Tarka — The Wonder and the One-ness

Bryan Wake *(from a talk first given at the HW Society AGM, Georgeham, October 1983)*

Tarka has been very much a part of me for forty-five years. Those who have known the book for a similar length of time, indeed anyone who first came to it in adolescence, will know how deeply personal can be one's reactions to it, and will understand if at first this seems to be more about myself than about the book.

When we discover an author in our childhood, and make a particular book a vital part of our growing awareness, this must to some extent colour our later, more mature judgment of it. It is not, I think, simply that we like to remain loyal to our early enthusiasms, indeed we may rebel against them. But whether we rebel or not, however we feel *now*, we *are* the result of what we *have been*.

For me, there is no conflict of interest or importance between Henry's nature writing and his other work. *Tarka* was my introduction to Henry as a writer, and when, in my twenties and thirties, I came to read his other work, I found much evidence of things in his early life which had parallels in mine, and that these common childhood experiences were both a cause of his being the nature writer he was and the source of that sensitivity to human frailty, of that incredible power of observation, and . . . as I now see, that self-torturing search for truth, all of which give his great work of the *Chronicle* its unique quality.

What did *Tarka* mean to me, as a twelve-year-old, on first discovery? It was the time of El Alamein, and the tide of war was beginning to turn in favour of the Allies. But this was unrealised, unfelt, by the boy who lived on the outskirts of an East Anglian town almost untouched by the war. There were no close relatives involved in the fighting. But there were constraints. Rigid constraints, the causes of which were neither known nor understood. The previous war of 1914–18 had left a father of unpredictable temper and a mother of earnest sadness in what to them was an uncertain and difficult time to cope with their own basic incompatibility. There were claustrophobic restrictions on talk and behaviour in the home which had little to do with the state of the world, but which were made more oppressive by the wartime restriction of activities which school, friends and holidays might have offered in normal times. The boy had only two lifelines by which to escape and be himself, . . . his reading and his bicycle rides into the nearby lanes and fields of Suffolk.

So there I was, a town boy, who had already found 'nature' and the countryside a vital escape from the uncomfortable realities of a restricting home, when by sheer chance I was given *Tarka the Otter* to read. Not given it deliberately with any purpose in mind by the giver, but just because it happened to be my grubby little hand there when the book came off a pile of mixed titles given out by the teacher as we scurried from the classroom to the school air-raid shelters.

I remember that when the alarm was over and we returned to the classroom I asked to be allowed to keep the book until I had finished it. This granted, I took it home, went to bed early, and curled under the blanket like an otter in its holt, read by the light of my pocket torch until I cried myself to sleep.

What was it about this book which took so strong a hold on me? I had since the age of eight or nine been a voracious reader. I had read much of Dickens, and liked it. Much of Sir Walter Scott, and liked it. All the Musketeer novels of Dumas and revelled in them. Countless adventure and cowboy stories, believing myself while doing so to *be* the main characters. What was it that now impelled me to seek out Henry's other books in the library, to the exclusion of all else, and to spend Christmas and birthday present money buying them?

I realise now that it was the *kind* of escape that *Tarka* offered which took this dominant hold on me. Those other books were about other historical times, or of far distant places, and all were about people. However far they took me from my present reality, I had to return, and it was from people, and from their behaviour to each other and to me that I wanted to get away.

Tarka gave me something I could reach out to, could extend from the book into the world around me. The images of a countryside I could transport from a Devon I had not yet seen to the fields and hedgerows near my home. The Taw and Torridge, the headlands and sea-swept sands could become the Deben, Stour and Orwell of Suffolk, with their willow-bordered meadows and wide estuaries where cormorants flew straight-winged like black bombers to alight, all angular, on the channel marker buoys. The local suburban spinney, with its clamorous rookery above and damp tangled sunless paths below, became the home of Iggiwick, Swagdagger and Old Brock. So I could translate what I read into my own reality, make it physically available to me as somewhere to be, and identify with the lives of the animals and birds as a relief from the antagonisms of people. *Tarka* opened for me an alternative life, in what seemed to me then to be the *real* world, where the life of fields and hedges, rivers and trees, heathland and seashore, was reliable and eternal.

It might be asked: could not the encouragement of some schoolteacher, or some factual nature-study books, have opened this world for me? To say why not is to answer the question: *how* did *Tarka* do this for me?

