

THE AMBIVALENT ORWELL:
Patterns of Ambiguity in his Thought
and its Expression

by

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B.A. (Hon.), Queen's University at Kingston, 1975

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of English)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
January, 1978

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is devoted to exploring the contention that there exists in the writing of George Orwell a strong element of ambiguity or ambivalence, and that this is manifest not only in the way he thinks about issues and problems, but also in the way he employs artistic forms to express himself. Orwell's often inconsistent views on religion, nature, the past, and society (which for Orwell invariably involves politics) are accordingly treated as aspects of his ambivalent response to two different problems that provide two slightly different, albeit related, perspectives on his thought. In Chapters II and III the main causes of this ambivalence in Orwell's thought are traced to a dislike of abstraction coupled with a tendency to confuse questions of morality (normative considerations) with questions of fact (empirical considerations), and in Chapter IV these features of his outlook are related to the modes and forms of expression which he employs in the writing of Homage to Catalonia, Coming Up for Air, Animal Farm, and Nineteen Eighty-Four, his last four major works. What emerges from this is a sense of Orwell's increasing control over the complexities of aesthetic distance involved in writing fiction. At the same time

there is a move from vague ambiguity to a more clearly defined formal tension, which though never resolved, is articulated so forcefully as to be instrumental in the making of Orwell's popular reputation and of his significance as a literary figure.

Throughout, the thesis develops a view of the critical difficulties involved in trying to deal with Orwell's work, and provides some commentary on the efforts of various critics in the field to overcome those difficulties. Though it is not a primary, purpose of this thesis, there is therefore some indication of the implications which a study of Orwell has for critical methodology.

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CHAPTER I

One of the most serious difficulties faced by critics of George Orwell's work stems from the many apparent or real contradictions, paradoxes and ambiguities in his thinking and writing. Although, for instance, he condemned Britain's imperial mentality and colonial administration, he admired the ethical sense of responsibility and missionary zeal that motivated the original empire builders. Although as a socialist he recognized the value of technological progress as a humanist he feared its possible consequences. He clearly saw as important the role which intellectuals and artists play in society, but was quick to condemn excessively abstract cerebration or an over refinement of sensibility among his fellow thinkers and writers, especially those of the left. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that in spite of his rejection of many of the tenets of literary symbolism, he frequently sought to emulate the achievements of artists such as Joyce and Proust.¹ Indeed, it may be said that

¹For further development of this idea vide Keith Alldritt, The Making of George Orwell: An Essay in Literary History, London: Edward Arnold, 1968.

although Orwell remains one of the more important figures of modern British literature, he produced neither a significant body of art nor a finished system of thought.. This per se makes it difficult to given an intelligible, coherent, and unified account of his work without distortion or or misrepresentation. What is needed is a critical approach that concedes the existence of contradiction and ambivalence in Orwell's writing, one that seeks to explore and explain these features rather than deny or avoid them.

The approach most frequently adopted by critics and commentators on Orwell has been to go beyond a study of his writing to a study of the events of his life. In effect, this biographical approach has been based on the premise that "Orwell is a man whose significance cannot be defined by his writing," for "he has a moral weight that other writers of greater stature lack."² The majority of books written from this perspective have been by men who knew Orwell during the thirties and forties, such as John Atkins, George Woodcock, Richard Reeves, T. R. Fyvel, and Christopher Hollis. Along with Orwell's autobiographical writings these books constitute a part of what Woodcock has called "the phantom biography of George Orwell." However, as Woodcock himself concedes, such an approach involves the critic in an attempt to set up a relationship between a literary personality and a private personality whose real nature can in most

² Roberta Kalechofsky, George Orwell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 46.

instances only be guessed at. He further suggests that the biography of a man of thought is generally of less significance than that of a man of action. This is because the creative intellect, expressed in writing, is so capable of transforming the nature of actions and events which are, after all, the basis for biography.³ Finally, it is clear that Orwell himself wanted his literary personality to stand independent of his private personality, for in his will he left instructions that no official biography of him should be written; and as he puts it in his essay on Charles Dickens: "A writer's literary personality has little or nothing to do with his private character."⁴

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming of the biographical approach stems from its tendency to cloud understanding of Orwell's actual artistic achievements and failures. For though Orwell was an "engagé" writer who gave a political purpose to much of his work, he was nonetheless concerned with the formal artistic qualities of writing. In "Why I Write" (1946), he speaks for instance about one of his better known works:

My book about the Spanish Civil War, Homage to Catalonia, is, of course, a frankly political book, but in the main it is written with a certain detachment and regard for

³ George Woodcock, "Orwell: The Phantom Biography" a talk for CBC Radio given August 30th, 1976, 10:15 p.m. PST, CBU FM (105.7), Vancouver.

⁴ George Orwell, "Charles Dickens" in The Collected Essays Journalism and Letters of George Orwell vol. I, ed Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell (1968; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 454. Hereafter this will be referred to as CEJL.

form. I did try very hard in it to tell the whole truth without violating my literary instincts. . . . (CEJL, I, 29)

Once the artistic qualities of his writing (both fiction and non-fiction) are recognized, it becomes clear that Orwell's literary significance can only be fully understood if the relationship between artistic and intellectual elements in his work -- between form and content as it were -- is explored.

If primary critical stress is laid on this aspect of Orwell's actual writing, on the fusions of thought and expression which he is able to achieve, certain conceptual difficulties are avoided. Among these are the intentionalist fallacy -- the error of assuming that the author conceives of his work in the same light as does the critic or that the task of the critic is to discover the intention of the author -- and the "personal heresy", which is the mistake of assuming that an author's work is the expression of largely private and personal concerns. Far too many critics who see Orwell's writing as an extension of, and simple commentary on the events of his life have at one point or another encountered these difficulties. Only by maintaining the form-content distinction is it possible to arrive at a full understanding of Orwell's literary accomplishment without looking far beyond his "consciously" created literary personality. His work can accordingly be assessed on its own terms to a much greater extent than is otherwise possible.

Nevertheless, there remains the problem of giving a coherent account of a body of material which is often unsystematic, fragmented

and contradictory. These qualities of Orwell's writing, together with his eschewal of literary pretension and his own tendency to collapse the critical distinction between "form" and "content" make it difficult, almost impossible, to establish the thought independently of the form or vice-versa. In practice, Orwell neither invariably let the form determine the meaning nor the meaning determine the form. Neither can stand as a fixed entity of which the other is a simple reflection or product. However some critics have applied the distinction to Orwell in a way that suggests this is so. Notable among these is David Kubal who, in his book on Orwell, Outside the Whale, finds it necessary at times to make categorical statements about Orwell's political views in order to establish a firm basis for his later comments on Orwell's artistic technique. By doing this, he distorts Orwell's views on some subjects, or makes them seem a lot less tentative than they really are. For instance, Kubal claims that

Orwell's significance will persist because he never admitted the possibility of defeat, considered alienation desirable, nor saw the "inside the whale" as anything but destructive.⁵

This statement is questionable on several grounds. To begin with, the endings of almost all of Orwell's fictional writings seem to belie the contention that he never admitted the possibility of

⁵ David Kubal, Outside the Whale: George Orwell's Art and Politics (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1972), 52.

defeat. Flory in Burmese Days commits suicide, Comstock in Keep the Aspidistra Flying is finally forced to come to terms with the "money god," the pigs in Animal Farm successfully manage to betray the ideals of the animal revolution, and Winston Smith, at the end of Nineteen Eighty-Four finds his will and his individuality crushed by the state machinery of Oceania. Nor can Dorothy in A Clergyman's Daughter or Bowling in Coming Up for Air be said to have triumphed over their situation since they are in much the same fix at the end of their adventures as at the beginning.

Even less tenable is Kubal's suggestion that Orwell never "saw the 'inside the whale' as anything but destructive," for there is every indication in Orwell's essay on the subject that he admires the creative achievement of Henry Miller, a writer whom he recognizes as the chief proponent of this attitude. In "Writers and the Leviathan", an essay which he wrote in 1948, it is again clear that despite the war experience, Orwell still feels the attraction of the "inside the whale" outlook and is conscious of its creative possibilities. While remaining firm in his advocacy of political involvement he notes that

Group loyalties are necessary, and yet they are poisonous to literature, so long as literature is the product of individuals. As soon as they are allowed to have any influence, even a negative one, on creative writing, the result is not only falsification, but often the actual drying up of the inventive faculties.

Well, what then? Do we have to conclude that it is the duty of every writer to "keep out of politics"? Certainly not! In any case, as I have said already, no thinking person can or does genuinely keep out of politics,

in an age like the present one. I only suggest that we should draw a sharper distinction than we do at present between our political and literary loyalties, and should recognize that a willingness to do certain distasteful but necessary things does not carry with it any obligation to swallow the beliefs that usually go with them. When a writer engages in politics he should do so as a citizen, as a human being, but not as a writer. . . . Sometimes, if a writer is honest, his writings and his political activities may actually contradict one another. . . . (CEJL, IV, 468-69)

Orwell obviously wants to be at once inside and outside "the whale," though even this passage does not constitute a definitive statement of his views on the subject of political involvement. It in no way accounts, for instance, for his decision to write propaganda for the BBC during the war, an occupation which he felt was necessary though he found it rather distasteful.

What begins to emerge from this is the realization that Orwell's ideological views were often much more tentative and ad hoc than Kubal would have us believe. For what remain as constant factors in Orwell's intellectual and literary growth are not so much a number of clearly defined key ideas which he could systematize and develop, but rather a number of recurring problems to which he responded in varying ways both as a thinker and a writer. This, at any rate, is how Orwell's intellectual and literary achievement must be viewed by the critic who is to avoid distortion or misrepresentation.

Treating the formal and intellectual aspects of George Orwell's work as responses to various problems offers one or two significant advantages, even though there is no reason for supposing that Orwell himself ever conceived of his endeavour in this way (in fact quite

the contrary!). Above all, looking at his writings in order to uncover the often latent problems with which he is grappling makes it possible to partly understand why Orwell never created any great masterpieces even though he has had an important cultural impact. At the same time, adopting a "problem solving" perspective on Orwell's work helps the critic to grasp more clearly the relationship between formal and intellectual elements in his writing. This is because Orwell's selections of genre and mode for his fictional works are as much responses to the kinds of problem he wrestles with as are the ideas he puts forth more directly in his non-fictional writings. The connection between formal and intellectual elements in his work is not always immediate or obvious, but by viewing them as two different types of response to the same problem, a connection can be established.

The basic soundness of this kind of methodological approach becomes obvious if its wider applications are considered. For though such an enterprise lies outside the scope of an M.A. thesis, the treatment makes it possible to delineate the relations between Orwell and other thinkers and writers of preceding generations as well as of his own time. In spite of the fact that two persons may appear to share a given idea, the different significances which each will attach to that idea become obvious only if the contexts -- not only historical but also logical and psychological -- are examined. A "problem solving" approach takes into account these various contexts and does not imply the objective or transcendental

existence of any idea. As a result, the treatment of Orwell's historical role becomes much more flexible and less dependent on the use of such cumbersome conceptual categories as "anarchist," "Trotskyist," "conservative," "liberal," or even "socialist," all of which have proven to be singularly inappropriate when applied to Orwell.

