

9. A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down* (1981)

Richard Adams's novel Watership Down, a best-selling novel in the late 1970s about a warren of rabbits, inspired what is probably Hauerwas's best exemplification of his claim about the moral significance of narrative for construing the Christian life. It is certainly his most extensive reading of a piece of fiction directed toward constructive reflection on the Christian life. Like the rabbits of Watership Down, Christians depend on a narrative to be guided and rely on a power of which the world knows not against those who would rule the world with violence. Furthermore, while Christians also often fail to be faithful to their guiding stories, this does not entail that the Christian story makes unrealistic demands. It does show the difficulty of being the kind of community where such a story can be told and embodied by a people formed in accordance with it and the challenge of developing skills to combat the tendency to self-deception that marks social life.

1. *Reforming Christian Social Ethics*

Each of the ten theses I have proposed for the reformation of Christian social ethics obviously involves highly controversial claims that require disciplined philosophical and theological argument.¹ However, I do not intend to supply that kind of discursive argument here, as I am more interested in trying to illuminate what the theses mean and how they are interrelated. To do that I am going to tell a story about some very special rabbits that inhabit the world of

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1. [See essay 5, "Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses."] For at least a beginning defense of the significance of narrative for moral rationality, see my *TT*.

Richard Adams's book *Watership Down*.² I cannot hope to convince you of the correctness of my theses by proceeding in this way, but I do hope at least to help you understand what they might mean. Moreover, it seems appropriate for someone who is arguing for the significance of narrative to use a story to make his point.

2. *The Narrative Context of Social Ethics*

It would be misleading if I were to give the impression that I am using *Watership Down* only because it offers an entertaining way to explain my theses. The very structure of the book provides an account of the narrative nature of social ethics that is seldom noticed or accounted for by most political and social theory. Adams's depiction of the various communities in *Watership Down* suggests that they are to be judged primarily by their ability to sustain the narratives that define the very nature of man, or in this case, rabbits. Thus *Watership Down* is meant to teach us the importance of stories for social and political life. But even more important, by paying close attention to *Watership Down* we will see that the best way to learn the significance of stories is by having our attention drawn to stories through a story.

Watership Down is at once a first-class political novel and a marvelous adventure story. It is extremely important for my theses that neither aspect of the novel can be separated from the other. Too often politics is treated solely as a matter of power, interests, or technique. We thus forget that the most basic task of any polity is to offer its people a sense of participation in an adventure. For finally what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common adventure. Indeed, our "dignity" derives exactly from our sense of having played a part in such a story.

The essential tie between politics and adventure not only requires recognition of the narrative nature of politics, but it also reminds us that good politics requires the development of courage and hope as central virtues for its citizens. As we will see, *Watership Down* is primarily a novel about the various forms of courage and hope necessary for the formation of a good community. Adventure requires courage to keep us faithful to the struggle, since by its very nature adventure means that the future is always in doubt. And just to the

2. Richard Adams, *Watership Down* (New York: Avon Books, 1972). All page references to *Watership Down* are in the text.

extent that the future is in doubt, hope is required, as there can be no adventure if we despair of our goal. Such hope does not necessarily take the form of excessive confidence; rather, it involves the simple willingness to take the next step.

Watership Down begins with the exodus of a group of rabbits from a well-established warren on the slim basis that one rabbit with the gifts of a seer thinks that warren is threatened with destruction. As a result the group is forced to undergo a hazardous journey in search of a new home, ultimately Watership Down, as well as the dangerous undertaking of securing does from the militaristic warren of Efrafa. It is important to note that the rabbits of *Watership Down* do not leave their old warren as a people (or a rabbithood). They leave only as a group of individuals joined together by their separate reasons for leaving the warren. All they share in common is the stories of the prince of the rabbits, El-ahrairah. They become a people only as they acquire a history through the adventures they share as interpreted through the traditions of El-ahrairah.

For this reason *Watership Down* is fundamentally a political novel. It is concerned with exploring what conditions are necessary for a community to be a viable polity. Thus much of the novel depicts contrasting political communities that bear striking similarities to past and present polities. Sandleford, the warren they must leave, is a traditional class society whose government is determined by loyalty to a strong and competent leader. On their journey they encounter a warren that has no name but bears a striking resemblance to the modern welfare state in which the freedom of the individual is primary. And the third warren, Efrafa, from which they try to secure some does, is a highly organized and regimented totalitarian society. Each of these societies is characterized by a virtue that embodies its ideal form—that is, loyalty, tolerance, and obedience.³

Even though none of these communities perfectly represents actual societies, they provide imaginative paradigms for tendencies in every polity, whether it be a state, a corporation, or a church. Issues fundamental to political theory, such as the relation of individual to community, the primacy of freedom and its relation to justice, and the legitimation of power, are obviously present in each of the communities described. It is extremely tempting, therefore, to interpret *Watership Down* as a commentary on current

3. Robert Paul Wolff has pointed out how each form of society has a corresponding virtue in *The Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 123.

actual and theoretical political options. Only *Watership Down* itself seems to be an exception, as it is presented as an ideal society for which there is no ready analogue.

Without denying that *Watership Down* is a ready source of standard forms of political reflection, the book has a deeper insight to offer for social ethics. Although each society can be characterized by traditional political opinions and theory, Adams's intention is to show how such discussions are subordinate to the ability of a community to live and tell its stories. As we shall see, the crux of the viability of any society in *Watership Down* is whether it is organized so as to provide for authentic retelling of the stories of the founder and prince of rabbit history, El-ahrairah.

Adams is trying to help us understand politics not only as it organizes people for particular ends, but also as it forms them to be inheritors and exemplifications of a tradition. In other words, Adams suggests that society can best be understood as an extended argument, since living traditions presuppose rival interpretations. Good societies enable the argument to continue so that the possibilities and limits of the tradition can be exposed. The great danger, however, is that the success of a tradition will stop its growth and in reaction some may deny the necessity of tradition for their lives. The truthfulness of a tradition is tested in its ability to form people who are ready to put the tradition into question, or at least to recognize when it is being put into question by a rival tradition. Of course, as we shall see, some traditions lapse into complete incoherence and can be recovered only by revolutionary reconstitution.⁴

2.1 *The Story-Shaped World of Rabbits*

This is all very abstract, but I can make it concrete by calling your attention to the way stories function for the rabbits of *Watership Down*. First, there are several things about rabbits that we need to know. A rabbit is constantly in danger. Mr. Lockley, a famous expert on rabbits, suggests that rabbits are as strong as the grass (167). That is certainly not very strong, for the strength of grass consists primarily in being able to grow back after it has been stepped on, cut, or burned. And just as grass grows back, so rabbits depend on their

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60, no. 4 (October 1977): 460–61. The general debt this paper owes to MacIntyre's work will be obvious to those familiar with his position. I have relied on MacIntyre's occasional essays; however, his *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) will soon be published. There MacIntyre systematically develops his position in a powerful and compelling manner.

stubborn will to survive against all odds. And they are able to survive because they are fast, constantly vigilant, and have the wit to cooperate with one another.

Another thing we need to know about rabbits, at least the rabbits of *Watership Down*, is that they are lovers of stories. There is a saying among them that a rabbit “can no more refuse to tell a story than an Irishman can refuse to fight” (99). Rabbits are, to be sure, creatures of nature, but their “nature” is the result of the interaction of their biology with their stories. Their stories serve to define who they are and to give them skills to survive the dangers of their world in a manner appropriate to being a rabbit.

