

George Orwell and Raymond Williams

In Barcelona not long ago, a square near the waterfront was renamed by the mayoralty of Pasqual Maragall, a member of the Catalan Socialist Party. It bears the title Plaça George Orwell. Not many miles away, in the town of Can Rull, a street was also named in honour of Andreu Nin, the murdered leader of the 1930s *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, better known to Civil War buffs by its odd-sounding acronym of POUM. The mayor of Can Rull was at the time a member of the Catalan Communist Party.

I choose to regard these relatively small if not minor gestures as something more than a homage from Catalonia. Rather, they constitute a final settlement of a long-overdue account. The full acknowledgement, by both parties of the official Left, of this English dissident and this native hero, represents a victory both for historical truth and for personal courage. As the age of twentieth-century ideology closes, with Stalinism dead and fascism defeated, it is quite possible that only in Catalonia are the school-children taught a full and honest account of that combat, and of those who with their bodies and minds fought, simultaneously and with great gallantry, against the forces that culminated in the Hitler–Stalin Pact and the ‘midnight of the century’.

This was not at all the outcome that Orwell himself expected. It was his experience in Catalonia that furnished much of the dystopian gloom of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Reviewing the torrent of lies and falsifications in a later essay entitled ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’, he wrote:

This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history . . . The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the

Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but *the past*. If the Leader says of such and such an event, 'It never happened' – well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five – well, two and two are five.

Both Orwell and Nin were cultural and literary figures, as well as political ones. Both reposed a certain irreducible trust – not a romantic belief, but a trust – in the potential of working people. Both were prepared, when ultimate danger impended, to sign up in a people's army. Both were willing to risk calumny and anathema rather than acquiesce in a lie. Both witnessed to a dramatic and almost unbelievable truth – that the Spanish Revolution was not safeguarded or aided by Moscow, but actually, deliberately strangled by it.

It's worth reflecting on how nearly we were deprived of the testimony that now makes this and other truths into relative commonplaces. Orwell, as is well known, could not get his despatches from Spain published in the *New Statesman* or other organs of the self-satisfied British Left. For trying to give an accurate account of events in Catalonia, he was instead vilified for 'giving ammunition to the enemy' and for undermining progressive morale. For a considerable time, he found it difficult to get his books published – being turned down by editors and publishers as diverse as Victor Gollancz and T. S. Eliot – and most of his literary success is in fact posthumous. Even that, we now know, was lucky enough. He not only survived a fascist bullet that passed through his throat in a Spanish front-line trench, but also a spirited attempt by the KGB (then known as the NKVD) to have him either kidnapped or killed. Recently unearthed documents, from the archives of expired despotisms, give us a sharper picture than has ever before been available.

The internal documents of the defeated Spanish Republic were annexed by Franco's fascists after 1939 and kept in libraries in Salamanca and Madrid. Only some time after the collapse of the dictatorship were they made available to scholars. One tranche of Russian secret police material has thus come down to us by way of General Franco, and is confirmed by subsequent research in the mother-lode in Moscow. It concerns the preparations for a show-trial of the POUM, and for the extirpation of the independent Left in Catalonia. And there is a memorandum, dated 13 July 1937, in which Stalin's glacial eye is trained on George Orwell or, to give him his proper name as well as the name which appears in the files, Eric Blair. He and his wife Eileen, who shared the risk, are described as 'pronounced Trotskyists' and accused of possessing clandestine credentials as well as of maintaining sinister contacts with opposition circles in Moscow. Plainly intended as notes for an interrogation should Orwell fall into the hands of the NKVD, these charges would have been lethal if they

could have been brought into any tribunal operating under Stalinist jurisdiction or control. (The couple managed to bluff their way through one near-arrest, and to escape from Spain, in which outcome they were more fortunate than other British internationalists, usually members of the Independent Labour Party, who were incarcerated or who 'disappeared'.) This story was first related in English by my friend and comrade Stephen Schwartz in an essay written in 1995, and also appears in a somewhat attenuated form in Peter Davison's 1998 edition of Orwell's *Complete Works*. Its significance, and even its existence, has been utterly overshadowed in most of the press by the far less important – and also less new and less concealed – 'revelation' that Orwell, in conversation towards the end of his life, identified to a friend in the Foreign Office the intellectuals and publicists whom he believed to be culpably negligent about Stalin, and about the other forces which had been trying to defame and (though he did not know it) to frame and to kill him, and his wife. The relative expense of outrage and concern on the two disclosures tells us a good deal about the persistence of certain habits among our literati.¹

As for Andreu Nin, it turns out – as is usual with allegations against Stalin and his followers – that the truth is even worse than one had suspected. In the briefly opened KGB files in Moscow in the early 1990s, reporters from the newly emancipated Catalan Television were able to unearth the 'operational file' on the kidnapping, torture and secret execution of the popular and charismatic leader of the POUM. The resulting documentary film – named 'Operation Nikolai' after the NKVD code-word for Nin – illustrates with a wealth of detail the plans for a rerun of the Moscow Trial in Spain itself, complete with tortured or blackmailed defendants and witnesses, and designed to persuade Western liberal opinion that the charade in Moscow itself had been no fluke. I have no doubt, revisiting the written work of the period, that such a strategy would have met with widespread acceptance among those gullible intellectuals who had already demonstrated such a sincere wish to believe.

