

George Orwell's Critical Reception

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This essay will survey the major pieces of criticism surrounding Orwell's major works and look at the chief concerns that have preoccupied his critics, both during his lifetime and posthumously. We will examine each book separately and proceed with a selection of key essays by the same method. Though we shall be looking at the works in a largely individual and linear fashion, the essay overall will be exploring broader, all-inclusive questions such as why his early novels, such as *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936), were hastily and unfairly dismissed by notable critics both then and now.

From the outset, owing to his literary connections, Orwell was a writer whose work would receive critical attention. However, it was not until the publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945 that Orwell began to enjoy worldwide fame. Both during his lifetime and posthumously, the critical reception of Orwell's novels has tended to fall into two camps: those who value and appreciate his novels as well as his essays, and those who dismiss him as a novelist but rate him highly as a journalist and documentary writer. This dichotomy is a little crude because there is diversity within these positions; however, it does reflect a strong trend. Typifying a popular sentiment among critics in the latter group is this comment by Morris Dickstein: "Orwell is not Shakespeare. Orwell is not John Milton. Orwell is not in the class with the greatest of all writers" (qtd. in Rodden, *Every Intellectual* 141). Timothy Garton Ash's review of Peter Davison's *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, entitled "Orwell in 1998," has exactly the same lament: "Yet Orwell was no Shakespeare. He was not a universal genius. Nor was he a natural master of the English language" (10). Garton Ash even compares Orwell to John Milton, coming to the conclusion that Orwell is inferior. But why compare Orwell to a playwright and composer of sonnets in the first place? Is it really of any critical value, particularly

when there is no textual example to support the claims? Garton Ash says *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “is marred by patches of melodrama and weak writing” (10). Again, absolutely no textual example of this melodrama and weak writing is provided, and this is something that needs to be borne in mind when evaluating the worth of critical commentary applied to Orwell.

Since Orwell’s death there has been a steady flow of critical attention to his work, with scholars such as Roger Fowler (since the 1970s) and John Rodden (since the 1980s) bringing out several in-depth studies. There have also been studies showing the influence that the nineteenth-century novelist George Gissing had on Orwell, most notably by Mark Connolly, on which my own study of Gissing’s influence builds. The year 1984 was a feverish date in the Orwell reception-history calendar, owing to the prophetic title of his last and most famous novel. In 1968, Sonia Brownell (Orwell’s second wife) and Ian Angus brought out *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, which was the main academic study of reference until the publication of Peter Davison’s brilliant *The Complete Works of George Orwell* in 1998. Both publications have done much to keep interest in Orwell alive. The next major event was the centenary of Orwell’s birth, June 25, 2003. Two weighty biographies, one by D. J. Taylor and one by Gordon Bowker, marked the occasion, and added to the many existing Orwell biographies. Regarding Orwell’s popularity today, there is the Orwell Prize for British political writing, established in 1974, and now Dione Venable has created an Orwell Society. Let us now turn to the works.

Down and Out in London and Paris (1933)

George Orwell’s first literary publication, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, was finally published (after several rejections under the title *A Scullion’s Diary*) by Victor Gollancz in 1933. Orwell’s firsthand account of life among the poor and destitute in the two European metropolises was well received, generally. J. B. Priestley in the *Evening Standard* echoed C. Day Lewis and Compton Mackenzie when he said

it was “the best book of its kind that I have read in a long time” (qtd. in Lucas 15). Most agreed that it was a reliable record of life below the poverty line. Some hoteliers were outraged by its suggestion that expensive meals came out of filthy kitchens; however, that was where the outrage stopped. When it was published in the United States, there was more critical scrutiny; some critics doubted the truth of Orwell’s claims of really living below the poverty line. “How down and out was George Orwell, actually?” became and still is a common refrain. Writing much later in the twentieth century, Lynette Hunter questions in the same manner, writing that Orwell comes off initially in the book as “blinkered, ignorant, prejudiced, sentimental, clichéd, or worse, snide and supercilious” (*George Orwell* 15). Hunter believes Orwell’s narrative is patronizing and unsympathetic because of his upper-class background, though it should be said that Hunter goes on to delineate how Orwell “moves on” from this position. Taylor’s 2003 biography confidently rejects much of Orwell’s documentary: “The first half of *Down and Out* is a conspicuously Gallic affair, full of somewhat stagy ‘French’ conversation, whose local colour has been laid on with a trowel” (99).