The first story told in *Watership Down* is the story of the “Blessing of El-ahrairah.” I suspect it is not accidental that this is the first story told by the rabbits who left Sandleford, as all new communities must remind themselves of their origin. A people are formed by a story that places their history in the texture of the world. Such stories make the world our home by providing us with the skills to negotiate the dangers in our environment in a manner appropriate to our nature.

The “Blessing of El-ahrairah” is the account of Frith, the god of the rabbits, allocating gifts to each of the species. In the beginning all animals were friends and El-ahrairah was among the happiest of animals, as he had more wives than he could count and his children covered the earth. They became so numerous that Frith told El-ahrairah he must control his people, since there was not enough grass for everyone. Rabbits, however, are intent on living day by day, so El-ahrairah refused to heed Frith’s warning.

Frith, therefore, called a meeting at which he gave a gift to all animals and birds. El-ahrairah, busy dancing, eating, and mating, was late to the meeting. As a result he heard too late that Frith had given the fox and the weasel cunning hearts and sharp teeth, the cat silent feet and eyes to see in the dark. El-ahrairah, realizing that Frith was too clever for him, tried to hide by digging a hole. But he had only dug halfway when Frith came by, finding El-ahrairah with only his back legs and tail above ground. El-ahrairah responded to Frith’s greeting by denying he was El-ahrairah, but Frith, feeling a kinship with this mischievous creature, blessed El-ahrairah’s bottom and legs, giving them strength and speed. El-ahrairah’s tail grew shining and his legs long and powerful, and he came running out of his hole. And Frith called after him, “El-ahrairah, your people cannot rule the world, for I will not have it so. All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener,

runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed” (37).

It is tempting to reduce this story to its obvious etiological elements: why rabbits have white tails and strong legs. But this would distort the importance of the story as the source of skills for rabbits to negotiate their world. The rabbit’s task is not to try to make the world safe, but rather to learn to live in a dangerous world by trusting in stories, speed, wit, and each other’s gifts. Rabbit existence in the world is contingent on the utilization of the lessons learned from the story of their origin and the gifts provided by Frith. These gifts determine their very character as wild creatures of the world. When they try to exist without relying on their gifts they pervert their nature and become tame, subject to even more tyrannical powers.

2.2 The Substitution of Security for Narrative

Only against this background can we understand the events at Sandleford that resulted in the escape of some of the rabbits. Not that Sandleford was an extraordinarily unjust society, but it was no longer sensitive to the dangers that always threaten. In effect, the destruction of Sandleford was the result of its success.

In many ways Sandleford was a typical rabbit community. At the top of the social order was the chief rabbit, named Threarah but usually referred to as “*the* Threarah.” “He had won his position not only by strength in his prime, but also by level-headedness and a certain self-contained detachment, quite unlike the impulsive behavior of most rabbits. It was well known that he never let himself become excited by rumor or danger. He had coolly—some even said coldly—stood firm during the terrible onslaught of the myxomatosis, ruthlessly driving out every rabbit who seemed to be sickening. He had resisted all ideas of mass emigration and enforced complete isolation in the warren, thereby almost certainly saving it from extinction” (19). As a result the rabbits at Sandleford assumed that their security rested in their loyalty to the Threarah.

Directly under the chief rabbit were the owsla, “a group of strong or clever rabbits—second year or older—surrounding the chief rabbit and his doe and exercising authority” (14). The character of the owsla varies from one warren to another, but at Sandleford the owsla had a rather military character; their chief duties were seeing that no one tried to leave the warren and protecting the Threarah. The rest of the warren were rank-and-file ordinary rabbits or “outsirkters.” Basically, at Sandleford warren the higher one’s status, the more

favorable one's share in the distribution of goods. A member of the owsla, for instance, had the advantage over the outskirter in silflay (feeding), mating, and choice of burrows. The primary occupation of the rabbits at Sandleford had become competition for the higher-status positions. The rule of the warren thus became "These are my claws, so this is my cowslip [a particular delicacy among rabbits]. These are my teeth, so this is my burrow" (14).

Stories of El-ahrairah still seem to have been told at Sandleford, but primarily as a means of entertainment, for it was assumed that the warren had weathered the worst. Into this warren were born Hazel, destined to become the chief rabbit of *Watership Down*, and Fiver, his strange brother who had the ability to sense the future. It was because Hazel had learned to trust his brother's gift that he paid attention to Fiver's premonition that Sandleford must be abandoned because it was soon to be destroyed. The basis for Fiver's concern was nothing but a piece of wood nailed to a post with the unintelligible script: "THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY, BERKS" (16).

Hazel convinced one of the lesser members of the owsla, Bigwig, to obtain an audience with the Threarah so Fiver might deliver his prediction of destruction of Sandleford and the recommendation that they leave the warren. The Threarah, however, said in an extremely understanding voice:

"Well, I never did! That's rather a tall order, isn't it? What do you think yourself?"

"Well, Sir," said Hazel, "my brother doesn't really think about these feelings he gets. He just has the feelings, if you see what I mean. I'm sure you're the right person to decide what we ought to do."

"Well, that's very nice of you to say that. I hope I am. But now, my dear fellows, let's just think about this a moment, shall we? It's May, isn't it? Everyone's busy and most of the rabbits are enjoying themselves. No elil [enemies] for miles, or so they tell me. No illness, good weather. And you want me to tell the warren that young-er—your brother here has got a hunch and we must all go traipsing across country to goodness knows where and risk the consequences, eh? What do you think they'll say? All delighted, eh!"

"They'd take it from you," said Fiver suddenly.

"That's very nice of you," said the Threarah again. "Well, perhaps they

would, perhaps they would. But I should have to consider it very carefully indeed. A most serious step, of course. And then—" (20–21)

Suddenly Fiver went into a trance, which gave the Threarah the excuse to dismiss them and to reprimand Bigwig for letting such unstable characters into his presence. That very stability provided by the Threarah for his warren made it impossible to be open to the seer. The stories of El-ahrairah had been domesticated in the interest of security and Sandleford thus became victimized by its own history. In fact its history had become its fate; it was no longer able to use tradition to remain open to the gifts and dangers of rabbit existence.

2.3 *The Loss of Narrative as the Loss of Community*

It might be expected that this would have happened at Sandleford; a key purpose of most societies is to provide a sense of security. For example, though we are constantly reminded of the violent and accidental deaths occurring around us every day, most of us live as if we assume our social order is secure and we are safe. We can do this because we assume death happens only to other people. We are even sometimes vaguely comforted by reports of others' deaths, as such reports confirm our own presumption that we are protected by a magical invulnerability. Absorption into most societies is training in self-deception as we conspire with one another to keep death at bay. Ironically, the more our societies confirm this self-deception, the more dangerous our life becomes. We lose the skill of recognizing what danger is and where it lies. Deception becomes the breeding ground for injustice, since the necessity to hide the dangers of our world make it impossible to confront those aspects of our social order that impose unequal burdens on others.⁵ Our conspiracy for safety forces us to see our neighbor as a stranger.

