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BARRY CASTRO

On Orwell

A little review like this one offers the possibility of a civilized conversation with friends — a place to celebrate the gentle collegiality which academic people are privileged to enjoy — not, in many ways, an appropriate context for an essay on Orwell. Orwell's passionate intensity seems intrusive. So do his political polemics and his quick moral judgments. His prejudices — against women, vegetarians, bohemians, homosexuals, the police, pacifists, fat people — against almost anyone but a romanticized kept-at-a-distance abstraction of the European working man are vitriolic and shallow. He exposes them to us, often knowingly, a self-flagellation which I expect most of us feel little need to witness. Orwell brandishes his impatience with theory, sophisticated language, and subtlety, and even when we know better than to take him at his word, it is easy to be impatient in return.

Why then does he seem to stay on so many of our minds? Part of it is that we feel vulnerable to the indictment he lays out — precisely an indictment of contemplative, intellectual, liberal, feminist, anti-war, and probably fond-of-vegetables academics — people like many of us. If we suspect that there is something self-aggrandizing or precious or self-protective about our posture, and who does not, Orwell is likely to strike a responsive chord. For the most part he makes it clear that the charges he levels are those he has been struggling to escape himself and from which he is not yet free. That confessional note lends an intimacy to Orwell's abuse that makes it easier to bear. Beyond that, we know that he earned some right to judge us in the slums of London and Paris, in the mines of the midlands, in the trenches of Aragon, and not least, on his death bed, summoning up the will to finish *1984*. That right is enhanced by our relative inaction. Nonetheless, I do not believe that we would be so quick to accept it — accept the indictment implicit in his active and heroic commitment to social justice — were it not for his later work's emphasis on personal freedom. That was a commitment we could share and unambiguously celebrate. Big Brother and Napoleon Pig were our enemies too.

There was also his persistent quest to seek out those truths which were most uncomfortable and least opportune. Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* when the Soviet Union was our great wartime ally. It was not a welcome part of the war effort. He wrote *1984*

about what he feared might be the future of the West after the Cold War had begun. The Soviet Union was at that point no longer a priority target for him. His criticism of loyalist Spain and the international brigades was written for partisans of both during the most desperate days of the Spanish War. Nevertheless, despite his commitment to say what needed to be said rather than what people wanted to hear, the Cold War gave him an enormous audience. It matters that he did not seek it. It matters to me that I can be confident that he would not have approved of my son's seventh grade teacher having used *Animal Farm* to reinforce his students' sense of their own virtue relative to the Soviets — that there was nothing that infuriated Orwell more than moral complacency. All of this makes it easier to accept the harshness of his criticism and makes it possible for me to write to you about him.

Orwell comes close to denying any hope for us. In 1984, Winston Smith seems to speak for him in declaring that the last hope for humanity is in the working class, but even then it is plain that Winston, like Orwell, does not see workers at all clearly — that Orwell is writing for readers who are not workers — as Winston is saving pieces of the past for those same readers, both of them hoping to teach us something that will matter. Most basically, Orwell's continuing commitment to imagine what it is that we, his readers, need to know about class prejudice and poverty, about war and journalistic distortion, about communism and home-grown totalitarianism, and his willingness to proceed to teach us his own hard-learned lessons is a deep sort of collegial affirmation. Orwell seems to me finally to be one of us — serious about social responsibility, about the life of the mind, about the connections between past and future, and about preserving and passing on his commitments — a model teacher whose lessons I believe we ought to consider.

Let me get into some text. The *Road to Wigan Pier* brings Orwell to a group of workers' caravans in the industrial midlands. Each caravan was six feet high, five feet wide, and from six to fourteen feet long. They housed families of up to seven people, some of whom had been there for years. Water came from a common hydrant which could be two hundred yards away and, winter or summer, canvas was often the only roof. There were no sanitary facilities. Orwell goes on with one awful detail after another.

Despite his eloquence, we are likely to remember both that we have been told of worse and that it is difficult to be sure that the information has made us more sensitive. Even when we make the effort to calculate the cubic feet of living space per caravan-dweller, imagine the stench and the humiliation, and feel the attendant pain, we suspect our motives. Is there a titillation, an unhealthy need to escape from the everyday problems of life that underlies our compassion? Are our sympathies based on

empathy for those less fortunate than ourselves or on the compatibility of particular kinds of victims to some symbolic posture we have adopted? Does it matter? How does our concern about avoiding impure motives compare to their concerns? A reading of Orwell suggests such questions.

