In any political argument of philosophical significance, everyone wants George Orwell
Connected with this was his honesty and his refusal to deny the obvious. In *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell wrote that “political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give solidity to pure wind.” Although he was not, in fact, entirely free of these vices himself, he has the reputation for being so. At any rate, he was far less inclined than others who wrote on the same subjects as he to disguise uncomfortable facts by means of euphemism or dialectical legerdemain. He never embraced lies as truth, or brutality as mercy.

Of course, his reputation beyond the purlieus of the Left now rests mainly on his two last books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They made him an honorary conservative, though in fact he was a conscript rather than a volunteer. His moral courage in exposing the evils of communism when the prestige of the Soviet Union among the leftist intelligentsia—and there was virtually no other—was at its height was very great, if not quite to be compared with that of dissidents under a totalitarian regime. Insofar as it is possible for an intellectual in a liberal democracy to be brave, Orwell was brave.

Perhaps the most genuine and moving encomia to him I ever heard were in Romania in the dark days just before the downfall of Ceausescu. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* circulated clandestinely, and several Romanians told me that they found it astonishing how an Englishman, who had never so much as set foot in a communist country, seemed to understand their own experience from the inside, as it were, and sometimes better than they understood it themselves, so that the meaning of their own experience became clearer to them as a result of reading him. And this they found immensely consoling, the very opposite of Primo Levi’s terrible nightmare that after he was released from Auschwitz no one would listen to him or believe him because what he had to say was so utterly at variance with all previous human experience. Orwell’s book reassured the Romanians to whom I spoke that, the Iron Curtain notwithstanding, they were not alone, and also that the political conditions under which they were living were highly abnormal and therefore, however apparently durable, historically temporary. Dismal and pessimistic as the book may have seemed to a reader in the west, it was read with immense joy in the east. Few authors have ever been loved and venerated as Orwell was loved and venerated by the people to whom I spoke in Romania.

Now, however, that Marxist Communism as a ruling doctrine has all but disappeared from the face of the earth (though its effects certainly live on), Orwell’s most celebrated books have lost some of their urgency. It is even possible that generations to come, historically uninformed and uninterested, will wonder what on earth they were all about. By then, of course, Newspeak will have become so deeply entrenched that no one will realize that he is talking it, for it is the fate of satire in the modern world to become prophecy.

Great writer as Orwell was, he is not beyond criticism—as I am sure he would have been the first to agree. He never encouraged anyone to turn him into a plaster saint, though his very
Abjuration of claims to sanctity is, paradoxically, one of the grounds for his canonization; this modesty should not obscure from us the fact that he was full of contradictions, his powers of analysis were very deficient, he often lacked the imagination to see the consequences of what he said, he accepted political clichés uncritically, notwithstanding his brilliant essay on that very subject, and though he made much of what he saw as the quintessentially English quality of *decency* (I don’t think anyone would make that mistake nowadays after half an hour in any English town or city), which he contrasted with the cruelty promoted by ideology, he was not himself entirely immune from the latter, at least in the abstract.

In 1946, he wrote, “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.” Let us look a little more closely at this famous claim, that itself has been more or less uncritically accepted. (When I mentioned to a mildly leftist retired schoolteacher that I intended to write an essay critical of Orwell’s views, he said, in the tone of one genuinely and painfully shocked, “But you accept that he was in favor of democratic socialism?”) I therefore apologize in advance for any upset that my heretical views may cause.

*Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is a widely admired book, but it is full of the most vicious sentiments (with, of course, humane ones as well). Indeed, the very opening passage is distinctly unpleasant. The first sentence reads:

In the Lenin Barracks in Barcelona, the day before I joined the militia, I saw an Italian militiaman standing in front of the officers’ table.

Orwell took an immediate shine to the Italian:

He was a tough-looking youth. . . . His peaked leather cap was pulled fiercely over one eye. . . . Something in his face deeply moved me.

What was it about it that so moved Orwell?

It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend. . . . There was both candour and ferocity in it; also the pathetic reverence that illiterate people have for their supposed superiors.

Do illiterate people reverence their supposed superiors, pathetically or otherwise? I have never noticed it, and I have had dealings with a lot of illiterates, but perhaps the nature of illiteracy has changed since Orwell’s day. In any case, one might have supposed that the type that Orwell describes, ready to commit murder and with a reverence for his superiors, was a rather dangerous
type. But Orwell says, “I have seldom seen anyone—any man, I mean—to whom I have taken such an immediate liking. . . . Queer, the affection you can feel for a stranger!”

