

Man is a Gorilla with a Gun

Reflections on an American best seller by Thomas Merton

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'Extrapolation', says the dictionaries, 'is the method of finding by calculation, based on the known terms of a series, other terms, whether preceding or following.' The method is proper to mathematics and works efficiently when dealing with number and quantity. When it is transferred to the realm of quality and of organic life, more still to that of history and of culture, it tends to lose its precisely exact scientific quality and becomes a venture in creativity, or, at any rate, a work of fantasy. Imagination now takes the place of calculation. There can be no doubt that the scientist who seeks to learn the origin of man from a fossilized remnant of a skull that might have belonged to a man or to a baboon, must be blessed with a creative imagination as well as with a scientifically exact intelligence. I suppose that when Robert Ardrey, a playwright rather than a professional scientist, sub-titles his book¹ 'A *personal* investigation into the animal origins and nature of man' he is serving notice that he intends to extrapolate with unrestrained imaginative abandon. At any rate, this is what he does!

There is of course a good basis of scientific evidence in *African Genesis*. The most recent discoveries of paleontology made in Africa, especially the most notable, those of Dr L. S. B. Leakey at Olduvai in Tanganyika, give very convincing indications that the origin of man was in Africa not in Asia. The Olduvai gorge is a deep canyon, fantastically rich in fossils and in primitive tools, which has preserved a seemingly completely and continuous record of the million year period in which man appeared. And here it must be clearly said that the conclusions of this very tendentious book differ radically from those of Dr Leakey, who is certainly the most credible authority on the subject. Dr Leakey says that the tools at Olduvai were the work of man in his earliest known form (*zinjanthropus*). Mr Ardrey's thesis is that the tools are the work not of man but of an ape. Indeed of an inferior ape, a vegetarian and pacifist ape, who was not even to be the 'ancestor of man'. The real ancestor of man in Ardrey's thesis, was an ape who made not tools but weapons – and was a killer.

So while admitting that L. S. B. Leakey is a 'great scientist', Mr Ardrey says that on this point he has gone wrong, misled by sentimentality and romanticism. The term 'romantic fallacy' occurs everywhere in the book,

¹ *African Genesis* by Robert Ardrey, Delta Books

and is used to discredit any and every theory of man which does not admit that he is a descendant, in the direct line, from a 'killer ape'. And therefore it must be said that the reader who picks up this book looking for precise and coherent information about the important new discoveries in Africa is himself the victim of an illusion. What information there is concerns mainly the discoveries and hypotheses of certain South Africans whom Mr Ardrey greatly admires, and even this information is buried in autobiographical reminiscence, picaresque anecdote and pages of philosophical improvisation.

On the basis of the remote possibility that there were, in Africa, perhaps a million years ago, tool-and-weapon using hominids, or pre-human apes, Mr Ardrey delivers a very aggressive homily in atheistic evolutionism. He attacks not only the traditional Christian world-view but also, much more radically, the world-views of Marx, Freud, Darwin and practically everyone else you can think of. One theory of man after another is tossed out the window with glorious enthusiasm as 'romantic fallacy': and all because some ape seems to have picked up the leg bone of an antelope and used it to crack the skull of one of his fellows. This is all the author needs in order to reconstruct entirely all social philosophy, all history, all anthropology, all psychology, all economics. For Mr Ardrey, this one monumental act of violence explains everything.

Homo sapiens is therefore he declares, the direct 'legitimate' descendent of a transitional, carnivorous, erect-walking, right-handed and weapon-using anthropoid. Because this ape was no ordinary mild-mannered vegetarian, no 'generalized fruit-eating ape', but a ruthless 'killer ape', man emerged. Man is, according to Ardrey, the child not only of the ape but of the weapon. It was 'the weapon that fathered man'. Not only that, but Mr Ardrey even goes so far as to hint that, instead of man developing weapons for himself, he was in some sense developed by biology to be a user of weapons. 'Whether man is in fact a biological invention to suit the purposes of the weapon must be a matter of future debate.' Whatever that debate may be, to suppose that instead of weapons being developed for man, man was developed *for weapons* is carrying alienation pretty far! But it is quite characteristic of Mr Ardrey's world-view and of its South African sources. The consequence follows immediately. Man is by his very nature an inventor and user of weapons and a defender of territory. The essence of human nature is therefore not so much rationality as trigger-happiness, or at least club-happiness and 'territoriality'. Even sex is set aside as a secondary, relatively meaningless urge compared with man's essential drive to beat up anything and anyone that threatens to invade his 'territory'. Yes, 'territory' is very important here, crucially important. Man is not really interested in woman, in love, in the warmth of satisfied libido (as Freud may have thought). Man is not so deeply engaged in making a living that his very existence is shaped and dominated

by the system of production (according to Marxian ideas). Man is an ape that goes berserk when he thinks he is running out of *Lebensraum*, and I must admit that Mr Ardrey's description of two rival teams of howling monkeys trying to jam each others' broadcasts is very suggestive of modern political life.

