

Orwell for Catholics
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George Orwell is probably not much read by American Catholics. When he is (unavoidable doses of Animal Farm or Nineteen Eighty-Four at school, perhaps) it's not likely to be with the thought that his work might nourish the reader's Catholic or American identity. This isn't surprising. Orwell had a vestigial affection for the rites and buildings of the Church of England, but was otherwise opposed to almost everything about Christianity as he understood it. And among the many groups he considered the enemy and for which he had little but vituperation, Catholics and Americans figure largely, though usually separately. You can't, then, if you're an American Catholic, read Orwell for the nostalgic Anglophiliac Catholic thrills you might get from Evelyn Waugh, or for the voyeuristic shudders you might hope for from Graham Greene. Instead, you'll get from Orwell insults for being a crass, uncultured, violent American with imperialist tendencies, and for being a member of a doctrinaire church closely allied to the principal fascist movements of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, American Catholics have much to learn from reading Orwell now.

"George Orwell" was the invention of Eric Blair, a "lower-upper-middle class" Englishman as he liked to describe himself (the precision and the interest in the particulars of class definition are typical), who was born in 1903 and died prematurely, from tuberculosis, in 1950. Blair transformed himself into Orwell in the early 1930s as part of his attempt to become a man who earned his bread by writing. It was a painful and difficult transformation, but by the mid-1930s Blair had effectively vanished into Orwell, who was much more than a pen-name. And it is only as Orwell that Blair is now remembered.

Blair was born in India to a minor servant of the British Raj and a woman of French middle-class ancestry. He returned to England with his mother and sister as a small boy, and was educated in the best preparatory and public schools (his public school was Eton, something of which he was not proud), but decided not to go to Oxford or Cambridge as would have been usual for someone with such a background. Instead, he joined the British Imperial Police in Burma, served there for five years, and returned to England in 1927, disgusted with empire and with his record as its servant, and determined to make a living as a writer. To this he devoted the rest of his life, and all his many other activities were subservient to it, undertaken usually to provide him with copy. He fought for almost a year (1936-37) in the Spanish Civil War for the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista), a broadly Trotskyist group with anarchist elements, opposed by both the orthodox Communist resistance to Franco, and, of course, by Franco's own quasi-fascist revolutionary party. He served in the Home Guard in England for several years during World War II, already by then a sick man; worked briefly for the BBC; and died at the age of 46. By the time of his death, he was a widely-sought commentator on politics and literature, holding an almost unique place in the political life of that time as what he called a "democratic socialist," which meant, roughly, someone opposed to totalitarianism in all its forms (fascist and communist) and supportive of the oppressed against the oppressors wherever he found them.

So much for the life. It's the work and its afterlife that counts. In his decision to become a man who made his living by writing he was successful, but only just. In the 21 years between 1928 and 1949, he published nine substantial books (six novels and three works of reportage), a number of other pamphlets and collections

of essays, and a very large quantity of occasional journalism. This is a respectable but not a prodigious output. Assembled into the Complete Works, a scholarly edition completed only in 1998, the Orwell oeuvre fills twenty substantial volumes. But he was not a literary success during his lifetime. Most of his books sold modestly or worse, and he said of himself that throughout the 1930s he sweated to publish 150,000 words a year for an income of £3 a week. This was barely sufficient to support a single man, perhaps the equivalent of about \$300 a week in today's dollars. Things began to change only during the last few years of his life, when his penultimate novel, Animal Farm, began to sell in large numbers, and his last one, Nineteen Eighty-Four, promised to sell in still larger ones. He did not live to see prosperity.

If, as I advocate, you do read (or re-read) Orwell, you ought not do so expecting great or even competent novels. The novels are, as novels, mostly bad and never better than mildly interesting. Orwell knew this, and often lamented his lack of skill as a novelist. The first four novels have Orwell-surrogates, barely disguised, as their protagonists, which shows his lack of interest in working to develop fictional character. They are clumsily plotted, sometimes so much so that they barely hang together. And they show undigested and incompatible literary influences (Joyce, Kipling, Maugham) whose yield is a *mélange* of prose styles often puzzlingly juxtaposed.

