**John Burnside : The Violent Animal as Spirit?**

The appearance of a first collection of scholarly essays, edited by Ben Davies[[1]](#endnote-1), on the work of the Scottish poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, columnist and memoirist, John Burnside, is an unsurprising tribute to the work of this highly regarded writer, and a good opportunity to reflect on his work (although this essay is not intended as a formal review of this collection). Here I focus on a central theme in Burnside’s work, the consideration of our dual, and conflicting nature, as both spiritual beings and very violent animals.

John Burnside is a very prolific writer, and in many forms, so that Davies is keen that we do not see him as ‘just’ a poet, or ‘just’ a novelist. Davies would like us to see him as ‘a type of poet-intellectual’. However, the word ‘intellectual’ doesn’t feel quite the right one for Burnside, despite the range of his interests and his undoubted intelligence. ‘Intellectual’ suggests someone who approaches things in a sort of rational, analytic way. Yet Burnside has a genuine suspicion of what is usually called ‘rationality’. In his first memoir, *A Lie About My Father* and his second, *Waking Up In Toytown,* he describes for instance a number of his own experiments with rationality, using a range of drugs and enormous amounts of alcohol. At one point, a little scarily, he tells us that he used belladonna, and this led to a first of two stays in a psychiatric hospital. Still, he clearly regarded neither alcoholism (which he describes as a spiritual exercise, ‘a perverse, home-made *via negativa* that the disciple travels without hope or desire, towards a limbo of his own making[[2]](#endnote-2)) nor temporary madness, as entirely undesirable states, and he once admitted in an interview, 'Having been, as it were, mad, and lived with horror I believed in, I know that rationality doesn't carry you all the way'[[3]](#endnote-3).

Burnside also has a complex position in relation to religion and spirituality, in which rationality may not play a particularly significant part. He was born into a Catholic background, and at one stage wanted to be a priest, and the influence of Christianity on his imagination remained considerable, even though he abandoned this faith in his mid-teens. As a child, he seems to have had an almost Blakean awareness of the supernatural ‘My sister and I were haunted … I had seen an angel once … Even at home I was never safe from such visions’[[4]](#endnote-4) as well as an extraordinary sense of the presence of the dead. There had been two still-born children in his family, Elizabeth and Andrew, and Burnside – partly because of the difficulty of forming relationships with those living around him, particularly his father – formed relationships with each of them, saying of the dead Andrew : ‘I would live for him, tuned in to the rhythm of an otherworld that nobody else could hear, a whole kingdom of ghost brothers, hidden in the dark’. Even in his adult poems, the imagined dead move almost tangibly alongside the living : ‘I think they are still passing through/weavers and children … held on the air like an echo of bells’[[5]](#endnote-5).

While he later abandons orthodox religion, often very dismissively[[6]](#endnote-6), religious symbolism pervades his poetry, and is frequently his preferred way of addressing what he sees as the essential mystery of the world. While not traditionally religious, Burnside has little sympathy with the neo-Enlightenment of Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins. As he wrote once in an essay on the relation between science and poetry, he regards the sheer existence of the world as a profound mystery, not to be fully explained by natural science. Poetry’s task is to evoke the mystery of existence : ‘The more we know, the more the mystery deepens. If poetry has a role in relation to science, it is to remind science of that universal truth … it teaches us a necessary awe’[[7]](#endnote-7).

When Burnside addresses this mystery, he often seems compelled to draw on Christian imagery : ‘morning changes - /sometimes to the angel we expect/watching the tomb in a garden of blood and lilies’[[8]](#endnote-8). Jan Wilm, in Davies’ collection, describes Burnside’s poetry as ‘numinous’, in the sense of frequently using religious imagery to incite religious experience. But whether Burnside is intending to incite *religious* experience is unclear, given his rather severe scepticism about religion. Indeed, the persistent use of religious imagery by someone who has so brusquely rejected religion is a peculiarity of Burnside’s art.

