

EXPERIENCE, INTERPRETATION, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF AUTHORSHIP:  
A STUDY OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVE  
IN THE WORK OF GEORGE ORWELL

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines stylistic technique and narrative strategy in a range of George Orwell's fictional and non-fictional texts to demonstrate how personal experience and detached interpretation interact dialectically in his work to create layers of narrative complexity. Moving from Raymond Williams' observation that the figure of "Orwell" is the writer's "most successful" creation, this study asserts a vital correlation between form and content in Orwell's work, specifically in the central position that *perspective* occupies in his political outlook. The multiple perspectives that surface in Orwell's texts – the reluctant Imperial policeman, the tramp in disguise, the advocate of the working poor, the rebellious and satirically-inclined anti-totalitarian writer – correspond with the author's life experiences, and yet are revealed as rhetorically constructed positions that are adopted strategically to generate nuanced, and at times contradictory, impressions of a wide range of subject matter. Chapter 1 treats Orwell's Burmese writings as ethnographically-inflected texts; Chapter 2 examines the figure of the mask in *Down and Out in Paris and London* and in *The Road to Wigan Pier*; Chapter 3 analyses a dialectic of experience and interpretation at play in *Homage to Catalonia*; Chapter 4 scrutinizes the mobilization of the rebel writer figure in a selection of Orwell's mature essays; and Chapter 5 examines the strategic deployment of competing perspectives in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s anatomy of the totalitarian state. This array of analytical approaches serves the dual function of highlighting the versatility and sophistication of narrative strategy across a range of individual texts in Orwell's *oeuvre*, and of demonstrating a trajectory in his work that adheres simultaneously to both formal and political considerations. Orwell's highly prolific two-decade-long writing career, I argue, can be productively understood as an ongoing experiment with narrative strategy, and this experiment exerts at each stage a direct influence on his evolving political aesthetic.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION:

In *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice*, Lynette Hunter argues that Orwell “has been consistently underestimated in terms of his awareness of the complexity of literary and linguistic strategy”:

From the beginning [Hunter writes] he recognizes that the distinctions between form and content, subject and object, fiction and documentary, are all versions of the fundamental separation between fact and value that has dominated rationalist humanism since the seventeenth century. And for Orwell, the final question is indeed one of value and morality: his writing career is concerned with a search for a valid voice with which to persuade others and express opinion. (1)

Hunter’s observations, made in the now-distant Orwell year of 1984, remain relevant to the extent that, as Nils Clausson points out, Orwell’s literary and linguistic strategies continue to be glossed as a mastery of the plain style, one of the effects of which is to relegate his work to introductory composition classes rather than literature classes – that is, as something to be imitated rather than studied.<sup>1</sup> The obvious exception is *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which continues to be read and studied in any number of contexts and from a range of scholarly perspectives; but in an important sense the very durability of this late text perpetuates the critical underestimation to which Hunter alludes. As Lorraine Saunders observes, “Orwell is as popular as ever, but this is due to the continued obsession with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (3) – an obsession, she thinks, that unwittingly

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<sup>1</sup> Clausson refers here to Orwell’s essays in general and specifically to the ways that “Shooting an Elephant” is used as a model for good writing in introductory-level English classes.

contributes to “an imbalance in Orwell studies” (1). For Saunders, this has resulted in an under-appreciation of Orwell’s 1930s novels, and her 2008 book, *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell*, sets out to refute the widespread impression that “Orwell’s reputation as a first-rate novelist must rely *solely* upon the continued appreciation of his last two works” (1). Like Hunter before her, Saunders’ strategy is to subject these books to “detailed textual analysis” and, in so doing, to demonstrate a hitherto unrecognized degree of sophistication in Orwell’s “imaginative and artistic powers” (1). To the extent that reading Orwell closely is thought to be an undervalued exercise, both these scholars set their text-focussed readings of Orwell work against the grain of typical Orwell scholarship. As Saunders puts it, her aim in *The Unsung Artistry* is “to be a part of the growing sea-change in Orwell criticism that is at last recognizing the totality of Orwell’s contribution to twentieth-century literature” (3).<sup>2</sup>

Following Hunter and Saunders, this thesis moves from the premise that Orwell’s stylistic technique should be taken seriously and that doing so reveals dimensions of his work that have been overlooked. On two key points, however, it departs from their claims. First, while Hunter’s focus on the rhetorical complexities of Orwell’s writing serves in some respects as a blueprint for the sort of work this thesis tries to do, her suggestion that Orwell’s writing career can be framed as an ongoing search for a single

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<sup>2</sup> “In doing this,” she continues, “I am building on the achievements of critics such as Peter Davison, Roger Fowler, Håkan Ringbom, and Lynette Hunter, who, by taking Orwell’s stylistic technique seriously, have made invaluable inroads into aiding our understanding of his artistic consequence” (3). One might expect that the proliferation of Orwell scholarship in 1984, followed by a second wave of interest in 2003 to coincide with the centenary of Orwell’s birth, would make any such claim for the critical underestimation of the author appear as exaggeration. However, to the extent that scholarly attention to Orwell persists in emphasizing the man (or, more precisely the figure of “Orwell”) as much as the work, the impression remains that the literary and rhetorical dimensions of his writing have not been fully appreciated. Reviewing Peter Marks’ 2011 book *George Orwell the Essayist*, Stan Smith refers to Orwell as an “under-rated writer”; and of Marks’ book, he goes on to say: “This study goes a long way towards restoring Orwell’s reputation as both a practitioner of English prose and an astute and long-sighted commentator on British culture and society” (Blurb for Marks’ book).

“valid voice,” I contend, indirectly contributes to an oversimplification of Orwell’s approach to narrative by reinforcing the impression of a steady progression towards mastery of style.<sup>3</sup> His singular contribution to twentieth-century literature is better understood, I argue, as an ongoing experiment with *multiple* perspectives as a means to explore a range of distinct but related themes that ultimately inform his political outlook. The level of complexity that can be uncovered in Orwell’s approach to narrative (some of which Hunter ably demonstrates in her analysis) has less to do with a search for a voice than with a strategic embrace of multiple voices and with an early and never-abandoned recognition that an understanding of the complex power dynamics of human society depends very much upon the issue of perspective. The position from which an event is experienced or witnessed, Orwell’s work shows, is crucial to how it is understood.

My objection to the argument put forth by Saunders in *The Unsung Artistry* also hinges on the question of Orwell’s embrace of multiple perspective as a narrative technique. In contrast to Hunter, Saunders rejects the model of reading Orwell’s writing career as a progression towards mastery of style and argues instead that a level of

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<sup>3</sup> In light of the centrality of the “Orwell” persona to his work – that is, of the pivotal role that the adoption of the pseudonym plays in his writing – it may seem counter-intuitive to argue against the notion that Orwell’s work can be framed as a search for a voice. And, indeed, without discounting the originality of Hunter’s study, Orwell’s writing career has frequently enough been described in terms of a long process of self-creation (or re-invention), the most salient feature of which is the cultivation of a distinct ‘voice’. In his 1971 study, Raymond Williams, for instance, argues that “[a]ll of Orwell’s writing until 1937 is...a series of works and experiments around a common problem. Instead of dividing them into ‘fiction’ and ‘documentaries’ we should see them as sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, ‘Orwell’” (52). In contrast, but still in keeping with the “single voice” model of Orwell scholarship, Keith Aldritt, in *The Making of George Orwell*, writes that, “Orwell’s [non-fictional] prose works all relate to each other, form a clearly discernible whole and should, if they are to be properly appreciated, be read as a piece. The three volumes published during the thirties, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*, together with the sequence of essays which Orwell wrote during the forties, all coalesce to form one work of autobiography” (5). In the chapters that follow, I argue that an overemphasis on autobiographical elements of these texts does not take into adequate account the degree to which they offer experiments in narrative perspective.

sophistication can be detected in his earliest work. She is very much alert to the strategic operation of multiple voices in Orwell's writing. Orwell, she insists,

is a writer who continually experimented with narrative voice and presence. Failure to understand Orwell's play with narrative perspective is perhaps an underlying cause of critical dissatisfaction with Orwell's fiction. For what has been largely missed is the fact that the narrative voices, which are subject to continual shifts in psychological perspective and narratorial positioning, have been carefully placed in accordance with a high degree of narrative understanding. (41)

In its basic outlines, the argument that Saunders advances here resembles one of the central claims of this thesis, with the crucial difference that her emphasis is on Orwell's fiction and does not extend to his non-fictional work.<sup>4</sup> Saunders seems to deny the existence of multiple perspectives in Orwell's non-fictional work, in fact. The documentary reportage, for instance, is in her analysis viewed as essentially monologic in character; it functions, narratorially-speaking, primarily as a "straightforward" contrast to the layers of complexity that can be found in the novels, which she sees as being more 'literary' in character:

In *Down and Out in Paris and London* [she writes], as with his other documentary works, a relatively straightforward authorial point of view operates, one that is manifestly different from the variable, third-person

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<sup>4</sup> In her efforts to offer a corrective to the "blind eye that is habitually turned towards Orwell's thirties' novels" and to show that they are "as rich textually as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," Saunders, I contend, underestimates the degree to which the very experimentations with perspective that she identifies in Orwell's novels, the "continual shifts in psychological perspective and narratorial positioning," are in operation in the non-fictional work as well. I should add that I do not concur with Saunders' re-assessment of the 1930s novels. Rather, I adhere to the critical consensus that sees them as the weakest work of his career. The sole exception, in my opinion, is *Burmese Days*, which stands as his best novel (the late satires excluded).



voice of *Burmese Days*, *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, and also the first-person voice in *Coming Up for Air*. In *Down and Out*, as one would expect, the speaking voice works appropriately as a conduit for the author's thoughts and perspective. (41)

This distinction that is drawn between Orwell's 1930s fiction and his documentary reportage of the same period echoes the sort of categorizing that Orwell himself attempts in "Why I Write." In that essay, he casts himself as "by nature" a man who "in a peaceful age...might have written ornate or merely descriptive books," but who has by the circumstances of the age in which he lived "been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer" (*CEJL* 1: 4). Orwell asserts a split, in other words, between an "aesthetic" motive and a "political" motive; his literary impulses and his inclination towards political commitment are, in this self-assessment, framed in dialectical opposition in the sense that an indulgence of one motive is thought to come at the cost of suppressing the other motive. The view put forth by Saunders, that Orwell's literary output – *i.e.* his fictional work – permits sophisticated experimentation of voice while the non-fictional work embraces a straightforwardly monologic approach, in which "the speaking voice works appropriately as a conduit for the author's thoughts and perspective," subscribes to a generic division between fiction and non-fiction, however, that is problematized by Orwell himself. One of the central points of "Why I Write," after all – Orwell's claim to have tried, since 1936 or thereabouts, to "make political writing into an art" – reveals that the author was at least retrospectively alert to the possibility that an "aesthetic" agenda could be incorporated into non-fictional work (*CEJL* 1: 6). One of the underlying aims of this thesis is to demonstrate – through close textual analysis – some of the ways that

Orwell set about turning “political writing into an art.” As I hope to show, his political writing is elevated to the status of art in part through his use of multiple perspective as a narrative technique.

