



## George Orwell : écrivain de droite ?

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# EPI-REVEL

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George Orwell : écrivain de droite ?

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## I

At first sight, there is something paradoxical if not downright perverse in presenting Orwell as a right-wing thinker, or even a conservative one. “I belong to the left and must work with it”, he wrote to the Duchess of Atholl on November 15, 1945, supplementing his earlier refusal to join an organisation which she had just founded, the League For European Freedom, by the statement: “I cannot associate myself with an organisation which claims to defend democracy in Europe, but which has nothing to say about English imperialism”. At least in his own vision of himself, Orwell never departed from the profession of faith which he made in his essay “Why I write”, and where he said that “every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism, and for democratic socialism, as I understand it”<sup>1</sup>.

Orwell shared the view, commonly held in the 1930’s and 1940’s, and which persisted for at least a decade after his death, that socialism both could and would produce a society which was not only freer and fairer than the one created by capitalism, but which was also considerably richer. Even to link him with the right seems, in the light of what he personally thought about himself and of his work, to be carrying the Barthesian notion of the Death of the Author to a point where it becomes totally absurd. It may well be as Wimzatt and Beardsley were already arguing in 1946, that a writer’s intentions have nothing to do with the meaning of his work, and Orwell would not be the first author to have understood the meaning of what he wrote in a way that differed completely from that of a number of his readers. If it is true, as G.K. Chesterton once remarked, that the aim of literary criticism is to tell an author something which would make him jump out of his boots, then there would certainly be a case for looking at Orwell in a way which he would have found very unattractive. But to link his work with the views of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, or even with those of Harold Macmillan, Edouard Balladur and John Major, evokes memories of productions of *Hamlet* which present Claudius as a prudent if slightly over-ambitious monarch, and the Prince as a neurotic adolescent whose over-active imagination leads him to be unduly preoccupied by his mother’s sexuality.

There are nevertheless four aspects of Orwell’s later work which are more closely linked to conservative than to left-wing styles of thinking. The first lies in the impact which *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* made not only on his readers but on public opinion generally. The second is his attitude to issues such as patriotism, warfare and sexual morality. The third is his insistence on the need for freedom of speech and his view of language as a means of rational communication. The fourth, for which he can be held only indirectly responsible, is the views expressed about him by his critics, both those who admire his work and those who find its ideas and themes unattractive. What all these areas have in common is the light they throw on the problem of definition. The critics who attacked Orwell for making what they saw as the great betrayal, like those who praised him for being one of the first to see the light, were either consciously or unconsciously defining what they saw as left and right at the moment when they were writing.

This is particularly noticeable in the case of Daphne Patai, who attacked Orwell in 1984, in a book entitled *The Orwell Mystique: a Study in Male Ideology*, for what she called his “pet

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, eds Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), I, p. 5 and IV, p. 30. Referred to from now on as *CEJL*.

peeves, his fears of socialism and the machine, his attraction to the experience of war, and the conservatism apparent in his carefully circumscribed challenge to hierarchy and authority”<sup>2</sup>. What she was doing, unconsciously as well as consciously, was defining by contrast, in a year which was less depressing than Orwell had predicted, something which was currently seen as a progressive attitude. For her, it was clearly still a defining characteristic of the left to want to bring the means of ownership, production and exchange under public control; to be as enthusiastic about machines as H. G. Wells had been in the early years of the century — and as the ecologists who were soon to see themselves as the true heirs of the left-wing concern for the quality of life were not; to distrust military force in a way which would have surprised admirers of the Red Army in the 1940’s; to be hostile to authority under all its forms, even if these did happen to incarnate the dictatorship of the proletariat; and to be a good deal keener on female emancipation than the French socialists of the nineteenth century had been during the years when they refused to give women the vote on the grounds that they would cast it for the conservative politicians who reminded them of their fathers.

The fact that Daphne Patai provided so useful a thumb-nail sketch of the attitudes characteristic of the left in the 1980’s did not prevent her from identifying aspects of Orwell’s work which were genuinely there. Orwell, for example, did not like machines. The idyllic world which George Bowling fails to rediscover in *Coming Up For Air* is that of an essentially rural England. There is little enthusiasm in the prediction in “England, Your England” of a civilization in which children grow up with “an intimate knowledge of magnetos and in complete ignorance of the Bible”<sup>3</sup>, and no mention in Orwell’s praise for England of the fact that this was the country whose inhabitants were enterprising and ingenious enough to be first in the field in the industrial revolution. What he admires about England is, in contrast, “the privateness of English life”, represented most clearly in a love of flowers.

There is, in contrast, little evidence for the phallogocratic and even misogynist attitudes of which Daphne Patel accuses Orwell elsewhere in her book. The Rosemary of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is a good deal more sensible than her lover, Gordon Comstock, just as Julia shows herself more enterprising than Winston Smith in her rebellion against the principles of Ingsoc in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Both women may be to some extent portraits of Orwell’s first wife, Eileen O’Shaughnessy, and one of the ways in which Orwell did not conform to the popular image of the left-wing intellectual was in his private life. When W.H. Auden wrote:

To the man in the street, who I’m sorry to say  
Is a keen observer of life,  
The word ‘intellectual’ means straightaway  
A man who’s untrue to his wife,

there was no way in which he could have been thinking of Orwell, who was uxorious to a fault, and who caused considerable embarrassment among his women friends by his eagerness to find another wife after Eileen’s tragically early death in March 1945. In spite of his friend Brenda Salkeld’s claim that he “did not really like women”<sup>4</sup>, there is no trace of misogyny in his books.

