George Orwell: A Centenary Tribute

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GEORGE ORWELL, born in 1903, was the child of a British Empire civil service family with long Burmese connections, which belonged, as he put it with characteristic precision and drollery, to the lower upper middle class. By the time he went to fight against fascism in Spain in 1936, he had already quit his job in the Burmese colonial police, attempted to drop out of the English class system, and become a writer and a socialist of a notably independent, indeed idiosyncratic, kind.

It was, however, only in Spain that his political identity became clear. In revolutionary Barcelona, Orwell experienced briefly and for the first and only time in his life a world where, as he put it, the working class was in the saddle and the privileged classes were lying low. Barcelona provided Orwell with an idea of socialism that stuck:

I had dropped more or less by chance into the only community of any size in Western Europe where political consciousness and disbelief in capitalism were more normal than their opposites … One had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where the word ‘comrade’ stood for comradeship and not for humbug. One had breathed the air of equality.

A taste of socialism was not the only thing that Orwell discovered in Spain. By accident he joined a Trotskyist militia. The Soviet Union was involved on the republican side in Spain through the local Communist Party and the influence of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. This was a time when the Soviet revolution was convulsed by the vast anti-Trotsky purge. The terror was exported to Spain. Orwell and his comrades in the Trotskyist militia were targeted by the republican secret police. In Barcelona, Orwell experienced the lunatic asylum atmosphere of a city gripped by fear. This was his only direct brush with the politics of totalitarianism. When he scrambled out of Spain, Orwell discovered that the left-wing press in Britain (and elsewhere) had not only systematically lied about what was happening in Catalonia at the time of the anti-Anarchist and anti-Trotskyist purge, but was also suppressing, by slander and censorship, any alternative view. Orwell was seized by a dread, from this time, of a world from which the objective history and, indeed, objective truth had been erased. In his wartime essay ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’ (1942), Orwell wrote that this was something that frightened him more than bombs.

Orwell left Spain a profoundly anti-communist revolutionary socialist, with an enlarged suspicion of his peer group, the left-wing intelligentsia, and an understanding, through personal experience, of the viciousness of Soviet power deployed behind republican lines, and of the catastrophe to which Stalin had brought the Russian Revolution.

On his return to England, Orwell was determined, as he put it, to spill the Spanish beans, to expose the Stalin myth, and to fight against what he regarded as the hypocrisy of the Communist Party’s anti-fascism and its advocacy, in the interest of Soviet foreign policy, of the democratic, anti-Hitler Popular Front. This was an awkward period in Orwell’s life. He opposed the drift to war and even argued that the British Empire was a ‘far vaster’ system of injustice than Nazi Germany.

Following the announcement of the Nazi–Soviet pact, Orwell and the pro-communist British left swapped sides. While the left discovered grounds for opposing what they characterised as a new imperialist war, Orwell discovered in himself a deep strand of English patriotism. He announced this discovery (in words that once had a profound impact on me) in a review he wrote of Malcolm Muggeridge’s portrait of the Nineteen Thirties (1940):

The final chapters are, to me, deeply moving … Beneath Muggeridge’s seeming acceptance of disaster there does lie the unconfessed fact that he does after all believe in something — in England … He does not want to see England conquered by Germany … I know very well what underlies these closing chapters. It is the emotion of the middle-class man, brought up in the military tradition, who finds in the moment of crisis that he is a patriot after all. It is all very well to be ‘advanced’ and ‘enlightened’ — to snigger at Colonel Blimp and proclaim your emancipation from all traditional loyalties, but a time comes when the sand of the desert is sodden red and what have I done for thee, England, my England? As I was brought up in this tradition myself I can recognise it under strange disguises, and also sympathise with it, for even at its stupidest and most sentimental it is a comelier thing than the shallow self-righteousness of the left-wing intelligentsia.

This was a critical moment in Orwell’s life. He detested capitalism, hierarchy and class privilege. He grasped the evil of Stalin. He was intensely suspicious of the Russophile tendency of the British left. He was a revolutionary socialist. In addition, he was now an English patriot. On the basis of these ingredients he wrote his great wartime essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ (1941).

