

George Orwell and the Question of Humiliation in Nineteen Eighty-Four

© Bertram Wyatt-Brown, 2010

George Orwell's 1984 first appeared in 1949 during the early years of the Cold War. In keeping with the times, this classic dystopia of humiliation and fear depicts the utility, in a totalitarian regime, of dominating masses of people by means of orchestrated terror and shame. First, we will sketch briefly the connection between Orwell's imaginative depiction of oppression and the psychological effects of structured and unrelenting abusive behavior. The protagonist Winston Smith, you will recall, famously surrendered his identity under the masterful spell of O'Brien, Oceania's chief tormentor in the Thought Police.

Of course, the work was designed as a political statement of trends in modern social and political life. Critics, pundits, satirists, novelists, historians, and so many others the world over refer to some current incident, individual, or course of action as one Orwell had predicted would occur.¹ At first, the book was rebuffed by major publishers in both England and America because of its satirical assault on Stalin's repressive rule.² Once the Cold War began in earnest, however, it sold millions and became, contrary to Orwell's own socialist convictions, a Bible for the Right wings of many countries, most notably our own. His reputation has since soared. One critic has declared, "Since his death his soul has been up for grabs."³ Indeed, regardless of one political bias or another, "Orwellian" has joined our everyday vocabulary.⁴ Apart from its apparent relevance to so many situations, Nineteen Eighty-Four also has a psychological underpinning sometimes overlooked. Therefore the second issue is to trace in Orwell's own experience the sources of his psychological insight. Events in an author's life have a bearing on what the writer transforms into fiction.

Returning to the first point, a most remarkable aspect of the book is its prescience about a psychological phenomenon that in the 1970s became known as the Stockholm Syndrome. By that is meant the use of humiliation and fear to reshape a personality so that no individuality remains. You may remember that in August 1973 in the course of a Swedish bank robbery, two machine-gun carrying thieves seized four employees, firing their weapons and shouting, "The party's just begun!" The standoff with police lasted 130 hours.³ After the captives' rescue on 28

August, the bank employees vigorously defended their recent oppressors. One of the three women even married one of the criminals. Another founded a fund for their legal defense. Nils Bejerot, a Swedish criminologist, coined the famous phrase to describe the psychological circumstances. The role of obsequiousness might seem to be gross cowardliness. Yet, it might mean survival. The infliction of humiliation and helplessness can destroy notions of resistance and revolt and even a sense of self.

In Orwell's narrative, an incident demonstrates how humiliation unnerved the protagonist. Winston Smith has to confront the children of Parsons, a party member and neighbor, and his wife. A boy of nine in the family leaps from behind a chair with a toy pistol and shouts "You're a traitor!. . .You're a thought-criminal! You're a Eurasian spy! I'll shoot you, I'll vaporize you, I'll send you to the salt mines!"⁴ Later we learn that the boy has turned in his father as an enemy of the regime, having overheard him when he was having a nightmare. Curiously, Orwell offers no words suggesting how Smith reacted to this uncalled for assault in the name of the ruling party.

On another occasion, during the daily mandated morning exercise, the female coach on the all-seeing "telescreen" publicly and raspily reprimands Winston. He had not reached his toes. Again we only surmise what the humiliated worker in the Ministry of Truth felt. The omissions may be deliberate, an outgrowth of customary English reticence about personal matters, the science fiction character of the work, in which genre setting more than character matters most, and the nature of Orwell himself. He was an intensely private individual even though his fictions draw greatly on autobiography. Thus, throughout the book humiliation is all too present but not named until the very last chapter.

This is the society that O'Brien and members of the Inner Party have fashioned for the sake of retaining complete and intractable control. O'Brien glories in a social order based solely on hatred, not on love or justice as the old ways were, however flawed in actuality. "In our world," O'Brien exclaims as he towers over Smith, "there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement."⁵ Our key word does not appear on his list, but the whole system was based on fear and humiliation, including O'Brien's reference to "self-abasement." At the climax of the story, the greatest humiliation played on Winston Smith's uncontrollable dread of famished rats. In the much-feared torture "Room 101" his face is

locked into place with rats frantically trying to reach him and devour his head. Completely unnerved, he shouts, "Do it to Julia," a signal betrayal of his beloved. Thus broken in spirit, as O'Brien has planned it, he is rendered harmless enough to be allowed to drink himself to death. No one minds at all. He is devoid of his lover Julia's companionship, devoid of any thoughts of rebellion or subversion, stripped of all his individualism. Instead he has come to know how to love Big Brother and the regime. There is no hope to relieve the outcome, except insofar as the polemical warning to avoid this scenario.