His motives for doing so, however, were neither entirely sexual nor wholly selfish. He needed to find a wife who could look after his adopted son, Richard, who was only two when Eileen died, and there is no doubt that one of the great tragedies of his private life lay in his and Eileen’s inability to have children of their own. This regret was not merely a personal matter, but reflected the disappointment which he felt at not being able to live up to one of the standards which he listed in 1943 as the only qualities by which, as he said, “any society can

<sup>2</sup> Amherst: The University of New Jersey Press, 1984. p 14.

<sup>3</sup> *CEJL*, II, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> In Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick, *Orwell Remembered* (London: Ariel Books, BBC publications, 1984), p. 67.

be sustained”: “industry, courage, patriotism, frugality and philoprogenitism”. It was the last one he mentioned, though not necessarily the least important.

The qualities he listed — in a review of the first three of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* in 1942<sup>5</sup> — are ones which, in Western Europe as in North America, are much more likely to be mentioned with approval by conservatively-minded speakers than by politicians who see themselves as belonging to the left-wing or progressive camp. They were high on the agenda for President Reagan and Lady Thatcher, and can be guaranteed to raise a groan in any Senior Common Room or at any literary dinner table. In this respect, they offer yet another reminder of how hard it is to provide an objective definition of the difference between left and right. There is nothing inherently right-wing or conservative about hard work, marital fidelity, love of children or a readiness to die for one’s country. The only reason why these values have come to be associated with the right is the way in which left-wing thinkers, from the late nineteenth-century onwards, have tended to disparage them. Orwell’s readiness to list them as desirable is certainly an indication that he had a very conventional attitude on a number of matters, and was not afraid to say so. It exposed him in his life-time to a certain amount of hostility from thinkers on the left, though less so than his famous remark in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that the very words “Socialism” and “Communism” are enough to “draw to them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist and feminist in England”<sup>6</sup>.

Yet while it may have been the unkind mention of feminists which first inspired Daphne Patai to write her very critical analysis of his work, the tone in which she does so suggests another reason why it is justified as well as tempting to see Orwell, as I have tried to do elsewhere as an example of what I have called “the conservative imagination”<sup>7</sup>. Richard Rees recalls him as saying, in a sardonic voice made harsher by the effect of the fascist bullet which went through his throat on May 20, 1937: “I notice that people always say *under* socialism”<sup>8</sup>, and Daphne Patai’s book is a good illustration of the tendency, which Orwell himself detected, for progressive writers to require everybody to be progressive in the same way. If, nowadays, you do not carefully compose every sentence so that it is shown grammatically to apply equally well to women as to men, you are guilty of sexism. It is no good your saying that you didn’t mean it that way, and that you are sufficiently convinced of the equality of the sexes to see most arguments as applying equally well to men and women. Only those whose political correctness shines through the syntax and accident of every line they write can be ideologically sound. The Orwell who argued that the first step to intellectual tyranny lies in a change of language which makes the expression of heretical thoughts impossible would have seen the point.

Daphne Patai may have been exaggerating a little when she spoke of Orwell’s “attraction to the experience of war”. The essay “Looking Back at the Spanish Civil War” goes out of its way to avoid any idealisation of life in the trenches or on the battlefield. “The picture of war set out in books like *All Quiet on the Western Front*”, he wrote in 1942, “is substantially true. Bullets hurt, corpses stink, men under fire are often so frightened that they wet their trousers”<sup>9</sup>. There is nothing in Orwell of the glamour of regimental life which characterises the first volume of Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy, *Men at Arms*, none of the fascination with violent action which runs through the work of Ernest Hemingway or of the

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<sup>5</sup> *CEJL*, I, p. 236.

<sup>6</sup> *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> Published under that title by Pinter publishers, London, 1993. It fell as dead from the press as Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rees, *George Orwell, Fugitive from the Camp of Victory* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p. 153. Victory, as the quotation from Simone Weil at the beginning of Rees’s book reminds us, is not socialism but justice.

<sup>9</sup> *CEJL*, II, p. 250.

enthusiasm for disciplined revolutionary violence visible in the closing pages of Malraux's *L'Espoir*. There is no sign that Orwell shared what I am given to understand is the characteristically right-wing view that the true test of manhood is to face other men in battle. There is nothing in his work comparable to the romantic vision of war which inspired Julian Henry Grenfell, a professional soldier who won the D.S.O. and was killed of wounds early in 1915, to write the opening stanzas of *Into Battle*:

The naked earth is warm with Spring,  
 And with green grass and bursting trees  
 Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,  
 And quivers in the sunny breeze;  
 And life is colour and warmth and light,  
 And a striving ever more for these;  
 And he is dead who will not fight  
 And who dies fighting has increase

Orwell's ideal self-image as the ordinary, commonsensical, unromantic Englishman also led him to admire the disillusioned and fatalistic attitude towards warfare which he saw as characteristic of the average working man. It was consequently of himself as much as of others that he was speaking when he wrote of the anti-militarism of the English and commented that "the most stirring battle-poem in English is about a brigade of cavalry which went in the wrong direction", and remarked that "of the last war, the four names which have really engraved themselves on the popular memory are Mons, Ypres, Gallipoli and Passchendaele, each one a disaster"<sup>10</sup>. But Orwell's recognition that war was a horrible and generally highly inefficient activity did not prevent him from recognising both the reality of the patriotic feelings which impel men to fight and the more practical need which arises at certain periods for them to do so. His famous description of England as "a family with the wrong members in charge" did not prevent him from recognising that even for the most rebellious of its sons, "a moment comes when the sand of the desert is sodden red, and what have I done for thee, England, my England"<sup>11</sup>.

