

A pig with a white face and pink ears is dressed in a formal black tuxedo with a white shirt and a dark bow tie. The pig is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The scene is set within a wooden arched doorway, with some cobwebs visible on the sides. The background is dark and indistinct.

George  
Orwell

ANIMAL  
FARM

  
GIUNTI CLASSICS

  
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GEORGE ORWELL

# Animal Farm

Introduction by  
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## Introduction

In August 1945, George Orwell presented *Animal Farm* to readers as a *fairy tale*. In fact, the full title reads: *Animal Farm, a Fairy Story*. An ambiguous, perhaps ironic indication.

In the fable tradition, starting with Aesop, animals represent humans, and their actions allude to human actions, in an apparently naive way. Not only that, but as Italo Calvino points out, it is possible in the small ergonomic miracle of a fable to “achieve the maximum results with the minimum expenditure of means”. This also applies to *Animal Farm*, but only in part, since Orwell’s masterpiece alters this structure not even too imperceptibly: the characters alluded to by the animals are not generic, they are not universal but historical characters, and recognisable as such. We do not find, for example, a wolf and a lamb to designate the arrogance of the strongest, whoever he may be, but an elite of “pigs” who have a direct reference to the Bolshevik party and the Soviet leadership.

The fairy tale, even the eighteenth-century one of the French Enlightenment, although “politicised” in comparison to older examples, has mainly a general significance, it brings human passions and feelings to the stage, and at most bends to the need to disguise in “times of oppression” (still according to Calvino) the open meaning of its thought. It shows and, at least in some cases, conceals. Orwell’s apologue, on the other hand, is completely open in transparently telling

us, through the “Revolt” of the animals chasing their human master from a British farm, the broken dream of the Soviet Revolution devouring its own children, the internal feuds, the purges, the farcical trials, the hunger but also the pride of the people. And the reader recognises the main actors one by one: from Stalin to Trockij, from Hitler to the Western or Atlantic democracies.

The need is certainly not to disguise the true meaning: the author, who writes in democratic England and would seemingly have nothing to fear in pronouncing those names, is not circumventing an oppression that weighs down on him and which, if it did, would strike him mercilessly, given the transparency of the text. He openly denounces, he transfers his world into an ancient structure with a new dynamic: he turns to the fable as something that, first of all, must warn us concretely, not abstractly. It points out danger, provides a means of defence.

In this sense, *Animal Farm* is not a dystopia, i.e. a negative utopia, as the almost testamentary *1984* (1949) would shortly be, or as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) had been, albeit with different nuances, and as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) would be. The three great twentieth-century dystopias imagine a world to come in an unspecified future, or at least outside historical time. *Animal Farm* tells about this world, in a precise historical and geographical situation. It is a fable, yes, because it recalls its structure. But it is above all a battle book.

It is the “pigs” who are the icons of this battle, the social agitators who lead the Animal Revolt with an iron will, but once the old, oppressive power has been overthrown, they replace and replicate it.

That the pig is considered a very intelligent animal – even more so than the dog, and second only to the chimpanzee – is widely believed and, in all likelihood, a fact. A team of French scientists managed to film pigs using a tree bark, manoeuvring it with their mouths, to dig a hole. Orwell's choice is therefore thoughtful and accurate: his pigs, who represent the elite of the animals on the farm, are credibly perhaps even able to organise and run it in the absence of humans.

Having said that, turning the Russian leaders into a bunch of pigs is not exactly a compliment (for the Bolshevik elite, it goes without saying; pigs have never been questioned on the subject) and represents a very strong political stance, a provocation: especially in 1945, when the book was published and gave Orwell great notoriety worldwide. Tearing to shreds the myth of the USSR, at that time still unquestioned by a large part of the world left, including intellectuals, was a risky undertaking for those who, like the writer, wanted first and foremost to speak in the name of workers, socialism and freedom.

The plot of *Animal Farm* is entirely linear, following the timeframe of the story and reversing that of the fairy tale: here it is a matter of bringing the dynamics of the contemporary world to perfection in the dynamics of an English farm. In the “Master Farm”, run rather absent-mindedly by a certain beer-prone and all-too-oblivious Mr Jones, animals are no better or worse off than anywhere else in the world: they are exploited to death without asking why.

However, the oldest pig close to death, «the old Major, a prize-winning boar» (Chapter 1) has a dream one night, and

the next day he tells it. It is a dream of revolt against «the only creature that consumes without producing», namely men, the capitalist masters. Without them there would be abundance for all. The dream is a kind of *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848): Marx called on all the proletarians of the world to unite, Old Major does the same with the domesticated animals. And he does not have to wait long, not as long as Marx at least, for his ideas to succeed. Under the leadership of the most enterprising pigs, horses, dogs, cows, ducks, ducklings, sheep in quantity, a goat, a cat, a donkey – with the significant exception of a crow – revolt and drive out their master. They fight heroically and win. The farm is now theirs. A new world opens up. Or rather, after the intoxication of freedom, the problems begin. The serious ones.