We know Orwell's work to be directly related to his struggles against injustice, arbitrary authority, and pretentiousness — problems he liked to sum up as indecency. We know that despite his energy, talent and commitment there was little he could do to make things better. Inevitably, Orwell understands that he is unlikely to be able to change anything. We wonder whether his commitment to act anyway is to be counted merely as a private value of his own — whether it might instead be held to be a public virtue for which we all might be accountable. He celebrates the plain man, and we may ask whether it isn't enough to simply live our lives, decently, on a scale consistent with the limits of our experience. He reminds us that it is difficult to do more without grave risk of falling victim to some self-deception or another. He also reminds us that we cannot trust those to whom larger responsibilities then would be left. As much as any writer I know he questions both what it means to really see people like those caravan dwellers and what it means to look away.

Orwell's career as a writer begins when he recognizes the power of his obligations. There are the five years as a colonial policeman to atone for. There is his knowledge that he will never be able to completely suppress the arrogance that came with his upper-middle classness — that must have come especially from a place like Crossgates. There is his shame at the physical repulsion with which he has learned to respond to working class sweat. There is his memory of the affected purple prose of his first years in Paris, of something effete he wishes to purge.

The debts pile up even when he may seem to be discharging them. He never spends more than two months at a time “down and out.” Most of his experiences in the slums of Paris and London are punctuated by at least weekly returns to middle class surroundings where he can get cleaned up and rest. His companions on the road lack such resources. He has had to lie to them. After gathering his material, he no longer seeks them out. He knows them, for the most part, to be permanently trapped; knows that they are unlikely to read what he will write on their behalf; that those who will read it are inevitably middle-class intellectuals like himself — people who, in his view, are unlikely to change anything significant.

In *The Road to Wigan Pier* he tells us that

... it is brought home to you, at least while you are watching, that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior.

You and I and the editor of the *Times Lit. Supp.*, and the Nancy poets and the

Archbishop of Canterbury and Comrade X, author of *Marxism for Infants* — all of us *really* owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward. . .¹

Nevertheless, Orwell gets to the coal face only once, and he keeps up with none of the men there who provided the contacts and support which made the book possible. He describes the miners powerfully.

[They] look and work as though they were made of iron. They really do look like iron — hammered iron statues — under the smooth coat of coal dust. . . nearly all of them have noble bodies: wide shoulders, tapering to slender supple waists and small pronounced buttocks. . . [The miner] is a sort of grimy caryatid upon whose shoulders nearly everything that is not grimy is supported.²

He owes them. They are the sources of his privilege: out of sight in the mines, or on the other side of the dining room wall, or dumped into neighborhoods where people like Orwell never need to go. Their existence is easy to forget and therefore all the more necessary to remember.

The working classes — more accurately, European working men — are the symbols of his indebtedness. Working class women complicate matters. At his best, as in *Wigan*, he is capable of quick insights.

I had time to see everything about her — her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. . . She knew well enough what was happening to her — understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain pipe.³

The fact that he was on a train is typical not just of Orwell but of people like us who would remember such a moment. He has seen a lot for a glance, but he seems to think he has seen everything — seems ready to characterize her as just a victim because that is all he needs her to be. He cannot get close. In his next sentence the train draws away into open country, and she is gone forever.

Orwell's treatment of her parallels his for-me most memorable working class hero — the Italian militiaman in *Homage to Catalonia*:

The Italian soldier shook my hand
 Beside the guard-room table;
 the strong hand and the subtle hand
 Whose palms are only able

To meet within the sound of guns,
 But oh! what peace I knew then
 In gazing on his battered face
 Purer than any woman's!

For the flyblown words that make me spew
 Still in his ears were holy
 And he was born knowing what I had learned
 Out of books and slowly

...

Good luck go with you, Italian soldier!
 But luck is not for the brave;
 What would the world give back to you?
 Always less than you gave.

...

Your name and your deeds were forgotten
 Before your bones were dry,
 And the lie that slew you is buried
 Under a deeper lie:

But the thing that I saw in your face
 No power can disinherit:
 No bomb that ever burst
 Shatters the crystal spirit.⁴

Again, and more explicitly than in *Wigan*, Orwell “. . . knew that to retain [his] first impression of him I must not see him again. . .” Despite his own near death in Spain, he is still privileged relative to his comrades. Those he has treated badly defer to him. He is their leader — “No hay cabo como el!” He is allowed to live a charmed life. They have given him a great deal and he refers to his indebtedness again and again. It is not at all clear that in the end he had found a way to discharge it.