* * *

We now reach the second concern--how Orwell's prior life helped him formulate this North Korean-like political satire of mindless obedience. Some critics have attributed the story to his schooling at St. Cyprian's grammar school, as he described it in a bitter essay, "Such, Such were the Joys." Anthony West and Jeffrey Meyers both claim that Nineteen Eighty-Four had its birth in his humiliations at St. Cyprian's.⁵ However well that might fit a psychological interpretation, it does not entirely work. He may have written about an exposed bed-wetting episode in the school as early as 1938. According to schoolmates the incident did not happen to Orwell--then Eric Blair--at all. It was another boy.⁶ But that matters little. The St. Cyprian essay is only partly true anyhow, but the imagination not fact-exhibiting was Orwell's central concern.⁷

The best literary sources for Orwell's preoccupation with the employment of fear and humiliation for political hegemony were his own works: Homage to Catalonia, The Road to Wigan Pier, and Down and Out in London and Paris. The humiliation of Orwell's poverty--he never had much of the ready, as the British say--also contributed to his very mordant outlook in Nineteen Eighty-Four. In Down and Out, Eric Blair, as he then was called, described how he nearly starved to death after a fellow boarder, he wrote, had stolen all his money. "Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else." It is as if "one had turned into a jellyfish," and one's blood had been flushed out and "luke-warm water substituted." Actually, it turns out that he may have been the victim of one "Suzanne," a boyish, pretty "little trollop," with whose pimp Blair had quarreled. Her boyfriend, an Arab, sent her off to Blair's room at some point and took not only his cash but all his luggage as well. He confessed to this incident years later, but is he to be believed? All along he could have obtained help from his Aunt

Nellie, a resident in Paris.⁸ In this instance at least, Orwell sought humiliation in order to learn about more about that state of mind. More perilously, though was his constant and life-threatening struggle against tuberculosis. He always had had weak lungs made worse by incessant smoking. The disease itself clearly has a depressive effect on the sufferer's psyche. When Frederic Warburg, his publisher, first read it, he declared, "Here is a study in pessimism unrelieved."⁹ According to psychiatrists Adam J. Trenton and Glenn W. Currier, "Mood disorders seem to be particularly common in TB patients compared with those with other medical diagnoses."¹⁰

In addition, it is hard for Americans to appreciate the depth of English class prejudices. Orwell's parents, the Blairs, scrimped on a small pension. They could only enroll their sensitive son at St. Cyprian's school after they had struck a tuition bargain with the Wilkes's, who ran the establishment. Belonging to the genteel middle class, the parents could not do for their son what other St. Cyprian's parents could--or so Orwell concluded. But they were not truly declassé. There, as Orwell's friend T. R. Fyvel put it, "deeply philistine" and wholly unappreciative of their son's literary possibilities.¹¹ That denigration may have triggered his resentments expressed in terms of class. According to a posthumous autobiography, he became the source of snobbish amusement among fellow pupils.¹² At age eleven, Orwell maintained, two fellow students began openly to rub his nose in his comparative poverty, refusing to give him the spending money his parents sent.¹³

But another seed for his outlook was his own history. When a young and callow police officer in Burma, Orwell was himself as imperious as the O'Brien character. In The Road to Wigan Pier, he remarks about beating Burmese commoners: "Orientals can be very provoking."¹⁴ According to a fellow Etonian visiting Rangoon at that time, Orwell acted the part of "the imperial policeman." He welcomed a prohibition against thrashing of English schoolboys but, he told his guest, "such laxity wouldn't work when trying to control the Burmese."¹⁵ There had once been a different Orwell, who was born and reared as Eric Arthur Blair--two personalities, two names, like O. Henry, Mark Twain, and Joel Chandler Harris. But Eric Blair repented his meanness and bursts of violent anger in Burma. It could be said that Nineteen Eighty -Four was a statement of expiation for his sins of the past. The humiliations he had felt throughout

his early years should not be visited upon others. Nor should those degradations be visited on others. Instead, Orwell translated them into the manipulations and character of his monstrous Thought policeman, O'Brien.

None of these factors truly matter as much as the profound insight that Orwell delineated. They came chiefly from his own imagination and the very brutal but revealing logic of his construction. O'Brien informs his intelligent but susceptible victim Winston Smith, "Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing."¹⁶ Such are the effects of humiliation that Orwell so marvelously uncovers.

Endnotes

i See, for instance, the satirist Timothy Rall, "Why Bush is Addicted to Perpetual War," <http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=12654>. (Unfortunately the site has been removed.)