Of course, selection of the problems which are to be examined in Orwell's writing remains necessarily a somewhat arbitrary procedure, since there are numerous possibilities. However, for an initial study, two problems seem to emerge as fairly basic. The first of these may be characterized as the problem of objectivity. This involves an examination of Orwell's response to the question "To what extent is objectivity possible?" A part of his intellectual response to this question lies in his views on the subject of religion and its inability to provide any viable standard of truth or reality in the modern world. Then too his views on nature, on history, and of course on society and politics -- those realms wherein man interacts with man -- may be interpreted in such a way as to provide further insight into his attitude. At the same time, Orwell's artistic response to the question manifests itself in the use he tries to make of language and in the handling of aesthetic distance which one observes in his fictional as well as non-fictional writing. At times he draws his reader into sympathetic understanding of events, situations, and individuals, which makes possible a subtly nuanced and realistic treatment of his material. At other times his

writing can become hortatory or sharply satiric as his use of caricature and irony set the reader at a distance from the material. The kinds of relationships which Orwell's narrators establish both with their readers and their narratives offer an important indication as to the writer's feelings about the problem of objectivity.

In the same way, the disposition and attitudes of Orwell's fictional and autobiographical narrator voices constitute significant indicators as to his response to the other basic problem with which this paper will deal, namely the problem of identity. In essays such as "The English People" (1944) and "The Lion and the Unicorn" (1940), Orwell attempts to sort out his response to the question of what gives a nation, a people, or a class its identity. Elsewhere (e.g. Nineteen Eighty-Four) he is concerned with exploring the conditions under which an individual's identity can be preserved, altered, or destroyed. Freedom and privacy, for instance, are things that he sees as requisite for maintaining one's identity. In fact many of his political views reflect his response to the problem of identity and are based on the need to satisfy the conflicting claims of the living identities which Orwell is prepared to recognize. Because of this, the problem of identity is very much related to, though distinct from, the problem of objectivity. Both are also closely related to Orwell's preoccupations with isolation and alienation, preoccupations which he shares with virtually every other thinker and writer of the twentieth century. By examining these two important,

albeit latent concerns, it will be possible to arrive at some understanding of the reasons for Orwell's successes and for his failures, as well as to lay the groundwork for a further exploration of the historical significance of his work.

CHAPTER II

Discovering Orwell's response to the problem of objectivity requires the exploration of a complex set of associations which often contradict one another and thus give his whole thought structure a marked degree of ambiguity. In his response to the question of whether there actually exists any firm basis for objectivity, Orwell generally seems to operate on the assumption that there is. However, he seems at times inclined to feel that, in the modern world at any rate, it has become virtually impossible to locate any such thing as objective truth. He occasionally reacts to this feeling by giving way to black pessimism, but more often asserts stridently that there are grounds for optimism¹ and that objectivity is really possible. On such occasions it is almost as if he feels that by being sufficiently forceful he can make it so.

One of the greatest difficulties involved in assessing Orwell's response to the problem of objectivity stems from the fact that he never explicitly formulated his position. This is partly a result

¹vide, for instance, his views on the work of Malcolm Muggeridge in "The Limit to Pessimism," CEJL I, 584.

of his dislike of abstraction, which made him unwilling to bother with any issue so apparently removed from the concerns of the average man. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston Smith puts forward the Orwellian case against abstraction in its most extreme form:

In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five and you would have to believe them. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: The logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy. The heresy of heresies was common sense. And what was terrifying was not that they might kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right. For, after all, how do we know that two and two make four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable -- what then?

But no! His courage seemed suddenly to stiffen of its own accord. The face of O'Brien, not called up by any obvious association, had floated into his mind. He knew with more certainty than before, that O'Brien was on his side. He was writing the diary for O'Brien -- to O'Brien; it was like an interminable letter which no one -- would ever read but which was addressed to a particular person and took its colour from that fact.

The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command. His heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him, the ease with which any Party intellectual would overthrow him in debate, the subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer. And yet he was in the right! They were wrong and he was right.²

Winston here associates abstraction with intellectualism, with sophistic subtlety, and with malleable standards of truth. On the other hand "external reality," ostensibly Winston's basis for objective

² George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949, rpt.; Signet Books: N. Y., 1950), 63.

perception, is unequivocally associated with concreteness and specificity. However the forceful terms in which Winston expresses moral horror and moral conviction suggest that he is above all concerned with banishing his own doubts, while his ability to articulate the logic of the state position shows to what extent he is capable of appreciating "abstraction." And though the reader, because of the passage's strong rhetorical quality, is invited to share Winston's point of view, the ending of the novel serves to undermine the viability of what he has to say at this point. It would seem that Orwell's attitude towards abstraction is not entirely consistent, and can therefore only partially account for the confusion inherent in his response to the problem of objectivity.

Compounding the difficulty of isolating and exposing Orwell's response to this problem is the fact that his perception of objective truth is often affected by his moral sensibility. For, to put it another way, Orwell often fuses his perception of "what is" with his ideal of "what should be." As a rhetorical technique used to make a moral point, this fusion can lend a kind of power to his writing which is rarely matched in the work of his contemporaries.

Consider for instance this passage from The Road to Wigan Pier:

At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waterpipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. I had time to see everything about her -- her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arm reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery;

and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that "It isn't the same for them as it is for us," and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her -- understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drainpipe.³

Such a scene, described with full concreteness and realistic detail, stands as a glaring condemnation of Orwell's whole society. Taken by itself, out of context, it constitutes a momentary achievement of the goal which he sought throughout much of his career: "the elevation of political writing into an art."⁴ But the accomplishment has its cost. Orwell may have had some idea of the extent to which moral idealism can affect the objective viability of what one has to say when he attacked Burnham for making political predictions. These are, he says, "usually wrong because they are usually based on wish fulfillment." (CEJL, IV, 205) Yet he himself, in works such as "The Lion and the Unicorn" and the Partisan Review war reports, offers elaborate political predictions, often expressive of his hope that socialism might be just around the corner for

³ George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier (London: Gollancz; 1937), p. 18.

⁴ George Orwell, "Why I Write" in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, ed. Ian Angus and Sonia Orwell (1968; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), I, p. 28.

England.⁵ One critic attacks Orwell by suggesting that his credibility, especially in the earlier autobiographical works, is seriously impaired by this tendency to reconstruct situations according to a vision of how he wants them to appear. Events and characters, even ones purportedly factual, are often "a sentimentalised projection of a cherished notion"⁶ claims Crompton, though he concedes that this is not the product of any deliberate misrepresentation on Orwell's part. Crompton clearly has a point even if the impact of Orwell's moral idealism on his assessment of situations is not always in the direction of "sentimentalised projection." As a satirist he could be scathingly reductive, an ability which caused him trouble on more than one occasion. In a letter to Stephen Spender, for instance, a red-faced Orwell attempts to explain away one contradiction which has been pointed out to him:

. . . You ask how it is that I attacked you not having met you and on the other hand changed my mind after meeting you. I don't know that I had exactly attacked you, but I had certainly in passing made offensive remarks abt. 'parlour Bolsheviks such as Auden and Spender' or words to that effect. I was willing to use you as a symbol of the parlour Bolshie because a. your verse, what I had read of it, did not mean very much to me, b. I looked upon you as a fashionable successful person,

⁵ An excerpt from one of Orwell's later "London Letters to Partisan Review" suggests that he was aware of this. Vide CEJL, III, 339.

⁶ Donald Crompton, "False Maps of the World -- George Orwell's Autobiographical Writings and the Early Novels," Critical Quarterly 16 no. 2 (summer, 1974), p. 161.

also a Communist or Communist sympathizer, and I have been very hostile to the CP since about 1935, and c. because not having met you I could regard you as a type and also an abstraction. Even if when I met you I had not happened to like you I should still have been forced to change my attitude because when you meet anyone in the flesh you realize immediately that he is a human being & not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas. It is partly for this reason that I don't mix much in literary circles, because I know from experience that once I have met and spoken to anyone I shall never again be able to show any intellectual brutality towards him, even when I feel that I ought to, like the Labour M.P.s who get patted on the back by dukes & are lost forever more. . . . (CEJL, I, 347)

What is interesting here is not only Orwell's reference to the quality of abstraction which sometimes despite him marks his thinking, but also the implied recognition of a discrepancy between the outlook which his moral vision demands and the outlook which personal experience offers. Orwell is torn between two differing attitudes towards Stephen Spender which appear as mutually exclusive, though he wants to look on both as objectively viable. His tendency to fuse (or confuse) empirical and moral considerations has here created a problem which in one form or another recurs throughout his work, producing an unresolvable ideological ambivalence.

Compounding this difficulty is the fact that Orwell sometimes tends to ascribe a positive moral value to being objective. For he associates objectivity with fairness and honesty. As a result, the contradictions and ambiguities in his work are sometimes the reflection of an unresolved moral dilemma. His views on Pacifism provide an instance of this. In 1942 he attacked Pacifism as being "objectively pro-Fascist":

Pacifism is objectively pro-Fascist. This is elementary common sense. If you hamper the war effort of one side you automatically help that of the other. Nor is there any real way of remaining outside such a war as the present one. In practice, 'he that is not with me is against me.' The idea that you can somehow remain aloof from and superior to the struggle while living on food which British sailors have to risk their lives to bring you, is a bourgeois illusion bred of money and security. . . . In so far as it takes effect at all, Pacifist propaganda can only be effective against those countries where a certain amount of freedom of speech is still permitted; in other words it is helpful to totalitarianism. (CEJL, II, 261)

However by 1947 he saw things in a slightly different context, and wrote

I draw attention to one very widespread controversial habit -- disregard of an opponent's motives. The key word here is 'objectively.'

We are told that it is only people's objective actions that matter, and their subjective feelings are of no importance. Thus pacifists, by obstructing the war effort, are objectively aiding the Nazis: and therefore the fact that they may be personally hostile to Fascism is irrelevant. I have been guilty of saying this myself more than once. . . .

This is not only dishonest; it also carries a severe penalty with it. If you disregard people's motives, it becomes much harder to foresee their actions. For there are occasions when even the most misguided person can see the results of what he is doing. Here is a crude but quite possible illustration. A pacifist is working in some job which gives him access to important military information, and is approached by a German secret agent. In those circumstances his subjective feelings do make a difference. If he is subjectively pro-Nazi he will sell his country and if he isn't he won't. . . .

. . . The atmosphere of hatred in which controversy is conducted blinds people to considerations of this kind. To admit that an opponent might be both honest and intelligent is felt to be intolerable. It is more immediately satisfying to shout that he is a fool or a scoundrel, or both, than to find out what he is really like. It is this habit of mind, among other things, that has made political prediction in our time so remarkably unsuccessful. (CEJL, III, 330-31)

In each of these passages Orwell's impulse is to make a moral point, though his perception of the situation differs in each case. Morally Orwell does not want to accept Pacifism, but feels that if his perception is to be objectively valid he must take account of all considerations even if to do so undermines his earlier view, casting doubt on his position. The issue for him here is as much moral as epistemological. His desire to constantly reduce things to their moral essentials often opens up areas of contradiction. One of his great strengths is at the same time one of his great weaknesses.

These features of Orwell's outlook which prevent him from developing an explicit or coherent response to the problem of objectivity require that any extensive understanding of his position be inferred from his writing style and from his stated or implied ideas on the subjects of religion, nature, the past, and politics. Not that Orwell is always consistent in his use of any of these concepts, whose meaning and whose relative importance within his thought "system" fluctuates. In their overlap they often reflect the ambivalence and the somewhat diffuse nature of his response to the problem of objectivity. Political considerations, for instance, are always of great importance for Orwell, but in the world of Nineteen Eighty-Four they totally determine the significance of everything, including love:

. . . you couldn't have pure love or lust nowadays. No emotion was pure because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax

a victory. It was a blow against the Party. It was a political act.⁷

Elsewhere, in works such as A Clergyman's Daughter or Keep the Aspidochelone Flying events are presented in a way which suggests that their most fundamental significance is religious. In Animal Farm, meanwhile, the very basis of the allegory evidences the importance which Orwell attaches to nature, and in Coming Up for Air it is Bowling's sense of the past which makes him so aware of the deficiencies of modern life. By providing differing contexts for his response to the problem of objectivity these elements lend a depth and complexity to his views that accounts for a good part of the critical interest in his writings.

