

# CRITICAL INSIGHTS

Animal Farm



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## Animal Farm

Editor

**Thomas Horan**

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## A Tale of Violence: *Animal Farm* as an Allegory of Social Order

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Dario Altobelli

*Animal Farm* was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole. (George Orwell, “Why I Write”)

Any interpretation of *Animal Farm* must take into consideration the obvious but important fact that the work is a fairy story. The fabulist style—defined by a tradition dating back thousands of years—permeates a work in which the moral, social, and political meanings as well as the aesthetic dimension exceed the historic event they deal with on a symbolic level. As Orwell himself stated at the end of the 1946, “though *Animal Farm* was ‘primarily a satire on the Russian Revolution’ it was intended to have wider application” (qtd. in Davison vii). Proof of this is the fact that, though memories of the Stalinist period have faded, *Animal Farm* continues to be read without reference to specific historical events by virtue of its remarkable narrative strength, dealing with themes related to the human condition and social dynamics.

### The Double Narrative Paradigm of the *Fabula*

This short novel’s expressive power stems primarily from its being a fable (in Latin, *fabula*): a narrative form with specific traits, where the characters are played by talking animals, a style that can be traced to the origins of Western literature. The *fabula* leads the reader to a place where human facts are represented in an essential, figurative, *sub specie aeternitatis* manner, drawing upon “the readers’ experience of tales told within an oral tradition” (Attebery 1991, Morse 85).

The *fabula* consists of stories of animals that embody vices, virtues, and human behavior; the “moral of the story” is a reflection or advice regarding the reader’s habits and beliefs. Naturalizing the

human allows the fabulist to portray the scene of our instinctual appetites with a cynical and disenchanting eye, often employing irony and sarcasm. Within this general framework, *Animal Farm* can be understood outside a specific historical timeline because it depicts a transtemporal and anthropological human condition. *Animal Farm* animalizes the human and humanizes the animal, building to the original and hallucinatory conclusion where the two worlds blend. A shocking and unsettling finale sets this *fabula* apart from many others, placing it within the realm of the horror genre: “Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which” (Orwell, *Animal Farm* 95).

This singular story must be read with reference to the fables by Aesop, Phaedrus, and Jean de La Fontaine, as the full expression of a noble and ancient tradition, weaving popular and high ingredients into the narrative. This literary tradition continues to exist in a form renewed in this book and in many others, such as the works of Luis Sepulveda, as well as in Walt Disney’s animated drawings and films.

On the one hand, *Animal Farm* fits within the literary tradition of the fable. On the other hand, it displays differences such as the length of the story, which is typical of a novella—a literary form unknown to classical fabulists. Moreover, Orwell voices a clear political and social view that is generally not found in fables. Nevertheless, *Animal Farm* follows the path traced by Aesop and Phaedrus because it provides a “history of the oppressed.” Indeed, Phaedrus is the author of the unique and remarkable statement that reads: “In a few words I now propose / To point from whence the Fable rose. / A servitude was all along / Exposed to most oppressive wrong, / The sufferer therefore did not dare / His heart’s true dictates to declare; / But couch’d his meaning in the veil / Of many an allegoric tale, / And jesting with a moral aim, / Eluded all offence and blame (Phaedrus, III, *Prologus*, vv. 33-37).

The playful inventions of Phaedrus and other fabulists portray and pass down a “minor” history, traditionally relegated to silence



by official historiography, which is written by the “winners” and often enclosed in the shrines of “cultural heritage,” where it can be neutralized and made harmless (Benjamin, *Theses* 256). The history of the losers, of the outcasts, the history of the masses, the history of “those with no history” is found in allegories and fiction, where it can be told, portrayed, and passed on without attracting the attention of the power establishment or succumbing to punishment and the violence of censorship.

This narrative tradition communicates, in this way, with the utopian tradition. In *Utopia* Thomas More presents the concept of *ductus obliquus* (leading indirectly). Caution guides *Utopia*'s elaborate inventions in order to allow More to question the certainties of his time and criticize the living conditions of the masses and the issue of enclosures, while avoiding censorship.

The deeper contents of *Animal Farm* take shape following the dual direction of fabulist literature: one a timeless representation of human nature in animal guise, the other a literary form exploring relations of power, violence, and justice. This is the sophisticated structure—however simple and immediate it may appear to the reader—on which Orwell constructs his allegory of the sociopolitical dynamics at play in the revolutionary process.

