

## FABLES OF FRAGILITY

*Cry Wolf: A Political Fable* by Paul Lake  
(Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2008)

By the time George Orwell's *Animal Farm* appeared in August of 1945, its readers were well prepared to sift the animals that constitute its cast of characters for their real-life analogues. The atrocities of Joseph Stalin's totalitarian regime had come sufficiently to light that even leftist sympathizers and card-carrying Communists like Orwell could no longer ignore them. Orwell's fairy story, as he subtitled it, depicts the revolution of the animal "class" on Manor Farm. They seize the state by sending their master, Jones, into permanent exile and in their jubilation erect a communistic state founded on egalitarianism. The intellectual architects behind this largely spontaneous revolution—the pigs on the farm—naturally take positions of leadership afterwards. And here, of course, begins the decline of a wonderful unrealized socialist utopia into a corrupt tyranny worse even than the days of Jones. Napoleon, the most politically astute pig, rules with an ever more ferrous fist and, as importantly, manipulates the axioms and rather fuzzy collective memory of the animals to transform an egalitarian society into a terrorized fiefdom. The chilling closing scene shows the animals looking in the kitchen window of the farm house to see Napoleon playing poker with neighboring—human—farmers: it has become impossible to tell the difference between pig and man.

Orwell's delightful, brief narrative acts as a fable: its animal characters allow us to see afresh well-worn and conventional truths. The fable warns us of what we already know, but must learn again and again if we are not to be fooled into historical optimism. Furthermore, a fable's warning comes primarily through the brief, easily recounted actions of personified animals, so that we *see* the consequences of foolishness, vanity, and greed in a manner that convinces us as the most well-reasoned and systematic eloquence may not.

Paul Lake's astonishing *Cry Wolf* is subtitled "A Political Fable," but that does not seem adequate to its achievement. The animals of Green Pastures Farm have come into its possession after its former owner, Grover, has died in old age. They develop a tightly organized agrarian society, where each animal has an assigned occupation. They live in obedience to four commandments: "No Trespassing," "Walk by Day, Not by Night," "Do Not Kill," and "Walk in the Ways of Man." They also have a constitution that divides power between the Animal Council, whose head is Kit, the stallion (perhaps a sardonic nod to

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Orwell, since the horses in *Animal Farm* had hearts of gold but heads of wood), and a combined judiciary and priesthood occupied by Ike the ram. For an unexplained reason, most other farms have all died off, and so Green Pastures stands alone, inside a literal fence. Outside is ungoverned wilderness. As is appropriate to a fable, these aspects of the world Lake has imagined are diminutive; they seem to carve a clarity and simplicity out of the sprawling complexity of actual historical societies.

After Lake has set his scene, he allows its history to unfold through a series of events that challenge the constitutional identity of the farm and call into question all of the assumptions that made it sustainable. And here lies the fascination of this book. Lake may at first seem to offer us a modest political fable, but the fable explodes with all the complications of history, forcing us to weight arguments to which there may be no easy or happy solution. As such, this fable develops into a genuine novel of ideas: a political morality tale that grapples in a compelling way with the role of prudence in moral and political life.

What initially appears a rather arbitrary first commandment on the farm—"No Trespassing"—we soon learn was canonized by passive and active tradition. Grover had posted "No Trespassing" signs on the borders of his property, which the animals merely inherited. In the early days after the animals had taken over the farm, however, it was attacked by a bear from the forest, and the ensuing battle forged the consciousness of the animals as *tame* and, consequently, as dependent upon each other for their mutual defense and the cultivation of a society distinct from the fearsome, formless wilderness beyond. The animals thus acquire a sense of their common identity not in mere opposition to the exogenous, the alien, but as a frag-

ile reality that comes into being naturally and which can only be maintained through choices codified as law. Society is nature organized, and law is society cultivated.

Giving meaning to this encounter of the domestic with the wild is a civil religion that endows their fragile achievement of a society with a *telos*. Ike the ram offers, in what we quickly understand is a Christmas sermon, a mythology of animal life. Mankind was once brute like the animals, but by harnessing the distinct abilities of dogs, then horses, then cows, man gained in power. Man then has a dream of a "man-shepherd" who tames man as man had tamed the animals; he learns to use an axe, first to cut firewood, and then to build fences. Within the confines of the fence, animals cooperate with man, subordinate to him.

But a second revelation would come not to man, but to Ike, after the death of Grover: "a day will come when the spirit will put on flesh and come to us in the guise of a human infant. Born in a barn, he will sleep in a humble manger. He will draw men and animals to him on an equal footing." The animals have, of course, found an old Nativity set, which they set up at Christmastime, and whose elements inform Ike's sermon. It is the inevitable figurine of the angel, however, that provides the crucial dimension. A human form with the wings of a bird: Ike tells his fellow citizens that the angel is not a separate creature at the Nativity, but a prophecy of the future, the divinization of man and animal alike, as they become one in tameness and gentility. This religion sweeps up the early combat with the bear: to defend against the invasion of the wild is to preserve a society engaged upon the slow, difficult pilgrimage toward "tameness," civility.

The commandment "No Trespassing" perhaps suggests that the threats to this

progress will be more crudely depicted than in fact they are, as if the scope of the book were a strident fable against immigration rather than a thoroughgoing reflection of what constitutes a community, nation, or state in general. Certainly the events that force this reflection pertain to matters of immigration. One night, a wounded doe leaps the farm fence and hides in the sheep shed. Terrified of this invasion, the animals only grudgingly conclude that they have a responsibility to treat her as a guest. The sheep in particular soon learn to love her and regret her parting when she heals and slips quietly back into the forest. Later, however, they corner a raccoon on the premises. In the middle of the night, he had crept into the farm and picked fruit in the high trees where the other animals could not harvest it. The raccoon begs to be allowed to stay, and, again reluctantly, the animals permit him on the condition he learns the commandments of their culture and swears fealty as a citizen.

