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Orwell: Liberty, Literature and the Issue of Censorship

Stephen Ingle

In this country intellectual cowardice is the worst enemy a writer or journalist has to face, and that fact does not seem to me to have had the discussion it deserves. ... At this moment what is demanded by the prevailing orthodoxy is an uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia. Everyone knows this, nearly everyone acts on it. Any serious criticism of the Soviet regime, any disclosure of facts which the Soviet government would prefer to keep hidden, is next door to unprintable. And this nation-wide conspiracy to flatter our ally takes place, curiously enough, against a background of genuine intellectual tolerance ... [It is] the kind of censorship that the English literary intelligentsia voluntarily impose upon themselves....¹

Despite this clear declaration of interest in the notion of censorship in the essay 'The Freedom of the Press,' since identified as a proposed preface to *Animal Farm*, George Orwell would have been intrigued to find himself included in a collection designed to explore any political concept, even something so close to his heart. Although, as Richard Rorty argued, Orwell's writing is a sure guide to an understanding of twentieth-century politics – and arguably twenty-first-century politics – he was not primarily a political thinker: conceptual analysis was not his forte. Orwell was first and foremost a writer and it was as a writer that he approached all aspects of politics, including individual liberty, truth telling and censorship.

He was concerned with censorship at two distinct but interconnected levels. The first level was an immediate concern: he found it impossible sometimes to get his own work published. This caused him to reflect on the nature of censorship in both totalitarian and liberal societies. The second was more general and indeed more substantive. It focused on the relationship

between 'truth telling' – the prime responsibility of any writer, he believed, but especially a novelist – and the nature of language itself. These two concerns come together most tellingly in Orwell's last and most widely read novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, though of course their origins can be traced back to earlier work. We shall explore each of these levels separately and then examine their interconnection.

Orwell's early writing offered an acerbic critique of British imperialism and of what he considered to be Britain's quasi-imperialist social structure. Nonetheless, he clashed with official state censorship only once, when in 1940 two detectives came to his cottage in Wallington from the public prosecutor's office to seize all the books he had received through the post. The detectives, he reported, were 'very nice about it' and the public prosecutor later wrote to him returning *Lady Chatterley's Lover* but not *Tropic of Cancer*.² Orwell subsequently made it clear that he did not oppose official censorship in principle, especially in time of war: he was willing to work within its confines when producing programmes for transmission to India in the Eastern Service of the BBC from 1941 to 1943. His letter of resignation states clearly that he was allowed 'very great latitude' in compiling his programmes and that he was never once required to 'say anything on air that I would not have said as a private individual'.³

What increasingly concerned Orwell, however, was what he identifies as voluntary censorship in the above quotation (101). He had no more trouble getting *Burmese Days* published in 1935 than any young author might, despite its explosive nature. But the publication of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the product of an empirical study of unemployment and poverty in Yorkshire and Lancashire, turned out to be more problematical. The manuscript comprised two separate sections – the first largely descriptive of what Orwell saw, the second an analysis of the shortcomings of British socialism. The publisher Victor Gollancz, who had commissioned Orwell's study, did his best to 'persuade' Orwell to drop the second half. He stood firm, however, and to Gollancz's chagrin, the published book drew a stream of protest from many on the left.

In a sense, voluntary censorship is a misleading description because, as Orwell acknowledges, the agent of this self-denial is not always or even usually an individual but an unofficial literary establishment, an intelligentsia that is both social and ideological. As Orwell came to maturity as a writer the prevailing orthodoxy of this intelligentsia was pro-Soviet socialism, an ideology that for obvious strategic reasons gained wide support after 1941 and Operation Barbarossa, but which had been highly influential for almost a decade before

then. In *Wigan Pier*, Orwell referred to two kinds of socialist whom he despised: the 'dull, empty windbags' (a category others might have labelled as ethical socialists) and the more scientific socialists, like George Bernard Shaw or Harold Laski, who have a 'hypertrophied sense of order' and who see socialism as a set of reforms that 'they', the clever ones, are going to impose upon 'them', the lower orders.⁴ While he views the first group with obvious distaste, the second group fills him with foreboding because of its 'strong tendency towards totalitarianism'.⁵ It is they who form the leftist intelligentsia with the power to invoke 'voluntary censorship' and they are generally in thrall to the Soviet Union. Shaw, for example, in answering criticisms about the Soviet Show Trials, declared that the revolutionary old guard who proved inadequate have to be pushed off the ladder with a rope around their necks. From before 1936, then, Orwell believed that his brand of socialism – democratic socialism – was under threat not just from fascism but from the pro-Soviet socialism championed by the Western intelligentsia. Though he clearly recognized the existence of this intelligentsia early in his writing career he failed initially to appreciate its increasingly hegemonic influence. To many observers, he was himself a member of that intelligentsia, if a rather idiosyncratic one.