The chief contention of Robert Ardrey's high-powered social message is that any philosophy, religious or otherwise, which takes an optimistic view of man, regards him as basically rational and progressive, and postulates that he can better himself by using his intelligence to improve his social system, is basically a 'romantic illusion'. It is absurd, says Mr Ardrey, to hope that man can settle his differences over 'territory' by means of arbitration rather than by bombs. 'Man is a predator whose natural instinct is to kill with a weapon'. It is fortunate that some members of the human race are still capable of thinking otherwise (for instance Pope John XXIII in his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*).

Quite apart from religious faith and Christian hope, it seems to me that Mr Ardrey's thesis negates any real hope there may be for man in evolutionism. After all, the theory of natural selection postulates that a species is able to survive by *progressive* adaptation to new and more difficult conditions. We armed gorillas have now reached a rather crucial point in our evolutionary development in which 'killing with a weapon' is about the least effective way of settling our problems and guaranteeing our survival. It would seem that if we cannot get beyond the stage where we seem to have been a million years ago, in other words, if we cannot adapt to a new situation and settle our problems by reason instead of with clubs, we are soon going to be as extinct as any dinosaur. The amusing thing about all this is that we are a species that has been given the *choice* of survival or non-survival. We have very large skulls and, presuming there is still a proportionate content inside them, it is up to us to make use of it for something besides inventing ways to blow ourselves up. This is so obvious that even Mr Ardrey, after ignoring and scouting it for over three hundred pages, finally has to face it in his last chapter ('Cain's Children') with conclusions that we shall presently see.

The author of *African Genesis* is totally and slavishly committed to a philosophy of iron-bound determinism which is dominated by one inexorable obsession: the 'killer ape' armed with the leg-bone of an antelope. *Because* man 'descended in a direct line' from an ape with a weapon, then he is predetermined to be a killer, he is before all else a killer, and it is folly to even consider him being anything else, at least until his 'lucky genes' have had a few hundred thousand more years. Mr Ardrey confesses himself to be firmly convinced of 'man's pristine depravity'. Thus he is committed to a world-view in which aggression, barbarism, murder, and every form of violence are bound to prevail.

Yet the whole picture is not all of unrelieved darkness – otherwise the

book would hardly have been a best seller in America. What about freedom? Man is predetermined to be a killer, but fortunately (says Mr Ardrey) his killing habits are the *basis of his freedom* – freedom from vegetarianism, freedom to leave the jungle and roam around the world living on high-calory foods and having a wonderful time. Man is a gorilla with a gun – and a credit card! ‘Freedom was the first gift of the predatory way’, and doubtless, as man exists for the weapon, so does freedom! In any case, he says, the progress of the weapon is mankind’s ‘*most significant* cultural endowment!’ and to many American readers this has evidently seemed quite reasonable.

However, the idea that man is capable of destroying *all life* with his weapons is dismissed by Mr Ardrey as ‘neo-romantic’. It presumes too much of man’s capacities. ‘While a giant effort on the part of man could conceivably bring extinction to all land vertebrates, it is impossible to believe that a world of insects would not survive.’ (p. 320). Though a nuclear disaster is, according to him, very likely, it cannot be more than a ‘partial disaster’ as a result of which ‘over-population will cease to be a problem in India’ and instead there will be plague and anarchy everywhere. A depleted population of radiated mutants may end up being devoured by rats, says our author cheerfully, but even then evolution will doubtless come out on top. This is not explained, since it is an article of faith.

Nevertheless, he has another ‘optimistic’ alternative which is a surprising variant of the new ‘red or dead’ realism. Man has indeed reached his peak, he has developed the absolute weapon: but now he must learn to live without it. At this point we begin to wonder if Mr Ardrey is suddenly going to say something useful. What he says is this: if man has to live without war, he is heading for a decline. Society and culture will disintegrate without armed conflict to keep them going. Moral order ‘sheltered throughout all history by the judgment of arms’ will collapse. But perhaps evolution will finally develop out of our race a new breed that really has and uses reason! This may take another million years. However, Mr Ardrey would not have us be romantics, putting our trust in conscience to preserve sanity and life, for conscience is ‘irrational’, is in league with our illusions, entirely subjective and ‘provincial’. It is consequently a-moral. It operates with symbols and emotions, not with ideas and principles. It is animal, not rational. In fact, he regards conscience as ‘an anti-rational power’. It has created a ‘chamber of dull horrors’ called civilization, and neither conscience nor civilization can save us. Our only hope is the presence of Cain, our unpredictable ancestor living in our ‘wild genes’. Cain will take care of everything, whether it be firing the weapon or avoiding a general disaster because he prefers to fight in the back streets with a switchblade knife. It is old daddy Cain who alone knows the answers and makes the choices. ‘We are children of Cain and

were it not so, then for humanity there would be small hope.' (p. 347).