The scheme foundered on the simple and extraordinary refusal of Andreu Nin to crack under the revolting cruelty of his interrogators. In fury and disgust, they killed him (or perhaps saw him succumb to his treatment) and, believing that his true whereabouts would always be a mystery, contented themselves with spreading lies and slanders about his defection to the camp of Hitler. As a result of this anonymous and, until recently, unproven heroism, the main body of POUM leaders remained alive. Some of them, like Victor Alba, survive to this day and continue to witness to history and truth. It is as if, in a Catalan microcosm of the twentieth century, Bukharin had not cracked in reality, Rubashov had not given way in

Darkness at Noon, and Winston Smith had preserved his defiance in 1984. More credit and honour should be given, to this radical determination, than I have so far seen outside the pages of specialist journals.

Nin is well remembered in today's Catalonia not just as the bravest son of the revolution, but as the brilliant translator of *Crime and Punishment* and *Anna Karenina* into Catalan. Having been an early member of the century's first Catalan cultural revival – a revival sent into eclipse by Franco's dire orthodox, Catholic, Castilian policy of nation-breaking – he returned to posthumous literary prominence as soon as the ban on his native tongue was lifted, and now the students of Barcelona read his rendition of the Russian classics as an essential part of their courses in literature. In this, too, there is something satisfying and vindicating. That the genius of Russia should be preserved and passed on, for the rising generation in Catalonia, by one of the victims of Stalinism has a certain – what shall we say? – ironic justice to it. Yeats once wrote, rather fancifully I sometimes think, of a 'Book of the People' in which certain names, once inscribed, could not be erased by any amount of propaganda or brutality or falsification. In one of the cradles of European democratic resistance – the cosmopolitan and indomitable city of Barcelona, which gave us Picasso and Casals and where Victor Serge composed *Birth of Our Power* – the names of Orwell and Nin have survived this most exacting of tests and are now inscribed in a lapidary form that would certainly have astonished both of them.

I should now like to read the opening passage of my favourite among the essays of Raymond Williams; a piece composed in 1958 and entitled 'Culture is Ordinary'. It commences with an evocative setting only a few miles from where we are met today, amid the strange and bookish political economy (and ecology) of Hay-on-Wye, in the ancient county seat of Hereford:

The bus stop was outside the cathedral. I had been looking at the Mappa Mundi, with its rivers out of Paradise, and at the chained library, where a party of clergymen had got in easily, but where I had waited an hour and cajoled a verger before I even saw the chains. Now, across the street, a cinema advertised the *Six-Five Special* and a cartoon version of *Gulliver's Travels*. The bus arrived, with a driver and a conductress deeply absorbed in each other. We went out of the city, over the old bridge, and on through the orchards and the green meadows and the fields red under the plough. Ahead were the Black Mountains, and we climbed among them, watching the steep fields end at the grey walls, beyond which the bracken and heather and whin had not yet been driven back. To the east, along the ridge, stood the line of grey Norman castles; to the west, the fortress wall of the mountains. Then, as we still climbed, the rock changed under us. Here, now, was limestone, and the line of the early iron workings along the scarp. The farming valleys, with their scattered white houses, fell away behind.

Ahead of us were the narrower valleys: the steel-rolling mill, the gasworks, the grey terraces, the pitheads. The bus stopped, and the driver and conductress got out, still absorbed. They had done this journey so often, and seen all its stages. It is a journey, in fact, that in one form or another we have all made. I was born and grew up halfway along that bus journey.

I have come all the way from Washington DC in order to challenge Raymond Williams on his home ground, so to speak, but it is this passage and some others like it that make it an honour to do so. One might quibble here and there – the three repetitions of the uninspiring word ‘grey’ may be intentional or they may be inattentive – but this is a paragraph of great understated power, of a modesty that one hopes and expects will soon be thrown aside, and also of mingled innocence and experience. ‘The rock changed under us.’ There’s a good deal of observant integrity contained in such a terse, shrewd phrase.

Although the essay displays evidence of Williams’s greatest stylistic weakness, which was a tendency to tautology (‘Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning’), it starts with a feeling for the land, and for tradition, and broadens out into a critique of English establishment philistinism. The text is consistently autobiographical, evincing a strong and confident rootedness in native heath and in family. ‘I was not, by the way, oppressed by Cambridge. I was not cast down by old buildings, for I had come from a country with twenty centuries of history written visibly into the earth.’

Unintimidated by ancient cloisters, Williams recoiled from the affectation of what he called ‘the teashop’, where manners counted more than culture. He insisted on the struggle against ugliness and crudity, but he was no pre-Raphaelite as this admirable extract shows:

At home we were glad of the Industrial Revolution, and of its consequent social and political changes. True, we lived in a very beautiful farming valley, and the valleys beyond the limestone we could all see were ugly. But there was one gift that was overriding, one gift which at any price we would take, the gift of power that is everything to men who have worked with their hands. It was slow in coming to us, in all its effects, but steam power, the petrol engine, electricity, these and their host of products in commodities and services, we took as quickly as we could get them, and were glad. I have seen all these things being used, and I have seen the things they replaced. I will not listen with any patience to any acid listing of them – you know the sneer you can get into plumbing, baby Austins, aspirin, contraceptives, canned food. But I say to these Pharisees: dirty water, an earth bucket, a four-mile walk each way to work, headaches, broken women, hunger and monotony of diet. The working people, in town and country alike, will not listen (and I support them) to any account of our society which supposes that these things are

not progress: not just mechanical, external progress either, but a real service of life.²

