

Orwell's painful childhood

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ORWELL was always extremely reticent about his personal affairs, so we know virtually nothing about how his character was formed in his earliest years. He was born in 1903 in Motihari, situated on the bank of a lake in the state of Bihar, between Patna and Katmandu. His father was a sub-deputy agent in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service, and Orwell's family was part of that 'upper-middle class, which had its heyday in the eighties and nineties, with Kipling as its poet laureate, and was a sort of mound of wreckage left behind when the tide of Victorian prosperity receded'.¹

Like Thackeray, Kipling, and Durrell, he spent his first years in India before he was sent to England at the age of four to begin school. Kipling's *Something of Myself* gives a lyrical description of a secure Indian childhood, protected by the gentleness and affection of bearer and *ayah*; and Fraser writes of Durrell that 'The Indian childhood, the heat, the colour, the Kiplingesque social atmosphere, deeply affected his childish imagination'.² But both Thackeray and Kipling stress the wrenching trauma of leaving India at five years old. In *The Newcombes*, Thackeray writes: What a strange pathos seems to me to accompany all our Indian story! . . . The family must be broken up . . . In America it is from the breast of a poor slave that a child is taken; in India it is from the wife.³

Kipling's 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' describes his sudden and painful departure from servants and parents ('through no fault of their own, they had lost all their world'), and the horrors of an alien family that engulfs him with meanness and cruelty. Like Orwell, Kipling endured inexplicable accusations of crimes, constant fear

¹ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Penguin, 1962, p. 106.

² G. S. Fraser, *Lawrence Durrell: A Study*, London, 1968, p. 31.

³ William Thackeray, *The Newcombes, Works*, ed. George Saintsbury, xiv, 1908, p. 66.

of punishment, unjust beatings, terrifying threats of hell and utter despair, and he concludes that 'when young lips have drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Suspicion, and Despair, all the Love in the world will not wholly take away that knowledge'.¹

Orwell attended the local grammar school at Henley-on-Thames and lived in that strangely artificial atmosphere that Anglo-Indian families recreated for themselves 'at home'. George Bowling, the hero of *Coming Up For Air*, married into one of these families and describes it with satiric wit:

As soon as you set foot inside the front door you're in India in the eighties. You know the kind of atmosphere. The carved teak furniture, the brass trays, the dusty tiger-skulls on the wall, the Trichinopoly cigars, the red-hot pickles, the yellow photographs of chaps in sun-helmets, the Hindustani words that you're expected to know the meaning of, the everlasting anecdotes of the tiger-shoots and what Smith said to Jones in Poona in '87. It's a sort of little world of their own that they've created, like a kind of cyst.²

Orwell writes in 'Such, Such Were the Joys' that, even while at home,

my early childhood had not been altogether happy . . . One ought to love one's father, but I knew very well that I merely disliked my own father, whom I had barely seen before I was eight and who appeared to me simply as a gruff-voiced elderly man forever saying 'Don't'³ . . . Not to expose your true feelings to an adult seems to be instinctive from the age of seven or eight onwards . . . I do not believe that I ever felt love for any mature person, except my mother, and even her I did not trust.⁴

An archetype image of a warm and secure family hearth, which Orwell never had and always wanted, appears again and again in his works as an idealized domestic portrait that reflects his deprivation:

¹ Rudyard Kipling, 'Baa Baa Black Shecp', *Works*, New York: Collier, n.d., pp. 960, 975. Orwell considered 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' one of the ten best short stories in English. Unlike Thackeray and Kipling, Orwell's description of childhood, though entirely subjective, has no self-pity or false pathos.

² George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, 1962, p. 134.

³ Orwell's father, who was fifty when Orwell was four, was separated from his family in 1907 and spent the next four years in India. See Gordon Ray, *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity*, New York, 1955, p. 62: 'In later life Thackeray's recollections of his first years in his "native country" were scanty. He "could just remember" his father, writes Lady Ritchie, "a very tall, thin man, rising out of a bath".'

⁴ *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, iv, New York, 1968, pp. 330-69. Subsequent citations will follow the quotation in the text.

In a working-class home . . . you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which is not so easy to find elsewhere . . . On winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the rocking-chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing.¹

Orwell states that at eight years old he was suddenly separated from his family and 'flung into a world of force and fraud and secrecy, like a gold-fish into a tank full of pike'.²

Like Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell won a scholarship to a mediocre prep school that intended to exploit his intelligence. His family, who made financial sacrifices for his education, counted on him to succeed and retrieve their diminishing fortunes. He spent the crucial adolescent years from eight to fourteen in Eastbourne at St Cyprian's school which he anatomized, condemned and attempted to exorcize in 'Such, Such Were the Joys'.