If one interprets Orwell’s work as a career-long engagement with political issues through the use of multiple perspectives, it is necessary to approach with some wariness the assessment of his development as a writer that he himself offers in “Why I Write,” for it is obvious from the most cursory glance at his earliest efforts that a political impetus was present from the outset. If, as Orwell insists, the important turning point in his thinking was his recognition of the threat of totalitarianism (which occurred in Spain in 1936), then one might expect not to find in the early work a deep engagement with political matters. Clearly, however, politics pervades the early material: the works that are set in Burma take the problem of imperialism as their central concern; *Down and Out in Paris and London* announces in its opening chapter that “poverty” is its subject; and *The Road to Wigan Pier* documents the author’s awakening to socialism.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the mere fact of their political content, though, these works reveal a sophisticated sense of the artifice involved in depicting both personal experience and the subtleties of political reality. They display a range of narrative techniques that work to enhance and illuminate our understandings of their political subject matter. In short, they demonstrate an alertness to the ways that literary art can be mobilized to explore political issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Orwell’s early novels also display a clear political agenda. As Chris Hanley observes, “[s]everal of Orwell’s characteristic political themes emerge in *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, which is concerned with vagrancy and poverty, with social inequality and the vested interests that sustain it. *Clergyman’s* is also concerned with society’s loss of spirituality and with mental dominance and submission, themes that nourish his later ideas and writings upon totalitarianism. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, commenting on the same destitute social landscape, is also...an obvious forbear of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (Para. 8).

Certainly, Orwell's own comments reveal an abiding interest in the relationship between politics and literature. Although the tension that he outlines in "Why I Write," between "aesthetic enthusiasm" and "political impulse," can be interpreted as simply the choice that any writer must make about what to write *about*, the essay should also be understood as a meditation on the inter-relationship of form and content. The politically committed writer, in Orwell's dichotomy, becomes a "pamphleteer," while the apolitical aesthete indulges in writing "ornate or merely descriptive books." The content of the work is thus reflected in and influenced by the form it takes. The tidiness of this split, as I mentioned above, is purposefully undermined in the essay by the suggestion that a writer might undertake to "fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole" (*CEJL* 1: 6), but the identification of a form/content relationship, however ambiguous, nonetheless gives some indication of its importance to Orwell's work, particularly since it appears in an essay devoted to his thoughts on writing.

Orwell's interest in the inter-relationship of form and content more usually manifests itself as a discussion of style. In his 1943 essay on W. B. Yeats, for instance, he ponders the link between "literary style" and a writer's political orientation. "One thing that Marxist criticism has not succeeded in doing," he declares, "is to trace the connexion between 'tendency' and literary style. The subject-matter and imagery of a book can be explained in sociological terms, but its texture seemingly cannot. Yet some such connexion there must be" (*CEJL* 2: 271). The late phase of Orwell's writing career is devoted in large part to exploring the exact nature of this connection and, through a combination of satire and polemical analysis, providing proof of its existence – of the "special connexion between politics and the debasement of language," as he puts it in

“Politics and the English Language” (*CEJL* 4: 135). Thus, in “Propaganda and Demotic Speech,” he observes that the “bloodless dialect of government spokesmen,” the “inflated bombastic style” of newspapers, and the “bastard vocabulary” of Left-wing political parties share in common a “remoteness from the average man” (*CEJL* 3: 135). Like the archaisms and needless words of Yeats’s poetry that Orwell reads as being somehow linked to the poet’s fascist tendencies,<sup>6</sup> the variations of propagandistic style that are adopted by powerful organizations directly reflect their insidious embrace of totalitarian tendencies – an idea that is brought to its dystopian extreme in *Nineteen Eight-Four* with the Party’s adoption of Newspeak. The appropriate, anti-totalitarian response to this stylistic tendency, Orwell suggests, is to speak in “clear, popular, everyday language” (*CEJL* 3: 135). The plain style, in other words, has a distinctly political component; it is the formal manifestation of a democratic sensibility.

Reading Orwell’s embrace of the plain style as a reflection of his democratic tendencies is hardly an original idea, of course – he more or less instructs us to do so, after all. Far less obvious, though, are the ways that his narrative strategies reflect these tendencies. The frequent manipulations of narrative distance and point-of-view, for instance, as well as the habit of adopting specific personae to his narratives – the policeman, the tramp, the journalist, the soldier, the writer, *etc.* – suggest a career-long interest in the issue of perspective and, by extension, in the ways that political events and contexts are experienced by common individuals. That Orwell actually occupied these roles in his life should not distract attention from the fact that, in his narratives, they are strategically constructed and so transformed into figurative personae that transcend the

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<sup>6</sup> Of Yeats he writes: “Translated into political terms, Yeats’s tendency is Fascist.... He is a great hater of democracy, of the modern world, science, machinery, the concept of progress – above all, of the idea of human equality” (*CEJL* 2: 273).

author's lived experience. Thus the narrator of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, to take but one example, encompasses a range of competing perspectives, at times writing from the point of view of a 'slumming' middle-class subject but at other times occupying the perspective of the tramp, *i.e.* a genuinely poor man. This sort of fluctuating perspective surfaces throughout Orwell's work, demonstrating that even his non-fictional writing should be viewed as more than simply "a conduit for the author's thoughts and perspective." The very adoption of the pseudonym "Orwell" provides a clear statement, if one needs to be made, of the distinction between the man and the literary persona (or personae, for "Orwell," as we will see, is a fluid construction), but separating the man from his work is only a preliminary step to understanding the complexity with which Orwell approaches the issue of perspective. The adoption and cultivation of the "Orwell" persona indicates, above all, a strategic inclination to inhabit multiple perspectives for the purposes of adding depth and complexity to seemingly straightforward narratives.

The multiple perspectives that surface in Orwell's work might also be understood as an embrace of a dialogic or polyphonic model of representing experience. For this reason, not surprisingly, some scholars of Orwell have turned to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin as a way of better grasping Orwell's narrative strategies, though the application of Bakhtin's ideas are usually limited to Orwell's fictions – as is the case in the work of the aforementioned Saunders.<sup>7</sup> In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, however, Bakhtin offers a reading of the Russian novelist that is applicable to both Orwell's fictional and non-fictional narratives and, at the same time, effectively links the very notion of multiple perspectives to a democratic sensibility. "Dostoevsky," Bakhtin writes, "brings into being

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<sup>7</sup> In his book *The Language of George Orwell*, Roger Fowler also summons Bakhtinian ideas in his analysis of Orwell. I discuss Fowler in some detail in the next chapter.

not voiceless slaves ... but *free* people, capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (emphasis in original 6). As we will see, the rebellious, free-thinking individual will come to be a central characteristic of the ‘Orwell’ persona, especially as it moves into its mature phase in the 1940s. Moreover, an examination of some of the ways that Orwell sets *competing* perspectives in motion, going back to his earliest narratives, reveals a formal echo of his more directly stated democratic values. Multiple perspectives, at least as they manifest themselves in Orwell’s work, permit an interplay of voices, often the voices of common individuals in difficult circumstances, that in effect dramatizes a democratic understanding of society.

In the chapters that follow, I try to show how Orwell’s approach to narrative is very much tied to his investment in political matters. My intention in doing so is to draw attention to a correspondence between form and content in Orwell’s work that, in contrast to his embrace of the plain style, has been largely overlooked. Orwell has, quite rightly, been interpreted as a political writer, but the degree to which his political outlook is influenced by, and even emerges from, his engagement with narrative strategy is little understood. And yet, I would argue, it is difficult to understand Orwell’s politics in all their complexity without examining his experiments with narrative, in particular his unwavering attention to the issue of perspective. Certain key themes in Orwell’s work are, in effect, articulated through his experiments with form. The fluid distinction between inclusion and exclusion, for instance – an issue that directly informs his sense of political injustice ( *i.e.* his anti-imperialism, his anti-communism, his anti-totalitarianism) – manifests itself as a tension in his writing between being “inside” and “outside” that is

frequently dramatized by manipulation of narrative perspective. Likewise, the dialectic of experience and interpretation that is so vital to his work, especially in the first half of his career, speaks to a range of Orwell's political-philosophical concerns and depends for its expression on shifts of narrative distance. As I strive to make clear in the subsequent chapters, these central concerns of Orwell's political engagement are brought into better focus when they are examined alongside his narrative strategies.