In part, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ is Orwell’s attempt to discover the peculiar, abiding qualities of English civilisation: its gentleness of spirit, its anti-militarism, its belief in the rule of law, its anti-metaphysical prejudice, its little England xenophobia, its addiction to the privateness of life. No one, he
wrote, is so unpopular in England as the nosy parker. ‘We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans.’ Yet the essay also involves a savage attack on the hypocrisy of empire, a distaste for the privilege of wealth, and wonderment at the unfailing incompetence of the English ruling class. Having studied its foreign policy performance during the 1930s, for Orwell the most interesting question about the upper class was whether it was genuinely wicked or merely stupid. On balance, he thought stupidity the more plausible explanation. His formula for English society was: a family with the wrong members in control.

For Orwell, Nazi Germany’s early military victories — Norway and Flanders — revealed once and for all the impossibility of the survival of England on the basis of laissez-faire capitalism and an antiquated ruling class. War had demonstrated the superiority of the planned, collectivist economy. The brutal totalitarian state of Germany, which believed in race and caste, could only be defeated by an England where a democratic socialist revolution was built upon the foundation of a liberal civilisation, distorted by class hierarchy but haunted by the great idea of human equality. In Orwell’s idea of the English revolution, patriotism and socialism were joined:

An English socialist government will transform the nation from top to bottom, but it will bear the unmistakable marks of our own civilisation … It will not be doctrinaire or even logical. It will abolish the House of Lords, but quite probably will not abolish the Monarchy. It will leave anachronism and loose ends everywhere, the judge in his ridiculous horsehair wig and the lion and the unicorn on the soldier’s cap buttons. It will not set up any explicit class dictatorship … It will never lose touch with the tradition of compromise and belief in a law that is above the state. It will shoot traitors, but it will give them a solemn trial beforehand and occasionally it will acquit them. It will crush every open revolt promptly and cruelly, but it will interfere very little with the spoken and written word.

In ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’, Orwell came as close as he was ever to do to formulating his socialist programme. Its first plank was the nationalisation of ‘land, mines, railways, banks and major industries’. Its second was the equalisation of incomes, so that no one earned an income more than ten times that of anyone else. Its third was the democratisation of education and the abolition of the public school. Its fourth was Dominion status for India during the war, and after it the right to secede.

Orwell was convinced that one of the greatest impediments to socialist revolution in England was the influence of the left-wing intelligentsia, whose astonishing inability to comprehend Stalin had given socialism its bad name. In his wartime essays, Orwell developed a devastating sociological critique of the English left-wing intelligentsia. He saw in it the ‘querulousness’ of a group that did not expect power. He saw in it a remarkable absence of common sense. One had to be an intellectual, he once joked, to believe in certain propositions. ‘No ordinary man could be such a fool.’ Orwell attributed to intellectuals a tendency towards moral cowardice, to thinking in groups and hunting in packs: orthodoxy sniffing, he called it. Most importantly, he attributed to intellectuals a disease of the mind he called nationalism, a disease that had no connection to patriotism, the defensive love of country, of which he thoroughly approved.

Orwell regarded nationalism as a certain anxious, fanatical and irrational attachment to a nation, a people, an ideology or a cause. Nationalists were those for whom facts that complicated political allegiance simply bounced off consciousness.

Right-wing nationalists had not heard of Dachau before World War II. Left-wing nationalists still had not discovered the Stalin purge. He thought nationalism was a symptom of the decline of religion and of the destabilising effects of the political catastrophes of the contemporary age. And he was certain that the most important form of nationalism afflicting the English intelligentsia — transferred nationalism, he called it — was communism. In an essay of 1940, ‘Inside the Whale’, Orwell asked why the intelligentsia had flocked during the 1930s to communism. His unflattering answer went like this:

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It was simply something to believe in. Here was a church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline. Here was a Fatherland and — at any rate since 1935 or thereabouts — a Fuehrer. All the loyalties, all the superstitions that the intellect had seemingly banished could come rushing back under the thinnest of disguises. Patriotism, religion, empire, military glory — all in one word, Russia. Father, king, leader, hero, saviour — all in one word, Stalin. God — Stalin. The devil — Hitler. Heaven — Moscow. Hell — Berlin. All the gaps were filled up. So, after all, the ‘Communism’ of the English intellectual is something explicable enough. It is the patriotism of the deracinated.

Concerning the intelligentsia’s disease of nationalism, Orwell could think of only two possible cures. One was the revival of the English language. He thought that long-windedness, jargon, Latinate abstraction, dead metaphors, prefabricated phrases allowed the speaker or writer to hide their political meaning even from themselves:
Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, ‘I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so’. Probably, therefore, he will say something like this: ‘While freely conceding that the Soviet régime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods.’