The reference is to two poems, both of which can still be guaranteed to raise a snigger in what Orwell called the pansy left, and both of which have an interesting literary characteristic. Just as a liking for the novels of P. G. Wodehouse, Anthony Powell and Simon Raven is found more frequently among men than among women, and a fondness for those of Jilly Cooper almost exclusively among women of under thirty-five, so a tendency to respond positively to the poems of W. E. Henley and Henry Newbolt would be found nowadays only among readers of *The Daily Telegraph* who are no longer in the first flush of their youth. Both *England, my England* and Newbolt's *Vitae Lampada*, to which his confession of residual pacifism refers, are what Orwell himself would have called "good-bad poems", specimens of the kind of verse whose directness and sentimentality can evoke a tear which one is almost immediately ashamed of shedding. This is especially the case with *Vitae Lampada*, with its message that courage and skill on the sports field will lead to courage and skill on the field of battle:

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night-  
 Ten to make and the match to win-  
 A bumping pitch and a blinding light,  
 An hour to play and the last man in.  
 And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat  
 Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,  
 But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote-  
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'.  
 The sand of the desert is sodden red -  
 Red with the wreck of the square that broke;-

<sup>10</sup> *CEJL*, II, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> *CEJL*, I, p. 535.

And the Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead  
 And the regiment blind with the dust and smoke.  
 The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
 And England's far, and Honour a name.  
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'  
 This is the word that year by year,  
 While in her place the School is set,  
 Every one of her sons shall hear  
 And none that hears it dare forget.  
 This they all, with a joyful mind  
 Bear through life like a torch in flame,  
 And fallin, fling to the host behind-  
 'Play up! Play up! and play the game!'

In a sense, the idea was always a ridiculous one, even when the poem was first written, in 1906, and it became more so after the Somme and Third Ypres. But while Orwell remained honest enough to admit that he could still be moved by it, and thus confirmed in advance at least part of Daphne Patai's case against him, there were other reasons for his refusal to share the condemnation of all forms of military activity which was a feature of the left which he knew in England in the 1930's and which again became one of its defining characteristics in the Europe and North America of the cold war.

Thus while it was ideologically correct, especially after the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany on June 21st, 1941, for men and women of the left to support the war of all freedom-loving people against fascist tyranny, a very different attitude towards the use of force became fashionable on the left once the cold war got into its stride. Jean-Paul Sartre was not the only thinker on the left to deplore what he called the Manicheanism of the cold war, to see the United States as far more responsible for what was happening than the Soviet Union, and consequently to deplore any military preparations made by the West to defend what statesmen as different as Harry Truman and Jules Moch saw as its legitimate interests. Isaac Deutscher expressed a very frequently held attitude in left-wing circles when he described *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as "a kind of ideological weapon in the cold war", and accused Orwell of "teaching millions to look at the conflict between East and West in terms of black and white...to see a monster bogey and a monster scapegoat for the ills that claim mankind"<sup>12</sup>.

Orwell was too ill, as well as too busy typing out *Nineteen Eighty-Four* himself, to express a direct view on the cold war, and thus to make himself fully vulnerable to the charge implicitly formulated by Daphne Patai and Isaac Deutscher: that of being an ideologically-motivated militarist serving the interests of international capitalism. There is nevertheless an incident in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which suggests that he might, had he lived, have become as vigorous a cold war warrior as his friend Arthur Koestler or as the Camus with whom he got on so well when they met in Paris immediately after the war. It occurs in Winston Smith's memory of how, as he hurried to "some deep place down in the earth" to escape "an air raid which seemed to take everyone by surprise", some time in the 1950's, an old man keeps repeating: "We didn't ought to 'ave trusted them. I said so, Ma, didn't I? That's what comes of trusting 'em. I said so all along. We didn't ought to 'ave trusted the buggers"<sup>13</sup>. It seems improbable, in the light of Orwell's opposition to the automatic anti-Americanism of the left-wing *Tribune* group, that the buggers in question were the USA, and much more likely that the reference was to the USSR. T. R. Fyvel reports Orwell as being highly critical of R.H.S. Crossman's and Michael Foot's opposition to German rearmament, and Orwell himself commented in a

<sup>12</sup> An essay in the collection *Heretics and Renegades* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), reprinted in Raymond Williams ed., *George Orwell. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> See the 1954 Penguin edition, p. 30.

letter to Julian Symons on October 29 that once “the Russians have recovered and have the atomic bomb”, war would be inevitable<sup>14</sup>.

If a readiness to warn against the dangers of left-wing totalitarianism, and even to be prepared to resist it by force of arms, is a sign of what Daphne Patai calls an “attraction to the experience of war”, then Orwell was certainly guilty as charged. But if he was, when he died, well on the way to becoming a cold war warrior, he was in good company. There is nothing in his suspicion of the Soviet Union which could not also be found at the time in Clement Attlee, and even more in Ernie Bevin. If it is true, as Frederic Warburg commented on receiving the typescript of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that its publication would be worth “a cool million” votes for the Conservative Party<sup>15</sup>, this is more because of the difficulty which the Labour Party was experiencing then, as it continued to experience until the end of the cold war, of being the party most likely to indulge in a policy of appeasement towards the Soviet Union. It did not reflect the political realities of the England of the late 1940’s, in which the two main parties were drawing much closer together on foreign policy issues. The enthusiasm for the Soviet Union which had been so marked a feature of the wartime period, and which had led to the difficulties which Orwell experienced in finding a publisher for *Animal Farm*, had virtually disappeared from all but the extreme left wing of the Labour Party.