The swine Napoleon, who led the Revolt together with comrade Snowball, little by little centralises all *power* in himself, while Snowball is marginalised, slandered, driven out. The one is clearly reminiscent of Stalin, the other of Trotsky. It is interesting to note how this pair reappears in 1984, where in the totalitarian regime established by a forgotten revolution, *Big Brother* has Stalin's moustache, and the great opponent, Goldstein, also hunted and slandered, even recalls the Jew Trockij in his surname (his real name was in fact Lev Davidovič Bronštejn).

It must be said that Orwell was always close to Marxist or socialist fringes, which were more or less improperly considered “trockist”, such as the Ilp (a small British party to the left of Labour), but he never accepted this definition, considering it mystifying and simplistic. His political and social point of view, from his earliest works, is the emancipation of



the working class. In this he sees the hope of humanity, but in the organisation in party form he sees the danger that this hope will be lost, and in other forms oppression will triumph again. *Animal Farm* crystallises this pattern. The pigs, using the puppies of dogs born in the aftermath of the Uprising, raised fiercely and indoctrinated away from their parents for repressive purposes, thus gradually become like the old masters. Indeed, with them, represented by the owners of neighbouring farms, they maintain increasingly close relations, while the rest of the animals are relentlessly exploited in the name of what Stalin in 1923, during the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, would call “socialism in one country”. Their momentary alliances with the other farms overshadow, for example, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 for the partitioning of Poland, in the episode of the sale of timber to the neighbouring “master”, who as a human being should be an enemy; but also the battle of Stalingrad is evoked in the Battle of the Mill, when the neighbour treacherously attacks them and is repulsed at great cost, with the sacrifice and heroism of all.

Although it is a short book, *Animal farm* expresses a now mature thought, which will be further developed and accentuated in *1984*: above all, the idea of power becoming an end in itself and the idea of the continuous falsification of the past, which Orwell also knows well from personal experience. In the regime established by the swine, little by little what is reminiscent of the glorious times of the Revolt is erased, the “seven commandments” on which the ambitious new project of coexistence was based are changed, the memory of the animals is erased as necessary, just as in the Soviet regime celebratory photos of people were retouched from time to time,

erasing the faces of the purged but, in some cases (which have remained famous), forgetting a hand or an arm that continued to recall, like a ghost, what had been expunged.

The idea of radical democracy that emerges from *Animal Farm* is a constant in Orwell, starting with early works such as *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), the book of enquiry into the miserable life of the working class in the North. From the outset it is outlined in an anarchoid declination in the memoir *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), the first book published under the pseudonym George Orwell: his real name was in fact Eric Arthur Blair.

Born in India, where his father was an imperial civil servant, the young man returned to the colonies after his studies in England with a similar job, which occupied him for some years. But it was in the motherland that the future democratic socialist Orwell was formed: when he began to question everyday life. Why, for example, was he forbidden to play with the plumber's children? The answer, as he wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, was that his environment could not allow his children to acquire a folk accent.

Orwell had studied at the prestigious Eton College, without much success. He detested it but also made it a small – or great – social status. He led an austere life but did not disdain comforts, and prostitutes, of whom he was apparently a regular customer during his service in Burma, which began at the age of nineteen: this experience provided him with the material for *Burmese Days*, published in New York only in 1934 because the English publishers feared lawsuits. He liked living as a vagabond but detested bad smells and dirt. He was always ill but smoked like a Turk. He was looking

for an escape route and found it in the slums of London and in the kitchens of the great restaurants of Paris, becoming a chronicler and scholar of the lives of what we would call the “last”, the English homeless or the fiercely exploited waiters and cooks in the French capital.

In *Animal Farm* there are no vagabonds or unemployed: what in Marxist terms would be called the under-proletariat is absent. There are proletarians, and the two horses, Boxer and Clover, represent them at their best: they are the symbols of the exploited, or in some way deceived, people. Boxer, in fact, has as his motto «I will work harder» whenever he is confronted with a complex situation or one that he does not understand. Another on the other hand, a vexatious little horse named Mollie, will quickly switch to her old “masters” for the sake of the ribbons knotted on her mane. Boxer is the true hero of *socialism*, the worker who never asks why and never shirks, and who has even introjected a sense of duty and works to death.