Far from being any kind of economic determinist, Williams the admirer of Leavis opposed what one might call the vulgar Marxism of the Right, which was even then proclaiming (citing Northcliffe rather than Murdoch) that mass industrial society necessitated cheap and nasty newspapers and mass media. He saw the exploitative, condescending fallacy that is contained in the notion of 'giving people what they want'. Towards his close, he loops back to his border country roots and says: 'I come from an old place; if a man tells me that his family came over with the Normans, I say "Yes, how interesting; and are you liking it here?"' The peroration calls upon intellectuals to join in the task of reaching and uplifting the decency and humanity of ordinary folk, and of bypassing slogans about 'the masses' in favour of an attention to the people.

Now, if I had been given this text by I. A. Richards in his Practical Criticism course, and asked to analyse it without any knowledge of its authorship, I should at once make the assumption that it was very much influenced by the writing of George Orwell. There is, first, the innate love for landscape and countryside and tradition, and for growing things. (I would never notice whether bracken or heather had been 'driven back', and I have no notion what 'whin' may be, but Orwell was a keen student of nature, and could name plants and birds, and had a sense of the lay of the land and also of its Anglo-Saxon underlay.) He had the same sense of being at home in ancient towns and buildings, though he never attended any university. He couldn't stand the tea-shop types, or any form of affectation. His essential Puritanism – in the Cromwellian sense which still leads us to divide our friends between Roundhead and Cavalier – was modified, like Williams's, by his view: 'How right the working classes are in their materialism'. One might add that his attachment to family, though less happy and confident than Williams's, informed his view that a society could be based on the same principles of solidarity and sharing. Finally, with his essay on Boy's Weeklies and his other reviews of popular taste and its manipulation by press lords, Orwell was 'doing' Cultural Studies before the discipline had a name.

Yet it is a fact that Williams despised Orwell, and devoted a lot of time to misunderstanding and misrepresenting him. In a short book published in 1971, and later in a long interview with the *New Left Review* published in book form in 1979, Williams depicted Orwell as a confected figure, sentimental and naïve about the English class system, and as a moral author of the Cold War and the politics of despair. The waste of effort involved here, and the wasted opportunity, and the peculiar ideological short-

comings that these required of Williams, are (if I may belatedly unmask my batteries) the subject of this lecture.

Williams's latent hostility to his subject is somewhat disguised in the 1971 book, which appeared in the famous Fontana *Modern Masters* series that, in 1971, was a partial expression of the ethos of the *soixante-huitards*. Williams knew, and even acknowledged, that to many of the New Left – I speak both of the old New Left and the new New Left, being now old enough to have been New Left, and young enough to have been Old Labour – Orwell had been an inspiration. But his own acknowledgements were grudging, understated and sometimes – so it seems to me – actually resentful; even envious.

This is apparent from the very first mention of *Homage to Catalonia*. The author of *Keywords*, we may be sure, chose his terms with care. Indeed, we know he did because, with the exception of some stretches of boilerplate politicised *langue de bois*, his prose is relatively exact and precise. (I remember the deft way he criticised the use of the word 'Apocalypse' by certain anti-nuclear writers, pointing out that the word implied revelation as well as awesome ending, whereas a thermonuclear conflagration would involve the second without any element of the first.) At all events, he describes the Stalinisation of Barcelona twice on the same page, first as 'the conflict between the Republican authorities and the POUM' and second as 'Communist-POUM rivalry'. This hardly rises to the level of euphemism. By 1971, a great deal had been uncovered, and also conceded, about the organised repression of dissent in Catalonia by Stalin's agents. The words 'conflict' and 'rivalry' are not just neutral as between the repressive and the repressed; in the context they are a falsification – as if Nin's and Orwell's friends might as well have done to Stalin's police what Stalin's police in fact did to them.

There is another oddity here. Williams was never a Welsh nationalist, but he did have an open sympathy for the survival of Welsh culture and language, and for the long and stubborn struggle that had been necessary to preserve and maintain them. (Of national feeling on the smaller scale he wrote, rather attractively, 'You can be proud without being independent: you often have to be'.) Yet in all his references, unless he is actually alluding to the title of Orwell's book, he invariably refers to 'Spain' and not to Catalonia. What was distinctive in the stoicism and resistance of the Catalans seems to have entirely escaped this bearer of a second identity.

Then there is this. Williams writes that there is more than one view about the May events in Barcelona in 1937, and that 'To move in that area at all is like moving in a minefield'. He goes on:

Most historians have taken the view that the revolution – mainly anarcho-syndicalist but with the POUM taking part – was an irrelevant distraction from a desperate war. Some, at the time and after, have gone so far to describe it as deliberate sabotage of the war effort. Only a few have argued on the other side, that the suppression of the revolution by the main body of Republican forces was an act of power politics, related to Soviet policy, which amounted to betrayal of the cause for which the Spanish people were fighting.