His continuing awareness of the moral power of this debt lends a rare quality of

personal investment to his work. Yet his briefly glimpsed workers and militiamen tell us more about who Orwell needs these people to be than about who they may actually have been. He cannot afford to look at the men with anything like the eye for detail he can apply to their circumstances. Nobody has done better with housing or diet in places like Wigan. Nobody has given us a more accurate feel for life in the trenches. Yet we are left with only the most generalized sense of who those miners and militiamen were. In both *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia* his most memorable portraits are uninformed by anything that could be called a conversation. By “Marrakech,” in 1940, he does not even try. It is as if he recognizes that he cannot really get away from his cafe table — that he can tell us only what he sees from there. In *Animal Farm* it is all summed up in Boxer — ironically a portrait that would fit nicely into the most rigid Stalinist standards. Finally, in 1984, the proles do not have names or faces. They are entirely abstract — presented no longer in order to make a case for social justice but as a last desperate hope for human salvation.

An eye for the seamy detail that reveals the plain truth is there from his first published stories to his death. The concern for social justice remains too, but as his work evolves and the times change it is no longer “the fat men eating quail while children are begging for bread” or “the patriots who read *Blackwood's* and thank God they are not brainy” on whom he seeks revenge. These men remain of course hypocrites and scoundrels. They are still enemies, but they are no longer the enemy. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1936

...the worst criminal who ever walked is morally superior to a hanging judge.⁵

Five years later in “England Your England”

The hanging judge is a symbol of the strange mixture of reality and illusion, democracy and privilege, humbug and decency, the subtle network of compromises by which the nation keeps itself in familiar shape.⁶

There had been a shift from moral outrage based on personal experience to what Orwell had just a little earlier in “Inside the Whale” called “. . . seeing life comprehensively but through the wrong end of the telescope.”

In the mid-twenties, when he returned from Burma, everything could be reduced to the struggle between oppressors and oppressed. In 1936, that struggle had been somewhat modulated:

...the working class are submissive where they used to be openly hostile, and the post-war manufacture of cheap clothes and the general softening of manners have toned down the surface differences between class and class. But undoubtedly the essential feeling is still there.⁷

By 1941, it seems to have almost disappeared.

. . . Nearly all citizens of civilized countries now enjoy the use of good roads, germ-free water, police protection, free libraries and probably free education of a kind. . . . To an increasing extent the rich and the poor read the same books, and they also see the same films and listen to the same radio programs. . . . In tastes, habit, manners and outlook the working class and the middle class are drawing together. The unjust distinctions remain, but the real differences diminish. The old style 'proletarian' — collarless, unshaven with muscles warped by heavy labor — still exists, but he is constantly decreasing in numbers. . . .⁸

The almost worshipfully described musculature of the Wigan miners has been reduced to "muscles warped by heavy labor." The corporation house which is described as ". . . uncomfortable, almost prison-like. . . ruthless and soulless" in Wigan, is five years later ". . . with its bathroom and electric light, smaller than the stockbroker's villa but recognizably the same kind of house. . . ." Our guilt is powerfully evoked in his earlier work and the charges against us are never withdrawn, but he gradually comes to find more important enemies — the totalitarian enemies of language and aesthetics and history — enemies we too can see ourselves in combat with — while remaining in the comfort of our studies.

If it is our self-doubt that engages us in his earlier work, it seems to me self-affirmation that we receive from *Animal Farm* and *1984*. His later stance is associated with his evolving antipathy for Communism, but that is only a matter of emphasis — not a reversal of his earlier views. It is undeniable that the brutality of the Communist apparatus in Spain mattered to Orwell, but that brutality was not entirely unanticipated. In the 8 June 1940 entry to his War-time Diary he remarks

. . . such horrors as the Russian purges never surprised me, because I had always felt that — not exactly that, but something like that — was implicit in Bolshevik rule. I could feel it in their literature.

In 1943, he sums up his sense of the Spanish war in terms that I expect are quite close to what he thought in 1936:

. . . the hatred which the Spanish Republic excited in millionaires, dukes, cardinals, play-boys, blimps and what-not would in itself be enough to show one how the land lay. In essence it was a class war. If it had been won, the cause of the common people everywhere would have been strengthened. It was lost, and the dividend drawers all over the world rubbed their hands. That was the real issue; all else was froth on the surface.⁹

He wants to know whether people like his Italian soldier shall be allowed a decent life — whether or not they shall be "pushed back into the mud." Five years after *Homage to Catalonia* that remains the "real issue of the Spanish war."