*Animal Farm* is an even moving homage to this (tragic) figure dear to Orwell and, at the same time, it is a gesture of denunciation against his new masters: the “Soviet myth” – on this Orwell has no doubts – is deadly for the socialist movement. He wrote this in a famous preface to the 1947 Ukrainian edition, printed in Munich and distributed not in the Sovietised country but to exiles: «In the last ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if the socialist movement was to be revived. And [...] I thought of denouncing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost everyone [...] However, I could not invent the details of the story until the day

[...] when I saw a little boy, maybe ten years old, leading a large draft horse along a narrow path, whipping it every time it tried to turn around. I was struck by the idea that if only animals were aware of their strength we would have no power over them, and that humans exploit animals in the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat».

He also makes it clear that, even if it were within his power, he would not want to interfere in Soviet affairs: «I do not condemn Stalin and his collaborators merely for their barbaric methods. It is even possible that, perhaps with the best of intentions, they could not have acted differently given the situation they found themselves in». But all this, he adds, has nothing to do with socialism, in which the writer continues to believe passionately.

In *George Orwell, a Life*, his best-known biographer, Bernard Crick, observes that the most remarkable aspect in Orwell is not so much his political stance, which was quite common at the time, but the fact that he openly demanded of his own political camp, the left, that they behave according to the principles they set out themselves, both in everyday life and in politics, that they respect freedom and above all truth. Socialism could not come about by the conquest of power or by an act of legislation, but only by convincing people with good arguments and personal example. *Animal Farm* is written with this in mind, but it is also the writer's last "optimistic" gesture.

*Pessimism* is one of Orwell's great themes, on which there is of course ample critical discussion. It can be said that behind the fighting spirit of the writer, one who never gave up, not even in the face of illness, there is a groundswell of pessi-

mism that will find its fullest expression in 1984, where the world itself, without remedy, becomes a monstrous dystopia. In *Animal Farm* we are not yet at this point, despite the final conclusion.

If Boxer is the tragic character who sums up the vicissitude of the animal people, who in some way act as his backdrop, precisely in this what we might call the “chorus” of the tragedy, we find minor figures who are nonetheless of great relevance for what they tell us about the author’s point of view. One of these represents distrust and surrender to a perennial, metahistorical state of affairs, and it is the donkey Benjamin. He appears little, but his is an ongoing counterpoint to the political struggle between the animals in power and those in subjection. He is not disappointed by events, just as he was not turned on to hope in the revolutionary moment. For him, there is an «unalterable law of life» that affects the weak, in every regime and in every historical circumstance: «hunger, hardship and disappointment» (Chapter 10). It represents the nihilistic temptation which Orwell certainly resists – at least by confining it to a quantitatively secondary role – but which he cannot ignore.

Next to the donkey, the other polarity of the Orwellian metahistorical pessimism is Moses, the “pet crow”, who does not participate in the Uprising, who does not share it, and keeps to the sidelines mostly on his perch. He had been «Jones’s especial pet, was a spy and a tale-bearer, but he was also a clever talker. He claimed to know of the existence of a mysterious country called Sugarcandy Mountain, to which all animals went when they died» (Chapter 2).

Moses is the representative of organised religion, kept at a distance yes, but tolerated. Some animals, not all, tend to

trust him, they believe that Sugarcandy really exists, and the crows, even though they «had to argue very hard to persuade them that there was no such place», after a few years, when life on the farm becomes as hard as it was in the days of men, or even worse, discover its indirect usefulness. Sometimes they even offer the raven a beer, the drink of the elite and normally forbidden to the «lower animals», the «lower classes» (Chapter 10), i.e. the proletariat.

Once again we are faced with the parable of the Soviet Revolution, from state atheism to the substantial acceptance of an Orthodox Church, first obedient and subservient, then the backbone of future regimes (if he could have imagined Vladimir Putin, he would probably have seen it not as a new nightmare, but as a logical consequence).

When in the aforementioned preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm* he quotes the convictions he has matured «over the last ten years», Orwell is pointing to Spain in 1936-1937, where he fought, albeit briefly, as a volunteer in the international brigades. It is precisely the Spanish experience, which finds its synthesis in the marvelous *Homage to Catalonia* (published in 1938, when the war was not yet over), that makes him realise the monstrosity of the system that had meanwhile established itself in Russia. After the clashes in Barcelona between the Republican army and the anarchists, and the ferocious repression that ensued – even endangering his own safety and that of his wife – he came to the conclusion that «what the communists were working for was not to postpone the Spanish revolution to a better time, but to make sure it never took place».

This was the conviction reached by the anarchists and also the socialists of the Poum, the small party in whose militia Orwell enrolled as soon as he arrived in Spain, in December 1936. His intention was to write articles for the newspapers with which he collaborated, but taking up arms, «at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do». The fight against Franco was in a fairly chaotic phase: trade unions and parties had their own armed formations, coordinated by a general command but also jealous of their own identity. The Poum was close to the anarchists and also to the (supposed, according to Orwell) Trockists of the British Iip, who had provided the writer with credentials and thus determined his political fate.