Again, one is compelled to observe that this prose is almost bureaucratic. And, as so often with such prose, that it contains a surreptitious element of pseudo-objectivity. Who, for a start, are these ‘historians’? I cannot think of one who has ever described Nin’s movement as one of deliberate sabotage. And since when did Williams regard it as his task to endorse a majority of historians, even supposing one to exist? (His paragraph makes plain that this is the view with which he sympathises, though he has a loftily undecided attitude to the second opinion as well.) As for the third view, which is again stated with the maximum of euphemism (‘the main body of Republican forces’ sounds good; ‘suppression’ is better than murder and defamation; ‘power politics’ smack of regrettable necessity and ‘related to Soviet policy’ is masterly in a minor way), it is the only view that serious historians, in Catalonia and elsewhere, now take. Williams might not have read the work of Burnett Bolloten, a Welsh Jew who covered the war for the United Press and later broke with his Communist associates, but he could have done. Bolloten’s book *The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counter-revolution* is now considered, I nearly said by ‘most historians’, as exhaustive if not encyclopaedic. But it is remarkable that he seems not to have read Noam Chomsky’s vivid and scholarly reflections on Stalinism in Spain, which were published in a volume of his essays that was very much in vogue on the academic Left when Williams was composing his Orwell book.

Two pages later, Williams says of the massacres in Barcelona that they took place ‘in the name of the struggle against fascism, and, most accounts say, in the name of the true cause of socialism and the people’. This steps across the line that divides pseudo-objectivity from propaganda. ‘Most accounts’ most certainly do not say anything like that. And the give-away stuff about ‘socialism and the people’ forces one to the conclusion that Williams – the Williams who joined The Party *after* the Hitler–Stalin pact and whose first published pamphlet was a defence of the 1940 Soviet invasion of Finland – had not by 1971 shed all of his early training in the Stalin school of falsification.

The remainder of the book, which makes some formal bows and inclinations in the direction of Orwell’s ‘decency’ – also a Williams keyword

by the way – is a sly rather than oblique argument that Orwell would have done better to be someone else, and would have been a better author if he had written different, or at any rate other, books. Let me acknowledge the sound points, and also the concessions, that Williams makes along the way. He seizes on Orwell's description, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, written in the distraught year of 1940, and slightly ridicules Orwell's analogy of English or British society with a family. The passage may be familiar to you:

England is not the jewelled isle of Shakespeare's much-quoted passage, nor is it the inferno depicted by Dr Goebbels. More than either it resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who have to be kowtowed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks. A family with the wrong members in control – that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase.

I cite it in full because Williams never does, and because this fact becomes important later on. The line about 'the deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income' is never quoted by him, because it is tougher and more accurate than the rest of the analogy, and because it echoes Orwell's insistence on remembering the role played by imperial exploitation (a thorny fact which the Communists, a year after 1940, were themselves prepared to play down in the interests of 'national unity' and the brotherhood between Churchill and Stalin). However, Williams does notice that 'a family with the wrong members in control' is too soggy and lenient a description of such a complex and divided society, and makes the further and rather searching observation that no father is ever mentioned. He was in a good position to notice this, incidentally, because his own family and particularly his own father were continuously evoked, for political purposes, in his work, but I had not noticed until Williams called it to my attention that Orwell's image is as free of a father figure as a passage from Wodehouse or Wilde. (A significant difference in the work of the two men is supplied by the fact that Williams revered his father, a railwayman and Labour militant, whereas Orwell disliked his father, who was a chilly and remote colonial civil servant.)

Williams also exposes a certain false modesty in his subject, as when Orwell says of himself that had it not been for the awful pressures of war

and tyranny and poverty he might have become a real writer and not what he was forced to become – ‘a sort of pamphleteer’, as he phrased it. This is the wrong kind of self-deprecation (I speak with feeling, as one who regards ‘pamphleteer’ as a title of honour) and it is married, in Orwell’s essay *Writers and Leviathan*, to a certain archness.

We have developed a sort of compunction which our grandparents did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude towards life impossible. No one, now, could devote himself to literature as single-mindedly as Joyce or Henry James.

Finnegan’s Wake was completed in 1939. Nor is this the only rejoinder one might make. Not all of ‘our grandparents’ were by any means deaf to injustice and misery – one might mention George Eliot and Hardy, as Williams does – and it is peculiar of Orwell, who was customarily alert to the influence of tradition, to write otherwise.

Williams makes another comment which is valid in itself, but which later I believe he misuses:

It would be easy to say that almost all Orwell’s important writing is about someone who gets away from an oppressive normality. From the central characters of *The [sic] Clergyman’s Daughter* and *Keep The Aspidistra Flying* to those of *Coming Up For Air* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*, this experience of awareness, rejection, and flight is repeatedly enacted. Yet it would be truer to say that most of Orwell’s important writing is about someone who tries to get away but fails. That failure, that reabsorption, happens, in the end, in all the novels mentioned, though of course the experience of awareness, rejection, and flight has made its important mark.

Before he moves to consummate this and other points, Williams makes another of his lethal lapses into tautology and the obvious by saying, of *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

But here the political point *is* the literary point. What is created in the book is an isolated independent observer and the objects of his observation. Intermediate characters and experiences which do not form part of this world – this structure of feeling – are simply omitted. What is left is ‘documentary’ enough, but the process of selection and organisation is a literary act: the character of the observer is as real and yet created as the real and yet created world he so powerfully describes.