It was nevertheless the admirers of Soviet Union, who remained numerous in the *Tribune* group and Militant tendency until the end of the cold war, who were keenest in their criticism of Orwell for having made what they saw as the great betrayal, and there is, even to-day, an acid test whereby you can tell whether the person you are talking to is emotionally and intellectually on the left or on the right. If they are on the left, they will use the fact that the England of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become “Airstrip One” to maintain that Orwell was at least as hostile to the United States as to the Soviet Union. After all, they will argue, this is what England did become during the cold war, when the Strategic Air Command had bases all over the country. Those on the right, in contrast, will supplement the remarks of the old man which Winston Smith overheard as the cold war became hot by pointing out how accurate an account of their society the inhabitants of the Soviet Union and its satellites discovered in *Nineteen-Eighty Four* when they read it in samizdat during the cold war.

## II

While Daphne Patai and Isaac Deutscher thought of Orwell as a man of the right, and saw this as a bad thing, other critics were more appreciative when confronted with the same features of his work. When the first version of what was to become “England, Your England” was first published, early in 1941, under the title *Socialism and the English Genius*, an anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote on March 8 that:

Mr Orwell seem to despair of the possibility of a virile, right-wing ideology; yet his own thought tends that way, and it may be that, with more courage, his provocative essay might have laid the foundations for a new conservatism. He has at least touched, if not grasped, something of what is best in conservative thought.

This was, of course, at a time when conservatism had not taken on the aggressively free-market ideology which characterised it in the 1980’s. Conservatism was still, at the time, linked with a number of ideas which took a back seat in the Conservative Party of Lady Thatcher: the concept of service, the vision of a community which was more than a collection of individuals, the subordination of wealth-creation to the need to protect the less fortunate, the concept of the gentleman and the notion of the duty which the rich and powerful had to their less fortunate compatriots. It would be unfair to Orwell, and seriously misleading to his readers, to suggest that he would have supported the reductions in public spending on welfare

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<sup>14</sup> *CEJL*, IV, p. 451. Letter of October 19, 1948 to Julian Symons.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Bernard Crick on p. 92 of the 1984 Clarendon Press edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

and education which are presented by the left as so marked a feature of the Reagan and the Thatcher years. Although he gave a hint as to how he was sometimes tempted to see himself when he described Swift as “one of those driven into a kind of perverse Toryism by the follies of the progressive party of his time”<sup>16</sup>, it is hard to imagine him taking the decisive step of actually voting for the Conservative party. On the other hand, and without indulging in what Bernard Crick calls “body-snatching”<sup>17</sup>, it is tempting to see him as adopting a number of other attitudes regarded by the left, in England if not in France or the United States, as characteristic of right-wing modes of thought.

The question of definition is as important here as it is elsewhere, and is closely linked to that of the evidence to be adduced. Orwell himself was not averse to basing his uncomplimentary remarks about the left on his own personal experience in literary London and among his fellow-broadcasters on the BBC, and it is partly this fact which justifies my basing some of my generalisations in this essay on personal experience. I spent thirty-nine years as a teacher of French at a series of English-speaking universities, and was led by a gregarious and argumentative disposition to talk about politics to as many of my colleagues as I could persuade to join me in the Senior Common Room or whom I could button-hole at dinner parties. The attitudes which I describe in this article as being characteristic of the intellectual left, especially in England, are thus as firmly based upon this experience as Orwell’s were on the views which he heard expressed by his friends in Hampstead and the BBC, and naturally have the same disadvantage: there is no independent, empirical evidence to back them up. If, however any reader who disagrees with my analysis cares to repeat the kind of experiments which I have carried out, or recalls comparable conversations over the years, I should be surprised if she or he does not find my portrait a basically accurate one. If this reader is a man or woman of the left, they will find the intensity of their indignation to be an accurate guide to the accuracy with which I have followed upon what I think of as Orwell’s footsteps.

In my own case, I have found my colleagues sneering most openly at me in discussions on foreign policy. When Sir Richard Rees said that Orwell’s patriotism gave him “an extraordinary kind of hard-headed, almost Machiavellian sort of commonsense in questions of international power politics”<sup>18</sup> he was putting his finger on an aspect of his thinking which would, I think, almost certainly have kept him out of the predominantly left-wing Campaign for Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament. I have never found any teacher of literature or politics prepared even to discuss the possibility of an author whom they admired failing to join the organisation of which they most approved. It would, for them be tantamount to accepting the idea that the Pope was a share-holder in the London Rubber Company. A refusal to join the CND would nevertheless, for me, be a quite reasonable attitude for Orwell to have adopted, basing his argument on the very sensible idea that you don’t throw away a weapon to which you have no riposte until your enemy does the same. While it is hard, if not impossible, to imagine Orwell supporting American policy in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973, it is much easier to see him as one of those who urged the governments of France, Great Britain and the United States to refuse to have anything to do with the Soviet attempt, between 1958 and 1962, to transform West Berlin into a “Free City” whose inhabitants would no longer have their freedoms protected by the French, American and British garrisons stationed there by the Four-Power agreement of 1945. Here again, in the discussions which I had in British universities during this particularly tense period of the cold war, I found virtually nobody outside the faculties of science, applied science and medicine — together with the ex-servicemen in History or Philosophy who had studied the Melian Debate in Book V of

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<sup>16</sup> *CEJL*, IV, p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> See p. 3 of the 1984 Clarendon Press edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in a comment on Norman Podhoretz’s article in the June 1983 number of *Harper’s Bazar*, “If Orwell were alive to-day”.

