

George Orwell as a Traditionalist

*But who will stand tonight,
Holding this other door against the press
Of brazen muscles? Who can conquer
wheels
Gigantically rolled with mass of iron
Against frail human fingers? Who can
quench
The white-hot fury of the tameless atoms
Bursting the secret jungle of their cells?*
—Donald Davidson,
"Fire On Belmont Street"

As the critics debate the purity of George Orwell's allegiance to "socialism," one remembers Will Rogers' comment when asked about his party preference: "I'm not a member of any organized political party. I'm a Democrat." People who seek to enroll Orwell posthumously as a good Labourite, or alternatively, to find his ghost dwelling in a right-wing closet, miss the point. In the essay "Writers and Leviathan" Orwell bid farewell to political orthodoxy, saying that "the acceptance of any political orthodoxy seems to be incompatible with literary integrity." Orwell had perhaps the most famous olfactory senses of any writer in the twentieth century, and when he sniffed out what he called "smelly little orthodoxies" he retreated. And yet,

had to close up shop. "He weakened their [the Left's] belief in their own ideology, made them ashamed of their clichés, left them intellectually more scrupulous and more defenseless." Orwell, again like Weaver, attacked the "god terms" of the age, concepts such as "science" and, especially, "progress," those all-pervasive ideas that, when invoked, usually represent a retreat from argument and a descent into a kind of technologically-inspired mysticism.

The belief that our civilization is decadent ("an old bitch gone in the teeth," Pound said) is not even a matter of debate for most important writers of this century. Orwell agreed with his contemporaries' judgment of decadence, yet he added to it his singular brand of pessimism, a dark mood which could surface even in an essay on "The Common Toad" (1944), in which he wrote that "every winter since 1940" had given the appearance, soon or late, of appearing permanent.

Perhaps one reason for the singularity of Orwell's pessimism was that he was one of the few significant modern authors who dealt directly with the political and economic realities of the century William

at another point, "have ended in barbed wire."

For a time Orwell would invoke the socialist credo whenever he despaired of political trends. At one point, speaking about disproportions between supply and demand in wartime, he said: "In a Socialist economy these problems do not exist. 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 coupon or ration-ticket, issued in sufficient quantities to buy up such consumption goods as may be available at the moment." Like most socialists, Orwell envisioned economic planning somewhat in the manner of bank robbers "divvying up" the loot or, more benignly, of three or four small boys who have found a quarter. Yet we also find him saying things like: "Even if we squeeze the rich out of existence, the mass of people must either consume less or produce more." Do we discover in such admissions an incipient capitalist budding up through the seemingly impenetrable compost heap of socialist rhetoric?

What saves Orwell from falling into the Fabianism of Sidney and Beatrice Webb is, on the one hand, his tough-minded rejection of the abstractions, jargon, and cant that generally accompany socialist thought and, on the other, his respect for what John Crowe Ransom called "the world's body": things as they are. There is a little Luddite in us all, in everyone who has never loved the computer or who has lost his punch card. Modern literature is not without what Karl Stern called the "romanticism of the spinning wheel," the idealization of the past; but it is also not without a striking, many-authored critique of the machine age. Orwell's disaffection with the machine started at least as early as his commitment to "democratic socialism," that is, about 1937, when he wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Many of the finest lines penned by this most quotable writer ("Big Brother Is Watching You") are in this work, commissioned by the Left Book Club. The book caused a great deal of embarrassment to the editors, Victor Gollancz, Harold Laski, and John Strachey. (Gollancz later refused to publish *Animal Farm* because he feared it would offend the Soviets.) *Wigan Pier* was issued with a cosmetic "Publisher's Note" by Gollancz, who sought to answer Orwell's hostile back-of-the-book comments about the condition of British socialism. The demurrals by the publisher have now a mainly comic interest. "There is an extraordinary passage in which Mr. Orwell seems to suggest that almost every So-

For socialists "the future is envisaged as an ever more rapid march of mechanical progress; machines to save work, machines to save thought, machines to save pain... the paradise of little fat men."

despite his hatred for the Blimps of the Right and despite his meager understanding of capitalism, Orwell was deeply conservative in his desire to preserve the essential texture of English life.