In the *London Review of Books* in 1998, Ian Hamilton, reassessing Orwell’s work through Davison’s *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, referred back to Orwell’s essay “Confessions of a Book Reviewer.” Hamilton says that in this essay Orwell was “piling on the agony” regarding the daily trials facing a book reviewer. He talks of the “glum theatricals” of Orwell’s testimony, in much the same way Taylor does about the trials documented in *Down and Out*. The title of Hamilton’s piece is “Eric the Nerd” (referring to Orwell’s real name, Eric Blair). Orwell comes in for a great deal of this kind of derision. His old-time school friend and literary peer, Cyril Connolly, once commented that Orwell “could not blow his nose without moralizing on conditions in the handkerchief industry” (qtd. in Rodden, *Every Intellectual* 4). Undoubtedly, getting fed up with Orwell at times is and always has been a common side effect of reading his work. Again, the question arises: Is this fair criticism?

***Burmese Days* (1934)**

Burmese Days, a fictionalized critique of the British Empire drawing on Orwell's own time as an imperial police officer in Burma, was also received rather well, though initially rejected for publication in Britain. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Cyril Connolly described it thus: "I liked it and recommend it to anyone who enjoys a spate of efficient indignation, graphic description, excellent narrative, excitement and irony tempered with vitriol" (qtd. in J. Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience* 117). In sharp contrast, an American reviewer, Margaret Carson Hubbard in the *New York Herald Tribune*, referred to the "ghastly vulgarity" of *Burmese Days*. Stansky and Abrahams say of her review: "Hubbard found that all of Orwell's sympathies were with the natives, which does not suggest a close reading of the text" (43). The distinguished *Boston Evening Transcript* gave it an impressive write-up and questioned why Orwell had not been able to find a British publisher. The review went on to say that Orwell's depictions of Burma under British rule presented "realities faithfully and unflinchingly realized" (qtd. in Stansky and Abrahams 44). Despite this praise, the novel would soon go out of print.

Today most critics view the novel as having as many strengths as weaknesses, although one or two critics are wholly negative. D. J. Taylor is in this latter camp; he dismisses the entire book, as he does Orwell's succeeding 1930s novels, as "a study in failure." He writes that Orwell's British protagonist, John Flory, "is a lonely fantasist, his best years squandered in drink and whoring" (319). However, most critics are more balanced and apply closer reading. David Seed appreciates the novel's political subtlety: "Orwell's protagonist Flory enacts the novelist's dissatisfaction with the Anglo-Indians by renouncing the club" (276). Regarding the novel's political integrity and treatment of character overall, Seed finds it limited by Orwell's inability to distinguish between Flory's thoughts and his own: "The combination of guilt and over-involvement with his protagonist . . . vitiates Orwell's presentation of empire" (278).

The examination of the next two novels will go into a little more textual detail in order to provide an understanding of why their critical reception has been so varied, and why one should not take at face value many of the critical assertions made about them.

A Clergyman's Daughter (1935)

From the outset, Orwell was not happy with *A Clergyman's Daughter*, an experimental novel about a pious young woman, Dorothy, whose life is thrown into chaos when she suffers an attack of amnesia. The book underwent a great deal of in-house censorship, with Orwell forced to change and cut out parts of the story, much to his despair. Yet Orwell's French translator, R. M. Raimbault, read it and liked it, commenting: "It is a book which is often powerful and makes remarkable observations, strange—in particular your Trafalgar Square—full of humour, sometimes fierce, and written boldly and with captivating originality" (qtd. in Orwell, *Lost Orwell* 46). Raimbault was not without sound critical credentials, being a professor of English at Le Mans University.

