Reading André Alexis' *Fifteen Dogs*: An Apologue

Robin Ridington

> As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods,
> They kill us for their sport.
> —Shakespeare, *King Lear*

An apologue is a philosophical fable often involving talking animals. Anansi and Brer Rabbit come to mind. *Fifteen Dogs* is the second in André Alexis' series of five philosophical tales in the genre. The first, *Pastoral* (2014), involved a young Priest, a sacred spring, and a cameo by talking sheep. *Fifteen Dogs* is the winner of the 2015 Giller Prize and well worth the tribute. At first glance I thought it looked like a nod to *The Iliad, Lord of the Flies,* and maybe *Animal Farm* or *Heart of Darkness*, but it's a much deeper book than such facile comparisons suggest. It might be about the transition from the deathless Olympian gods to the Christian God who experiences death as a man. Maybe it's best to start with the poetry rather than the opening scene, which is where reviews often start, although the opening epigraph from Pablo Neruda's "Ode to the Dog" may help: "*why is there day, why must night come . . .*" (*Fifteen Dogs* 8). Neruda's "Ode" recalls a question posed in the Gospel of John, 9:4: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." In his implied response to John, Neruda evokes the way the dog asks questions of his masters. Like wandering Jews, wandering dogs answer a question with another question: Why not? The fifteen dogs of this novel, in their way, answer a question posed to them both by humans and by eternal celestial beings by posing yet other questions. Their questions, like Neruda's, are expressed in the language of poetry. Here are a few more lines from Neruda in another translation by Leonard Durso.

> why is it daytime? why does night always fall?
> why does spring bring
> nothing
> in its basket
> for wandering dogs
> but useless flowers,
> flowers and more flowers?
> This is how the dog
> asks questions
> and I do not reply. (n. pag.)

The novel includes fifteen artful poems composed by a dog named Prince. Each poem poses its own questions and names one of the fifteen dogs to whom the gods have given human consciousness and language. Prince's poems use a poetic genre invented by François Caradec for the OULIPO, "the workshop of potential literature" (*Fifteen Dogs* 142). *Oulipo* uses "constrained writing techniques" related to palindromes and mathematics to release meanings through sound, rather than from the written text ("Oulipo" n. pag.). These poems reflect Prince's experiences and those of his pack. Each poem embeds the name of a dog in a way that is heard in the recitation but is not obvious in print. As an example

I have highlighted the one for Bella below (in bold). The hidden meaning is in the sound rather than in the typography. Kim Maltman (the author of some of Prince's poems) is a poet, mathematician and theoretical physicist. Kim is also the name of Prince's beloved first master with whom he is reunited in his last dream. But I'm getting ahead of the story. Here is Prince's Bella poem:

> Beyond the hills, a master is
> who knows our secret names.
> With **bell a**nd bones, he'll call us home,
> winter, fall or spring. (25)

The alpha male of the pack is a mastiff named Atticus. His name is in this poem composed by Prince, but I haven't highlighted it. Sound it out.

> In the sunny world, with its small
> things moving too fast,
> I shy away from light
> and in the attic cuss the dark. (76)

Some of the names are less obvious, and as of this reading I am in doubt about one or two. Here is a poem containing the name of Rosie.

> The light that moves is not the light.
> The light that stays is not the light.
> The true light rose countless sleeps ago.
> It rose, even in the mouth of birds. (30)

Prince is a mutt who, along with fourteen other dogs, was given human intelligence and consciousness in a wager between Apollo and Hermes about whether or not a being with human language and consciousness can die happy. Olympian gods are obsessed with life and death, death being something they can never experience. Apollo says no, Hermes says yes. The prize is two years' servitude. The fifteen dogs are housed in a kennel in Toronto, near where the Greek gods had been having a beer in Toronto's venerable Wheat Sheaf tavern, founded eighteen years before Confederation. They speak ancient Greek to one another. The wheat sheaf, of course, is the symbol of Demeter: "often described simply as the goddess of the harvest, she presided also over the sacred law, and the cycle of life and death. She and her daughter Persephone were the central figures of the Eleusinian Mysteries that predated the Olympian Pantheon" ("Demeter" n. pag.). Hermes argued that "the human way of creating and using symbols is more interesting than, say, the complex dancing done by bees" (*Fifteen Dogs* 12). Apollo maintained that "Human languages are too vague" (*Fifteen Dogs* 12). Prince, the dog poet, shows that the ambiguity of metaphoric language is not vague but generative.