Burmese Days (1935), drawn from Orwell's years there, is a melodrama of empire's decay, featuring alcoholism, obsession, and suicide. A Clergyman's Daughter (1935) comprises scenes so disparate (country vicarage life, hop-picking in Kent, the desperation of the poor in London, the iniquities of English education) that Orwell scarcely seems to have bothered to stitch them together, and his efforts to do so leave embarrassingly visible seams. Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936) is an extended rant about class, money, and literature, drawing heavily from George Gissing and in every literary way inferior to its models; its protagonist, Gordon Comstock, is among the most unsympathetic literary figures ever created, and such liveliness as he has is because his unpleasantnesses are very like Orwell's own. The best novel as a novel is Coming Up For Air (1939), which is coherently plotted, speaks in a single, affecting voice -- that of a restless lower-middle-class insurance agent on the eve of World War II who attempts and fails to recover his lost, golden, pre-World-War-I childhood -- and is a moving evocation of nostalgia, decay, loss, and anticipated totalitarian violence. And the last two novels, Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four, are, respectively, a fable and a tract, and thus not really novels at all.

So much for the novels. They're failures as such, but this doesn't mean they're not worth reading. Quite the contrary. They are often affecting, they contain much precise observation of the particulars of the lives of the poor and suffering, and they are often disturbingly direct in their rendering of illness, filth, decay, and death. They are fueled, too, by anger that poverty is what it is (one of Orwell's best essays on this theme is called "How the Poor Die"), that violence is so common and so casual, and that the beauties of the natural order, to which Orwell was very alive, are so frequently and easily transformed into the smouldering slag-heaps of an industrial civilization. But these virtues are exactly those found in more concentrated form in the non-fiction: Down and Out in Paris and London (1933 -- this was Orwell's first book) describes what it was like to live on nothing a year in those cities in the early 1930s; The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) reports on the condition of the working and unemployed poor in the industrialized cities of northern England; and Homage to Catalonia (1938) describes the experience of fighting in Spain. What Orwell does in these books, and in many essays and newspaper columns on similar topics, is what anthropologists came later to call participant-observation. His is not a theoretical

analysis or a distanced description; it is a detailed and precise literary depiction of what he had himself seen and suffered while living with those about whom he wrote.

Recent works such as Barbara Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed have Orwell as their principal tutelary deity; and it must be said that he does it much better than she, and better than just about anyone else who's attempted it since his time. Orwell's deepest scorn is reserved for those who theorize about these matters without observing them closely. In this camp he included what he liked to call, strikingly to contemporary ears, the "pansy left" (Spender, Auden, et al.), and the hard-line Stalinist theorists who, as he saw it, offered a merely doctrinal analysis of the condition of the oppressed.

Orwell's principal literary virtue, then, is as an angrily prophetic and precise observer of the particulars of poverty and oppression. The novels should be read principally for this, as should the non-fiction. He came eventually, in "Why I Write" (1946), to advocate a prose that would be like a window-pane, a prose, that is, which would do nothing other than show to the reader what is there without embellishments that obscure -- and, he came to think, all embellishments obscure. There is no such prose as this, of course, and even if there were its writer would have to take care to arrange what it framed, which objects it would show; but the regulative idea that there should be such a prose had entirely salutary effects on Orwell's style. By the late 1930s he was writing with a clarity, unpretentiousness, and directness rarely matched in English since.

Observing the virtues of such prose is among the reasons Catholics should read Orwell, for it is essential to Catholic belief that there is an order of things, a way things are, and that both language and thought can approach, asymptotically, an accurate depiction of that order. Orwell's prose shows what happens if you take that conviction seriously. But this is not the most important lesson to be drawn for Catholics from a re-reading of Orwell. Much more important is what can be learned from his approach to the political, an approach that has been often misunderstood by his interpreters and about whose value and meaning there has been only conflict since his death.

