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April 25, 1999

Prof. George Gerbner  
Annenberg School of Communication  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA  
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*Rep e-mail  
6/12/99*

Dear Prof. Gerbner:

Some time ago I heard a broadcast (or a rebroadcast) on public radio of a speech you made at Carleton College in Northfield, MN. I listened intently and agreed with a good deal of what you said.

However, in the question period, which might have been abbreviated for broadcast, you were asked a question concerning George Orwell. Your answer, as I recall, was that he was nothing more than a red-baiter; and you added Aldous Huxley to your list. I was somewhat taken aback by your dismissive, almost reflex reaction to the name of George Orwell since I am familiar with his work and that of his biographers. My first thought was that you said more on the subject but it was edited out of the broadcast. My second thought was that perhaps you were less conversant with the work of Orwell than you might be.

It is upon that second thought, presumptuous though it may be, that I communicate with you. If nothing else, Orwell was a complex political commentator who recognized earlier than most the horror of Marx as interpreted by Stalin. The essay I enclose addresses that complexity.

I still remember with amusement our fence-climbing antics -- to the boos of young Russians -- when by grace of god and a feisty young woman you and I attended the first ever rock concert in Red Square. Seems now like a long time ago.

Stay well.

Best regards,



Donald M. Gillmor  
Silha Professor of Media  
Ethics and Law, Emeritus



## THE TRUTHTELLER

*It was when Orwell stayed home that he changed the world.*

BY CLIVE JAMES

WHO wrote this? "Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." But you guessed straightaway: George Orwell. The subject stated up front, the sudden acceleration from the scope-widening parenthesis into the piercing argument that follows, the way the obvious opposition between "lies" and "truthful" leads into the shockingly abrupt coupling of "murder" and "respectable," the elegant, reverse-written coda clinched with a dirt-common epithet, the whole easy-seeming poise and compact drive of it, a world view compressed to the size of a motto from a fortune cookie, demanding to be read out and sayable in a single breath—it's the Orwell style. But you can't call it "Orwellian," because that means Big Brother, Newspeak, the Gestapo, the K.G.B., the Stasi, and any other totalitarian obscenity that has ever reared its head or ever will.

The word "Orwellian" is a daunting example of the fate that a distinguished writer can suffer at the hands of journalists. When a totalitarian setup, whether in fact or in fantasy—in Brazil or in "Brazil"—is called "Orwellian," it is as if George Orwell had helped to create it instead of helping to dispel its euphemistic thrall. (Kafka has suffered a similar fate with the word "Kafkaesque.") Such distortions would be enough to make us give up on journalism altogether if we happened to forget that Orwell himself was a journalist. Here, to help us remember, are the twenty volumes of the new complete edition, cared for with awe-inspiring industry, dedication, and

judgment by Peter Davison, a scholar based in Leicester, who has spent the last two decades chasing down every single piece of paper his subject ever wrote on and then battling with publishers to persuade them that the accumulated result would supply a demand. The All of Orwell arrives in a cardboard box the size of a piece of check-in luggage: a man in a suitcase. As I write, the books are stacked on my desk, on a chair, on a side table, on the floor. A full, fat eleven of the twenty volumes consist largely of his collected journalism, reproduced in strict chronology along with his broadcasts, letters, memos, diaries, jottings, et exhaustively and fascinatingly al. The nine other volumes, over there near the stereo, were issued previously, in 1986-87, and comprise the individual works he published during his lifetime, including at least two books that directly and undeniably affected history. But, lest we run away with the idea that "Animal Farm" and "1984" are the core of his achievement, here, finally, is all the incidental writing, to remind us that they were only the outer layer, and could not have existed without what lay inside. Those famous, world-changing novels are just the bark. The journalism is the tree.

A four-volume edition of the journalism, essays, and letters, which was published in 1968 (co-edited by Ian Angus and Orwell's widow, Sonia), had already given us a good idea of how the tree grew, but now we get an even better chance to watch its roots suck up the nutrients of contemporary political experience and— But it's time to abandon that metaphor. Orwell never liked it when the writing drove the meaning. One of his precepts for composition was "Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around." For him, prose style

was a matter in which the ethics determined the aesthetics. Reading others, he was open to persuasion, but he would not be lulled, least of all by mellifluous rhetoric. Anyone's prose style, even his, sets out to seduce. Orwell's, superficially the plainest of the plain, was of a rhythm and a shapeliness to seduce the angels. Even at this distance, he needs watching, and would have been the first to admit it.

