

But is that not the problem with Straussian wisdom? If Pangle thinks that simply restating the pseudo-*logoi* of the intellectual luminaries of our age, and appearing to remain unconvinced, really suffices for refutation or serious criticism—if, in other words, Pangle thinks that the flaws in these offending doctrines are so egregiously obvious that it would be condescending to point them out—then another problem with *The Ennobling of Democracy* emerges. For if the positions of our nihilist *avant garde* really are so obviously intellectually bankrupt, then it would seem that our problem, our crisis, is not primarily intellectual, but rather spiritual in nature. If these ultimately threadbare criticisms are driven by a “motiveless malignity” against all things Western, all things American, bourgeois, Christian, etc., then we would certainly seem to be confronted by a kind of resentful, insatiable aggression that it is futile to “argue” with, however dialectically. And yet, aside from a few honest words of praise for the role that the Christian faith played in the liberation of Eastern Europe, Pangle’s book shies away in characteristic silence from the suggestion, or the recognition, that the true root of our trouble is spiritual—religious—that what we face is a matter of faith and its loss. For if this is the way things are, then one fears that even the most erudite and learned of recollections will *au fond* be but “like the chaff which the wind driveth away.” Of course, to follow this line too far would amount to an abandonment of faith in reasonableness and abandonment of the characteristic reticence about religious faith and piety that are the earmarks of Pangle’s learned book.

Even as one draws back from the nasty tribulations of our *Kulturkampf*, it does not seem entirely irrelevant—or without irony—that Pangle’s book should be open to exactly the criticism that Aristotle leveled at the rhetoricians at the end of

the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For while we should expect, perhaps, as a kind of occupational hazard among intellectuals, and even philosophers, too much precious confidence in the power of the reasoned word, and too much satisfaction with what seems clear enough in speech, there are issues and times concerning which those who love as well as understand will demand and will be ready for something more “to light up [their] sleeping magazines of faith.”

1. As an example of the notion behind this premise of *The Ennobling of Democracy*, I cannot resist observing that just the other day (*i.e.*, May 15, 1992) James Madison returned to us from the dead, via the final ratification of his constitutional amendment concerning congressional pay raises. Thus, across more than two centuries, Madison’s little arrow against the self-aggrandizing vanity of “politicians” allowed us to recall that old Lockean warning about it being the responsibility of the *legislative*, “only to make laws, and not to make legislators” (*Second Treatise* #141; emphasis mine). 2. I am thinking here especially of Frederick D. Wilhelmsen’s trenchant critique of the Great Books Model [see, “The Great Books: Enemies of Wisdom,” *Modern Age*, 31, 3-4 (Summer/Fall, 1987), 323-331] as well as the criticisms of Bloom’s presentation of this approach by Peter Lawler, John Lyon, and Marion Montgomery: [see, Symposium on *The Closing of the American Mind*, *Modern Age*, 32, 1 (Winter, 1988), 27-29, 30-34, and 39-44].

## *A Sense of the Whole*

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***Orwell, the Authorized Biography***,  
by Michael Shelden, *New York*:  
*Harper Collins*, 1991. x + 497 pp.  
\$25.00.

*ORWELL, THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY* by Michael Shelden is a remarkable book for several reasons. First, it makes sense of the biographical process. Lurking at the back of most thoughtful readers’ minds there is always the suspicion that the chief pur-

pose of a biography is gossip: a look at the hidden life, or the unknown one, of a famous or important person. Shelden's book has a greater purpose, to analyze what Orwell wrote as a reflection of his life, if possible. A good example is his argument that Big Brother and the cult of false-hero worship in *1984* is a cast back to Orwell's school days, where he was humiliated (by his own testimony) by the temptation to love those who bullied him, in order to be relieved of his fear of them.

This seems to me a completely convincing analysis of the novel's psychology. *1984* is a great book in bits and pieces, if that is possible. It has dull, grimy passages that seem anything but the work of an artist, but also poetic conceits that are striking in their power: *Big Brother, Victory Gin, two plus two equals five, Newspeak, Ingsoc, War is Peace*—the whole range of mad images that make up the book's world, embedded in a story that I suspect most people would not re-read once in twenty years for pleasure. And yet the story has a convincing, terrible message; that we fool ourselves into loving our oppressors. This is exactly the relationship that Orwell describes between the headmistress of his pre-Eton prep school and some of the students in his essay "Such, Such Were the Joys . . ." It was written many years after his school days should have been forgotten or have taken on a golden glow, and shows his tenacious honesty in facing what he had once feared.

