

Language as Theme in *Animal Farm*

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George Orwell's repeated insistence on plain, firm language reflects his confidence in ordinary truth. This is visible in the language of the narrator in *Animal Farm*, which is characterized by syntactic tidiness and verbal pithiness. "Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-houses for the night, but was too drunk to remember to shut the pop-holes"; this is how the narrator begins the fable. Set in ironic juxtaposition to this terse phrasing is another distinct language: the crassly elitist, manipulative, unintelligible, and circumlocutory discourse of the pigs, through which the fictitious passes off as factitious and the animals' world is created for them. The magical agency in this fairy tale takes the form of language which becomes a distorting mirror rather than a clear pane.¹ I suggest that the deliberate derangement of language, and linguistic exclusiveness which sustain the usurpation of power, stand out as one of the novel's central thematic concerns. In a sense, the revolution on the farm is a language-focused enterprise, a product of specifically aggressive linguistic energy, and language, which can effectively control reality, is at the root of the tragic experience rather than merely mirroring it. The animals are the negative other of the pigs. They—with an underdeveloped language, a para-language—are overpowered by the linguistic skill of the pigs; their ensnarement is less a matter substance than of generic linguistic impotence and deficient semantic memory. They are incompetent readers of the pigs' devious texts.

The beginning of the narrative quickly establishes the primacy of language. The character of old Major, who dominates the scene of this section, is reduced to a mouth. In a lengthy address to the animals, he engages in a verbal creation of what society might become. He is the "man on the white horse" who steps in with utopian discourse. A nocturnal time setting (Major "was so highly regarded on the farm that everyone was quite ready to lose an hour's sleep in order to hear what he had to say"²) lends to the situation a layer of fantasy. Major speaks from above ("a sort of raised platform" [1]—perhaps a symbol of the sacred locus of revelation, distance also marks separation) and offers his text in the light of the received major prophecy. Attacks are heaped upon man. With his elocutionary style and the accent of exhortation, Major creates an atmosphere of paternalism; there is a disparity between the liberating stance and authoritative language structure. Beside the hammering imperative tone ("You cows"; "And you hens"; "And you Clover"; "get rid of Man"; "work night and day"; "Fix your eyes on that"; "pass on this message" 4-5) there is his willful persistence in the use of the first person (15 "I"s in one short paragraph;

¹ In his essay "Why I Write," Orwell states that "good prose is like a window pane." *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968) 1:7.

² George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Penguin, 1989 edition) I. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.

3). He sets sights idealistically high about forming a happy collectivity with a manna economy. His general prescription that getting rid of man will bring an overnight change is delivered as gospel. The dramatic speech moves incrementally to a climatic point: "... only get rid of Man, and the produce of our labour would be our own. Almost overnight we could become rich and free" (5). According to Major, the society of the future is marked by spontaneous fraternization: "All animals are comrades" (6). In a supreme cautionary irony, the dogs suddenly chase the rats, substituting a truth for the lie and deconstructing the preceding platitude. Yet, this is lost on the animals. Major, too, is not aware that the animals will suffer under the pigs what he predicts will come if revolution does not take place. There is a grim irony in this: "To that horror we all must come—cows, pigs, hens, sheep, everyone. Even the horses and the dogs have no better fate. You, Boxer, the very day that those great muscles of yours lose their power, Jones will sell you to the knacker, who will cut your throat and boil you down for the foxhounds" (5). The oration has cunningly generated an emotional momentum which carries the animals incarcerated along with it. Their experience as naive readers seduced by the text can be viewed in terms of pleasure. Major climaxes his linguistic construct with a patriotic hymn that finds a response in the animals' euphoria (7-8). His linguistic fantasy is virtually a deathbed utterance. "Three nights later," we read, "Major died peacefully in his sleep"(9). The high ideals are as dead as Major himself. It is of significance for Orwell's deconstruction that the visionary potential is shrouded in darkness.

A rhetorical ploy that Major uses to lease ears is varying the type of sentence structure, and varying the usual declarative statement with questions, exclamations, exhortations, and other moods of discourse. Anaphoric repetition—the repeated word "And" at the beginning of consecutive paragraphs—is another device used, creating a bouncing rhythm. This helps form cross-correspondences and build the expansion of the discourse to a climax. More still are the refrainlike restatements of the same point: "Man is the only real enemy we have, "All men are enemies," Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy," "remember always your duty of enmity towards Man." Ironical use of Oxymoron appears later in the novel in structures such as: "This work was strictly voluntary, but any animal who absented himself from it would have his rations reduced by half" (40), "Napoleon, who was directing operations from the rear" (70), and "Napoleon had commanded that once a week there should be held something called a Spontaneous Demonstration" (77).