<sup>18</sup> Coppard and Crick, *Orwell Remembered*, p. 124.

Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War — who was prepared either to support Western policy or even to envisage the possibility that George Orwell, if alive, would have agreed with the stance taken by the governments of France, Great Britain and the United States.

These were some of the specific issues, in the period in which better health could well have kept Orwell alive, which divided left from right in England. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to extrapolate from what Orwell did say during his life-time to what he might have said after his death, and to look in more detail at what Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote when he commented that his effect on the English left:

might be compared to that of Voltaire on the French nobility: he weakened their belief in their own ideology, made them ashamed of their clichés, left them intellectually more scrupulous and more defensive<sup>19</sup>.

The first point that occurs, as I have already suggested by my description of my experience as a teacher in the Faculty of Arts and Social Studies in an English-speaking university, is that it took a long time for the aspect of Orwell's work highlighted by O'Brien's remark to have much effect. It was not until the leaders of the Soviet Union conceded defeat in the cold war that Marxism began to be unfashionable. A knee-jerk reaction of hostility against the United States — coupled rather oddly with a readiness to go there in order to lunch with the Devil face-to-face and at his expense — remains the common feature uniting teachers of literature, politics, sociology and Fine Art. Indeed, this hostility is so marked that it gives me the impression that many of my colleagues would have much preferred it if the Soviet Union had been allowed to keep its missiles in Cuba in October 1962, to use them to force the Western allies to abandon Berlin; and that they would have been happier if the authorities in Moscow had relaxed their hold on Eastern Europe only to the extent of allowing a slightly different way to socialism. In so far as Orwell's "conservatism" never grew to the point where it led him to say anything complimentary about the capitalist system, my colleagues are probably right to pooh-pooh the idea that it can be applied to the meaning of his work when taken as a whole. Whether they are right in their denial of a possible change of attitude on Orwell's own part on this specific point remains a more open question.

From this point of view, arguments about the direction which Orwell's thought would have taken if he had lived to the Biblical three-score-years-and-ten raise issues which go beyond the limits in which most discussions about the meaning of an author's work take place. For what nowadays really divides left and right on an ideological plane is the question of whether or not political freedom can exist in a society whose economy is not firmly based on free-market economics. Everything that Orwell said suggests that he clung firmly to the belief that only socialism could create a society in which human beings were genuinely free. What would have been intriguing, had he lived until 1975, is how he would have reacted to the view which was then starting to become fashionable and which said that a free market in ideas was possible only in states with a free-market economy. Or, to put it more bluntly, that it is the existence of Wall Street which enables me to write and say what I want without the fear of a policeman coming to knock at my door at three in the morning in order to take me away to a concentration camp or to the gulag.

But although there is no evidence that Orwell would have changed his mind about what he saw as the essential link between socialism on the one hand and political and intellectual freedom on the other, there are other aspects of his work apart from the praise given to him by Conor Cruise O'Brien and the disapproval expressed by Daphne Patai and Isaac Deutscher which strengthen the case for seeing him as a representative of the conservative imagination. He was an odd sort of revolutionary — a role in which he liked to cast himself — in that he was like Mr Hardcastle in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, a man who loved everything

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<sup>19</sup> See O'Brien's essay in Raymond Williams ed., *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 132.

that was old. He was also an odd sort of left-wing writer, in that his two most famous books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, were directed against the way of thinking which predominated in progressive circles of his day. He was also, on two issues which I have so far mentioned only in passing, as well as on a question I have already mentioned, thoroughly out of step not only with the predominant temper of the left-wing thinkers in his own day, but also with what became attitudes very fashionable with the intellectual left several years after his death.

Thus I have never taken part in a discussion of the cold war with my literary colleagues without a phrase in Orwell's essay on Kipling coming irresistibly into my mind. For when he remarks that it would be "difficult to hit off the one-eyed pacifism of the English in fewer words than in the phrase 'making mock of uniforms that guard you while you sleep'"<sup>20</sup>, he exactly defines the attitude towards the use of armed force which still characterises English left-wing intellectuals. Even on the rare occasions when they can be brought to confess that the Soviet Union was at least partly responsible for the cold war, they invariably stop short of endorsing the policies pursued by the West. While none of my colleagues will disagree with the thesis that the policy of Appeasement followed by the democracies in the 1930's helped to bring about the second world war, they refuse to admit that one of the reasons why the cold war did not turn into the third world was the readiness of the United States to act in time by countering Soviet aggression by going to war or threatening to do so. My colleagues will all agree that the democracies were wrong to let Hitler take the Rhineland in 1936, wrong to offer no opposition to the *Anschluss* in March 1938, and wrongest of all to give the Sudeten areas of Czechoslovakia to Germany by the Munich agreements of September 1938. What they will not accept is that the Berlin airlift of 1948-9, the creation of the NATO alliance in 1949, the armed intervention against the invasion of South Korea by the Communist North in June 1950, the insistence in the 1980's on countering the installation of the SS20's in Eastern Europe by the placing of Cruise and Pershing weapons in the West had the same effect on the Soviet Union that a comparably firm policy might have had on Hitler's Germany. For while no left-wing intellectual will contest the thesis that a series of foreign policy failures on Hitler's part might have brought about the collapse of the Nazi régime and thus avoided the need to fight the second world war, they will not even consider the possibility that one of the reasons why the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980's was that its leaders had been so unsuccessful in their foreign policy, and that this failure had been brought about by the firmness with which it had been resisted by the West.