Odd indeed, especially in such a case, as Orwell himself half-recognizes in the same paragraph. “I also knew that to retain my first impression of him I must not see him again.” In other words, he knew, really, that his romanticized first impression was likely to be destroyed by further acquaintance with the truth, and he wanted to avoid the truth.

Having extolled ferocity and potential murderousness, presumably at the service of a pathetic reverence of superiors, Orwell goes on to describe Barcelona as it struck him when he first arrived there.

It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Churches were here and there being systematically demolished by gangs of workmen. Every shop and every café had an inscription saying it had been collectivised; even the bootblacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red and black. . . . The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud.

Orwell also described the appearance of the people in the street:

In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no “well-dressed” people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls or some variant of the militia uniform.

What had happened, you might ask, to the “wealthy classes”?

I believed that things were as they appeared, that this really was a workers’ State and that the entire bourgeoisie had either fled, been killed, or voluntarily come over to the workers’ side.

What Orwell is describing is a totalitarian, completely politicized society, of which a Kim Il Sung might have approved. And so does Orwell:

There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I
recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.

In other words, he thought that this totalitarian society was an improvement on the messy compromises of liberal democracy. And in so thinking, it seems to me likely that he was guilty of precisely the dishonest self-hatred of which he later accuses British intellectuals: he has to suppress in himself the taste for the appurtenances of bourgeois life, such as cocktails and hot baths, for which he later admits that he so longs. That the disappearance of the bourgeoisie in Barcelona was only apparent and temporary was for him a matter of regret: obviously not enough of them had been killed.

I did not realize that great numbers of well-to-do bourgeois were simply lying low and disguising themselves as proletarians for the time being.

Orwell’s opinion that it is worth fighting for the destruction of churches is not the result of a sudden rush of blood to the head. The whole of his book is sewn with such crude sentiments. The fact that a village “church had long been used as a latrine” by militiamen was unworthy of his condemnation and seemed to him no worse than that the fields surrounding the village had been used for the same purpose; likewise, looting candles from churches not only failed to draw from him a condemnation, but even an awareness that there was even a moral question involved: likewise when a “church had been knocked about but was used as a military store.” The “but” surely indicates approval: at least the building was still of some, no doubt temporary, use.

In a cemetery, the crosses on tombstones “usually had been chipped off by some industrious atheist with a chisel.” Is “industrious” quite the word needed here? “To the Spanish people . . . the Church was a racket pure and simple.” To all the people, pure and simple? “Churches were wrecked and the priests driven out or killed”: the only regret that Orwell expresses is that it allowed Franco to represent himself to readers of the Daily Mail as “a patriot delivering his country from hordes of fiendish ‘Reds.’” But why the quotation marks? If it was not the Reds who drove out or killed the priests, who was it? The People, one and indivisible?

Orwell even exhibited a Taliban tendency:

For the first time since I had been in Barcelona I went to look at the Sagrada Familia. . . . Unlike most of the churches in Barcelona, it was not damaged during the Revolution—it was spared because of its “artistic value,” people said. I think the Anarchists showed bad taste in not blowing it up when they had the chance, though they did hang a red and black banner between its spires.

Incidentally, the fact that the Sagrada Familia was spared because of its artistic value proves that the other churches were not damaged collaterally, but by deliberate policy. And this was eight
years after Stalin had had the cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow blown up, so Orwell ought to have understood the meaning of such destruction. In this matter he was definitely on the side of Stalin—in his own words, pure and simple.

Just to make sure we get the point, Orwell states that “churches were pillaged everywhere as a matter of course, because it was perfectly well understood that the Spanish Church was part of the capitalist racket. In six months in Spain I saw only two undamaged churches, and until about July 1937 no churches were allowed to reopen and hold services.” Not much reflection here on freedom, tolerance, or the consequent accuracy of Franco’s propaganda, at least in this regard.

Another aspect of the struggle that Orwell describes, but does not see as morally problematical, is the use by the revolutionary militia of children as soldiers. He mentions it over and over again without attributing any deep significance to it.

Boys of fifteen were being brought up for enlistment by their parents, quite openly for the sake of the ten pesetas a day which was the militiaman’s wage; also for the sake of the bread which the militiamen received in plenty and could smuggle home to their parents.

Far from questioning the worth of a cause that could accept such a soldiery, Orwell says:

I defy anyone to be thrown as I was among the Spanish working class . . . and not be struck by their essential decency; above all, their straightforwardness and generosity.

It should be borne in mind that at this stage Orwell appeared to believe the power in the land to be wielded in an unmediated fashion, directly as it were, by the working class, and therefore what was done in its name was the same as what it did. So Orwell believes that accepting young peasant boys as mercenaries recruited by their parents is a manifestation of decency, straightforwardness, and generosity.