In his fascinating book The Last Man in Europe, which deals with the religious context of Orwell's thought, Alan Sandison argues that his subject's views on the issue of objectivity resemble those of Luther and of certain 17th century English Puritans:

It is not too much to say that to Orwell the reality of a historical event is at least as much in his personal experience and expression of it as in its putative intrinsic "truth." How is this to be reconciled with his championship of and moral dependence on "objective truth"? There is, as it happens, no contradiction; for it neither denies "fact" nor the concept of objective truth. To the contrary it returns us to a very Protestant position. The objectivity and reality of the external world is accepted and it is the responsibility of the individual to strive to give an account of it and himself in it, true to his only yardstick, the evidence of his own sensations and perceptions. He may not gain general credence for his evaluation but he will have accepted the concept of

⁷ George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, 97.

objective truth and in the process fulfilled his responsibility to probe all things, thus displaying the freedom of his personal moral sense.⁸

Arguing that the religious context is the primary one in which to place Orwell's response to the problem of objectivity, Sandison goes on to show how the outlook he ascribes to Orwell enables him as artist and autobiographer to fuse formal and ideological considerations into a unified and coherent whole in Homage to Catalonia. In Homage, he suggests, Orwell is rather attempting to put forward this particular view of the relationship between a subjective response to experience and the objectivity of fact, than seeking to give a definite account of the situation in Catalonia during the winter and spring of 1937:

What he is really concerned with is being true to his own unmediated sensations and perceptions and in being so to assert his fundamental principle that the individual's capacity to exercise this freedom is a condition and guarantee of his individuality. One man's ability and will to do so in the context of the Civil War where the main contenders made such strenuous efforts to falsify the record was worth more than the most carefully balanced & researched assessment. . . . Obviously he was fully aware that his own reporting of the war was both inadequate and biased . . . [but] . . . He, at least, is trying to be truthful . . . whereas, with Fascist propaganda about the war in mind, in all about him 'the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world.' So that in going to considerable lengths to expound the complexity of the parties involved, he is simultaneously offering an example of what he is affirming the fundamental importance to the individual of the concept of objective truth.⁹

⁸ Alan Sandison, The Last Man in Europe: An Essay on George Orwell (Macmillan: London, 1974), 138.

⁹ Alan Sandison, The Last Man in Europe: An Essay on George Orwell, 143.

Sandison concludes by saying that Orwell's inclusion of Chapter XI which explains the relationship of various left wing splinter factions to each other (a chapter which many critics felt he would have done better to omit) is in fact justifiable on aesthetic grounds as a formal expression of Orwell's views on the problem of objectivity.

Sandison is in effect arguing that Orwell has a single moral and epistemological response to the issue of objectivity, and to prove his point he has carefully selected from Orwell's writing. His interpretation of Homage to Catalonia seems both persuasive and plausible when developed in the context of the larger contention that Orwell must above all else be seen as a homo religiosus in the Protestant tradition.¹⁰ However, though interesting and suggestive, Sandison's interpretation of Homage does not account for the shift in tone and perspective which occurs in chapter XI of the Spanish autobiography, and which is certainly important from a technical or formal point of view. Nor is it fair to suggest that such an attitude towards the nature of objectivity occurs uniformly in Orwell's writing. Sandison's articulation of the Orwellian view is too definite to account for the variants of response, since even

¹⁰ Incidentally, it may be noted that Sandison's approach to the critical problem of presenting an intelligible, unified, and coherent account of Orwell's work is to place it in an historical context. The historical tradition of Protestantism which he establishes as a basis for his interpretation thus serves a function similar to that of the "author-personality" which the biographical critics use or to the philosophic "problems which are advanced in this paper as a critical context.

the example chosen to illustrate his point presents problems which he glosses over. Though evidently attracted by the view of objectivity here ascribed to him, Orwell is seldom able, partly because of other influences on his outlook, to fully or consistently accept it.

Studying Orwell's views on the problem of objectivity in the light of his attitude to religion and religious belief does, however, yield certain insights. In fact, the connection between his religious background and his response to this issue is in many ways even more direct than Sandison's analysis suggests. In a 1940 essay which he wrote for Time and Tide, Orwell notes that with the abandonment of traditional Christian belief in God, and more especially in personal immortality, modern man has had his soul cut away. But, though personal religious belief has vanished, the need for it has not and man has turned to new authoritarian and totalitarian creeds which, purporting to set up an earthly paradise, have in fact created a nightmare. "If," continues Orwell, "one assumes that no sanction can ever be effective except the supernatural one, it is clear what follows. There is no wisdom except in the fear of God; but nobody fears God; therefore there is no wisdom." (CEJL, II, 30-32) Without God there is no transcendent moral sanction applicable to human activity and no sense of absolute objective truth, for in the Christian tradition, God is both the supreme moral arbiter and the source of all truth.

The connection made by Christianity between moral truth and objective reality goes a long way, I believe, towards explaining

Orwell's recurrent tendency to fuse considerations of morality with considerations of objectivity. At the same time, Orwell's attitude to questions about the nature and existence of objective truth in some ways resembles the attitude of a Christian towards his God. His ambivalence on the issue may, for instance, be seen as analogous to religious doubt: To the extent that Orwell was sensitive to the void left by the collapse of faith in God and in personal immortality his work embodies a search for another basis of objectivity -- a difficult, often frustrating, and ultimately unending quest.

Especially important as a new basis for Orwell's sense of objectivity is the felt connection he has with nature. The sense of nature's reality is important in virtually all of Orwell's works and appears in the earliest of his novels, Burmese Days. As George Woodcock points out in The Crystal Spirit, Flory's pilgrimages to the pool of green water in the jungle express his desire "for a permanent access to a more natural life, a desire which runs all the way through Burmese Days and, needless to say, is never satisfied."¹¹ Orwell himself in a 1936 letter to Henry Miller writes, "I have a sort of belly-to-earth attitude and always feel uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green, stones hard etc." (CEJL, I, 257) As Sandison suggests, such passages indicate the importance of physical sensation in Orwell's implicit epistemology.¹²

¹¹ George Woodcock, The Crystal Spirit: A study of George Orwell (Johnathan Cape: London, 1967), 82.

¹² Alan Sandison, The Last Man in Europe: An essay on George Orwell, 11.

His response to the problem of objectivity in this context is that of the empiricist who sees the concrete as more real than the abstract and who looks on the natural world as the primary locus of truth. The necessities of nature form a basis for objectivity, and it is Winston's sense of this that gives him the courage to stand against the party in Nineteen Eighty-Four (vide p.13 of Chapter II above). Their reality lies beyond the complete control of man:

. . . spring is here, even in London N1, and they can't stop you enjoying it. This is a satisfying reflection. How many a time have I stood watching the toads mating or a pair of hares having a boxing match in the young corn and thought of all the important persons who would stop me enjoying this if they could. But luckily they can't. So long as you are not actually ill, hungry, frightened, or immured in a prison or a holiday camp, spring is still spring. The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it. (CEJL, IV, 175)

But here again, as the excerpt testifies, Orwell fuses his sense of what is with his sense of what should be. Nature is not only real, a basis for objectivity, it is also an ideal, and man's link with it can be threatened. For Orwell often conceives of nature as a sort of Garden of Eden which is being polluted by industrial waste and overrun by sprawling ugly slums. Nowhere does this attitude emerge more strongly than in Coming Up for Air, his 1939 novel which tells of one man's attempt to return to the natural simple world of his childhood only to find that it has been destroyed by "progress." George Bowling, the narrator-protagonist, is brought up against the

horribly glaring reality of modern life which has shattered that ideal and made it completely unrealizable. The language he uses to express disgust at having bitten into an ersatz sausage confirms the point:

It gave me the feeling that I'd bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was really made of. That's the way we're going nowadays. Everything slick and streamlined, everything made out of something else. Celluloid, rubber, chromium-steel everywhere, arc lamps blazing all night, glass roofs over your head, radios all playing the same tune, no vegetation left, everything cemented over, mock-turtles grazing under the neutral fruit-trees.¹³
(italics mine)

Animal Farm, Orwell's next major work, further portrays modern industrial man as the villain, ruthlessly exploiting nature, and especially the animals. His development of the fable makes the world of the animals, though clearly idealized, seem more real than that of the humans. Significantly, the metamorphosis of the pigs into men at the end of the fable is what marks the final abandonment of the revolutionary ideals, leaving the other animals worse off than before. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, when Winston and Julia make love for the first time, it is out away from the city in a natural setting. To Winston, the place resembles his dream vision of "The Golden Country," a pastorally idyllic place where terror, hate, brutality, and squalor are non-existent. In this instance the ideal is made real, although the threat of detection remains, and as subsequent events prove, the moment of harmony is short-lived. Again and again Orwell presents

¹³ George Orwell, Coming Up for Air (1939; rpt. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1962), 27.

nature not only as an embodiment of truth which is essential for man's grasp on reality -- the empirical standard which objectively confirms his opinions -- but also in terms which suggest that it is an ideal, threatened by progress, and in many respects already lost to man.

Given Orwell's frequent idealizations of nature and his tendency to regard technological progress with some suspicion, it may seem as if his view of things should be naively ahistorical: Critics of civilization and modernity such as Rousseau are often less concerned with studying the history and development of that civilization than with chipping away its accretions in an attempt to find something basic, essential, natural. In Orwell's case there is some truth to this observation, for he at times indulges in sentimental reconstructions of the way things were. George Bowling, for instance, reminisces about the pre-war world of his childhood in a way which suggests that he speaks for his creator:

It always seems to be summer when I look back. I can feel the grass around me as tall as myself and the heat coming out of the earth. And the dust in the lane and the warm greeny light coming through the hazel boughs. I can see three of us trailing along, eating stuff out of the hedge, with Katie dragging at my arm saying "Come on Baby!"¹⁴

For Bowling, as for Orwell, this static and crystalline image of some moment in the past is symbolic of a better time and a better place. The idealism of such an outlook on history and the past is, as with

¹⁴ George Orwell, Coming Up for Air, 39.

his attitude to nature, largely moral. For Orwell looks back wistfully on a time when the great majority of people lived their lives according to a recognized standard of decency, and puts himself on record as saying that from a moral point of view, modern man is if anything worse off than his forbears:

Part of the trouble . . . is that the English intelligentsia have been so conditioned that they simply cannot imagine what a totalitarian government is like. They have become infected with the inherently mechanistic Marxist notion that if you make the necessary technical advance, the moral advance will follow of itself. I have never accepted this. I don't believe that capitalism, as against feudalism, improved the actual quality of human life, and I don't believe that Socialism in itself need work any real improvement either. Hitler is perhaps a large scale demonstration of this. I believe that these economic advances merely provide the opportunity for a step forward which, as yet, hasn't happened. A year ago I was in the Atlas mountains, looking at the Berber villagers there, it struck me that we were, perhaps, 1,000 years ahead of these people, but no better than they, perhaps on balance rather worse. We are physically inferior to them, for instance, and manifestly less happy. All we have done is advance to a point at which we could make a real improvement in human life, but we shan't do it without the recognition that common decency is necessary. My chief hope for the future is that the common people have never parted company with their moral code. (CEJL, I, 583)

By stressing his preoccupation with the moral condition of man, which he refuses to see as subject to historical development, Orwell seems to dismiss questions pertaining to the actual nature of historical change -- questions of primary importance to a thinker such as Marx, or to virtually any professional historian. He seems in fact to feel here that attempts to describe the nature of historical change can but serve to promote evasion of moral responsibility or (as he argues elsewhere) to justify repression and the abuse of power.