It is perhaps another sign of the potentially right-wing nature of Orwell's later work that it can encourage criticisms of this type directed against the left-wing intellectuals of the present day. These intellectuals are, of course, quite right to make the point which I have found recurring in all discussions of his books: that while it may be justified to interpret *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen-Eighty Four* in this very hawkish light, the same approach can in no way be justified in the case of his other fiction, up to and including *Coming Up For Air*, and is no way applicable to *Down and Out in Paris and London*<sup>21</sup>. This is certainly true, and it may well be that if Orwell had lived on after 1950, he would have seen that he had done his bit in warning against Soviet totalitarianism and have gone back to the kind of critical analysis of English society which characterises *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* or the account of the effects of unemployment in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. This might well have happened, and it is useful to remember that Orwell never gave the slightest sign of adopting the religious attitude which the best-known of English right-wing thinkers of the present day, Roger Scruton, sees as

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<sup>20</sup> *CEJL*, II, p. 187.

<sup>21</sup> Ingeniously translated into French under the title *La Vache Enragée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935). When I met Albert Camus in Paris in the summer of 1956, he told me of his admiration of Orwell's work in general, and for that volume of autobiographical reminiscences in particular.

essential to a genuinely conservative approach to existence<sup>22</sup>. Orwell's request that he be buried according to the rites of the Church of England was based on his awareness of the contribution which this church had made, through its liturgy and through the language of the Authorized Version of the Bible, to the development of the English civilization which he so admired. It did not, if the content of his books and the recollections of his friends are anything to go by, indicate any acceptance of its doctrines.

The same *caveat* about linking Orwell with the contemporary right also applies to his views on the British empire. There is no way in which the remark in his essay on Kipling to the effect that

The nineteenth-century Anglo-Indians, to name the least sympathetic of Kipling's idols, were at any rate people who did things. It may well be that all that they did was evil, but they changed the face of the earth (it is instructive to look at a map of Asia and compare the railway system of India with that of the surrounding countries<sup>23</sup>

can outweigh the impact of *Burmese Days*. One of the reasons why my colleagues threw up their hands in such horror when I told them of my decision to include Orwell, alongside Burke, de Tocqueville, Anouilh, Anatole France, Conrad, Koestler, Evelyn Waugh and Tom Stoppard, in my book *The Conservative Imagination*, lay in their reluctance to make the distinction between conservatism as a general attitude towards experience and Conservatism as a specific set of policies, especially those implemented by Mrs Thatcher. It is an important distinction, though I again suspect that Orwell would not have sneered with the same automatic hostility as they do at any mention of the Falklands war of 1982. He might well have observed that the victory of the British forces did at least have the advantage of overthrowing a cruel and tyrannical military dictatorship and enabling the Argentinians to adopt a democratic form of government under which they have achieved one of the highest economic growth rates in South America. This is, of course, a matter of speculation. The critics who, like Raymond Williams and the biographer Bernard Crick, show the greatest reluctance in seeing Orwell as anything but a man of the left, point to the general hostility towards the Conservative Party which runs through the whole of his work as a sign that he would have seen the Falklands expedition as they do: as a cynical exercise in *realpolitik* and public relations aimed first and foremost at winning the next general election in Britain. There are nevertheless two other aspects of Orwell's work, both of which I mentioned at the beginning of this article, which seem to me to link him much more firmly with a conservative style of thinking than with the attitudes prevalent on the left in his day and which have become very much more marked since his death. They are his attitude towards freedom of speech and towards the nature of language.

### III

Here again, of course, it is a question of definition. There is an important sense in which Orwell's attitude on both these issues was that of a nineteenth-century liberal, of the kind of person who finds his views best expressed by the words which Thomas Jefferson had carved on the portals of the University of Virginia: "Here, we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, or to tolerate any error, so long as reason is left free to combat it", or who agrees with Anatole France that "la clarté est la politesse de l'homme de lettres". There is certainly a long tradition, in the kind of conservatism associated with Burke, both of refusing to allow total freedom of expression to one's opponents and of writing peculiarly obscure English.

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<sup>22</sup> See his introduction to *Conservative Texts: An Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1991): "The conservative will naturally sympathise with the religious world view. It is through the language, symbols and folk-morality of a religion that a people is rendered competent to confront its greatest fears and sufferings, and to work for its continuity, so as to establish a 'partnership' of the living, the unborn and the dead".

<sup>23</sup> *CEJL*, II, p. 187.

Burke's remark, in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that "We have prisons as secure as the Bastille for those who dare to libel the Queen of France"<sup>24</sup> suggests that he could be as intolerant of dissent as any Stalinist, and it is often extremely difficult to see what the prose of conservative thinkers such as Coleridge and T.E. Hulme actually means. Orwell himself nevertheless highlighted what was a fundamental change in the attitude of the left when he wrote, in 1946, in his essay "The Prevention of Literature" that

Fifteen years ago, when one defended the freedom of the intellect, one had to defend it against Conservatives and against Catholics, and to some extent — though they were not of great importance — against Fascists. Now, one has to defend it against Communists and 'fellow travellers'<sup>25</sup>.

