linea retta ” (p. 163). Elsewhere Don Calogero is a bat (“andava avanti e indietro in tutto il territorio come un pipistrello” p. 142): for him, the art of conversation is more like a
dog fight (p. 166); when Fabrizio has to discuss matrimonial questions with him, this is like swallowing a toad (pp. 152 & 156); and, much later, at the Ponteleone ball, Don Calogero and his kind remind Fabrizio of crows in search of carrion (p. 265).

The ant hill which Fabrizio observes while hunting in the hills of Donnafugata provides an implicit assertion of the superiority of the aristocratic spirit by a metaphorical demonstration of the paltriness of the opposing spirit. On the one hand we have the lonely, proud, essentially disinterested hunt: the lithe Gattopardo stalking his prey. On the other hand we have the ants, symbols of greed, pettiness and mediocrity:

Richiamate da alcuni chicchi d’uva stantia che don Ciccio aveva risputato via, le loro fitte schiere accorrevano, esaltate dal desiderio di annettersi quel po’ di marciume intriso di saliva di organista. Acorrevano colme di baldanza, in disordine, ma risolute: gruppetti di tre o quattro sostavano un po’ a parlottare e, certo, esaltavano la gloria secolare e l’abbondanza futura del formicaio numero 2 sotto il sughero numero 4 della cima di Monte Marco; poi insieme alle altre riprendevano la marcia verso il prospero avvenire (pp. 127-128).

The ant hill is the new order which is about overwhelm the aristocratic spirit, and that the identification should not escape us, Fabrizio himself associated “l’affaccendarsi di quegli insetti” with the plebiscite that has already introduced the new order.

However, *Il Gattopardo* is by no means a simple-minded exaltation of aristocratic virtues in contrast with plebeian worthlessness. The real interest in the novel lies in the ambivalence of Fabrizi’s attitude toward the class which he so eminently represents, an ambivalence which is of course the author’s. Aristocratic virtues may shine when placed in contrast with certain bourgeois traits, but left to themselves, these virtues tend to tarnish. Self-possession can turn into arrogance, pride into vanity, disinterestedness into frivolity, refinement into morbidity, and stability into stagnation. Fabrizio exemplifies the best of aristocratic culture, but it is interesting that the aristocrats toward whom he feels closet are precisely those who reject their own class, like his eldest son, who has left Sicily to become an English businessman, and his Garibaldian nephew Tancredi.

Fabrizio’s paradoxical attitude (which takes many forms in the novel) is his response to the complex mixture of strengths and weaknesses in the upper classes. The strength of the aristocratic spirit is the a basic aspect of the novel because it is demonstrated
by its hero, while the weaknesses are revealed through ironic counterpoints in which animal images play a significant role. The animal imagery here is primarily in the second category mentioned, in which the basic notion is that of bestiality, of elements in man which debase or weaken him. The movement of this image pattern is reductive: the aristocracy is subjected to a series of animal metaphors and symbols tending to undermine its status.

The association with other animals is as debasing to the aristocracy as its association with the Gattopardo is elevating. Fabrizio, for example, in respect to his affair with a mistress in Palermo, considers himself “un porco, e niente altro,” and recalls a previous Parisian mistress who used to call him “mon chat,” and “mon singe blond” (p. 39). The episode is slight, but there is a certain suggestion of decadence and moral flippancy which is accentuated by these metaphors. Again, Tancredi courting Angelica is compared to a cat (p. 109), and, later, arriving from Naples in a storm, he describes himself as “innamorato come un gatto, ma anche bagnato come un ranocchio, sudicio come un cane sperso, e affamato come un lupo” (p. 178). His ironic and incidental self-deprecation functions in fact, in a minor way, to deprecate his whole class. Elsewhere, the aristocracy in general is compared to sheep about to be shorn (p. 165). To be sure, this is in Don Calogero’s eyes, but his view is not altogether wrong, and while the image might evoke pity it is certainly reductive in respect to the aristocracy’s accustomed status.

But the most elaborate reductive treatment of this sort is executed not by Don Calogero but by Fabrizio himself at the Ponteleone ball. It is both his virtue and (for the sake of his peace of mind) his misfortune to be the arch-critic of his own class. As he wanders about this Proustian gathering of the Sicilian upper-crust, he becomes more and more appalled at their ugliness, insipidity and frivolity. There are a few beautiful women among them, but they are like swans in a pond full of frogs—“cigni su uno stagno fitto di ranocchie” (p. 261). Indeed, this whole party, after a while, gives him the impression of a zoo, and all the chattering women seem monkeys to him, about to start swinging by their tails from the chandeliers, exhibiting their behinds and throwing nut shells at the guests. (p. 262). A few pages later his sardonic mood has abated, and his scorn has changed to pity. But the stature of the aristocracy is hardly rehabilitated: “Anche le scimmiette sui pous, anche i vecchi babbei suoi amici erano
miserevoli, insalvabili e cari come il bestiame che la notte mugola per le vie della città, condotto al macello” (p. 266). From silly and annoying apes these poor aristocrats have become cattle being led to slaughter. It is of them, the dying class, no doubt, that we are meant to be reminded a little later when Fabrizio, having decided to walk home, first muses on the serene detachment of his beloved stars, but then is shocked back into the world of earth, flesh and death by a passing cart loaded with recently slaughtered cattle (p. 279).

The cats and monkeys and cattle associated with the aristocracy suggest its creatural weaknesses, its folly, and its perishability. The Gattopardo, of course, is another matter, and serves not to demean but to enhance the aristocracy. And yet the image of the Gattopardo itself is not immune from the reductive process. There is a stone Gattopardo in bas relief at Rampinzèri, but one of its legs has been knocked off (p. 68). Since the stance of the Gattopardo on the coat of arms is always described as “dancing,” this mutilation has a particular force. Again, the Gattopardo may have been used to knocking over obstacles with his paws, but those paws are weakened by the thorns which are Tancredi’s middle-class marriage (pp. 253-255). And Fabrizio, nearing the end of his life, considers himself “un Gattopardo in pessima forma” (p. 289). This might be taken simply as a Stoical acceptance of his personal condition if it did not apply only too well to the situation of his class.

The animal imagery in Il Gattopardo helps to symbolize an aristocratic culture deserving, simultaneously and paradoxically, our contempt and our esteem. The novel opens and closes with animal images suggesting this theme. In the opening scene, the drawing room where the daily rosary is said is described in great detail. Among the frescoes, mostly of pagan deities, we find, on the one hand, an exotic scene of monkeys chasing parrots, and, on the other, the coat of arms with the Gattopardo (p. 18). This seems to suggest both the basic eminence of the aristocratic spirit, and the decadent frivolity which is one of its corruptions. At the end of the novel, Lampedusa describes the half insane life of Fabrizio's three daughters. Among their mementos of the past is a stuffed effigy of Fabrizio’s faithful old dog Bendicò. But even stuffed, the poor animal is falling apart and is finally thrown away. For an instant, as he flies out the window, he takes the shape of the dancing Gattopardo: “Si sarebbe potuto vedere danzare nel-
l'aria un quadrupede dai lunghi baffi," p. 327). Then he falls on the garbage heap and disintegrates into a heap of dust. A proud and noble jungle animal, momentarily reconstructed, but which is really an old stuffed dog about to become a heap of dust: this is a concise enough symbol of the principal theme of *Il Gattopardo*.

STANLEY G. ESKIN

*University of California* (Berkeley)

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1 All page references are to the original Feltrinelli edition, Milano, 1958.