This element of moral idealism¹⁵ linked with his sensitivity to the potential for abuse of history forms a basis for the critique of totalitarianism which Orwell develops more fully in his later writings such as Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four. His distrust of the systematic and rational approach to history seems entirely consistent with the view of Hannah Arendt who, writing after the war, is able to grasp that one of the essential features of totalitarian society is its reliance on a logic or dynamic of change which is used to justify eradication of opposing forces and submergence of the individual:

The most persuasive argument . . . , an argument of which Hitler like Stalin was very fond, is: You can't say A without saying B and C and so on, down to the end of the murderous alphabet. Here, the coercive force of logicity seems to have its source; it springs from our fear of contradicting ourselves. To the extent that the Bolshevik purge succeeds in making its victims confess to crimes they never committed, it relies chiefly on this basic fear and runs as follows: we are all agreed on the premise that history is a struggle of classes and on the role of the Party in its conduct. You know therefore that, historically speaking the Party is always right (in the words of Trotsky: "We can only be right with and by the Party for history has provided no other way of being in the right."). At this historical moment, that is, in accordance with the law of history, certain crimes are due to be committed which the Party, knowing the law of History, must punish. For these crimes the party needs

¹⁵ Though the term "idealism" here is not intended to convey anything other than Orwell's quasi-visionary faith in moral ideals, there is a sense in which his rejection of the materialist view of history marks him as an idealist in the philosophic sense -- that is, one who believes that any object of perception must be conceived as idea, and who consequently feels that ideas are both the basic and the ultimate realities. Again, however, it would be stretching the point to apply this term to Orwell's outlook for he neither explores the abstract metaphysical implications of his thought, nor adhered consistently to any one position.

criminals; it may be that the Party, though knowing the crimes, does not quite know the criminals; more important than to be sure about the criminals is to punish the crimes, because without such punishment History will not be advanced but may even be hindered in its course. You, therefore, have either committed the crimes or have been called by the Party to play the role of the criminal--~~the~~ in either case you have objectively become an enemy of the Party. If you don't confess, you cease to help History through the Party, and have become a real enemy -- The coercive force of the argument is: if you refuse, you contradict yourself and, through this contradiction, render your whole life meaningless; the A which you said, dominates your whole life through the consequences of B and C, which it logically engenders.¹⁶

Orwell would doubtless have agreed, for like Arendt, he rejects the kind of reductive "mechanistic" logic which leaves one open to the totalitarian argument, refusing to apply it to his sense of history. Within the framework of his own concerns, the concept of totalitarianism fuses his sense of moral idealism with his hatred of abstraction. Totalitarian society represents the polar opposite of every ideal he wanted to believe in -- the nadir of his hopes. The actual existence of social orders which approximated the kind of extreme represented by Oceania was for Orwell a terrifying comment on the viability of his own socialist ideals. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell suggests that memory of past experience, both personal and public, can be a hedge against totalitarianism. It must accordingly be countered by Big Brother's elaborate machinery for historical rectification. Significantly, however, Orwell's dislike of the kind of historicism which he associates with totalitarian thinking tends

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 2nd ed. (1951; rpt. Cleveland Ohio: World Publishing Co., 1958), 473.

to provoke him into a blanket defense of the untrained and unsophisticated perception, for he feels compelled to defend the nostalgic response to history:

There is now the widespread belief that nostalgic feelings about the past are inherently vicious. One ought, apparently, to live in a continuous present, a minute-to-minute cancellation of memory, and if one thinks of the past at all it should merely be in order to thank God that we are so much better than we used to be. This seems to me to be a sort of intellectual face lifting, the motive behind which is a snobbish terror of growing old. . . . In many ways it is a grave handicap to remember that lost paradise 'before the war' -- that is before the other war. In other ways it is an advantage. Each generation has its own experience and its own wisdom, and though there is such a thing as intellectual progress, so that the ideas of one age are sometimes demonstrably less silly than those of the last -- still, one is likelier to make a good book by sticking to one's early acquired vision than by a futile effort to 'keep u'. (CEJL, IV, 504)

It is this benign romanticizing glow of nostalgia, countering the horror of Orwell's vision of totalitarianism, which more than anything else can make his attitude to the past seem idealistically naive.

Yet Orwell's attitude to the past is not as simplistic or as happily naive as many of his more sentimental reconstructions might suggest. He is quite capable of remembering the unhappier times of his childhood in "Such, such were the Joys." And when dealing with historical events which lie outside his personal experience, his work shows evidence of some regard for the procedures of the historian. Alex Zwerdling moreover, finds that with respect to Marx, Orwell as "not anti-Marx so much as anti-Marxist," and claims that "he

knew Marx's work quite well, actually."¹⁷ Certainly as far as modern history is concerned, Orwell seems able to have based his critiques of English socialism on a wide range of historical knowledge. Then, too, Orwell's critical writings, whatever their other merits and drawbacks, provide strong evidence of his ability to see things in an historical context. In one of his letters to his friend Geoffrey Gorer (CEJL, I, 579), Orwell articulates his interest in the kind of "semi-sociological literary criticism" which he attempts in the essay on Charles Dickens; and it is of especial significance that some of the most incisive passages in the essay involve demonstrations of how Dickens' conservative middle class values affect his perceptions of the historical events which he writes about:

The apologists of any revolution generally try to minimize its horrors; Dickens' impulse is to exaggerate them -- and from a historical point of view he has certainly exaggerated. Even the Reign of Terror was a much smaller thing than he makes it appear. Though he quotes no figures he gives the impression of a frenzied massacre lasting for years, whereas in reality the whole of the Terror was a joke compared with one of Napoleon's battles. But the bloody knives and the tumbrils rolling to and fro create in his mind a special, sinister vision which he has succeeded in passing on to generations of readers. (CEJL, I, 464)

As the essay proceeds, Orwell discusses Dickens' attitude towards the lower classes as well as his attitude towards education, sports, the military, industrial progress, and machines. He also notes the lack of vulgar nationalism in the Victorian's novels and in each

¹⁷ Alex Zwerdling, Orwell and the Left (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 20.

case tries to assess Dickens' views in the light of historical actuality and the social context of mid-nineteenth century England. Significantly, the essay chastizes Dickens for too often being ignorant of the facts surrounding the conditions he writes of, and suggests "he knows very little about the way things really happen." (CEJL, I, 483) This ignorance is partly attributed to the "narrowness of vision" which Dickens shares with his class, and to a lack of "intellectual curiosity," both of which, however, make it possible for him to develop his "infallible moral sense" and his skill as a caricaturist. At one point, for instance, Orwell revealingly comments on the attitude which Dickens has towards servants:

What Dickens seems to be doing, as usual, is to reach out for an idealized version of the existing thing. He was writing at a time when domestic service must have seemed a completely inequitable evil. There were no labour-saving devices, and there was huge inequality of wealth. It was an age of enormous families, pretentious meals, and inconvenient houses, when the slavery of drudging fourteen hours a day in the basement kitchen was something too normal to be noticed. And given the fact of servitude, the feudal relationship is the only tolerable one. Sam Weller and Mark Tapley are dream figures, no less than Cheerybles. If there have got to be masters and servants, how much better that the master should be Mr. Pickwick, and the servant Sam Weller. Better still, of course, if servants did not exist at all -- but this Dickens is probably unable to imagine. (CEJL, I, 483)

Again it becomes apparent that Orwell vaguely senses a tension between the need to grapple with the realities of a situation while still retaining an idealistic moral perspective. The passage doubtless sheds more light on the Orwellian than on the Dickensian outlook,

for though Orwell chides the Victorian for being unrealistic, he appears somewhat less than satisfied with Dickens' simplistic moral ideal. For Orwell the problem seems to be summed up in Madame de Staël's famous remark, "tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner," since he wants to clearly define his moral stance in terms of an ideal vision, but finds it hard to do so while at the same time taking account of situations in their full complexity. This dilemma, which so strongly conditions his response to the problem of objectivity finds one of its many and varied expressions in the attitude which he takes to the past -- an attitude in which his tendency to mythify and morally idealize people and events conflicts with his desire to know, understand, and accurately interpret the historical facts. So Orwell's views on the past and on nature, which provide a context for the expression of his sense of objectivity, feature the dislike of abstraction and the tension between "real" and "ideal" which characterize so much of his thinking and writing.

In Orwell's thought then, both nature and the past provide some basis for his sense of objectivity. Yet although both of these are important, neither is as crucial an underpinning for this sense of objectivity as the relationship between man and man. Indeed, Orwell's social and political concerns are all-pervasive and largely determine the direction of his thought. When he speaks of the past, for instance, his preoccupation is as much with collective history (consider his essay "The English People") as with personal reminiscence (consider "Such, Such were the Joys"). His formal autobiographies (Down and

Out in Paris and London, The Road to Wigan Pier and Homage to Catalonia) represent an attempt to integrate the two. At the same time, Orwell's stress on nature is partly a result of his belief that it is accessible to all and constitutes a source of common experience. So the issue of human relations, recurring as it does at virtually all levels of Orwell's thought, is obviously an important aspect of his response to the problem of objectivity.

Orwell's views on patriotism furnish a good example of the importance which he attaches to promoting this response. Recognizing that social cohesion is indispensable if the relation between man and man is to serve as a basis for objectivity, in his 1941 essay, "The Lion and the Unicorn", he takes issue with those socialists whose doctrinaire opposition to patriotism kept them from seeing how that sentiment could be used to further socialist objectives:

Patriotism, against which the Socialists fought so long, has become a tremendous lever in their hands. People who at any other time would cling like glue to their miserable scraps of privilege will surrender them fast enough when their country is in danger. War is the greatest of all agents of change. It speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions, brings realities to the surface. Above all, war brings it home to the individual that he is not altogether an individual. . . . If it can be made clear that defeating Hitler means wiping out class privilege, the great mass of middling people, the £6 a week to £2000 a year class, will probably be on our side. These people are quite indispensable, because they include most of the technical experts. . . . An intelligent Socialist movement will use their patriotism instead of merely insulting it, as hitherto. (CEJL, II, 117-18)

Orwell sees that patriotism, forming a bond between the English of varying social classes, can serve Socialism. In its most perfect

form, this Socialism comprises a state of national and social solidarity, with a strong element of popular consensus that can act as a standard of measurement for objectivity. Orwell's Socialism, with its good dose of patriotic sentiment can in other words be seen as a reflection of his desire for a strong relationship between man and man.

Central in Orwell's thought, the subject of human relations is of course bound to become an area wherein his preoccupations with the normative and the empirical find themselves intertwined in complex ways. The things he says in his writing about class and poverty, for instance, reflect the convolutions very well. In The Road to Wigan Pier he writes about the misery of poverty:

Most of the people I talked to had given up the idea of ever getting a decent habitation again. They were all out of work and a job and a house seemed to them about equally remote and impossible. Some hardly seemed to care; others realized quite clearly in what misery they were living. One woman's face stays by me, a worn skull-like face on which there was a look of intolerable misery and degradation. I gathered that in that dreadful pigsty, struggling to keep her large brood of children clean, she felt as I should feel if I were coated all over with dung.¹⁸

Clearly, Orwell is appalled and disgusted by this material poverty which he agrees with Marx in blaming on an exploitative social structure. Like Marx he detests this system wherein the relations between people are defined by money and geared to meeting the needs of material production rather than promoting human dignity and welfare. He also shares with Marx an indignation at the destitution of the

¹⁸ George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 63.

working poor, and especially of the miners on whose shoulders the whole economic structure rests:

Our civilisation, pace Chesterton, is founded on coal, more completely than one realises until one stops to think about it. The machines that keep us alive, and the machines that make the machines are all directly or indirectly dependent upon coal. In the metabolism of the Western world the coal-miner is second in importance only to the man who ploughs the soil. He is a sort of grimy caryatid upon whose shoulders nearly everything that is not grimy is supported. . . .
 . . . Their lamplit world down there is as necessary to the daylight world above as the root is to the flower. . .¹⁹

Yet at the same time Orwell's writing manifests an admiration for these people, their moral decency, and their no frills lifestyle:

In a working-class home -- I am not thinking at the moment of the unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes -- you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere. . . . I have often been struck by the peculiar easy completeness, the perfect symmetry as it were, of a working-class home at its best. Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirtsleeves, sits in the rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat -- it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently of it to be taken for granted. . . .
 . . . Curiously enough it is . . . the memory of working-class interiors . . . that reminds me that our age has not been altogether a bad one to live in.²⁰

What appeals most to Orwell here is the sense of community, of harmony, of belonging, and though he wants to avoid "idealising" the working-class

¹⁹ George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 21 and 34.

