**Animal Farm reviewed by Christopher Hitchens**

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**Christopher Hitchens re-reads Animal Farm**

Still outlawed by regimes around the world, Animal Farm has always been political dynamite – so much so, it was nearly never published. Christopher Hitchens on George Orwell’s timeless, transcendent ‘fairy story’

Animal Farm, as its author later wrote, “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”. And indeed, its pages contain a synthesis of many of the themes that we have come to think of as “Orwellian”. Among these are a hatred of tyranny, a love for animals and the English countryside, and a deep admiration for the satirical fables of Jonathan Swift. To this one might add Orwell’s keen desire to see things from the viewpoint of childhood and innocence: he had long wished for fatherhood and, fearing that he was sterile, had adopted a small boy not long before the death of his first wife. The partly ironic subtitle of the novel is “A Fairy Story”, and Orwell was pleased when he heard from friends such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Sir Herbert Read that their own offspring had enjoyed reading the book.

Like much of his later work – most conspicuously the much grimmer Nineteen Eighty-Four – Animal Farm was the product of Orwell’s engagement in the Spanish civil war. During the course of that conflict, in which he had fought on the anti-fascist side and been wounded and then chased out of Spain by supporters of Joseph Stalin, his experiences had persuaded him that the majority of “left” opinion was wrong, and that the Soviet Union was a new form of hell and not an emerging utopia. He described the malrmgenesis of the idea in one of his two introductions to the book:

. . . for the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the socialist movement. On my return from Spain I thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone . . . However, the actual details of the story did not come to me for some time until one day (I was then living in a small village) I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge carthorse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat.

I proceeded to analyse Marx’s theory from the animals’ point of view.

The simplicity of this notion is in many ways deceptive. By undertaking such a task, Orwell was choosing to involve himself in a complex and bitter argument about the Bolshevik revolution in Russia: then a far more controversial issue than it is today. Animal Farm can be better understood if it is approached under three different headings: its historical context; the struggle over its publication and its subsequent adoption as an important cultural weapon in the cold war; and its enduring relevance today.

The book was written at the height of the second world war, and at a time when the pact between Stalin and Hitler had been replaced abruptly by an alliance between Stalin and the British empire. London was under Nazi bombardment, and the manuscript of the novel had to be rescued from the wreckage of Orwell’s blitzed home in north London.

The cynical way in which Stalin had switched sides had come as no surprise to Orwell, who was by then accustomed to the dishonesty and cruelty of the Soviet regime. This put him in a fairly small minority, both within official Britain and among the British left.

With a few slight alterations to the sequence of events, the action approximates to the fate of the 1917 generation in Russia. Thus the grand revolutionary scheme of the veteran boar Old Major (Karl Marx) is at first enthusiastically adopted by almost all creatures, leading to the overthrow of Farmer Jones (the Tsar), the defeat of the other farmers who come to his aid (the now-forgotten western invasions of Russia in 1918–19) and the setting up of a new model state. In a short time, the more ruthless and intelligent creatures – naturally enough the pigs – have the other animals under their dictatorship and are living like aristocrats.

Inevitably, the pigs argue among themselves. The social forces represented by different animals are easily recognisable – Boxer the noble horse as the embodiment of the working class, Moses the raven as the Russian Orthodox church – as are the identifiable individuals played by different pigs. The rivalry between Napoleon (Stalin) and Snowball (Trotsky) ends with Snowball’s exile and the subsequent attempt to erase him from the memory of the farm. Stalin had the exiled Trotsky murdered in Mexico less than three years before Orwell began work on the book.

Some of the smaller details are meticulously exact. Due to the exigencies of the war, Stalin had made various opportunistic compromises. He had recruited the Russian Orthodox church to his side, the better to cloak himself in patriotic garb, and he was to abolish the old socialist anthem “The Internationale” for being too provocative to his new capitalist allies in London and Washington. In Animal Farm, Moses the raven is allowed to come croaking back as the crisis deepens, and the poor exploited goats and horses and hens are told that their beloved song “Beasts of England” is no longer to be sung.

There is, however, one very salient omission. There is a Stalin pig and a Trotsky pig, but no Lenin pig. Similarly, in Nineteen Eighty-Four we find only a Big Brother Stalin and an Emmanuel Goldstein Trotsky. Nobody appears to have pointed this out at the time (and if I may say so, nobody but myself has done so since; it took me years to notice what was staring me in the face).

It is sobering to consider how close this novel came to remaining unpublished. Having survived Hitler’s bombing, the rather battered manuscript was sent to the office of TS Eliot, then an important editor at Faber & Faber. Eliot, a friendly acquaintance of Orwell’s, was a political and cultural conservative, not to say reactionary. But, perhaps influenced by Britain’s alliance with Moscow, he rejected the book on the grounds that it seemed too “Trotskyite”. He also told Orwell that his choice of pigs as rulers was an unfortunate one, and that readers might draw the conclusion that what was needed was “more public-spirited pigs”. This was not perhaps as fatuous as the turn-down that Orwell received from the Dial Press in New York, which solemnly informed him that stories about animals found no market in the US. And this in the land of Disney . . .