In Chapter One I examine Orwell's Burmese writings, the essays "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant" and the novel *Burmese Days*, with the aim of demonstrating how Orwell's understanding of imperial power dynamics exerts a direct influence on his approach to narrative, most notably in his embrace of multiple perspective as a device that can be effectively marshaled to reveal the limitations of the imperial subject as a chronicler of culture. Following a recent development in scholarship that asserts an interdependent relationship between modernist literature and anthropology, I read Orwell's Burmese texts as ethnographically-inflected explorations of the experience of being a representative of empire. As Carey J. Snyder writes in *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters*, "ethnographic ideas and methods not only informed the subject matter of literary modernism, [they] also stimulated many of its most important aesthetic innovations" (2). This phenomenon is very much in evidence in Orwell's Burmese works; in their capacity as written narratives composed by a representative of the British Empire who has immersed himself in a foreign culture and who later steps back to record his experiences, these texts exhibit a clear ethnographic structure. Like the modernist writers of Snyder's analysis, Orwell "represent[s] ethnographic scenarios" in his Burmese work and "adapt[s] ethnographic tools or perspectives to literary ends" (8). As Snyder argues,

“*ethnographic methods* are redeployed by [modernist] writers ... to generate many of the central tropes and aesthetic devices we have come to associate with modernist literature – including the use of multiple perspectives, the showcasing of incoherent identities, and the pervasive trope of disorientation” (8). In addition to making the issues of disorientation and identity thematically central, Orwell’s Burmese writings utilize techniques such as split point-of-view, narrative irony, and fluctuating narrative perspective to dramatize the complexity of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized Other. My analysis of these techniques in Chapter Two serves the dual purpose of building on the suggestive claims of Snyder and others with respect to the interdependent relationship between modernist literature and anthropology, and of establishing the strategic embrace of multiple perspective as a narrative strategy that can be traced to Orwell’s earliest writings.

In Chapter Three I build on my observations regarding Orwell’s early alertness to narrative complexity by examining the related issues of disguise and transformation in two of the three book-length documentaries he produced in the 1930s, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936). Inspired by the suggestive aphorism that appears in “Shooting an Elephant” (“[The white man] wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it” [CEJL 1: 239]), I argue that the mask functions as a flexible metaphor in Orwell’s early work, and that it plays a crucial role in his evolving approach to representing the middle-class. In this respect, Orwell displays what Keith Alldritt refers to as the “propensity of the modern writer to wear a mask or ... to reconstitute the self” (14). In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the mask is mobilized in part to exercise a “concern with self-definition” (Alldritt 14), but it also functions as a means to



explore the very nature of perspective. The narrator adopts multiple personae in the book – the aesthetically-inclined middle-class writer, the detached social scientist, the self-conscious “slummer,” and, of course, the tramp – to offer a range of (sometimes competing) perspectives that together convey a more nuanced impression of the experience of poverty than is usually attributed to the book. In seeming contrast, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell disparagingly likens his forays disguised as a tramp in *Down and Out in Paris and London* to “masquerading” (50) and ultimately characterizes his earlier activities as a naïve experiment. And yet, I argue, a more subtle manifestation of the figure of the mask appears in the later book as well, where Orwell adopts the distinctive pose of the journalist with a clear strategic agenda. He dons a mask of interpretive distance, at times even *exaggerating* his distance from the subjects of his reportage, to make the point that the “normal working class” is an essentially impenetrable entity with whom it is “impossible” to achieve “real intimacy” (*Wigan Pier* 154 -55). Thus, while a rhetoric of repudiation characterizes the later book in the sense that it seems to reject the sort of sweeping generalizations about poverty that are advanced in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the treatment of the related issues of disguise and transformation in *The Road to Wigan Pier* emerges nonetheless as a continuation of Orwell’s experiments with narrative perspective. The mask functions in both books as a figure through which Orwell turns the issue of perspective itself into a subject of inquiry.

In Chapter Four I offer a reading of *Homage to Catalonia* that focuses on the book’s exploration of a complex dialectic of experience and interpretation. Drawing on Richard Lanham’s discussion of the opposing categories that constitute the Western self,

*homo seriusus* (serious man) and *homo rhetoricus* (rhetorical man), I argue that Orwell's memoir of the Spanish Civil War wrestles with the *serious-rhetorical* tension by presenting a roughly analogous tension between personal experience and political rhetoric. *Homage to Catalonia* juxtaposes the political backdrop of the Spanish Civil War and the personal narrative of an individual soldier (Orwell) in a way that reveals competing impressions of the same events and draws attention to the necessity for measured interpretation. Contrary to the well-known view of *Homage to Catalonia* offered by Lionel Trilling – that Orwell “was interested only in telling the truth” (xxiii) – I argue that the book treats ‘truth’ as an elusive category that depends very much on context and perspective, and that it is less an exercise in truth-telling than an inquiry into the fraught relationship between personal experience and politically-constructed reality. To this end, I contest the notion that Orwell was a dogmatic empiricist – or, as Raymond Williams has it, a writer doing a “successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it” (qtd. in Norris 242) – and suggest instead that he embraced rhetoric as an interpretive strategy – that is, in the sense meant by Stanley Fish when he writes: “Properly used, rhetoric is a heuristic, helping us not to distort the facts but to discover them; the setting forth of contrary views of a matter will have the beneficial effect of showing us which of those views most accords with the truth” (206)<sup>8</sup> – and that his conception of truth emerges through several stages of mediation and does not rely solely on ‘experience’. Orwell, in my reading of *Homage to Catalonia*, sets fluid and competing versions of truth against

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<sup>8</sup> Fish is here paraphrasing one of the arguments put forth by Aristotle in his defence of rhetoric. As Fish points out, however, this seemingly strong point is also a point of weakness, “for in making it [Aristotle] reinforces the very assumptions in relation to which rhetoric will always be suspect, assumptions of an independent reality whose outlines can be perceived by a sufficiently clear-eyed observer who can then represent them in a transparent verbal medium” (206).

one another in an effort to demonstrate the difficulty of epistemological certainty. He does this by structuring the book as both a journey from innocence to experience and by emphasizing, in turn, the personal memoir and the political backdrop of the Spanish conflict. In his efforts to dramatize the challenges of documenting the war and conveying one man's experience of war, Orwell again embraces multiple perspectives as a narrative technique, alternately occupying the roles of the confused common soldier and the more-enlightened journalist (in a variation of the participant-observer dynamic of the Burmese writings). By focusing on this dimension of *Homage to Catalonia*, I complicate the notion of Orwell as a plain-speaking truth-teller and emphasize his ongoing alertness to narrative complexity.

In Chapter Five I examine three of Orwell's 1946 essays, "The Prevention of Literature," "Why I Write," and "Politics and the English Language," with the purpose of interrogating his embrace and cultivation of the figure of the rebel writer – a figure John Rodden sees as a central component of the "Orwell" persona. In Orwell's later work, I argue, the centrality of the rebel writer figure reflects a distinctly *rhetorical* agenda, and so should not be understood simply as a reflection of the author's impulse towards self-portraiture. In the three essays I examine in detail, the rebel writer is deployed strategically, as a figurative construct that functions to clarify the individual's position in the totalitarian age. In this respect, Orwell's use of the rebel writer figure is revealed as a continuation of his career-long exploration of multiple perspective. For while the trope of the rebel writer bravely confronting attacks on personal liberty appears in the documentary reportage of the 1930s (especially *Homage to Catalonia*), and indeed can be understood to some extent as an accurate characterization of the author, a crucial turn

away from the experiential emphasis of the earlier narratives surfaces in the later essays, and in its place emerges the *writer*, a comparatively disembodied and figurative presence. Unlike the “Orwell” of the 1930s documentaries, who occupies a tangible presence because of his physical immersion into the contexts of his inquiry – *i.e.* the slums of Paris and London, the coal mines of Wigan, and the battlefield in Spain – the “Orwell” of the 1940s essays is a more universally emblematic figure who is able to align himself with rebellious writers from the past – such as Milton, Swift, or Dickens – and who, simultaneously, provides a model of conduct for the common individual in the totalitarian age. Indeed, the retreat in the 1940s essays from an emphasis on personal experience coincides with Orwell’s ever-increasing concern with totalitarianism, its threat to free expression, and the role that the individual should play in the face of it. Although it is conventional enough to refer to Orwell as a rebel, my argument in this chapter is that his late essays mark a turning point in the way that the rebel writer is cultivated as a figurative construct that serves a range of rhetorical agendas. In the sense that the “Orwell” persona of the late essays reveals itself as a distinctly rhetorical construction whose purpose transcends self-portraiture, it marks another stage in Orwell’s career-long interest in multiple perspective.

In Chapter Six I turn my attention to the complex interaction of the fictional and the non-fictional in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. My primary interest in examining this text is to interrogate some of the ways that Orwell’s earlier engagements with totalitarian theory find their way into his great novel of totalitarianism. Orwell’s immersion in the subject of totalitarianism is abundantly documented, but less examined are the ways that his analyses of the totalitarian state find *ambiguous* expression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Key

strands of totalitarian theory, I argue – the assertion of Nazi-Stalinist equivalence, for instance, or the notion that totalitarianism was historically unprecedented – are taken up in the novel in ways that depart subtly from comments Orwell makes elsewhere, in his non-fictional writings. I make a special emphasis of a standard *topos* of totalitarian theory: the invocation of the Spanish Inquisition as a dark chapter of European history that prefigures twentieth-century totalitarianism. Orwell, I show, frequently turned to the Inquisition in his non-fictional work to illustrate the barbarous and regressive character of totalitarian regimes, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of course, the Inquisition is built into the very structure of the narrative, with O’Brien occupying the role of Grand Inquisitor. In this capacity, O’Brien at times performs the function of providing historical analyses of the totalitarian state (for Winston’s enlightenment) that echo sentiments put forth by his author in other contexts. The degree to which a common ground can be detected between Orwell and his demonic creation is of particular interest to my analysis in this chapter. Contesting Richard Rorty’s assertion that “the last third of *1984*... becomes a book about O’Brien, not about twentieth-century totalitarian states,” I argue that O’Brien is in fact used by Orwell as a device to engage with twentieth-century totalitarian theory (171). O’Brien’s “totalitarian perspective at times seems to dovetail with Orwell’s own views, but close scrutiny of this incongruous convergence reveals that the novel is very much concerned with the complex relationship between morality and perspective. In this and other ways, Orwell’s last and most famous work also turns out to be his most complex exploration of narrative perspective.