Again, this is no mere lapse on Orwell’s part:

quite half of the so-called men [in Orwell’s battalion] were children—but I mean literally children, of sixteen years old at the very most. Yet they were all happy and excited at the prospect of getting to the front at last.
So that’s all right then, except that “It seemed dreadful that the defenders of the Republic should be this mob of ragged children.” Seemed, Eric—I know not seemed. And “dreadful” isn’t quite the word either, implying as it does something ineluctable rather than chosen by authority.

The first casualty was a child:

We had just dumped our kits and were crawling out of the dug-out when there was another bang and one of the children of our company rushed back from the parapet with his face pouring blood. He had fired his rifle and had somehow managed to blow out the bolt; his scalp was torn to ribbons.

Of this incident, Orwell comments merely that “It was our first casualty, and, characteristically, self-inflicted.” Nothing else.

Orwell is generally an honest man and writer, but he is fully capable of special pleading, as in the following:

Here and there in the militia you came across children as young as eleven or twelve, usually refugees from Fascist territory who had been enlisted as militiamen as the easiest way of providing for them.

It was creditably honest of Orwell to mention their existence, but surely he cannot really have believed his explanation for their presence in the militia? They were given arms, too: for he remembers “one little brute” throwing a hand grenade for fun.

The only protest that Orwell utters against the employment of children in war is on the weakest, indeed almost morally imbecilic, of grounds:

Boys of this age ought never to be used in the front line, because they cannot stand the lack of sleep that is inseparable from trench warfare.

And this was highly inconvenient:

The wretched children of my section could only be roused by dragging them out of their dug-outs feet foremost, and as soon as your back was turned, they left their posts and slipped into shelter; or they would even, in spite of the frightful cold, lean up against the wall of the trench and fall asleep.

Not even the deaths of children at the front, thirty pages later in the book, made Orwell pause for
Twelve wretched children . . . were caught by the dawn and unable to escape. All day they had to lie there, with only tufts of grass for cover, the Fascists shooting at them every time they moved. By nightfall, seven were dead, then the other five managed to creep away in the darkness.

And the rest, as far as Orwell is concerned, is silence, apart from anger that the foreign Stalinists who support the Partido Socialista Unificado de Cataluña (psuc) at a distance should designate the child-soldiers of the anarcho-Trotskyite Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (poum) as fascist.

It is not a nice thing to see a Spanish boy of fifteen carried down the line on a stretcher, with a dazed white face looking out from among the blankets, and to think of the sleek persons in London and Paris who are writing pamphlets to prove that this boy is a Fascist in disguise.

Orwell thinks, and therefore writes, in some of the political clichés of his time. He is, of course, not worse in this respect than most writers, better in fact, but nonetheless he accepts certain propositions uncritically, among them that society is divisible into clearly defined classes with consequently easily defined and necessarily conflicting interests. We learn, for example, that “the working class believed in a revolution that had begun” and “if I [Orwell] had to use my rifle at all . . . I would use it on the side of the working class and not against them,” as if the working class were simply and indubitably a solid bloc of like-minded people and its interests self-evident. And Orwell says this despite the fact that he took part in the violence in Barcelona between three political groups, all of which claimed equally to represent (in the sole legitimate representative sense of the word) the working class, and all of which did, in fact, have working-class members. Moreover, he admits that “there must have been quantities of people, perhaps a majority of the inhabitants of Barcelona, who regarded the affair without a flicker of interest.” He also says that “There is already the beginning of a dangerous split in the world working-class movement,” a statement that takes it for granted that the workers of the world are, and ought to be, unifiable within a single organization. Orwell is a man whose vision is distorted by ideological spectacles, but who occasionally takes them off to see reality without the lenses. Of course, many of his contemporaries never took those spectacles off even for a moment, or only very much later, but he is capable, at times, of just as much dialectical claptrap as his opponents.

Orwell sometimes gives the impression of not remembering what he himself had written only a few pages before. Thus we learn that Fascism “forces [an alliance] upon the bourgeois and the worker,” and only a little later that “It is nonsense to talk of opposing Fascism by bourgeois ‘democracy.’ Bourgeois democracy is only another name for capitalism, and so is Fascism.” Actually, one might have supposed that, in the circumstances, Orwell saw some
virtues in what he calls “bourgeois ‘democracy,’” for he recognizes that in England, unlike in Spain even on the government side, one is safe from arbitrary arrest, no inconsiderable advantage to the average person. “It was no use [in Spain] hanging on to the English notion that you are safe so long as you keep the law,” and “I had the ineradicable English belief that ‘they’ cannot arrest you unless you have broken the law.”