The wartime solidarity between British Tories and Soviet Communists found another counterpart in the work of Peter Smollett, a senior official in the Ministry of Information who was later exposed as a Soviet agent. Smollett made it his business to warn off certain publishers, as a consequence of which Animal Farm was further denied a home at the reputable firms of Victor Gollancz and Jonathan Cape. For a time Orwell considered producing the book privately with the help of his radical Canadian poet friend, Paul Potts, in what would have been a pioneering instance of anti-Soviet samizdat or self-publishing. He even wrote an angry essay, entitled “The Freedom of the Press”, to be included as an introduction: an essay which was not unearthed and printed until 1972. Eventually the honour of the publishing business was saved by the small company Secker & Warburg, which in 1945 brought out an edition with a very limited print-run and paid Orwell £45 for it.

It is thinkable that the story might have ended in this damp-squib way, but two later developments were to give the novel its place in history. A group of Ukrainian and Polish socialists, living in refugee camps in post-war Europe, discovered a copy of the book in English and found it to be a near-perfect allegory of their own recent experience. Their self-taught English-speaking leader and translator, Ihor Sevcenko, found an address for Orwell and wrote to him asking permission to translate Animal Farm into Ukrainian. He told him that many of Stalin’s victims nonetheless still considered themselves to be socialists, and did not trust an intellectual of the right to voice their feelings. “They were profoundly affected by such scenes as that of animals singing ‘Beasts of England’ on the hill . . . They very vividly reacted to the ‘absolute’ values of the book.” Orwell agreed to grant publication rights for free (he did this for subsequent editions in several other eastern European languages). It is affecting to imagine battle-hardened ex-soldiers and prisoners of war, having survived all the privations of the eastern front, becoming stirred by the image of British farm animals singing their own version of the discarded “Internationale”, but this was an early instance of the hold the book was to take on its readership. The emotions of the American military authorities in Europe were not so easily touched: they rounded up all the copies of Animal Farm that they could find and turned them over to the Red Army to be burnt. The alliance between the farmers and the pigs, so hauntingly described in the final pages of the novel, was still in force.

But in the part-acrimonious closing scene, usually best-remembered for the way in which men and pigs have become indistinguishable, Orwell predicted, as on other occasions, that the ostensible friendship between east and west would not long outlast the defeat of nazism. The cold war, a phrase that Orwell himself was the first to use in print, soon created a very different ideological atmosphere. This in turn conditioned the reception of Animal Farm in the US. At first rejected at Random House by the communist sympathiser Angus Cameron, it was rescued from oblivion by Frank Morley of Harcourt, Brace, who while visiting England had been impressed by a chance encounter with the novel in a bookshop in Cambridge. Publication was attended by two strokes of good fortune: Edmund Wilson wrote a highly favourable review for the New Yorker, comparing Orwell’s satirical talent to the work of Swift and Voltaire, and the Book-of-the-Month Club made it a main selection, which led to a printing of almost half a million copies. The stupidity of the Dial Press notwithstanding, the Walt Disney company came up with a proposal for a film version. This was never made, though the CIA did later produce and distribute an Animal Farm cartoon for propaganda purposes. By the time Orwell died in January 1950, having just finished Nineteen Eighty-Four, he had at last achieved an international reputation and was having to issue repeated disclaimers of the use made of his work by the American right wing.

Probably the best-known sentence from the novel is the negation by the pigs of the original slogan that “All Animals Are Equal” by the addition of the afterthought that “Some Animals Are More Equal than Others”. As communism in Russia and eastern Europe took on more and more of the appearance of a “new class” system, with grotesque privileges for the ruling elite and a grinding mediocrity of existence for the majority, the moral effect of Orwell’s work – so simple to understand and to translate, precisely as he had hoped – became one of the many unquantifiable forces that eroded communism both as a system and as an ideology. Gradually, the same effect spread to Asia. I remember a communist friend of mine telephoning me from China when Deng Xiaoping announced the “reforms” that were to inaugurate what we now know as Chinese capitalism. “The peasants must get rich,” the leader of the party announced, “and some will get richer than others.” My comrade was calling to say that perhaps Orwell had had a point after all. Thus far, Animal Farm has not been legally published in China, Burma or the moral wilderness of North Korea, but one day will see its appearance in all three societies, where it is sure to be greeted with the shock of recognition that it is still capable of inspiring.

In Zimbabwe, as the rule of Robert Mugabe’s kleptocratic clique became ever more exorbitant, an opposition newspaper took the opportunity to reprint Animal Farm in serial form. It did so without comment, except that one of the accompanying illustrations showed Napoleon the dictator wearing the trademark black horn-rimmed spectacles of Zimbabwe’s own leader. The offices of the newspaper were soon afterwards blown up by a weapons-grade bomb, but before too long Zimbabwean children, also, will be able to appreciate the book in its own right.

In the Islamic world, many countries continue to ban it, ostensibly because of its emphasis on pigs. Clearly this can not be the whole reason – if only because the porcine faction is rendered in such an unfavourable light – and under the theocratic despotism of Iran it is forbidden for reasons having to do with its message of “revolution betrayed”.

There is a timeless, even transcendent, quality to this little story. It is caught when Old Major tells his quiet, sad audience of overworked beasts about a time long ago, when creatures knew of the possibility of a world without masters, and when he recalls in a dream the words and the tune of a half-forgotten freedom song. Orwell had a liking for the tradition of the English Protestant revolution, and his favourite line of justification was taken from John Milton, who made his stand “By the known rules of ancient liberty”. In all minds – perhaps especially in those of children – there is a feeling that life need not always be this way, and those malnourished Ukrainian survivors, responding to the authenticity of the verses and to something “absolute” in the integrity of the book, were hearing the mighty line of Milton whether they fully understood it or not.