As these brief chapter descriptions should indicate, the nature of the argument put forth in this thesis is that Orwell’s highly prolific two-decade-long writing career can be

understood as an ongoing experiment with narrative strategy and that this experiment exerts at each stage a direct influence on his evolving political aesthetic. Although Orwell claims in “Why I Write” that “*Animal Farm* was the first book in which [he] tried, with full consciousness of what [he] was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole,” I hope to show here that a fusing of artistic and political purpose can be found in his earliest work – even if the feat was unconsciously achieved (*CEJL* 1: 7). The arguments of my individual chapters are linked in that they demonstrate a wide range of Orwell’s narrative agendas, but in an important sense I do not wish to advance a reading of Orwell that sets out either to capture a defining element of his craft or to offer a reductive summary of his political outlook. Part of my intention in focusing on Orwell’s attention to narrative strategy, and in particular on his embrace of multiple perspective as a device, is to demonstrate the degree to which his work is varied in its approach. Undeniably, there are strong correspondences between the works (the above-mentioned tension between “inside” and “outside” is but one example), but an analysis of Orwell’s approach to narrative that sets out to avoid seeing his work as a steady progression towards mastery should be attentive to the specific aims of each stage of his writing career and to the distinct formal solutions that are conceived to meet those aims. To this end this thesis strives to offer multiple perspectives of Orwell’s work.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**CHALLENGING ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITY**  
 IN “A HANGING,” “SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT,” AND *BURMESE DAYS*

“He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling,  
 understanding the same world.”

“A Hanging”

Thematically central to George Orwell’s Burmese writings – the essays “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant,” and the novel *Burmese Days* – is a sustained interrogation of what it means to be on the “inside,” whether this implies being a representative of Empire, a member of the European Club, or merely privy to the nuances of Burmese (or imperial) culture.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in the way they track the experiences of an individual who has immersed himself in a foreign culture for an extended period, and who then steps back to record those experiences with the authority of one who has been on the “inside,” the Burmese writings can be productively understood as *ethnographies*. In a crucial sense, Orwell’s Burmese work emerges, in George W. Stocking Jr.’s terms, from “fieldwork by participant-observation, preferably in a face-to-face social group quite different from that

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<sup>9</sup> As Orwell remarks in the autobiographical second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, “In order to hate imperialism, you have to be a part of it” (144). Terry Eagleton protests that this statement is “plainly false” because “being part of it in the way [Orwell] was is as likely to blunt your hatred as to sharpen it” (*LRB*). Orwell, Eagleton argues, “suffered from the empiricist illusion that what was real was what you could smell with your own nose and feel with your own fingers” (*LRB*). In reply to Eagleton’s complaint, William E. Cain insists that Eagleton “misses Orwell’s subtlety” (79). Orwell’s remark, he argues, operates on two distinct levels: it suggests the degree to which involvement in colonial administration gives one insight into its appalling tactics, and (more subtly) it hints at the scope of imperialism’s influence. To “be a part” of something, Cain suggests, at least in the ambiguous sense deployed by Orwell, is to be both *inside* it and to be exercised by its power.

Margery Sabin has emphasized the importance of the “inside/outside” dialectic in Orwell’s work. In “Outside/Inside: Searching for Wigan Pier,” she makes a special focus of Orwell’s exploration of this dialectic in his report on working class conditions in the North of England. I take up Sabin’s discussion in some detail in the next chapter.

of the investigator” (70). To the extent that these works function as interrogations of the immersed individual’s perspective, however, they simultaneously articulate a rejection of what James Clifford has called “ethnographic authority” (21), the peculiar authority that is ascribed to the participant observer figure whose extended immersion is the source of what Stocking describes as “the special cognitive authority claimed by the modern ethnographic tradition” (71). Orwell’s ambivalent engagement with the ethnographic encounter and his resistance to the notion that a special authority is generated by an extended immersion into a foreign culture complement the strong anti-imperialist sentiment that characterizes these works. For Orwell, *Empire* constitutes a kind of spurious authority, mainly because it claims to bring civilization to the world when its real purpose is to attain wealth. As John Flory puts it (speaking for Orwell in this instance), “it is the lie that we’re here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them” (*Burmese Days* 39). Likewise, the perspective of the imperial subject, whether merchant or policeman, is in Orwell’s view a dubious position from which to assess the nuances of a foreign culture because that perspective is necessarily both shaped and constrained by the power dynamics of imperial domination. Orwell’s Burmese writings challenge the authority of the imperial subject as chronicler of colonial culture by demonstrating that the bias inherent in the perspective of imperial representation inevitably influences the outcome of ethnography.

In framing Orwell’s literary treatments of his experiences in Burma as *ethnographic* encounters, I follow a recent development in scholarship that asserts an interdependent and mutually influential relationship between modernist literature and anthropology. In her book *British Fiction and Cross-Cultural Encounters: Ethnographic*



*Modernism from Wells to Woolf* (2008), Carey J. Snyder argues that, “to a degree that scholars of modernism have not fully appreciated, literary writers of the period engaged ethnographic discourse on multiple levels, depicting characters who function as amateur ethnographers, emulating ethnographic techniques on a narrative level, and, at the same time, questioning the very premise of ethnography through a pervasive attitude of epistemological uncertainty” (1). The term *ethnographic modernism*, Snyder explains, is meant to denote a “significant category in British modernist fiction” whose texts are set in “colonial outposts or other exotic locations,” and that tend to “emulate modern ethnographies, in which metropolitan observers voyage into foreign cultures, regarded as exotic, primitive, or traditional” (1, 7). Orwell’s work has received surprisingly little attention in terms of how it fits into this ethnographic nexus, although there have been notable exceptions. In her reading of *The Road to Wigan Pier*,<sup>10</sup> for instance, Patricia Rae argues that the book is “an exercise in ‘modernist anthropology’, a genre that ironizes the reactions of the fieldworker in order to foreground the difficulty of attaining an objective and genuinely sympathetic understanding of alien cultures” (72).<sup>11</sup> In her essay for the “Anthropology” chapter of the *Blackwell Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, Rae also refers to *Down and Out in Paris and London* as a work that is potentially receptive to ethnographic analysis.<sup>12</sup> Snyder, for her part, offers *Burmese*

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<sup>10</sup> I return to Rae’s reading of *The Road to Wigan Pier* in the next chapter.

<sup>11</sup> The term ‘modernist anthropology’ comes from Marc Manganaro, who edits and writes the introduction to *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Of the intimate relationship between modernist literature and modernist anthropology, Rae observes that “the narrator-participant-observers in an increasing number of modernist novels and ethnographies, produced by Woolf, Joyce, George Orwell, André Breton, James Agee, and Zora Neale Hurston, to name a few, have been shown to be anything but objective and dispassionate: their ‘pure experience’ of alien cultures is rendered in detailed accounts of their desires, somatic sensations and feelings of disgust, and of their limitations in empathy and other forms of understanding” (99). In this way, Rae suggests, these modernist authors achieve the goal of a “radically empirical” ethnography that proved elusive to

*Days* as an example of “ethnographic modernism,” but she only mentions the book in passing and does not subject it to close analysis (7). While Orwell’s Burmese writings have been treated extensively in terms of their critical engagements with imperialism, their specifically *ethnographic* foundations have not really been scrutinized. That is to say, they have not been examined *as* ethnographies. Part of my aim in this chapter is to test the suggestive claims of Rae and Snyder and to tease out the nuances of cultural representation in Orwell’s Burmese material. “A Hanging,” “Shooting an Elephant,” and *Burmese Days* each adhere to an ethnographic structure whereby a written narrative emerges directly from the experiences of a representative of the West who has previously immersed himself for an extended period in a foreign culture – specifically, in this case, in a colonial outpost of the British Empire.

Beyond the somewhat obvious fact that the Burmese writings dramatize the colonial encounter in an exotic location, there are other, more compelling theoretical reasons why it makes sense to subject these texts to an ethnographic reading. In Snyder’s analysis, the specifically ethnographic dimension of works that fall into the category of *ethnographic modernism* is signalled primarily by the way “they seem to elucidate a foreign culture for outsiders, from the liminal perspective of a participant-observer, who mediates between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of that culture” (7). The inside/outside tension, as I have noted, is not only central to Orwell’s Burmese writing; it is present in one shape or another in his entire body of work. Drawing on the discourse of anthropology therefore enables a useful contextualization of Orwell’s commitment to the tension between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ as a foundational theme in his writing. Just as, in Stephen Ingle’s

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anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas, who for different reasons fell short of this ideal.

view, the anti-imperialist stance that Orwell picked up in Burma would eventually evolve into a more general political philosophy that transcended the immediate context of imperialism, so the ethnographic dimensions of Orwell's Burmese writings come to exert a decisive influence on his writing strategies (234).<sup>13</sup> His encounters with the colonized peoples of Burma, and with their Anglo-Indian rulers, seem to have influenced his approach to the construction of narrative by forcing him to consider *perspective* as both a limitation and as a means to achieve precise literary ends. The Burmese writings are characterized by their use of split points-of-view, narrative irony, and fluctuating narrative perspective, techniques that mirror in their complexity and attention to shifting perspective the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized.