Good and just societies require a narrative, therefore, that helps them know the truth about existence and fight the constant temptation to self-deception. Lack of such a narrative is most vividly depicted in *Watership Down* by the encounter of Hazel and his friends with a warren that, because it lacks a name, I call Cowslip's warren, after the rabbit who invited them to rest there. The primary characteristic of this warren was that it allowed each rabbit to do as he pleased. The story that formed them was that they were no longer

5. See, for example, Simone Weil's powerful reflections on this theme in *The Iliad or The Poems of Force* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 1964).

dependent on tradition. They assumed the way to stop history from becoming their fate, as it had for Sandleford, was to have no history at all.⁶

Before I can describe Hazel and his friends' encounter with Cowslip's warren I need to introduce two other characters crucial to the story. In addition to Fiver and Bigwig (who had left with them because he obviously had no future at Sandleford), there was Pipkin and Blackberry. Pipkin, like Fiver, was small; unlike Fiver, he had no gift or skill. Though weak and constantly in need of help, in some ways he is the most crucial rabbit for the determination of the character of Watership Down warren. By endangering themselves in order to care for Pipkin, they develop an openness to the stranger.⁷

Blackberry, who was as rational as Fiver was insightful, also joined the band. It was he who helped them escape from Sandleford without having to leave the completely exhausted Pipkin behind by suggesting the extraordinary idea of floating Pipkin across a stream on a board. It should be noted that Blackberry's gift, like those of all the other rabbits, is a manifestation of the virtue of courage. For Blackberry's intelligence is more than brightness; it stems from his willingness to consider all aspects and alternatives of a problem, even when they are extremely threatening or unpleasant.

It is therefore to Blackberry that Hazel turns for advice on whether they should accept Cowslip's invitation to rest at his warren. It is a very tempting invitation, since they are tired after their escape from Sandleford, they are out in the open, and a storm is soon to break. Blackberry argues,

There's no way of finding out whether he's to be trusted except to try it. He seemed friendly. But then, if a lot of rabbits were afraid of some newcomers and wanted to deceive them—get them down a hole and attack them—they'd start—wouldn't they?—by sending someone who was plausible. They might

6. Langdon Gilkey provides an insightful analysis of fate in *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 49–50.

7. Our culture has unfortunately confused the moral significance of gift giving by assuming that what is important is giving rather than receiving. As a result we have failed to pay adequate attention to the difficulty of knowing how to receive a gift. For nothing is harder than knowing how to simply accept a gift and be thankful for it. We fear the power of the gift-giver and want to do something in return so we will not be in debt. Pipkin's gift was the ability to accept gifts without assuming that he owed anyone anything in return, and also not to feel resentment that he was the one that had to receive the gifts. Of course, Pipkin's ability to receive gifts depended on his community sense that they would not have it otherwise.

For further reflections on this theme, particularly as it challenges how the commitment to equality can too easily be used to deny the importance of diversity for a good polity, see my "Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality," in *sp*.

want to kill us. But then again, as he said, there's plenty of grass and as for turning them out or taking their does, if they're all up to his size and weight they've nothing to fear from a crowd like us. They must have seen us come. We were tired. Surely that was the time to attack us? Or while we were separated, before we began digging? But they didn't. I reckon they're more likely to be friendly than otherwise. There's only one thing that beats me. What do they stand to get from asking us to join their warren? (75)

Blackberry's logic is perfect, of course, but we shall see it leads to exactly the wrong conclusion. Fiver is convinced that they should not enter the warren, but as usual he is unable to give any reason and thus Hazel decides to follow Blackberry's advice. On entering they discover that there are some very "unnatural" aspects to the warren. It is roomy and well made with a large central room, but very few rabbits inhabit it. Those that do live there are big, but they are not, as Bigwig observes, very strong—nor do they have any fighting skill.

Even stranger is the absence of a chief rabbit, as everyone is allowed to do as he pleases.⁸ Cowslip's invitation to them, for example, was made on his own initiative. They need no chief rabbit, because there is no need to worry about foxes or other enemies (elil). It seems that there is a man who kills all the rabbits' enemies and provides the rabbits with the best kind of food. They no

8. One of the most persistent problems with the liberal understanding of society is how to account for and legitimate authority. According to John Rawls, the primary purpose of liberalism is to make "society a cooperative venture for mutual advantage" (*A Theory of Justice* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971], 4). In other words, it is the intention to supplant the need for leadership with procedural rules of fair play. The continued phenomenon of leadership in society thus can appear to the liberal only as due to the incomplete institutionalization of liberal principles. Robert Nozick is, perhaps, a clearer example of the tendency of liberalism to assume that some kind of invisible-hand explanation of state power and authority is possible. See his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 10–25.

A correlate of the liberal attempt to avoid providing an account of legitimate authority is their assumption that society can be construed as a voluntary venture. It is the function of liberal theory to convince us that we can choose our own story, that we are free from the past, that our participation in society is "voluntary." There is perhaps no better metaphor for this than Rawls's utilization of the "original position," where we are explicitly stripped of all history in an effort to have us assume the "moral point of view." Even though one can appreciate the powerful moral motivation behind Rawls's method, he fails to give an adequate account of how our social order is as much our fate as it is our destiny. As a result, liberalism can become self-deceptive, as it gives us the illusion that freedom is more a status than a task. See, for example, Richard Sennett's insightful analysis of the deceptions involved when "autonomy" is claimed to replace "authority" in *Authority* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 84–121.

longer need to hunt for their food, and they have even begun the unheard of practice of storing food underground.

Stranger yet is that stories are no longer told. To repay them for their hospitality, Hazel suggests that Dandelion, a fellow escapee from Sandleford who has a gift for telling stories, entertain everyone by telling the story of the king's lettuce.⁹ It is a story of how El-ahrairah bet Prince Rainbow not only that he could steal King Darzin's lettuce, which was guarded night and day, but that he could even get the king to deliver the lettuce to Rainbow's warren. If he won the bet Prince Rainbow must let the rabbits out of the marshes to breed and make homes everywhere.

El-ahrairah's plan was to have Rabscuttle, his close friend and commander of his owsla, gain entrance to the palace by playing with some children and then being taken inside with them. Once admitted to the palace, Rabscuttle found his way to the royal storeroom and made some of the lettuce bad, so that King Darzin would fall ill after eating it. At that moment El-ahrairah arrived disguised as a physician and examined the king. He told the king that the lettuce was infected by the dreaded virus Lusepedoodle, and because the infected lettuce is particularly deadly to rabbits he advised the king to send the lettuce to his worst enemy, El-ahrairah. The king thought this was a splendid idea, so El-ahrairah had the lettuce delivered and thus freed his people from the marshes.

Now this is obviously a story to delight any rabbit, for it is a story of wit, cunning, and humor that reinforces the point that the rabbits must survive using the gifts provided to El-ahrairah by Frith. After hearing the story, however, the rabbits of the warren of freedom were less than enthusiastic.

"Very nice," said Cowslip. He seemed to be searching for something more to say, but then repeated, "Yes, very nice. An unusual tale."

"But he must know it, surely?" muttered Blackberry to Hazel.

"I always think these traditional stories retain a lot of charm," said another of the rabbits, "especially when they're told in the real old-fashioned spirit."

"Yes," said Strawberry [another rabbit of Cowslip's warren]. "Conviction,

9. The stories of El-ahrairah are not only told, but told at the right time. Thus, the story of the "Trial of El-ahrairah," which involves El-ahrairah's use of other animals, is told as they are beginning to develop Watership Down, that is, just before Hazel's care of Kehaar, the wounded gull. Adams seems to be suggesting that good communities not only know how to tell truthful stories truthfully, but also when to tell them.

that's what it needs. You really have to *believe* in El-ahrairah and Prince Rainbow, don't you? Then all the rest follows."