Raimbault's Trafalgar Square comment refers to the third chapter, presented entirely in the form of dialogue, in imitation of the "Night-town" chapter in James Joyce's modernist masterpiece *Ulysses* (1922). The various critical reactions to Orwell's inclusion of this chapter show an unwillingness on the critics' part to trust Orwell's literary judgment. Norman Collins went so far as to hint that "the chaotic structure of [*A Clergyman's Daughter*] would suggest some kind of mental instability" (qtd. in J. Meyers, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience* 119). Others were more constructive: Douglas Kerr's assessment, for example, praised the chapter's artistic merits, noting that its characters "have no possessions at all except their voice, and to tell their story Orwell recognizes that he has to allow them to speak for themselves. So the controlling narrative voice falls silent, and a chattering polyphony takes over" (27). In detailing how Orwell reconstructs Joyce's experimental narrative, Kerr challenges those critics who insist that the Trafalgar Square scene is "written unsuccessfully in the manner of James Joyce" (Fyvel 54).

Robert Lee expertly delineates how the varying, disparate narrative elements in *A Clergyman's Daughter* actually harmonize to strike a greater political note. Alluding to the passages where the third-person narrator disappears, Lee writes: "Such passages spoil the conventional unity and justify the designation episodic. But this need not be pejorative. If we think of the novel as picaresque, the seemingly random adventures the protagonist experiences must conventionally be disparate, revealing varied inequities in the society which is explored" (27).

Daphne Patai offers a feminist reading of the story that finds much fault. She writes, "Dorothy does not suffer a breakdown; she suffers from a creator, Orwell, who, having invented a female protagonist, does not know how to get her out of the house and into the street where he wants to place her" (97). Similarly, Jenni Calder insists that "Dorothy . . . is the least successful of Orwell's fictional rebels. He is just not able to get far enough inside an unfamiliar consciousness" (87). Dorothy is often described by feminists as "pathetic." Lynette Hunter points out that much feminist reading of Orwell is ungenerous, and I would second this.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936)

Again, from the outset, Orwell disparaged *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*—his novel about a man, Gordon Comstock, who tries to rise above the materialism of his society and suffers great hardship as a result—to anyone who would listen; and sadly they mostly did and still do. In a letter about it to his agent Leonard Moore, Orwell wrote, "I have made the alterations Gollancz asked for. . . . It seems to me to have utterly ruined the book" (*Collected Works* 10: 434). In the *Telegraph*, Cyril Connolly gave a far different review from the one he gave *Burmese Days*, objecting a great deal to what he reads as the "disagreeable" truths circulating in the book. Here Connolly has fallen into the (still-familiar) trap of confusing opinions expressed in the novel with those of the author. Connolly is clearly reading the complaining protagonist as a stand-in for Orwell, failing to grasp Orwell's experimentation with narrative voice.

John Mander, too, follows Connolly's reading of the character's thoughts as a reflection of the author's:

Instead of allowing the money theme to develop out of the talk and behaviour of his characters, Orwell tells at the start that his novel is going to be about money. He hammers this into us page after page: "For after all, what is there behind it, except money? Money for the right kind of education. . . . Give me not righteousness, give me money, only money." (74)

But these are Gordon's outpourings and not the author's. Mander goes on to say, "*Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is not, by general consent, a very good novel. But are the others so very different? In *Coming Up for Air* . . . there is a similar intrusion of Orwellian prejudice" (74). Another critic, Samuel Hynes, finds the novel and its author morbid: "The Orwell-character in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* imagines civilisation dying . . . and Orwell was just as gloomy with his friends" (373). Similarly, Valerie Meyers writes, "Orwell's depiction of Gordon's anger, frustration and difficulties as a writer are completely serious" (79).

Wholeheartedly rejecting the idea that the novel is defeatist is Robert Bierman's 1997 film adaptation of the story. At its close, the film celebrates the happiness between Gordon and Rosemary, the woman he opts to marry, as they look forward to a life together as a family with their baby. There is one niggle, however, and this is the film's depiction of Gordon and Rosemary's smugness at being members of the middle class. I would argue that this does not chime with the novel's sensitivity toward "class feeling."