I only really met Raymond Williams once, and never had the opportunity to ask him how he thought, in a work of reportage and discovery, including self-discovery, things could conceivably have been otherwise. Yet – as you will see – the idea that Eric Blair somehow metamorphosed into George

Orwell, becoming a 'construct' in the process, came to strike Williams as something almost sinister. Without such a metamorphosis, to rejoin with the obvious for a moment, there would have been no 'Orwell' as a character to argue with in the first place.

All these Williams throat-clearing reservations culminate in a full-dress attack on *1984*, which is denounced for being too anti-Communist, for being too pessimistic, and for surrendering to the masochism of betrayal. Williams begins by being mistaken about the sources and inspiration for this novel, which he attributes to the experience of fascism and Nazism alone. It is quite plain, from internal evidence and from Orwell's own writings and correspondence, that it was the Stalin terror (which he had seen early and at first hand in Catalonia) that provided the raw material for the nightmare of 'Ingsoc'. Writers in Eastern Europe, notably Czeslaw Milosc in *The Captive Mind*, were later to record their astonishment at discovering that the author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, which they had read only in pirate editions, had not had direct experience of a 'People's Democracy'. But of course, in Barcelona, he had. One might and should add that, as a novelist, Orwell did more than draw on sheer political material. His descriptions of whining masochists and stool-pigeons in *1984*, for instance, seem to me to be taken almost straight from his accounts of sadism and toadyism at English boarding schools.

Williams's error here is even more remarkable, in that he goes on a few pages later to contradict himself directly:

Ingsoc, it might then be said, is no more English Socialism than Minitrue is the Ministry of Truth. But the identification is in fact made, and has been profoundly damaging. Not in what it says about Soviet society – Orwell's position there was clear and consistent – but in what it implied generally about socialism and a 'centralised economy' . . . By assigning all modern forms of repression and authoritarian control to a single political tendency, he not only misrepresented it, but cut short the kind of analysis that would recognise these inhuman and destructive forces wherever they appeared, under whatever names, and masked by whatever ideology.

So a book published in 1948 – in the face of endless difficulties – should in Williams's view have been a dystopian satire on the form of dictatorship – National Socialism – that had just been defeated and destroyed, rather than on the form – 'People's Democracy' Stalinism – that had just annexed Eastern Europe. Such a book would certainly have been better received by the progressive intellectuals, but it would hardly have forced anybody to face uncomfortable truths.

Williams also appears to have felt – as an unflinching social realist himself – that the novel would have benefited both from being a bit more

cheerful and a touch more optimistic. And, for failing in this respect, he accuses Orwell of beckoning on the very future that he warns against:

It needs to be said, however bitterly, that if the tyranny of 1984 ever finally comes, one of the major elements of the ideological preparation will have been just this way of seeing 'the masses', 'the human beings passing you on the pavement', the eighty-five per cent who are *proles*.

Not content with attributing the views of Winston Smith to his creator – the sort of vulgar fallacy that all students of literature are taught to avoid in their first year – Williams also arraigns Orwell for, as it were, *recommending* the course of self-abnegation and betrayal that Smith takes when he is finally broken in Room 101. Remember the song at the end of the book? Here is how Williams allows himself to characterise it.

Under the spreading chestnut tree
I sold you and you sold me.
He [Orwell] can describe this accurately as 'a peculiar, cracked, braying, jeering note ... a yellow note,' but still *it is what he makes happen*. The cynical jingle of the rat-race, which in similar forms we have been hearing ever since from the agency offices and parties, leads straight to the rat in Room 101. Of course people break down under torture, but not all people break down. (my italics)

One rubs the eyes. *Orwell* makes this happen? As early as the Moscow trials, he had noticed that there was something new and horrific and incredible about the abject confessions of the defendants; about the very thing, in short, that caused many people to believe that the same confessions must be true. But to Williams, who doesn't even register this point, the rat in Room 101 is a rodent spawned by the consumer society! As to betrayal and breakdown, it is indeed true that not all the victims succumbed to torture. Andreu Nin did not, for one, but Williams had nothing to say about his case except for the insinuation that he might at best have been wasting the Communist Party's valuable time.

The element of bad faith here is made manifest, in my judgement, by Williams's call for a novel about totalitarianism that has a happy ending. Pessimism has its mobilising uses – one of them is the role it plays in the essential and unfinished task of destroying illusions.

I'll end this section by noting a suggestive coincidence. In 1982 in *Harper's* magazine in New York, the neoconservative critic Norman Podhoretz – perhaps the most unscrupulous man of letters of our time – wrote an essay to prove that Orwell took the American side in the Cold War between the superpowers. He did this by the method of inserting an ellipsis where none belonged, in an extract from Orwell's 1947 *Tribune* essay 'In Defence of

Comrade Zilliacus'. As between Washington and Moscow, Orwell had written:

'If you *had* to choose between Russia and America, which would you choose? It will not do to give the usual quibbling answer, 'I refuse to choose'. In the end, the choice may be forced upon us. We are no longer strong enough to stand alone, and if we fail to bring a West European union into being we shall be obliged, in the long run, to subordinate our policy to that of one Great Power or another.