"Don't say anything, Bigwig," whispered Hazel: for Bigwig was scuffling his paws indignantly. "You can't force them to like it if they don't. Let's wait and see what they can do themselves." Aloud, he said, "Our stories haven't changed in generations, you know. After all, we haven't changed ourselves. Our lives have been the same as our fathers' and their fathers' before them. Things are different here. We realize that, and we think your new ideas and ways are very exciting. We're all wondering what kind of things you tell stories about."

"Well, we don't tell the old stories very much," said Cowslip. "Our stories and poems are mostly about our own lives here. . . . El-ahrairah doesn't really mean much to us. Not that your friend's story wasn't very charming," he added hastily.

"El-ahrairah is a trickster," said Buckthorn, "and rabbits will always need tricks."

"No," said a new voice from the further end of the hall, beyond Cowslip. "Rabbits need dignity and, above all, the will to accept their fate." (108)

The speaker was Silverweed, the poet of this strange warren, who recited a poem that ended as follows: "I am here, Lord Frith, I am running through the long grass. O take me with you, dropping behind the woods, Far away, to the heart of light, and the silence. For I am ready to give you my breath, my life, The shining circle of the sun, the sun and the rabbit" (110). As Silverweed recited his poem, Fiver became increasingly nervous and finally caused a stir by bolting out of the warren. Hazel joined him and Fiver again emphasized that they must leave because Silverweed spoke the truth for this warren—that rabbits in such a warren must learn to accept death. Hazel and Bigwig ignored this warning, however, since they continued to think that the warren might make a good permanent home.

Their hopes were quickly dashed when the next morning Bigwig was caught in a snare prepared by the farmer who protected the rabbits. Only by an extraordinary effort were they able to chew through the stake holding the snare and free Bigwig. Even that would not have been possible if Pipkin's small size had not allowed him to get down to where the peg was narrower. Though in bad shape, Bigwig immediately wanted to turn on Cowslip and the others for leading them into such a warren. Fiver restrained him, however, by constructing the story of this strange warren.

He suggested that the warren was the result of the farmer's realization that he did not have to keep rabbits in hutches if he fed and looked after some wild ones. He would snare a few from time to time, but not enough to frighten them away. As a result of the farmer's plan, the rabbits grew big and forgot the ways of wild rabbits. They also forgot El-ahrairah, for they had no use for tricks and cunning. Moreover, they had no need for a chief rabbit:

For a Chief Rabbit must be El-ahrairah to his warren and keep them from death: and here there was no death but one, and what Chief Rabbit could have an answer to that? Instead, Frith sent them strange singers, beautiful and sick like oak apples, like robins' pincushions on the wild rose. And since they could not bear the truth, these singers, who might in some other place have been wise, were squeezed under the terrible weight of the warren's secret until they gulped out fine folly—about dignity and acquiescence, and anything else that could make believe that the rabbit loved the shining wire. But one strict rule they had; oh, yes, the strictest. No one must ever ask where another rabbit was and anyone who asked "Where?"—except in song or a poem—must be silenced. To say "Where?" was bad enough, but to speak openly of the wires—that was intolerable. For that they would scratch and kill. (123–24)

Because they could not ask where anyone was, they also lost the most precious skills rabbits needed to survive: cooperation and friendship. One could not risk getting too close to another rabbit, for that one might be the next to die. Friendship implies mutual giving of aid, but these rabbits had accepted a social system that required them to look after themselves first.¹⁰ Cowslip had extended invitations to strangers only because that increased the odds that he himself would not be caught in the wire. Deception thus became the rule for this society, since the truth would require a concern for and trust in one another that these "free" rabbits were no longer able to give. It was no wonder that such rabbits were not interested in hearing about the adventures of Hazel and his friends or even those of El-ahrairah, for who "wants to hear about brave deeds when he's ashamed of his own, and who likes an open, honest tale from someone he's deceiving" (124).

Finally taking Fiver's advice, Hazel and the others decided to leave immediately. However, just as they were leaving, Strawberry, whose doe had recently

10. Contemporary political and ethical theory seems to ignore entirely the nature and social significance of friendship and other special relations such as the family. As a result we are left devoid of any language that can help articulate the significance of friendship and the family for our personal and political existence.

been snared, asked to be allowed to join their company. Just as the others were about to say no, Hazel simply said, "You can come with us" (126). Thus, still homeless but in the beginnings of community, they accept a stranger even though he was a former enemy. As we shall see, their willingness to take the stranger into their midst becomes the very means of their survival.

3. *Gifts, Strangers, and Community*

By attending to the stories in *Watership Down* I have tried to illuminate the relation between narrative and social ethics. For whatever else can be said about Sandleford and Cowslip's warren, their inability to maintain the traditions of El-ahrairah resulted in the corruption of rabbit community and nature.¹¹ There is, in addition, a close connection between the ability to tell the stories of El-ahrairah and the capacity to recognize and use gifts that often come in the form of friends. To better appreciate this connection we need to pay closer attention to the character of Hazel's warren, *Watership Down*.

The scraggly band of rabbits who escaped from Sandleford were changed by their journey. The demands of their journey gave them not only renewed appreciation for the significance of El-ahrairah for their lives, but they learned to trust and depend on one another. They had become tenacious in their struggle for survival, and now understood one another and worked together:

11. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that our culture lacks a moral scheme that might provide "a vision" of man's true end, of the relation of his empirical nature to his essential nature. "It is a tacit assumption of secular, liberal, pluralist culture, of the culture of modernity, that to a rational man no such vision is now available, because we can have no rationally defensible concept of man's true end or of an essential human nature. Consequently, what we inherit from the varied and different strands of our past is a collection of fragments, of moral premises detached from the contexts in which they were once at home, survivals now available for independent moral assertion from a variety of moral points of view. It is this that makes moral argument appear to consist merely of the clash of bare assertion and counterassertion, marked by what is only the appearance of argument, so that nonrational persuasion seems to be the only way for an agent to resolve the issues in his own mind" ("How Virtues Become Vices," in *Evaluation and Explanation in the Biomedical Sciences*, ed. H. T. Engelhardt and Stuart Spicker [Boston: Reidel Publishing, 1974], 100). See also MacIntyre's "An Essay Prepared for the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavior Research on the Subject of How to Identify Ethical Principles," *The Belmont Report* (Washington, DC: DHEW Publications, 1978), article 10, pp. 1-20, 41. From this perspective the commitment of liberal political and ethical theory to the autonomy of the individual is not so much a rational necessity as it is the only practical alternative. The problem with such a strategy, however, is that it only leads us further away from confronting our situation, as we fail to see the narratives that in fact constitute our "autonomy."

“The truth about the warren had been a grim shock. They had come closer together, relying on and valuing each other’s capacities. They knew now that it was on these and nothing else that their lives depended, and they were not going to waste anything they possessed between them. In spite of Hazel’s efforts beside the snare, there was not one of them who had not turned sick at heart to think that Bigwig was dead and wondered, like Blackberry, what would become of them now. Without Hazel, Blackberry, Buckthorn, and Pipkin, Bigwig would have died. Without himself he would have died, for which else, of them all, would not have stopped running after such punishment? There was no more questioning of Bigwig’s strength, Fiver’s insight, Blackberry’s wits or Hazel’s authority” (129).