The attitude introduced by this change has only very recently begun to disappear in the English-speaking universities. From 1968 onwards, the National Union of Students in England was dominated by what was known at the time as the "Broad Left", and was very largely successful in preventing speakers such as Enoch Powell and Hans Eysenck from giving talks or lectures on British campuses. Charles J. Sykes's *Profscam* gives details of a comparable ban on speakers accused of racism or sexism being implemented on campuses in North America<sup>26</sup>, and this was not simply the product of vulgar hooliganism. In 1969, Herbert Marcuse, one of the acknowledged intellectual leaders of the 1968 student rebellion, had written that:

The whole post-fascist period is one of clear and present danger. Consequently, true pacification requires the withdrawal of tolerance before the deed, at the stage of communication in word and picture. Such extreme suspension of the right of free speech is indeed justified only if the whole of our society is in extreme danger. I maintain that our society is in such an emergency situation, and that it has become the normal state of affairs<sup>27</sup>.

It was the rise in my own university of Leeds, as well as at institutions such as the London School of Economics, of what was quite rightly described at the time as left-wing fascism which made me begin to refer to myself as a man of the right, and to argue that it was Orwell's insistence on the need for free speech, together with his thesis that the left had betrayed its trust in this matter, which had placed him most clearly on the right of the political spectrum during his life-time.

If the present tendency among erstwhile members of the left continues, and free speech recovers its central position as one of the defining values of the left, then this aspect of the case for seeing Orwell as a conservative thinker will begin to fade. In spite of the fact that there are few signs of a comparable change taking place on the question of the type of language used, the same will apply to his defence of clarity of expression, and the wheel will once again have come circle. For here again, as throughout this article, it is a question of definition, with Orwell coming to take up what is deemed to be a right-wing or conservative position only because the left which he had always tried to serve had betrayed it. Orwell's famous statement that "good prose is like a window pane" did not seem particularly right-wing or conservative in his life-time. Indeed, in so far as the conservative writers of his day tended to wrap their thought up in the curiously alembicated prose inherited from Coleridge and Hegel, it was the sign of a progressively-minded thinker to express his ideas as clearly as he possibly could. This is what Voltaire and Diderot had done in the eighteenth century, and a comparable appeal to clarity and empirical evidence had characterised David Hume when he wrote, in the concluding passage of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in 1740:

If we take in hand any volume; of divinity, or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No.

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<sup>24</sup> See p. 47 of the 1961 Dolphin books edition, New York, Doubleday.

<sup>25</sup> *CEJL*, IV, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> See especially Chapter 9 'Academic Licence' (New York: St Martin's Press, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Paul Johnson, *The Offshore Islanders* (London, 1974), p. 574.

Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact or existence?  
No. Commit it then to the flames. For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

The most iconoclastic and progressive English thinker of Orwell's day, Bertrand Russell wrote in the most pellucid prose, thus enabling his many critics at least to know what they were disagreeing with when they attacked him. In Orwell's own life-time, in contrast, and even more after his death, the situation changed. Deliberate obscurantism became feature of the left, leaving the field open to representatives of the conservative camp to make the same claim as they did on the issue of free speech: that clarity, like intellectual freedom, had become one of the values which they had the mission and privilege to defend. They, like Peel, had caught the Whigs bathing and run away with their clothes.

Significantly enough, Orwell's most memorable statement of the need for people to say what they meant in the clearest and simplest terms came in the passage in his "Politics and the English language", in 1946, in which he was attacking the left-wing writers of his day. It would, he said, be a great help both to them and their readers for them to translate a passage such as

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 and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement

by the terser phrase

I believe in killing your opponents when you can get good results by doing so<sup>28</sup>.

Although the political situation is very different, in that there are now no apologists for totalitarian régimes in the democratic west, matters have become even worse intellectually than they ever were in Orwell's day. The issues involved, it is true, have ceased to be obviously political ones. There is no sense in which the work of writers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault are going to justify sending people to the gulag archipelago. But there is a very good if rather worrying reason why a statement like Jacques Derrida's claim about metaphor, for example, that it is

the passage from one existent to another, or from one signified meaning to another, authorised by the initial submission of Being to the existent, the analogical displacement of Being to the existent, irremediably repressing discourse in its metaphysical state<sup>29</sup>

cannot be translated into terms as clear as the ones which Orwell used when he talked about the advantages of killing people. Derrida's claim does not mean anything, and is not meant to do so. The same is true of Foucault's sentence that

the function of enunciative analysis is not to awaken texts from their present sleep, and, by reciting the marks still legible on their surface, to rediscover the flash of their birth; on the contrary, its function is to follow them through their sleep, or rather to take up the related themes of sleep, oblivion and lost origin, and to discover what mode of existence may characterise statements, independently of their enunciation, in the density of time in which they are preserved, in which they are reactivated, and used, in which they are also — but this was not their original destiny — forgotten, and perhaps even destroyed<sup>30</sup>.

The reason why Derrida and Foucault write like this is not to express ideas which can be understood by other people, or applied in contexts apart than those in which they or their disciples are working. It is merely to show that they belong to the avant-garde of their day. Style, in a context such as this, has become the equivalent of the open-necked shirt by which

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<sup>28</sup> *CEJL*, IV, p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> See p. 27 of Alan Bass's translation of *L'Écriture et la différence* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>30</sup> See p. 123 of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).

the English intellectuals of Orwell's day showed that they had no time for bourgeois conventions, or the leather jacket whereby continental intellectuals proclaimed that their sympathies went to the members of the German proletariat who had been in the habit of wearing it in the 1920's to go to work. The words and syntax used by the structuralists and deconstructionists have become, to use an appropriately Barthesian comparison, a set of signs comparable to the swear words by which Hébert indicated in *Le Père Duchesne*, that he was on the side of the sans-culottes<sup>31</sup>.