Podhoretz employed the simple expedient of leaving out the whole of the third sentence and the whole middle clause of the fourth one. He continued to do this, in reprints of his dull polemic, despite being advised of the fact that he had been rumbled. Williams, by contrast, chose to omit the second and third sentences. Neither man acknowledged that Orwell drew the conclusion, later in the same year, that the emerging Cold War was a contest between greater and lesser evils, that it did not have to be, and that: 'Therefore a Socialist United States of Europe seems to me the only worthwhile political objective today'. Fighting Stalin and Hitler at the same time was a much harsher business than fending off the crudities of Podhoretz and Williams, but it involved sticking to the same consistent points – even if they were inconsistently expressed – and trusting to the readers to notice who was being honest in the long term, or at all. Orwell, incidentally, never paid his foes back in the same coin. At the very last stage of the proofs of *Animal Farm*, he altered the passage about the blowing up of the animals' hard-built and hard-won windmill. It had read: 'All the animals including Napoleon flung themselves on their faces.' Orwell changed this to 'All the animals except Napoleon'. It weighed with him that Stalin had remained in Moscow during the Nazi advance on the city.

There's a tendency, unremarked so far as I am aware, for Williams's works to end with deflated or inconclusive or even vapid sentences. 'In speaking of a common culture,' he wrote or typed at the end of *The Idea of a Common Culture*, 'one is asking, precisely, for that free, contributive and common *process* of participation in the creation of meanings and values, as I have tried to define it.' What is the word 'precisely' doing in that lame assembly of terms? Check it out – you'll see that I'm right as often as I'm wrong. Anyway, at the close of the Orwell book he wrote, in 1971:

We are never likely to reach a time when we can do without his frankness, his energy, his willingness to join in. These are the qualities we shall go on respecting in him, whatever other conclusions we may come to. But they are real qualities only if they are independent and active. The thing to do with his work, his history, is to read it, not imitate it. He is still there, tangibly, with the wound in his throat, the sad strong face, the plain words written in hardship

and exposure. But then as we reach out to touch him we catch something of his hardness, a necessary hardness. We are acknowledging a presence and a distance: other names, other years; a history to respect, to remember, to move on from.

I can recall thinking, when I read this first, that what was most striking was the insincerity. The sentence about the wounded throat is rather fine, but the rest is either tautology or cant. Of course he is 'still there', even if not 'tangibly'. But how can qualities like frankness and energy be made more or less 'real' – which it has been conceded that they already are, and almost timelessly at that – by becoming somehow 'independent and active'? The hardness, on its own evidence, is neither here nor there. Williams's long withdrawing flannel and flounder in the last sentence, with its presence and distance and other names and years (why not faces?), struck me as a weak way of his saying that this example was something to note, perhaps, but also to try and forget.

As it was to prove. In the book-length interview and conversation with Perry Anderson, Francis Mulhern and Anthony Barnett, published as *Politics and Letters* in 1979, there is an entire chapter given over to the promulgation of contempt for Orwell. (The book takes its title in part from a post-Cambridge journal of the same name, founded by Williams and Wolf Mankowitz and Clifford Collins in the postwar period, and consecrated to the rather forbidding idea of a synthesis between Marx and Leavis.) Recollecting this ephemeral enterprise, Williams pays one unintended compliment to Orwell:

who, then riding high on the success of *Animal Farm*, although now getting really ill, gave us his 'Writers and Leviathan' essay. Then when Collins went to see him in hospital he actually handed over the manuscript of his essay on Gissing and said: 'You are very welcome to this.' By the time it should have appeared the magazine had folded (incidentally inducing a dreadful moment since for quite a long time that essay on Gissing, which Orwell was naturally quite anxious to get back, was lost: it eventually turned up under a pile of someone's old papers).

This glancing mention of Orwell's generosity out of the way, the fun can begin. One cannot always appreciate the answers without being given the full benefit of the questions, but let me allow Williams's first response to stand on its own:

In the Britain of the fifties, along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting. If you tried to develop a new kind of popular cultural analysis, there was Orwell; if you wanted to report on work or ordinary life, there was Orwell; if you engaged in any kind of socialist argument, there was an enormously inflated statue of Orwell warning you to

go back. Down to the late sixties political editorials in newspapers would regularly admonish younger socialists to read their Orwell and see where all that led to.

This is bizarre, coming from the Williams who knew (and had cited the fact) that Orwell had repudiated, in a firm letter to an official of the United Auto Workers Union in America, precisely that misreading of 1984. It is also bizarre, coming from the Williams who had written and presumably believed, in 1971, that 'the generation for whom Suez, Hungary, and the Bomb were signals for political action looked to him with respect ... this New Left respected Orwell directly', and who had also asserted (quite perceptively) that Orwell's novels of the thirties were the seedbed of the anti-hero, 'Angry Young Men' works of the English 1950s. Such a piece of double-entry book-keeping – which among other things involves the curiously passive stratagem of judging Orwell by what others choose to make of him – is explicable by one of perhaps two things: a change of heart or a feeling of resentment – even of envy. Williams does not propose a change of heart, at any rate, as his motive. He simply, though pressured somewhat by his questioners, discards the layers of ambivalence that had invested his earlier work:

The chapter [of the 1971 book] that I would not have missed writing was the one where I discuss the creation of a character called Orwell who is very different from the writer called Orwell – the successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it.