Such a community depends on the ability to trust in the gifts each brings to the group’s shared existence. They must in a certain sense “be out of control,” often dependent on luck to help them over their difficulties. “Luck” can be a very misleading term; more properly, it is fate put to good use by the imaginative skills acquired through a truthful tradition.¹² This is perhaps best exemplified in the story of the “Black Rabbit of Inlé.”

3.1 *How Gifts Make Us Safe*

The story of the Black Rabbit of Inlé is told at the most dangerous moment in the lives of the rabbits who constitute the Watership warren. It is a time when their lives hang in the balance, a time when they will be called on to take chances that few rabbits are willing to take. For they must secure does from Efrafa if their warren is to have a future. Bigwig insists that the story of the Black Rabbit be told, even though he will soon enter Efrafa itself in hopes of convincing some does to escape.

The story begins with King Darzin, tired of being constantly tricked and outwitted by El-ahrairah, finding an effective way to stop the rabbits from

12. For one of the few attempts to provide a philosophically adequate account of luck, see Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 50 (1976): 114–35. Williams makes an important distinction between luck that is intrinsic to my project and luck that is extrinsic, but points out that knowing how to make such a distinction in respect to our own lives is extremely difficult. He also rightly criticizes Rawls’s claim that the guiding principle of a rational individual is to act so that he need never blame himself for how things turn out. For such a view “implicitly ignores the obvious fact that what one does and the sort of life one leads condition one’s later desires and judgments: the standpoint of that retrospective judge who will be my later self will be the product of my earlier choices” (130–31). In other words, Rawls fails to see that my “autonomy” depends exactly on my being able to accept responsibility for what I have not, strictly speaking, “done.”

leaving their warrens. The rabbits are beginning to die of starvation and disease because they can silflay only with the greatest difficulty. El-ahrairah concludes that his only hope is to journey far away to the cold and lifeless world of the Black Rabbit of Inlé. It is his plan to bargain with the Black Rabbit to free his people.

We cannot take the time to speculate about the ontological status of the Black Rabbit, but we should know that he is fear and everlasting darkness. Though a rabbit himself, the Black Rabbit hates the rabbits and wants their destruction. Even in his darkness he serves Lord Frith by doing his appointed task, which is “to bring about what must be” (274). As it is said, “We come into the world and we have to go: but we do not go merely to serve the turn of one enemy or another. If that were so, we would all be destroyed in a day. We go by the will of Black Rabbit of Inlé and only by his will. And though that will seems hard and bitter to us all, yet in his way he is our protector, for he knows Frith’s promise to the rabbits and he will avenge any rabbit who may chance to be destroyed without the consent of himself. Anyone who has seen a game-keeper’s gibbet knows what the Black Rabbit can bring down on elil [foxes] who think they will do what they will” (274–75).

El-ahrairah, with Rabscuttle, undertakes the arduous journey to the warren of the Black Rabbit so that he can offer his life in return for the lives of the rabbits. But the Black Rabbit points out that El-ahrairah’s life is his already so he has nothing with which to bargain. El-ahrairah tries to trick the Black Rabbit into taking his life by enticing him into several contests, but El-ahrairah succeeds only in losing his whiskers, tail, and ears; finally he even tries to contract the dreaded white blindness. The Black Rabbit, although still completely unmoved by El-ahrairah’s suffering, suddenly declares that “this is a cold warren: a bad place for the living and no place at all for warm hearts and brave spirits. You are a nuisance to me. Go home. I myself will save your people. Do not have the impertinence to ask me when. There is no time here. They are already saved” (283).

Because of El-ahrairah’s weakened condition it took many months for him and Rabscuttle to find their way home. Their wits were confused, and they survived only by other animals giving them direction and shelter. After finding their way back to the warren at last, they discover that all their old companions have been replaced by their children. Rabscuttle, inquiring about the whereabouts of Loosestrife, one of the captains of owsla during the fighting, was asked:

“What fighting?”

“The fighting against King Darzin,” replied Rabscuttle.

“Here, do me a favor, old fellow, will you?” said the buck. “That fighting—I wasn’t born when it finished.”

“But surely you know the owsla captains who were?” said Rabscuttle.

“I wouldn’t be seen dead with them,” said the buck. “What, that white-whiskered old bunch? What do we want to know about them?”

“What they did,” said Rabscuttle.

“That war lark, old fellow?” said the first buck. “That’s all finished now. That’s got nothing to do with us.”

“If this Loosestrife fought King What’s-His-Name, that’s his business,” said one of the does. “It’s not our business, is it?”

“It was all a very wicked thing,” said another doe. “Shameful, really. If nobody fought in wars, there wouldn’t be any, would there? But you can’t get old rabbits to see that.” (284–85)

El-ahrairah did not try to respond to this conversation, but rather found a place under a nut bush to watch the sun sink into the horizon. In the failing light he suddenly realized that Lord Frith was close beside him.

“Are you angry, El-ahrairah?” asked Lord Frith.

“No, my lord,” replied El-ahrairah, “I am not angry. But I have learned that with creatures one loves, suffering is not the only thing for which one may pity them. A rabbit who does not know when a gift has made him safe is poorer than a slug, even though he may think otherwise himself.” (285)

Lord Frith then gave El-ahrairah a new tail and whiskers and some new ears that had a little starlight in them, but not enough to give away a clever thief like El-ahrairah.

Hazel’s warren is Adams’s attempt to show what kind of community might result in a group of rabbits that have learned that a gift has made them safe. But the recognition that their lives depend on luck causes them to work all the harder to make the necessities of their lives their destiny. Thus after a long journey they come to a particularly lonely and well-protected down that Fiver feels is the right place for their home. “‘O Frith on the hills!’ cried Dandelion. ‘He must have made it, for us!’ ‘He may have made it, but Fiver thought of it for us,’ answered Hazel” (133).

Any community that has a story such as the “Black Rabbit of Inlé” in its

tradition can never assume that it “has control” of its existence.¹³ As much as Hazel and his companions desire a warren they can call home, they know also that they can never cease being on a journey. When rabbits yearn for and try to secure complete safety, their nature is perverted. They can only continue to rely on their wit and their courage and each other. Bigwig is particularly interesting in this respect, since we see him learn to trust not only in his strength and bravery but in his wit and the aid of others—particularly those who seem to have little to contribute.

3.2 *Tradition, Nature, and Strangers*

Often, claims that tradition is central for political and social theory are meant to have a primarily conservative effect. We are supposed to be convinced that we must do as our fathers did if we are to preserve those values we hold dear, or that society is too complex for planned change because such change always has effects that we have not anticipated. Those who would change society too often feel the only alternative to the conservative option is to find a rational basis for social organization that is tradition-free. As a result they become captured by a tradition that is more tyrannical because it has the pretense of absolute rationality. In contrast, I am suggesting that substantive traditions are not at odds with reason but are the bearers of rationality and innovation. The establishment of the warren at Watership Down is particularly interesting in this regard, because here we see tradition opening up new ways to distinguish the “natural from the unnatural” and to turn the stranger into a friend.