ORWELL was born into the impoverished upper class—traditionally, for its brighter children, a potent incubator of awareness about how the social system works. Either they acquire an acute hunger to climb back up the system—often taking the backstairs route through the arts, à la Sir John Betjeman—or they go the other way, seeking an exit from the whole fandango and wishing it to damnation. Orwell, by his own later accounts, went the other way from his school days onward. In one of his last great essays, "Such, Such Were the Joys," he painted his years at prep school (where he nicknamed the headmaster's gorgon of a wife Flip) as a set of panels by Hieronymus Bosch:

"Here is a little boy," said Flip, indicating me to the strange lady, "who wets his bed every night. Do you know what I am going to do if you wet your bed again?" she added, turning to me. "I am going to get the Sixth Form to beat you."

Orwell had a better time at Eton—it sounds as if he would have had a better time in Siberia—but twenty years later, after he left it, reviewing his friend Cyril Connolly's partly autobiographical "Enemies of Promise," he poured scorn on Connolly's fond recollections of the place. When Connolly proclaimed himself fearful that after his climactic years of glory at Eton nothing in the rest of his life could ever be so intense, Orwell reacted as if Flip had just threatened to deliver him to the Sixth Form all over again: "‘Cultured’ middle-class life has reached a depth of softness at which a public-school education—five years in a lukewarm bath of snobbery—can actually be looked back upon as an eventful period."

Orwell often reviewed his friends like that. With his enemies, he got tough. But it should be said at the outset that even with his enemies he rarely took an inhuman tone. Even Hitler and Stalin he

*Though his views would keep him out of mainstream newspapers, Orwell's journalism was at the core of his achievement.*

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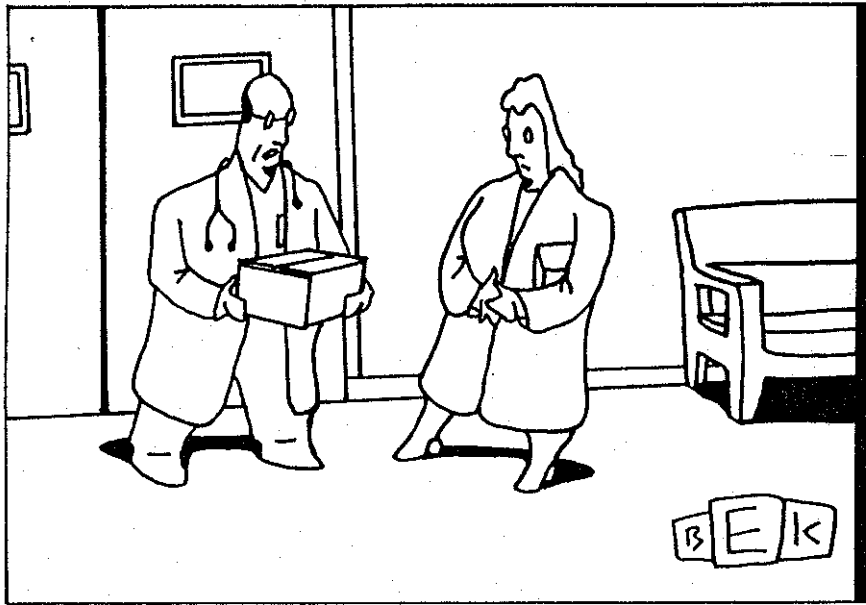
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*"Here—in case you ever need a shoulder to cry on."*

treated as men rather than as machines, and his famous characterization of the dogma-driven hack as "the gramophone mind" would have lost half its force if he had not believed that there was always a human being within the fanatic. His comprehension, though, did not incline him to be forgiving; quite the reverse. Society might have made the powerful what they were as surely as it had made the powerless what they were, but the mere fact that the powerful were free to express whatever individuality they possessed was all the more reason to hold them personally responsible for crushing the freedom of others. When they beat you, you can join them or you can join the fight on behalf of those they beat. It seems a fair guess that Orwell had already made his choice by the time Flip threatened him with a visit from the Sixth Form.

