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# CORRESPONDENCE

George Orwell

*Malcolm Pittock*

I THOUGHT THAT PETER LOWE'S account of Orwell ('Englishness in a Time of Crisis')<sup>1</sup> did not do justice to the complexity of his case. For an understanding of Orwell's conventional patriotism during the Second World War, it is necessary to realise that it represented a break with the position he took immediately before it. In 1938 and 1939 Orwell was a member of the Independent Labour Party and, after a spell with POUM, in the Spanish Civil War he fought alongside other members of the ILP on the side of the Spanish republic. It is still not widely recognised that the ILP, though willing to fight fascism in Spain, was opposed to a war against Hitler since, like the Communist Party before its volte face when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, it regarded such a European war as one between two forms of capitalism. So until September 1939 Orwell stuck to the ILP line and even supported Chamberlain's accommodation with Hitler at Munich. When the war started, Orwell decided to support it and broke with the ILP which, led by James Maxton in Parliament, continued its opposition throughout the war. (At the ILP summer school in Bangor in 1941 or 1942, a panel from the Party was asked whether one was a better socialist if one went to prison as a conscientious objector or if one took part in the fighting : the panel came down on behalf of the conscientious objector. Both question and answer were recorded in *The New Leader* a week or two later.)

It is important to remember that *Coming Up for Air* was written and published during Orwell's ILP period and cannot be fully understood unless it is realised that it is an anti-war novel. Orwell's position was that if Britain fought in a war against Hitler it too would become a fascist state: the first adumbrations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are indeed to be found in *Coming Up for Air* ('But it isn't the war that matters, it's the after-war. The world we're going down to, the kind of hate-world, slogan-world. The coloured shirts, the barbed wire, the rubber truncheons. The secret cells

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Quarterly*, 38/3 (Sept. 2009), Special Issue: *After Modernism?*

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where the electric light burns night and day and detectives watch you while you sleep'). To read what Orwell wrote during the war one would never dream that it represented a significant departure from his pre-war position. While not suppressing his change of mind completely, he certainly did not go out of his way to draw attention to it. There was a touch of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* about his reticence.

It must be appreciated, too, that Orwell was not, until after the war, a democratic socialist but a revolutionary one. This is made clear in *Homage to Catalonia* and later in 'The Lion and the Unicorn', while in 'My Country Right or Left' he says: 'Only revolution can save England. I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood.' Broadly speaking his position (as Eliot and Wells recognised) was fundamentally Trotskyist (though he could never bring himself to admit it) and, though there are certain ambiguities in *Animal Farm*, it is not a condemnation of revolution as such, as it is often presented as being, but of a revolution that went wrong. Its implicit message is similar to that at the end of Friedrich Wolf's play *Die Matrosen von Catarro* about the failure of the German Revolution in 1918–1919: 'Next time better.' It is still not sufficiently realised just how anti-Stalin Trotskyists were. *Stalin's Satellites in Eastern Europe*, which was published not long after the war ended, was not, as its title would suggest, written by a scholarly supporter of the Cold War but by Ygael Gluckstein, aka Tony Cliff, a leading figure in the International Socialist Party (neither Washington nor Moscow but international socialism), which later became the Socialist Workers Party, which is still very much with us. It is indeed possible to see the end of *Animal Farm*, where the pigs turn into men, as a political statement: Stalinist state capitalist imperialism is now no different from Western free market capitalist imperialism.

After the war, Orwell became a fairly orthodox Labour supporter and cold warrior. The distance he had travelled can be seen if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is compared with *Animal Farm*. The former novel is a repudiation, not merely of Stalinism, but of Trotskyism as well. Socialist revolution is represented here as the enemy of mankind itself. The regime has not been established by conquest (the nightmare of cold warriors) but by an authentic indigenous revolution conducted by Ing Soc. Paradoxically, however, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a masterpiece because in it Orwell creates the concept of hell more effectively than any previous writer, including some of the great names of European literature, had managed to do. Like no other of Orwell's writings it has an authenticity arising from guilt: the first thing that Winston Smith writes in the book he has purchased from Mr Charrington's shop is not about the regime, but about a sordid encounter with an elderly prostitute, which has nothing to do with the

hellish world established by Ing Soc at all, but which could have occurred anywhere at any time.