Barthes himself made it clear why anyone wishing to be considered progressive should write in as obscure a way as possible when he argued in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* that

clarity is a purely rhetorical attribute, it is not a general quality of language, attainable at all times and all places, but merely the ideal appendix to a certain discourse, the one subjected to a permanent attempt to persuade. It is because the pre-bourgeoisie of the period of the monarchy, and the bourgeoisie of the post-revolutionary period, using the same kind of writing, have developed an essentialist mythology of men, that classical writing, one and universal, has given up all trembling in favour of an unbroken tissue of which each element represented a voice, that is to say radical elimination of every possible in language<sup>32</sup>.

This type of writing has another advantage apart from its convenience as a sign to be used to show that you are on the side of the anti-bourgeois angels, a member of the virtuous left rather than the wicked right. Whereas the sentences written by the apologists for Stalin could, eventually, be translated into clear and meaningful English, those of the Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and their followers cannot. It is consequently never possible to criticise the content of what they are saying, since any attempt to put it into comprehensible English — or into the French of the Voltaire whom Barthes so dislikes<sup>33</sup> — is met by the reply that this translation into the language of bourgeois empiricism is a gross travesty of their ideas. They consequently make themselves, at least in the view of their admirers, invulnerable to the comment which an English scientist once made about a new theory put forward by one of his colleagues: "This isn't right. It's not even wrong".

## IV

In the fifth fit of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, the Butcher and the Beaver get separated from the rest of the party, and find themselves in a dark and desolate valley. There, their earlier differences are forgotten, and their reconciliation described in a stanza which reads:

But the valley grew narrow, and narrower still,  
And the evening was darker and colder,  
Till, merely from nervousness, not from good will,  
They marched along shoulder to shoulder.

Ideologically, much the same reconciliation took place between the previously opposed forces of conservatism and liberalism under the threat of the totalitarianism which was such an inescapable feature of the political landscape in Orwell's life-time. Values such as freedom of speech and of intellectual inquiry, clarity of diction, patriotism, and a realistic appraisal of the need sometimes to fight in order to protect these values, came to be recognised by both conservatives and liberals as part of a world view which they shared. Emotionally, as I have suggested, Orwell was wrong to see himself as a member of the revolutionary left. He was, in contrast, a Tory, a man characterised by a nostalgia for the rural England of his boyhood, by an idealised vision of England, and a feeling of discomfort when faced by many aspects of the

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<sup>31</sup> See the opening passage of Barthes's *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris, 1953).

<sup>32</sup> My own translation of p. 43 of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Collection 'Points', Editions du Seuil, 1975).

<sup>33</sup> See his remarks in "Le dernier des écrivains heureux", *Essais Critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 94-101, in which he argues that Voltaire's readiness to tolerate all ideas is the worst forms of intolerance.

modern world. In that respect, Daphne Patai was right, just as she was to hint by the accusation of militarism at a certain hard-headedness which distinguished Orwell at one and the same time from what he called the pansy left and from the optimism about human nature which was still, during his life-time, a feature of political as well as intellectual liberalism. He was nevertheless in the best tradition of liberalism by his attachment to intellectual tolerance and clarity of expression, as well as by his constant sympathy with the underdog.

To use the reconciliation between conservatism and liberalism as a device for annexing Orwell to the conservative camp naturally involves a more sympathetic vision of conservatism than the one which led Ted Honderich to write that he had never found conservatives to be friends of civil liberties, and to claim that his study of the present British Conservative Party had led him to conclude “not only that Conservatives are selfish” but that they are “nothing else”<sup>34</sup>. If Orwell can be meaningfully looked upon as a conservative, it is partly for the reasons I have suggested: the reaction to his books, both from left-wing critics and conservative admirers, the effect which *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had on their readers, his often derogatory remarks about the left, his patriotism, his attachment to freedom of speech and clarity of expression. It was, I am the first to admit, a change in the left itself which made the later Orwell — objectively speaking, Comrades — seem so much the spokesman for a set of what had in effect become right-wing or conservative values. To study Orwell from this point of view is to see how thoroughly the left changed during his life-time, transforming itself from the supporter of clarity, freedom of speech and personal liberty to the point where Orwell, who never saw himself as anything but a man of the left, could write that it was “only after the Soviet régime became unmistakably totalitarian that English intellectuals, in large numbers, began to take an interest in it” and that James Burnham, “although the English intellectuals would repudiate him, is really voicing their secret wish: the wish to destroy the old, egalitarian version of socialism and usher in a hierarchical society in which the intellectual can at last get his hands on the whip”<sup>35</sup>.

There are also two further reasons why it seems justifiable to call Orwell a conservative rather than a liberal. By the time he became a political writer, the liberal tradition in England, like the Liberal Party itself, was in such a state of decline that it is hard to imagine so practically-minded a man as Orwell linking his fortunes with it. The second reason is that the word “liberal” has still not acquired in English the connotations which it has in French, where “libéral” immediately evokes the idea that political freedom cannot be separated from a free market economy. This is not an idea which the political developments of his day ever brought to Orwell’s attention. I clearly differ from my colleagues in wishing to suggest that he might have changed his mind on this issue, as he changed his mind on a number of others.

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<sup>34</sup> See p. 11 and p. 121 of his *Conservatism*, 1990 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> See *CEJL*, IV, 179. It will be recalled from Chapter X of *Animal Farm* that when Napoleon first appears walking on two legs, he carries a whip in his trotter.