For example, among rabbits it has always been assumed that digging warrens is does’ work. The rabbits that established Watership Down, however, were all bucks. Hazel argued that in the warren of “freedom” many things the rabbits did were “unnatural,” but “they’d altered what rabbits do naturally because they thought they could do better. And if they altered their ways, so

13. It may be that the popularity of *Watership Down* denotes a change of consciousness in our culture. For it was just a few years ago that the Kennedy administration represented the “can do” mentality of our society. If we have a problem, then it is bound to be solvable by well-trained people using the amazing technology developed by our scientists. However, since then we have found ourselves brought to a halt by our lack of oil. Our solutions seem to cause as many problems as they solve. Ecologically we are damned if we do and damned if we do not. In other words, it may be that we identify with rabbits because we suddenly feel that like them we do not have control of our world. But even more disturbing we do not know how to get control of our world, nor are we sure how to live in such a world.

can we if we like" (138). Blackberry, following the example of how the warren of the snares was dug around tree roots to allow for the large common room, began to dig amid some birch trees. Soon all the bucks followed his example.

It is important to note, however, that Hazel does not assume that rabbit nature is infinitely malleable. As we will see later, Efrafa is condemned because it is an "unnatural society" led by a fierce leader, General Woundwort, who is so unrabbitlike he will even fight a dog. In Efrafa, Woundwort has attempted to organize his rabbits so that they will feed at a certain time, rest at a certain time, breed at a certain time, and so on. Nature has its revenge, and rabbits in this strange warren actually die of old age, and overpopulation causes does to reabsorb their litters. For long ago El-ahrairah made a bargain with Frith that rabbits should not be born dead or unwanted; thus if there was little chance of a decent life it was a doe's privilege to take them back into her body unborn.¹⁴

The other crucial aspect of *Watership Down* is that this community continues to remain open to the stranger. Soon after finishing some of the runs they find a bloodied rabbit near death. As they tend to him they realize that it is Captain Holly of the Sandleford owsla. He tells them that Sandleford has indeed been razed by men and that only a few, like himself, were able to escape. Such destruction is almost impossible for rabbits to comprehend, "for all other elil do what they have to do and Frith moves them as he moves us. They live on the earth and they need food. Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals" (157). Holly, even though he is a sign of this terrible and incomprehensible evil, is allowed to join *Watership Down*. In doing so he apologizes to Bigwig for attacking him as he tried to leave Sandleford: "It wasn't I who tried to arrest you—that was another rabbit, long, long ago" (166). He has been changed through his suffering, and as such becomes a crucial member of Hazel's warren.

14. I suspect the continual return of natural law is best explained as an indication that our "nature" seldom tells us what we ought to do but often tells us what we are doing is inappropriate. Thus natural law is primarily a test, as the "principles" of natural law are means to sensitize us to ways our nature can and may be distorted. The traditional claim that the Christian life is in harmony with natural law is a promissory note that Christian existence stands ready to be challenged by "nature." It has been a mistake, however, to assume that Christian ethics can therefore begin on the basis of clearly articulated "principles" of natural law. For the "principles" of natural law are known only through the articulation of a positive tradition. [For Hauerwas's constructive understanding of the role of the natural law, see "Natural Law, Tragedy and Theological Ethics" (1975) in *TT*, and "The Truth about God: The Decalogue as Condition for Truthful Speech" (1998) in *STT*.]

It is one thing to accept an enemy who is like yourself, but it is quite another to help those with whom you share no kinship at all. But that is what Hazel does, for just as El-ahrairah had been helped by other animals, so he helps a mouse escape a kestrel by letting him hide in one of the warren's runs. Hazel's friends are offended by this, but Hazel explains that in their situation they cannot "afford to waste anything that might do us good. We're in a strange place we don't know much about and we need friends. Now, elil can't do us good, obviously, but there are many creatures that aren't elil—birds, mice, yonil [hedgehogs] and so on. Rabbits don't usually have much to do with them, but their enemies are our enemies, for the most part. I think we ought to do all we can to make these creatures friendly. It might turn out to be well worth the trouble" (169). And soon another mouse tells them where to find the grass rabbits favor most.

Even more astounding is Hazel's rescue of Kehaar, a gull that had been injured by a cat so it could not fly. Condemned to the ground, he faced certain death, but Hazel offers him hospitality in the warren. The rabbits even undertake an activity degrading to rabbits to ensure his survival: digging for worms so that Kehaar might eat. Soon, however, Kehaar and Bigwig become fast friends, because it is apparent they share the same aggressive spirit toward life. Moreover, as we shall see, Kehaar proves invaluable in helping them secure the does from Efrafa.

For Hazel knew that as soon as they became reasonably safe the bucks would become lonely for does. While rabbits tend not to be romantic in matters of love, they have a strong will to perpetuate their own kind. Without does, no matter how good a life they established for themselves at Watership Down, nothing would matter. Rabbits survive by their dogged refusal to let the dangers of their life stop them from carrying on—which is nowhere more centrally embodied than in their insistence on having and rearing kittens. For it is only through their children that the tradition can be carried on. To fail to have kittens would be tantamount to rejecting the tradition and would symbolize a loss of confidence in their ability to live out that tradition.

As soon as Kehaar is well Hazel asks him to act as their air force and search the countryside for does. He finds two groups of does: some hutch rabbits at the nearby Nuthanger Farm and at the huge warren of Efrafa some distance away. Hazel chooses Holly to lead a group to Efrafa to see if they might be willing, because of overcrowding, to allow some does to leave. However, they find that not only is that not possible, but that Efrafa represents an even more frightening political alternative than either Sandleford or the warren of freedom.

4. Leadership, Community, and the Unexpected

Though the differences among the communities in *Watership Down* are pronounced, the most dramatic contrast is certainly between Efrafa and Cowslip's warren, the former being completely organized with each rabbit belonging to a "Mark" with a captain who controlled every movement, and the latter being characterized by almost complete freedom. The former was led by a fierce and dominant rabbit, and the latter had no chief rabbit at all. But in spite of their differences, in neither were the stories of El-ahrairah told. In Efrafa, Bigwig discovers that does recite poetry, such as:

Long ago The Yellowhammer sang, high on the thorn.
 He sang near a litter that the doe brought out to play,
 He sang in the wind and the kittens played below.
 Their time slipped by all under the elder bloom.
 But the bird flew away and now my heart is dark
 And time will never play in the fields again. . . .

The frost is falling, the frost falls into my body.
 My nostrils, my ears are torpid under the frost.
 The swift will come in the spring, crying "News! News!
 Does, dig new holes and flow with milk for your litters."
 I shall not hear. The embryos return
 Into my dulled body. Across my sleep
 There runs a wire fence to imprison the wind
 I shall never feel the wind blowing again. (323)

The loss of the narratives of El-ahrairah at Efrafa has also resulted in a transformation of the position of chief rabbit. For General Woundwort is unlike any rabbit ever seen. As Holly described him, "He was a fighting animal—fierce as a rat or a dog. He fought because he actually felt safer fighting than running. He was brave, all right. But it wasn't natural; and that's why it was bound to finish him in the end. He was trying to do something that Frith never meant any rabbit to do" (467).

As a kitten Woundwort had seen his father killed by a man and his mother wounded and as a result eaten by a fox. He was rescued by a man who fed him so well he grew huge and strong. At the first opportunity he escaped, took over a small warren by killing any that would challenge his rule, and then united by force his warren with others close by to form Efrafa. In order to secure Efrafa

he would not allow any further runs to be dug or the warren extended in any way: to do so might attract elil.