Orwell's work has, since that early death, been successful and lucrative to a degree he almost certainly did not anticipate and that would have made him acutely uneasy. All his nine major books remain in print in English, in both cheap paperback and expensive hardcover editions, and the last two have sold in the tens of millions, been translated into dozens of languages, filmed (astonishingly badly, twice in the case of Nineteen Eighty-Four), and canonized as required reading for schoolchildren in England and the US. All his occasional work is now in print in the Complete Works, and goodly parts of it have been so since 1968, when a four-volume selection was published (it, too, remains in print). At least three of his essays have attained classic status and are widely anthologized: "A Hanging" (1931); "Shooting an Elephant" (1936); "Politics and the English Language" (1946); and a fourth, "Such, Such, Were the Joys" (written probably in 1947, but not published until 1968 because of libel worries), though less widely read, is generally acknowledged even by Orwell-haters (there are many) to be among the best things written on the horrors of the English educational system. The essay was written at the same time that Orwell was planning Nineteen Eighty-Four, and most who read the essay and the book agree that life with Big Brother in Oceania sounds a lot better than life in St. Cyprian's prep school.

But the afterlife of Orwell's own work is only a small part of the story. Beginning before his death, and ebbing and flowing ever since, there has been a flood of secondary literature -- biographies, studies, impassioned refutations, exposés, hagiographies, and so on. One high water-mark of excitement was reached, naturally enough, in 1984; another was in 2003, for the centennial celebrations of

Orwell's birth. Between 2000 and 2004 there appeared in English no fewer than four biographies, three full-dress (by Jeffrey Myers, Gordon Bowker, and D. J. Taylor -- Taylor's is much the best of these, penetrating in its literary analysis, lively in its prose, and interested neither in canonizing nor trashing its subject), and one polemical short life (by Scott Lucas). Also in the last five years there have been defenses of Orwell by Christopher Hitchens (Why Orwell Matters, 2002) and John Newsinger (Orwell's Politics, 1999), and a hatchet-job by Scott Lucas (Betrayal of Dissent, 2004). There are also two very useful volumes by John Rodden of a more politically dispassionate sort which provide the most information about the struggles for Orwell's legacy. No doubt there's more that I've missed.

The first upshot of all this activity is that a great deal is now known about the details of Orwell's life in all its aspects, and that probably not much more remains to be uncovered. If you read, as I did in preparing to write this essay, Myers, Bowker, Taylor, and Lucas on the life, you'll know more about Orwell's psyche (self-tormenting), finances (always rocky, sometimes desperate), sexual interests (women, obsessively, but with special interests in prostitutes), carpentry (yes, carpentry, enthusiastically undertaken but badly executed), taste in clothes (hairy neckties, filthy tweed jackets), gastronomic preferences (puddings figure largely), obsessive fears (rats), olfactory likes and dislikes (fecal smells are an object of fascination) and ascetical tendencies (he'd choose physical hardship over physical comfort whenever possible) than likely even he could have told you. Orwell's is now among the best-documented twentieth-century literary lives. But the second upshot is that there is little agreement on how to interpret his work, and that the divisions about this have become more rancorous and impassioned with time, not less.

Most prominent among these divisions of opinion about Orwell's significance is that among socialists. For orthodox Marxists, and most especially for the supporters of Russian communism in the 1930s, Orwell was a traitor to the socialist cause, someone "objectively" (to use the Marxist cant of the period) supportive of fascism. This claim began to be made in 1937, as soon as Orwell began to publish about the Spanish Civil War, and has continued to be made until now. A peculiarly slippery and intense form of it can be seen in the treatment given to Orwell by the (late) British Marxist Raymond Williams in 1971, in his short and very widely read critical study of him; a more crass form of it is to hand in Scott Lucas' recent books. And the claim that Orwell was objectively pro-fascist was made and continues to be made even though Orwell himself was utterly consistent in opposing fascism in his writing and his life: he went to Spain to fight against Franco; he understood German and Italian fascism to be tyrannical in both theory and practice, and repeatedly argued that position in published work; and (at least from 1935 onwards) he advocated a re-ordering of English social and political life on socialist lines -- his clearest statement about this is in The Lion and the Unicorn (1941).