The other cure for nationalism that Orwell proposed was for intellectuals to try to identify in themselves their nationalist blindspots by a process he called, more than once, ‘moral effort’, and which he demonstrated, by force of example, in his political writing throughout his life.

Orwell was interested in the problem of nationalism because of the impendence it presented to rational political discussion. More immediately, he believed that the nationalist mindset of the pro-Soviet intelligentsia stood in the way of socialism. The chief purpose of Orwell’s late career was to destroy the illusion that what had happened in Russia since 1917 was socialism. It was for this reason that he wrote his great political fable, *Animal Farm* (1945). He did not write it, as some believed, because he thought all revolutions were destined to fail. It was for a position of this kind that he criticised the movement from hedonistic utopianism to conservative pessimism in the work of Arthur Koestler. Nor did he write it to influence the direction of Soviet politics. As he somewhat unexpectedly explained in the Ukrainian preface to *Animal Farm*: ‘Even if I had the power I would not want to interfere in Soviet domestic affairs.’ Why, then, had he written *Animal Farm*? Because he had been convinced ‘for the past ten years … that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the socialist movement’.

In the last years of his life, Orwell’s political vision darkened. The age of catastrophe — of world wars, Hitler and Stalin, secret police and concentration camps, gas ovens and the atomic bomb — had their effect. Orwell was influenced by two ideas put into circulation by a former American Trotskyist, James Burnham. One was the idea that due to a so-called managerial revolution all major states were drifting towards a condition known as oligarchic collectivism or what others, including Orwell, more commonly called totalitarianism. The other was the vision of a world divided between three great totalitarian empires that might live forever, because of atomic weaponry, in a situation of permanent military stalemate. As the Cold War developed, Orwell believed that war might be looming between the US and the Soviet Union, that everyone involved in that war would be obliged to choose sides, and that no one in their right mind could fail to choose the US. In the longer term, however, he believed that, as the civilisation of laissez-faire capitalism was dead, the only choice remaining was between two forms of collectivism: democratic socialism and totalitarianism. On balance, Orwell was inclined to believe that the global victory of totalitarianism was likely. But it was not inevitable. In order to fight against such a future, he wrote his Burnhampite political science fiction, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), in which, in one of the most astonishing acts of political imagination, on the basis of Barcelona, books, newspapers, and conversations and correspondence with European émigrés, Orwell created one of literature’s most plausible portraits of totalitarian society. In order to try to bring his fellow intellectuals to their senses, Orwell Anglicised Stalinism. And in order to show where he believed totalitarianism was tending, he placed it in the future when, in the inner-party élite, the conventional Soviet hypocrisy about the quest for human equality had been replaced by the frank admission that the purpose of power was power; and where the Soviet iconography of human brotherhood had been overturned by an image of a boot stamping on a human face. With *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the idea of totalitarianism — Big Brother, the telescreen, the Ministry of Truth, Hate Week, thoughtcrime, doublethink, newspeak — entered the political consciousness of the Western world.

Orwell, at this time, spoke about himself as a doctor trying to cure a patient whose prognosis was poor. Shortly before his own death, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared. He was now obliged, because of misreadings on the anti-socialist right, to issue press releases in Britain and the US pointing out that his novel was a fantasy about a totalitarian future and not a satire of the democratic socialist Attlee Labour Government, to which he had given consistent, if not uncritical, support.

We come now to the central puzzle of George Orwell. Of all the political writers of what Eric Hobsbawn has called ‘the age of catastrophe’, none has stood the test of time better than Orwell. All his books remain permanently in print. There is a four-volume edition of his essays, journalism and letters. More recently, a twenty-volume collected works has been published. Almost every year, new biographies and critical studies appear.

And yet, in the most obvious way, the persistence of Orwell is strange. In 1946 Orwell published an essay called ‘Why I Write’. In it he pointed out, quite accurately, that since 1936 everything he had written had been written against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism. No one in our age is any longer troubled by the threat of totalitarianism, or at least not by what Orwell and his generation understood by the term. Even more importantly perhaps, almost no one any longer believes in the kind of socialism for which Orwell fought from the time of his arrival at political maturity in 1936. The Orwell puzzle can be stated, succinctly, like this. If no one fears totalitarianism any longer, if virtually no one has hopes any longer for what Orwell understood by socialism, why do we bother to read him still?