F. R. Leavis once remarked of Trevelyan's *English Social History* that 'it belongs with that higher advertising of England which has employed so many distinguished pens of late'. That is a reminder that much that was written in the war period was written with one eye on the war effort and should be considered with that in mind. For instance, Orwell's comparison of England to a family with the wrong members in control is not a serious comment on the nature of British society. Characteristic of such essentially propagandist sentimentality was the pretence that it was not the United Kingdom that was at war but just one part of it: England (to mention the actual belligerent might, of course, be an unwelcome reminder that conscription could not be introduced in Northern Ireland because many of the nationalist Northern Irish took their cue from Dublin, which was neutral). Nor was 'England' even the whole of England: it was identified with what remained of the rural South and south Midlands. In the grammar school I attended during the war there was a recitation competition for senior pupils for which they had to learn a famous purple passage from one of Stanley Baldwin's speeches: 'To me England is the country; and the country is England' (and he was not talking about the Pennines!). In my class we had a reader entitled *Our Heritage*, in which Hilaire Belloc described a day's mowing (not a characteristic activity of his, I should have thought). 'There'll always be an England while there's a country lane' was a line from a popular patriotic song (of which the writer or composer – I was never clear – later became ashamed), and Ivor Novello wrote a famous duet which took *The Waste Land* head-on with its most famous line: 'We'll gather lilacs in the Spring again and walk together down an English lane'. This selective sentimentalisation went back a long way: there was of course Rupert Brooke's 'If I should die think only this of me | That there's some corner of a foreign field | That is for ever England' from an earlier war.

One of the touches of genius in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that this kind of rural nostalgia becomes a trap to be manipulated by the all-seeing regime. Julia and Winston do not escape into the country: the regime follows them there. The nursery rhyme 'Oranges and Lemons' becomes not a memory of childhood but a threat of the violence that the regime will use towards dissidents: Mr Charrington is not a bumbling relic of a kinder past, but a secret policeman who has set the shop up to entrap Winston, knowing beforehand that he will be entrapped. It is a brilliant concept more profound than Orwell could have been fully aware of. Only the Christian millennialists seemed to have any awareness that ultimately *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stands the promise of Revelation on its head: the

regime possesses demonic powers – that is why there can be no escape from it – and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is about the reign of Antichrist for ever. It is not Satan that is cast into the pit, but Winston Smith ('He was falling backwards into enormous depths'). The cultural significance of the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation cannot be overestimated. It was a vision which impelled not only many Christians but many socialists as well, as can be seen from J. B. Priestley's play *They came to a City* and Arnold Wesker's *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*. But not only Christians and socialists: the US ideal of becoming 'the shining city on the hill' comes from the same source. So also does Blake's lyric from *Milton* retitled 'Jerusalem', which in Parry's stirring setting has become almost a second national anthem and whose wording is even reflected by F. R. Leavis in his *Nor Shall My Sword*. Orwell, in cancelling the very possibility of building the New Jerusalem by envisioning the creation of its direct opposite, generates phenomenal imaginative power. And that power is authentic, not factitious. By not finally identifying the regime with any possible version of political totalitarianism, Orwell showed he had an inkling of the profundity of the evil released by the bloodiest war in human history and what it had done to him, and could only register that by going outside conventional political analysis. In the war itself there had been a gulf between mawkish 'there'll always be an England' sentiment and the hideously inhuman bombing of German civilians, of which A. C. Grayling has recently reminded us (in *Among the Dead Cities*) and against which Bishop Bell protested at the time, and protested in vain. And yet it was that very mawkish sentimentality that encouraged and legitimated it. What had happened can be seen in Orwell himself: the humane Orwell of *Coming Up for Air* had been horrified by the very idea of aerial bombardment ('On every side people seemed to be rushing and screaming . . . But in among the broken crockery there was lying a leg. Just a leg, with a Wood-Milne rubber heel'). This is the result of course of a British bomb dropped accidentally. In the war, however, Orwell supported the terror bombing of German cities and was callously dismissive of those who had qualms about it. And that of course is the Orwell who, turning McCarthyite informer, gratuitously made lists of people whom he thought were communists or communist sympathisers and passed them through a third party to the authorities – something that would have been unthinkable for the pre-war Orwell. When this disturbing fact was made public many years later, the *Daily Telegraph* aptly commented: 'To some it was as if Winston Smith had willingly co-operated with the Thought Police in 1984.'

During and after the war far too much of Orwell's writing displays coarsely self-righteous insensitivity. But at the deepest level of his being he

couldn't deceive himself about what had happened as the result of the war – and had happened to him through the betrayal of his best self. And that is why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ultimately makes use of religious concepts and why his feeling of guilt should drag in its train the memory of more personal betrayals which ostensibly have nothing to do with the situation portrayed. The nightmare world that Orwell envisaged has, of course, not come to pass in the terms in which he envisioned it; but the fact that his key concepts have taken on a life of their own and are felt to illuminate the workings of our own society – 'doublethink' and 'newspeak', for example, nearly sixty years after Orwell coined them – shows that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not merely fantasy. And, of course, we all know what a 'doubleplusgood duckspeaker' is: we hear him or her all the time. And Orwell's prediction of a world that was characterised by perpetual war, if we include in that preparations for war, has proved alarmingly accurate.

Orwell was a far more interesting, complex and significant figure than he is usually taken to be.