Orwell fought in the trenches (and it is worth remembering Kean Loach's 1955 film, *Land and Freedom*, inspired by his story), was soon wounded and found himself in Barcelona, on leave after hospital treatment, at the moment of the showdown between the Republican government, increasingly influenced by the Communist party, and the revolutionaries, including the radical socialists of the Poum, whose expulsion, according to Orwell, took place «under precise orders from the USSR», the most important and indeed vital ally. There was fighting in the streets, there were casualties and above all a wave of arrests, with the sinister sequel of mysterious disappearances. Orwell himself, with his wife, had to flee. Little did he know that he was carrying tuberculosis, contracted in hospital but diagnosed many years later, of which he died in January 1950: he had just completed in desperate conditions, in Jura, the cold and inhospitable island of the Hebrides, *1984*, the novel, this one darkly dystopian, working from his bed and smoking incessantly.

Returning to England in early July 1937, he wrote in his *Homage to Catalonia*: «All in all, the war was worth winning even if the revolution was lost. But in the end I began to doubt whether, from a long-term perspective, the Communists' strategy would lead to victory».

*Homage to Catalonia* was a countercultural book. *Animal Farm* was scandalous, and Orwell knew it. He wrote it between November 1943 and February 1944, but he had been thinking about it since he was working on BBC broadcasts to India. These were the years when the myth of the USSR and Stalin were at their peak, Russia had stopped Hitler at the gates of Stalingrad, and was a vital ally.

Publishing the book was not easy, and he had to suffer humiliating  *censorship*: even Thomas Stearns Eliot, the great poet who was a well-known conservative and therefore not suspected of Stalinist sympathies, refused it to him in his capacity as director of Faber & Faber, replying to him coldly, in a letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> July 1944 (published only in 1969 in *The Times*, now available on the British Library's website), that he had no conviction «that this is the right point of view from which to criticise the present political situation». Nor was this the first time: already in 1932 he had rejected *Down and Out in Paris and London*. So did his usual publisher, Gollancz, who had to explain, some time later, his (painful?) decision with reasons related to the necessities of war, although he had liked the book: one could not attack an ally. Those that Orwell suffered (four in all) were purely political rejections. For years the writer, who was always very close to the Ilp but not “organic” to it (he joined the party in 1938), had been looked upon with suspicion, also because of his intense



publishing activity, by a relevant part of the left, explicitly accused of being a bourgeois traitor, and in some cases of connivance with fascism.

By the time the book came out, on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1945, the world was divided between the two superpowers. Orwell gave up the preface, entitled *The Freedom of the Press*, where he explained that while he was writing in 1943, he had taken all kinds of censorship into account: he knew very well «that there would be great difficulty in finding a publisher». The point of arrival does not differ much from the point of departure.

As it has often been observed, perhaps Orwell did not “write well” in the traditional sense, or in the one commonly attributed to the expression, but he was as if guided by a dowsing sixth sense and wrote so effectively that he influenced the *language of generations to come*. In a 1946 essay, *Politics and the English Language*, thus a year after the publication of *Animal Farm*, he explained the linguistic aspect of it in some detail: «In our time, political speech and writing are above all the defence of the indefensible». And he called for the avoidance of metaphors, of which he was, moreover, a master.

“Orwellian” has become a current adjective, as has the metaphor of “Big Brother”, which arose in 1984 to designate a faceless, collective entity that controls everyone via an interactive “telescreen”. Orwellian is a society based on unchallenged domination and technology, but also on the manipulation of language. In 1984 it is routinely practised by a despotic regime, and is theorised under the term “doublethink”. However, it is also a current practice already in *Animal Farm*, which refers to the typically communist the-

ory of double-truth: something that goes beyond the simple political lie, widely practised by the swine elite, and which over time has spread to the entire world of politics, from right to left.

In *Animal Farm*, the most important example is in the sort of constitution that animals give themselves once they are free of their human master. «The seven commandments», very clear in their enunciation and defined as «unalterable» (Chapter 2), are surreptitiously altered with the passage of time, almost imperceptibly. Thus we pass from «No animal shall drink alcohol» to «No animal shall drink alcohol to excess», from «No animal shall sleep in a bed» to «No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets» and so on, until we are reduced to a single law, written in block letters on a wall: «All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others» (Chapter 10). A phrase that has become of imperishable relevance, entered into the everyday language of us all, testifying, once again, to the writer's extraordinary ability to grasp linguistic and social drifts.

Finally, not everyone knows that he was also responsible for the coining, in the essay *You and the Atom Bomb* (1945), of another expression destined for everlasting fortune: “cold war”. In his growing pessimism, he could not imagine the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but today's “fake news”, those he clearly intuited: because they suffocated him then, as they suffocate us today.