**I**N the early part of his adult life, he was a man of action. He wrote journalism when he could—for him it was more natural than breathing, which, thanks to a lurking tubercular condition, eventually became a strain—but he wanted to be where the action was. Already questioning his own privileged, if penny-pinching, upbringing and education, he went out to Burma at the age of nineteen and for the next five years served as a colonial policeman—an experience from which he reached the

conclusion (incorporated later into his novel "Burmese Days" and his essays "Shooting an Elephant" and "A Hanging") that the British Empire was a capitalist mechanism to exploit the subjugated poor. Back in Europe, he found out what it was like to be a proletarian by becoming one himself—"Down and Out in Paris and London," "The Road to Wigan Pier"—and expanded his belief about the exploitative nature of the Empire to embrace the whole of capitalist society, anywhere. He volunteered for service in Spain in the fight against Franco, and the selfless comradeship of ordinary Spaniards risking their lives to get justice—"Homage to Catalonia"—confirmed his belief that an egalitarian socialist society was the only fair and decent alternative to the capitalist boondoggle, of which Franco's Fascism, like Hitler's and Mussolini's, was merely the brute expression.

So here, already formed, were two of his three main political beliefs—about the awfulness of capitalism and the need for an egalitarian alternative. There was nothing uncommon about them except their intensity. The third belief was the spanner in the works. Again, he was not the only one to have figured out that the Soviet Union's vaunted Socialist utopia was a put-up job, but nobody ever expressed his revulsion better or more lastingly than Orwell, who got it

right without ever having to go there.

He went somewhere else instead. Discovering in Spain, from the behavior of the Russian representatives and their Communist adherents, that the Soviet Union was as implacable an enemy of his egalitarian aspirations as Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, he developed the idea that it wasn't enough to be against Mussolini and Hitler: you had to be against Stalin as well, because the enemy was totalitarianism itself. That was as far as he got before his career as a man of action came to an end. Shot in the throat by a sniper, he recuperated, but if he had stayed in Spain any longer he would have almost certainly been murdered. The anarchist group in whose ranks he had fought, the POUM, was being liquidated on Soviet orders, and his name was on the list. (The evidence is all here, in Volume XI, and it is enough to bring on a cold sweat: losing Orwell to the N.K.V.D. would have had the same devastating effect on our intellectual patrimony that the loss of the historian Marc Bloch and the literary critic Jean Prévost to the Gestapo had on the French.)

Back in England with his three main beliefs—capitalism was a disease, socialism was the cure, and Communism would kill the patient—the erstwhile man of action carried on his cause as a man of letters. For part of the Second World War, he was a member of the Home Guard, and for a further part he was with the BBC, preparing broadcasts for India, but as far as the main action went he was an onlooker. No onlooker ever looked on more acutely. The journalism he wrote at the close of the thirties and in the forties would have been more than enough by itself to establish him as having fulfilled his life's purpose, which he made explicit in his last years: "What I have most wanted to do is to make political writing into an art." The whole heavy atmosphere of the prelude to the war, the exhausting war itself, and its baleful aftermath: it's all there, reported with a vividness that eschews the consciously poetic but never lapses from the truly dramatic, because he had the talent and the humility to assess even a V-1 in terms of its effect on his own character, using his soliloquy to explain the play:

Every weapon seems unfair until you have adopted it yourself. But I would not deny that the pilotless plane, flying bomb, or whatever its correct name may be, is an

exceptionally unpleasant thing, because, unlike most other projectiles, it gives you time to think. What is your first reaction when you hear that droning, zooming noise? Inevitably, it is a hope that the noise *won't stop*. You want to hear the bomb pass safely overhead and die away into the distance before the engine cuts out. In other words, you are hoping that it will fall on somebody else.

First, though, with the Spanish war over and the full European war not yet begun, he had another battle on his hands, bloodless this time but almost as noisy: the battle against Britain's left-wing intellectuals. He realized that they had willfully declined to get the point about Spain: they still saw Communism as the only bulwark against Fascism. Worse, they thought that the Moscow trials were justified or otherwise to be condoned—a price worth paying to Build Socialism. Orwell's conviction that no socialism worth having could be built that way set him at odds with the progressive illuminati of his generation, and that altercation was made sharper by how much he and they had in common. He, too, had had the generosity to declare his own privileges meaningless if they were bought at the expense of the downtrodden. He, too, believed that the civilization that had given birth to him was a confidence trick. And, although he had already concluded that free speech was the one liberal institution no putative future society could abolish if it was to remain just, he still thought that the plutocratic oligarchy allowed liberal institutions to continue only as part of the charade that favored the exploitation of the poor. (In the sixties, the same notion lived again, as "repressive tolerance.") Fascism, he proclaimed, was just bourgeois democracy without the lip service to liberal values, the iron fist without the velvet glove. In 1937, he twice ventured the opinion that democracy and Fascism "are Tweedledum and Tweedledee." In the same year, he warned that "the moneyed classes" might trick Britain into "another imperialist war" with Germany: language hard to distinguish from Party-line boilerplate.