But none of this cut any ice with the English or Spanish Stalinist left of the 1930s. For them, Orwell's exposé (in Homage to Catalonia and other essays of the period) of the divisions on the left in the Spanish conflict, and especially his critique of attempts by the Russian-sponsored Spanish communists to eliminate by violence other left groups opposing Franco (including the Trotskyist POUM for which he had fought), sufficed to show his complicity with fascism. Orwell argued that if the Spanish left had not been so internecinely violent Franco could have been defeated; his opponents argued that anyone who criticized Russia (and Stalin) was thereby contributing to pan-European fascist victory by undermining the only force capable of defeating the European fascist powers.

Orwell's socialist opponents appealed to Marxist doctrine to criticize him, just as his supporters on the right after his death (the film version of Animal Farm was in part CIA-financed, and US groups on the far right such as the John Birch Society

were remorseless promoters of Nineteen Eighty-Four -- these were allies and promoters Orwell would have found unbearable) appealed to capitalist doctrine to claim him as their own. Orwell, by contrast, consistently refused to justify or oppose tyranny, totalitarianism, and political or economic oppression by appeal to doctrine. Indeed, he refused, for good theoretical reasons, to develop or deploy a systematic political doctrine of any sort. When he saw, in Barcelona in 1937, Spanish workers being shot by communists because they were (or were thought to be) Trotskyist or anarchist, he objected with indignation to what seemed to him a fundamental offense against human dignity and decency, an offense compounded by the fact that it was done in the name of a doctrine nominally supportive of those -- the workers -- being shot. The roots of Orwell's suspicion of systematic political and economic doctrines -- "smelly little orthodoxies" he liked to call them, whether of right or left -- lie in his Spanish experiences of 1936-37, and in the vilification by the European left that he consistently received afterward.

A similar non-doctrinal stance can be seen in Orwell's writings about the poor in England and France. He objects to the sufferings and indignities of miners in Wigan, factory-workers in Sheffield, plongeurs in Paris, and the homeless in London because he thinks those sufferings offensive to human decency and evidence of profound injustice. He does not object to them on the basis of Marxist views about the decay of capitalism that such sufferings represent. For these views he had a scorn exceeded only by that directed at the British middle- and upper-class blindness to the condition of the poor; or, on the part of those who acknowledged it, attempts to justify it by the claim that the lower orders, being subhuman, do not suffer from deprivation in the same way that the upper classes would in similar situations. Orwell had been inoculated against views of this latter sort by his time in Burma, where he had heard, ad nauseam, servants of the British empire make such claims about the Burmese. His discussion (in Wigan Pier) of the middle-class view that the lower orders smell, and not just because they don't wash, is of classic relevance here; it will raise echoes in American minds of home-grown racist rhetoric from the same period. Orwell's fundamental critical vocabulary for objecting to human suffering is that of decency and justice; it is not a theorized or systematic vocabulary, and he consistently opposed attempts to turn it into one. Seeing why he refused theory will show why the Marxist critique of Orwell's socialism as romantic, nostalgic, individualist, and objectively pro-fascist has no purchase on him; it will also show why Catholics ought to pay attention to Orwell, for Orwell's non-doctrinal denunciations of indecency and oppression deploy, often explicitly, three fundamental convictions, each of which resonates deeply with Catholicism and certainly has something to teach Catholics in thrall to over-theorized political convictions.

First, there is the conviction that there is a natural moral order whose fundamental contours are evident to those whose perceptions and consciences have not been malformed -- or, as Orwell would prefer to say, to those whose ordinary decency is still in place. Second, there is the conviction that tyrannical oppression, whether of one by many, many by one, or many by many, is a paradigmatic offence against the natural moral order. Third, there is the conviction that a principal cause of the dissolution of ordinary decency is the deformation of language and thought to accord with the demands of a doctrinal system -- with, that is, the attempt to ascend further up the ladder of theory than is appropriate to the case.

On the first conviction: Orwell thinks there is a natural moral order that obtains in the human sphere (social, economic, political, interpersonal) as well as in the non-human. Careful, precise description (prose like a window pane) of phenomena in any of these orders will often show, Orwell thinks, which phenomena are as they should be and which are not; which are harmoniously ordered and which

are more-or-less disordered. The modifier 'often' in the preceding sentence is important. Although Orwell does not argue the point, all the examples he uses suggest that he expects appropriate reactions to careful depiction only in certain kinds of case, most often those that involve evident violence or suffering. In such cases, theory is superfluous if vision is undistorted; and if vision is distorted theory (doctrinal system) is both useless and dangerous. The kinds of case he has in mind will become clearer if we consider some examples.

