

# “Dogism”: Fascism and the Philosophy of Violence in André Alexis’s *Fifteen Dogs*

---

Erin Chewter

**Abstract:** With *Fifteen Dogs* (2015), André Alexis presents the riddle of what it means to be human without prescribing his own solution. The task of deciding which of the hybrid dogs’ behaviours arise from which of their constituent elements—human or dog—is left up to the reader. This essay presents a theoretical exploration of the human-like violence found within *Fifteen Dogs*. I argue that the violence exhibited by the hybrid dogs is of a distinctly human quality and is fuelled by a fascistic ideology, which I call dogism. Attention is given to two particular manifestations of such violence: the sacrificial culling of the pack and the Garden of Death.

Greek gods making bets over drinks at a Toronto bar? Dogs capable of abstract thought? With *Fifteen Dogs* (2015), André Alexis clearly sets out to defamiliarize the familiar. Throughout the novel, Alexis invokes a number of traditional dialectics only to intentionally subvert and confuse them: freedom and bondage, the individual and the pack, human and animal, and so on. In refusing the expected resolution of these dialectics, Alexis presents his readers with the riddle of what it means to be human without prescribing any solution. The task of deciding which of the hybrid dogs’ behaviours stem from which of their constituent elements—human or dog—is left up to the reader. This essay explores the theme of violence within *Fifteen Dogs*, with particular attention to two manifestations of violence in the text: the culling of the pack and the Garden of Death. I will argue that the violence exhibited by the hybrid dogs when culling the pack is ideologically fuelled and, therefore, of a distinctly

human quality. Furthermore, I propose that the dog Benjy, with his penchant for authority and violence, embodies the figure of the totalitarian revolutionary by tactically exploiting the cruelty of humans to achieve liberation via the Garden of Death. These instances of violence suggest that the dogs' "gift" of human consciousness brings with it a new-found capacity for calculated cruelty.

A survey of several theories of violence and a cursory exploration of dog psychology allows us to begin isolating the human quality of the hybrid dogs' violence. Dogs are undeniably hierarchical creatures and can exhibit aggression in order to maintain that hierarchy and to secure the basics for life and security. Nevertheless, aggression is a phenomenon distinct from violence. Researchers in behavioural neuroscience have outlined the distinction between violence and adaptive aggression. One article from the field defines violence as "an exaggerated/escalated form of aggression leading to extreme harm in humans and animals alike. Aggression, on the other hand, has been defined primarily as a form of social communication, which is pro-inhibitory and aimed at functional endpoints such as the acquisition of food, shelter, mates and status" (Natarajan and Caramaschi 2). According to this definition, the actions of the pack in *Fifteen Dogs* would certainly qualify as violence. In its attacks against other dogs, the pack goes beyond what is necessary to ensure survival; it becomes malicious, calculating, and ideologically motivated. A UNESCO study exploring the causes of violence also reinforces the distinction between animal aggression and human violence. The study concludes that animals deploy a range of tactics to avoid violence and ensure survival of the species as a whole. It concludes that "[o]nly the human race is capable of destroying itself, precisely because it has lost its capacity for self-regulation" (Domenach 30). In gaining human-level consciousness, Alexis's dogs have lost their capacity for instinctual self-regulation through adaptive aggression. Their loss inevitably leads to an increased reliance on violence to reconcile tensions of identity and belonging. Like humans, the dogs become capable of destroying themselves; by the

end of the novel, Atticus and his followers succumb to an immanent and totalizing annihilation.

There are two occasions in which the dogs Majnoun and Atticus openly admit that their acts of violence are a departure from canine sensibilities. For Majnoun, this recognition comes after deciding that he must kill Benjy to prevent further disruption to the dynamic within Majnoun's home with the human couple Nira and Miguel. He reflects that "it would mean annihilating a part of himself, taking a final turn away from what had been his life: pack, canidity, coppice" (Alexis 87). Majnoun's thoughts reveal that this turn towards violence is far from natural for canines. On the contrary, the dogs' new state of consciousness—and the isolation leading to individualism that it inspires—is to blame. Atticus also admits that the excessively violent and rash way in which the pack kills Bobbie after offering her the illusion of exile is "not in keeping with the canine. They had killed [Bobbie] in a frenzy of which he was, in retrospect, ashamed" (Alexis 94). The perversity of the murder exposes the strangeness of the dogs: the attack is driven by their passion to pursue a retrospectively ideological cleansing of the pack, through which they might return to the Eden of pure caninity.