2. Orwell drew the criticism of the far left because its members refused to recognize the possibility of a totalitarian regime emerging in the modern world according to the fashion the novel depicts,. Raymond Williams and Milan Kundera did not see the work as a dystopia but as a very unpoetic fiction. Certainly it is not very successful in the delineation of the main characters, Winston Smith, Julia, and O'Brien. They are, at best, only two-dimensional. But Orwell was not seeking artistic results but political attention. See John Rodden, Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell (Wilmington, Del. ISI Books, 2003), 156-60. Likewise, according to Daniel Leab, Animal Farm as a film underwent harsh criticism from Lewis Menand and especially Stonor Saunders. They argue that the movie was a product of the iniquitous CIA. Some other critics even claim that the agency distributed it and had much influence in its Hollywood production. See Daniel J. Leab, Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of Animal Farm (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), xvi-xvii.

3 John Rodden, Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003), 228.

4. According to the Civil Liberties Newsletter, The word Orwellian “is sometimes used to describe a particularly anti-libertarian government policy, but it is also sometimes used to describe the peculiar, nonsensical thought process behind Oceania's social structure--a thought process in which ideas that are obviously self-contradictory are accepted as true based on the fact that an authority figure is asserting them. See [.http://civilliberty.about.com/od/historyprofiles/g/orwellian.htm](http://civilliberty.about.com/od/historyprofiles/g/orwellian.htm)

3. Laura Fitzpatrick, “Stockholm Syndrome,” Time Magazine (31 August, 2009); Nils Bejerot, “The Six Day War in Stockholm,” New Scientist, 61 (No. 886, 1974):486-487; Rebecca A. Demarest, “The Relationship Between Stockholm Syndrome and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Battered Women,” Student Pulse, 5 November, 2009; A. Favaro, D. Degortes, G. Colombo, and P. Santonastaso, “The Effects of Trauma among Kidnap Victims in Sardinia, Italy,” Psychological Medicine, 30 (2000):975-980; D. L. R. Graham, E. I. Rawlings, K. Ihms, D. Latimer, J. Foliano, A. Thompson, K. Suttman, M. Farrington, and R. Hacker, “A Scale for Identifying ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ Reactions in Young Dating Women: Factor Structure, Reliability, and Validity,” Violence and Victims, 10 (1995):3-22; I. Kuleshnyk, “The Stockholm Syndrome: Toward an Understanding,” Social Action and the Law, 10 (1984):37-42.

4 Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, 756.

5. Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four , 898.

5. Anthony West, Principles and Persuasions (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1958), 155-59, and Jeffrey Meyers, A Reader’s Guide to George Orwell (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 30, 46, 144-54. See also Bernard Crick, George Orwell: A Life (New York: Penguin, 1982), fn3 &4, 609.

6. George Orwell, “Such, Such Were the Joys,” in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., Orwell: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950 (Boston: David Godine, 1968), 330-69; D J. Taylor, Orwell: The Life (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), 34.

7. John Ruskin put it well: “ The action of the imagination is a voluntary summoning of the conception of things, absent or impossible; and the pleasure and the nobility of the imagination partly consists in its knowledge of and contemplation of them.” Quoted from The Seven Lamps of Architecture by Christopher Ricks, “Undermining Keats,” New York Review of Books 66 (17 December 2009):46. On Orwell’s St. Cyprian experience, see Cyril Connolly, “Enemies of Promise,” in The Selected Works of Cyril Connolly (2 vols.; London, Picador, 2002), 2:23: Orwell, Connolly remarks, “escaped persecution through good manners, and a baffling independence.” He also wrote that the boys who knew Orwell never had any idea that he felt himself to be a social inferior to them. See Connolly, “George Orwell,” in Selected Works, 1:253.

8 Michael Shelden, Orwell: The Authorized Biography (London: Heineman, 1991), 139.

9. Krick, Orwell, 567; George Orwell, Down and Out in Paris and London (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 38.

10. Adam J. Trenton and Glenn W. Currier, “Treatment of Comorbid Tuberculosis and Depression,” Journal of Clinical Psychiatry 3 (No. 6 2001): 236–243, quotation 236; Ismail Orhan Aydin and Aylin Ulus,ahin, “Depression, Anxiety Comorbidity, and Disability in Tuberculosis and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Patients: Applicability of GHQ-12,” General Hospital Psychiatry, 23 (No. 2, March 2001): 77-83 (March 2001):77-83; G. D. Natani, N. K. Jain, T. N. Sharma, P.S. Gehlot, S. P. Agrawal, S. Koolwal, R. B. Gupta, and S. P. Agnihotri “Depression in Tuberculosis Patients: Correlation with Duration of Disease and Response to Anti-Tuberculous Chemotherapy,” Indian Journal of Tuberculosis. 32 (October 1985): 195-98.

