Graves and Animal Farm

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George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) was probably the most brilliant, popular and influential political satire of the twentieth century. To the best of my knowledge, it has not been noticed that the central conceit of Orwell's fiction was anticipated by Robert Graves in a witty poem called 'The Figure-Head', published twenty years earlier. Like so much of his other work, it has been made accessible after many years in the Carcanet edition of the *Complete Poems* (Graves 1: 253–54, 400–02).

In this poem a farmer has neglected his farm for years, and in his absence the more intelligent animals run it themselves. They maintain order by manipulating the others, and like Orwell's pigs they do it by propaganda. Whereas the pigs use the fiction of a threatening Snowball, the Ox and the Ass in Graves's poem pretend that the farmer, though invisible, is still in control. In the Ass's words:

'Still, to ensure domestic peace,
We've taught the turkeys, ducks and geese
"He rules, he rules, serene and great,
Proof-armoured against fate." […]

'"Master must be assumed to know
Where best his favours to bestow.
He has left us (caring for us still)
To cultivate free-will.

'"Himself, from some grand inner room,
Directs the cowman, steward and groom,
Makes up his ledgers, page by page,
In joy or solemn rage. […]"

'The simple birds believed this true,
What now, poor poultry, will they do,
Stunned with confusion, when the glum
Gloved undertakers come […]?'

As the poem ends the 'passing-bell' sounds for the farmer, and the Ass fears the system may collapse when the bewildered birds see his coffin carried away, 'they know not where'; but the Cow predicts that 'farm-life' will go on 'much the same'.

As Orwell's farmer represents capitalism, Graves's represents the Christian God, hailed hopefully in Bethlehem by the ox and the ass but despaired of by

their descendants. Graves's credulous poultry correspond roughly to Orwell's sheep. Orwell's satire is obviously a greater achievement than Graves's poem, with the story more fully worked out and used to different ends; but the allegory of the animals' takeover and the darkly comic twist Graves gave it are fundamental. The crisis of confidence feared by Graves's Ass materializes in *Animal Farm*, when the horrified animals see Boxer being taken away in the knacker's van (Orwell 8: 81–83).

The opening sentence of *Animal Farm* runs: '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.' Orwell later tells how in his drunken stupor Jones precipitated the rebellion of the animals by forgetting to feed them (8: 11–12). This is skilful and amusing fiction, but of course Orwell could have chosen any number of ways to trigger off the rebellion. So it is persuasive evidence for a link that Graves had made the farmer a drunkard and that he too had used that as his starting-point. 'The Figure-Head' begins:

> 'What caused the breakdown, do I think?
> Undoubtedly,' the Ox cried, 'Drink,
> That first of all the reason dims,
> Then staggers trunk and limbs.'

If Orwell took over the drunken farmer from Graves, he turned him to account in an allegory of the food shortages of 1917 which led to the Russian revolution.

There would be nothing improbable about Orwell reading Graves's poem. His writings refer to many poets, living and dead, he wrote thoughtfully on Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and W. H. Davies – less thoughtfully, perhaps, on Auden – and he occasionally wrote verse himself. On 21 September 1940 he reviewed Graves's *Sergeant Lamb of the Ninth* in the *New Statesman*, and took the opportunity of giving high praise to *Good-bye to All That* (Orwell 12: 264–66) .

Orwell was in Burma in 1925 when 'The Figure-Head' appeared, first in the *London Mercury* for May (with the title 'The Passing of the Farmer'), then in *Welchman's Hose*, a limited edition from the Fleuron Press. The poem was again reprinted in Graves's first collected edition, *Poems (1914–26)*, published in 1927, the year Orwell returned from abroad; he could have met with it in that volume, or in a not-very-old copy of Squire's famous periodical. Thereafter it was not reprinted in full by Graves, but the Foreword to his *Collected Poems* (1938) expresses his affection for the poem, and includes a long extract which indicates the scenario (Graves 2: 307). This volume appeared shortly after Orwell returned from Spain determined to write a short story 'exposing the Soviet myth', and *Animal Farm* began to take shape. For the long genesis of *Animal Farm* see Orwell's preface to the Ukrainian edition (8: 109–14).

The last version of the poem published by Graves was a much shortened one, given the title 'Death of the Farmer' and printed in *The More Deserving Cases:*

Eighteen Old Poems for Reconsideration (Marlborough: Marlborough College Press, 1962). This version is presented as the main text in the Carcanet edition (1: 253–54). But the notes to that volume (400–02) include the variant readings of earlier texts, from which it is possible to reconstruct the version Orwell may have seen. It is from this reconstructed version that I quote.

Was the borrowing, if there was one, conscious or unconscious? Orwell may have remembered the poem well, and would probably have felt no qualms about taking over Graves's fable and turning it to his own urgent purpose. But in that case I think he would eventually have acknowledged the debt, as he never did. Perhaps after he had read it about 1927 he forgot Graves's authorship and remembered only being pleased by the main conceit, which recurred to his mind so often that he came to believe he had thought of it himself. It is equally possible that he forgot the whole thing for ten years and the seed lay dormant, so that he began his own allegory with only a shadowy recollection, or none, of having seen something like it before.

Orwell was devoted to politics, Graves to poetry, yet the two had much in common. Both were strong-minded individualists, breaking away (in different spheres) from an old order with which they kept affectionate ties. Both believed passionately in clear direct prose. But as writers they differed importantly, and not only in subject matter. Graves was a natural story-teller, image-maker and mythologist: many poems show him giving concrete form to an idea or experience by reworking an old fable ('Saint', 'Ulysses', 'Galatea and Pygmalion') or inventing new ones ('Ogres and Pygmies', 'Lollocks'). Orwell was much less creative in this sense. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a powerful work through its vision of dystopia, and not through the story of Winston Smith and Julia, which has the thinness of most science fiction. The other novels would probably never be read if their author had not written *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. In *Animal Farm* the fable is not only apt but full of vitality, even down to its minor characters like the cantankerous Benjamin and the frivolous Molly. But it is unique in Orwell's work, and it seems likely enough that the spark that brought it to life came from the work of another writer who was, centrally, a fabulist.

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