In closely examining the behaviours of Atticus and his followers throughout the novel, it becomes clear that the culling of the pack is fueled by an emergent ideology reminiscent of fascism. Henceforth, I will refer to this ideology, as it operates in the novel, as dogism. Dogism is a set of beliefs guided by a complete rejection of the hybrid dogs' new human-like abilities. The doggists (followers of dogism) long for a return to their former state of purely dog-like behaviour, which I will call dogliness. The pursuit of dogliness (the *ÜberHund*, if you will) becomes the doggists' normative grounding, their ethical foundation. Over time, the pack's dogism inspires a new culture and spirituality according to which the murder of dissenting or nonconforming dogs takes on a sacrificial quality.

Atticus and his followers, the doggists, come to view their new gift of consciousness as an immoral contagion that must be suppressed or, ideally, exorcised. Ironically,

the existence of dogism itself hinges upon the capacities of a conscious mind to moralize and envision an ideal way of being. Furthermore, the violence invoked in the name of this morality is of a very conscious and human nature: calculating, sacrificial, and punitive. The twentieth-century French philosopher Georges Bataille argues that “there is no fundamental distinction between society and violence, or between civilization and violence” (Pawlett 30). Violence becomes enshrined in the very fabric of the pack’s new culture. The pack must find ways to channel this by-product of consciousness:

Human cultures have long sought to control violence by measures taken under sacred auspices, in two ways: first, by legitimizing certain forms of violence (holy wars, justice rendered in the name of God, and so on); secondly, by religious rites whereby violence is purified through the selection and sacrifice of a victim. (Domenach 37)

The pack cannot rid itself of its new consciousness, so it suppresses that consciousness until the pressure builds to a point of necessary release through sacrifice. The sacrificial dog becomes the temporary embodiment of all that is excessive and frightening in the pack’s new consciousness—a representative of Bataille’s “accursed share,” which must be culled to “save the rest from the mortal danger of contagion” (Pawlett 23). Through the dog’s death, the pack feels momentarily cleansed and able to continue its performance of dogliness a while longer with renewed conviction. Through sacrifice, the pack is ostensibly united and made stronger. Rosie expresses this impression of having achieved a higher state of unified dogliness when recounting the murder of Max to Benjy: “In killing him, the dogs had behaved according to nature. They had been true dogs: blameless and faithful to the canine” (Alexis 75). But this sense of renewed caninity is an illusion. Having developed out of their capacity for abstract thought, the doggists’ reliance on sacrificial violence and their conceptions of dogly propriety only serve to further alienate the pack from the canine. The doggists indulge Bataille’s romanticization of sacrificial violence as a

pure and uncalculated release. In fact, their ritualization of violence constitutes the apex of formulaic calculation. Benjy senses this paradoxical situation upon his return to the pack, remarking that he found the dogs evermore strange—indeed, “all had become ritual” (Alexis 74).

The doggists interpret poetry as a repugnant exaltation of human language’s most corrupting qualities. For this reason, they select Prince—the poet dog—as the inaugural sacrificial victim. Much to the chagrin of the doggists, however, the gods interfere to foil their plans: Prince is saved via *deus ex machina* when Hermes magically transports him to safety in the moment before his impending murder by the pack. Having been denied the satisfaction of Prince’s sacrifice, the conspirators are driven into a frenzy. Their need for the kill is doubled and projected onto their next victim: “Frustrated by Prince’s mysterious disappearance, Max, Frick and Frack now wanted nothing more than to bite the black dog [Majnoun] to death” (Alexis 38). The pack’s desperation provides the first indication of its dependence upon sacrifices for stability. Later, the novel exposes this dependency once again when the pack ruthlessly kills Dougie immediately upon his return with Benjy. It is revealed that the pack had been left without a scapegoat after having killed the omega dog, Max. The resulting disruption to the pack’s hierarchy had caused it to become increasingly unstable; by the time Benjy and Dougie returned, the pack was long overdue for a sacrifice and desperate for the superficial cleansing and unifying effects of the kill. In this light, it becomes clear why the pack falls upon Dougie with such immediate, vicious, and united intent despite his act of submission. The doggists are caught in a vicious cycle: “the accursed share cannot be negated, transcended or resolved: sacrifices must continue” (Pawlett 23). With growing awareness of his fate as the next inevitable sacrifice, Benjy begins preparations for his gruesome escape from the pack.

In the novel, Alexis uses the term “Gardens of Death” to allude to poison-laced composts and kibbles left out by humans to eradicate stray dogs. In the real world, such Gardens of Death are a poignant example of human cruel-

ty and violence: the indiscriminate luring and poisoning of animals out of an irrational and extreme species-based hatred and disregard for non-human life. Between 2008 and 2016, animal lovers in Toronto were devastated by a series of malicious dog poisonings that made headlines in the local papers (D'Andrea; Kyonka; Miller; "Four Sick Dogs"). Alexis seems to have taken inspiration from disturbing incidents such as these, borrowing the expression "the Garden of Death" from the title of an 1896 painting by Finnish painter Hugo Simberg. The Garden of Death signals the point in the novel where the violence of the hybrid dogs and the violence of humans coalesce with the greatest clarity: while the Garden is a human creation, Benjy strategically uses it to annihilate the pack.