Indeed, when the war began he said that Britain was bound to be defeated unless it had a social revolution, which might even require an armed uprising. Possibly he had been carried away by the rifles issued to the Home Guard, and had visions of an English POUM taking pot shots at the oppressor. (Orwell rose to the rank of sergeant in the Home Guard, but

Davison should have found room to say, in a footnote, that his hero was notoriously more enthusiastic than competent: a Court of Inquiry was conducted after he supervised a mortar drill that almost resulted in the decapitation of one of his men.) Even in 1941, well after the Battle of Britain demonstrated that this bourgeois democracy might well hope to withstand Hitler, we can still hear Orwell promising that "England is on the road to revolution" and that to bring the revolution about a "real English socialist movement" would be "perfectly willing to use violence if necessary."

But the facts were hard at work on a mind whose salient virtue was its willingness to let them in. Even before the war, he had been impressed by how the English people in general had managed to preserve and develop civilized values despite the cynicism of their rulers. Now he became less inclined to argue that all those things had happened merely because the sweated labor of colonial coolies had paid for them, and were invalidated as a result. He was even capable, from time to time, of giving some of the cynical rulers a nod of respect: Orwell's praise of Churchill was never better than grudging, but nobody else's was ever more moving, because nobody else would have so much preferred to damn Churchill and all his works. From the early war years until the end of his life, Orwell wrote more and more about British civilization. He wrote less and less about the irredeemable obsolescence of bourgeois democracy. He had come to suspect that the democratic part might depend on the bourgeois part.

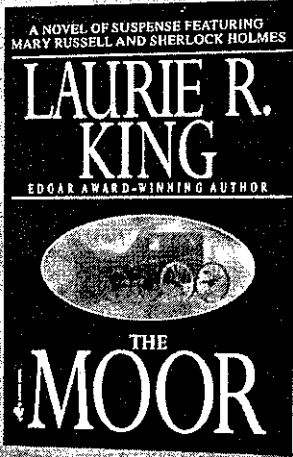
Most of the left-wing intellectuals hadn't. After Hitler clamorously repudiated his non-aggression pact with Stalin by launching Operation Barbarossa, they were once again able to laud the virtues of the Soviet Union at the tops of their voices. Even on the right, keeping Uncle Joe sweet was regarded as mandatory. In this matter, Orwell showed what can only be described as intellectual heroism. Though his unpalatable opinions restricted his access to mainstream publications—most of his commentaries were written for *Tribune*, an influential but small-circulation weekly newspaper backed by the Labour Party's star heavyweight, Aneurin Bevan—Orwell went on insisting that the Soviet regime was a tyranny, even as the Red Army battled

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the Panzers to a standstill on the outskirts of Moscow. At this distance, it is hard to imagine what a lonely line this was to take. But when it came to a principle Orwell was the sort of man who would rather shiver in solitude than hold his tongue.

Solitude fitted his character. Though he was sociable, and even amorous, in his everyday life, he didn't look it: he looked as gauntly ascetic as John Carradine, and in his mental life he was a natural loner. Collectivist theories could appeal to his temperament for only so long, and in this strictly chronological arrangement of his writings we can watch him gradually deconstructing his own ideology in deference to a set of principles. Even with this degree of documentation, it is not easy to see quite how he did it from moment to moment, because for a crucial period of the war he metaphorically went off the air. Literally, he had gone on it. For a two-year slog, from 1941 to late 1943, he expended most of his time and energy broadcasting to India for the BBC. Belated market research on the BBC's part revealed that not many Indians were listening (you guessed it: no radios), but the few who did manage to tune in heard some remarkable stuff from a man who had expended so much ink on insisting that the British would have to quit India. Orwell told them the truth: that they had a better chance with the British than with the Japanese. He also scripted weekly summaries of the war's progress. Writing on the tenth of January, 1942, he remarked on a tonal shift in Germany's official pronouncements:

Until a week or two ago, the German military spokesmen were explaining that the attack on Moscow would have to be postponed until the spring, but that the German armies could quite easily remain on the line they now occupied. Already, however, they are admitting that a further retreat—or, as they prefer to call it, a rectification of the line—will be necessary. . . . Before the end of February, the Germans may well be faced with the alternative of abandoning nearly all their conquests in the northern part of the Russian front, or of seeing hundreds of thousands of soldiers freeze to death.