Given his scepticism about religion, Burnside has notoriously described his own development as a poet in terms of coming to live and write ‘as a spirit’[[9]](#endnote-9), although he naturally insists that he is not intending to be religious with this claim. His idea is that the poet is required to somehow withdraw from the world and from social relations, so that they cease to be a *person*, by which Burnside means a ‘conditioned’ being, one in a set time and place, and become a ‘spirit’, which he sees as an ‘unconditioned’ being, one that he claims lives ‘in eternity’. He adds that the poet most becomes a spirit when they love, and when they write a love poem; he puts this point fulsomely : ‘When we love -as when we write – we cease to be conditioned social existences, and emerge into being’.

Burnside illustrates this idea of the artist as spirit at several points in his fiction. In the novel, *The Locust Room,* for instance, the main character, Paul (heavily based on Burnside himself), is an amateur photographer who sees the supreme achievement of the artist as an emptying of the self so that one becomes perfectly attentive to the world. Paul is described as seeking something ‘resembling absence … a form of invisibility that would consist of nothing but attention, nothing but being itself’.[[10]](#endnote-10) By becoming nothing himself, Paul can more fully attend to the world he addresses in his photography.

The idea of ‘invisibility’, that Paul achieves, is a pervasive one in Burnside’s writing. He often describes the journey he undertook through drugs and alcohol – which we know he sees as a ‘spiritual’ exercise - as a search for invisibility. The characters in his novels frequently desire to become invisible. In his most recent novel, *Ashland and Vine,* Jeremy Culver, after a life working for the government, disappears to Vietnam, becoming ‘transparent, so the light just shone through, without obstruction’; Culver’s sister, a one-time radical activist, ultimately falls ‘in love with the idea of invisibility ... this self she invented so she could live alone all this time’[[11]](#endnote-11). Invisibility is a spiritual corollary. By becoming a spirit, one becomes invisible – a sort of non-person – and then one is able to see more clearly, to ‘emerge into being’.

Yet despite this sense of the poet as some kind of ‘invisible’ spirit, Burnside is still palpably aware of the fact that he, we, and all other living things, are wholly earthbound, that we are animals and that all animals are flesh and blood. He is, as is well known, a deep ecologist, committed to the idea that human beings are only some of the residents of this planet and that we are part of a single natural continuum. To this extent, we are not *merely* spirits. We are animals, as well as spirits, though animals that are capable of acting, as he puts it, *as if* we are spirits. There is a plausible case for seeing Burnside’s overall vision as one in which he attempts to imaginatively reconcile our dual nature as both spirits and flesh and blood creatures. But this is not a particularly easy task – it may even be impossible - and leads to notable tensions in Burnside’s work.

There is, for instance, a tension – often pointed out by readers - between the tone of his fiction and that of his poetry. His poetry often does seem the work of a spirit, drenched with the numinosity that Wilm refers to. In his novels, though, we are often brought brutally down to earth. Most of them, for instance, are very violent. Violence is a pervasive theme in Burnside’s fiction. Alexandra Campbell, in another of the essays in Davies’ collection notes, ‘For Burnside, violence is an ugly and banal reality’[[12]](#endnote-12). His first novel, *The Dumb House,* features Luke, who experiments on his twin children, before leaving them to die. *The Locust Room* turns around the activities of an imagined Cambridge rapist, and one of the characters, Steve, is found at one point with a room full of animals that he has allowed to die. In *The Mercy Boys,* two of four alcoholic Scotsmen die violently after another of them has violently killed his wife and neighbour. *Glister* is centred on a number of ritualistic child murders; *Living Nowhere* leads inexorably to an act of violence. In *A Summer of Drowning* the story turns around the mysterious death of two boys, and whether they might have been killed by a demon. Burnside’s last novel’s title, *Ashland and Vine,* is named after the street junction where someone was gunned down. Acts of violence usually provide the key structures around which Burnside’s fiction moves.