Benjy's appropriation of human creations warrants an investigation into his motivations. After having been empowered by an epiphany reminiscent of Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Hegel 111–19), Benjy ostensibly kills the pack to achieve personal liberation from his oppression under its hierarchy. This interpretation appeals to Frantz Fanon's notions of revolutionary violence and raises pertinent philosophical questions surrounding the legitimate uses of violence to overthrow oppressive regimes. Indeed, Fanon argues that violence is justifiable and even necessary under such circumstances (1–62). However, Benjy's innermost thoughts suggest that—far from being against oppression—he is *obsessed* with authority and power. Channelling the sentiments of a modern-day Stalinist apologist, Benjy reflects, "The truth was, though, that he had felt admiration for the conspirators.... They had been swift and clear, and one had to admit that clarity, however terrifying it might be, was at least admirable. It was perhaps even beautiful" (Alexis 61). Benjy's revolutionary sentiments seek only to invert rather than subvert the structures of domination. Upon his death, Benji's last vision is of a world where "the echelon was clear to all" and "the weak gave their respect without being coerced" (90). He longs for an ideal form of power resembling Hannah Arendt's notion of true authority as "unquestioned recognition by those who freely choose

to obey governmental rule” (Fry 65). But if, as Max Weber attests, state power rests in a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence (33), can citizens ever truly consent to that authority? Can consent truly exist in the hierarchy of a pack sustained through violent coercion? Benjy’s violent revolution, like so many before him, can succeed only in replacing one totalizing regime with another, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence.

The only thing preventing Benjy from becoming a full-blown autocrat is his physical stature. Benjy is acutely aware of his own lack of physical power in the pack and feels shame, an emotion which only further entrenches his feelings of powerlessness. Shortly after his return to the pack, “it occurred to Benjy that being mounted was a humiliation.... [T]his new feeling, this shame, changed him” (Alexis 74). The gods’ “gift” of higher consciousness is a Trojan horse, it would seem, bringing with it the capacity to feel alienation and shame. In an article on the relationship between shame and violence, Krista Thomason describes shame as an emotion that arises from the conflict between an idealized self-image and those elements of our identity over which we have little control (Thomason 13). According to Thomason, this sense of powerlessness is what contributes to violent outbursts in individuals who feel shame. Violence, she explains, is a means of reasserting agency: “Violence turns the tables in shame: in the moment of shame I am made to feel powerless, and now as a violent agent others are powerless before me” (Thomason 19). This echoes Jean Paul Sartre’s assertion that violence presents a distorted method by which individuals seek meaning and autonomy in the wake of the alienation at the root of human consciousness (Stagliano 52). Benjy feels defined by his lowered status and thus becomes desperate to reclaim a degree of agency.

Unfortunately, Benjy is confused as to how power may best be achieved. According to Arendt, true power cannot be attained through violence: “Though violence is meant to generate power ... the use of violence signals the impotence of the rulers who cannot convince the people through reg-

ular means of their cause.... [T]he emergence of violence indicates that power is in jeopardy” (Fry 65). Benjy recognizes the violence of the doggists as indicative of the pack’s instability: “Atticus and the others mounted him, it seemed, in order to prove that there was order and hierarchy. That is, to prove it to themselves” (Alexis 73). It is this lack of legitimacy, or “true power,” that causes Benjy to become disillusioned with the pack’s hierarchy. Benjy, ever obsessed with his ideal notions of power and authority, takes it upon himself to put an end to the pack and its charade. By appropriating the Garden of Death to achieve his goal, Benjy fails to extend his limited insight regarding the futility of using violence for power to include his own actions. Through this reading, Benjy can be seen to represent the misguided totalitarian revolutionary, who only perpetuates the cycle of violence in his quest for security and freedom. If we accept Arendt’s philosophy of violence—that violence cannot create power or stability and is only destructive (Ayyash 344)—it is unsurprising that the pack descends into violent obliteration. The Garden of Death punctuates the irony of the doggists’ sacrificial violence and serves as a warning: what appears to be the means for salvation might in truth sow the seeds of destruction.