I leave it to any reader to decide whether Orwell among the tramps or the coal-miners took the view, or expected any reader to take the view, that he was 'simply' a camera on the Issyvoov model. Now here comes one of those collectors'-item questions that I promised earlier. Having said that '1984 will be a curio in 1984', Williams's prompters propose the following:

During the Cold War, the international bourgeoisie had an objective need for extremely potent and, above all, popular works of a blatantly anti-communist direction. Of all the countries in Europe, England was a particularly strong candidate for producing them, because it had no experience of a mass revolutionary movement in the 20th century, the local ruling class was less affected by internal upheavals than any of its continental counterparts, and the social order was the most traditional and stable. It is unlikely to be an accident that it generated the two best-sellers of anti-communist literature on an international scale – Orwell and Koestler. The case of the latter is particularly suggestive since he was himself of course not English. It is always necessary to remember the enormous international resonance of the later Orwell. To this day, for example, tens of thousands of copies of *Animal Farm* and *1984* are sold every year in West Germany, as obligatory texts in the

school system. That is not to mention the broadcasting of his catchwords over the various emigre radio networks to Eastern Europe.

To this, Raymond Williams (who was old enough to smile at the ancient thirties tic about things being 'no accident', and had done so in print) offered this reply:

The qualification one must make is that the composition of these writings predates the outset of the Cold War – he wrote *Animal Farm* during the period of maximum popularity of the Soviet Union in this country. There was an oppositional element in him which made him the first in the field. The recruitment of very private feelings against socialism becomes intolerable by 1984. It is profoundly offensive to state as a general truth, as Orwell does, that people will always betray each other.

Well, at least he gave Orwell credit for 'the composition of these writings', which his questioners had thought to be 'generated' by the English-speaking subsection of 'the international bourgeoisie'. He appears to have forgotten that Orwell opposed Stalin and the Soviet Union long before their wartime and postwar popularity, just as his questioners have overlooked the fact that *Animal Farm* was disapproved by the Ministry of Information and rejected by T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber. (Their inane observation that '1984 will be a curio by 1984' was itself to become a curio long before 1989.) Nor does he intrude the reasonably obvious fact that Arthur Koestler, regardless of 'upheavals' in traditional and hidebound England, would very certainly have been dead if he had tried to carry on writing in any of the countries affected by the Hitler–Stalin Pact. Orwell would, however, probably have been pleased at the reception accorded his books in any part of Germany – one of the early editions of *Animal Farm* was available only in the Ukrainian language for 'displaced persons' kept in cages in that country, and much of that printing was seized by American occupation forces and turned over to the Soviet zone for destruction. As for the unconscionable exploitation of Orwellian texts by Western or émigré radio networks, we knew long before 1979, from Milosc and others, that the message of these same texts had already been driven home in what *New Left Review* might well have chosen to call more 'concrete' ways.

Williams's obtuse insistence that Orwell magnifies and praises betrayal in 1984 has, I hope, already been answered. When asked whether his view had altered since he penned his 1971 book, he replied decidedly:

I must say that I cannot bear much of it now. If I had to say which writings have done the most damage, it would be what you call the social patriotism – the dreadful stuff from the beginning of the war about England as a family with the wrong members in charge, the shuffling old aunts and uncles whom we could fairly painlessly get rid of. Many of the political arguments of the

kind of Labourism that is usually associated with the tradition of Durbin or Gaitskell can be traced to these essays, which are much more serious facts than *Animal Farm*.

One might as fairly say that, when John Major compared Eric Blair favourably to Tony Blair, Williams was 'objectively' on the side of John Major. I confess, though, that I don't know and cannot guess what may be implied in the idea that these parish-pump observations are 'more serious facts' than the world-historic tragedy satirised in *Animal Farm*. For Williams the Marxist to argue that British social democratic revisionism took its tune from one of Orwell's weaker essays, rather than from Ramsay MacDonald or R. H. Tawney, would seem to undergird my suggestion that there is something unpleasantly like jealousy involved in such an a-historical overestimate (as well as underestimation) of Orwell's real-time influence.

I note again that the crucial image – of a conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income – is too strong to have been overlooked by accident. When Edward Said stressed a similar point in his treatment of *Mansfield Park*, nobody accused him of confusing Jane Austen's delicately filiated family relationships with the deep structure of slavery and imperialism.

In the last paragraph of his exchange with *New Left Review*, in which he repeated and intensified his earlier statement by saying 'I cannot read him now', Williams confined his condemnation to the narrow, debatable but scarcely indictable charge that Orwell had changed his mind. 'For example, there was no objective reason at all for the disgraceful attacks he made on pacifists or revolutionary opponents of the war in American periodicals, denouncing people here who were simply in his own position of three or four years before.' What have we here? What we have here is a conscious confusion of categories, allied to an unworthy hint of chauvinism. The American periodical was *Partisan Review*, for all that Williams makes it sound like a sheet produced by Henry Luce. The 'people here' were often those who – sturdy provincials as he makes them sound – did Stalin's work by advocating the partition of Poland, and denouncing the British naval blockade of Germany as an inhuman attack against civilians. That this was also Hitler's work is an equally 'objective' fact, materialised by both Molotov and Ribbentrop in their explicit alliance. So, even if there was no good 'objective' reason for Orwell's attacks, there were some pretty solid subjective ones. As against that, Orwell always defended the right of Indian nationalists to opt out of Britain's war, and showed a lively interest in defending the civil liberties even of the most gullible pacifists. (The British Communists of the time, lest we forget, waited only for Hitler's assault on Russia before demanding the practical equivalent of internment for all those to the Left and the Right who disagreed with their patriotic war aims.)