The Road to Wigan Pier (1937)

The reception of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which pairs with *Down and Out in Paris and London* as another of Orwell's nonfiction documentaries on the plight of the lower classes, was predictably mixed. There was much praise for the first part, which documented the lives of the poor in Wigan and other towns in the north of England, but the second

part angered and provoked left-wing sensibilities with its criticisms of socialists and leftist politics. Walter Greenwood gives a good example of this in his 1937 review of the book for the socialist weekly *Tribune*. Toward the first part he is all adulation, saying that Orwell is “at his best as a keen observer with great skill at character drawing”; however, of the second part he writes, “I cannot remember having been so infuriated for a long time than by some of the things he says here” (qtd. in J. Meyers, *George Orwell* 13). Greenwood does end on a positive note though, saying how readable the book is. The amount of critical commentary on *The Road to Wigan Pier* since its publication certainly shows it has enduring power. I say much more about the controversy surrounding this book in the chapter “Orwell’s Documentaries of the 1930s.”

***Homage to Catalonia* (1938)**

From the outset, *Homage to Catalonia* was destined to be controversial because of the book’s denunciation of the bloody intervention in the Spanish Civil War by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Orwell had been fighting in Spain with the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, or Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification), which was eventually outlawed as a splinter group by the increasingly Communist-dominated government of the Spanish Republic. Orwell, by then officially labeled a Trotskyist, became at risk of being charged with high treason and executed. In fact, Andrés Nin, leader of the POUM, was arrested by Stalin’s agents and murdered, making it highly likely that the same end would have befallen Orwell had he not evaded capture.

It is not surprising, then, that Victor Gollancz, Orwell’s Communist-sympathizing publisher, rejected *Homage to Catalonia*, much to Orwell’s disgust. When finally published by Secker and Warburg, it was received rather coolly by the Left (selling just 600 copies). It was not published in the United States until 1952. Jeffrey Meyers, in his *Orwell, Wintry Conscience of a Generation*, gives a good account of the reception of *Homage to Catalonia*. Geoffrey Gorer praised the book, saying it was of “first-class” importance. Philip Mairet agreed,

stating, “The book is likely to stand as one of the best contemporary documents of the struggle” (qtd. in Meyers 176). Meyers summarizes Douglas Woodruff in the Catholic *Tablet* as viewing Orwell as “a romantic who did not understand the Fascist point of view” (176). V. S. Pritchett in the *New Statesman* stated, “There are many strong arguments for keeping creative writers out of politics and Mr. George Orwell is one of them” (qtd. in Meyers 176). However, Pritchett was later responsible for the description of Orwell as “the wintry conscience of a generation,” giving Meyers the title of his book. Stephen Spender described the book as “one of the most serious indictments of Communism which has been written” (qtd. in Meyers 176).

Coming Up for Air (1939)

On its publication there was much enthusiasm for *Coming Up for Air*, in which the middle-aged protagonist, George Bowling, reflects on his life and the things he has lost due to social “progress”—among them his childhood and his old hometown, which he visits and finds unrecognizable. Again, though, critics voiced lament for how the novel was written. Margery Allingham in *Time and Tide* was full of praise, but said of its being written in the first person: “This device . . . tends to falsify the character slightly” (qtd. in Shelden 340). In a 1987 study, David Wykes also cited the point of view as a problem: “Like his other novels, this too deals with a solitary character, but Orwell has compounded this fact with the greater failing—as he himself was soon to pronounce it—of making it a first-person narrative” (106). Raymond Williams strikes a familiar chord when he writes that the book exhibits a “characteristic coldness, an inability to realise the full life of another,” a problem he sees as typical of Orwell’s characterizations: “Relationships are characteristically meagre, ephemeral, reluctant, disillusioning, even betraying” (89). Terry Eagleton is of the same opinion: “Failure was Orwell’s forte, a leitmotif of his fiction. For him, it was what was real. . . . All of his fictional protagonists are humbled and

defeated; and while this may be arraigned as unduly pessimistic, it was not the view of the world they taught at Eton” (“Reach-Me-Down” 6).