This wager by the antique gods is an experiment going deep into the paradox of humans having both an animal, instinctual nature and a cultural, linguistic one. Like the dogs that these capricious Olympians transform, we, too, have been transformed by a capricious trick of evolution into becoming sentient beings with animal natures. Our primate natures are in some ways less nuanced than the canine natures of dogs. Their sense of smell is far superior to our own, although we have binocular colour vision. We use dogs as sniffers in criminal investigations. They use us as providers.

The fifteen dogs react differently to their transformation. Atticus, "an imposing Neapolitan Mastiff, with cascading jowls" (9), becomes alpha male and rejects their new language, even while continuing to think in it and occasionally even communicate in it, contrary to the rule he imposes on the others. He reminds me of the hypocritical evangelical preachers who inveigh against homosexuality while secretly indulging in it. Prince is a mutt who composes poetry. Majnoun is a black Poodle who learns about love from Nira, the woman with whom he has an intense bond of understanding and communication. They are avatars of the Arabic/Persian love story of Layla and Majnoun, an inspiration for

Romeo and Juliet among other things. Benjy is a scheming self-interested Beagle who, if he were not a dog, might have been a politician.

Just as the fifteen dogs were given a new language and with it a new way of thinking, *Fifteen Dogs* gives the reader an aural sensation through OULIPO poetry: discovering something that is there but disguised and revealed only in the hearing of it. And, of course, there are the gods. They have a fascination with the mortality that is forever absent in their lives. They give mortal men (and dogs) free will to determine their feelings as their lives end, but not freedom from that fate, just as the gods themselves are fated to be immortal. In the book, the gods are not alone among the Olympians. They cannot control the Fates: Atropos who cuts the threads of mortal lives, Clotho and Lachesis who weave them together. To the Fates, even Zeus is just a "loud-mouthed fornicator" (110). All the dogs die in the end, as, of course, do all humans, but Prince, at least, lives and dies as the poetic Prince of Peace. The Christian God, unlike the Olympians, must die in order to become one with Man, but in his grace he is given to be born again. The fate of Man remains a matter of theological debate.

Am I reading too much into this novella about fifteen dogs? No. On the contrary, at this point I am probably reading too little. Alexis is gifted in voicing ultimate questions about culture and nature, Man and God, without using bafflegab or impenetrable philosophical jargon. He is a storyteller and a poet. The narrative, replete with dog-on-dog violence, carries the book's philosophical message well, and the poems reinforce the importance of communicating meaning through the spoken word. The Olympians' wager reveals that creating and understanding spoken poetry is at the heart of being human. Reading Prince's poems and listening for the *oulipo* names embedded in them led me to think about the process of writing a poem using *oulipo.* I am in the habit of writing sonnets and created one that references *oulipo* as well as a name. Composing a poem with embedded *oulipo* meaning works as a way to engage with both the form and the novel.

Oulipo
You leap over the musty hallowed halls
of prosody. You rob in sight of fate.
A fallow fingered sheaf of foolscap falls
as casements blindly ratiocinate.
Slick scratch of pen or easy tap of key
assembles fonts as diadems of words
that conjugate, that breed and then that flee
into the fastnesses that are absurd
or flacid, or to quicken stiff with sound
that signifies the nought or one—the code
you understand, stand under, and are found
to lie within the textual abode
of sonic sonnetry. Pray, say it's not
the toxic tropic malady I've got.

WORKS CITED

Alexis, André. *Fifteen Dogs: An Apologue.* Toronto: Coach House, 2015. Print.

"Demeter." *Wikipedia*. 14 Feb. 2016. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

Durso, Leonard. "from Ode to a Dog by Pablo Neruda." *Leonarddurso.com.* 24 July 2013. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

"John 9:4." *King James Bible*. 1987. *BibleGateway.* Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

"Oulipo." *Wikipedia*. 10 Feb. 2016. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. 1608. *The Tech MIT Shakepeare.* n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.