²⁰ George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 148-149, 150.

existence he often does just that, focussing on its cultural and moral values. In The Road to Wigan Pier, as elsewhere in his writing, Orwell emphasizes the importance of cultural values in the delineation of class, and in fact suggests that cultural and class consciousness play as much of a determining role in the course of events as do the material and economic factors whose primacy was stressed by Marx.²¹ More specifically, Orwell seems to feel that the destitution of the working poor, as of the thoroughly indigent, has some positive moral and cultural value. In Nineteen Eighty-Four the proles who embody these values seem for Winston Smith to represent the hope of the future, and even in The Road to Wigan Pier Orwell flatly states his belief that the sinking middle-class, by espousing lower-class values, will discover the kind of communal bond that strengthens the sense of objectivity. This aspect of his thinking prompts Philip Rieff to argue that for Orwell

Only those whose souls have been quickened by poverty really experience the world as it is. The experience of poverty is the loss of innocence.²²

Orwell's disgust at the nature of poverty and his desire to eliminate the kind of destitution which he records in his early autobiographies

²¹ This point touches once again on the confused nature of Orwell's implied metaphysic, which is bound up with his inability to separate the normative from the empirical. Is Orwell a philosophic materialist (as Marx was) or is he a philosophic idealist? Clearly he feels torn between the two positions (vide footnote #15 above).

²² Philip Rieff, "George Orwell and the Post Liberal Imagination," Kenyon Review, 16 (Winter, '54) 53.

makes this statement somewhat of an exaggeration, though it does capture one aspect of his outlook. Apart from the chance it gives him to assuage his guilt feelings,²³ poverty is important to Orwell as a kind of shared experience which breaks down artificial social barriers, allowing free and honest relations to exist between man and man. Nevertheless, Orwell's inability to precisely articulate the relationship between his championship of working-class cultural values which go with its material condition and his condemnation of that same condition once again brings out a sense of contradiction in his response: between the actual and the ideal.

If class consciousness and material prosperity are important factors in Orwell's perception of the relations between man and man which serve as a basis for objectivity, so too is language. For language is the stock in trade of any writer, no matter what he writes about, and Orwell is strongly aware of it as a factor in human relations. In his two essays "Propaganda and Demotic Speech" and "Politics and the English Language" he attacks abstract forms of expression -- the bloodless dialect of bureaucrats and politicians -- as being at once remote from the average man, and lacking in clarity. So as to improve communication, especially in the public realm, Orwell says that jargon should be avoided and language simplified: Since "the whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness" and

²³ vide George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 179-80, for Orwell's own admission of this.

since "modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer," (CEJL, IV, 163) the way to rectify abuses of language is to call up mental pictures of the things to be named and convey those pictures in the simplest most direct language possible. Orwell then offers a few rules to use as guidelines:

- i. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (CEJL, IV, 169)

Though careful not to pretend that his proposals provide any perfect or total solution to the problems of language abuse, he does suggest that they can free one "from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself." (CEJL, IV, 170)

Seen in the context of other aspects of his response to the problem of objectivity, Orwell's outlook on language embodies the familiar concerns with moral ideal and recalcitrant reality:

The inflated style is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. (CEJL, IV, 166-67)

But in his attack on language abuse, Orwell manages to avoid the usual contradictions. By conceding that abstract language is not always per se responsible for the follies of political orthodoxy, Orwell does allow a certain amount of his usual ambivalence to creep into the essay. But he short circuits any implications this might have which could detract from the thrust of his essay by expressing the relationship between political thought and language as a tautology: "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." (CEJL, IV, 167) While such a simple premise detracts somewhat from the value of the essay as an analytical study, it preserves the integrity of Orwell's morally based perception of language. Rather than attempt to develop his generalized empirical observation about language use to the point where its limitations become obvious, he stresses its normative implications. This allows the reader to feel that specific positive action will remedy the problem, promote a more harmonious social structure, and concomitantly, provide a stronger sense of objectivity for the individual.

One of the most interesting aspects of Orwell's work lies in the connection between his sense of man's social relations, significant as bases for objectivity, and his views on religion; for Orwell remains quite aware that the religious sentiment is an important social factor even though he feels the bankruptcy of traditional Christian belief. In his 1935 novel, A Clergyman's Daughter, he deals with the case of a Christian who loses her faith and who is left with a feeling only of purposeless emptiness. At the end of

the novel, Dorothy Hare is engaged in making props for a church pageant as she prays for grace to overcome her lack of faith:

The smell of glue was the answer to her prayer. She did not know this. She did not reflect, consciously, that the solution to her difficulty lay in accepting the fact that there was no solution; that if one gets on with the job that lies to hand, the ultimate purpose of the job fades into insignificance; that faith and no faith are very much the same provided that one is doing what is customary, useful, and acceptable. She could not formulate these thoughts as yet, she could only live them.²⁴

The ending of this novel, as Philip Rieff argues, suggests that "along with liberals from Feuerbach to Durkheim," Orwell knew that established religion remains a fundamentally important force of social cohesion.²⁵ Elsewhere Orwell writes that

²⁴ George Orwell, A Clergyman's Daughter (1935; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), 261.

²⁵ Philip Rieff, "George Orwell and the Post Liberal Imagination," 63. Alan Sandison in The Last Man in Europe: An Essay on George Orwell attacks this view, saying "It is simply not true that elsewhere he asserts religion as basically a mode of social cohesion with action consequently downgraded to an antidote for doubt, as Tennyson put it, or a mere psychological expedient for holding the self together. . . . It is, too, a quite inadequate summary of his attitude to the liberal Christian tradition to say that to him it was irrevocably exhausted, though one had to act as if it were not. This is to make him live in a Conradian world of deliberately created illusion which does not square with the evidence." (p. 50) Sandison's remarks however, overlook the fact that Orwell was often inconsistent and that the "evidence" is conflicting. Indeed Orwell later repudiated both A Clergyman's Daughter and Keep the Aspidistra Flying (vide CEJL, IV, 241), not wishing to acknowledge any suggestions which he made in those novels. This inconsistency, or perhaps 'ambivalence' is a better word, indicates that it will not do to dismiss Rieff's reading simply because Orwell does not adopt the same position consistently. Sandison's argument presupposes here a systematic logicity on Orwell's part, and is based on a form of rationality alien to his work.

Marx's famous saying that 'religion is the opium of the people' is habitually wrenched out of context and given a meaning subtly but appreciably different from the one he gave it. Marx did not say, at any rate in that place, that religion is merely a dope handed out from above; he said that it is something people create for themselves to supply a need recognized to be a real one. 'Religion is the sigh of the soul in a soulless world. Religion is the opium of the people.' What is he saying except that man does not live by bread alone, that hatred is not enough, that a world worth living in cannot be founded on 'realism' and machine guns. (CEJL, II, 33)

Despite his distrust of established religion, and especially of the kind of orthodoxy promulgated by the Catholic Church, which he saw as a direct threat to freedom, Orwell is perfectly capable of appreciating the Christian expression of religious sentiment and its role in promoting social harmony.

In Keep the Aspidistra Flying Orwell goes on to develop a perception of the association between religious and social consciousness by suggesting that in the modern world money has replaced Christian virtue as the basis for human interaction. This is made clear from the outset as Orwell takes his epigraph from the Bible, changing only a single key word:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not money, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, money, these three; but the greatest of these is Money.²⁶

Money has become the sine qua non of social interchange and exchange, the most fundamental of social bonds, and Gordon Comstock expresses his feeling that it has been deified by a materialistic society.

²⁶ George Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying.

This deification has made of it the sole source of objective truth, superceding all other:

"No. All this talk we make -- we're only objectifying our own feelings. It's all dictated by what we've got in our pockets. I go up and down London saying it's a city of the dead and our civilization's dying, and I wish war would break out; and all it means is that my wages are two quid a week and I wish they were five."²⁷

Throughout the novel Comstock's perceptions as to the objective worth of even his own poetry -- the artist's expression of himself -- are constantly shifting, coloured largely by the state of his finances. Though his poverty makes him acutely aware of the power of money, his negative attitude towards this reality suggests a tacit adherence on his part to some undefined ideal of how things should be. In the end, Orwell finds that he cannot accept total pessimism or leave Comstock alone with his bitterness and cynical outlook bred of frustrated idealism. The novel concludes with an attempt to resolve the tension between this uncompromising, though negative, idealism, and Comstock's awareness of his own limitations and actual options through an affirmation of life that will mitigate the effects of his capitulation to the Money-God. Artistically, ideologically, psychologically, this ending is unsatisfactory and leaves the reader with a strong sense of uncertainty. Once again, the ambivalence in Orwell's attitude, not only to religion, to social position, and to poverty, but to all of modern society, emerges. With his skeptical turn of mind he rejects final conclusions while simultaneously seeking to establish a firmer, more clearly defined, and more morally

²⁷ George Orwell, Keep the Aspidistray Flying, 112.

acceptable basis for objectivity.

This then is the situation: Orwell is never fully capable of separating his concern with finding a quasi-ontological basis for objectivity from his concern with morality. A confusion of normative and empirical preoccupations is reflected in his views on religion, on nature, on the past, and especially on the relations between man and man -- these being some of the principal realms of thought and experience which he feels driven to understand and validate. In all of his writing, and particularly in his fictional writing, he develops a complex web of association and interrelation whereby he links his views on the various subjects one to another, often with startling results. The insight into the interrelated functions of money and religion as social bonds which he presents in Keep the Aspidistra Flying is but one example. However, Orwell's professed dislike of abstraction, leading him to avoid rigorous and logical examination of his thought structure, finally prevents him from systematically sorting out the confusions in his response to many issues and especially to the problem of objectivity.

CHAPTER III

In his short book on the life and work of George Orwell, Raymond Williams writes:

The key to Orwell as an individual is the problem of identity. Educated as he was to a particular consciousness, the key to his whole development is that he renounced it, or attempted to renounce it, and that he made a whole series of attempts to find a new social identity. Because of this process we have a writer who was successively many things that would be unlikely in any normal trajectory: An Imperial police officer, a resident of a casual ward, a revolutionary militiaman, a declassified intellectual, a middle class English writer.¹

Though our concern here is less with Orwell the individual than with Orwell the writer, Williams' comment remains very much a propos. For Orwell went so far as to abandon his given name Eric Blair, in order to adopt the literary pseudonym by which he became most widely known; and in his writing he is definitely preoccupied with the problem of identity in very personal terms, as evidenced by his devotion to formal autobiography. As Williams suggests, however, an examination of Orwell's work as a whole (or of the facts of his

¹ Raymond Williams, George Orwell, ed. Frank Kermode (Viking: New York, 1971), 90.

life) fails to provide any sense of a single definitive or coherent response to the problem of identity. A fragmented response is found even within individual writings, and his approach to questions of identity (what is it? what basis is there for it?) is in many ways a corollary to his response to the problem of objectivity. For if he sees many possible bases for objectivity, he is also capable of defining identity (and his own in particular) in terms of a number of differing contexts.