Anthropology's theorization of the subject position of the ethnographer also sheds light on the central role that *experience* plays in Orwell's work. As Peter Marks observes, "whether as down-and-outer in London, imperial policeman in Burma, militia man in Spain, or investigative reporter in northern England, Orwell had seen for himself many of the things he would later describe" (85). But, as Marks notes, "modern critical debate ... has called into question the capacity of the author to depict reality, objectively or otherwise" (85). The experience-description formula, in other words, is by no means straightforward, and can be better understood by taking recourse in anthropological theory. Clifford's analysis of the textual implications of participant observation is especially helpful in this regard. "Understood literally," Clifford writes, "participant

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<sup>13</sup> Ingle writes: "When Orwell returned to this country he may originally have believed that he was exchanging the tyranny of imperialism for liberty but he apparently did not believe this for long; perhaps he did not entirely believe it even at the beginning. Soon enough he was beginning to use imperialism as a metaphor not merely for the relationship between the classes in Britain but also for any relationship between those with and without power. Every such relationship was based implicitly or explicitly upon exploitation" (234)

observation is a paradoxical, misleading formula, but it may be taken seriously if reformulated in hermeneutic terms as a dialectic of experience and interpretation” (34). The centrality of this dialectic to Orwell’s *oeuvre* is suggestive of the foundational position that an ethnographic model holds in his approach. Moreover, as James Buzard points out, the emergence of the participant-observer figure in the discipline of anthropology coincides with the “intensification and heightened self-consciousness of late nineteenth-century imperialism” (9). The precise context that initially motivates Orwell politically as a writer, in other words – the violent death throes of imperialism – seems also to provide him with the theoretical substance of his material.

Subjecting Orwell’s Burmese material to an ethnographic reading thus illuminates several key elements of his work, the most important perhaps being his approach to narrative. As Snyder observes (drawing on Clifford’s insights), “participant-observation may be regarded as a narrative technique as well as a methodology for the field” (5). For this reason, the theoretical underpinnings of “ethnographic modernism” provide a means to examine Orwell’s distinctly *literary* response in the Burmese writings to the ‘insider’/ ‘outsider’ dialectic. As Clifford argues, “‘Participant observation’ serves as a shorthand for a continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in a wider context” (“Ethnographic Authority” 34). As I will show, this explanation of the back and forth movement of the participant observer, from an empathetic ‘inside’ to a more scrutinizing ‘outside’ position, serves as an accurate description of the movement of Orwell’s narrator in both “A Hanging” and

“Shooting an Elephant,” and at the same time provides a productive way of interrogating the encounter between European and non-European in *Burmese Days*.

### **‘A Hanging’ and ‘Shooting an Elephant’**

The gesture of turning the raw experience of immersion into another culture into a written account that exhibits some of the qualities of a *literary* performance is evident in both “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant,” where the strategy of employing a split in the narrative, between an imperial representative who performs his duty and a conscience-stricken narrator who rejects the authority of that duty, reflects these essays’ adherence to the structure of the “fieldworker-theorist” split that Clifford equates with participant-observation. Crucially, however, “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” engage with the issue of ethnographic representation on two distinct levels: both are examples of the sort of self-reflexive ethnographic modernism that Snyder associates with works that dramatize “encounters between British travelers and other. . . cultures,” and both display some of the key features of what Buzard calls *auto-ethnography*, “the study, representation, or knowledge of a culture by one or more of its members” (“On Auto-Ethnographic Identity” 61). Buzard defines the “autoethnographic consciousness” as “the consciousness centered upon the notion of oneself as the product and possessor of a distinct culture” (*Disorienting Fictions* 14), and while his focus is the nineteenth-century British novel, the term can be usefully applied to an interrogation of Orwell’s ethnographically-inflected treatment of British Imperial culture, specifically the Anglo-Indian expatriate community that represents empire in Burma.

As Orwell's comments regarding the special knowledge that comes with being "a part of" imperialism suggest, he saw his experiences as an Indian Imperial Policeman as unique and felt that they gave him a degree of special insight into both the "dirty work" of imperialism and into its "real nature" (*CEJL* 1: 236). It should not be surprising, then, that the two works that document these experiences are concerned not only with a critique of imperialism itself but with the special vantage point that makes such a critique possible. In this respect, both "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant" function in a meta-critical capacity: in addition to offering lacerating critiques of the British Empire, they dramatize the "dialectic of experience and interpretation" that Clifford holds as the essential redeeming function of participant observation. In doing so, however, the essays simultaneously resist prevailing notions of what is expected of participant observation. "Experiential authority," Clifford writes, "is based on a 'feel' for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy and a sense of the style of a people or place" (35). Orwell's Burma memoirs actively qualify what is meant by a 'foreign context' by foregrounding the expansiveness of British territorial claims in the East, and by making a focus not of a 'native' population but of an occupying expatriate community or, more precisely, the experience of a single member of that community. In this subtle departure from the conventional understanding of what the participant observer does, "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant" assert a doubly-qualified two-fold authority: of the *participant* who is both thoroughly "inside" the culture about which he writes (and yet, simultaneously, at its outer reaches, on the frontier where imperial culture confronts its colonized Other); and of the *observer* who has retreated to a position where he may

“situate his meanings in a wider context,” in Clifford’s phrase, but who nonetheless remains ‘inside’ because of his affiliations with empire.

The uniqueness of the ethnographic vantage point explored in “A Hanging” and in “Shooting an Elephant” can be better understood by turning briefly to Buzard’s analysis of the dynamics of representation in the context of imperialism. “[E]thnographic and autoethnographic representation within the global framework of imperial and postimperial history,” he writes, offers a range of possibilities in terms of the perspectives available to the observer (15). Buzard offers a modification of A. J. Greimas’s “semiotic rectangle” as a way of showing how spatial and power relations can be examined together to gain a sense of the political and theoretical underpinnings of ethnographic perspective. I reproduce his schematic here:

#### WHO IS REPRESENTED

		Colonizable Periphery	Imperial Metropolis
W H O  R E P R E S E N T S	<i>Imperial Metropolis</i>	Dominant mode of 20 <sup>th</sup> -c. ethnography (Westerners study ‘traditional,’ ‘other’ cultures)	‘Metropolitan Autoethnography’ (19 <sup>th</sup> -c. British novel, cultural criticism, sociology)
	<i>Colonizable Periphery</i>	Autoethnography as described by Pratt: colonized peoples speak of/for themselves (19 <sup>th</sup> -c. romantic nationalisms; 20 <sup>th</sup> -c. post-colonial nationalisms)	‘Reverse Ethnography’: representation of metropolitan societies by the formally colonized (a product of ‘reverse colonization,’ esp. post-WWII)

(*Disorienting Fictions* 15)

Orwell's Burmese essays do not easily fit this model. On the one hand, the policeman narrator of both works is clearly a representative of the Imperial Metropolis; as such, his memoirs of Burmese life reflect the "dominant mode of 20<sup>th</sup>-c. ethnography." At the same time, the focus on the experience of the British imperial subject that characterizes both works marks a departure from the model of the Western observer who studies "traditional" or "other" cultures. The narrators' extreme self-reflexivity, in fact, renders Burmese culture in both these essays opaque, some obscure things whose nuances are inaccessible to the narrator.

In "A Hanging," the claustrophobic setting of the prison performs the function not only of incarcerating a segment of the 'native' population but of keeping indigenous culture decisively out of the narrative. The prison in this sense can be understood as an enclosed space where the exercise of imperial power unfolds mostly undiffused by local custom. Indeed, while the essay immediately announces its colonial context with the crucial scene-setting opening, "It was in Burma," this statement is immediately qualified by the description of "[a] sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, [that] was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard" (*CEJL* 1: 44). The impression of a walled compound complicates any clear notion that the narrative unfolds in a foreign land and instead locates it in a distinct and detached space, "in Burma" and yet also set apart from the colony: a liminal space in the truest sense. Conversely, the logic of the wall imagery implies that the activity that takes place in the prison is at least partially contained and so does not exercise a decisive influence on Burmese culture. Of the dog that follows the procession to the gallows, for example, we are informed that "[i]ts yaps echoed from the jail walls" (*CEJL* 1: 45). As the sounds that issue from the animal bounce back into the jail yard, so



the exercise of imperial power is in some way contained by the space of the prison. The sequestered nature of the proceedings that take place within the prison suggests both their criminality (something that the policeman narrator detects) and the way they reflect the limits of imperial power. More important to the issue of ethnographic representation, though, the non-European figures who do appear in the essay participate in an imported ritual that does nothing to illuminate how the Burmese live outside a context of imperial domination.

In “Shooting an Elephant,” meanwhile, the Burmese population is kept at a distance by being persistently reduced to an undifferentiated mass. The narrator senses the hatred of “crowds” and everywhere is met by “sneering yellow faces” (*CEJL* 1: 236). The famous epiphany in the essay is, significantly, preceded by a “glance round at the crowd”; the narrator sees only a “sea of yellow faces” but can feel “their two thousand wills pressing [him] forward” (*CEJL* 1: 239). When he claims to be “not thinking particularly of [his] own skin, only the watchful yellow faces behind,” he is nonetheless reducing the Burmese crowd to an *influence* rather than an object of interest (*CEJL* 1: 240). The moment of illumination is thus a radical turn inward that reflects an *autoethnographic* agenda; the Burmese population is presented only as a hostile foreign entity against which the experience of representing empire abroad can be understood.