This essay, Orwell's most poignant and (after *Animal Farm*) his most perfect work, is of the greatest value for an understanding of his character, life and works. Just as 1984 is a final synthesis of all Orwell's major themes, so 'Such, Such' (which was written at the same time) reveals the impetus and genesis of these ideas. Its central themes — poverty, fear, guilt, masochism and sickness — are manifested in the pattern of his life and developed in all his books.

Orwell confesses that he was 'lonely, and soon developed disagreeable mannerisms which made me unpopular throughout my schooldays' (1.1); and he states that one of the school codes (which he accepted) was 'an almost neurotic dread of poverty, and, above all, the assumption . . . that money and privilege are the things that matter'. In school, Orwell felt guilty because he did not have money and also because he wanted it. (When Orwell doubles his father's income, a Russian boy calculates that *his* father has more than two hundred times as much money.)

The experiences Orwell describes in *Down and Out in Paris and*

¹ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 104. See also *Coming Up For Air*, 1939, p. 46; 'Boys' Weeklies', 1940, l. 473; 'Decline of the English Murder', 1946, iv. 98; and 1984 New York, 1949, p. 96.

² The echo of Milton's Satan ('by fraud or guile | What force effected nor', *PL*, 1.646-7), emphasizes the hellish aspect of the school into which Orwell is flung.

London are a direct reaction against and refutation of this privileged school ethos, just as his use of a pseudonym (George is the patron saint of England, Orwell an East Anglian river) beginning with that book is an attempt to abandon that hateful part of his life he associated with St Cyprian's, Eton and Burma. 'People always grow up like their names. It took me nearly thirty years to work off the effects of being called Eric' (II.22), he writes; and when he gave up the family name of Blair, he rejected the Scottish birth of both parents and the odious cult of Scotland that pervaded his snobbish school. The hero of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* admits that 'Gordon Comstock' was a pretty bloody name, but then Gordon came of a pretty bloody family. The 'Gordon' part of it was Scotch, of course.¹

Comstock's experience at a school where nearly all the boys were richer than himself and tormented him because of it led to his renunciation of ambition and the world of money. As Comstock says:

Probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send it to a school among children richer than itself. A child conscious of poverty will suffer snobbish agonies such as a grown-up person can scarcely even imagine.²

In this respect, Orwell's childhood was like that of Dickens, who 'had grown up near enough to poverty to be terrified of it' for they both came from a middle-class family going into decline. Orwell's painful treatment at school was the emotional equivalent of Dickens's servitude in the blacking factory (which occurred at the same age), and both men bore the scars of early poverty throughout their entire lives. Dickens 'prayed when I went to bed at night to be lifted out of the humiliation and neglect in which I was. I never had suffered so much before';³ and Orwell writes of 'suffering horrors which [he] cannot or will not reveal'.⁴

¹ George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 1962, p. 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 46. This is surely not the 'greatest cruelty one can inflict', but it was the one Orwell suffered.

³ Quoted in G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, New York, 1965, p. 37.

⁴ See Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself*, New York, 1937, p. 17:

afterwards, the beloved Aunt would ask me why I had never told anyone how I was being treated. Children tell little more than animals, for what comes to them they accept as eternally established. Also, badly treated children have a clear notion of what they are likely to get if they betray the secrets of a prison-house before they are clear of it.

The hideous birthmark of Flory in *Burmese Days* is the symbolic equivalent of Orwell's feeling that he was an ugly failure, and Flory also suffers agonies of humiliation at school. Certain aspects of St Cyprian's ('The school still had a faint suggestion of the Victorian "private academy" with its "parlour boarders"') reappear significantly in Ringwood Academy where Dorothy teaches in *A Clergyman's Daughter*. And its psychological atmosphere is reproduced and intensified in 1984 where the guilt is familial as well as political. Winston feels regret about stealing his sister's food and feels responsible for the tragic disappearance of his family in the purges, and this guilt is expressed in his recurrent nightmare about his drowning mother and sister. The overwhelming doom that threatens Orwell at school also threatens Bowling in *Coming Up For Air*; and the fearful oppression by one's fellows recurs in *Animal Farm*. The lonely Orwell's desperate need for human sympathy, comradeship and solidarity is at the emotional core of *Homage to Catalonia*; and a deep sympathy for the oppressed underdog sent Orwell to Spain and put him on the road to Wigan Pier. At school Orwell learned 'The good and the possible never seemed to coincide', and in an important sense, his whole life was an attempt to bring them together. Oppression and humiliation formed the dominant pattern of his personal life at the time when Europe was being dominated by Communism and Fascism.

In his essay on Dali, Orwell states:

Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats. (III.156)

Orwell's feelings in 'Such, Such' were so intense, his revelations so personal, that he never published the essay during his lifetime. Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* gives a rather different and more promising picture of their prep school, and when his book was published Orwell wrote to him, 'I wonder how you can write abt St Cyprian's. It's all like an awful nightmare to me' (I.343).

