

Miroslav Beker

The Ambivalence of George Orwell: a Note

In his interesting article on George Orwell and Rudyard Kipling¹ Mr. Cook points to a number of »fundamental attitudes and opinions« which these two apparently dissimilar authors had in common. The convergences are according to Mr. Cook Orwell's interest »towards a man whose early life bore so close a resemblance to his own« and the preoccupation of both men with the British Empire, where Orwell showed a »perceptible strand of the Kiplingesque«. Further on Mr. Cook stresses that Orwell »shared Kipling's distaste for those pacifists and intellectuals who categorically denounce all wars«, and he mentions »the sturdy patriotism« that both authors shared, as well as Kipling's sense of moral responsibility »which appealed to Orwell more than any other aspect«. This went hand in hand with Orwell's contempt of intellectuals who, lacking the responsibility of personal involvement, dealt with human and social issues in entirely abstract terms. Both men were suspicious of social reformers and »tend(ed) to associate left-wing intellectualism with homosexuality or, at least, effeminacy«. In contrast to effeminacy they both showed a »basic masculine tendency« in their portrayals of women. As to technical influence Mr. Cook mentions that Orwell could have drawn on some of Kipling's stories for his *Animal Farm*. Finally Mr. Cook claims that Kipling appealed to Orwell as a defender of middle-class virtues, such as »respect for the individual, a sense of responsibility, and, above all, a code of personal decency and honor«. Mr. Cook's contentions are well argued and supported by sound reasoning from which the reader can only gain valuable new insights into the mental relationship between the two writers. And yet there seems to be a point

¹ *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1961, Vol. 7. No. 2, Richard Cook, »Rudyard Kipling and George Orwell«, pp. 125—135.

of attraction between the two men which probably deserves more attention than it has received in Mr. Cook's article.

Orwell had definite preferences in the choice of topics for his writings. His discussion of literary subjects is usually connected with politics and social issues, and special items were Dickens, Koestler, crime stories, Henry Miller, *Gulliver's Travels*, etc.; other subjects included the sordid autobiography of Salvador Dali, the horrors of a hospital for the poor (in »How the Poor Die«), the misery, ruthlessness, and squalor of colonial life (»Shooting an Elephant«, »Hanging«, »Marakech«), the pitiful poverty of a book reviewer and the »tough« thinking of James Burnham. There is an obvious slant in these subjects; Orwell does not deal with aesthetic sophistication or delicacy in the handling of human relationships; in politics his subjects will not be the champions of liberal and democratic thought but ruthless dictators whereas in social subjects the stress will be on cruelty, suffering, and the dual character of man. And it is precisely here that Kipling fits in: Orwell discovered in him »a definite strain of sadism«, the »hunger for cruelty«, while most of Kipling's poetry he thought »horribly vulgar«, but still retaining some value just because it expresses the dual character of man and covers the »emotional overlap between the intellectual and the ordinary man.«² The point I want to stress here is that there was a remarkable degree of duality in Orwell's own personality. His well known humanitarianism and sense of decency were coupled with a fascination for cruelty and nastiness, and the latter element responded sensitively to Kipling's art. Several critics have noted this duality of Orwell's: Laurence Brander mentions Orwell's »constitutional perverseness«, John Atkins has a chapter on Orwell the saint and the sinner, and Wyndham Lewis remarks in his book *The Writer and the Absolute*: »Had Orwell been of

² Orwell's most explicit statement about the dual character of the ordinary man can be found in his essay »The Art of Donald McGill« where he says, addressing the reader: »If you look into your own mind, which are you, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza? Almost certainly you are both. There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin. He is your unofficial self, the voice of the belly protesting against the soul. His tastes lie towards safety, soft beds, no work, pots of beer and women with »voluptuous« figures. He it is who punctures your fine attitudes and urges you to look after Number One, to be unfaithful to your wife, to bilk your debts, and so on and so forth. Whether you allow yourself to be influenced by him is a different question. But it is simply a lie to say that he is not part of you, just as it is a lie to say that Don Quixote is not part of you either, though most of what is said and written consists of one lie or the other, usually the first«. (*Critical Essays*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1954, pp. 108—109).

German nationality who can doubt that he would have been an SS man«. In his letter to the *Critical Quarterly* (1959, Vol. 1, No. 3) Mr. G. S. Fraser speaks about Orwell's »very queer and very personal sadistic tinge«, and Mr. Richard J. Vorhees calls his book significantly *The Paradox of George Orwell*. The only objection to these comments is that most of them have remained on a casual level, whereas in fact Orwell's duality can be traced in practically all his works and therefore requires more critical attention.