It was, I am sure, Henry's use of language, the rich prose-poetry of his words. This was the medium, in itself excitingly warming, mesmeric, which flooded my senses, carrying with it the excitements of the story's action and detailed visual descriptions of things yet unseen by my young eyes. Let me read from the very first page:

> *The cleft of its fork held the rains of two hundred years, until frost made a wedge of ice that split the trunk; another century's weather wore it hollow, while every flood took more earth and stones from under it. And one rainy night, when salmon and peal from the sea were swimming against the brown rushing water, the tree had suddenly groaned. Every root carried the groans of the moving trunk, and the voles ran in fear from their tunnels. It rocked until dawn; and when the wind left the land it gave a loud cry, scaring the white owl from its roost, and fell into the river as the sun was rising.*[1]

and again from the opening of Chapter 14 from the second half of the book:

> *When the bees' feet shake the bells of the heather, and the ruddy strings of the sap-stealing dodder are twined about the green spikes of the furze, it is summertime on the commons. Exmoor is the high country of the winds, which are to the falcons and the hawks: clothed by whortleberry bushes and lichens and ferns and mossed trees in the goyals, which are to the foxes, the badgers, and the red deer: served by rain-clouds and drained by rock-clittered streams, which are to the otters.*
>
> *The moor knew the sun before it was bright, when it rolled red and ragged through the vapours of creation, not blindingly rayed like one of its own dandelions. The soil of the moor is of its own dead, and scanty; the rains return to the lower ground, to the pasture and cornfields of the valleys, which are under the wind and the haunts of men.*[2]

There is a passage like these on almost every page of the book. To some the style might seem 'high-flown', too consciously styled and full of strange words. When I re-read it now it conjures up again the sense of mystery, of entering a secret world, where sadness and hurt were somehow made bearable because they were but passing moments in something living and eternal. Although I would not have put it into such words at the time, there is no doubt that my first reading of *Tarka* was a religious experience.

I think now, that this heightened descriptive style, crafted and re-crafted as we know it was, itself reflects the intensity of feeling of a man who *needed* to immerse himself in the role of an observer of life *other* than that of men and women, whose relationships were so much the personally felt material of his other work.

Tarka was my first encounter with the art with which a master craftsman can so precisely match the images of colour, shape, sound and movement, with his choice of word and phrasing in the actual pattern on the page. No one who has watched a wagtail by a fast running stream can fail to admire the slim, alert delicacy of this description:

> *. . . a grey wagtail skipped airily over the sky-gleams of the brook, flitting from stone to stone whereon it perched with dancing tail and feet. In the light of the sun more gold than at noon the drakeflies were spraying low over the clear water, and the bird fluttered above its perch on a mossy stone and took one. The water reflected the colour of its breast, paler than kingcups. It did not fly, it skipped through the air, calling blithely* Chissik Chiss-ik, *until it came to the verge of a pool by a riven sycamore.*[3]

. . . anyone who reads this passage before seeing a wagtail for the first time should instantly recognise the bird when he does see one. Again, something as good can be found on almost every page. There is no better teacher of how to see. For some forty years now, if I have perhaps been watching a late summer flight of gulls wheeling against the sky, stalling and staggering as they snatch their quarry from a high rise of flying ants, I have thought of Henry, and how he would have seen so much more than I — perhaps a damaged flight feather or a dangling damaged foot, and would have used the detail to make the moment come alive as part of a rich pattern of life. For this is another of the insights to be gained from *Tarka*: to know the interdependence of living things. Animals, birds, plants, rivers and the sea, sun, wind and rain. I absorbed the ideas of ecology and environment long before these words were fashionable on every tongue. From *Tarka* flowed the wonder and the oneness of it all. And within this, the feeling that in some way man was an intruder, from outside the scheme of things.

What, in parrticular, was it about the life of an animal, as portrayed by Henry, that so appealed to a young mind? Tarka is essentially a 'loner'. There is a minimum of family and group relationships in his life. Such as there are are brief, with no extended responsibilities. In his life there is pain, there is fear, there is joy, there is rage. But all these are of the moment, sudden and of no duration. There are no lasting hatreds, no lingering sorrow. The freedom of the animal is a freedom from yesterday and from tomorrow. It is a freedom from that conflict of wills which can so dog a child's life, with the fear that yesterday's sins of omission and commission will bring tomorrow's discovery and retribution. It is a very physically felt freedom from mental fear, perhaps particularly attractive to boys at the time of my childhood, as of Henry's. Today, perhaps, the conflict of wills between boys and their parents and teachers is less physically expressed. These are the very freedoms which, as adults, we know we cannot have.