This being the case, it is hardly surprising that the opposition between Orwell's strong sense of morality and his desire to fully experience, understand, and absorb into himself the realities of differing situations, which colors his response to the problem of objectivity, should also color his response to the problem of identity. In the first place the question "Who am I?" becomes confused with the question "Who should I be?" Orwell feels compelled at times to live up to standards of fairness, honesty, sympathy for another and understanding of his position which lead him into self denial. In the second place the moral stance which forces him to continually and consciously evaluate people, creeds and deeds often suggest negative forms of self definition. It is easy to characterize Orwell in terms of his anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, anti-communism, anti-fascism, anti-Conservatism, or even his anti-pacifism and anti-catholicism. What is more difficult is to state precisely, categorically, or unequivocally what he does believe in.

One thing which Orwell's biography does reveal is that for him the process of self definition involves action and commitment as much as it does verbal articulation or expression of belief. Raymond Williams explains that

He made a single life contain, at first hand, the experiences of imperialism, of revolution, of poverty. He had no theory to explain them and no rooted positive beliefs extending beyond his own role. But with great persistence and courage he went to the centres of the history that was determining him, so that it might be experienced and differently determined. This, above everything, was his individual achievement. He was the writer who put himself out, who kept going and taking part, and who learned to write as a function of this very precise exploration.²

The idea that Orwell saw action per se as providing a means of self definition finds textual as well as biographical support. Dorothy's meditations at the end of A Clergyman's Daughter constitute Orwell's articulation of this idea (vide Ch. II, p. 42 above). We are clearly intended to see that action serves to reinforce Dorothy's sense of identity as well as her belief in objective truth and value. And it is significant that Orwell should develop his idea in the context of a novel which deals so directly with the question of religion and the issue of faith. The Pauline emphasis on doing as well as knowing the good, on living out one's beliefs is very much a Christian concept which forms an important part of Orwell's outlook. Thought and action are equally important.

Orwell's views on nature can be interpreted in such a way as

² Raymond Williams, George Orwell, pp. 92-93.

to suggest a very different aspect of his response to the problem of identity. As Alan Sandison puts it,

Nature, in the sense of the surface of the earth, is real. Its reality is conveyed to the individual through his senses and in precisely this commerce is his personal identity confirmed. For the senses are inalienable and in the reception of their independent and particular report of the natural world is proof of individuality. Not that they are the sum of personality which to Orwell is something much more spiritual than that would allow as we shall see when we come to discuss the almost equal importance of history to the individual.³

Sandison's remark not only captures the full significance for Orwell's sense of identity of nature, but also expresses very nicely the relationship between his sense of objectivity and his sense of identity in this context. As Sandison notes, however, history, or more broadly speaking a sense of the past, also provides an important context for Orwell's views on the subject of identity.

Orwell's preoccupation with the past as a basis for identity emerges most clearly in two essays which he wrote in the early 1940's, "My Country Right or Left" (1940) and "The Lion and the Unicorn" (1941). In the former essay he refers mostly to personal experiences:

Of the middle years of the war I remember chiefly the square shoulders, bulging calves, and jingling spurs of the artillery men, whose uniform I much preferred to that of the infantry. As for the final period, if you ask me truthfully what is my chief memory, I must answer simply -- margarine. (CEJL, I, 588)

³ Alan Sandison, The Last Man in Europe: an Essay on George Orwell (Macmillan: London, 1974), 10.

These personal memories are significant, for they are of immediately apprehended, specific, concrete, and hence very individual events. But as a basis for Orwell's sense of identity, the shared past, encompassing a relation between man and man, becomes even more important. In "The Lion and the Unicorn" Orwell uses historical fact and analysis to support his generalizations about Britain's national identity. He claims, for instance, that one of the most prominent features of English civilization is "the English hatred of war and militarism":

It is rooted deep in history and it is strong in the lower-middle class as well as the working class. Successive wars have shaken it but not destroyed it. Well within living memory it was common for "the redcoats to be booed at in the streets and for the landlords of respectable public houses to refuse to allow soldiers on the premises. (CEJL, II, 79)

Orwell the "historian" goes on to account for this by explaining it as the result of an island defence strategy which required sea power to a much greater extent than land power. Throughout the essay Orwell establishes his generalizations about England in an historical context always expanding on the idea that

... there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists as in a living creature. (CEJL, II, 76)

Clearly pastness and the sense of continuity through time are important aspects of any living identity for Orwell.

Ultimately the thrust of "The Lion and the Unicorn" is to show that the advent of Socialism poses no threat to the "essential" Britain, and is in fact quite consistent with the course of national and social development. The class history and analysis which Orwell offers in the first and second parts of the essay are certainly directed towards this end. "The Lion and the Unicorn" attempts to mobilize patriotism and nostalgia as well as just plain common sense in support of Orwell's moral and social ideals. Written at a time when Orwell saw a genuine revolution in the offing, as a result of Britain's full commitment to war on Fascism, the essay offers a fairly positive appraisal of the situation and significantly does not contain any rift between what he would like to see happen and what he expects to see happen. The strong sense of national identity and unity which existed in the face of the Nazi threat, giving Orwell grounds for hope in the future, largely accounts for this. So although the main thrust of the essay is not directed towards the problem of identity, the work nonetheless expresses an important aspect of his response to that problem.

As is the case with his view of the past, Orwell's view of the relationship between man and man finds expression in specifically personal as well as in more general terms. The private sexual attitudes of his fictional characters are, for instance, every bit as important an indication of his outlook as are the opinions which he or his protagonists hold on partisan politics. Orwell is aware of, and makes his readers aware of, the importance which

an individual's role or function in these contexts has for defining his identity.

Of particular concern to Orwell in his thinking on the subject of role relationships is the concept of power. In The Crystal Spirit George Woodcock notes that one of Orwell's earliest essays "Shooting an Elephant" advances a critique of the power relationship as a basis for self definition. In this essay he tells of having to shoot an elephant against his will, simply in order to impress a crowd of Burmese villagers in front of whom he must maintain the pose expected of him as an imperial official:

I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives' and so in every crises he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. (CEJL, I, 269)

Orwell feels the emptiness of any form of identity based on a social role which conflicts with an individual's personal emotional and moral response. This is why he later comes to respect, if not accept, the writing and world view of Henry Miller who completely eschewed any conscious social responsibility and avoided any recognizable social role. The fate which Orwell sees for Flory in Burmese Days shows though that he remains aware of how difficult it is for an individual to escape the role which society expects him to fulfill. Significantly, Flory's greatest vulnerability exists

in his sexual and romantic relationships, for it is in this realm that convention and taboo (expressions of society's power) are strongest. The complete annihilation of these aspirations which Flory focusses on Elizabeth Lackersteen accordingly reflects Orwell's insight into the negative effects of a constricted social identity defined in terms of power.

In A Clergyman's Daughter and Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Orwell further explores these insights, although the ambivalence of his response becomes stronger. Self definition through an intimate personal relationship is denied Dorothy, whose prudish attitude towards sex seems to preclude it. Yet Orwell's portrayal of her relationship to the other characters during her period of amnesia suggests that, freed from the strictures of her social role⁴ she can begin to develop greater human awareness and self reliance. Her return to life with her father at the end of the novel thus becomes an indication of her willingness to accept the constrictions of a socially and institutionally defined role as the clergyman's daughter, despite the fact that her loss of faith makes the role seem

⁴ This aspect of the novel draws attention once again to the question of whether Dorothy's freedom exists despite, or because of the conditions of material want in which she finds herself. Certainly for Orwell in Down and Out in Paris and London and The Road to Wigan Pier the feeling of confronting the worst material poverty imaginable and of therefore having nothing to lose, provided a freedom from both social or class stricture and moral quandry, though he nowhere advocates abject poverty as a desirable lifestyle for others to seek after. (vide Ch. II pp. 36-39 for elaboration)

a mockery. Only a somewhat gratuitous recognition of the power of action saves the ending from total pointlessness. What might be desirable for Dorothy does not seem realistically possible within the terms of the novel.

For Comstock, personal intimacy in a sexual relationship offers the possibility of positive self-definition, and Orwell certainly intends to show this in the ending. Comstock's decision to marry Rosemary and raise their child represents a triumph of love. But such is the confused nature of the work that this resolution fails to convince. For earlier in the novel Orwell has made it clear that Comstock's relationship to Rosemary is, like Flory's relationship to Elizabeth in Burmese Days, very much conditioned by the material exigencies, the role structures and the puritanical mores of a soulless, unjust and repressive society. When they go out into the country together, the concerns imposed by society taint their love by preventing them from consummating it; and these implicating terms of the novel are such that Comstock's decision to accept the roles of husband, paterfamilias, breadwinner and upright citizen represent as much a capitulation as a triumph.

Only in Nineteen Eighty-Four does Orwell develop his ideas about social roles and power relationships to their fullest extent, showing how the structured and power oriented view of human relationships which a society tends to promote affects and ultimately moulds the individual's sense of identity. In Oceania, a society wherein

power is an end in itself, even the individual's sexual responses reflect this outlook, and Winston Smith is not immune:

Suddenly, by the sort of violent effort with which one wrenches one's head away from the pillow in a nightmare, Winston succeeded in transferring his hatred from the face on the screen to the dark-haired girl behind him. Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind. He would flog her to death with a rubber bruncheon. He would tie her naked to a stake and shoot her full of arrows like Saint Sebastian. He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax.⁵

The feelings of violence together with the repression which exists in Oceania form the basis for Winston's sado-masochistic fantasy, and this vividly expresses Orwell's insight into the type of self image which a society's power orientation can impose upon people. At the same time the passage reflects Orwell's recurrent interest in the fundamentals of human psychology, especially as they relate to politics and to the totalitarian experience. Such an extreme perception of society's influence over the individual naturally leaves little room for redemption, and Orwell's sense of the truth of his insight forces a bleak ending, which he avoids in Keep the Aspidistra Flying. For when he is released from the Ministry of Love there remains no identity for Winston apart from the one defined by the state which has become the sole focus for his most personal emotions: He loves Big Brother.

Clearly, there is much of Orwell's response to the problem of identity which is expressed in very negative and bleak terms in his

⁵ George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949; rpt. Signet Books-New American Library, 1950), p. 15.

writing. This is true both of the direct and personal response to the problem which he formulates at the level of political ideology and of the more indirect literary response which appears in his fiction. The metamorphosis of pigs into men (evoking the fate of Odysseus' sailors on the island of Circe) at the end of Animal Farm is as much an expression of this negative vision as is his anti-capitalism, for instance. It is equally clear that such a negative response is in large part the result of Orwell's inability to reconcile his moral ideals with the sense of actuality forced upon him by his environment. Yet there remains one element of his outlook on which his views are both positive and unequivocal, namely his commitment to the ideal of freedom and the need for it in establishing one's identity. This of course is why he so detests power as a factor in human relations. Orwell's advocacy of social as well as political freedom coincides with his overriding concern with honesty since he recognizes that self deception can lead to a false sense of identity. He himself was often ready, perhaps too ready, to admit to self deception and allow it to give him grounds for despair. But doubtless his living commitment to these two beliefs has been to a considerable extent responsible for the size and devotion of his readership.

Orwell's response to the problem of identity is developed in much the same contexts as his response to the problem of objectivity. The two problems are closely related and difficulties which he has

with the one are very much a part of his response to the other.

This is why an examination of both is required to give an adequate sense of Orwell's place as a modern British thinker and writer.