### **Benjamin, Derrida, and the Problem of Violence**

*Animal Farm* can be read in philosophical and political-sociological terms, with reference to the early essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (“Critique of Violence”) (1921) by Walter Benjamin. Written in the years following the October Revolution, Benjamin analyzes how a state’s judicial system, which permeates the political and social order, attains and keeps power through violence. Through “justified means used for just ends,” an ambiguous relationship with violence nurtures the newly established judicial order. The violence the state originates from becomes the means by which it is then protected:

All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favorable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself.

And if the importance of these problems cannot be assessed with certainty at this stage of the investigation, law nevertheless appears, from what has been said, in so ambiguous a moral light that the question poses itself whether there are no other than violent means for regulating conflicting human interests. (“Critique of Violence” 287)

The judicial creation, that is the ability to confer an effective and stable juridical form to social relations and to provide models of nonviolent solutions for conflicts between opposed interests, is the outcome of violence as the primary source of law, from which, throughout history, it never separates. From this perspective violence is an indispensable element within the political and social spheres to which the possibility of transforming, but also of conserving, the given order is paradoxically linked.

Considering the reality of his times, Benjamin brought to light the hypocrisy inherent in the critique of violence, acknowledging that violence is the main means of establishing and maintaining all forms of judicial and governmental order, even democratic order, as proven by the case of modern law enforcement, whose functions have increased disproportionately from surveillance to repression. The implicit reference was to Max Weber and his definition of the state as the “holder of legitimate violence” irrespective of the political form assumed:

In the past the most diverse kinds of associations—beginning with the clan—have regarded physical violence as a quite normal instrument. Nowadays, by contrast, we have to say that a state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory, this “territory” being another of the defining characteristics of the state. For the specific feature of the present is that the right to use physical violence is attributed to any and all other associations or individuals only to the extent that the state for its part permits that to happen. The state is held to be the sole source of the “right” to use violence. (3-4)

Benjamin refers to the violence that establishes and maintains the law as “mythical violence”; to this he opposes the pure, divine violence (“divine power”) that is present throughout religious traditions, for example in the Hebrew Bible:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (“Critique of Violence” 297)

“Divine violence” is represented by the revolutionary violence that interrupts the “cycle maintained by mythical forms of law,” and overthrows law and the state (“Critique of Violence” 300).

In recent years Jacques Derrida provided a detailed and fruitful critique of Benjamin’s essay. Resuming some of Blaise Pascal’s thoughts linking “justice and force,” Derrida states the principle by which “there is no law without enforceability” (925): there is no law beyond an act of force or enforcement. The expression “force of law” is adequate for describing the meaning of the German term “Gewalt,” employed by Benjamin because it covers both its main meanings: that of violence and that of legitimate power, authority, public force. Thus, like Benjamin, Derrida believes that law is a constitutional compromise with the sphere of violence. In addition, he considers the contradictory relationship between law and justice: “law is always an authorized force, a force that justifies itself or is justified in applying itself, even if this justification may be judged from elsewhere to be unjust or unjustifiable” (925). The legitimacy of a state’s judicial order is separate from justice. This gap between law and justice cannot be breached: law refers to generality, while justice refers to singularity. The relationship between the two is aporetic: “Law (*droit*) is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary,

of justice, that is to say moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule” (Derrida 947).

An interesting aspect of Derrida’s thesis is that law—considered in its inaugural and original phase as a “new” judicial order compared to the predecessor it substitutes—establishes itself and emerges in a tear “in the homogeneous tissue of a history” in relation to the performative use of language: “The very emergence of justice and law, the founding and justifying moment that institutes law implies a performative force, which is always an interpretative force . . . the operation that consists of founding, inaugurating, justifying law (*droit*), making law, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence” (941). Here lies, following Michel de Montaigne and Pascal, the mystical foundation of authority. In its founding moment law is neither just nor unjust, legitimate nor illegitimate: it expresses the performative power of language that allows the establishment of law without a foundation: “since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can’t by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground” (Derrida 943). It follows that law is “essentially deconstructible, whether because it is founded, constructed on interpretable and transformable textual strata (and that is the history of law (*droit*), its possible and necessary transformation, sometimes its amelioration), or because its ultimate foundation is by definition unfounded” (Derrida 943).