In a newspaper column written in 1940, Orwell recalled his first experience of Asia in 1922, when his ship docked at Colombo in Sri Lanka (he was on his way to take up his police post in Burma). He wrote:

... the usual swarm of coolies had come aboard to deal with the luggage. Some policemen, including a white sergeant, were superintending them. One of the coolies had got hold of a long tin uniform-case and was carrying it so clumsily as to endanger people's heads. Someone cursed at him for his carelessness. The police sergeant looked round, saw what the man was doing, and caught him a terrific kick on the bottom that sent him staggering across the deck.

Orwell goes on to comment that the white spectators approved, and that they did so because the person doing the kicking was white and the one being kicked was black. Orwell engages in no theoretical argument about the evils of racism. He simply depicts, and by depicting convicts of moral malformation those who do not share his judgment that what he depicts is disordered and ought to be resisted.

A second example. In the novel Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Orwell describes his protagonist's reaction to a suggestion from the girl he's gotten pregnant that she might have an abortion, and that it can be done for only £5:

That pulled him up. For the first time he grasped, with the only kind of knowledge that matters, what they were really talking about. The words "a baby" took on a new significance. They did not mean any longer a mere abstract disaster, they meant a bud of flesh, a bit of himself, down there in her belly, alive and growing. His eyes met hers. They had a strange moment of sympathy such as they had never had before. For a moment he did feel that in some mysterious way they were one flesh. Though they were feet apart he felt as though they were joined together -- as though some invisible living cord stretched from her entrails to his. He knew then that it was a dreadful thing they were contemplating -- a blasphemy, if that word had any meaning.

As the nature of the phenomenon, the suggested abortion, becomes clear to Gordon Comstock, the novel's anti-hero, his response follows naturally and spontaneously. He sees clearly and reacts properly. No theory is needed. If he didn't see, argument about abortion's evils would be of no use.

A third example. In Wigan Pier, Orwell gives a lengthy (too long to quote) and vivid description of the poor scavenging for tiny pieces of coal on smouldering slag-heaps, desperate for combustible offscourings from the coal-mines which they might use to heat their homes. The scavenging is dangerous, for it requires the jumping of trains bringing new slag to the heaps; loss of limb and sometimes life results. The picture is one of human beings dehumanized, maimed, and killed by economic necessity. It is also one of unredeemed and unredeemable ugliness, of a landscape despoiled and defiled. This last point connects it to a fourth and last example. In Coming Up For Air, Orwell contrasts his protagonist's memories of the English

countryside on the eve of the First World War with its reality on the eve of the Second. A favorite fishing-pool has become a rubbish dump full of tin cans; a stretch of the Thames that used to harbor herons and alders has become a wasteland of "rowing-boats, canoes, punts, motor-launches, full of young fools with next to nothing on, all of them screaming and shouting and most of them with a gramophone aboard."

Justificatory doctrinal arguments could be advanced in each of these cases. The coolie, it might be said, needs to be kicked in order that the benefits brought to Asia by the British Empire be maintained; and Orwell's thought about empire is subtle enough to recognize that it did bring benefits. The abortion might be needed in order that the hero be able to realize his dreams of becoming a poet without being forced into the clutches of the capitalist money-god by the necessities of supporting a wife and child (the novel ends with him doing just that). The inability of the poor to earn enough to heat their homes might be justified (by a Marxist) as a transitional phase in the decay of capitalism, or (by a capitalist) as a transitional phase in the process of industrialization, eventually to be remedied by increased efficiency by way of improved technology. And the despoliation of the English countryside, it might be said, is incidental to the leisure needs of the new middle classes, needs that only an élitist would deny. But in Orwell's mind, these would be justifications that obscure what everybody really knows, which is that these things are wrong, revoltingly offensive to the natural order. Coolies are not there to be kicked; babies are not there to be killed; people are not there to be forced into near-starvation by industrialization; meadows and moorlands are not there to be turned into slag-heaps; and so on. The appeal to doctrine, to economic or political systems of thought, may blunt revulsion and disgust at these things; but it can do so only by deforming the consciences and perceptions of those who engage in it. Ordinary, decent people, Orwell thinks, know better, and they only cease to know better when corrupted by doctrinal systems.