Though Woundwort had immense personal power, his only object seems to have been to create a warren that would be free from the tragedy of his parents. He not only organized the warren into Marks, but he gathered around him the bravest and most ferocious rabbits and made each of them live only to gain his special favor. These rabbits were sent out on periodic patrols so that any elil in the area could be reported and that strange rabbits, who might unwittingly attract elil, could be killed or captured. For Efrafa's safety depended on seeing that the unexpected did not upset their defenses. The primary rule for the owsla had become "Anything out of the ordinary is a possible source of danger" and must thus be reported immediately (338).

It would be a mistake, therefore, to think Woundwort an evil tyrant, for he was more like Dostoyevski's Grand Inquisitor. Nor is there any doubt that his leadership produced results, for Efrafa was remarkably safe. The only difficulty was that his followers lost the ability to think and make decisions for themselves. As a result, they increasingly had to bring every matter for judgment to Woundwort himself.

The kind of leadership that Hazel provides is obviously in marked contrast to Woundwort. Although he cares no less than Woundwort for his warren, he is prepared to take the risk of depending on others for the governance of the warren. In fact, Hazel was never formally installed as chief rabbit, he just became chief rabbit because he seemed to know how to make the decisions that made best use of everyone's talents and he made everyone face up to the necessities of their situation. As they left Sandleford, for example, they became hopelessly lost and some wanted to simply quit or go back. It was Hazel, as lost as the rest, who said,

"Look, I know there's been some trouble, but the best thing will be to try to forget it. This is a bad place, but we'll soon get out of it."

"Do you really think we will?" asked Dandelion.

"If you'll follow me now," replied Hazel desperately, "I'll have you out of it by sunrise." (62)

Note that Hazel's primary gift is his willingness to accept responsibility for making the decision when it is not clear what it is that should be done. Moreover, he is willing to pay the price for such decisions; thus it is he who refuses to leave Pipkin behind at the stream on the grounds that "I got Pipkin

into this and I'm going to get him out" (44). Other than this he lacks any characteristic that should make him the chief rabbit: he is not as strong as Bigwig, lacks Fiver's insight, and is not as clever as Blackberry. All he is able to do is say "Let's do this," and then live with the consequences. After finally making it through the night they reach some hills and Blackberry says, "Oh, Hazel, I was so tired and confused, I actually began to wonder whether you knew where you were going. I could hear you in the heather, saying 'Not far now' and it was annoying me. . . . I should know better. Frithrah, you're what I call a chief rabbit" (64).

Of course, as a leader Hazel does have one advantage as he is the rare leader who has the courage to listen to the seer. Listening to seers is tricky business and is safely done only in a community on which the seer's insight depends. At one point, when Hazel decides against Fiver's advice to be as heroic as Bigwig and raid the Nuthanger Farm for the hutch does, the whole affair almost ends in disaster. He was simply not cut out to be a hero. His leadership and his use of Fiver's insight depends on his willingness to rely on the other's strength. A leader like Woundwort simply cannot understand this kind of leadership. Thus in the final confrontation between Efrafa and Watership Down he is shocked to discover that Bigwig is not the chief rabbit.

Note that Hazel is not only an exceptional chief rabbit, but that it takes an exceptional community to have a chief rabbit like Hazel. This is nowhere better exemplified than in the decision to raid Efrafa to get the does. After Holly's failed attempt to secure the does peacefully from Efrafa it was clear to Hazel that their only hope was to get the does by a raid. His plan was to have Bigwig join Efrafa as a stray rabbit and then with the help of Kehaar to escape with some willing does during a silflay. Hazel's problem was that he did not know how to get the group back to Watership Down without Woundwort's patrols overtaking them. But the incompleteness of the plan did not prevent them from following Hazel; they would simply have to trust in luck.

To make a very complicated story short, Bigwig was able to successfully join Efrafa and secure the cooperation of some does in an escape attempt. However, the escape was complicated by an unexpected thunderstorm, which they were nonetheless able to turn to their advantage, and they were aided by an attack by Kehaar. Their escape, however, was successful only because Blackberry discovered a boat and saw how to use it.

During their march back to Watership Down an event occurred that graphically highlights the difference between Efrafa and Watership Down. In

spite of the difficulty that escape from Efrafa involved, Bigwig took the time to also rescue Blackavar, a rabbit who had been severely beaten by Woundwort's guards for trying to escape earlier. As they proceeded home Blackavar warned them that they needed to be particularly careful of fox in a certain area, since he had learned that fox were often there through his patrols with General Woundwort. However, Hazel decided that, because of the risk of General Woundwort catching them, they needed to go through the area, and as a result a fox got one of the does that had come with them from Efrafa. Later when Bigwig suggested to Blackavar that they should have taken his advice, he was shocked to discover that Blackavar had forgotten he had ever given the warning. Hyzenthlay, a doe from Efrafa, was able to explain why:

"In Efrafa if a rabbit gave advice and the advice wasn't accepted, he immediately forgot it and so did everyone else. Blackavar thought what Hazel decided; and whether it turned out later to be right or wrong was all the same. His own advice had never been given."

"I can't believe that," said Bigwig. "Efrafa! Ants led by a dog! But we're not in Efrafa now. Has he really forgotten that he warned us?"

"Probably he really has. But whether or not, you'd never get him to admit that he warned you or to listen while you told him he'd been right. He could no more do that than pass hraka underground."

"But you're an Efracan. Do you think like that, too?"

"I'm a doe," said Hyzenthlay. (390)¹⁵

It was thus that the rabbits of *Watership Down* learned how extraordinary the form of leadership was that they had evolved. Hazel was remarkable for his willingness to learn from all the others and for his ability to see that *Watership Down* depended on all their gifts. But even more remarkable was the character of their community manifested in their ability to sustain a leader who could make mistakes and yet remain chief rabbit. Security could not be bought by placing absolute faith in any chief rabbit, no matter how talented or brave. Rather, their security depended on their willingness to trust one an-

15. *Watership Down* is obviously not a book that contemporary feminists will find very satisfactory. However, it is at least worth observing that Hyzenthlay's affirmation of being a doe made her the freest of the rabbits at Efrafa. For every society corrupts us by tempting us to identify with the ends of the society in order to do good as a means for personal aggrandizement. Those who are the "outs" in a society often have the best perspective to appreciate the coercive aspects of a social order, since they are not easily tempted to accept the stated idealizations of their society.

other with their lives. For only then could their various talents be coordinated in service for the community.

4.1 *The Insufficiency of Power as Coercion*

It is well-known that Stalin responded to Pius XII's condemnation with the taunting question about how many divisions had the pope. Most assume that Stalin's point is well taken, for without divisions the power of the church counts for nothing. Yet in spite of all appearances to the contrary, Stalin's response masks the fundamental weakness of his position. A leadership that cannot stand the force of truth must always rely on armies. But a leadership so constituted must always respond to the slightest provocation that might reveal its essential weakness.

So Woundwort could not afford to let the successful escape of the does go unnoticed. His power depended on never being embarrassed, and the rabbits of Watership Down had done just that.

"And fools we look now," said Woundwort. "Make no mistake about that. Vervain will tell you what the Marks are saying—that Campion was chased into the ditch by the white bird and Thlayli [Bigwig's alias while in Efrafa] called down lightning from the sky and Frith knows what besides."