In his best writing (for example, in "Politics and the English Language" and the "England My England" section of *The Lion and the Unicorn*) Orwell is a traditionalist; the American writer he most reminds one of is Richard Weaver, disciple of the Nashville Agrarians, critic and admirer of the Southern American tradition, and rhetorician *extraordinaire*. Like Weaver, Orwell is a prickly-pear, in that any political movement which reaches for him is likely to end up with a barb or two in its hand. As Conor Cruise O'Brien has pointed out, with a few more friends like Orwell the Left would have

Stephen R. Maloney, who teaches English at the University of Georgia, contributed "A Dim View from the Penthouse" and "Of (Ms.)anthropes and Men" to these pages.

F. Buckley has called "the most odious on record": with the depressions, the totalitarian states, and the wars. Originally an idealistic young leftist, Orwell was horrified by the Stalinists' brutal liquidation of the Trotskyite forces in the Spanish Civil War, a massacre he chronicled in *Homage to Catalonia*. And in his review of Eugene Lyons' *Assignment in Utopia*, an early exposure of the Moscow purge trials, Orwell summarized the madhouse nature of modern totalitarian politics when he spoke of "some monstrous state trial at which people who have been in prison for months or years are suddenly dragged forth to make incredible confessions, while their children publish articles in the newspaper saying 'I repudiate my father as a Trotskyite serpent.'" Orwell's characteristic image of the thoroughly modernized political man is the zombie-like S.S. representative with "two blank discs instead of eyes," who carries a rubber truncheon in one hand, a bottle of castor oil in the other. Walt Whitman's "democratic vistas," he said

cialist is a crank." At another point Gollancz takes umbrage at one of Orwell's finest—and aptest—lines: "he even commits the curious indiscretion of referring to Russian commissars as 'half-gramophones, half-gangsters.'"

In *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell asks the ultimate question about the mechanized, industrialized, planned society of the future. Will not the antidote—socialism—designed to cure the illness—poverty and inequality—end up by killing the patient's spirit? Orwell excoriates the proponents of the Age of the Gadget. For the socialist, "the future is envisaged as an ever more rapid march of mechanical progress; machines to save work, machines to save thought, machines to save pain, hygiene, efficiency, organization... until you land up in the by now familiar Wellsian Utopia, aptly caricatured by Huxley in *Brave New World*, the paradise of little fat men." Orwell fears that the arrival of the socialist "paradise" will bring about the redistribution of wealth only at the cost of the elimination of the traditional virtues and strengths of society.

Unlike the Gollanczes and Stracheys, Orwell respected the poor enough to find human values, such as bravery, loyalty, and gratitude, emerging out of their difficult struggle for existence. Indeed, he wonders whether we should not "return to a simpler, harder, probably agricultural way of life." In the mechanized future, people will have more leisure, but for what purpose? "Science" will lengthen their lives, but will they lose a sense of meaning in existence?

Although he never denied his membership in the "lower-upper-middle-class," Orwell identified strongly with the British workingman, whose "half-pint of ale" Orwell considered healthier than the intellectual's "tea and toast." He had an almost mystical faith in the British people, especially in their capacity to pull together in time of war. Some of his statements about Britain recall the "sceptered isle" lyricism of Shakespeare. In "England Your England" Orwell says: "And above all it is *your* civilization, it is *you*. However much you hate it or laugh at it, you will never be happy away from it for any length of time.... Good or evil, it is yours, you belong to it, and this side of the grave you will never get away from the marks it has given you." He views the nation as an almost mystical network of spiritual membranes binding each to each; "in moments of supreme crisis the whole nation can suddenly draw together and act upon a species of instinct, really a code of conduct which is understood by almost everyone, though never formulated." His Anglophilia even extended to an admiration for Kipling, whom every "enlightened" person had been taught to "despise," to the older English detective stories ("Raffles and Miss Blandish"), and—the ultimate test—to cricket.