The focus in both “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” on a discrete segment of ‘British’ culture that exists at the far reaches of empire also complicates the spatial dimension of Buzard’s rectangle. The experience of the imperial representative takes place in a liminal space rather different from the one alluded to by Snyder in her description of the position occupied by the participant-observer moving ‘inside’ and then

‘outside’ of a foreign culture. Orwell’s narrators, we are meant to see, are forced into a stance of inwardness by the sense of imperial overreach that characterizes their circumstances. They hold positions of power, but they are plagued by moral misgivings and they are outnumbered. This combination creates the impression of their existing in a precarious in-between space, neither in the Imperial Metropolis because they hover vulnerably at its outer edges, nor quite in the Colonizable Periphery because they function as extensions of the British Empire. The narrators’ interpretive agenda in both these essays might be described, in Buzard’s terms, as an auto-ethnography of empire on the periphery.

One of the consistent themes of Orwell’s anti-imperialism, of course, is a refusal to distinguish Britain from the British empire. In his 1939 essay “Not Counting Niggers,” for instance, he writes that “the overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain, but in Asia and Africa” (*CEJL* 1: 397).<sup>14</sup> If Orwell’s conception of “Britain” is usually characterized by a wide-lensed, inclusive understanding of the nation that takes into account its colonial territories, his treatment of Anglo-Indian communities in the Burmese writings is, however, more nuanced and ambiguous. In these works the colonial outpost is sharply distinguished from the imperial metropolis. In *Burmese Days*, the sense of a monolithic empire is challenged on various fronts: Flory’s efforts to return to England, for instance, are consistently thwarted, and the European Club is treated not as an extension of Britain but as a distant outpost that has been culturally severed from the

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<sup>14</sup> In “Writers and Leviathan” (1948), as well, he makes an explicit link between imperial economics and domestic class politics, insisting that the British economy, far from being self-contained, be understood in terms of its ties to an imperial past (and present). “Ever since the nineteenth century,” he observes, “our national income, dependent partly on interest from foreign investments, and on assured markets and cheap raw materials in colonial countries, had been extremely precarious.” Many British workers, Orwell continues, “were won over to Socialism by being told that they were exploited, whereas the brute fact was that, in world terms, they were exploiters” (*CEJL* 4: 411).

motherland. Its members read days-old English newspapers and wax nostalgic about a homeland to which they will likely never return. The overall impression, in other words, is of a culture that is cut off from British culture, something remote and hybrid in character, as the designation ‘Anglo-Indian’ implies.

Certainly, the ethnographic treatment of the experience of the imperial representative in both “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” is attentive to the unique cultural position of the expatriate. And, as a number of commentators have noted, these works frame the experience of participating in the exercise of imperial power as a kind of *performance*. Carl H. Kraus writes of “A Hanging” that “the essay is dominated by a consciousness of protocol because everyone involved in the hanging (except for the prisoner and the dog) is intensely devoted to it” (110). The essay is structured in such a way, Kraus argues, as to dramatize the narrator’s recognition of the “unspeakably complex way in which legalized regulations, public rituals, and social communities conspire to suppress. . . moral consciousness” (113). Detecting a similar attention to the importance of bureaucratic routine in the essay, Peter Marks observes that, once the narrator’s epiphany has passed and the idea of a common humanity has faded, he “adopt[s] an institutional aloofness to the body” of the dead man. “[M]omentary individualization,” he writes, “[is] followed immediately by subsumption in a group” (87). This return to the group is indicated, of course, by the narrator’s willingness to participate in the ‘celebration’ that follows the hanging. Instead of obeying the logic of his epiphany and distancing himself from the structures that work to suppress his moral consciousness, he consents to join his fellow officials for a post-execution drink.

In “Shooting an Elephant,” the theme of imperialism as performance is made even more explicit. The “futility of the white man’s dominion in the East” is more or less defined by the emptiness and insincerity of his performance. Indeed, in the essay’s pivotal moment of epiphany the narrator describes himself variously as “the leading actor of the piece,” “an absurd puppet,” and “a sort of hollow posing dummy, the conventional picture of the sahib.” “A sahib has got to act like a sahib,” he concludes, trying to explain his actions (*CEJL* 1: 239). Imperialism is thus conceived as a ritual in which its members somewhat helplessly take part. Routine, repetition, protocol, convention – all combine to ensure the ongoing performance of ritual and to prevent the machinery of empire from breaking down. John McBratney names this performance “imperial theatricality” and sees it as essential to the maintenance of the illusion of racial superiority and imperial power for Anglo-Indians. Borrowing from Edward Said, McBratney suggests that the notion of the White Man as “persona” can be understood “as performance on the stage of empire.” “What often mediated between idea and reality in the British Empire,” he writes, “was some form of theatricality, the material embodiment of the imperial idea in actors who performed within an imperial *mise en scène*” (16). Daniel Bivona, in a similar vein, writes that the “rulers of the colonies must submit themselves to a rigid code of behaviour.” This code “binds whites tightly to rigid formulae that provide them with ready interpretations of Burmese behaviour while simultaneously prescribing their own behaviour” (180). The attention to “codes” and “rules” and “formulae” and the regulation of behaviour that surfaces in Orwell’s Burmese writings is suggestive of the fact that he is providing an ethnography of the expatriate population in Burma. Again, this places his Burmese material in a unique position with respect to Buzard’s model of the varieties of

ethnographic representation. Orwell's focus on the behaviour of imperial representatives in a circumscribed imperial *mise en scène* sets his Burmese writings apart from the categories that Buzard identifies as potential perspectives of ethnographic observation.

Nonetheless, to the extent that these essays foreground a set of codes and rules that signal a need within Anglo-Indian society to keep up appearances for the smooth operation of empire, they adhere to a method of cultural observation that has some affinity with the "functionalist" approach made popular by Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.<sup>15</sup> Rae explains that the ultimate objective of "functionalist ethnography" is to detail the "interrelated 'functions' performed within a society conceived as a biological organism." Customs, beliefs, and even material objects, in this model, are understood as being both "useful and necessary" in some way to the ongoing operation of a society (*Blackwell Companion* 94). The Anglo-Indian performance of the role of sahib thus served the dual function of impressing upon 'natives' a sense of solidarity on the part of their imperial rulers and of convincing the rulers themselves that this impression was justified. Orwell, as McBratney observes, was "acutely aware of [this] double audience of imperial theatricality," and his Burmese writings are attentive to the ways that "the British perform [the] same absurd dance for their own instruction" (29). Orwell's approach to representing the experience of being an imperial policeman thus demonstrates an adherence to the notion that custom, however absurd-seeming, can be explained by its function in a larger context. In this respect, the essays fit neatly into the paradigm of ethnographic modernism outlined by Snyder.

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<sup>15</sup> See George W. Stocking Jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology: 1888-1951* (1995), esp. Ch. 6, "From Fieldwork to Functionalism: Malinowski and the Emergence of British Social Anthropology," 233-97.

The idea that imperialism engenders a kind of performance has further implications with respect to the ‘insider’/ ‘outsider’ tension that underlies Orwell’s engagement with ethnographic representation. “Imperial theatricality” indirectly informs the *textual* dimension of ethnographic representation in the sense that the writing of culture, to use Clifford’s phrasing, constitutes a kind of performance in and of itself in which the raw materials of participant observation are ‘dressed up’ to convey wisdom, reflection, or expertise. In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, an anthology devoted to analyses that emphasize the textual character of ethnography, Clifford asserts that “[l]iterary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted ‘observations’, to the completed book, to the ways these configurations ‘make sense’ in determined acts of reading” (*Writing Culture* 4).<sup>16</sup> Buzard takes this analysis a step further, insisting on a still more radical level of textuality: “*Ethnography* acquires its modern, restrictive significance when it becomes definable, for all practical purposes, as the discourse in which “a culture” and a Participant Observer reciprocally define one another. A *culture* amounts to ‘that which it takes a Participant Observer to find’” (9). The process of turning the raw experience of performing the ritual of empire into a written document that exhibits the features of a literary performance is very much in evidence in Orwell’s two Burmese essays, where the sense of a split in the narrative, between an imperial agent who fulfils his duty and a self-

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<sup>16</sup> In his analysis of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Stocking similarly insists on the distinctly literary elements that infused Malinowski’s influential work. “We may assume from his epigrammatic proclamation,” Stocking writes, “an awareness that the ethnographer was ultimately a literary artificer, [but] we are left to our own literary critical devices to explicate the method of his artifice” (105). Stocking notes that Malinowski is reported to have proclaimed as his “ultimate anthropological ambition: ‘[W.H.R.] Rivers is the Rider Haggard of anthropology; I shall be the Conrad’” (104). Clifford’s “On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski” in *The Predicament of Culture* discusses the influence of *Heart of Darkness* on *Argonauts* and concludes that Malinowski fails to incorporate the full measure of Conradian irony into his ethnography of the Trobriand Islanders.

reflexive narrator who rejects the authority of that duty, reflects both the performative dimension that Buzard sees as being inherent to ethnographic representation and the sense of a “fieldworker-theorist” split that Clifford identifies as the essential components of the participant observer.

Commenting on this split in “Shooting an Elephant,” Nils Clausson observes that, “through a series of theatre metaphors, Orwell portrays his former self (Orwell the naive young policeman in Burma) as an actor playing a role in a script already written, and his present self as a writer taking pleasure in his performance as a writer (and expecting the reader to do so as well)” (311). Orwell, in fact, is quite clear about the distance between the two perspectives in operation in the essay. The young policeman, we are told, experiences the performance of imperial ritual as something that is “perplexing and upsetting”; he is “young and ill-educated” and his absolute immersion into the maintenance of empire ensures that he can “get nothing into perspective” (*CEJL* 1: 236). His mature reflections on the experience, in contrast, are characterized by a sense of knowingness and an ironic awareness of the ‘correctness’ of his actions. “Among the Europeans opinion was divided,” he announces near the end of the essay. “The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie” (*CEJL* 1: 242). With his commentary issuing from an interpretive distance, the narrator exhibits here the confidence to condemn his own actions through a more sweeping condemnation of empire. The assessments of both the older and younger men, we are meant to see, reflect only varying degrees of wrongness; their ‘European’ perspectives, however divergent, agree on the basic premise of imperial domination. The narrator,

having removed himself sufficiently from the event to question the moral integrity of his actions, ironically emphasizes their legality. Indeed, twice in the final paragraph of the essay he points out that he had been “legally in the right” to kill the elephant (*CEJL* 1: 242). However, in light of his explanation of the “real motives” for killing the elephant, and indeed for imperialism itself, the law that justifies his actions must appear as part of the elaborate structure of the “white man’s dominion in the East,” an essentially “hollow” institution whose primary purpose is to “impress the ‘natives’” (*CEJL* 1: 239).