On the other hand, Peter Goodall views *Coming Up for Air* and its narrator in a far more positive light: “The deepest analysis of common decency in the novel . . . is in the life of George Bowling. Bowling is really the prototype of the proles, despite the fact that he is from a different social class from the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (80). But despite such constructive readings, most critics see the novel as gloomy. Writing in 1978, Bernard Bergonzi, for example, reads Bowling as a reflection of a depressed novel by a depressed author:

George Bowling is very much a vehicle for Orwell’s vision of English life, and his responses suggest that the troubled ambivalence expressed in Orwell’s poem of 1934, “On a Ruined Farm near the His Master’s Voice Gramophone Factory” has now been resolved into outright rejection of the new architecture of the factory and the way of life associated with it. (107)

Today it is not a novel that receives a great deal of attention. George Bowling certainly does not exist in the public consciousness, and *Coming Up for Air* has never been adapted for television or film. There is, however, a glimmer of hope: British theater critic Dominic Cavendish adapted the novel for the stage in 2008, and it was well received. So we may well see more of this production.

***Animal Farm* (1945)**

Gordon Bowker’s Orwell biography provides an excellent account of the publishing history and reception of *Animal Farm*, Orwell’s allegory of totalitarianism set in a farmyard. Bowker details Gollancz’s rejection of the novel, despite having particularly asked to be considered as the publisher. Orwell now was aggressively anti-Communist, and the British Left was distancing itself from him, partly for fear of alienating a key ally—the Soviet Union—during World War II. Another publisher, Jonathan Cape, rejected the book after consulting Pe-

ter Smollett—an official at the Ministry of Information who was later discovered to be a Soviet spy. Bowker details T. S. Eliot’s rejection of the book for Faber and Faber, on the grounds that *Animal Farm* was “Trotskyite”; he quotes Eliot’s now-famous conclusion that “what was needed, was not more communism but more public-spirited pigs” (qtd. in Bowker 313). The publication news was equally bleak in France, and again Orwell was astonished. Bowker reveals that Yvonne Davet, a translator, wrote, “I am afraid that no French publisher will agree to compromise himself by publishing a book which speaks ill of the Communists” (qtd. in Bowker 338).

Finally, Secker and Warburg published *Animal Farm* in London in 1945, and Harcourt followed in New York a year later. It became a great success. Peter Davison also provides full details of the publishing history, showing that by the time of Orwell’s death in 1950, 617,000 copies had been issued worldwide. Davison cites a number of important reviews from the many written at the time of initial publication. Tosco Fyvel in *Tribune* called it a “gentle satire on a certain State and on the illusions of an age which may already be behind us” (qtd. in Orwell, *Complete Works* 17: 253). Julian Symons called this insufficient: “Should we not expect, in *Tribune* at least, acknowledgement of the fact that it is a satire not at all gentle upon a particular State—Soviet Russia?” (qtd. in Orwell 17: 253). Another reviewer, Simon Watson Taylor, concludes, “I am prepared to claim on behalf of Mr. Orwell that *Animal Farm* is of far greater significance than its unassuming title would suggest” (qtd. in Orwell 17: 253). Today, it is a world classic; although Raymond Williams argues that it lives in the shadow of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He says that *Animal Farm* “is seen as a text appropriate for secondary level teaching, while its successor is ‘for grown ups’” (101).

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)**

Upon the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley, creator of another famous dystopia, wrote to Orwell saying, “The nightmare of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is destined to modulate into the nightmare of

a world having more resemblances to that which I imagined in *Brave New World*” (qtd. in Orwell, *Collected Works* 20: 177). Huxley appears to have read the novel as pure prophecy and not as a disguised attack on the nature of global politics being played out in the decade of the 1940s. In both the United States and Great Britain, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was read widely, and there was a critical frenzy surrounding what it meant. Peter Davison’s *The Complete Works of George Orwell* gives full details of the critical storm that followed publication. Some read the book as an attack upon socialism; others read it as being too pessimistic and alarming; and one dismissed Orwell as “not in full command of his material” (qtd. in Orwell, *Collected Works* 20: 128).