CHAPTER IV

Inconsistency, confusion, ambivalence, an almost painful sense of honesty, and a yearning towards some barely discernible human ideal -- all these are aspects of Orwell's response to the problems of objectivity and identity; and as these are features of his thought, so are they features of its expression. An examination of his later writing makes this especially clear, and by considering the approach to his material which he adopts in his last four major works -- Homage to Catalonia, Coming Up for Air, Animal Farm, and Nineteen Eighty-Four it becomes possible to more fully gauge the measure of his artistic successes and failures.

Homage to Catalonia, like Down and Out in Paris and London and The Road to Wigan Pier, is not a fictional work, but rather a personal autobiography. The genre presupposes that Orwell and his narrator are one and the same. Orwell's perceptions and opinions are expressed directly -- there is no need for him to project them onto some created character who must function within the confines of an artificially created plot. His sense of identity is sharpened and strengthened by the fact of his partisan involvement in a

clearly defined military and political confrontation. His sense of objectivity finds satisfaction in the fact that he is honestly recording actual lived experience. Because of the work's topical nature, Orwell does not feel the need to create in advance the context for his narrative . . . He can rely on an informed readership. This reinforces the confidence with which he proceeds.

Writer, narrator, sequence, circumstance, and readership: Orwell has a clear idea of all of them in Homage until he reaches Chapter XI. There suddenly he is dealing with facts which he feels are in dispute, and his confidence in his own perspective wavers. His readership, he knows, has heard a different account of the Barcelona street fighting. Orwell's link with the reader has been threatened by contrary propaganda and one of the bases for his sense of objectivity (the relationship between author and audience is, after all, one facet of the relationship between man and man) has suddenly been lost. Then too the increased complexity of shifting political and military alignments within Catalonia robs of its clarity any self definition based on partisan allegiance. The shift in tone and perspective which occurs in Chapter XI must be seen as an attempt to compensate for these things as he moves from personal and colloquial narrative to a more distanced, formal, and cautious analysis. This shift, which is not in subject matter so much as in approach, does not in any way detract from the substance of what Orwell has to say about Spain and the civil war experience. If anything, the reader's acquaintance with some of the facts surrounding

events which took place in Catalonia at that time enhances appreciation of Orwell's own story. But the formal and artistic unity of the work is disturbed as a result of the internal contradictions which form such an important part of Orwell's response to problems such as those of objectivity and identity. These contradictions are so deeply entrenched that, though Orwell recognizes their marring effect on Homage, he feels compelled to retain Chapter XI, where that effect is most clearly visible, as part of the finished work:

. . . among other things it contains a long chapter, full of newspaper quotations and the like, defending Trotskyists who were accused of plotting with Franco. Clearly such a chapter, which after a year or two would lose its interest for any ordinary reader, must ruin the book. A critic whom I respect read me a lecture about it. 'Why did you put in all that stuff?' he said. 'You've turned what might have been a good book into journalism.' What he said was true, but I could not have done otherwise. I happened to know, what very few people in England had been allowed to know, that innocent men were being falsely accused. If I had not been angry about that, I should never have written the book. ("Why I Write" in CEJL, I, 29)

Despite this, Homage to Catalonia remains one of Orwell's more convincing expressions of self and of the world he knows.

The special and peculiar nature of Orwell's formal response to the problems of objectivity and identity is perhaps more fully evident in Orwell's fictional writing where he is required to work with such elements as plot and character. The increased complexity of fiction's formal demands gives his response to the problems of objectivity and identity an added dimension. For it is in his fiction that he can most clearly be seen wavering between a mode of presentation which appeals to his reader's moral sense, often through the use of

satire, and one which appeals to the reader's sense of mimesis through the use of 'naturalistic' or 'realistic' techniques. The former requires that the reader be somewhat distanced from the subject, while the latter requires that he look more closely at the detail of something specific which the author wishes to portray in all its richness and complexity.

In "Why I Write" (1946) Orwell speaks of his early literary aspirations:

. . . it is clear what kind of books I wanted to write, in so far as I could be said to want to write books at that time. I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed description and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound. And in fact my first complete novel, Burmese Days, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book. (CEJL, I, 25)

Passages in his work like this one, together with his interest in English novelists such as Charles Reade, Anthony Trollope, and George Gissing, indicate that Orwell has strong roots in the English and continental traditions of literary and social realism.¹ Moreover, his preoccupation with the direct and concrete in expression puts his formal approach to fiction writing well in tune with the techniques employed by proponents of literary realism and naturalism. For as Ian Watt argues in The Rise of the Novel,²

. . . the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention

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Keith Alldritt, in The Making of George Orwell: An Essay in Literary History (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), explores this whole issue at greater length.

²Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 18 & 21.

it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment. . . . the characters of the novel can only be individualised if they are set in a background of particularised time and place.

Orwell's fictional writing often tends to follow precisely these precepts.

In Coming Up for Air, for instance, Bowling's background and personal interests are sketched out in some detail. Orwell has in fact gone to great pains to construct a sense of his individuality and of his identity in time. Also, Bowling, who as protagonist narrates his own story, is usually adept at creating the vivid sense of particularized place, and at capturing the real sensuous quality of an event or situation in his past through concrete description:

It was a damp wintry kind of morning. All round, of course, was the awful muck and litter of war, the sort of filthy sordid mess that's actually worse than a battle-field of corpses. Trees with boughs torn off them, old shell holes that had partly filled up again, tin cans, turds, mud, weeds, clumps of rusty barbed wire with weeds growing through them.³

Throughout the novel, and elsewhere in his writing, Orwell proves his mastery of this kind of visual description which contributes to a sense of realism.

This sense of realism is enhanced by Orwell's ability to draw the reader into the world of his fiction, and implicate him in its developments, drawing a close bond between reader and narrator. Bowling's colloquial and informal manner, together with his direct form of address create a "postulated" or "implied" reader who is manipulated into sharing Bowling's perceptions and who, as a result,

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George Orwell, Coming Up for Air (1939; rpt. Penguin: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1962), p. 81. All further quotations will be drawn from this edition.

provides a feeling of objective confirmation which makes them seem more convincingly real:

Do you know the road I live -- Ellesmere Road, West Bletchley? Even if you don't, you know fifty others exactly like it. (p. 13)

The ease and neatness with which Bowling establishes a sense of aesthetic distance in the novel suggest that Orwell is firmly in control of the process. He would seem to have the reader in the palm of his hand.

Unfortunately, Orwell appears unable to accept the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" or his ability to appreciate an indirect fictional presentation:

the novelist demands more imaginative work from his readers than does the essayist. He trusts his audience in a way the essayist does not, trusts it to understand things not explained on the surface, his attitude toward the characters, the meaning of symbolic objects or scenes, and so on. Orwell's fiction seldom suggests that he was willing to accord his reader's such trust.⁴

On several occasions when he has a point to make, Bowling's tone becomes hortatory and rhetorical in a more direct fashion, which destroys the fabric of the fiction:

I was down among the realities of modern life. And what are the realities of modern life? Well the chief one is an everlasting, frantic desire to sell things. With most people it takes the form of selling themselves -- that's to say getting a job and keeping it. I suppose there hasn't been a single month since the war, in any trade you care to name, in which there weren't more men

⁴ Alex Zwerdling, Orwell and the Left (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 148-149.

than jobs. Its brought a peculiar, ghastly feeling into life. It's like on a sinking ship when there are nineteen survivors and fourteen lifebelts. But is there anything particularly modern about that, you say? Has it anything to do with the war? Well, it feels as if it had. That feeling that you've got to be everlastingly fighting and hustling, that you'll never get anything unless you grab it from somebody else, that there's always somebody after your job, that next month or the month after they'll be reducing staff and it's you that'll get the bird -- that, I swear, didn't exist in the old life before the war. (p. 128)

This is Bowling, up on a soapbox, no longer speaking in his own voice but in Orwell's, hectoring his reader in an attempt to make a point as directly and clearly as possible. In a letter which he later wrote to his friend Julian Symons Orwell says:

Of course you are perfectly right about my own character constantly intruding on that of the narrator. I am not a real novelist anyway, and that particular vice is inherent in writing a novel in the first person, which one should never do. One difficulty I have never solved is that one has masses of experience which one passionately wants to write about, e.g. that part about fishing in that book, and no way of using them up except by disguising them as a novel. (CEJL, IV, 478)

Effectively Orwell concedes that he has lost control over the aesthetic distance which should separate him as writer from Bowling as narrator. He is somewhat less prone to doing this, of course, when he writes his autobiographies and essays since the degree of distance which must be maintained there is not as great. When he uses shorter forms, moreover, the need for excessive care in maintaining a consistent narratorial stance is considerably reduced. The failure of Orwell in his fiction to consistently control his relationship to the text may be seen as a reflection of the ambivalence in his response to the problem of identity.

Nor do Orwell's difficulties in controlling aesthetic distance end with his tendency to cut through the fictional fabric in order to speak directly to the reader. For the demands of his polemical position and moral outlook also become evident when he turns to satire, a mode of presentation which in some instances runs directly counter to his use of realistic technique. This is particularly true of much of the characterization which he produces in Coming Up for Air, for though the setting and the actions of the characters are generally described in a convincingly real manner, individuated and particularized, they themselves remain essentially "flat" character types:

The girl was about eighteen, rather fat, with a sort of moony face, the kind that would never get the change right anyway. (p. 18)

She [Hilda] was a small, slim, rather timid girl, with dark hair, beautiful movements, and -- because of having large eyes -- a distinct resemblance to a hare. She was one of those people who never say much, but remains on the edge of any conversation that's going on, and give the impression that they're listening. (p. 132)

Old Vincent, Hilda's father, had been not only in India, but also in some even more outlandish place, Borneo or Sarawak, I forget which. He was the usual type, completely bald, almost invisible behind his moustache, and full of stories about cobras and cummerbunds and what the district collector said in '93. (p. 134)

Porteous is a retired public school master. . . . He's a bachelor of course. You can't imagine that kind married. . . . He's a learned kind of chap with his Greek and Latin and poetry and all that. I suppose that if the local Left Book Club branch represents Progress, old Porteous stands for Culture. (p. 153)

This sort of caricature or type-casting forms the basis for Bowling's

satirical perspective and his wry humour. He even manages to achieve the necessary self distance to look at himself as a type:

I had no illusions about myself that morning. It was almost as if I could stand at a distance and watch myself coming down the road with my fat, red face and my false teeth and my vulgar clothes. A chap like me is incapable of looking like a gentleman. . . . (p. 13)

Do you know the active, hearty kind of fat man, the athletic bouncing type that's nicknamed Fatty or Tubby and is always the life and soul of the party? I'm that type. . . . (p. 8)

What Orwell has effectively done by using this technique is to set the reader at a distance from his subject. There is a marked shift of outlook and perspective away from that which Orwell develops elsewhere in the novel, and there is an increased sense of rhetorical pressure which somewhat undercuts the novel's easy and colloquial mimesis. Nor is the satire or irony always as effective as it might be, for by continually attempting to affirm the fact that he and the reader share a common perspective, Bowling appears to show some insecurity. Indeed, the novel is laced with expressions such as "you know (?)" which function as pleas for reassurance:

You know those tennis clubs in the genteel suburbs -- little wooden pavilions and high wire-netting enclosures where young chaps in rather badly cut white flannels prance up and down, shouting "Fifteen-forty!" and "Vantage all!" in voices which are a tolerable imitation of the Upper Crust. (p. 132)

A remark such as this has a strangely self conscious quality that derives from the stress which Bowling lays on his relationship with the implied reader. Effective satire and irony require that narrator and reader share a basic set of underlying assumptions and values

and be in possession of a similar set of facts, but acceptance of the implied ideal against which an absurd or foolish reality is to be measured must be taken for granted. Bowling's failure to do this often robs his remarks of their full satiric impact and imparts a pervasive sense of irresolution, uncertainty and impotence to the novel as a whole. The reader can never be completely comfortable in his response to the fiction. This is a formal reflection of Orwell's ambivalent outlook and especially of his ambivalent response to the problem of objectivity.

