

George Orwell

The adjective which is often used to describe George Orwell and his writing is integrity. He was a committed person, an Englishman who fought in the Spanish Civil War against fascism. He was a humanist, but also a writer who was hinged to reality and historical experience. In *Homage to Catalonia*, he wrote of the repercussions of the Stalinist purges of 1936–1938 in Spain when other socialist writers adhered to the abstract and the ideal. Orwell is best known for *Animal Farm*, a satirical fable on the Russian Revolution, and for the warning of *1984*. He said a lot about the human condition; our dignity, our vulnerability, and our ominous potential for the abuse of power in a technological age.

George Orwell was the pen name of Eric Blair. He was born in 1903 in Imperial India to a lower middle-class family in the Civil Service. He attended boarding school in England at the age of eight (*Such, Such Were the Joys*) and then Eton. From this background, he remained throughout his life very sensitive to the problems of class. He served as a policeman in Burma for five years (*Burmese Days* and *Shooting an Elephant*) and found that he had no taste for authority or imperialism. His disillusionment with capitalism is seen in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a tour of northern industrial England during the depression.

He became a democratic socialist and this led to his dilemma. During the Spanish Civil War and with the German-Russian Pact, he saw clearly that collectivism, the socialist's hope for improving the lot of the common man, had also the potential to lead to totalitarianism.

Orwell did not abandon democratic socialism, but became the writer who most vividly defined the threat of the totalitarian state to personal freedom. This was the most important issue of his time. Orwell made clear that totalitarianism was a new phenomenon in that, in the name of ideology, it sought to suppress all conflicting sources of authority—church, state, law, culture, education, family and individual spiritual free-

dom. The ends justified the means. Arthur Koestler, in *Darkness at Noon*, had asserted that unless the means do justice to the ends that ideology is corrupted and indeed changed. Orwell simply stated that imposed ideology is but a thin veil for power for the sake of power. He felt that the totalitarian state was as great a threat to humanity as nuclear warfare.

In *1984*, Orwell explores the malleability of human nature. Marx held that man is only the product of the society in which he lives. In *1984*, Orwell creates a state which attempts through total control of society to change human nature and destroy the personal self. The character of Winston Smith represents cultural values and spiritual freedom and Julia represents instinct and sexual impulse. In the state of Big Brother, however, values and motivation can be inverted. Written on the Ministry of Truth were the three slogans of the Party:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

In the anti-utopian novel, technology has clearly outstripped moral development. In Huxley's *Brave New World*, social control was through genetic engineering and drugs. In *1984*, it was through brainwashing and terror.

In both *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Orwell emphasizes the importance of language and history. What is important to creating a personal self is culture and tradition; the boring necessities of work and civil duty, and the small pleasures of personal relationships and vegetable gardening.

Oppression begins with the distortion of the truth, therefore candor is one of the burdens of freedom. In *1984*, Newspeak and Doublethink destroy free thought and allow contradiction. History becomes what serves the state, for "who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."

In the 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language" Orwell wrote that "in our time, political speech and writing are large-

ly the defense of the indefensible. Things...can be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties...Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*." Orwell had "no capacity for illusion."

One of Orwell's enduring memories of the Spanish War was his inability to shoot an enemy soldier in the early dawn hours who was running along the top of the lines, half dressed, holding his pants up. He was clearly a fellow creature. Orwell makes little of this, but there seems to be the simple recognition that we're all in the same boat, and that without the belt of ideology, we all have to hold our pants up.

Orwell was not a religious person, but in 1944 he wrote, "the real problem is how to restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final." In *Looking Back on the Spanish War*, he wrote, "Privation and brute labour have to be abolished before the real problems of humanity can be tackled. The major problem of our time is the decay of the belief in personal immortality, and it cannot be dealt with while the average human being is either drudging like an ox or shivering in fear of the secret police." In his essay on Charles Dickens he speaks of a cultural unity based on the native decency of people who, although of very different types, can be called the common man. Orwell felt that we should help ameliorate the human condition by being decent to one another.

Recently, Shirley Letwin wrote *The Gentleman in Trollope*, which is a study of individuality and morality in the English character. The integrity of a gentleman's personality, she explains, depends on the coherence of his life, thoughts, and actions. His individuality is not in conflict with his ability to manage his life within a changing communal framework of rules and conventions. Isaiah Berlin wrote in *Russian Thinkers* of the Greek lines of poetry, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The analogy is

that the continental mind has tended toward monistic theories to explain the universe and life, whereas the English, in general, debunk grandiose schemes, see the diversity of human experience, and have a more pragmatic philosophy. It is, for example, the different perspectives of Shakespeare and Dante.

It is in this cultural context that we can best understand Orwell. He was a gentleman and a decent “common” man. Through reflective self-knowledge he valued truth and freedom and extended compassion to others. He was chronically ill with tuberculosis and was dying at the time he wrote *1984*. He was aware of what could be changed and what could not. Throughout his writing he urges us to accept the moral, economic, and political responsibilities of freedom, for he knew how easily freedom could be lost. Philip Rahv said it best when he described Orwell as not merely a friend of mankind but of man.