It was an optimistic forecast for 1942, but it all came true in 1943, and it showed two of Orwell's best attributes operating at once: he had a global grasp, and he was able to guess the truth by the way the other side told lies. The broadcasts make such good reading today that

you almost feel sorry he ever stopped. From these indirect sources, you can surmise something of what was going on deep within his mind, and when he started writing journalism again he retroactively filled in some of the gaps. From the realization that the violent socialist revolution would not take place, he was apparently moving toward the conclusion that it should not. Reviewing a collection of Thomas Mann's essays published in English translation in 1943, he praised Mann in terms that would have been impossible for him before the war: "He never pretends to be other than he is, a middle-class

Liberal, a believer in the freedom of the intellect, in human brotherhood; above all, in the existence of objective truth." While careful to point out that Mann was pro-socialist, and even excessively trustful of the U.S.S.R., Orwell went on to note, approvingly, that "he never budges from his 'bourgeois' contention that the individual is important, that freedom is worth having, that European culture is worth preserving, and that truth is not the exclusive possession of one race or class." For Orwell, who had once preached that bourgeois democracy existed merely to swindle the working class, this was a big switch.

The last and most acrimonious phase of Orwell's battle with the left-wing intelligentsia began not long after D Day. As the Allied forces fought their way out of Normandy, a piece by Orwell landed on a desk in America. *Partisan Review* would publish a London Letter in which Orwell complained about the Western Russophile intellectuals who refused to accept the truth about Stalinist terror. Clearly, what frightened him was that, even if they did accept it, Soviet prestige would lose little of its allure for them. For Orwell, the Cold War was already on, with the progressive intellectuals in the front rank of the foe. Orwell was the first to use the term "cold war," in an essay published in October, 1945, about the atomic bomb—the very device that would insure, in the long run, that the Cold War never became a hot one. At the time, however, he saw no cause for complacency.

But unreconstructed *gauchiste* pundits who would still like to dismiss Orwell as a "classic" Cold Warrior can find out here that he didn't fit the frame. For one thing,

Orwell remained all too willing to accuse the West of structural deficiencies that were really much more contingent than he made out. When he argued, in the pages of *Tribune*, that the mass-circulation newspapers forced slop on their readership, he preferred to ignore the advice from a correspondent that it was really the readership forcing slop on the newspapers. He should have given far more attention to such criticisms, because they allowed for the possibility—as his own assumptions did not—that if ordinary people were freed from exploitation they would demand more frivolity, not less. And he was still inclined to regard Stalin's regime as a perversion of the Bolshevik revolution rather than as its essence. As late as 1946, it took the eminent émigré Russian scholar Gleb Struve to tell him that Zamyatin's "We," written in 1920 but never published in the Soviet Union, wasn't merely a projection of a possible totalitarian future but had drawn much of its inspiration from the Leninist present. If Orwell took this admonition in, he made little use of it. (He made great use of "We," however: if the English translation of Zamyatin's little classic had been as good as the French one, many more of the reviewers of "1984" might have spotted that Orwell's phantasmagoria had a distinguished precursor.)

As a journalist, Orwell had labored long and hard for small financial reward, and overwork had never been good for his delicate health. Life was pinched, not to say deprived, especially after his wife and faithful helpmeet Eileen (he was an unfaithful spouse and she may have been as well, but they depended on each other) died as a result of a medical blunder. The success of "Animal Farm," in 1945, could have bought him a reprieve. He upped stakes to a small farmhouse on the island of Jura, in the Hebrides, and cultivated his garden. Though he overestimated the strength he still had available for the hard life he lived there—he could grow vegetables to supplement his ration, but it took hard work in tough soil—the place was a welcome break from the treadmill of London. Mentally, however, he found no peace. A heightened anguish can be traced right through his last journalism until he gave it up to work on "1984." The left-wing intellectuals, already promoting the revisionism



that continues into our own day, not only were giving Stalin the sole credit for having won the war but were contriving not to notice that he had rescinded the few liberties he had been forced to concede in order to fight it; that his rule by terror had resumed; and that in the Eastern European countries supposedly liberated by the Red Army any vestige of liberty left by the Nazis was being stamped flat. Once again, crimes on a colossal scale were being camouflaged with perverted language, and once again the intellectuals, whose professional instinct should have been to sick it up, were happily swallowing the lot. It took a great deal to persuade him that reasoned argument wasn't enough. But it wasn't, so he wrote "1984."