Major's control over language, over others, builds anticipation for further makers of words, for whom the play of tyrannical power is wordplay. The uncontested owners of language and its resources use their talent to serve strategies, with foregrounding attention to the teaching process, constructing student-animals as conformers to new ideologies: "The work of teaching and organizing the others fell naturally upon the pigs, who were generally recognized as being the cleverest of the animals" (9). The pigs have a "good" claim to leadership and privileges; a hierarchy already existed among the animals. Squealer is the best game player, in him we see nothing but convoluted words. Like Major, he can project his own mental linguistic images onto the minds of the underprivileged or onto the fabric of reality itself. Endowed with the quickest tongue, he shows a remarkable disposition for diversionary oratory—its incommunicable

quality notwithstanding. He shares the deconstructionist's sense of free play in putting into the text what he regards as meaning: "He was a brilliant talker . . . he could turn black into white" (9). He is the apologist par excellence for the new corps of leaders. He slyly legitimates the exclusive consumption of the milk and apples by one of his palliatives, and he assigns noble motives to the pigs: "It is for *your* sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples" (23). It is testimony to his efficiency that he succeeds. This should not surprise us, for he is aware of and delights in his capability to incite, and takes advantage of the animals' linguistic vulnerability. His "eloquence [carries] them away" (35), and makes it doubtful that anyone would have an opposing thought. And to circumvent the possibility of this, he plays upon their variously scaled stresses—they are apprised of Jones's danger to them: "Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back! . . . surely there is no one among you who wants to see Jones come back?" (23).

Malevolent Napoleon, though in character "not much of a talker" (9), still he adequately fits words and articulatory dynamics to objects. He offers to the perplexed animals a scapegoat to soothe other anxieties; pitch raising is used for additional reinforcement of persuasion: "Comrades," he said quietly, 'do you know who is responsible for this? Do you know the enemy who has come in the night and overthrown our windmill? SNOWBALL !' he suddenly roared in a voice of thunder, 'Snowball has done this thing!'. With the absence of Snowball which leaves no resistive voice, Napoleon establishes his reign by coercion. He retires into elitist isolation and rules by remote control. Squealer most effectively helps him by the instantaneously available speeches stating untruths throughout; language stands as a substitute for the status quo: "Do not imagine, comrades, that leadership is a pleasure! . . . No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal . . . And as to the Battle of the Cowshed, I believe the time will come when we shall find that Snowball's part in it was much exaggerated . . . One false step, and our enemies would be upon us . . . Once again this argument was unanswerable" (37). Ailing recognition of irrelevancy and inadequacy weighs the masses down. Squealer is a master manipulator of his approving listeners and his oratorical competence continues unabated throughout the novel. As economic shortages pile one on another, he placates them with fictionality making as factuality. To the dunder-headed fools hearing is believing—particularly of scarcely remembered things—and familiarity has bred "understanding": "On Sunday mornings Squealer, holding down a long strip of paper with his trotter, would read out to them lists of figures proving that the production of every class of food-stuff had increased by two hundred per cent, three hundred per cent, or five hundred per cent, as the case might be. The animals saw no reason to disbelieve him, especially as they could no longer remember very clearly what conditions had been like before the Rebellion" (61-62). The reader gasps with wonder at Squealer's blatant absurdities. Claims and plain truth, signifiers and concrete reality, are widely disparate. The mass dis-informationist wraps himself in the cloak of statistics. His freely inventive handling of numbers, woven in the very fabric of his discourse, dodges and goes unchallenged. Numbers have almost magical powers; they dissolve any doubt.