The first clue comes from a peculiar fact. Orwell died fifty-three years ago, yet I know of no political writer of whom it seems more natural to wonder where he would have stood on the political questions of our own time, and for whose posthumous approval political thinkers, of both the left and right, seem so keen. When I was at university as an undergraduate,
we wondered where Orwell would have stood on the Vietnam War. Today it seems natural to wonder whether he would have approved of the invasion of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or, to use an example recently suggested by Barry Hill, whether he would have been part of the anti-globalisation movement. For most political writers who are dead, we either know where they are likely to have stood or, to be honest, do not greatly care. With Orwell we are uncertain, and we care. Orwell persists in contemporary consciousness in a way no other long-dead political writer does. Why?

It cannot be because of his prescience. On most great questions and many small ones, his predictions were wrong. Orwell thought England would lose the war against Germany if there were no socialist revolution. He believed that the era of capitalism was over. He believed that a world divided into three great totalitarian empires was the most likely prospect. Even his short-term predictions were frequently wildly mistaken. At the end of 1945 he published in Tribune his political crystal-ball gazings for the coming year. This is what he thought would happen in the US:

For some months an all-round orgy of spending, followed by a sudden economic crisis and huge-scale unemployment, complicated by over-rapid demobilisation. Growth of a formidable fascist movement, probably under military leadership, and parallel with and hostile to this, growth of a Negro fascist movement, affiliated to kindred movements in Asia.

If Orwell presses on our consciousness, and if it is not for his prescience, in the long-term or the short, then why?

The answer is, in part, connected with his political judgment. As a writer of the revolutionary left, his understanding that socialism would not be built on what he once called ‘a pyramid of corpses’, a proposition which so many intellectuals cleverer than him found so difficult to grasp, and to which he devoted so much of his life, has clearly stood the test of time. Yet there is more to it than this. For there was no great issue connected to the age of catastrophe — Stalin, Hitler, totalitarianism, imperialism, racism (the idea, not the word), anti-Semitism, the Cold War, the atom bomb — in which Orwell was uninterested, about which he did not have something fresh and illuminating to say. There have been many more brilliant thinkers in the twentieth century than Orwell. But very frequently their political judgment was lamentable. Martin Heidegger could not see through Hitler. Jean-Paul Sartre could not see through Mao. Orwell understood Stalin at a glance. There is perhaps no political writer of the twentieth century with Orwell’s political penetration and moral taste.

Because of his untheorised openness to experience, Orwell is, too, always capable of surprise. In ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’, he discussed very briefly a situation in which he found himself incapable of shooting at an enemy soldier, whom he had in his sights, but who was holding onto his trousers (which were falling down), and who was, at that moment, transformed from a fascist into a fellow human being. Orwell does not draw from the experience any trite anti-war sentiment. It did not cause him to doubt the justice of fighting on the anti-Franco side. Indeed, when he asked himself what the experience had meant, he answered not very much. Yet precisely because it is unburdened by interpretation, the passage manages somehow to go deep. Let me take another example. At the end of World War II, Orwell went to Germany. He visited a concentration camp in the company of an intelligent young Jewish man, who landed a boot on a now pathetic SS officer. There was a time, Orwell understood, when this man would have derived enormous satisfaction from this act. This time had passed. ‘Who would not have jumped for joy, in 1940, at the thought of seeing SS officers kicked and humiliated? But when the thing becomes possible, it is merely pathetic and disgusting.’ He called his short essay ‘Revenge is Sour’ (1945).

Orwell’s openness to experience is connected to something of which every reader of Orwell is aware: his honesty, or what Orwell himself, with greater precision, called his ability to face unpleasant facts. In his essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (1936), an exploration of the costs of imperialism for not only the oppressed but also the oppressors, Orwell does not flinch from revealing an uncomfortable truth. As a colonial policeman, he experienced the daily jeering of young Burmese men. Worst of all were the Buddhist priests. ‘With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny … with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet in a Buddhist priest’s guts.’ In his investigation during the Depression of the condition of the working class in the north of England in The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), to the anger of a considerable part of his middle-class socialist readership, and to the evident embarrassment of his publisher at the Left Book Club, Victor Gollancz, Orwell discussed at length one of the foundations of class division in England: the near-impenetrable barrier of smell, or, to put the matter more concretely, the fact that the propertied classes were taught to believe that the working class stank, a fact which Orwell felt obliged to concede was, to some extent, true. Later in his life, Orwell wrote a savagely dismissive review of one of the plays of Arthur Koestler. When next they met, Koestler asked his close friend why he had not at least softened it a bit. Orwell replied that it simply had not occurred to him.