Such was the furor and misunderstanding surrounding *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that Orwell issued a statement saying that in no way was his book an attack on the state or socialism per se, and that as a member of the British Labour Party, he supported Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee and his government (see *Collected Works* 20: 134–36).

A critical body of work largely hostile to Orwell’s writing appears in Christopher Norris’s *Inside the Myth*, published in 1984. Subtitled *Orwell: Views from the Left*, many (though not all) of its essays were strongly anti-Orwell; and the book’s pro- and anti-Orwell tug-of-war is a good example of how Orwell’s work tends to polarize critical opinion. Alan Brown cautioned that Orwell’s kind of moral writing leads to a false feeling of objectivity. The reader is somehow *bound* or seduced into swallowing the point of view whole and uncritically: “The binding together of morality and objectivity works to erase our sense of point of view in reading Orwell. . . . Statements attributed to the author take on an oracular and incontestable value” (Brown 43). However, Antony Easthope did not share Brown’s and the others’ views. He noted that Patrick Parrinder was too hasty in his judgment when he wrote, “*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, after two decades in which it was read with the utmost seriousness as a political prophecy, is now taking its place . . . as a science fiction story” (qtd. in Easthope 263). Easthope’s reply to the clamor of dismissive comment was: “It is hard to know what one is doing in try-

ing to *refute* or bring evidence against *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (267). Extending such a view would be Robert Giroux, who wrote, “With two notable exceptions—Anthony Burgess and Mary Lee Settle—no writer seems to have perceived that Orwell’s book was dealing not with the future but the present” (qtd. in Orwell, *Collected Works* 20: 19).

Some reactions to Orwell’s depiction of the “proles” in this novel are strong indeed. Beatrix Campbell, among others, believes that Orwell has nothing but contempt for “the people.” She writes: “Despite his wish to invest his revolutionary optimism in the people, what [Orwell] feels for the common people edges on contempt. Actually, he thinks they’re dead common” (127). John Rodden argues that such negative assertions have perhaps had the effect of fomenting critical prejudice against Orwell. He says that reception of Orwell’s work is often tinged with preconceptions about his dislikes. In fact, Rodden has identified an ideological bias against Orwell running through much feminist criticism (and his analysis could equally apply to class-sensitive treatment of Orwell’s work): “‘Gender-tinged’ images of the author get disseminated. . . . Gender-sensitive critiques bear on the formation of reputations. . . . Intellectual reference groups and ideological allegiances shape critical response” (“Sexist” 33).

Rodden further provides an excellent breakdown and analysis of what he calls the “incredible and unprecedented” impact *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had on the media when the year 1984 approached. He also points out that it topped the best-seller list, again unprecedented for a book thirty-five years old. In the chapter “Countdown to 1984: The Public Writer” in his 1989 book *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, Rodden details the numerous television broadcasts, particularly in Great Britain and the United States, that celebrated everything from Orwell’s life to the relevance and meaning of the novel for the late twentieth century. He refers to the pop-cultural “absurdities and spinoffs” the novel generated. Rodden also makes a strong case for thinking that the title of the book is actually one of the reasons for its enduring legacy: “In seizing a calendar year as his own, Orwell not

only etched his own name in history but blackened a segment of time” (*Politics* 284). Daniel Lea’s *George Orwell: Animal Farm/Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism* (2001) is a good guide to the varying critical receptions of the novel.

“A Hanging” (1931) and “Shooting an Elephant” (1936)

These two essays remain classic pieces, much revered for their symbolic depiction of the evils of colonial domination. However, arguably since Bernard Crick’s questioning of the truth of both incidents in his 1980 Orwell biography (that is, Orwell may not have actually witnessed a hanging or shot an elephant), reception of Orwell’s journalistic accounts has been complicated to an even greater degree than it was in the wake of *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Homage to Catalonia*. Since Crick’s biography, critics seem almost obligated to temper their appreciation with the question, “Did this actually happen?”