One of Orwell's versions of England under a state-planned economy ends up sounding like the gospel of socialism according to P.G. Wodehouse. In "A Na-

tion of Shopkeepers" British socialism is described thus: "It will not be doctrine.... It will leave anachronisms and loose ends everywhere, the judge in ridiculous horse-hair wig, and the lion and the unicorn on the soldier's cap-button."

The obverse of Orwell's Anglophilia was his bitterness toward the expatriate writers and other British intellectuals who scorned their homeland. The intelligentsia, he thought, had accomplished an internal emigration, severing themselves from the "common culture" of their land. Probably the only important writer who ever wrote in defense of English cookery, Orwell anathematized the intellectuals thus: "...the English intelligentsia are

Europeanized. They take their cookery from Paris and their ideas from Moscow." The typical British intellectual, he suggests at another point, would feel less embarrassed at being caught filching a few pence from a poor box than at being apprehended standing during "God Save the King."

In all of Orwell's condemnations of the intelligentsia (often portrayed as "squealing" or "shrieking," like the pigs in *Animal Farm*) and his Blimp-baiting, there is a strong tint of admiration in Orwell's writing for the Britain of the Empire. In his autobiographical work "Such, Such Were the Joys..." Orwell condemns "the sheer vulgar fatness of great wealth" possessed by Edwardian millionaires, but

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he immediately notes that "aristocratic elegance" can redeem it. During World War II he pronounced the English upper class to "be *morally* fairly sound" because of their willingness to fight and die for their country. In "Shooting an Elephant," an early story usually included in anthologies as a powerful anti-colonial work, which it is in part, he criticizes the British Raj only to remark that it was a good deal better than the newer empires which are succeeding it. Thus, Orwell's anti-capitalism partakes heavily of the British humanist's abhorrence of people in "trade," of the monied middle class as opposed to the landed aristocracy.

Orwell's Anglophilia proceeds in part

Deutscher and Irving Howe, criticize him for portraying the authoritarian Party in 1984 as permanent. After all, such critics argue, do not "all things pass away"? Yet history has borne out Orwell's fear that the modern autocracies, such as the Russian form, are more efficient and enduring than their totalitarian predecessors.

In 1984 O'Brien tells Winston Smith that the "Party" rules for the sake of Power itself. "We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power.... The object of power is power." Critics have puzzled over this; Isaac Deutscher accused Orwell of propounding a "mysticism of cruelty." Alex

on the Spanish War" Orwell had commented that "...what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written." Orwell's pictures in 1984 of "double-think" reflect not only his observation of the fate of history in Germany and the Soviet Union *but also* his own experience at the hands of British left-wing publishers. In a letter to Geoffrey Gorer he says, "The reason why so few people grasp what has happened in Spain is because of the Communist command of the press.... it is almost impossible to get anyone to print anything in contradiction."

Shortly before his death in 1950 Orwell was worrying that "Republican papers" in America would be making propaganda use of 1984; he was still, in effect, waving a socialist flag, but it was the size of a postage stamp by then. As a socialist, he had become the equivalent of the young policeman in Burma who had to shoot the elephant, lest he lose face with the natives. There is little doubt that the Orwell who campaigned against the use of abstractions in language had discovered that abstractions in politics were even more dangerous (and that they proceeded, in fact, from the same corrupt use of language).

