

ORWELL BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

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The many contradictions found in Orwell's work¹ illuminate the nature of his own consciousness; a consciousness capable of important insights into the social and historical reality it confronts. Yet he was unable to carry these perceptions far enough or to establish the necessary connexions between them for any searching analysis or radical critique of that reality. For this reason, Orwell can be placed within a group of middle class intellectuals² who aligned themselves with some conception of Marxism in political and social thought and action. Like Orwell, brought up in a society and, more particularly, a social group which saw the individual as the primary factor in social development, they were obliged by the particular events of national and international history in their own time to recognize pressures on the individual generated by larger social forces. Not that Orwell felt an affinity with this group which he criticized for the facile and essentially personal nature of their political commitment. However, the model of society found in all these writers, Orwell included, rests on and implies the polarisation of the individual and environment. Orwell's basic dichotomy of the individual and everything outside him, and his conception of deterministic rather than dialectic relations between the two, influence not only his view of history but of social groups and society as a whole. It also led him to a profoundly misleading and rigid distinction between writing for the effect of the content

and writing for the effect of words; the distinction between the 'social' and the 'aesthetic'.

Within the framework offered by Marxism, society, and the place of literature within it, can be analysed in terms of a more adequate model. It recognizes a much more complex and multi-layered totality in which the relations between the elements take the form not, as in Orwell, of a one way determinism but of a complex dialectic. It is the English Marxist writer of this period Christopher Caudwell who attempted an analysis in these terms. His work can be used as an alternative viewpoint to Orwell's, which suggests that Orwell's contradictions and confusions can only become valuable in illuminating his experience and situation if we step outside his 'bourgeois individualistic' model of thought into a totalizing theory which eliminates the dichotomy between literature and other forms of life.

Orwell's distrust of theorizing ensures that we do not find in his work a thought-out aesthetic, but his own literary criticism and the essay he wrote retrospectively on his own motives and aims in writing³ are sufficient evidence of his thought, and its contradictions, on this subject. Thus his own criticism is concerned largely with the social and moral basis and implications of the work considered: he insists that "an artist is also a citizen and a human being,"⁴ and endorses the cartoonist's ridicule of the aesthete⁵. Yet he also suggests that the latter's conception of 'pure' literature is in fact the ideal and that the writer's social consciousness and purpose is a burdensome duty forced upon him by a particular historical situation⁶. This, along with his references to "the joy of mere

words", and "mere description" suggests his basic dualism of concerns seen as specifically 'aesthetic/literary' and specifically 'social', and that the relationship between the two was seen in terms of a one-way determinism. His position, therefore, is not unlike that of the Marxist writers whose model of society rests on and implies the same polarization of individual and environment and whose main criterion of literary judgement is its truth to life, discussed earlier. Again it is Caudwell who attempts to overcome this dualism and resolve the problems it raises by postulating a totality - here of social experience and artistic activity - in which dialectical relations operate between the elements.⁷

Consciousness, society, the whole world of social experience, the universe of reality, is generated by action, and by action is meant the tension between organism and environment, as a result of which both are changed and a new movement begins. This dynamic subject-object relation generates all social products - cities, ships, nations, religions, the cosmos, human values.

Bourgeois culture is incapable of producing an aesthetics for the same reason that most of its social products are unbeautiful. It is disintegrating, because it refuses to recognise the social process which is the generator of consciousness, emotion, thought, and of all products into which emotion and thought enter.

The contradictions in which Orwell's dualistic involve him become clear in the essay on Arthur Miller.⁸ Since, in 1940, the writer's commitment not to a particular political cause but to the broader social values of freedom and justice was seen as ineffective then his only course is to maintain his individual integrity in the face of hostile social developments by his fidelity to "the individual reaction", by "emotional sincerity."⁹ The artist can only protect his own individual inner life, he can no longer assert himself in or act upon the outer world.

It would appear that the frustration and withdrawal apparent in this essay do not result - or not solely - from Orwell's failure to commit himself politically, as contemporary Marxist critics might have argued¹⁰ but from his failure in the commitment to art. By this I mean that, just as he denied the power of consciousness to transcend its immediate environment to achieve a critical consciousness of social structures and create effective programmes of social change and political action, so he failed to see the ability of imagination to overcome, for example, class-barriers, and to project alternative structures and ways of living¹¹. His idea of a socially conscious art was to turn the novel into documentary. However, the naturalistic obsession with surface detail actually hinders real understanding and traps the consciousness in the very situation which is to be transcended and changed. Furthermore, Orwell's documentary obsession actually widens the gap between the observer and his subject - this is especially damaging in his account of the English working-class - because he does not see that a relationship is already set up between observer and observed - that they form a new totality which can be viewed critically from outside both. Orwell's pose

of the neutral observer bringing back objective reports thus leads him to deliberately avoid any relationship - and thus any full understanding - in relation to this subject. Yet, stepping outside this obsession with neutrality it does seem clear that his most valuable 'documentary' concerns the very subject in which he was most fully involved as an active participant - i.e. the Spanish Civil War. In *Homage to Catalonia* the real experience of the militiaman is more free of distortion than Orwell's accounts of the working-class at home not only because he *was* a militiaman but because the pose of objectivity is abandoned. In his fiction, Orwell's rejection of imaginative projection deprived him of the ability to describe other situations and experiences from a similar viewpoint.