There are still diehards who would like to think that "1984" is not about the Soviet Union at all. Their argument runs: "Animal Farm" is a satire about what happened in Russia once upon a time, but "1984" is a minatory fantasy about something far bigger—the prospect of a world divided up into a few huge centers of absolute power, of which a Soviet-style hegemony would be only one, and the United States, of course, would be another. It is just possible that Orwell thought the Marshall Plan was meant to have the same imperialist effect in Europe as the Red Army's tanks. He never actually said so, but people as intelligent as Gore Vidal believe much the same thing today. The late Anthony Burgess sincerely believed that "1984," because the Ministry of Truth bore such a strong resemblance to the BBC canteen, had been inspired by the condition of postwar Britain under rationing. As Orwell said so resonantly in his essay "Notes on Nationalism," "One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that: no ordinary man could be such a fool."

If they didn't get it in the West, they got it in the East. From the day of the book's publication until far into the Thaw, it meant big trouble for any Soviet citizen who had a copy in his possession. In the years to come, now that the Soviet archives are opening up, there will be a fruitful area of study in trying to decide which were the Western cultural influences that did most to help the Evil Empire melt down. For all we know, the jokes were always right, and it was the Beatles albums and the bootleg bluejeans

that did the trick. But it will not be surprising if "1984," even more than "The Gulag Archipelago," turns out to be the book that had the greatest subversive effect, ounce for ounce. For one thing, you could put "1984" in your pocket: a portable little slab of spiritual plastique, a mindblower.

But if the part played by Orwell's dystopian novels in the dismantling of the Sovietized monolith will always be hard to assess, there is less difficulty about measuring the effect of his last period of journalism on his own country. Self-immured on Jura, he was a Prospero running on the reserve tank of his magic. Orwell was only forty-two, but he had little physical strength left, and although many friends and colleagues sent him letters and books, and presents of rice and chocolate, and some even made the slow and tricky journey to visit him, he was short of love. A widower of some fame and no longer without means, he offered his affections to a succession of young women and found himself in the humiliating position of being respected and refused. When it emerged recently that he handed a list of fellow-travellers to a government propaganda unit, suggestions

that he had conspired in a witch-hunt carried little force. McCarthyism was a nonstarter in Britain, and most of those named on the list were already glad to have it known that they had aligned their prayer mats in the direction of the Kremlin. But if he lapsed from his own standards by tittle-tattling in school the most likely reason was that his Foreign Office contact was a noted beauty. He was sending her a bouquet.

The young woman who finally accepted him, Sonia Brownell (renowned in literary London as the Venus of Euston Road), married him practically on his deathbed: cold comfort. He kept a diary of what was happening in his garden—small things growing as the great man withered. For us, the only consolation is that he could speak so clearly even as the walls of his lungs were giving way against the tide of blood. The succession of magnificent essays he wrote as the harsh war wound down into an austere peace add up to a political event in themselves: a textbook example of how well-informed commentary on events can feed back into history and help to shape its course.

It takes nothing from Davison's



achievement to say that these last essays are probably best encountered in the "Collected Essays," or even in a single small volume, such as "Inside the Whale," where they will be found to have the effect of poems, as the paragraphs succeed one another with the inevitability of perfectly wrought stanzas, with every sentence in the right place yet begging to be remembered on its own, like a line from a magisterial elegy. "Notes on Nationalism," "The Prevention of Literature," "Politics and the English Language," "Why I Write," "Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of 'Gulliver's Travels'"—read for and by themselves, they tell you all you need to know about Orwell except the one fact so poignantly revealed here: that they were the work of a man who was not only dying but dying young. Very few writers about politics have said much in their forties that is lastingly true; and even Orwell undoubtedly would have continued to deepen, enrich, modulate, and modify his opinions.

But he had come a long way, and, by coming as far as the great last essays, he left a precious heritage to the country that he loved in spite of itself. Though the appeal to a totalitarian model of a just society (and the corresponding contempt for piecemeal solutions) was to remain possible in the academy, it became much more difficult in everyday political journalism, simply because Orwell had discredited the idea in a plain style that nobody could forget and everybody felt obliged to echo. The theoretical work that disenfranchised all total transformations was done by others, such as Karl Popper, Raymond Aron, and Isaiah Berlin. Orwell never got around to figuring all that out in detail. But he felt it, and the language of his last essays is the language of feeling made as clear and bright as it can ever get.