It is notorious that politics — notably the decay of liberalism and the rise of authoritarian regimes — was Orwell's major preoccupation. The question may be asked what made Orwell so sensitively aware of some of the crucial developments of his time. Certainly it was partly the intensity of political pressures, but on the other hand the resonant elements in Orwell's personality responded to the challenge of the new authoritarian regimes. In an indirect way Orwell admitted it himself when saying that those people understood Fascism best »who have either suffered under it or those who have a Fascist strain in themselves«³. As Orwell did not suffer under Fascism, but was sure he understood it (and he did understand it), the conclusion that he himself had a »Fascist strain« is not difficult to reach. In his essay on Salvador Dali Orwell writes that a »pastiche usually implies a real affection for the thing parodied«⁴. If we apply this statement to Orwell's *Newspeak* in 1984 and to O'Brien's rising importance in the same novel we shall reach the conclusion that Orwell, while expressing his horror of the 1984 society, was partly fascinated by it. Here we must also remember how often in Orwell's writings (especially in the essays) the paraphernalia of totalitarian regimes are paraded before the reader's eyes: truncheons, bombs, concentration camps, machine guns, purges, etc.

Orwell's very attitude towards politics was ambivalent; while often repeating that politics was essentially fraud and coercion he continuously introduced politics into his works and took an active part in political life himself.

The subjects of Orwell's essays, where suffering and squalor figure largely, have already been mentioned. And with them goes his fascination with violence and cruelty. In his essay »North and South« Orwell writes about the »sinister magnificence« of Sheffield at night; in his study of Dickens he praises the intensity of the description of the reign of terror in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and in his wartime notebooks he speaks with some fascination about the sight of a burning

³ *Critical Essays*, p. 98.

⁴ *Ib.*, p. 146.

London district after an air raid. In *Homage to Catalonia* Orwell exclaims, when seeing a train of soldiers moving to the front, that war, after all, can be a glorious thing.

In his first novel, *Burmese Days*, the most successfully drawn characters are those of the vile U Po Kyin and the callous Ellis whom Orwell seems to have created with obvious relish. *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* are explorations of squalor, poverty, and drudgery, where, among other things, Orwell's »smell-consciousness« (noted by several critics) comes fully to the fore. *Coming Up for Air* is an illustration of the Sancho Panza element in man with its irresponsible selfishness and lack of faithfulness.

By now it might seem that the less pleasant aspects of Orwell are being overstressed, but the emphasizing of the virtues he stood for — decency, integrity, and gentleness — has become a commonplace of criticism on Orwell, finally leading to an oversimplified picture of him as a writer and man. It is almost a truism that in order to perceive something unusual one has to possess latently the same quality in oneself which will respond to the thing perceived. In a complex and tortured age like ours Orwell's ambivalence accounts for a good deal of his peculiar vision. His superiority becomes obvious when we compare his writings on public issues with those of some of his contemporaries from the Bloomsbury circle, such as the *Three Guineas* by Virginia Woolf or John Lehmann's *Whispering Gallery*.

Now it cannot be said that Mr. Cook does not mention the duality of Orwell as one of the reasons why he was attracted by Kipling, but the point has not obtained sufficient prominence by being treated on a par with items such as the similarity between the early lives of the two writers⁵ and the tendency

⁵ The similarity between the biographies of two authors need not necessarily lead to any considerable resemblance in outlook or artistic techniques. The very fact that the early life of Kipling and Orwell was so similar would be of little importance if there were no mental and emotional similarity. Although, for example, Arthur Koestler's early life had little in common with Orwell, he is temperamentally nearer to him than, say, E. M. Forster whose biography resembles in some detail that of Orwell.

The attempts to compare Orwell's life to someone else's are a curious feature of the criticism on him. At the beginning of his book on Orwell Laurence Brander compares him with Thackeray: both were born in Bengal and both went to a public school they did not like. Thackeray, like Orwell, »decided that writing was to become his fortune«, both began their careers in Paris, both became essayists with a sense of style, and »both felt strongly about society«. T. R. Fyvel (in *World Review*, June 1950) compares Orwell's life with that of D. H. Lawrence:

»The savage pilgrimage« — the term has been applied to the life of D. H. Lawrence. It could be used for the life of George Orwell,

to present women as disrupters. To illustrate his claim on the role of women as disrupters in Orwell's works, Mr. Cook takes his novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* where the chief female character Rosemary makes the hero Gordon »give up his quixotic struggle against the 'money world' and to assume middle class respectability«. Yet it would seem that anybody who manages to persuade a person to give up a *quixotic* struggle should be praised rather than called a disrupter. In *Coming Up For Air* it is certainly George Bowling who is the potential disrupter of his married life. The case of Julia in 1984 is even more questionable. It was not Julia's fault that Smith's disloyalty was discovered but the result of their love affair, which is a *human* affair in an essentially *inhuman* society.

The point at issue here is one of relative significance. Mr. Cook's thesis of women as disrupters in Kipling and Orwell is rather tenuous whereas Orwell's duality is beyond doubt and, in the long run, more worth of attention. It is an important point of attraction between the two authors, it provides a valuable insight into their mental relationships and, what is more, it makes some features of Orwell's works more understandable. It also supplies us with at least a partial answer as to why Orwell was more involved in the political drama of his time than most English writers of his generation.

who died of consumption, like Lawrence, and much at the same time.

Some of the points of similarity are obviously far-fetched; how can one single out as points of similarity between two *writers* that they decided to make writing their fortune and that they both felt strongly about society (as if this were highly unusual among writers!). As to T. R. Fyvel's comparison, where shall we get if we start pointing out as a similarity between two authors that they died of the same illness and much at the same time. Here a coincidence seems to have been taken as a genuine similarity.