Structurally, it must be recognized that the ending of the novel offers no solution to many of Bowling's preoccupations, the implied issues which it raises. This has the effect of making whole sections of the work seem gratuitous -- digressions which have little to do with the main story. Though Orwell's purpose, it might be argued, could be to indicate that failure to fully understand and integrate his experience is one of the predicaments of modern man, the formal vagueness evidenced in the novel's tendency to straddle two differing modes of presentation cannot be said to satisfactorily answer his purpose. Imitative form is not always the writer's most effective technique, and this is especially true where a strong, unified sense of conviction is lacking in his response to experience.

It would be grossly unfair to Orwell, however, to suggest that his work is invariably inferior, either intellectually or artistically as a result of his ambivalent response to the problems of objectivity

and identity. In fact, as I have already suggested, there are times when those things which contribute to the ambivalence work to lift his writing to the level of clarity and intensity which has served in the making of his reputation. This is particularly true with respect to Orwell's famous satirical allegory or fable, Animal Farm, a work criticized by some as lacking in emotional depth or complexity. Yet, while the book does not have the same obsessive drive which powers his last important work, Nineteen Eighty-Four, even its more hostile critics concede that in formal terms it maintains a level of consistency not found in his other writings:

In specifically literary terms, there is only one aspect of the book that continues to interest us and that is its form, and the particular tone of voice which this form enjoins upon the author.⁵

Within the context of Orwell's development, this in itself represents a considerable achievement. By establishing a clear allegorical basis for the work he is able to maintain a consistent sense of his own relationship to the text and of its relationship to the reader. Structurally it is tightly coherent, and the characterization techniques of allegory mesh with those of satire most effectively and become a vehicle for Orwell's moral thrust. The irony in the work is not only clear and powerful, but also razor sharp, and a line such as "all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others" is worthy of a Pope or a Swift. In the fable, moreover, Orwell's touches of sentimentality over the death of Boxer do not seem out of place as they would in a novel which must follow more closely

⁵ Keith Alldritt, The Making of George Orwell: an Essay in Literary History, p. 148.

the conventions of realism. At the same time those realistic techniques of individuation and detailed description which operate at the verbal level and are used to characterize some of the animals or establish the setting, do not undermine the allegory or the satire. On the contrary, they enhance it by fastening a more certain hold over the responses of the reader. Irony and vivid prose are the main vehicles for emotion in this work which expresses both anger and a sense of compassionate pathos. For the first time in Animal Farm Orwell refuses to allow himself to feel guilty or self-conscious at his failure to cover all the angles, see all the complexities, or give everything a fair hearing. Kubal's remark about the book may well be true but fails, I believe, to take this into account or to see the work on its own terms within the context of Orwell's other writing:

Orwell's success in establishing a formal unity notwithstanding, political realities cannot be accounted for in one dimensional terms.⁶

What Orwell achieves in Animal Farm seems deceptively simple, perhaps even simplistic, but is in fact the synthesis of a number of previously undigested formal, emotional, and intellectual responses to a situation which no other writer before or since has been able to present so clearly or forcefully.

"Animal Farm," Orwell was later to write, "was the first book

⁶ David L. Kubal, Outside the Whale: George Orwell's Art and Politics (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1972), p. 129.

in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole."

To this he adds:

of later years I have tried to write less picturesquely and more exactly. (CEJL, I, 29)

The comment is of crucial importance for it in large part explains Orwell's success in achieving in Animal Farm a synthesis of pre-occupations which conflict elsewhere: clear moral thrust with mimetic persuasiveness -- idealistic conviction with faithful rendering of "the real." What he has done is express his honesty and "truth to life" at the semantic level of his art rather than at the fictional level of plot, character, and setting. He trusts in the reader's willing suspension of disbelief as he creates his fable with its obvious allegory and allows himself to use a simple plot and to present simple characters in a simple environment. All of his art is dedicated to giving these elements a neat, clear, well rounded verbal expression, and he avoids inclusion of gratuitous "picturesque" passages. In this he lays the groundwork for what is achieved in Nineteen Eighty-Four, his last, and despite its flaws, his most compelling work of fiction.

For in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell uses his exactitude of prose to give focus and definition to two conflicting realities, the brutally obtrusive one of Big Brother's Oceania and that of pleasant memory and personal experience private to Winston. Each is concretely depicted and Orwell gives a detailed intensity to his narration of

incidents and objects that define and express the conflict:

It was a heavy lump of glass, curved on one side, flat on the other, making almost a hemisphere. There was a peculiar softness, as of rainwater, in both the color and the texture of the glass. At the heart of it, magnified by the curved surface there was a strange pink, convoluted object that recalled a rose or a sea anemone.

there was a middleaged woman might have been a jewess sitting up in the bow with a little boy about three years old in her arms. little boy screaming with fright and hiding his head between her breasts as if he was trying to burrow right into her and the woman putting her arms around him and comforting him although she was blue with fright herself all the time covering him up as much as possible as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him. the the helicopter planted a 20 kilo bomb in among them terrific flash and the boat went all to matchwood. then there was a wonderful shot of a child's arm going up up up right up into the air a helicopter with a camera in its nose must have followed it up. . .⁷

By limiting the focus of the reader's perspective to the experience of Winston Smith, Orwell can use the gulf which exists between the two realities effectively. The moral and aesthetic distance is present for him to develop the satire while the reader's identification with Winston implicates him in the protagonist's emotional response. The fear is palpable and this gives a threatening quality to the whole first part of the novel. The fact that the U.S. Republican Party, as Orwell was dismayed to learn,⁸ felt that the work could be used as effective propaganda against the Labour Party shows the

⁷ George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949; rpt. Signet Books-New American Library: New York, 1950) pp. 74 and 10.

⁸ vide CEJL, IV, 566.

extent of its rhetorical power. This suggests however that its author was unable to target the satire as clearly as he might have liked. In the final analysis, Orwell's failure to fully and consistently control the reader's perspective, a failure resulting from tensions within his own thought, makes the message of the work seem equivocal, its power and intensity notwithstanding.

Commenting on Nineteen Eighty-Four, Alex Zwerdling recognizes that it

remains in many ways an ambiguous book . . . Despite this ambiguity, Nineteen Eighty-Four is certainly a far darker book than its predecessor. In contrast to Animal Farm its tone is unrelievedly grim. . . .

He [Orwell] was unlike other socialists in that he finally did not believe his ideals would be or could be realized; and it is this which makes his political ideas and attitudes toward the end of his life so heterodox and accounts for the odd tangle of conservative and radical strands.⁹

Zwerdling might have added that it is the conflict between his morally based ideals and his sense of what could actually be realized which gives Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four its nightmarishly oppressive sense of anguish and despair. For, seen structurally, the work is in fact a compound of two distinct albeit related stories, each of which mirrors one facet of the emotional and intellectual response to life which Orwell expresses in his writing. There is the dark Juvenalian satire of those tendencies which he saw in contemporary industrial society, and which he makes his reader see as hateful

⁹ Alex Zwerdling, Orwell and the Left, pp. 108 and 113.

and terrifying through the eyes of Winston Smith and then there is a rendering of the actual psychological process whereby a victim's conscious identity is destroyed to satisfy the need of those to whom power and oppression have become ends in themselves -- a process whose description forms the entire basis of Arthur Koestler's book, Darkness at Noon. It is because he fuses these two concerns and lays the burden of their expression almost completely on a single character within a single plot that Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four reflects once again the essential ambivalence of his thought and feeling in their response to the problems which confront them.

In the end Orwell remains incapable of escaping from the contradictions and divergent tendencies of his response to experience, and it is perhaps this, expressed apocalyptically with the full force of a despairing anguish in Nineteen Eighty-Four that gives the book its power and hold over the popular consciousness. Though structurally flawed, the novel is not structurally diffuse as are Coming Up for Air and so many of Orwell's other fictional writings and if its shortcomings are easier to see, it is because the tensions and contradictions of Orwell's psyche are expressed more clearly and with greater intensity here than anywhere else in his writing. Nineteen Eighty-Four offers no resolution, but it poses a uniquely modern dilemma in terms that unmistakably implicate anyone capable of reading and understanding it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In any discussion of Orwell's work, two features should emerge as absolutely basic. One is his dislike of abstraction, and the other is the conflict which exists in his mind between empirical and normative perspectives. Together these two factors condition both his thought and his writing and account for the highly individual style which he came to develop. At the same time, however, they remain the source of much confusion and ambivalence for him since he often refused to deal systematically with the ideological generalizations that he worked with, and so found it difficult to give a single overriding thrust to many of his longer works.

Yet his significance persists, perhaps because of his ambivalence as much as anything else. For Orwell has come to represent many different things to people of many different persuasions, and there are few literate persons who have not read at least one of his works. Certainly his impact upon the popular consciousness of English speaking readers has been enormous, something that Orwell himself would doubtless be glad to learn. In fact, he on several occasions stated his belief that

Ultimately there is no test of literary merit except survival which is itself merely an index to majority opinion. (CEJL, IV, 335)

Given this kind of attitude on Orwell's part, of which his continuing interest in popular fiction provides further evidence, it is not being at all unfair to the spirit of his writing to stress its popularity as a factor in the making of his reputation.

Obviously, though, there is more than just Orwell's ideological ambivalence involved in the comparative popularity which his work has enjoyed. One of the most important factors is surely his ability to manipulate his readers, inspiring in them feelings of comfortable familiarity or shocked recognition. This is why the concept of aesthetic distance developed in Chapter IV is so important in allowing for a better understanding of his work. For Orwell is undoubtedly one of the twentieth century's masters of written rhetoric. How he writes is every bit as significant a factor in the making of his reputation as what he writes, and whom he writes for is equally important (vide once again Winston Smith's thoughts cited Chapter II, on p.13). His writing is at its best when his sense of audience is strongest:

we of the sinking middle class -- the private school-master, the half-starved free lance journalist, the colonel's spinster daughter with £75 a year, the jobless Cambridge graduate, the ship's officer without a ship, the clerks, the civil servants, the commercial travellers and the thrice bankrupt drapers in country towns -- may sink without further struggles into the working class where we belong, and probably when we get there it will not be so dreadful as we feared, for, after all, we have

nothing to lose but our aitches.¹

This sort of appeal, be it explicit or implicitly allusive, to an experience which reader and narrator share, underlies much of Orwell's popularity.

Despite the impossibility of fully explaining this popularity, if there is a final factor in the making of Orwell's reputation it is surely the ambitiousness of the task which he set for himself:

The difficulty of the task he set himself -- to find a literary vehicle that could accommodate confession, realistic observation, intellectual analysis, and political persuasion -- was surely bound to defeat him, and helps explain why so many of his works later struck him as failures. . . . It is perhaps our sense of the ambitiousness and inherent difficulty of this attempt that makes us discount some of the obvious imperfections of Orwell's work and see the career itself as more successful and impressive than the individual works it produced.²

Zwerdling's comment, perhaps better than any other, gives a key to understanding the prevalent myth surrounding Orwell.

In concluding, then, it must once again be stressed that Orwell's writing has both its strengths and its weaknesses, though in many instances these become corollaries of each other when his work is examined as a response to the problems which confront him. Though this paper deals only with two of these, others, such as

¹ George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 263-64.

² Alex Zwerdling, Orwell and the Left, 209.

the problem of human nature, may be introduced. Each one allows the critic to see Orwell in a different light and gives him the opportunity to place Orwell's work in a more exact historical, intellectual and literary relationship to that of other figures in Western civilization. And in the final analysis, this is the challenge which faces the critic of Orwell, for he remains a writer whose achievement spans a wide variety of those cultural traditions that have moulded the modern consciousness.

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