Something must also be said about Orwell's most fundamental perception into the relations between the writer's activity and his social experience and attitudes: his insistence that aspects of prose style both reflect and - as it were, subliminally- enforce the writers attitudes to his reader, his subject and, more generally, to the whole social environment and structure. Rather than repeat Orwell's own arguments here¹² it is important to ask whether his own writing fulfils his demands for prose "like a window-pane."

This idea of prose itself develops from the obsession with some impossible objectivity and the failure to see the subject, the account and the intervening consciousness as part of a single whole. It is noticeable, in connection with this point, that Orwell often seems to consider the confession of his prejudices rather than any attempt to transcend them, as sufficient guarantee of objectivity¹³.

In considering Orwell's own prose we find spurious generalizations, a play with terms and use of loaded terms masquerading beneath a pretence of objectivity:

*A humanitarian is always a hypocrite¹⁴.
This is not fatalism, it is merely acceptance
of facts¹⁵.
The alienation of decent minds from Socialism¹⁶.*

What we might call 'public school' adjectives like "dreadful" and "repulsive" are frequently used without any sense of awareness of their implications; the tone is often rancorous and judgements supported not by reason but enforced by the writer's own emotion and emotional overtones of his words:

*The typical little bowler-hatted sneak
- Strube's 'little man - the little
docile cit who slips home by the six-
fifteen to a supper of cottage-pie
and stewed tinned pears¹⁷.*

And in his social thought so in his prose, Orwell is unable to escape the attitudes and practices he consciously criticizes in others. We can suggest furthermore that these techniques of his style are deployed to create - by illicit means - the community of opinion on which he could not depend but only will into existence.

Orwell's thought and writing revolves around a group of problems and contradictions which must remain on the level of

confusion and frustration so long as we remain within the terms he himself offers for dealing with them. The nature of these problems does seem to me to suggest that an explanation in terms of social class and class ideology is useful: we can look at Orwell in the terms offered by Caudwell in his discussion of the English Romantic poets:

*The doom of bourgeois poets in this epoch is precisely that the misery of the world, including their own special misery, will not let them rest, and yet the temper of the time forces them to support the class which causes it.*¹⁸

There is no question that Orwell himself did suffer these contradictions, yet they can only become illuminating – if not finally resolved – from a viewpoint outside and critical of the terms in which they were presented to and by the writer. This suggests the value of applying Marxist concepts and criteria – as one available alternative viewpoint – not only to Orwell but to a range of non-Marxist writers and, more generally, to a range of critical problems. It also suggests that literary criticism itself can become a valuable and legitimate tool of a wider critical activity without compromising its own special ends and interests since it is the very peculiarity of literature and art – functioning within a total social context – which enables it to project new ends and adopt fresh viewpoints, to escape forms of consciousness which in other fields appear as adequate or inescapable.¹⁹

NOTES

- ¹ These contradictions in the response to Orwell's work are discussed in detail by Raymond Williams, *Orwell* (Fontana, 1971), Ch. 7.
- ² Raymond Williams in his *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 279-80.
- ³ "Why I write" *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* vol. I (Secker & Warburg, 1968).
- ⁴ "Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dali," *Critical Essays*, p. 144.
- ⁵ Review of *The Novel Today* by Philip Henderson, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. I, pp. 256-57.
- ⁶ "Why I write" pp. 4-5:
"As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleter ."
- ⁷ Caudwell's essay on "Beauty: a Study in Bourgeois Aesthetics" *Further Studies*, pp. 112-13.
- ⁸ "Inside the Whale" *Inside the Whale and other essays*.
- ⁹ *Loc. cit.* pp. 45-6.

¹⁰ We have at this point to criticize the theory of political commitment and identification with the working class. Such commitment, we can suggest, is not the only effective means of ating critical consciousness and initiating change. Orwell is being critized here for his failure to escape from the dominant middle class ideology of his time.

¹¹ It is function of art which is emphasised by Jean Duvignaud in *The Sociology of Art* (Paladin, 1972) pp. 57-61.

¹² These are set out in "Politics and the English Language" and "The Prevention of Literature," in *Inside the Whale and other essays*, and in "why I write."

¹³ "Why I write," p. 7.

¹⁴ "Rudyard Kipling" *Critical Essays*.

¹⁵ *The Road to Wigon Pier*, p. 192.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 176.

¹⁷ *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 279 discusses Orwell's use of the adjective "little."

¹⁸ *Illusion and Reality*, p. 98.

¹⁹ This aspect of art is emphasised by Duvignaud, op. cit.. The parallel aspect of literary criticism is suggested by Perry

Anderson, "Components of the National Culture" *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action*. ed. Cockbuen & R. Blackburn (Penguin Books, 1969).