"The best thing," said old Snowdrop, "will be to say as little about it as possible. Let it blow over. They've got short memories." (416)

But Woundwort could not settle for that, and he made plans to send out patrols to find Watership Down. As he said, "I told Thlayli I'd kill him myself. He may have forgotten that but I haven't."

Hazel, confronting Woundwort on such a patrol, tried to make peace.

"You're General Woundwort, aren't you? I've come to talk to you."

"Did Thlayli send you?" asked Woundwort.

"I'm a friend of Thlayli," replied the rabbit. "I've come to ask why you're here and what it is you want."

"Were you on the riverbank in the rain?" said Woundwort.

"Yes, I was."

"What was left unfinished there will be finished now," said Woundwort.

"We are going to destroy you."

"You won't find it easy," replied the other. "You'll take fewer rabbits home than you brought. We should both do better to come to terms."

"Very well," said Woundwort. "These are the terms. You will give back all

the does who ran from Efrafa and you will hand over the deserters Thlayli and Blackavar to my owsla.”

“No, we can’t agree to that. I’ve come to suggest something altogether different and better for us both. A rabbit has two ears; a rabbit has two eyes, two nostrils. Our two warrens ought to be like that. They ought to be together—not fighting. We ought to make other warrens between us—start one between here and Efrafa, with rabbits from both sides. You wouldn’t lose by that, you’d gain. We both would. A lot of your rabbits are unhappy now and it’s all you can do to control them, but with this plan you’d soon see a difference. Rabbits have enough enemies as it is. They ought not to make more among themselves. A mating between free, independent warrens—what do you say?”

At that moment, in the sunset on Watership Down, there was offered to General Woundwort the opportunity to show whether he was really the leader of vision and genius which he believed himself to be, or whether he was no more than a tyrant with the courage and cunning of a pirate. For one beat of his pulse the lame rabbit’s idea shone clearly before him. He grasped it and realized what it meant. The next, he had pushed it away from him. . . .

“I haven’t time to sit here talking nonsense,” said Woundwort. “You’re in no position to bargain with us. There’s nothing more to be said. Thistle, go back and tell Captain Vervain I want everyone up here at once.”

“And this rabbit, sir,” asked Campion. “Shall I kill him?”

“No,” replied Woundwort. “Since they’ve sent him to ask our terms, he’d better take them back.—Go and tell Thlayli that if the does aren’t waiting outside your warren, with him and Blackavar, by the time I get down there, I’ll tear the throat out of every buck in the place by ni-Frith tomorrow.” (421–22)

I cannot take the time to provide the details of Woundwort’s attack, but Hazel and the rabbits of Watership Down were able to defeat him. They were able to do it because Bigwig used cunning as well as his strength and was able to fight Woundwort in a place where he could not make full use of his bulk; Hazel, taking a cue from Dandelion’s telling of “Rowsby Woof and the Fairy Wogdog” (a story of El-ahrairah’s tricking a dog into letting him steal the cabbage he was supposed to guard for his master), unleashed a dog from Nuthanger Farm that drove off Woundwort for the last time. (We are later told, however, that his body was never found. As a result he was said to live alone as a killer of elil. To this day does threaten their kittens by saying that if they do not behave the General will get them.)

4.2 *Peace*

Peace, as has often been pointed out, is not the absence of disorder and cannot be built on injustice. Peace is built on truth, for order that is built on lies must resort ultimately to coercion. It is, therefore, remarkable that peace seems to have come to Watership Down. Campion, one of Woundwort's former Mark captains, has now become chief rabbit of Efrafa. Hazel's original peace proposal is put into effect and a new warren made up of Efracans and Downers is established between the two warrens. Hazel, never one to overlook a good thing, even incorporates some of the advantages of Efrafa, such as hiding run openings.

Perhaps even more significant is a suggestion that someday there might be peace between humans and rabbits. In the process of releasing the dog, Hazel was attacked by a cat and saved by a little girl at the farm. She saw that his wounds were cared for by a veterinarian, who released Hazel not far from Watership Down. It is not much, but it is something.

A yet more profound peace awaits Hazel, because a few springs later, as Hazel is dozing in his burrow, a stranger with ears shining with strange silver light comes and invites Hazel to join his owsla. Thus Hazel's part in the story ends, but his life has contributed to the further telling of the story. One lovely spring day shortly before his death, he and Silver come across one of the does of the warren telling her litter a story:

"So after they had swum the river, El-ahrairah led his people on in the dark, through a wild, lonely place. Some of them were afraid, but he knew the way and in the morning he brought them safely to some green fields, very beautiful, with good, sweet grass. And here they found a warren; a warren that was bewitched. All the rabbits in this warren were in the power of a wicked spell. They wore shining collars round their necks and sang like the birds and some of them could fly. But for all they looked so fine, their hearts were dark and tharn [forlorn]. So then El-ahrairah's people said, 'Ah, see, these are the wonderful rabbits of Prince Rainbow. They are like princes themselves. We will live with them and become princes, too.'

"But Frith came to Rabscuttle in a dream and warned him that the warren was enchanted. And he dug into the ground to find where the spell was buried. Deep he dug, and hard was the search, but at last he found that wicked spell and dragged it out. So they all fled from it, but it turned into a great rat and flew at El-ahrairah. Then El-ahrairah fought the rat, up and

down, and at last he held it, pinned under his claws, and it turned into a great white bird which spoke to him and blessed him.”

“I seem to know this story,” whispered Hazel. “But I can’t remember where I’ve heard it.” (470–71)

But at least as long as the story was told, his children would know that a gift had made them safe.

5. Are Rabbits Relevant to Christian Social Ethics?

I have reached the end of my tale (no pun intended) and some may feel that I have failed to make my case. But remember I have told the story of the rabbits only to illustrate and illuminate my ten theses for the reform of Christian social ethics. The story was not meant to demonstrate that the theses must be accepted. That must await more direct theological and philosophical arguments.

Even allowing such a qualification, you may feel that the story is less than illuminating, because the life of rabbits is so discontinuous with our life. After all, rabbits, even the extraordinary rabbits of *Watership Down*, have no complex economic interaction, they do not form political parties, they do not invent complex forms of technology or machinery. They are simply too unlike us even to illustrate my case.

Without trying to claim a strong continuity between rabbits and us, I think at least the suggestion that we, no less than rabbits, depend on narratives to guide us has been made. And this is particularly important to Christians, because they also claim that their lives are formed by the story of a prince. Like El-ahrairah, our prince was defenseless against those who would rule the world with violence. He had a power, however, that the world knew not. For he insisted that we could form our lives together by trusting in truth and love to banish the fears that create enmity and discord. To be sure, we have often been unfaithful to his story, but that is no reason for us to think it is an unrealistic demand. Rather, it means we must challenge ourselves to be the kind of community where such a story can be told and manifested by a people formed in accordance with it—for if you believe that Jesus is the messiah of Israel, then “everything else follows, doesn’t it?”

Further Reading

“Jesus and the Social Embodiment of the Peaceable Kingdom” (1983), essay 6 in this volume

- "Self-Deception and Autobiography" (1974), essay 10 in this volume
"Vision, Stories, and Character" (1973, 2001), essay 8 in this volume
"From System to Story" (1977), in *TT*
"The Gesture of a Truthful Story" (1985), in *CET*
"A Tale of Two Stories: On Being a Christian and a Texan" (1981), in *CET*
"A Child's Dying" (1990), in *NS*
"Courage Exemplified" (1993), essay 14 in this volume