### **Violence, Power, and Justice in *Animal Farm***

The interpretative guidelines set by Benjamin and Derrida apply perfectly to *Animal Farm*, amplifying the book’s range of meanings. In this fairy story the logical and dialectic sequence between different forms of violence (the “divine” and revolutionary violence at first, the “mythical” violence establishing and maintaining judicial order later) and the complicated historical path taken by a society undergoing a revolutionary process effectively converge. The “divine violence” that destroys the existing order is represented in the initial revolt of the animals against Jones and his helpers. The processes of foundation and legislation as well as political

revolution are set in motion by a profound need for justice. This need is dictated by a new awareness of the life conditions of the animals on the farm. Following a dream—“a dream of the earth as it will be when Man has vanished” (Orwell, *Animal Farm* 6)—“old Major, the prize Middle White boar” summons all the animals to a meeting where he gives a revelatory speech:

Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring from the tyranny of human beings? Only get rid of Man, and the produce of our labour would be our own. . . . That is my message to you, comrades: Rebellion! I do not know when that Rebellion will come, it might be in a week or in a hundred years, but I know, as surely as I see this straw beneath my feet, that *sooner or later justice will be done*. (5, emphasis added)

In the name of true and liberating justice and under the influence of the hunger suffered by the animals “the Rebellion was achieved much earlier and more easily than anyone had expected” (11). This is the explosion of a “divine violence” “that strikes without bloodshed” (Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” 297):

[Jones’s] men suddenly found themselves being butted and kicked from all sides. The situation was quite out of their control. . . . After only a moment or two they gave up trying to defend themselves and took to their heels. A minute later all five of them were in full flight down the cart-track that led to the main road, with the animals pursuing them in triumph. . . . And so, almost before they knew what was happening, the Rebellion had been successfully carried through: Jones was expelled, and the Manor Farm was theirs. (12)

The promise of a happy society of liberated animals, after the bloodless revolt against the human master, is followed by the slow and relentless establishment of a dictatorship by some of the animals, mostly by the pigs: this is the “mythical violence” that immediately establishes law.

A perfect example of this is the renaming of the master’s farm as Animal Farm and the drafting of the Seven Commandments. The

violent nature of the foundation of law can be seen in the double action of renaming the community and writing its fundamental laws. The passage from an oral tradition to the use of writing marks the transition from a revolutionary moment to a constituent one. The precepts, handed down orally by Old Major in the speech that awakens the animals' consciences, through writing become the official idiom of society, the source legitimizing the newly established power, the boundaries within which relations between the animals must henceforth take place. The Seven Commandments provide the legal and moral standards for the new society. The fundamental law regulating this new social order is at the same time its foundation and its guarantee.

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill any other animal.
7. All animals are equal. (15)

Orwell clearly shows the link between society, the founding nature of law, and the moral imperative at the moment of the establishment of a new social order:

At the beginning, rules are essentially imperative, either negative or positive, and they aim to establish desirable behavior or to avoid undesirable behavior by recourse to sanctions in this world or the next. The Ten Commandments immediately come to mind, and are just the most familiar example. . . . The moral world . . . is born with the formulation, imposition and application of commands and prohibitions . . . the primary function of the law is to constrict and not to liberate, to limit and not to open up areas of liberty, to straighten the twisted and not to allow it to grow wild. (Bobbio 37-38)

According to Norberto Bobbio, there is a precise tie between the moral sphere and the political one; it resides precisely in the original function of the rules of conduct: "to protect the group as a whole

rather than the single individual” (38): “Originally the function of the precept ‘thou shalt not kill’ was not to protect the single member of the group so much as to remove one of the fundamental reasons for a group’s disintegration. The best proof of this is that this precept, which is justifiably considered a moral cornerstone, was valid for members of the same group, but not of other groups” (38-39).

### **Law and Language between the Foundation and the Preservation of the Social Order**

The Seven Commandments indicate that writing coincides with law and law coincides with writing: from this moment, the ability to master the tools for writing and reading become requisites for enjoying the right to citizenship in the new order. Only the pigs, however, fully understand the benefits of mastering these tools, and they use them to keep power and direct it toward different aims that are legitimate from a formal point of view—because they are supported by law—though not at all just.

Orwell’s sensitivity toward the politics of language leads him to accentuate the disproportion between the animals with knowledge and power of language and those who remain unlettered and governed. The certainty of law in its written form reveals itself as the complete and coherent continuation of the mythical and original violence founding the “new” order. Orwell’s attention to language ranges from general issues pertinent to cognitive processes— “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” (“Politics and the English Language” 137)—to specifically political issues: “a society which cannot control its language is . . . doomed to be oppressed in terms which deny it the very most elemental aspects of humanity . . . those who control the means of communication have the most awful of powers—they literally can create the truth they choose” (Lee 127, qtd. in Hirvisaari 22).