In interviews, Alexis has expressed that his decision to explore the nature of humanity through dogs was intended to circumvent the discomfort and rejection reflex invoked by the topic of violence in humans (“André Alexis Unleashes”; “Fifteen Dogs”). By displacing the violent behaviour of humans onto another species, *Fifteen Dogs* allows us to withhold judgment and consider the complexity of violence. Our assumption that animals are irrational creatures inspires a sympathy for the hybrid dogs of the novel. We do not judge them as harshly for the violence they exhibit, seeing it instead as a symptom of something imposed upon them. From the tragic outcomes for many of the novel’s dogs, one could even arrive at the conclusion that the gods’ imposition of consciousness on living creatures is a violent act in and of itself. Bataille proposed that violence is inherent to the human condition, and—while never explicitly stating so—the

sheer violence exhibited by the human-dog hybrids of *Fifteen Dogs* appears to reinforce such a position. Nevertheless, the novel also highlights the senselessness of violence: while violence may be a uniquely human phenomenon, it is in no way a useful or necessary feature of human behaviour; indeed, it can only lead to mutual destruction. Despite the proliferation of alienation and violence within *Fifteen Dogs*, there remains a message of hope nestled amongst the tragedy: Majnoun and Prince remind us that consciousness may bring alienation and suffering, but it also brings the capacity to approach beauty through love, empathy, and art.

### Works Cited

- Alexis, André. *Fifteen Dogs: An Apologue*. Coach House Books, 2015.
- . "André Alexis on Understanding Humanity Through Dogs." Interview by Shelagh Rogers. *The Next Chapter*, CBC Radio, 3 May 2017, [www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/André-alexis-bethlehem-terrefe-gebreyohannes-and-gail-anderson-dargatz-1.4007035/André-alexis-on-understanding-humanity-through-dogs-1.4007199](http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/André-alexis-bethlehem-terrefe-gebreyohannes-and-gail-anderson-dargatz-1.4007035/André-alexis-on-understanding-humanity-through-dogs-1.4007199).
- . "André Alexis Unleashes His Wise New Novel, *Fifteen Dogs*." Interview by Piya Chattopadhyay. Q, CBC Radio, 1 Apr. 2015, [www.cbc.ca/radio/q/q-schedule-for-wednesday-april-1-2015-1.3017465/André-alexis-unleashes-his-wise-new-novel-fifteen-dogs-1.3017490](http://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/q-schedule-for-wednesday-april-1-2015-1.3017465/André-alexis-unleashes-his-wise-new-novel-fifteen-dogs-1.3017490).
- . "*Fifteen Dogs* by André Alexis Wins Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize." Interview by Carol Off. [www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/fifteen-dogs-by-andr%C3%A9-alexis-wins-rogers-writers-trust-fiction-prize-1.3304366](http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/fifteen-dogs-by-andr%C3%A9-alexis-wins-rogers-writers-trust-fiction-prize-1.3304366).
- Ayyash, Mark Muhannad. "The Paradox of Political Violence." *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 16, no. 3, Aug. 2013, pp. 342–56.
- D'Andréa, Aaron. "Possible Dog Poisoning in King West Village." *Toronto Sun*, 31 Aug. 2016.

- Domenach, Jean-Marie. "Violence and Philosophy." *Violence and Its Causes*. UNESCO, 1981, pp. 27–40.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
- "Four Sick Dogs in Beach Neighbourhood Raise Warning From Vet." *CBC News Toronto*, 2 Feb. 2016.
- Fry, Karin A. "Power and Violence." *Arendt: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2009, pp. 64–68.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford UP, 1977.
- Kyonka, Nick. "Two Dogs Die from Poisoning." *Toronto Star*, 24 June 2008.
- Miller, Adam. "Dog Killed After Eating Kibble Allegedly Laced With Antifreeze in Vaughn, Ont." *Global News*, 30 Nov. 2015, [www.globalnews.ca/news/2370831/dog-killed-after-allegedly-eating-kibble-laced-with-antifreeze-in-vaughan/](http://www.globalnews.ca/news/2370831/dog-killed-after-allegedly-eating-kibble-laced-with-antifreeze-in-vaughan/).
- Natarajan, Deepa, and Doretta Caramaschi. "Animal Violence Demystified." *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, vol. 4, no. 9, 2010, pp. 1–16.
- Pawlett, William. *Violence, Society, and Radical Theory: Bataille, Baudrillard and Contemporary Society*. Ashgate, 2013.
- Stigliano, Tony. "Jean-Paul Sartre on Understanding Violence." *Crime and Social Justice*, no. 19, 1983, pp. 52–64.
- Thomason, Krista K. "Shame, Violence, and Morality." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–24.
- Weber, Max. *The Vocation Lectures*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone, edited by David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, Hackett Publishing, 2004.