I started out making a list, and I shall stick to it: second, the book is beautifully written, with the same deft organization of detail Shelden showed in his first study of modern British literature *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of the Horizon*. The two chapters on Orwell's career in India are perhaps the best example here. His reasons for joining the Indian service, including family tradi-

tion, good pay and a safe career, his enormous power as a combined military officer and policeman, the social status of the job, the look and sound of India, are brought together with readable, interesting lucidity. Later in the book Orwell's having been a policeman for several years seems to echo through his life as Shelden tries, as with the school experiences, to make sense of the whole.

Attempting to make sense does not mean automatic avoidance of folly, but I think that Shelden steers through the treacherous passages of his subject's life perfectly. The book would be valuable if only for the year-by-year account of the Stalinism that held Orwell's publisher Victor Gollancz like a chronic disease. Gollancz's attempts to influence how his books were written, to mangle them after they were finished, even to prevent their being published, make the strangest tale of addiction to leftism that I know. Gollancz is the best verification of Malcolm Muggeridge's thesis that left-wing power worship is akin to a taste or addiction for something that wanes or increases unaccountably, not simply possessing the mind for a period until it is shaken off, if ever. Gollancz seems to have attempted behaving decently (he even renounced the Party and Stalin for a period), but he was drawn back to slavishness to the U.S.S.R. like an addict to drugs, except that the metaphor doesn't really work, because most people who kick the worst drugs long enough do stay clean, according to doctors. Not Gollancz. He was apologetic, helpful, encouraging—after all, he *did* publish Orwell's first books—but in the end he was a philistine hack in service to a false god.

There were striking contradictions in Orwell's life: he was a man of action, but also a chronic invalid; a reserved, introspective man who constantly became involved in political controversy. His own father was a dutiful but cold parent; Orwell was a kind, careless father who

took his adopted son to live on a remote island in the Hebrides where he was barely able to care for the child, to say nothing of his own health. (Nevertheless, *1984* was written there.) A businessman would say that Orwell was a producer, and he produced against heavy odds. He accepted tuberculosis, being wounded in war, the death of his wife in an operating room accident, the mutilation of his early books by a Stalinist publisher, because he seems to have worked on the basis that it is better to *have* had a wife (a good one) and a publisher (a bad one) than not.

He wrote twenty or thirty of the finest essays in English, from casual pieces like "Riding Down from Bangor" to much longer works like "Inside the Whale" that are masterpieces of clarity, with strongly held (if sometimes eccentric) positions, fascinating digressions, vigorous attacks, and comic introspections.

The Gestapo is said to have teams of literary critics whose job is to determine, by means of stylistic comparison, the authorship of anonymous pamphlets. I have always thought that, if only it were in a better cause, this is exactly the job I would like to have...

At the heart of Orwell's style is his own voice. His novels are weak because that genre requires an artifice, a shaping of language into a medium of human consciousness—an artificiality—that Orwell did not possess, in the sense that a James or a Stevenson or a Hemingway did. But in his non-fiction he is not only a great writer, he is an infectious one, as we see in this paragraph of Shelden's that could have been written by Orwell himself.

He was always proud of the flower bushes and fruit trees they planted at the cottage that year. They put in some apple and plum trees, some gooseberry bushes, and some rose bushes. The prize of the lot was a rambler rose that cost him only

sixpence at Woolworth's, but that grew rapidly and produced "a beautiful little white rose with a yellow heart." When Orwell came back to the cottage, after a long absence in the 1940s, he saw that the rambler "had grown into a huge vigorous bush" and was so satisfied with the result that he wrote about it in his "As I Please" column in *Tribune*. Some anonymous ideological purist of the left wrote him an "indignant letter" complaining that "roses are bourgeois." Orwell was unrepentant, telling *Tribune* readers that, "I still think that my sixpence was better spent than if it had gone on cigarettes or even on one of the excellent Fabian Research Pamphlets."

It is really as much an Orwell paragraph as a Shelden one, with the same mixture of hard facts—roses and *Tribune*—and abstract phrases, with a comic conclusion. The love of nature, the love of politics, the love of man as a mixture of the two: all this comes out as it did in so much of what Orwell wrote. The poet James Dickey once said to William F. Buckley on an interview show "Bill, you were born for controversy, and you're not going to get any out of me." Orwell was born for it also, but in his own peculiar, old-fashioned way. He was as much a soldier as a pamphleteer, and perhaps that is why there is a likeable, disarming seriousness behind what he says in his essays that is different from the carping voice of an ordinary uprooted intellectual.

Shelden's book has one unusual omission: there is no mention of the meeting between Orwell and Evelyn Waugh, when the latter visited Orwell in a hospital late in the 1940s. Undoubtedly, the visit took place, based on the testimony of Waugh, Orwell, Lady Donaldson (who claims to have suggested the visit, in her memoir of Waugh), and others. Any reader devoted to the works of these two men can dwell on this meeting the way an Edwardian Blimp might have re-created in his imagination the meeting of Stanley