So much for Orwell's first fundamental conviction. The second is that tyrannical oppression is a paradigmatic offence against the natural order. This is the subject of most of his work. He depicts economic tyranny in Down and Out in Paris and London and Wigan Pier, and, remorselessly, political tyranny in virtually every essay and book. Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four are the classic documents, but the main themes are already there (though the rhetoric is very different) in Burmese Days and the early essays about empire. All Orwell's depictions of tyranny's systematic and theoretically-justified violence -- the policeman's boot on the coolie's behind, the hangings and beatings in colonial Burma, the shootings and bombings in Spain and later everywhere in Europe, the mass deportations, killings, and show-trials in Stalin's Russia, the camps and the gas-chambers in Hitler's Germany, the boot stamping on a human face forever -- are in the service of this conviction. He does not propose a solution: to do so would require excursions into theory that, for the most part, he is opposed to taking. Rather, he depicts and is indignant. He intends that those who read his depictions will be likewise indignant; and, as he clearly understood, the greatest opposition to his depictions would come from those in thrall to systematic theoretical positions that had deformed them into justifying what he depicted.

Orwell's third fundamental conviction is that a principal cause of the dissolution of the ordinary decency that would permit clarity of vision and response to offences against the natural order is the deformation of language and thought to accord with the demands of a doctrinal system. An essential document here is "Politics and the English Language," but almost equally important is the essay "Why I Write." Systems provide distance, thought Orwell, by means of a technical language that obscures the reality of what they pretend to discuss. Marxist doctrine justifies

horrors by appeal to historical inevitability; whiggish apologists for empire justify horrors by appeal to the white man's burden and (also) historical inevitability; the English middle classes justify economic horrors by appeal to a theorized and thoroughly ontologized understanding of the nature of the difference between social classes; and so on. All these theoretical positions (and Orwell of course includes Christianity among them) serve to avert the gaze from what's there, and a good index of the extent of such aversion can be found in the degree of abstraction with which social, political, and economic reality are described.

What Orwell offers by way of contrast to all this is a meliorist localism in politics and economics. Observe closely what's going on around you; pay attention to its particulars and try to understand why they are what they are; you will often know when something you see or have proposed to you is offensive to the natural order; when you know this, protest it, remove your co-operation from it, refuse to listen to those who offer theoretical justifications of it, and do what you can to prevent it from continuing. This won't, thinks Orwell, solve all political and economic problems. Some can only be addressed at the theoretical level, and there will always be disagreements at that level. But the mode of approach he advocated and practised will, sometimes, provide a guide for political action, in our day as much as in his; and it will, more importantly, guard against the most seductive and dangerous political errors, most notably that of utopianism produced by excessive theorizing. In the kinds of cases that interest Orwell, he thinks that the clear eye can be more sure that what is recommended is wrong than the intellect can be of the upshot of any theoretical argument at a high level of abstraction. This conviction lies at the heart of on Orwellian epistemology. The proletariat, blessedly free of theory, are the repositories of vitality and hope, while the intellectual classes are sick, tempted always to atrocity.

It isn't necessary to endorse every element in Orwell's rejection of political theory in favor of human decency in order to see that he's saying something important. He doesn't mean that political theory is never necessary; he means that it should be modest, and that an important test of a particular polity's rightness is the extent to which the actions it requires or commends appear disgusting or indefensible to the untutored eye. This isn't an infallible test, but it is an important one, as can be seen by the care taken on the part of theorists-with-power, also known as politicians and statesmen, to obscure from the naïvely uncatechized the particulars of the horrors they think demanded by theory. Neither before, nor for a long time after the fact did the US government make clear to Americans the particulars of what was done at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; a good deal of trouble is taken in our present wars and adventures to prevent the uncatechized gaze from resting upon such particulars, too. And America is not alone in taking such care, and in working hard to catechize its population away from disgust and toward advocacy. Orwell, it is true, tends to underestimate the pleasure taken by the naïve in spectacles of violence, torture, and obscenity; he also certainly underestimates the importance of some theorizing in opening the naïve eye to horrors it would not otherwise have seen. But he is nonetheless correct that the ordinary use of political theory and rhetoric, in the US as much as anywhere else, is to make the obscenely violent seem acceptable. And he is right, as well, that this needs exposing by careful, precise, and cool acts of depiction.