Then a possum appears. He does not ask to join the farm, but to be allowed to live there during the warm seasons as a guest worker. The animals grant the request, and he spares them much labor they either cannot or prefer not to do. But when the possum's wife and litter are found living in the woodpile and are allowed to remain for charity's sake, the active choice of the animals to accept this or that new creature gives way to a passive acceptance derived of bewilderment, lethargy, and avarice. Within a year, the farm is crawling with more possums and raccoons than the tame animals can count, and new species appear—quails, hedgehogs, chipmunks, and foxes—to whom no one actually *decided* to grant citizenship.

The influx of wild creatures is not primarily what Lake's story bemoans, how-

ever. Although it powerfully laments the replacement of a sense of a fragile society, carefully maintained, with one of complacency, gluttony, and passive resignation to societal changes that no one has explicitly chosen, this hardly captures the story's scope. Descending from the rafters of his plot is "The Professor," an owl probably based upon that now former professor, Ward Churchill, whose essay "On the Justice of Roosting Chickens" likely inspired the conceit of Lake's story. The Professor provides ideological justifications that not only enable the farm animals to stretch and distort the meaning of their commandments to accommodate new animals, but undermine those commandments entirely. The distinction between tame and wild is an "illusory construct," he teaches the animals. The sacred maxim "Many Animals—One Farm" had traditionally meant that all the animals combined for the common good of the farm. The Professor inverts this understanding, proclaiming a doctrine of "Many-Animalism" that initially "guilts" the farm animals to admit more and more wild animals (who are already living on the farm) to full citizenship. He accomplishes this by renarrating the history of the farm.

According to the Professor, the defense against the bear was Green Pastures' original sin: the tame rejecting the wild rather than accepting them as equal in every way. This sin must be repented by, initially, the farm animals' renunciation of every distinction between tame and wild. Eventually they must also concede special privileges to the "forest-born" (politically correct animal-speak for "wild") in compensation for their historical injustices against them. Before long, the pigs and larger animals are starving because they must only be fed an equal portion to what the raccoons and possums require; the rooster descends into

misery as all the animals are forced to live nocturnally, in keeping with the natural practices of the wild creatures and against Green Pastures' second commandment. Lake's Professor is given every opportunity to make an attractive and morally compelling case for overturning the principles of the animal society. Indeed, what is most provocative about the story is the inability of the farm animals to articulate a winning case against the Professor. They are slowly reduced from ineffective pleas on behalf of tradition to sullen resignation as they watch their children fall entirely under the spell of the "Many-Animalist" doctrine.

Indeed, the farm animal parents' account of history becomes incomprehensible to their children. Following the Professor, they do not see the farm as a civilization both fragile and difficult to achieve, but as an artificial aberration amid the "noble savagery" of the forest. The farm fences are not boundaries within which some good can slowly be obtained, but the legal codification of oppression and injustice. Seeing no purpose to the arrangement into which he has been born, the young dog Pip gains access to the old farm house, where the wild creatures now choose to live. Hidden within this decadent ghetto, Pip encounters a coyote "cleric" who preaches a negative civil religion. Once, the world was whole, with no distinctions of being, time, or space. But then man was born and felt his natural inadequacies and thirsted for the goods of the animals. He conquered, divided, and ordered all things, robbing them of their primordial unity. But the "All" of nature rebelled against this, putting a crescent moon in the sky to allow the wild animals to hunt, to fight against man, and to reclaim the unity-in-wildness. The Professor had undermined the farm animals' sense of historical narrative; the coyote now inverts their civil religion into

a quintessentially countercultural monism: culture, cultivation itself is a perversion of a primordial unity. As the coyote gains more adherents, darkness threatens to eclipse the small remnant of principles on the farm.

It is a pleasure to trace the various analogues between modern American society and Lake's Green Pastures. For example, there is *Pierre* the (French) duck who always wants to negotiate with the enemy, who always excuses himself from a fight, and who finally flies away when things get difficult. And Lake's farm could only describe the United States, that modern nation with a written constitution inherited from the common law of England. Still, Lake's story takes contemporary concerns about immigration as its occasion, not its subject. The fable raises far more fundamental questions, about civilization and about the spirit of the laws—the set of common ideals that may long lie unpossessed on the horizon of the future but that make possible any decent society in the present. Doom does not come to Green Pastures when the laws are prudentially interpreted, but when the vision of the good life behind the laws is gradually rejected by those who inherit them. Lake could have written an amusing tale about how a society struggles with its assimilation of new members—immigrants, to be sure, but also new generations. He has done more, probing the way in which the challenges to a society's order confront us with the metaphysical questions of what kind of "something" a society is, and how it comes to be despite the forces of dissolution and nothingness that precede it and always invite it back.

The pathos of *Cry Wolf* lies in the failure of the farm animals to overcome the sophistry of the Professor; they know by instinct, tradition, and prejudice the fragile good they have achieved, but they do

not learn to defend articulately the *telos* that fragile good makes possible until eloquence and reason have ceased to matter: the bear quite literally is already inside the gates. Orwell's *Animal Farm* could tell a tidy tale, because it iterated lessons already—if recently—learned. Lake's story

is far darker, because the troubles he depicts have largely been confronted only in a partial and partisan manner, generating rhetoric alternately evasive and “guilt-ridden” or hotheaded and shortsighted. Its catastrophic ending is sealed; ours remains to be written.



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