Janne Hirvisaari observes that in relation to the ability to master language, “the pigs, who control the means of communication and have a far more advanced rhetoric, can thus persuade and govern the other animals according to their will” (43). In other terms, “linguistic oligarchy will sustain their exploitation of the animals through

the monopoly of language” (Elbarbary 37). The manipulation of the commandments does not merely aim at taking control of language, but at manipulating the foundations of society. The Seven Commandments represent the “constitutional charter” of the Animal Farm, the modification of which reveals an agenda of ruthless constitutional engineering affecting the overall political and social organization, interfering with the basic shape of social relations.

Even before using the dogs’ repressive and policing violence, the pigs employ an astute and subtle form of violence by modifying the fundamental judicial body at their own pleasure. Orwell shows that the manipulation of the judicial and legal (constitutional) sphere coincides with the manipulation of memory, since the Seven Commandments are also—especially on an interpretative level—the source of social memory. The inability to read the commandments provokes a sense of absolute existential bewilderment in the farm animals. The violent act of foundation of law and state remains unexplained to them. They have no key to access the memory of the original facts through which the legitimization of the “new” order takes place and is perpetuated: the return to the past can only happen through written law. The written law establishes which principles and vision inspired the achieved political and social revolution. The repressive and mystifying violence exerted on the past is even more terrible for those who, suffering it, do not have the cultural and cognitive resources to grasp the outcomes in the *present day* of what they themselves had participated in creating in the not-so-distant *yesterday* (Derrida 991).

Violence establishes the judicial relations within society, that is the political and social form of a society in its founding moment. In *Animal Farm* we see how the expression of the “force of law,” as Derrida characterizes it, links to what he calls the “mystical foundation of authority” that in *Animal Farm* recalls the central role of writing and knowledge as expression of “a performative and therefore interpretative violence” (Derrida 941). Derrida himself quotes La Fontaine’s fable “The Wolf and the Sheep” to demonstrate how the principle “Might makes right” still lacks the full understanding of “force as an essential predicate of justice”



(*droit*) because it remains within a conception of “a conventionalist or utilitarian relativism . . . that would make the law a ‘masked power’” (941).

*Animal Farm* also provides a representation of “mythical violence” as a force that preserves the law, exemplified by the institution of a police force of dogs. The audacious and ferocious nature of their duty leads to the desired effects of terror and enslavement. By threatening to use them—following Snowball’s escape from the farm—Napoleon establishes a dictatorship. Among the many passages where Orwell recounts the unsettling role of the canine police force, perhaps the most terrible one is when Napoleon orders the execution of the animals who displayed reservations about his decisions: “And so the tale of confessions and executions went on, until there was a pile of corpses lying before Napoleon’s feet and the air was heavy with the smell of blood, which had been unknown there since the expulsion of Jones” (57). The sense of bewilderment that comes upon the surviving animals is due not only to the fear of becoming themselves the victims of this kind of “justice” but also to the inability to find a supporting clause within society’s law: “some of the animals remembered—or thought they remembered—that the Sixth Commandment decreed “No animal shall kill any other animal” (61). The imperative principle among animals demanding reciprocal respect of each other’s lives, which was crucial to the original formulation by Old Major, has been overturned with the addition of two simple words that “slipped out of the animals’ memory” (61): “No animal shall kill any other animal *without cause*” (61). By dealing with the issue of absolute power in matters of life and death, Orwell’s novel raises the irresolvable question of the legitimacy of violence as the means for obtaining results defined legally as just. The rephrased Sixth Commandment exemplifies the dramatic passage from the dimension of an ethical universal assumption “do not kill” to a law of convenience and calculation legitimizing an oppressive social order, “for in the exercise of violence over life and death, more than in any other legal act, law reaffirms itself” (Benjamin, “Critique of Violence” 286).

*Animal Farm* is a complex allegory of social order developed on multiple levels. It is a fairy tale in the sense of Phaedrus: a “slave’s tale,” we could say: a story written by the losers of history. It is a narrative representation of the “force of law” in Derrida’s sense: “a performative and therefore interpretative violence” affirmed through writing and related to the “mystical foundation of authority” (941). And, lastly, following the thought of Walter Benjamin, it is a bitter apologue on the distance that always separates justice from law, a consideration of law as an instrument of power, domination, and oppression.

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