I have tried so far to share something of what *Tarka* meant to me as a child, on first discovery. It is interesting that, in general, 'nature stories' as distinct from 'natural history' writing, are regarded as primarily for children. Is this because, as adults, we are loth to admit any personal identification with animals as characters in a story? Do we perhaps regard the authors of animal stories, and ourselves when reading them, as attempting to escape from the responsibilities of adult life? What is certain is that *Tarka* was not written primarily for children, and that in this book Henry has given us an insight into animal life which avoids those excesses of anthropomorphism found in other authors who quite blatantly give their animals the human characteristics of self-consciousness, of formalised language, deliberately planned social organization, and even carefully plotted revenge on their enemies. They do this within the structure of fantasies which may be most fit for the entertainment of children, but in so doing they are making points, political, sociological and religious, which must really be directed at the reader with adult experience. I am thinking, of course, particularly of Richard Adams.

What, now, does *Tarka* do for me as an adult? Having read and re-read most of Henry's other work, particularly the *Chronicle*, and while doing so, having learnt through other reading and other media, of depths of human suffering and heights of human achievement outside the scope of the work he has left us. Having myself become a parent, and a grandparent, and since a very young man, having been healed of most of that need to escape which *Tarka* answered . . . can I still find *Tarka* relevant? Can I still take seriously the final words of Sir John Fortescue's Introduction that: 'our author will have made for us a happier and more beautiful world, a world in which we can seek refuge among (*sic*) the toils and the worries of life, and be thankful.'?[4]

Yes, I can. I can because I feel that the need for some form of 'escape' is ever-present with us all, particularly in our increasingly technological european culture (in which I include most of America and of Russia), and because I believe it is important to examine how this need shows itself and how we try to satisfy it. *Tarka* is interesting to me now, not only in its own right, not only for the debt I owe for having first read it when I did, but because it helps to focus my attention, to illuminuate, this need for escape as it is found in two areas of life which are of great interest to me.

The first of these areas is that occupied by a creative writer.

We do ourselves an injustice if we regard all forms of escapism as simply negative, as merely running away. As Wordsworth put it: 'The world is too much with us, late and soon, getting and spending we lay waste our powers.'. Getting away from it all is often necessary for creation and for re-creation. But, getting away from what? If those of us who are urban, or suburban, living folk, examine honestly our need to 'get away from it all', we may find that it is not just a wish to escape from the noise, grime and ugliness of much that surrounds us, not just a yearning for the fields, hills and streams. It is some form of *personal* freedom we seek. It is the pressure of other wills against our own, our inability to control the things made and done by other men and women, the constant intrusion of actions and ideas not of our own making but which demand of us the effort either of participation or avoidance, . . . these are the things from which we seek to escape.

For the creative artist some means of escape from these pressures is essential. Ironically, it can be these very pressures which make the artist, and his art becomes his escape. Of all creative artists the writer is surely the most vulnerable, most at risk from suspicion and attack, both by others and himself. He may need to escape to be able to write, and often he may need to escape from his writing.

Those of us who are not musical know that we cannot compose, sing or play an instrument; who are not painters, know that we cannot make a picture. We may have the desire, but we lack the gift of ability. These are special gifts, and recognised as such. The writer's art, however, uses our common currency of words. We accept readily that our efforts to paint, sculpt or make music, may be childish, clumsy or crude. We do not so easily accept that this may also be true of our imagination and use of language. For those other artists, their actual creative activity can sometimes be an escape from the pressures of daily life and the stresses of personal relationships. There can be no such escape for the writer, at least not when the very stuff of his creativity *is* human relationships and the state of the world as he sees it. The very threads of his daily life, the warp and woof of his contact with people and things, can so easily tangle with the weave of his creative work, because they engage the same faculties and expend the same energies that he uses in his art. Writing has to be a selfish activity, in its actual doing. It is not just the hard, physical slog of putting words on paper, but the fragile tension of holding a felt theme whose words flow more quickly than the hand can transcribe (or mouth dictate), and the destructive frustration when some interruption, however gentle and well-meaning, breaks the vital thread and the idea is gone, wafted away like an unseen autumn gossamer. In re-creating events of the past, and in re-feeling personal relationships, there is a need for isolation, for insulation from the needs and pressures of the now. This must be especially true of a writer such as Henry who used so much of himself and his family in his work.

I now see Henry's nature writing, of which *Tarka* is the supreme example, as much more than a finely observed exultation in the complex beauty of the natural world. Just as entry into this world had been an escape for him as a boy, so, I believe it was for him as a writer. It was an escape from a world where he had to be both participator and observer, to one where he needed to be only an observer with freedom to choose the extent, if any, of his personal involvement. From a world in which he had to make moral judgments, striving as he habitually did to find the underlying causes of the behaviour of people to people, . . . to a world where such moral judgments, and the self-examination they demanded, were irrelevant . . . where the pain and death inflicted by animals on animals were seen and accepted as part of the pattern of life itself, and needed no excuse.