The dialectic of experience and interpretation that defines the ethnographic encounter surfaces in “A Hanging” as well, where the contrast between the confused young man learning through experience to detest his role in colonial oppression and the mature writer settled in his political opposition underlies the narrative structure of the essay. Written in 1931, five years before “Shooting an Elephant,” the critique of empire in “A Hanging” is comparatively muted, and indeed the essay’s mature narrator appears less certain of his political position. Moreover, the essay’s epiphany is oriented not towards a recognition of the “hollowness” of empire, as it is in “Shooting an Elephant,” but rather towards a more universal, and politically less dangerous, opposition to capital punishment. The young policeman’s great moment of illumination is not in any obvious way connected to a recognition of the “futility of the white man’s dominion in the East” but is concerned rather with “the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide” (*CEJL* 1: 45). That said, a strong anti-imperialist subtext runs through the essay. Most obviously, the hanged man is not British; he is “a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man,” we are told, “with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes” (*CEJL* 1: 44). Likewise, the other condemned prisoners in the jail are described as “brown silent men. . .



squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them” (*CEJL* 1: 44).<sup>17</sup> The hanging that takes place in the essay, in other words, is firmly situated within a context of imperial domination, and the “unspeakable wrongness” of the event unfolds against that background.

More subtly, at the level of narrative, there are clues to suggest that a split reminiscent of the fieldworker-theorist division functions in “A Hanging” as a way of shedding light on the spurious nature of imperial authority. As in “Shooting an Elephant,” the narrator’s participation in the ritual of empire is framed from distinct points of view. In the later essay, we are given both an immediate perspective of his experiences as a policeman – with an emphasis on his emotional responses and his inability to comprehend the importance of the events described – and a more reflective account that places his experiences in a broader historical-political context. In “A Hanging,” the contrast between immediacy and reflection emerges mainly through the essay’s ambivalent treatment of institutional affiliation. The young policeman, as numerous commentators have observed, is very much a part of the machinery of empire. More than in “Shooting an Elephant,” the role that he must play in the performance of empire is not something that is revealed over the course of the events described in the narrative but rather is firmly established at the outset. As Kerr points out, he is “a member of the party – warders, the superintendent of the prison, ‘magistrates and the like’ – who escort the condemned man to the scaffold” (“Orwell, *Animals, and the East*” 240-1). As such, his perception of the event at the centre of the essay is filtered through his affiliation with the hierarchical power structure that oversees capital justice and carries it out with confident

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<sup>17</sup> These descriptions anticipate Orwell’s observation in “Marrakech” that “colonial empires are founded” on the notion that their subject peoples are perceived not so much as human beings but as “undifferentiated brown stuff” (*CEJL* 1: 388).

authority. The descriptions of the procession leading to the gallows leave a strong impression of the inexorable character of imperial justice by emphasizing the degree to which all involved have acquiesced in taking part in a brutal ritual:

Six tall Indian warders were guarding [the prisoner] and getting him ready for the gallows. Two of them stood by with rifles and fixed bayonets, while the others handcuffed him, passed a chain through his handcuffs and fixed it to their belts, and lashed his arms tight to his sides. They crowded very close about him, with their hands always on him in a careful caressing grip, as though all the while feeling him to make sure he was there. It was like men handling a fish which is still alive and may jump back into the water. But he stood quite unresisting, yielding his arms limply to the ropes, as though he hardly noticed what was happening.

*(CEJL 1: 44)*

This image of a Hindu prisoner surrounded by Indian warders who carry arms supplied to them by their European rulers evokes a sense of the insidiousness of imperial power. Colonial subjects are reduced to taking part in the implementation of imperial justice, despite the fact that imperial justice, at its root, is steered toward fortifying imperial power. The irony of the Indian warders' involvement in the ritual is made explicit by the symbolism of their being literally chained to the prisoner whom they lead to the gallows. The young policeman, for the moment, appears as a bystander, but an impression of his affiliation soon enters the narrative when it surfaces that he is not merely observing the scene but actually walking among those who lead the prisoner to his death.

We set out for the gallows. Two warders marched on either side of the prisoner, with their rifles at the slope; two others marched close against him, gripping him by arm and shoulder, as though at once pushing and supporting him. The rest of us, magistrates and the like, followed behind.

(*CEJL* 1: 44)

Noting the narrator's frequent use of the first-person plural, Klaus observes that the depth of the young policeman's participation in the ritual of the execution is to a significant extent a measure of the degree to which he identifies with his fellows members of the procession. According to Klaus, Orwell's decision to use the first-person plural *we* to describe most of the action in the essay demonstrates that he was "intent on showing his reactions [to the events recorded in the narrative] to have been virtually identical to those of the other observers, despite the moral insight that distinguishes him from them" (106). That insight – the recognition of the "wrongness" of the execution – corresponds with a temporary shift in the narrative to the first-person singular *I*, a move that indicates the narrator's sense of standing momentarily apart from the other members of the party. The shifting pronoun technique in the essay thus mirrors the movement that theoretically underpins the very idea of participant observation. The narrator employs the pronoun *we* to signal his *participation* in a ritual of imperial justice (and to suggest the complicity that is required to carry out such justice); and he turns to the pronoun *I* to indicate an interpretive distance, a stance of *observation*.

Klaus's analysis of the fluctuating narration in "A Hanging" is insightful, but his casual alignment of Orwell with the essay's mature narrator is problematic. Conflating the two figures is a tempting interpretive move, of course, because the mature narrator

undeniably shares Orwell's sensibilities – at least in terms of his alertness to the injustices of imperial occupation (and indeed to his own complicity) – more than does the narrator's younger self, who more or less unselfconsciously participates in the symbolic ritual of imperial domination at the centre of the essay. The essay's closing lines make clear, however, that the young policeman has ultimately failed to extract himself from the routinization of behavior that he had momentarily looked beyond. "We all began laughing again," he declares. "At that moment Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably" (*CEJL* 1: 48). In the sense that the essay tracks the brutal treatment and dehumanization of non-Europeans in the imperial sphere, the suggestion in these closing lines of a cross-racial unity is clearly ironic. Indeed, the macabre moment in which the members of the execution party share a drink while "the dead man [is] a hundred yards away" functions as a hollow parody of the narrator's earlier epiphany. The shifting of perspective that can be observed in the essay, and especially the decision to not give the mature narrator the final word, reveals the extent to which a crucial distance lies between Orwell and the mature narrator. The essay does not merely chronicle the experiences of a participant-observer; it dramatizes the phenomenon of participant observation, stands at one remove from its back-and-forth movement, and so subjects the ethnographic perspective to scrutiny.

To speak of "Orwell" in reference to "A Hanging" is, of course, problematic in another sense: the essay was written in 1931, before Eric Blair adopted the pseudonym George Orwell. This issue of authorship, which has the initial appearance of a minor problem of chronology, in fact suggests a larger interpretive problem that applies not only

to Klaus's alignment of author and mature narrator in "A Hanging" but to the many interpretations of Orwell's work that conflate the real historical figure Eric Blair (who adopted the pseudonym "George Orwell") and the "Orwell" persona that is projected in his work in ever-evolving manifestations. On a superficial level, the gesture of aligning the man and his creation appears justified. In his non-fictional work, especially but not exclusively, Orwell's life provides the raw material for his narratives, and his written creations in turn provide a vivid portrait of his life. Aside from the fact that he may have fabricated or embellished certain details of his life for literary ends,<sup>18</sup> however, the failure to adequately distinguish the real historical figure from the image of himself that is projected in his written work results in an over-simplification of his approach to narrative. The complex dynamics of representation that characterize so much of Orwell's work are partially obscured when the texts that he creates are denied their autonomous status.

One way of attending to the narratological complexity of Orwell's work without dismissing entirely the role that his biography plays in it is to turn to Wolf Schmid's notion of the "abstract author." In Schmid's view, "the author is expressed through symptoms, indexical signs. The result of this semiotic act is, however, not the concrete author [that is, the "real historical figure, the creator of the work" (36)], but rather the image of the creator as s/he shows himself in his or her creative acts" (37).<sup>19</sup> This

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<sup>18</sup> In response to Bernard Crick's question about the historical accuracy of "Shooting an Elephant," Sonia Orwell, the author's widow, offered this reply: "Of course he shot a fucking elephant! He said he did. Why do you always doubt his fucking word!" (qtd. in Barnes).