. . . Behind all the ballyhoo that is talked about 'godless' Russia [there is]. . . the

simple intention of those with money or privileges to cling to them.¹⁰ Orwell did not feel that he lost his sense of what side he was on in Barcelona.

It seems to me that, at least in part, the energies unleashed by his commitment to the proletariat had simply run their course. He had borne a personal witness. He had risked his life and celebrated the working classes. He had demeaned their enemies: the Society dames “. . . who have the cheek to walk into East End houses and give shopping lessons to the wives of the unemployed;” the writers “. . . with a safe 500 pounds a year [who had] turned highbrow [and discovered that]. . . disillusionment was all the fashion;” the petty bourgeois shopkeepers like Mrs. Brooker “. . . a soft mound of fat and self-pity. . .”; any working man’s wife who would deny him his role as master and permit him to become a “Mary Ann.” He had informed us and enjoined us to act. He had lived with and written about his working class subjects because he had recognized the size of the gulf between them and people like himself. He had felt both a personal and a social obligation to do what he could to bridge it. He discovers that he cannot really get to Wigan Pier — that the Pier has never been more than a music hall joke to cover something unspeakable — that there is nowhere further to take that journey. That discovery, as much as anything that happened in Spain or during the Second World War, seems to me to have driven him toward 1984.

No matter how many brave excursions he made into the world of the poor he remained a member of the lower-upper-middle class, a political intellectual, a writer and, not least, an Englishman. It was the consciousness of those who shared these affiliations to which he was always most sensitive. Their self-delusion about Communism was his second. It is critical that he did not regard these subjects as incompatible. He never argues either that the demand for social justice should be subordinated to the cold war or that the brutalities of the Soviet Union were an indictment of Socialism. He was never, as the Communist press liked to claim, a secret Fascist. Neither does there seem to me to be any indication, as Norman Podhoretz claimed in the January 1983 issue of *Harpers*, that he would have abandoned his interest in social justice and become a conservative if he had only lived long enough to see how well we have done by our poor. Podhoretz takes this even a step further, suggesting that Orwell may have “clung tenaciously to his identity as a man of the Left” so as to increase the authority with which he could criticize his nominal colleagues — as a ruse to permit him more effectively to bore from within. Such stuff seems quite on a par with the most self-serving of the Communist allegations. Orwell would not have been surprised by it, but I expect that he would not have taken it lightly either. His purpose was to bring workingmen, the demand for social justice and the traditions

of democratic Socialism into a larger struggle, and joining that struggle himself, to speak plainly and truthfully on their behalf. That is what he said he was doing and, it seems to me, is what he did.

Perhaps Orwell's final victory is that having to be an outsider, supported by neither church nor party nor, for most of his life, by anything that could be called popular success, he nevertheless produced a sustained body of work that required enormous selflessness and dedication. I do not believe that would have been possible without his commitment to social justice — that it could have been nearly so powerful had he not been able to regard workingmen as his unrequited creditors. There is a sense in which Orwell may be said to have been an honest man who, O'Brien speaking for 1984's totalitarian evil to the contrary, managed to stand alone and avoid defeat, in an honorable struggle to pay an overwhelming family debt.

In another sense, Orwell never parted company with his readers. More than any writer I know, he saw himself, his subject-matter, and his readers in a dynamic relationship that it was his task to imagine and reimagine continuously. My sense is that we need to struggle to see him, his subject-matter, and ourselves with the same acuity when we read him — that ultimately our concern with liberal education and Orwell's with common decency both center on this relationship — that he is at least in that regard our colleague, and welcome in our precincts.

¹ George Orwell. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, First American edition, 1958, Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London, pp. 34-35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ George Orwell. "Looking Back on The Spanish War," in Sonia Orwell and Jan Angus (editors) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 2, *My Country Right or Wrong*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1968, pp. 366-67.

⁵ George Orwell. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁶ George Orwell. "The Lion and the Unicorn" in *The Orwell Reader*, Harcourt Brace & Co., New York, 1956, p. 256.

⁷ George Orwell. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁸ George Orwell. "The Lion and the Unicorn" in *The Orwell Reader*, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-69.

⁹ George Orwell. "Looking Back on The Spanish War," *op. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*