Orwell's theoretically skeptical prophetic meliorism resonates with much in Catholicism. Catholics do think that there is a natural order, that its fundamentals are accessible to the naïve gaze, that these fundamentals include the profound impropriety of torture, oppression, tyranny, the killing of the innocent, and the despoliation of the natural order. Further, the Catholic Church has no political theory of its own; it does not identify any political order here below with the Kingdom of

God; and it is (in its best moments) properly skeptical of the idea that we can do any better than local meliorism in politics. Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum, for example, protests against utopianism and perfectionism in politics for reasons very like Orwell's. John Paul II's address to political and economic questions during the last quarter-century has also refused to identify any particular solution to the political question as the right one, but has instead concentrated on identifying instances of offense against natural law and natural right that belong to particular polities. His critique of the offenses that belong to Marxist polities is too well known to need recapitulation, and Orwell would have endorsed most of it. Perhaps more in need of emphasis is his critique of the offenses that belong to democracies: unbridled consumerism, commodification, an understanding of rights that embraces a right to kill the defenseless, and so on. This too Orwell would have endorsed.

It remains to ask, then, why Orwell was so largely vituperative about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. The most basic reason is that he thought Catholicism just another example of a doctrinal system that encouraged its adherents to excuse and perform horrible deeds. Like Marxism, in his view Catholic doctrine moves at a level of abstraction and pretended completeness that forces an aversion of the gaze from particulars, and encourages the malformation of that gaze. He draws this parallel explicitly in Wigan Pier. In addition to this general objection, like most of his generation in Europe, he saw the Catholic Church as an ally of fascism, and therefore complicitous with the very worst tyrannies. In Spain, for example, the Church supported Franco, in large part because of the violent anti-ecclesiasticism of his leftist opponents. This anti-ecclesiasticism included the burning of churches, the killing of priests, and the raping of nuns. Orwell was aware of this: he records instances of it in Homage to Catalonia, in a dispassionate way. He did not endorse such atrocities, but he also did not think they excused support of fascism. I don't here offer any opinion about the rights and wrongs of the Spanish Church's support of Franco in the 1930s and afterwards. I note it only to identify one source of Orwell's hostility to the Church.

But along with this anti-Catholicism there is something else. Orwell's substantive judgments as to which actions are indefensible, which actions ought always to be resisted because they are indecent or unjust or oppressive, are very often in accord with those of Catholic doctrine. His conscience was, by Catholic standards, surprisingly well-formed: he saw the evils of abortion, contraception, oppression, tyranny, and poverty. But there is more yet: there are sometimes glimmers of empathy. In Wigan Pier, Orwell writes favorably of those English working-class homes in which you can see "the crucifix on the wall and the Daily Worker on the table." He likes this because it bespeaks a non-doctrinaire approach to both socialism and Catholicism: neither is taken to exclude the other, and each can be pressed into the service of resisting the unacceptable. As soon as either becomes doctrinaire, though, as Catholicism does in the "silly-cleverness" of the English Catholic apologists of the time (Orwell has Chesterton and Belloc in mind), and as socialism does in the polysyllable-chewing of the popular socialist orators of the time ("human barrel-organ[s] shooting propaganda at you by the hour," as Orwell calls them in Coming Up For Air), then the game is lost. Then evils are justified, even encouraged, in the name of the system: Catholics become apologists for Hitler (Orwell reviewed the English version of Karl Adam's Spirit of Catholicism in 1932, and although Adam was not then known in England as a Nazi sympathizer, the criticisms that Orwell made of the book show that he sees that trajectory in Adam's work), socialists become apologists for Stalin, and violence, torture, concentration camps, and mass extermination spread without limit.