**H**OW clear is that? Finally, it comes down to a question of language, which is only appropriate, because, finally, Orwell was a literary man. Politics inspired Orwell the way the arts had always inspired the great critics, which gives us the clue to where he got the plainly passionate style that we are so ready to call unique. It is unique, in its flexibility of speech rhythms and its irresistible force of assertion, but he didn't invent it; he invented its use. George

Saintsbury had something of Orwell's schooled knack for speaking right out of the page, and Shaw had almost all of it: Orwell isn't often outright funny, but Shaw, in his six volumes of critical writings about music and theatre, deployed the full range of Orwell's debunking weapons with a generous humor to drive them home. Orwell called Shaw a windbag, but had obviously taken in every word the old man wrote. And there are many other critics who could be named, all the way up to the young F. R. Leavis, whom Orwell read with interest, if not without a certain distaste for his joyless zeal.

Orwell was a superb literary critic himself: he is the first person to read on Swift, on Dickens, and on Gissing, and if he had lived to finish his essay on Evelyn Waugh it would have been the best thing on the subject, the essay that really opens up Waugh's corrosively snobbish view of life without violating his creative achievement. Had Orwell lived to a full term, he might well have gone on to become the greatest modern literary critic in the language. But he lived more than long enough to make writing about politics a branch of the humanities, setting a standard of civilized response to the intractably complex texture of life. No previous political writer had brought so much of life's lesser detail into the frame, and other countries were unlucky not to have him as a model. Sartre, for example, would have been incapable of an essay about the contents of a junk shop, or about how to make the ideal cup of tea—the very reason he was incapable of talking real sense about politics.

In one of the very last, and best, of his essays, "Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool," Orwell paid his tribute to Shakespeare. He was too modest to say that he was paying a debt as well, but he was:

Shakespeare was not a philosopher or a scientist, but he did have curiosity: he loved the surface of the earth and the process of life—which, it should be repeated, is *not* the same thing as wanting to have a good time and stay alive as long as possible. Of course, it is not because of the quality of his thought that Shakespeare has survived, and he might not even be remembered as a dramatist if he had not also been a poet. His main hold on us is through language.

A writer has to know a lot about the rhythms of natural speech before he can stretch them over the distance covered by those first two sentences. Each of them is

perfectly balanced in itself, and the second is perfectly balanced against the first—the first turning back on itself with a strict qualification, and the second running away in relaxed enjoyment of its own fluency. They could stand on their own, but it turns out that both of them are there to pile their combined weight behind the third sentence—the short one—and propel it into your memory. It hits home with the force of an axiom.

And it isn't true—or, anyway, it isn't true enough. Elsewhere in the essay, Orwell shows signs of being aware that the relationship of Shakespeare's language to the quality of his thought can never be fully resolved in favor of either term. But not even Orwell could resist a resonant statement that fudged the facts—a clarity that is really an opacity. Yes, Orwell did write like an angel, and that's the very reason we have to watch him like a hawk. Luckily for us, he was pretty good at watching himself. He was blessed with a way of putting things that made anything he said seem so, but that was only a gift. His intellectual honesty was a virtue.

Orwell's standards of plain speaking always were and still are a mile too high for politicians. What finally counts with politicians is what they do, not how they say it. But for journalists how they say it counts for everything. Orwell's style shows us why a style is worth working at: not just because it gets us a byline and makes a splash but because it compresses and refines thought and feeling without ceasing to sound like speech—which is to say, without ceasing to sound human. At a time when ideological politics still exercised such an appeal that hundreds of purportedly civilized voices *had* ceased to sound human, Orwell's style stood out. The remarkable thing is that it still does. Ideologues are thin on the ground nowadays, while any substantial publication has a would-be George Orwell rippling the keys in every second cubicle, but the daddy of modern truth-tellers still sounds fresh. So it wasn't just the amount of truth he told but the way he told it, in prose transmuted to poetry by the pressure of his dedication. This great edition, by revealing fully for the first time what that dedication was like, makes his easy-seeming written speech more impressive than ever, and even harder to emulate. To write like him, you need a life like his, but times have changed, and he changed them. ♦