The melancholy tone in Orwell's later writings grows not so much out of his sadness that socialism would not be established—in fact, the Attlee government was already proceeding with a dreary "socialization"—but out of a growing recognition that he did not really want to see socialism established. The shape of the future might well be a totalitarian one that would extirpate the "liberty and justice" that justified the present British system. On the other hand, the new system might be one that heightened present tendencies. The "dirty little secret of Socialism" has always been, notwithstanding its condemnation of the bourgeoisie, to make *everyone* middle-class—preferably "lower-upper-middle-class." At one point in "England Your England" Orwell speaks of the rise of "people of indeterminate social class." The new "culture" is "a rather restless, cultureless life, centering round tinned food, *Picture Post*, the radio and the internal combustion engine. It is a civilization in which children grow up with an intimate knowledge of magnetoes and in complete ignorance of the Bible." In other words, Orwell saw the rise of the new masses, unlike the old in that they had a full belly—and an empty head. (George W. Shea, Dean of the Liberal Arts College at Fordham, has recently described the "ideal" citizenry for a modern leviathan state; modern societies require, Shea sadly observes, "a predictable populace, firmly wedded to the notion of the normal type, easily analyzed statistically...." The modern state is "frightened by the eccentric and the idiosyncratic"; it needs a population that "believes that happiness is easily achieved.")

Not enough has been said in Orwell studies about his late writings, the jour-

The negativism of the Left is really only the growling and squealing of the powerless. Power corrupts, certainly, but so does powerlessness—and in much more pernicious ways.

from the aforementioned respect for (or at least, understanding of) the world's body. There is also an emotional overlay of "my country, rude or gracious" in his paeans to England. ("At bottom it is the same quality in the English character that repels the tourist and keeps out the invader.") Finally, Orwell's choice of England "as is" reflects his view of alternative possibilities as politically and culturally objectionable.

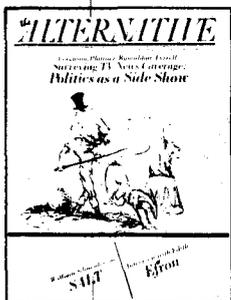
In "Hitler, Wells, and the World State" Orwell showed that the rationalist dreams of H.G. Wells and other progressivist thinkers had become the statist nightmares of Hitler and Stalin; the world was driven by nationalism, by blood lusts, and by racial myths to a much greater extent than the Wellsite could ever believe. (Wells felt Hitler's armies would collapse because Nazism was "unscientific" and "irrational.") Orwell, writing in the shadow of the fall of France, knew better. In fact, Hitler's example showed the moral neutrality of Science, for the Germans had mobilized modern techniques in the service of ancient doctrines.

In 1984 85% of the people are "Proles," working-class types who are neither members of the Outer Party (like Winston Smith, who combines the heroic past and the anonymous future in his name, and Julia, whose name suggests the lovely ladies of seventeenth-century sonnets) or the Inner Party (like O'Brien, the Inquisitor). Ever since the Spanish Civil War Orwell had been writing about the increasing tendency of the mass of men to become "passive victims," to become irrelevant. There is a suggestion, but only a dim one, that revolution in 1984, if it comes, will come from the Proles. In a sense, this is Orwell's last muted hurrah for the working class. Some of Orwell's early critics, such as Isaac

Zwerdling seems partially correct in finding the answer in Orwell's growing pessimism. However, the roots of an answer go back at least as far as *Wigan Pier* with its early criticism of the amoral technocrats who seem destined to inherit the mantle of leadership. The "Blimp," the "half-pay colonel with his bull neck and diminutive brain" assumed a great divorce between political power and intelligence. Yet between the Blimp and the highbrow there is a kinship much like that between Julie O'Grady and the Colonel's lady in Kipling's poem. The intellectual, "with his domed forehead and stalk-like neck" was often a younger son in the same family as the Blimp. Without any governmental or colonial patrimony, the highbrow expended his energy on left-wing causes (the Tories wouldn't have him) or penned precious articles for leftist reviews. Not having power, the intellectual came to worship it. ("A *New Statesman* reader worships Stalin," said Orwell.) The negativism of the Left is really only the growling and squealing of the powerless. Power corrupts, certainly, but so does powerlessness—and in more pernicious ways. Instability and amorality came to mark the Left. "Many intellectuals of the Left were flabbily pacifist up to 1935, shrieked for war against Germany in the years 1935-9, and then promptly cooled off when the war started."