Non-doctrinaire Catholicism, then, can be a force for good in Orwell's view. But there is more even than this. Orwell was deeply aware that the world in which he

lived, the world of decaying and corrupting empire in Asia, of flourishing totalitarianisms in Europe, and of "sluttish" (a favorite word of his) commercial civilization in England and America, did not nurture the clear eye or the well-formed conscience. In 1935 he had the protagonist of Keep The Aspidistra Flying say that if you reject the corruptions of the money-god, of sluttish commercialism, then you have only three options: suicide, socialism, or Catholicism. And in 1949, a few months before he died, he wrote to a friend that "the problem of the world is this. Can we get men to behave decently to each other if they no longer believe in God?" He was by that time skeptical that the answer could be yes. Of the three alternatives to sluttish commercialism he identified, socialism was the one he tried to embrace, but his version of it proved unacceptable to most socialists; Catholicism he could not manage; and suicide was, finally, the most attractive. He chose, against medical advice, to spend much of the last four years of his life on Jura, one of the most inhospitable of the Hebridean islands, to the detriment of his tuberculosis; and he worked himself to an earlier death than need have been his, again against medical advice.

Orwell is not a comfortable character to read or to read about. He was, from a Catholic point of view, a self-tortured pagan whose moral vision was unusually clear. From a reading or re-reading of him at the beginning of the third millennium Catholics can learn how easy it is to justify atrocity by misplaced theory, whether in politics or in ethics. Too many Catholics in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s permitted themselves to connive at or endorse atrocity because of the seductions of theory. Orwell reminds us of the first thing to do when you're faced with actions or recommendations to action malum in se: don't theorize: actively resist and speak out. He reminds us, too, that most of us have an uneasy grasp of theoretical argument, much more uneasy than our grasp upon our moral responses to what we are faced with. Can we, for example, be more sure that capitalism is a good than that sweatshop labor is an evil? More sure that national security requires pre-emptive war than that torturing prisoners is an evil? More sure that the fourteenth amendment to the US Constitution requires that restrictions on abortion be illegal than that abortion is an evil? Orwell would say not, and he is right.

Orwell's opposition to theory in politics and economics is also a useful reminder of argument's extraordinarily limited capacities to convince anyone of anything, and in this he aligns himself (though he would not have known it) with that great Catholic tradition of skepticism about this matter that runs from Augustine through Pascal to Newman. Newman once wrote: "When men understand what each other mean, they see, for the most part, that controversy is either superfluous or hopeless." This is a deeply Orwellian sentiment, and it is one that Catholic apologists of the present ought take to heart. Arguing with people whose consciences and perceptions are deeply malformed can do no good, for the difficulty isn't at the conceptual level. Argument about such matters as whether torture is always wrong, whether genocide is an acceptable instrument of foreign policy, whether state-authorized killing has justifications beyond the protection of the innocent, whether killing babies in utero is defensible, whether the Shoah occurred, and so on, is not only useless, however. It is also dangerous because it will typically seem to take seriously a corrupt standpoint. To argue, for example, with a holocaust-denier about the evidences for the holocaust's occurrence is already to give the position more credit than it deserves. Orwell's virtue is to see the power of language to depict and of thought to grasp the meaning of what is depicted, and to strive to use language in such a way that it more fully realizes that power.

This virtue is not much in evidence in American political or literary life today, and the passionate divisions among those on left and right trying to expropriate Orwell for their own almost all show precisely the kind of slavery to their own smelly

little political orthodoxies that Orwell encouraged us to see through. If we can see through them with a clear eye, we will see what he saw, which is the field of human history and human political effort as a potter's field, a field of blood. Every step we take is on ground from which the blood of the slaughtered seeps and oozes. That has not changed since Orwell's time, and American Catholics can benefit from paying close attention to his central lesson, which is that the one sure way to increase the flow of that blood is to think ourselves in possession of the means to stanch it. Acting on such a conviction is to sacrifice the present to an imaginary future, and it is among Orwell's principal virtues that he presses that truth upon us. It should not be a hard lesson for Catholics to learn, for it is written into the text of our tradition, too.

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