Are English notions and the order that produced them worth defending, then? Not really: for he has earlier contrasted the revolutionary atmosphere (which “had attracted me deeply, but I made no attempt to understand it”) with “the hard-boiled cynical civilization of the English-speaking races.” Intellectual and moral frivolity could hardly go further.

Such economic ideas as Orwell expresses are of astonishing crudity, never rising above the level of the caricature of the bloated plutocrat. For him, capitalism is just “money-grubbing” and the “grab-motive,” nothing more. The very air of England is “money-tainted.” He never connects the shortages of even basic commodities in Spain with the expropriation of manufacturers and distributors. His utopia appears to be a permanent effervescence of revolutionary fervor, and never mind the filth or hunger it results in.

Orwell is a man whose vision is distorted by ideological spectacles, but who occasionally takes them off to see reality without the lenses.

At the same time, Orwell recognizes the superiority of the Fascists (he never calls them nationalists) in almost everything practical, and their equivalence in much that is moral, or rather immoral. It is not just that Orwell, being a fundamentally decent man blinded by abstract ideas, expresses sympathy for the Fascist soldier whom his unit has injured with a grenade and who screams in pain. “Poor wretch, poor wretch!” exclaims Orwell with feeling that does him credit. No; he excoriates the filth on his own side and contrasts it with the order on the other side. Here is what he says of his own side:

The whole barracks was in a state of filth and chaos to which the militia reduced every building they occupied. . . . In every corner you came across piles of smashed furniture, broken saddles . . . and decaying food. From my barrack-room alone a basketful of bread was thrown away at every meal. . . .
The splendid horses of the Spanish cavalry had been captured . . . and handed over to the militia, who, of course, were busy riding them to death.

At the front everyone stole . . . but the hospital people were always the worst.

In La Granja every room that was not in use had been turned into a latrine—a frightful shambles of smashed furniture and excrement.

Everywhere was the usual litter, the broken furniture and torn paper that seem to be the inevitable products of revolution.

Orwell tells us about things the Fascists did better. He learnt the bugle calls from the Fascists because they did them properly. Then he tells us about bullfights: “in Barcelona there were hardly any bullfights nowadays; for some reason all the best matadors were Fascists.” Then the treatment of buildings: “Sometimes it gave you a sneaking sympathy with the Fascist ex-owners to see the way the militia treated the buildings they had seized.”

It wasn’t even as if there was immense moral superiority on the revolutionary or government side. At Albucierre, when you “had inspected the row of holes in the wall—made by rifle volleys, various Fascists having been executed there”—you had exhausted its charms. (Orwell doesn’t wonder about the numbers involved, or the trial procedure before these executions. In his famous piece about a hanging in Burma, published in 1931, the condemned man had had an appeal to a higher court, suggesting that Orwell was as capable of employing double standards as anyone else.) The situation of Fascist and Loyalist troops was the same; all they wanted was food and warmth, “the meaningless bullets wandering across the empty valley.” “How the peasants must have cursed both armies!” “If they [the ambulances on the militia’s side] came too near the Fascists had a habit of shelling them—justifiably, for in modern war no one scruples to use an ambulance for carrying ammunition.” The jails on the Loyalist side were bad—worse than that described by Arthur Koestler in his *Spanish Testament*, for example. “[They] were flung into jail, and kept for eight days in a cell so full of people that nobody had room to lie down.” “[T]he police were adopting the trick (extensively used on both sides in this war) of seizing a man’s wife as a hostage.” “Obviously, there was no real popular movement in Franco’s rear.”

This is all very honest of Orwell, but it does make his enthusiasm for the revolution seem a little strange, and based on faith rather than reason. “In that community where no one was on the make, where there was a shortage of everything but no privilege . . . one got, perhaps, a crude forecast of what the opening stages of Socialism might be like . . . [The] Spaniards . . . with their innate decency . . . would make even the opening stages of Socialism tolerable.” This is nothing short of adolescent drivel.

But by far the worst aspect of *Homage to Catalonia* is its strong advocacy of totalitarianism. It is the literary equivalent of an urban myth that the book argues against the Stalinist deformation of
socialism, when the very opposite is much nearer the truth. Of course, Orwell does indeed object to
the Stalinist resort to lying on an industrial scale, but that is only a minor part of his objection to
Stalin’s policy in Spain. His real objection is that Stalin did not want the radical revolution—as
exemplified by the destruction of the church, the collectivization of the land, the nationalization of
all major industry, the elimination of the bourgeoisie, the prohibition of prostitution and the legal
profession, and the complete equalization of wages—to proceed, because he thought that a
popular front, in which liberal democrats would be taken into temporary partnership, would be
more effective in stopping Franco.