Peter Davison urges us to ignore the question altogether: “Orwell’s fictionalising . . . is acceptable because the ‘truth’ being offered is independent of the artistic reorganisation” (43). Peter Marks agrees. He writes, referring to both essays, “Orwell’s use of the personal in eyewitness, then, has importance both in terms of the narrative and ideology. . . . It seems clear that it is unnecessary to situate Orwell within either piece to validate interpretation. . . . The invocation of Orwell as narrator is superfluous to an understanding of that tale” (91).

“The Sporting Spirit” (1945)

This essay shows very well how Orwell could ignite debate instantly, and also drive people to disagree with him violently. In “The Sporting Spirit,” Orwell makes the claim that “sport is an unfailing cause of ill-will” (*Complete Works* 17: 440). The match he observed was between a Russian soccer team, the Moscow Dynamos, and England’s Arsenal. It was part of the Dynamos’ 1945 tour of Britain. Orwell records that “a British and a Russian came to blows and the crowd booed the referee” (440–41). He concludes, “If you want to add to the vast fund of ill-

will existing in the world at this moment, you could hardly do it better than by a series of football matches between Jews and Arabs, Germans and Czechs, Indians and British, Russians and Poles” (442). The essay was published in *Tribune* and triggered a deluge of letters to the editor. E. S. Fayers wrote, “George Orwell is always interesting. But he does write some bilge”; Fayers believes that Orwell is “falling into the error of intellectual contempt for the ‘mob’” (17: 443). He feels Orwell sees ordinary people as “sadistic morons.” He ends by saying Orwell has missed a lot of fun in not liking football. The debate highlights the familiar contrasting reactions to Orwell’s ideas. Another response runs, “I wish to thank George Orwell for his article . . . the most intelligently written on the subject I have read” (17: 445).

“Politics and the English Language” and “The Prevention of Literature” (both 1946)

These two essays are yet another example of how Orwell polarizes critical opinion. “Politics and the English Language,” with its six rules for good writing, remains one of Orwell’s most-referenced essays. John Rodden calls it Orwell’s “most famous essay.” Marshall Berman says of the essay: “I’ve taught [it] many times to very different groups in different decades, with uniformly great results” (qtd. in Rodden, *Every Intellectual* 152). D. J. Taylor notes that in this essay, Orwell “foreshadows the basis of ‘Newspeak,’” the language of political control he created for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Taylor 376). However, Geoffrey Pullum considers “Politics and the English Language” to be “pointless and unfollowable.” The title of his 2008 essay is a provocatively open insult to Orwell: “A Load of Old Orwellian Cobblers from Fisk,” deriding another author’s list of clichés to avoid.

“The Prevention of Literature,” about freedom of expression on the Left, received a similar response. Randall Swingler wrote a lengthy and spirited reply (“The Right to Free Expression”) to Orwell’s essay, demanding that Orwell define what he meant by terms such as “totalitarianism.” It also, among other things, asked that Orwell support

his claims against Communists (of which Swingler was one) with factual evidence. Orwell did indeed reply, to each question. He ends with: “As to the Russian ‘myth,’ I was referring—as I think Mr. Swingler knows—to those glowing prospectuses presented to us day after day and week after week by Messrs. Pat Sloan, the Dean of Canterbury, Ivor Montagu and all the other paid and unpaid apologists of totalitarianism in this country” (*Complete Works* 18: 442–43). One can feel the sarcasm in Orwell’s reply to someone he clearly counts among the apologists for Soviet Communism.