Squealer's quite heated verbalization, expanding into a narrative, about the death of Boxer banishes any disbelief over outrageous incongruities (83). He has had much practice in verbal acrobatics. In using hard vocabulary, distractors, he makes the content of the text as intransparent and distancing as possible: "This, said Squealer, was something called tactics. The animals were not certain what the word meant" (39). He never feels obliged to prove the case for legibility or for logical justification. animals are caught in his semantic nets; they cannot decipher the complexities of arcane jargon and meaningless sound structures: "... it had been found necessary to make a readjustment of rations (Squealer always spoke of it as a 'readjustment', never as a 'reduction') ... Reading out the figures in a shrill rapid voice, he proved to them in detail that they had more oats, more hay, more turnips than they had in Jones's day ... The animals believed every word of it" (75). The finite minds of the animals are inherently incapable of the linguistically rich mind of Squealer; words do not fail him to take them further in: "You did not suppose, surely, that there was ever a ruling against *beds*? ... The rule was against *sheets*, which are a human invention" (45-46). Squealer is typically quick with indigenous diction that is not part of the animals' lexicon. Language becomes so opaque that it parodies its communicative purpose: "The other animals were too ignorant to understand. For example, Squealer told them that the pigs had to expend enormous labours every day upon mysterious things called 'files,' 'reports,' 'minutes' and 'memoranda'" (86). If the animals are left guessing about what happened, Squealer strikes out into further explanation that leaves them mute—their memory is viewed askance. On the issue of trading with the neighboring farms, Squealer "assured them that the resolution against engaging in trade and using money had never been passed, or even suggested" (43).

The propagandist's ability to transmute reality into linguistic artefacts, with such certainty of composure, is displayed in further situations. One such scene is that in which Squealer inflatedly attacks Snowball, tarnishing his name. He is balked by Boxer who cannot grasp what he hears—Snowball "fought bravely at the Battle of the Cowshed. I saw him myself. Did we not give him 'Animal Hero, First Class'?" But Squealer is adamant; with customary ease he can write or unwrite a text, and Boxer's remark is brushed aside: "That was our mistake, comrade. For we know now—it is all written down in the secret documents that we have found—that in reality he was trying to lure us to our doom" (54). And if Boxer responds to sense rather than to the untruth-filled words, his unbending trust in the infallible Napoleon immediately impels him to silence: "If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right." When Snowball speaks falsely of the outcome of the battle, Boxer once again interrogates—he cannot see a victory as the windmill was demolished. Squealer's riddling phrases, however, confiscate disbelief (71). The passage from "Beasts of England" to the song of Minimus is unjustifiable to animals, but the commentator-at-large is "perspicacious" and interprets *raison* in this: "'Beasts of England' was the song of the Rebellion. But the Rebellion is now completed" (59).

In addition to the labyrinthine flow of words in which the rhetor indulges, he employs a language of physical gestures, bearing a false freight of emotional overtone. This emerges conspicuously in his explanation of the death of Boxer, where, amid a breakup of utterance, he affects sadness in a seemingly

partisan manner: "Lifting his trotter and wiping away a tear . . . Squealer's demeanor suddenly changed. He fell silent for a moment, and his little eyes dated suspicious glances from side to side before he proceeded . . . he cried indignantly, whisking his tail and skipping from side to side" (83). This wordless language of communication has been used rather more crudely earlier by Major. Too conscious of making a speech he solemnly clears his throat twice (3,7), which raises an expectation of a high point in the paternalistic exhortation.

A secondary character who also drugs the masses with words beyond their ability to fathom is Moses. Like Squealer, he is what he is because of what he says than what he does. The clerically attired black raven gladly follows any leader, claiming a future happiness beyond the grave. He flies after an exiled Jones, then returns to the farm to be rewarded with "a gill of beer a day" (79) for his palliatives to the problems of real life circumstances—devaluing the here-and-now in favour of the everafter. His presence provides a scathing satire on religion. Being a raven, he is attracted to the odor of carrion on which he feeds, a verbal pun showing us the extent of Orwell's antipathy to religious symbolic expressions as organs of mass deception. As is the case with other successful orators, his use of a special diction and style, lacking semantic clarity, conveys a sense of authoritarian paternalism, which then puts his addresses in a credulous frame of mind.