Orwell objected to Stalin’s policy because Stalin maintained that “we can’t afford to alienate the
peasants [in Spain] by forcing collectivization upon them,” whereas Orwell thought that the war
was lost unless it was turned into a true revolutionary war, which included such forced
collectivization. “It was easy,” he lamented, “to rally the wealthier peasants against the
collectivization policy.” There are no prizes for guessing, then, on whose side he would have been
on in the struggle against the so-called kulaks in the Soviet Union, and necessarily so: for kulaks
are money-grubbers, the air they breathe is money-tainted, and so forth.

It requires a kind of dimwittedness not to see that forced collectivization of land, nationalization of
industry, and the complete equalization of pay for work of all kinds, such as Orwell strongly
advocated, must have profound economic effects and consequences for freedom. Orwell objected
to Stalin—who, as supplier of arms to the loyalist side, was in a position to dictate policy—telling
the Spanish (according to Orwell) “Prevent revolution or you get no weapons.” He, Orwell,
wanted the totalitarian society that he had glimpsed in Barcelona. Therefore, in Spain at least,
Stalin was a freedom fighter by comparison with Orwell.

Well, you might say, we have all committed bêtises in our time, and so we have. But Orwell never
fully repudiated the ideas of Homage to Catalonia. Let us remember that in Why I Write, eight years
later, he said that every line he had written was in favor of democratic and against totalitarian
socialism. Either he forgot what he had written, didn’t understand its implications, stood by it, or
was re-writing his own history à la Stalin. He never really asked the right question, which is not
whether there could be democratic socialism (clearly there can be, in the one-man-one-vote sense,
just as there can be democratic racism or even participatory democratic genocide, as there was
most notably in Rwanda), but whether socialism is compatible with freedom.

Orwell wanted the totalitarian society that he had glimpsed in
Barcelona.

In The Lion and the Unicorn, written in 1940, he says that the war against Nazi Germany must be
a revolutionary war, or it will be lost (just as he had argued in Homage to Catalonia). He
demands the nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks, and major industries. “What is needed is that the ownership of all major industry shall be formally vested in the State, representing the common people.” He says that this will allow “the common people to feel . . . that the State is themselves.” Hadn’t we by then heard that somewhere before? Ownership will become management: there is not the faintest flicker of a recognition of the likely consequences, thanks to the operation of human nature.

Orwell does not demand the complete equalization of incomes this time, but only that no one should earn more than ten times more than anyone else. It does not occur to him that this control would give the agents of the state fairly drastic powers, with consequences for freedom. Rationing as brought about in the war, of course, will last for ever, because it is socially so just.

During and after the revolution, “It [the disembodied Revolution] will shoot traitors, but it will give them a solemn trial beforehand and occasionally it will acquit them. It will crush any open revolt promptly and cruelly,” thus making itself irreversible, “but it will interfere very little with the spoken and written word.” As Orwell delicately puts it, “At some point or other it may be necessary to use violence.”

As to money, that horrible tainted stuff that makes the air of England smell so awful, Orwell is at one with Ezra Pound: “The State simply calculates what goods will be needed and does its best to produce them. Production is only limited by the amount of labor and raw materials. Money, for internal purposes, ceases to be a mysterious all-powerful thing and becomes a sort of ration-tacket, issued in sufficient quantities to buy up such consumption goods as may be available at the moment.” Pound couldn’t have put it better himself: in fact, he put it in almost exactly the same way. The pair of them did not pause to wonder about the power granted to those who “simply calculated” what other people needed, and went about producing and distributing it. As late as 1944, reviewing F. A. von Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*, Orwell wrote, “A return to ‘free’ competition means for the great mass of the people a tyranny worse, because more irresponsible, than that of the state.” One pinches oneself: what, with Hitler and Stalin still alive, the Holocaust continuing, and the Gulag full to overflowing? In 1949, he allowed *Homage to Catalonia* to be reprinted without any note of retraction.

I admire Orwell greatly: I think he was a decent man (he himself liked decency), but he was blinded and stupefied by ideological abstractions born of self-hatred. He wrote a couple of very great books and other novels that are semi-classics. Some of his essays are among the best English prose of the twentieth century. His genuinely anti-totalitarian books did incomparably more good than *Homage to Catalonia* ever did harm. But I do not admire his uncritical admirers. Orwell it was who said of Dickens, in his great essay on that author, that he was a type hated with equal hatred by all those smelly little orthodoxies that are contending for our souls. Unfortunately, for quite a lot of his life, Orwell was a purveyor of some of those orthodoxies.
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