This no doubt draws on some of Burnside’s personal experience. *The Locust Room, The Mercy Boys* and *Living Nowhere* are heavily autobiographical. Some of the violence in them reflects experiences Burnside writes of in his first two memoirs. The poetry, by contrast, is little concerned with violence, drug-abuse or alcoholism, and gives few clues to this aspect of Burnside’s life, although there are very occasional, slightly clinical studies of the minds of killers, or their victims[[13]](#endnote-13). The poetry seems to explore the world of the spirit, of the mind moving above the pull of violent flesh and blood. At times the two forms of art feel like the work of two different artists. In his fiction, Burnside enters easily, and demotically, into the mind of a coarse, violent man:

‘He was pissed off, and he was beginning to feel a bit depressed, and now he was looking for any chance to lose his rag. In a split second, before the old boy knew what was happening, and before the other two could intervene, he put the head on the boy, butting him square and hard in the middle of the face, knocking him to the ground. The old bastard let out a roar of anger and pain’[[14]](#endnote-14)

In the poetry, we are generally in a very different world, where the spiritual note is so high strung that it sometimes issues in a horror of the flesh : ‘I have never learned/nor wished to learn/how bodies work’[[15]](#endnote-15).

Nevertheless, while Burnside believes that the poet must live as if they were a spirit, it is clear that not only does he realise that each of us is an animal, but that in some ways there is a *yearning* to be an animal : ‘if I could have chosen anything/but this inevitable self, I’d be the one/who walks alone and barefoot in the woods/to stand, amidst a family of deer’[[16]](#endnote-16)*.*  For Burnside, becoming an animal would also be to lose oneself, to cease being a *person,* to lose ‘the inevitable self’*.*  Becoming an animal paradoxically achieves the same goal as becoming a spirit. The spirit seeks invisibility but, as Burnside often shows us, this is also what the animal frequently achieves. For Burnside, animals are invisible, mysterious presences : ‘Something is in the wood but nothing/visible’[[17]](#endnote-17) In the poem, *Animals,* for instance, the animals move like spirits, practically out of reach of sight and knowledge : ‘we’ve sometimes caught/a glimpse of powder blue, or Chinese white/or chanced upon a mystery of eyes’[[18]](#endnote-18). And then, in a vivid and disturbing image, the spirit and violent animal nature seem to become almost one in the figure of the ‘Cambridge rapist’ in *The Locust Room,* who, we learn, sits and watches his victims and becomes ‘transparent, a negligible presence, so absorbed in the act of watching … that he himself became almost invisible’*.* It is striking how this description of this violent ‘animal’ mirrors the description of Paul, the artist-spirit, who aimed for a state ‘resembling absence … a form of invisibility that would consist of nothing but attention, nothing but being itself’.

Of course, the rapist and the artist are not the same, but the momentary identification in both of a similar underlying desire, to become invisible and transparent, to become the non-person that is a spirit, shows up strikingly the great paradox of our nature that Burnside’s work frequently seems to address, the paradox of the very violent animal that is also able to live as if it were a spirit.

1. Davies, Ben (ed.) (2020*), John Burnside, Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Academic, London [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Burnside, John, A Lie About My Father, Vintage (2007), p.230 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sarah Crown, *John Burnside : a life in writing,* The Guardian, 26.8.2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *A Lie About My Father,* p.43 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *The Dead,* from Burnside, John, *The Myth of the Twin,* Cape Poetry (1994) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. see for instance Burnside, John, *Walk The Tightrope,* in *New Humanist* (December 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Burnside, John, *Poetry As Ecology,* in Crawford, Robert (ed.), *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science,* Oxford (2006), p.95 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Home* from Burnside, John, *Common Knowledge,* Secker and Warburg (1991) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Burnside, John, *Strong Words,* in Herbert W.N & Hollis, Matthew (eds.), *Strong Words, Bloodaxe (2000),* pp.259-261 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Burnside, John, *The Locust Room,* Vintage (2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Burnside, John, *Ashland and Vine*, Jonathan Cape (2017), p.309 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Campbell, Alexandra, *Violent Dwellings and Vulnerable Creatures in* Burning Elvis *and* Something Like Happy, in Davies (2020), p.53 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. e.g. *Blood* in *The Good Neighbour,* Cape Poetry (2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Burnside, John, *The Mercy Boys*, Vintage (2000) p.148 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *De Humani Corporis Fabrica,* from *The Good Neighbour* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Deer*, from *The Light Trap,* Cape Poetry (2002) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Home* [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Animals,* from *The Light Trap* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)