“Inside the Whale” (1940)

Jeffrey Meyers says that, in “Inside the Whale,” Orwell “defined his own place in contemporary literature by means of a sympathetic contrast to Henry Miller and to the main literary traditions of the Twenties and Thirties” (*Orwell: Wintry Conscience* 206). Orwell greatly admired Henry Miller’s work. In this essay, Orwell is discussing the American novelist’s first book, *Tropic of Cancer* (1934). Orwell maintains that Miller’s is a “human voice among the bomb-explosions, a friendly American voice, ‘innocent of public-spiritedness’” (*Collected Works* 12: 110). In many respects, through praise of Miller, Orwell is hinting at his own preference for writing about ordinary, nonpolitical people. Meyers gives a good account of how “Inside the Whale” was received:

Critics responded favorably to Orwell’s blend of political and literary analysis, and praised its sanity and sharpness. . . . V. S. Pritchett praised the “lucid revelation of a mind that is alive, individual and nonconforming.” Queenie Leavis, in *Scrutiny*, was one of the first critics to draw attention to the distinctive qualities of Orwell’s criticism, and recognized the value of his personal experience: “He has lived an active life among all classes and in several countries, he isn’t the usual parlour-Bolshevik seeing literature through political glasses” (*Orwell: Wintry Conscience* 207).

I say more about “Inside the Whale” in my essay “Orwell’s Documentaries of the 1930s.”

“The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius” (1941)

In this essay about the political situation in Great Britain during World War II, Orwell is demonstrating that he is not interested in political theory but in what can be done practically to improve society. Again, Jeffrey Meyers summarizes this essay well, noting that it “offered socialistic solutions to wartime problems: nationalization of major industries, limitation of incomes, reform of education, Dominion status for India,” and so on (*Orwell: Wintry Conscience* 207).

D. J. Taylor writes that the essay “is the first considerable statement of Orwell’s view of ‘Englishness’ and national identity” (289). Describing Orwell’s assertion that in order to win the war, socialism had to be established, Taylor points to the radicalism of the essay’s message: “In the context of 1940 this was incendiary stuff” (290).

“Such, Such Were the Joys” (1952; published posthumously)

Regarding “Such, Such Were the Joys,” Orwell’s grim account of his English preparatory school experience, Peter Davison draws attention to the unexpected beginning of the essay. He writes that Orwell does not begin with a description of his school, as one might expect, “but with a vivid and painful account of how, soon after his arrival, he reverted to wetting the bed and the physical punishment that induced. Because he writes so personally, this has been assumed by many readers to be factual. However, it is likely that Orwell has imaginatively taken the experience of another boy as his own for dramatic effect” (in Orwell, *Lost Orwell* 202–03).

Jacintha Buddicom, Orwell’s childhood friend, reinforces this view and states in her book of reminiscences, *Eric and Us*, “I can guarantee that the ‘I’ of ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ is quite unrecognizable as

Eric as we knew him then” (45). Again, Orwell, while conceivably misrepresenting what actually happened, is not misrepresenting his own emotional experience.

Conclusion

From all that has been said and referred to so far, it is clear that there has and continues to be a mixed reception to Orwell’s literary output. Geoffrey Wheatcroft repeats a familiar sentiment when he writes that Orwell’s books are no more than “projections of his own self-pity,” and that “[his] posthumous reputation is close to being literary fraud” (10–11). Yet what is striking when scrutinizing Orwell criticism is the dearth of reference to his actual words. In his study of Orwell’s essayistic and novelistic style, Håkan Ringbom writes, “Among other words used to describe [Orwell’s] style are ‘nervous, flexible and lucid’ . . . Only rarely would such statements be supported by explanatory comments or even by illustrative quotations from Orwell’s works.” (9) One needs to bear this in mind when reading conclusions such as the following: “[Orwell’s] four prewar efforts constitute a sort of amateur throat clearing” (Hitchens 133).

We can end this essay with John Carey, who noted the dismissive and negative strain running through the reception history of Orwell’s work. Of D. J. Taylor’s commentary he writes: “[Taylor] leaves out [Orwell’s] greatest achievement. The secret of his style is its invisibility. [Orwell] wrote the most vibrant, surprising prose of the twentieth century, but disguised it as ordinary prose” (“Invisible Man” 35).

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CRITICAL READINGS