The horrors that Orwell suffered represent an archetypal childhood trauma and are similar to literary analogues in Dickens and Joyce that illuminate his situation. Orwell compares St Cyprian's to Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and that

infamous school, where 'lasting agonies and disfigurements are inflicted upon children by the treatment of the master',¹ probably influenced Orwell's portrayal of his school as a reactionary and barbaric Victorian institution. Mrs Squeers feeds the boys brimstone and treacle 'because it spoils their appetites and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner',² and Orwell writes that 'Only a generation earlier it had been common for school dinners to start off with a slab of unsweetened suet pudding, which, it was frankly said, "broke the boys' appetites"'. Mrs Squeers taps the crown of the boys' heads with a wooden spoon just as Sambo 'taps away at one's skull with his silver pencil'. And the scene where Squeers flogs the helpless boy, who has warts on his hands and who has failed to pay his full fees, is psychologically similar to Orwell's caning for bed-wetting, since both boys must confess to an imaginary 'dirty' crime while suffering unjust punishment.

'Such, Such' and the school chapters of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* both discuss the themes of authority, guilt, cruelty, punishment, helplessness, isolation and misery. Both Stephen and Orwell are bullied by the older stronger boys: Stephen is pushed into the cold slimy water by Wells, and Orwell fears 'the daily nightmare of football — the cold, the mud . . . the gouging knees and trampling boots of the bigger boys . . . That was the pattern of school life — a continuous triumph of the strong over the weak'. The innocent Stephen is abused and beaten by Father Dolan:

'Lazy idle little loafer! cried the prefect of studies. Broke my glasses! An old schoolboy trick! Out with your hand this moment!'³

just as Orwell is by Sambo:

'Go on, you little slacker! Go on, you idle, worthless little boy! The whole trouble with you is that you're bone and horn idle.'

And both boys are threatened with damnation and terrified by vivid sermons: 'up to the age of about fourteen I officially believed in [Hell]. Almost certainly Hell existed, and there were occasions when a vivid sermon could scare you into fits'.⁴

¹ Charles Dickens, 'Preface' to *Nicholas Nickleby*, Everyman ed., 1964, p. xvi.

² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, New York, 1956, p. 50.

⁴ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 127.

Orwell's reaction to this nightmare, a self-destructive expression of protest and fear, is recorded in his startling opening sentence: 'Soon after I arrived at St Cyprian's . . . I began wetting my bed'. The result of this shameful practice was two beatings which caused that

deeper grief which is peculiar to childhood and not easy to convey: a sense of desolate loneliness and helplessness, of being locked up not only in a hostile world but in a world of good and evil where the rules were such that it was actually not possible for me to keep them . . . I had a conviction of sin and folly and weakness, such as I do not remember to have felt before . . . This acceptance of guilt lay unnoticed in my memory for twenty or thirty years.

It was unnoticed, that is, during the whole course of his life, from schooldays until he tried to purge this guilt by writing the essay in the forties.

The bed-wetting was only the first of endless episodes that made Orwell feel guilty: he was poor, he was lazy and a failure, ungrateful and unhealthy, disgusting and dirty-minded, 'weak, ugly, cowardly, smelly'. Flip and Sambo caned, reproached, abused and humiliated him throughout the six years, and Orwell developed the 'profound conviction that I was no good, that I was wasting my time, wrecking my talents, behaving with monstrous folly and wickedness and ingratitude — and all this, it seemed, was inescapable'. After a homosexual scandal, guilt seemed to hang in the air like a pall of smoke . . . Till then I had hoped that I was innocent, and the conviction of sin which now took possession of me was perhaps all the stronger because I did not know what I had done.

These disturbing passages have metaphysical implications and suggest the guilt, absurdity, confusion and anxiety of the world created by Franz Kafka. And in this world the child — who is credulous, weak and vulnerable — is the ready and constant victim, for he lacks any sense of proportion or probability and is forced to live with the constant 'dread of offending against mysterious, terrible laws'.

The dominant pattern in Orwell's life that emerges from 'Such, Such' is the series of masochistic impulses for a higher cause that testifies to his compulsive need to assuage his intense guilt by self-punishment: at St Cyprian's; in the Burmese police; among

scullions and beggars; in squalid doss houses and inside mines; with the ragged, weaponless army of the Spanish Republic; in propagandistic drudgery for the wartime BBC (a 'whoreshop and lunatic asylum'); in thankless and exhausting political polemics; and finally in that mad and suicidal sojourn amidst the bleak and isolated wastes of Jura. In *Wigan Pier* Orwell states that he was 'haunted by a sense of guilt' (p. 127) and he explains that this guilt is political and derives from his experience as a colonial oppressor. But it seems that the cause of this guilt, which he could never extinguish, occurred earlier than Orwell suggests and had its deep roots in his childhood. Though this masochistic strain existed, Orwell's writing is manifest proof of his ability to transcend this personal guilt by channeling it into effective social and political thought and action. His own suffering led to a feeling of responsibility for the suffering of others.