Yet there is, I suspect, something deeper than any of this for Orwell’s endurance as a writer. Ever since the French Revolution, politics in the West have been haunted by two of its great ideals: equality and liberty. No writer seems to have been more faithful to these ideals or to have loved them more truly — in thought and action — than Orwell did.

Many of the most luminous passages in his books are
connected with his belief in human equality and his hopes for the coming of a world where rough material equality between human beings will exist. One of the most striking passages in his work, for example, occurs towards the beginning of *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. 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. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that ‘It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us’ and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. 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.

Later, in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), he wrote about ‘the party hacks’ and ‘sleek little professors’ who were busy trying to prove that socialism meant ‘planned state capitalism with the grab motive left intact’. For Orwell, if socialism did not mean ‘equality’ and a ‘classless society’, it meant nothing at all. The most famous line he ever wrote is the one that captured the great betrayal represented by the Russian Revolution: ‘All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.’ In our neo-liberal age, equality has had a bad press. But as Orwell knew, the idea of equality somehow will not leave us be.

Yet it was not only equality that Orwell cared for; he also cared for freedom. If the power of *Animal Farm* rests on the idea of the betrayal of the idea of equality, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* imagined a world from which the idea of freedom had been drained. Nothing disgusted Orwell more deeply than those writers, for whom freedom was the condition of existence, who were willing to trade their freedom for one or another cause. Sometimes he writes almost as if he cared more about the exercise of free intelligence than the move towards truthfulness that its exercise might achieve. In a polemical dispute with a communist in 1946, he put the point like this:

For some years past, orthodoxy — at least the dominant brand of it — has consisted in not criticising Stalin, and the resulting corruption has been such that the bulk of the English literary intelligentsia has looked on at torture, massacre and aggression without expressing disapproval … This may change, and in my opinion probably will change. In five years it may be as dangerous to praise Stalin as it was to attack him two years ago. But I shall not regard that as an advance. Nothing is gained by teaching a parrot a new word.

Orwell loved both equality and freedom, then. This is largely why, despite the fact that we have woken to find that the totalitarian nightmare has lifted and that the socialist dream has faded, he still remains alive to us and fresh.

Yet there is one more thing I wish to say. Despite the political gloom that settled over Orwell in the final years of his life, there remained a delight in what he was inclined to call the surface of life, which nothing could extinguish. If the primary concern of his writing was to defend socialism against totalitarianism, his secondary concern was to defend humanism against the other-worldly, religious point of view. Orwell was always sceptical about Gandhi. He begins ‘Reflections on Gandhi’ (1949), the last major essay he wrote, with the wonderful line: ‘Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent.’ And in ‘Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool’ (1947), his essay on the rage against Shakespeare that Tolstoy expressed in his ascetic old age, he writes that Tolstoy:

...could have no patience with a chaotic, detailed discursive writer like Shakespeare. His reaction is that of an irritable old man who is being pestered by a noisy child. ‘Why do you keep jumping up and down like that? Why can’t you sit still like I do?’

In any way the old man is in the right, but the trouble is that the child has a feeling in its limbs which the old man has lost. And if the old man knows of the existence of this feeling, the effect is merely to increase his irritation: he would make children senile if he could.

Despite all the horrors of his age, there remained in Orwell, even as illness overtook him, a feeling in his limbs, an exuberance of spirit, a fascination with the details of life, a love of the world. Orwell tells us that, when he was shot through the throat in Spain and believed he was about to die, what he experienced was ‘a violent resentment at having to leave this world which, when all is said and done, suits me so well’.

This is a birthday celebration. Let me conclude by reading the final paragraph of a piece of Orwell’s journalism, which he called ‘Some Thoughts on the Common Toad’ (1946):

At any rate, Spring is here, even in London N1, and they can’t stop you enjoying it. This is a satisfying reflection. How many a time have I stood watching toads mating, or a pair of hares having a boxing match in the young corn, and thought of all the important persons who would stop me enjoying this if they could. But luckily they can’t. So long as you are not actually ill, hungry, frightened or immured in a prison or a holiday camp, Spring is still Spring. The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.