The recent absurd fuss over Orwell's willingness to 'name names' – the names of those he had already publicly denounced and lampooned – was manured in the soil by those who have never forgiven him for the stubborn rectitude he evinced between 1936 and the time of his death. Notice the way that a lonely, derided, near-bankrupt and desperately ill man is awarded such *power* by Williams three decades later: the power to disrupt the whole movement of those who are on the right side of history; the power to unleash the Cold War; the power to induce despair and to encourage betrayal in the ranks of a people who could look the Normans in the eye. This argues, in the same hypocritical relationship that vice bears to virtue, the realisation that principles are potent, that historical truth will out, and that the fearless individual can make a difference. Raymond Williams had the gift of plain and direct speech, and he never resorted to jargon unless he felt that 'objectively' it was required of him. The Plaça George Orwell, on that Barcelona waterfront, is proof that 'history to the defeated' can still make some amends, and that the masses – as Williams himself so finely stated – are not fashioned for manipulation or drudgery but are made up of autonomous individuals, and that justice is ordinary, though not quite in the way that he thought culture to be, because it is not latent or innate but needs to be decided by struggle, and by irony too.

Notes

- 1 I have wondered if this is a sly reference to Orwell's novel *Coming Up For Air*, in which the narrating character, George Bowling, alludes to the misery of the petit-bourgeois housing estates of the 1930s, and sarcastically proposes a statue to 'the god of building societies'. In one hand, this figure would carry an enormous key, and in the other: 'a cornucopia, out of which would be pouring portable radios, life-insurance policies, false teeth, aspirins, French letters and concrete garden rollers'. Either Williams has only a subliminal memory of this passage, or he is again mistaking the voice of the character for the voice of the author. Or else I am mistaken.
- 2 The recent publication of Orwell's *Complete Works* (in twenty volumes produced by Secker and Warburg) concludes the argument about his being a 'snitch' or police spy. The entries for 4 March 1949 and 2 May 1949, among many others, show Orwell insisting to his friends Richard Rees and David Astor that 'fellow-travelling' is not to be criminalised. While a petition from the Freedom Defence Committee (FDC) on 21 August 1948 demands that all government employees suspected or accused of disloyalty be entitled to legal and trade-union representation, be permitted to cross-examine witnesses against them, and be allowed to demand corroborative evidence in the case of unsupported testimony from the Special Branch or MI5. Orwell was a sponsor of the FDC and signed this important letter along with E. M. Forster, Osbert Sitwell, Julian Symons, Gerald Brenan, Augustus John, Herbert Read and Henry Moore, among others.

Afterword by Colin MacCabe

Christopher Hitchens's acute article is a tough read for someone who, like so many other of his students, adored Raymond Williams 'this side idolatry'. There is no doubt that Orwell is Raymond's blind spot, that the student reflexes of a committed Stalinist were brought into unusually prominent play by Orwell to whom Raymond's positions are often little different from a hack Soviet apologist. The passages on the Spanish Civil War that Hitchens quotes are inexcusable. But Williams's general argument with Orwell has more than historical pertinence. Indeed it poses problems that are as real for Hitchens as Williams. It can be found in its most interesting form neither in the short book that Raymond wrote on Orwell in 1971 nor in the section on Orwell in *Politics and Letters* in 1979, but in the brief chapter on Orwell in *Culture and Society* that Raymond published in 1958.

This short note cannot hope to deal with the complex evolution of Williams's thought. Suffice it simply to assert that Raymond's most interesting work was elaborated outside a university system and in the context of an adult education movement invigorated by the new social settlement of 1945. It is a considerable paradox that the resurgence of Marxism within the universities in the late sixties and early seventies had a debilitating influence on Raymond's thinking. It is for me unquestionable that the 1979 interviews published as *Politics and Letters* marked an intellectual nadir. Williams's own very sophisticated position, which had held together the radical development of democracy with the growth of universal education and its attendant media, was replaced with a facilely updated and economically ignorant Marxism which already twenty years later looks like a museum piece. It is worth adding that when I taxed Raymond with a rather more polite version of these comments in 1979, he seemed to grant them some justice when he told me that he had found the whole process very psychically taxing. The immediate result, he said, was that he had been unable to write for six months, something which had never happened to him before.

If we go back twenty years before *Politics and Letters* to *Culture and Society*, we find Raymond's case on Orwell put concisely and succinctly in a short chapter at the end of that book. The objection to Orwell is his refusal of all affiliation within society – if socialism is retained as a goal, socialists are dismissed en masse in a variety of easy generalisations which leave no possibility of positive social change. And Orwell's generalisations are rooted in a stance of simple objectivity in which the writer's own social and linguistic formation is simply discounted.

These questions are ever more important today. What are the possibilities of a felt collectivity which could achieve the political transformation rendered ever more urgent by the intensifying contradictions of capitalism? Williams's convinced belief in the progressive possibilities of the working class may have a dated feel for those of us living post Reagan and Thatcher. But all those who own nothing but their labour are witnessing an objective convergence of interest which awaits a non-coercive elaboration of a shared global subjectivity. Such a project will inevitably confront the tension between language as conscious instrument and language as defining perspective.

These brief remarks are simply to suggest that Hitchens is absolutely right to think that Williams's argument with Orwell is important, and it is for that reason that *Critical Quarterly* has published his brilliant lecture. But its brilliance should not obscure the fact that the argument is even more important and wide-ranging than Hitchens suggests.