The inflated rhetoricity of porcine texts is reinforced by the implications of the gradual lexical reformulation of Commandments, statutory, and inscriptions, in which the pigs, the appropriative authors and determinants of this text of texts, initially placed so much faith. Their success in scrambling it stems from their linguistic talent which deludes and obfuscates. As the Commandments are largely incomprehensible to the animals, Snowball "solves" the problem by conjuring a reducibly comprehensive label: "four legs good, two legs bad," an oversimplification, like the rest of the pigs' ideology, which disguises the evil intentions of the unscrupulous. Abridgement is the first step towards perversion. Birds find it hard to concur with Snowball's "judicial" analysis of their identity. Snowball exploits his linguistic superiority and silences their subtle questioning by his unintelligible proof that a wing "should therefore be regarded as a leg" and not as a "*hand*, the instrument with which he [man] does all his mischief" (22). By a verbal sleight of hand, he misreads the signifier and makes the bird appear quadruped. The pigs void the Commandments of their determinate and objective content—rendering the constant variable and the impermissible permissible by interpolating new tags: "'No animal shall sleep in a bed *with sheets*,' 'No animal shall kill any other animal *without cause*,' 'No animal shall drink alcohol *to excess*,' 'Four legs good, two legs better!' 'ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS'" (45, 61, 73, 89, 90). This textual variation can be seen in the light of Paul Ricoeur's observation: ". . . a linking together of a new discourse to the discourse of the text."³ The pigs exploit their listeners' lack of facility for recall, and their textual-comparison ineptitude. They empha-

³ See David M. Rasmussen, *Mythic - symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology: A Constructive Interpretation of the Thought of Paul Ricoeur* (The Hague: Maritnus Nijhoff, 1971) 144.

size the rhetorical basis of interpretation and discredit the denotative, univocal, and hermeneutical. In effect it would appear that they are deconstructors: they put in question the assumption that interpretation defines a stable and unquestionable truth about the Commandments.

It is remarkable that whilst most of the animals are able to make out letters and words, they cannot make the move toward meaning and semantic perception. Their learning disabilities are articulate in the reading and writing priming passage: "The dogs learned to read fairly well, but were not interested in reading anything except the Seven Commandments. Muriel, the goat, could read somewhat better than the dogs . . . Benjamin could read as well as any pig, but never exercised his faculty. So far as he knew, he said, there was nothing worth reading. Clover learnt the whole alphabet, but could not put words together. Boxer could not get beyond the letter D . . . Mollie refused to learn any but the five letters which spelt her own name . . . None of the other animals on the farm could get further than the letter A" (20-21). The passage charts the extent of the primates' verbal learning repertoire, their variable pacing, and endemic inequality. Some are less or more able than others. Classes prepare the dogs, who act as a punishing squad, for a particular reading task: to watch over the seven fundamental dogmas in which they have been indoctrinated. It is doubly ironic that the dog, well armed with powerful physique and canine teeth, is in fact the proverbial man's best friend. As the pigs eventually turn into "men," tyrannical humans, this largely offers itself as a verbal pun on the proverb. Benjamin has achieved poorly owing not to mental laziness to read texts but to his self-protective obtuseness. He is the linguistic anti-Squealer. The status quo seems to justify his pose of noninvolvement. His attitude which supposes the vacuity of the text (or life) comes close to the claim of deconstruction, the most radical of skepticisms about the text. This is evident from his quip "Donkeys live a long time. None of you has ever seen a dead donkey" (19). His own silent text will remain basically unchanged until Boxer is taken off to his death. A mood of defiance takes hold of him: "It was the first time that they had ever seen Benjamin excited—indeed it was the first time that anyone had ever seen him gallop. 'Quick, quick!' he shouted. 'Come at once! They're taking Boxer away!'" (81). Here Benjamin also speaks through nonverbal forms. This is a moment of revelation when a flat character suddenly, as a result of a more positive concern, outgrows his flatness. It is ironic that he reads without fail the sign on the knacker's van, since he prefers not to read. But his reaction is one that makes the whole situation more tragic. Realistic enough to see the writing on the wall for the rebellion before it starts, and always tongue-tied, it must therefore be an immense tragedy to bring him out of his cynical silence and to make him genuinely saddened. His subsequent response is definitive, it vents all the hate pent up for years of oppressed life. He abandons self-preservation in the face of this disaster. Benjamin thus seems to be a representation of Orwell himself. Orwell is the outspoken critic of communism after an intolerable, close view of the inner working of the system. On the other hand, Orwell could be seen as a betrayed Boxer, belatedly kicking his legs against the walls of the knacker's van, having been robbed of his power by his loyalty to the pigs.