What opened Orwell's eyes to the extent of that hegemonic influence was his experience in the Spanish Civil War, or more precisely his experience subsequently when he tried to publish his reflections on the war. Almost by accident, Orwell had joined and fought with the POUM brigade, a disparate group of Catalan trade unionists, anarchists and Trotskyites. He had acquired first-hand experience of the attempts of the Communist government, under Moscow's instructions, to eliminate POUM; indeed in Barcelona he came close to being eliminated himself. On his return to Britain he sought to expose Soviet duplicity in his writing. He turned – where else – to the socialist *New Statesman* and its editor Kingsley Martin. The latter refused an article and later a review by Orwell because they 'controverted the political policy of the paper'.⁶ But he offered to pay Orwell for the article all the same!

For Orwell this was no mere ideological dispute. He had seen 'the most terrible things' in Barcelona.⁷ What, above all, turned Orwell from hostility to Soviet communism into what Bowker calls a 'deep dyed loathing of it' was the death in Communist custody of the idealistic young Glaswegian Bob Smillie. Smillie, whom Orwell described as a 'brave and gifted boy' had fought with Orwell on the Aragon Front but was later seized and thrown into prison by the Communists where, according to Orwell, he was left to die 'like a neglected animal' – a fate that might well have overtaken Orwell himself had he not

engineered a successful escape from Barcelona.⁸ Orwell found outlets for his writing but not the ones he wanted or indeed felt entitled to expect. He was vilified by British Communists like Harry Pollitt, who had never forgiven him for *Wigan Pier* and who called him a disillusioned bourgeois with no grasp of political reality and who certainly should not be writing about politics. Orwell might have expected this; but the fact that the majority of the left-wing establishment sided with this position came as a shock. Indeed his publisher Victor Gollancz, after initial enthusiasm, made it clear to him that he would not publish the book Orwell had begun to write; it would, he said, harm the struggle against fascism. When eventually *Homage to Catalonia* was published by Warburg, there was an initial print run of only 1,500, of which more than half remained unsold until after Orwell's death. Orwell was convinced that Gollancz and his allies were taking all steps to prevent the book's success, such as pressuring their friends in the press not to review it.

The existence of something referred to as 'the establishment' is sometimes dismissed as a conspiracy theory but Orwell believed, and not without reason, in the existence of a fellow-travelling publishing establishment which found his writing unhelpful to the cause. When the USSR was obliged to join the war as an ally, his anti-Stalin views were deemed unhelpful – unpatriotic even – to a wider establishment. While the war continued, Orwell failed completely to find a publisher for his masterpiece *Animal Farm* – a book he himself described as 'murder from the Communist point of view'.⁹ One originally supportive publisher, Jonathan Cape, decided against publication after receiving representations from the Ministry of Information that Cape would be 'highly ill-advised to publish [*Animal Farm*] at the present time' (98). Had the book been a generalized attack on dictatorship and not one so clearly aimed at Stalin and the USSR, there would have been no problems. Orwell failed to secure a publisher for what is arguably the greatest work of satire in the English language since *Gulliver's Travels*. It was even turned down by an American publisher, ostensibly because there was no market in the USA for animal stories. Three days after the Japanese surrender on 17 August, *Animal Farm* was finally published by Secker and Warburg.

Orwell was surely right to see himself as a victim of the 'prevailing orthodoxy' of uncritical admiration for the USSR. When he railed against the ensuing censorship, when he argued that liberty meant the 'right to tell people what they do not want to hear' (107), he was clear that the opponent of liberty in Western societies was not so much the state (except in times of crisis) or indeed the 'common people' but rather the intellectuals who seek to deny freedom 'for the other fellow', as he paraphrased Rosa Luxemburg in the 'Freedom of the Press'

essay (103). Perhaps he was wrong here: though prior to 1941 it was indeed the pro-Soviet intelligentsia that tried to silence him, the state clearly colluded with them between 1941 and 1945. Moreover, evidence that the working class was supportive of Orwell's notion of individual liberty is also hard to come by.

It is easy to understand why Orwell should define liberty as the right to tell people what they do not want to hear. This takes us back to the beginning: Orwell was first and last a writer and not a political thinker. Any form of political commitment that caused a writer to say, for ideological reasons, things he did not truly believe was a form of censorship. While it can be argued that all writers are politically committed – even those who make a show of detachment are the ‘tacit supporters’ of the prevailing political system – it clearly makes no sense at all to think of writers as equally committed.¹⁰ Having said that, nobody surely would consider Orwell to have been engaged in anything but what Sartre called *littérature engagée*. He acknowledged as much himself in his essay ‘Why I Write’, in which he elucidates his motives for writing: sheer egoism and aesthetic enthusiasm need no comment, but historical impulse and political purpose are a different matter. He expresses a desire to ‘see things as they are, to find out true facts and to store them up for posterity’. He wishes to push the world in a different direction, to ‘alter other people’s ideas of the kind of society that they should strive after’.¹¹ How can Orwell square his ambition to discover and store up ‘true’ facts with a desire to alter people’s ideas by taking sides? How can he avoid the kind of censorship imposed by the ‘smelly little orthodoxies’ to which some writers self-subscribe and which Orwell claimed to despise? After all, as one critic pointed out, ‘*Homage to Catalonia* is about as unbiased a piece of history as an account of the English Civil War by one of John Lilburne’s Levellers’.¹² It is clear that distinguishing self-censorship (choosing to subscribe to an ideological position) and simple bias – the habits of our eyes – is not easy, but it can be done.