Although I am sure his nature writing *was* an escape, a necessary release from the personally felt themes of his other work, I recognise that it was much else besides, including the not unimportant matter of being saleable work. On my recent re-reading of *Tarka* I was surprised to find that two remarkable little passages had always escaped my notice: on the last page of the first half of the book, at the end of Chapter

10, we read:

> *And when the shining twitter ceased, I walked to the pond, and again I sought among the reeds, in vain; and to the pill I went, over the guts in the salt grey turf, to the trickling mud where the linnets were fluttering at the seeds of the glasswort. There I spurred an otter . . .*[5]

and much later, in Tarka's journey from Morte Point through Georgeham to the Burrows:

> *The cottage door was pulled open, my spaniel rushed out barking. A white owl lifted itself off the lopped bough of one of the churchyard elms, crying* skirr-rr. *An otter's tiss of anger came from out of the culvert under the road. Striking a match I saw, on the scour of red mud, the two-toed seal, identical with the seal that led down to the sea after the Ice Winter.*[6]

The second passage is a direct reference back to the first, and together they are the only first-personal intrusions of the author into the narrative. The fact that even in telling the story of Tarka, and through umpteen revisions of the text, Henry could not completely exclude himself from it, is indicative of his personal need for some spiritual identity with the natural world.

The other, and more general, area of life on which *Tarka* helps me to focus can best be described as the great explosion of public concern for wildlife and conservation, and the ways in which this interest is fostered and expressed. That there has been such an explosion hardly needs proof. When I left school there was the danger of being thought something of a sissy for being a member of the junior section of the RSPB. Today, that organization must be one of the world's most powerful conservation bodies, with a membership in excess of half a million, and that is just one British body amongst a multitude of well supported private and government agencies.

Never, since the eighteenth-century dictum that 'the proper study of Mankind is Man' was overturned by Wordsworth's 'One impulse from a vernal wood can teach you more of Man, of moral evil and of good, than all the Sages can.' . . . never has there been such widespread devotion to the study and preservation of wildlife.

I would now do little more than to comment that this interest, world-wide as it now may be, has its origins in european culture, which perhaps needs it, and can certainly afford it, more than in other cultures whose main task has to be the very basic preservation of human life itself.

The little more which needs to be said is that, because Henry's work, like that of Jefferies and many others, has contributed to the growth of this interest in wildlife, perhaps we should look again, with care, at Henry's work in relation to some of the ways in which this interest shows itself. We should look at our own attitudes as individuals, and at the behaviour of some conservationist organizations. It may sound cynical, but I often feel that some of the present interest in wildlife expresses more dislike, even hatred, of man for man, than any real respect for or desire to understand other creatures. On the one hand there is an increasing number of private and public bodies owning vast areas of land in reserve, from which, by membership subscription and entry fee, they effectively exclude all but the comparatively well-off; on the other hand are the lunatic fringe extremists willing to maim people and indiscriminately release caged alien species such as mink to ravage the native wildlife.

Some recently successful fiction has reflected, if not encouraged, what I would call this 'man hate man' attitude, by an unrelievedly simplistic characterisation, as 'good' and 'evil' of both the human and animal protagonists. This, Henry never did. His was a more balanced view.

I will conclude with another paragraph from *Tarka*: Henry's comment, made when still a comparatively young man, on the attitudes to wildlife of his contemporary working farmers and sporting landowners. Typically, it illustrates his seeking for the causes underlying observed human behaviour, and it contains within its final words perhaps an unconscious indicator of his own inner conflict between the imaginative writer and the man of action, who sought another kind of release in the ordered physical effort of the Norfolk farm.

> *The farmers would exterminate nearly every wild bird and animal of prey, were it not for the landowners, among whom are some who care for the wildings because they are sprung from the same land of England, and who would be unhappy if they thought the country would know them no more. For the animal they hunt to kill in its season, or those other animals or birds they cause to be destroyed for the continuance of their pleasure in sport — which they believe to be natural — they have no pity; and since they lack this incipient human instinct, they misunderstand it and deride it in others. Pity acts through the imagination, the higher light of the world, and imagination arises from the world of things, as a rainbow from the sun. A rainbow may be beautiful and heavenly, but it will not grow corn for bread.*[7]

Tarka has been, and remains, for me, more than just a 'nature story'.

Extracts, by permission of the Henry Williamson Literary Estate, are all from the 1975 (The Bodley Head Ltd) Edition of *Tarka the Otter*. Readers who may wish to place the extracts in context will find them as follows: 1 p15, 2 p157, 3 p42, 4 p10, 5 p120, 6 p181, 7 p157.