Boxer's learner's ability stops at the infancy stage. His talent is taken up with ebullient physical activities emanating from a determinedly high sense of

responsibility to the community and dedication to the work ethic. He suffers from great deficiencies in both episodic and semantic memory as well as in perceptual recognition. His illiteracy, we know, will be his undoing as he is carted off in the van and is ignorant of the markings on its side. Mollie, although not categorized low in words, but vain as she is, stops at decoding the five letters forming her name. The rest of the animals—the sheep, hens, and ducks—rank very low in achievement, almost unteachable. It cannot be matter of surprise that the sheep identify with a communal ideology which makes them merge with the mass at the expense of individual autonomy. Put through a catechism, they become mere prattlers, finely tuned to pigs' ways. They loudly proclaim their unshakable loyalty by ritually breaking into "Four legs good, two legs bad" drowning any possibility of antiphonal thought.

This allows us to conclude that animals' learning disabilities will impede all efforts to improve their lot. They have the common man's responsibility in propping up tyrannies, and inviting their own victimization, through a trio of handicaps: a linguistic and cognitive deficiency, gullibility in acceptance of maneuverings at face value, and historical amnesia. However, there are a few oblique hints that the animals are not merely mindless beasts. They do have minds, they do think as we read that "they reasoned" (78), and that they have "the thought that at least he [Boxer] had died happy" (84), they also remember the issue of the pension field (85). This makes their betrayal all the more poignant since they are aware (if only obliquely) of what is happening to them.

One may ask whether it makes any sense to represent all animals as a single community. Can a mass society divided by a wide range of linguistic variation and differences in intelligence, among others, be said to hold a single doctrine? Pan-animalism cannot be a reality. It becomes apparent at the end of the novel that the pigs have firmly secured their position. The inference is that a shadow of doubt is thrown on a second insurrectionary round as long as the linguistic oligarchy will sustain their exploitation of the animals through the monopoly of language. If animals are ever to be liberated, they should be raised up into language and provided with semantic space to enable them to be conversant with the pigs and to engage them on their own ground with a counter discourse and gestures of their own.

The reader is indeed not wholly dependent upon the narrator's discourse for access to the characters. We should not be at all astonished to see that the narrator is totally coldly uncritical where tragic happenings take place. At Boxer's betrayal and at the cataclysmic massacre, extremely emotional contexts, his language is notably restrained. He ventures nothing, and soon after each event Squealer appears, attuning animals to mutability, constructing his versions of events, and explaining that what happened was justified, or what they just say was not what really occurred. Indeed, there is a comic element in all of Squealer's presentations. The comic also appears in Orwell's attention to details. Out of context the idea that a pig on hind legs, wiping "hot" tears from his eyes in memory of a "departed" friend, is absurd. But here juxtaposed against an act of extreme betrayal, it assumes a very sinister note. Orwell's very silence and detachment would seem to carry much weight here, it is in such marked contrast to the agitation that crowds about. To add insult to injury, the

pigs get drunk on whisky, paid for by Boxer's killing, on the night of his death. Though this is to be expected from the callous pigs, what makes this situation so black is that the animals do not connect Boxer's death with the pigs' drinking. Orwell's silence mirrors the animals' inability to discern truth.

A final point remains. Of some interest is Orwell's intertextual perspective which draws on his familiarity with and taste for Oriental materials. Language abets religious association which is, of course, burlesque. One detects nuances of the maximum number of wives permissible by Islam in Napoleon's "four sows [that] had all littered about simultaneously, producing thirty-one young pigs between them" (75). There is a clear injunction in the Holy Qur'an: "... marry women of your choice, two, or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly [with them], then only one."⁴ In a similar vein, the lush farm of the afterlife, where earthly suffering will be recompensed, shows intertextual possibilities and Orwell's attraction to Islamic epistemology. A heavenly "Sugarcandy Mountain" as envisioned by Moses is plentiful of material benefits for all animals: "It was situated somewhere up in the sky, a little distance beyond the clouds, Moses said. In Sugarcandy Mountain it was Sunday seven days a week, clover was in season all the year round, and lump sugar and linseed cake grew on the hedges" (10-11). This evokes the description of Paradise in the Holy Qur'an: "[There is] a Parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it there are for them all kinds of fruits" (XLVII:15). Furthermore, Moses "even claimed to have been there on one of his higher flights, and to have seen the everlasting fields of clover and linseed cake and lump sugar growing on the hedges" (78)—a clear parody of Prophet Muhammad's ascent through the seven heavens [the night journey]: "Glory to [God] who did take his servant for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless" (XVII:1). This contextual echo helps to keep us aware of the religious dimensions of Moses's titillating language.

⁴ *The Glorious Qur'an*, translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (The Muslim Students' Association of the United States & Canada, 1975) IV: 3.