Much of Orwell's celebrated pessimism stems from his implicit assumption that, with the aristocracy disappearing and Blimps collapsing, it is the turn of the "stalk-necks" to rule. These would be the new managers of the nation; in effect, they would be some of the same people who printed the Stalinist lies in the *New Statesman* and the *News Chronicle*, the people who had refused to print Orwell's articles on the Barcelona purges, and who had rejected his books. In "Looking Back

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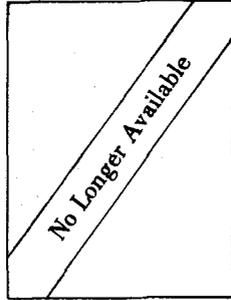
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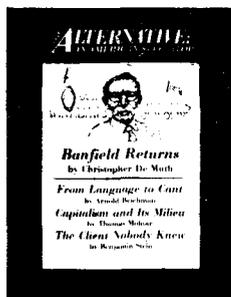
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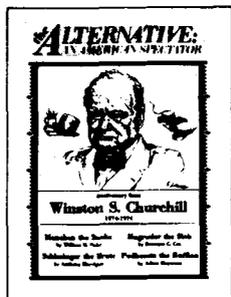
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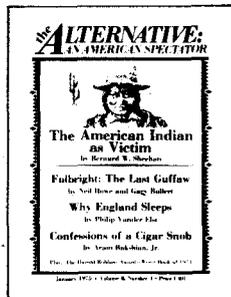
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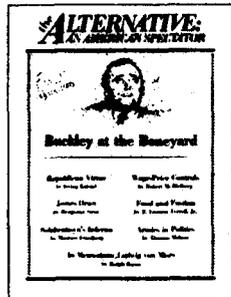
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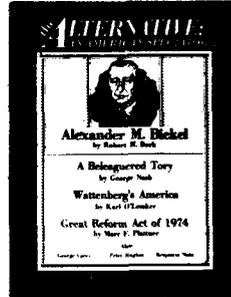
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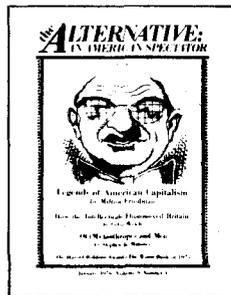
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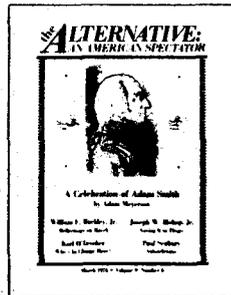
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nals and letters published only recently (1968). In his later years Orwell, who had earlier been somewhat ashamed of his Scottish heritage (his dropping the name Eric Blair had something to do with this) often returned to the Hebrides. Writing about his adopted son, Richard, Orwell envisioned a future for him neither as an intellectual nor as a technocrat of the new political orders. Writing to his friend T.R. Fyvel, Orwell said "If he [Richard] grew to be a farmer I should be pleased." (He did.) At one point Orwell, according to Richard Rees, tried to get V.S. Pritchett

(of all people!) to take up goat-farming. Writing three months before his death, Orwell suggested that his friend Julian Symons try to find a place to live in the "very agricultural" Hertfordshire. Almost the last fragment Orwell composed (just before the famous, "At 50, everyone has the face he deserves.") was this remark: "Greater and ever-increasing softness & luxuriousness of modern life."