11 T. R.,Fyvel, George Orwell, A Personal Memoir (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 12-14.

12. Orwell was very class-conscious and considered his familial legacy as belonging to the “lower-upper” class “as being upper-middle class short of

money,” as Crick puts it (p. 58). “The Blairs, living on a retired civil servant's relatively modest fixed income, had to scrimp ingeniously to educate their children in the style they considered proper.” Mitzi M. Brunsdale, Student Companion to George Orwell (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 3. Cyril Connolly, “George Orwell” in The Evening Colonade (London: David Bruce and Watson, 1973), 373. Orwell, “Such, Such Were the Joys,” in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., Orwell: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950 (Boston: David Godine, 1968), 330-69. Michael Shelden's biography treats such incidents as the bed-wetting with which “Such, Such” opens as an insight into Orwell's mind. Bernard Crick, however, worries whether the humiliating episode really happened to Orwell. See Crick, Orwell, 526, and Roger Averill, “Empathy, Externality and Character in Biography: A Consideration of the Authorized Versions of George Orwell,” CLIO, 31 (2001). See Shelden, Orwell,

13. With reference to the alleged bed-wetting incident, Orwell claimed in “Such, Such,” that “To this day I can feel myself almost swooning with shame as I stood, a very small, round-faced boy in short corduroy knickers, before the two women. I could not speak. I felt that I should die if “Mrs Form” were to beat me. But my dominant feeling was not fear or even resentment: it was simply shame because one more person, and that a woman, had been told of my disgusting offence.” Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell v. 4 (4 vols. Boston, Nonpareil Books, 2000), 332. “From the age of eight, or even earlier, the consciousness of sin was never far away from me. If I contrived to seem callous and defiant, it was only a thin cover over a mass of shame and dismay. All through my boyhood I had a profound conviction that I was no good, that I was wasting my time, wrecking my talents, behaving with monstrous folly and wickedness and ingratitude.” *Ibid.*, 333.

14. When a policeman in Burma, less than twenty years old, Orwell was thoroughly abashed when an American missionary saw another policeman brutally work over a prisoner. The clergyman turned to Orwell and remarked, as Orwell records it, with pity in his voice, “‘I wouldn't care to have your job.’ It made me horribly ashamed.” Orwell, Road to Wigan Pier (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1961), 126-27. He then remarks, “For five

years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience. Innumerable remembered faces--faces of prisoners in the dock, of men waiting in the condemned cells, of subordinates I had bullied and aged peasants I had snubbed, of servants and coolies I had hit with my fist in moments of rage (nearly everyone does these things in the, East, at any rate occasionally: orientals can be very provoking)--haunted me intolerably. I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. I suppose that sounds exaggerated; but if you do for five years a job that you thoroughly disapprove of, you will probably feel the same. I had reduced everything to the simple theory that the oppressed are always right and the oppressors are always wrong: a mistaken theory, but the natural result of being one of the oppressors yourself. I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants. And, chiefly because I had had to think everything out in solitude, I had carried my hatred of oppression to extraordinary lengths. At that time failure seemed to me to be the only virtue. Every suspicion of self-advancement, even to 'succeed' in life to the extent of making a few hundreds a year, seemed to me spiritually ugly, a species of bullying." (Ibid., 127-28).

In addition, his famous essay, "Shooting an Elephant," reveals his own sense of humiliation. As a young officer in Burma, he found himself confronting a crowd of Burmese villagers expecting him to kill a rogue elephant. But the animal had calmed down and causing no further destructiveness. If he failed to carry out the execution he would lose respect and be the subject of local derision. Even though his conscience and knowledge of the elephant's high value to its owner, he fires. Some authorities claim that the incident occurred to one of Orwell's colleagues, and he was not himself involved. But Orwell made it his own story, and, true or not, it is another indication of his repudiation of his own imperialist impulses and his despising of the subjects under his authority. See James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 10-11. Scott remarks, "Orwell is no more free to be himself, to break convention, than a slave would be in the presence of a tyrannical master. If subordination seems to require a credible performance of humility and deference, so domination seems to require a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery" (p. 11). The

slave risks a beating, but the master is only subject to ridicule. In effect, as Scott argues, Orwell “has so assimilated the code [of colonial dominance] that he appears to fear possible derision as much as death” (p. 49). He must maintain the public impression of being a brave Sahib.

15. Emma Larkin, Finding George Orwell in Burma (New York: Penguin, 2004), 144-45.

16. Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, 897.