I am prompted to reflect that this is where you end up when you lose your grasp on the real import of the higher religions. No man can really exist completely without a religion and a philosophy. If he gets rid of good ones, he will unconsciously exchange them for bad ones. If he is impatient of 'myth' in higher religion then he will end up fabricating a myth of his own, and organizing his own crude fantasies into another home-made 'system' which pleases him better – with consequences that are only too well known.

Now Mr Ardrey's exploits in myth-making are not hard to observe. They are evident on every page of his book. To take just one example: on page twenty-one, he wants to give a brief description of Lake Victoria, as the spot near which man came into existence. There are innumerable ways in which one could describe Lake Victoria. Out of a hundred possible qualifiers Mr Ardrey, characteristically, selects the following: 'A hundred miles to the east spreads *sprawling* and *enormous* the *cynically smiling* face of Lake Victoria, *poisonous with disease*, *crawling with crocodiles*, the probable focus of our earliest human experience.' I submit that people who read books like this need a little elementary training in semantics, in the interests of their basic mental and spiritual hygiene. Such a sentence (and there are hundreds like it in the book), has one function above all others: it attempts to predispose the reader a suitable feeling of disillusionment, an awareness of the general dominion of evil and violence as the basic law of all existence. Once one 'feels' this, one will resist the 'romantic fallacy', and will experience less compunction in reaching for a gun or firing a ICBM.

This kind of thinking is all too common in the twentieth century. Theories which substituted genes for intelligence and conscience abounded in the Europe of Mussolini, of Hitler, of Goebbels. The Second World War was the direct consequence of mental conditioning by pseudo-scientific myth. The Nazi dogma of race, blood and land, developed an ideology of war and conquest out of just this kind of emotionally loaded anthropology. Everyone is aware that Hitler's racism was, in part, simply a crudely misunderstood mish-mash of popular evolutionism. Hitler's attempts to help the processes of natural selection with his gas chamber are mentioned in this book with no particular expression of romantic disapproval.

Once when the quiet and distinguished Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno was lecturing at Salamanca in the early thirties, a one-armed Falangist general leaped up and expressed his impatience with all forms of humanism by shouting '*Viva la Muerte!*' The heroes of *African Genesis* are the killer gorilla and daddy Cain. The 'God' (if we can call it that) which has watched over the gorilla's fortune and destiny is no other than Death. Mr Ardrey is cool toward all other gods, particularly to the

ones that favour non-violence and compassion. About Death he waxes lyrical. 'Death is the evaluator . . . Death chooses . . . Death disposes . . . We should all be lost in a wilderness of chance had not death through a billion choosings, erected the values of the world I know.' If this last sentence had a meaning (and I am not able to find much meaning in it myself) it would be that Death is a kind of free and personal Absolute and Mr Ardrey turns out to be no atheist after all.

Nothing can better dispose us for a third world war than the conviction that we are doomed to fight anyway, that our enemies are all well-armed gorillas too, and the only smart thing to do is to let them have it before they ambush us. In the chaotic atmosphere of a nation torn by race riots, deafened by the stridency of hate groups and of fanatics, it is understandable that readers may derive a kind of perverse comfort from this mythology – made to order for the 'radical right'. They will do so all the more readily because there is an unquestionably important basis of scientific data mixed in with the theatrical rhetoric and sermonizing of *African Genesis*.

Romanticism has more forms than one. The sentimentally optimistic kind that served the purposes of nineteenth century *laissez faire* and the liberal myth of perpetual easy progress has obviously had its day. But it has yielded to the tough and callous romanticism of the street gang or of the fascist storm troop – a romanticism no less fallacious and deceptive for the fact that it also on occasion covers itself with a veneer of 'realism' and pseudo-science. This second kind of romantic fallacy is that which we find developed and indeed monstrously overdeveloped in *African Genesis*. It is all the more regrettable because it is rooted in an intuition – one which in our day has become completely inescapable – of the desperateness of the human situation.

This is the greatest and most urgent truth of our time: we live in the presence of the meaningless and absurdity to which we have been inexorably reduced by our own more or less dishonest attempts to convince ourselves that we were progressing toward a definite and even a noble goal. The pessimism of the existentialists may indeed be dour and frustrated, but it has at least a certain stoic dignity about it. But this fraudulent attempt to organize the negativity and desperation of modern man around a stupidly melodramatic killer image, assembled from the less responsible surmises of popular anthropology, can do nothing whatever to help modern man in his quest for identity and for meaning. It is one thing to admit our violence and face it humbly and realistically: quite another to turn that 'acceptance' into the shouting and posturing of racist self congratulation. I do not know if this book is being read in Europe where – surely – people have had enough opportunities to grow tired of the formula. But it is still all too acceptable in America.