Thus Orwell, who was singing the "Internationale" in 1937, ended up sounding much like Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, and some of the other

"Agrarians." Like all thinkers with a deep strain of traditionalism in their work, Orwell cannot be easily classified under our skimpy "Left-Right" dichotomy. His work represents an increasing dissatisfaction with the increasingly mechanical nature of modern life and politics. Proclaiming his socialism until the end, his good prose ("like a window-pane") nevertheless cut through the cant and the clichés of the time. This "fugitive from the camp of victory," as Rees called him, finally challenges all our orthodoxies. □

The
Nation's
Pulse



by
Peter J.
Rusthoven

Discrimination and the Changing Court

In the last thirty years, no single problem has proved more vexing and intractable to the United States Supreme Court than the general issue of discrimination based on race. The most controversial area of decision-making in this field has, of course, involved public school desegregation—a series of cases which began in 1954 with the Court's courageous (though technically inelegant) ruling against *de jure* segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and which now centers on the far more troublesome question of forced busing to "alleviate" what is often simple *de facto* segregation in income and housing patterns. But if the public school decisions have occupied most of the headlines and public attention, they have hardly been the only cases on the Court's overcrowded docket involving relations between blacks and whites. Three recent opinions—all handed down in June of this year—indicate that the problems of race continue to arise in a variety of legal settings, and continue to involve the nation's highest judicial panel in increasingly complex and intricate judgments with wide-ranging implications for the public and private life of the land.

In terms of their immediate substantive resolution, the results of two of these cases are somewhat encouraging, while that of the third is rather disturbing. The first decision, *Washington v. Davis*, basically involved a contention that the written personnel test administered to applicants for the District of Columbia police force was racially discriminatory in

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violation of the Constitution, solely because the percentage of blacks failing was significantly higher than that of whites. The Circuit Court of Appeals, in overruling a trial court decision permitting use of the test, held that lack of discriminatory intent in enactment and administration of the test was "irrelevant," that the "critical fact" was the higher black failure rate, and that this "disproportionate impact," standing alone, was sufficient to prove discrimination unless D.C. officials could affirmatively demonstrate that the test directly measured subsequent on-the-job performance.

The Supreme Court, however, refused to accept the argument that disproportionate impact necessarily proves the existence of discrimination. In a 7-2 opinion, the majority held that "the invidious quality of a law claimed to be racially discriminatory must ultimately be traced to a racially discriminatory purpose." Thus, the Court indicated that as far as Constitutional requirements are concerned, every official device for measuring an individual's ability to perform a job need not yield statistical results that correlate with overall black/white population percentages—a healthy development in an era when all too many of our scholars and commentators glibly and almost reflexively attribute all evidence of black social and economic disadvantage to "racism." Ironically, however, the Washington decision left untouched a number of earlier cases which rest not on the Constitution but on Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These latter decisions *do*, in essence, establish disproportionate racial impact of job testing as sufficient by itself to prove violation of the law, unless an

employer can affirmatively establish, in accord with complex and burdensome Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines, that the test is rooted in "business necessity." The Court's principled stand in *Washington* against the facile use of disproportionate impact as a shortcut for "proving" racism thus arrives in a murky context of ambiguous and at least marginally conflicting precedent, all of which suggests that the Court is still slowly feeling its way through the thicket of race, testing, and jobs.

The second encouraging recent decision is *McDonald v. Sante Fe Trail Transportation Co.*—although here, too, one's final reaction is somewhat mixed. *McDonald* involved a claim by two white employees, fired by a company for stealing from a shipment, that *they* had been discriminated against due to their race in violation of Title VII of the 1964 Act, since a black employee who had participated in the same theft had *not* been fired. The Court unanimously* decided that the 1964 Act prohibits discrimination against whites as well as blacks; Mr. Justice Marshall, the only black Justice in the nation's history, concluded in his opinion that the law "prohibits *all* racial discrimination in employment," regardless of the race of the complaining individual.

McDonald has its troubling aspects. One feels less than overwhelming sympathy for fired thieves who complain that not all thieves were fired. In addition, the case stands as another example of the federal government's extraordinarily heavy hand

*Two justices disagreed on the question of whether the Civil Rights Act of 1866 was also applicable to the case.