What distinguishes a writer from a political thinker surely is precisely the relationship of each to reality. The political thinker tries to examine reality through an ideological prism whereas the task of the writer is to examine reality through experience. Orwell conceded that *Homage to Catalonia* gave a partisan perspective to the events he was writing about, but he resolutely claimed nevertheless to have recorded his own experiences as truthfully as possible. This was the duty of the writer. The reason that Orwell is generally regarded as a writer of integrity, a writer who did not opt for a self-denying ideological framework, is that he wrote what he thought was the truth: as Lionel Trilling pithily observed, Orwell *was* what he wrote.¹³ For Orwell, this

experiential truth equated to a truth beyond relativism, in fact to objective truth. Not everybody would follow him to this conclusion but it is important to bear in mind that this was what Orwell thought.

It is not surprising then to discover in Orwell's last and best-known book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that Winston Smith's first act of rebellion was to write. And it is no coincidence that the moment that he makes his first diary entry he recognizes that he is doomed. The writer is the natural enemy of the totalitarian state and its censorship, because in creating an account of experiential reality he is taking on the whole apparatus of the Ministry of Truth, indeed its whole rationale. Even in modern liberal states the importance of creating a party line is seen to be crucial. How much more thorough is the Ministry of Truth, which not only spins the party line as Big Brother develops it but immediately amends all historical records to show that this had always been the party line. Truth is too important to be left to the individual.

Orwell's championing of the individual as guardian of the truth is only half of the story.¹⁴ When O'Brien taunts that the 'truth' of the individual is not more than the delusion of the lunatic he is expressing crudely the fears of Dostoevsky's Inquisitor: there is one truth or there is no truth. When Winston declares that 'reality' reveals itself to the undeceived intelligence – if you know that two plus two equals four then you have a grasp on it – he is going beyond Orwell's original claim for the writer, that he faithfully records facts as he sees them, for posterity. But this implies a whole social process through which a private truth finally becomes a public one. This important social process is absent in Oceania because there is no public sphere outside of the state through which 'the truth' can be captured and sustained.

Nevertheless, O'Brien cannot allow even the individual writer of a diary freedom of expression. All modes of thought must be censored and the party apparatus is hard at work developing a means of censorship so comprehensive as to render such thought impossible: Newspeak. In purging the vocabulary relating to everyday life and inventing a language for politics the state seeks to control thinking. The express function of words in Newspeak was 'not so much to express meanings as to destroy them'.¹⁵ Orwell provides an example. The entire world of sexual desire and activity is encompassed by two Newspeak words: *goodsex*, which is based on chastity and sex within marriage specifically for procreation (until such time as reproduction can be engineered and the orgasm abolished) and *sexcrime*, which covers all other sexual activities from normal intercourse practised for its own sake through to child molestation via rape, adultery, masturbation and so on. The Party believes that since all these

illegitimate forms of sexual activity are described by only one word, each will eventually be recognized as equally reprehensible and anti-social. The immediate objective of those working on the shrinking and regulating of vocabulary is to render heresy, especially heretical writing, simply impossible. This is surely the ultimate form of censorship.

We can take some comfort from the sheer enormity and complexity of this task but we would be foolish to overlook the attempt to manipulate political behaviour through 'vocabulary censorship' that is prevalent within liberal democracies in today's world. Orwell used the term 'duckspeak' to denote words without meaning, words used actually to disguise meaning, words that act as symbols for the cognoscenti while leaving ordinary people floundering in ignorance. The best examples of duckspeak, perhaps inevitably, come from the military. We are familiar with phrases such as friendly fire, collateral damage, or ambient non-combatants (for civilians) but less familiar perhaps is the Pentagon's description of peace as permanent pre-hostility. The phrase 'extraordinary rendition' offers a perfect example of duckspeak. Who could guess that it referred to the sending of suspected terrorists overseas to be tortured? The official misappropriation of language is meant to inhibit debate; it is a form of censorship towards which writers like Orwell would be especially sensitive.¹⁶

Orwell's hatred of censorship was personal. We have seen how a pro-Soviet intelligentsia in liberal Britain sought to restrict his access to publication. This was not official state censorship but unofficial censorship by an intellectual and social elite, and Orwell felt it was all the more difficult to combat for that reason. We then considered Orwell's attack on state-sponsored censorship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and his more general concern with the destruction of vocabulary and language. Orwell saw the task of the writer as being to tell the truth, by which he meant presenting accurately one's experience and not adapting it for ideological reasons. He worried deeply about censorship, official and unofficial, and he worried about the insidious manipulation of the basic rules of language by the state, and indeed by corporate institutions. Orwell's own writing, in which aesthetic integrity is suffused with political integrity, stands as a lasting rebuttal of institutional censorship, both official and social, and censorship through lies and obfuscation. More than sixty years after his death Orwell remains a champion of individual liberty, a beacon of truth-telling, and an enemy to the death of all forms of censorship.