<sup>19</sup> Schmid's concept has an obvious forebear in Wayne Booth's "implied author," but it differs in ways that make it appropriate to a reading of Orwell. While Schmid adheres to Booth's notion that "the author's voice is never really silenced" (60), he detects a fluidness in the projection of the "abstract author" that (in the analysis here) makes it more accommodating to an author whose embrace of a pseudonym highlights the instability of the author category. Kindt and Müller contend that while Schmid "is perfectly ready to acknowledge [the debt to Booth] openly on a whole range of occasions, it is somewhat curious that he

formulation goes some way towards explaining the nature of the relationship that the literary persona ‘Orwell’ has with the texts themselves. The “abstract author” concept also helps to make some sense of the idea that the multiple perspectives in Orwell’s narratives are presided over by some “governing consciousness,” to use Willem Weststeijn’s phrase (quoted in Schmid 45), that is both distinct from and a creation of the historical figure Eric Blair. Defending the practical value of the concept of the “abstract author” to the interpretation of literary texts, Schmid writes:

The existence of the abstract author, who is not part of the represented world but nonetheless part of the work, puts the narrator, who often appears as master of the situation and seems to have control over the semantic order of the work, in proper perspective. The presence of the abstract author in a model of communication highlights the fact that narrators, their texts, and the meanings expressed in them are all represented. (50)

This description nicely contextualizes the dramatization of participant-observation that is found in “A Hanging” and indeed provides some theoretical foundation for the manipulation of multiple perspectives that appears in so much of Orwell’s work. So, while it is tempting to link the mature narrator of “A Hanging” directly to Orwell (as Klaus does), it should be kept in mind at all times that the narrative is represented and, by

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never attempts to provide ... reasons for why Booth’s concept should be re-named in the way he suggests” (134). This criticism overlooks, among other things, the ethical emphasis in Booth’s analysis (and the corresponding appropriateness of the term “implied”), as well as the move away from an ethical reading in Schmid’s reworking of the concept. Elsewhere, Kindt and Muller observe that “Schmid bases his approach on the idea that works of narrative literature have a status that is at once both autonomous and intentional” (131). This conclusion goes some way in explaining Schmid’s decision not to embrace the term “implied author” because the notion that an author is “implied” places the emphasis more squarely on the intentional dimension of the text.

extension, that the mature narrator is a represented entity even when he appears to share much in common with the real historical figure Eric Blair, whom he ostensibly represents.

In any case, while both “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” are structured in such a way that the respective epiphanies of their young narrators appear as thematic centrepieces, in both essays the moment of illumination during which an injustice is perceived for the first time in all its clarity has no real impact on the eventual outcome of events. The young policeman of “A Hanging” does not step forward to protest the wrongful hanging of the Hindu prisoner; nor does the narrator of “Shooting an Elephant” put down his rifle and disappoint the crowd. In terms of how these essays inform an *ethnographic* understanding of Anglo-Indian culture, it is this failure to act on the wisdom of recognition that stands as the most incisive observation. Noting the characterization of the young policeman in “Shooting an Elephant” as an “uneasy, doubt-ridden, yet dutiful bureaucrat,” Guha observes that “[t]he moral and political doubts the subdivisional police chief has about [colonial rule] are all integral to and indeed consistent with the normalcy of this world” (490). Similarly, the discomfort that is signalled by the uneasy laughter at the end of “A Hanging” is meant to convey a kind of inverted ‘normalcy’ in which moral insight is routinely overcome by gallows humour. “Everyone was laughing,” the narrator emphasizes, as though to suggest that each man in the party had recognized the “unspeakable wrongness” of the occasion and repressed the knowledge as a matter of cultural protocol.

The failure to maintain a stance of detachment and observation while participating in the rituals of empire may constitute the most penetrating insight that emerges from

these essays. In their capacity as autoethnographic representations of imperial culture on the periphery, they foreground the extent to which the cultural experience of “imperial theatricality” engenders a sense of alienation in its performers, despite the fact that the performance itself is very much a collective enterprise. For Orwell, of course, the performance of empire evolves ultimately into a literary performance. In the sense that both essays demonstrate the difficulty of *acting* on a recognition of the injustices of empire, they offer a pointed explanation of what Orwell means by being “a part of imperialism.” To the extent that “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” dramatize a dialectic of participation and complicity, they show that to be “a part of” empire means both to take part in its rituals and to play a part in perpetuating them.

### *Burmese Days*

In *Burmese Days*, a challenge to the ethnographic authority of a participant-observer of a *foreign* culture takes the form of a multi-layered interrogation of the limitations of perspective that are imposed upon the European observer by his complicity with imperial domination. As in “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant,” the ethnographic dimension of *Burmese Days* may be partially obscured by the fact that its would-be participant observer figure offers more ‘ethnographic’ insight into the Anglo-Indian community than into its native Burmese population. More than the essays, however, *Burmese Days* explores the raw encounter between the imperial representative and a foreign culture. Although the novel is taken up largely with an examination of the Anglo-Indian culture centred in the European Club in Kyauktada, and as such displays an *auto-ethnographic* agenda, it departs from the essays in the sense that ‘native’ culture figures more



prominently and is treated with greater nuance. In *Burmese Days*, the ethnographic encounter with a foreign culture is dramatized on multiple levels, and is at the same time tied in more complex ways to a critique of empire.

For some readers, the Anglo-Indian focus of the timber merchant protagonist John Flory is emblematic of a more insidious Eurocentrism in the novel. Praseeda Gopinath, for instance, argues that Flory's "lack of concern for colonial victims" is mirrored in the narrative's casual treatment of his mistress Ma Hla May's demise, and that Flory's seeming concern about the exploitation of Burma is "inwardly directed: it is turned towards the ensuing corruption of disinterestedness inherent to the English character rather than the victimization of the Burmese people" (216). Douglas Kerr, in a similar vein, notes that the novel "rarely enters the private life or the consciousness of the local people." "[V]irtually all the novel's action," he writes, "is focused through [Flory's] European consciousness" (151). Alok Rai, challenging the extent to which *Burmese Days* departs from the conventions of colonial writing, complains that, "although the overtly stated sympathies are clearly anti-imperialist, the actual references to Burmese nationalism, which constitutes the political background, are consistently contemptuous and belittling, and the 'natives' are caricatures drawn from the traditional mode of colonial fiction" (33). Even the friendship between Flory and Dr. Veraswami, Rai insists, though "anti-conventional," betrays a condescending Eurocentrism because Orwell "fail[s] to make a man of the good doctor" (35). "Although the fact of the relationship subverts the tradition," Rai writes, "Dr Veraswamy [sic] keeps slipping helplessly into the stereotype of the 'comic native', with his convoluted English and his ingratiating

mannerisms – a stereotype which derives precisely from the tradition that the author is seeking to subvert” (35).

While it is not necessary to dismiss these arguments entirely, I would suggest that at least some of what appears as an over-determined Eurocentrism in the novel may be read as a demonstration of inadequate cultural representation. The sheer *obviousness* of some of the novel’s Eurocentrism would be out of step with its otherwise sophisticated handling of the ethnographic encounter were it not for the fact that, as displays of limited perspective, these instances of Eurocentrism perfectly exemplify the insider/outsider theme so central to the book. My purpose here is not to deny the existence of traces of Eurocentrism in Orwell; rather, I argue, his awareness of his own prejudices influences his approach to writing about how other cultures are represented. Recognizing that his perspective of Burmese culture was determined (and limited) by his position as an imperial representative, he makes the issue of limited perspective a central theme in his writings about Burma. Much as, in “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant,” the dramatizations of the narrators’ failures to act on their respective epiphanies hint at a certain authorial distance, so in *Burmese Days* the introduction into the narrative of the very notion of Eurocentrism suggests an awareness of the phenomenon on the author’s part that should influence an interpretation of how it unfolds in the novel.

It is significant, then, that perhaps the most compelling of the charges of Eurocentrism cited above, Gopinath’s observation that Ma Hla May’s tragic demise barely registers on a narrative level, refers to an event near the end of the novel, after the subtleties of the book’s treatment of the colonizer/colonized relationship have been well established. The evidence of Eurocentrism in this case is more damning because it is

more subtle; it refers not to what is distorted by a limited perspective but to what is missed altogether. Ma Hla May is clearly a victim of empire, and yet despite the novel's anti-imperialist rhetoric, her tragedy goes unsung. In contrast, Rai's complaint that Veraswami is a caricature stems primarily from the very blatant caricatural elements of the early characterization of the doctor. It is one of the instances in the novel in which an *obvious* Eurocentrism is employed to make a point. Following immediately upon the chapter that introduces the degenerate Anglo-Indian crew of the European Club in the most parodic of terms, the introduction of the obsequious, empire-loving Veraswami (who sees the British as "torchbearers upon the path of progress" [42]) can *only* be understood as caricature.

In fact, Orwell signals a nuanced approach to the issue of cultural stereotype even earlier in the novel with the characterization of the magistrate U Po Kyin. The decision to open an anti-imperialist novel with a portrait of a Burmese villain is enough to give pause, as are some of the descriptions of the 'Oriental' mind at work. We are informed in the opening chapter, for instance, that U Po Kyin's "brain, though cunning, was quite barbaric, and it never worked except for some definite end; mere meditation was beyond him" (8). The chapter, meanwhile, is comprised almost entirely of passages that convey his vanity, dishonesty, and scheming nature. At the same time, there is reason to suspect that this characterization is meant to be understood in the context of a commentary on the limitations of cross-cultural perspective. U Po Kyin's own assessments of the European character are instructive in this regard. In conversation with his clerk accomplice Ba Sein, he makes clear his distrust of Europeans in the most generalizing terms: "No European cares anything about proofs. When a man has a black face, suspicion *is* proof"; "How

little you understand the European mind, Ko Ba Sein. . . No European has faith in a man with a black face”; “Flory will desert his friend quickly enough when the trouble begins. These people have no feeling of loyalty towards a native” (12). U Po Kyin exhibits here an essentializing tendency that mirrors his own stereotypical characterization as a scheming Oriental. That his predictions about European behaviour turn out to be accurate is one of the book’s more subtle ironies because his paranoid distrust of Europeans effectively draws attention to the narrowed perspective that characterizes the oriental mind as “cunning” and “barbaric.”

A challenge to the notion of ethnographic authority thus surfaces early on in the novel in this interplay of mutually reductive cross-cultural representation. The reciprocal exchange of recognizably limited perspectives signals the novel’s attention to the distance that lies between the two cultural groups: the colonized Burmese and their Anglo-Indian rulers. Moreover, the difficulty of representing the Other is framed here not simply as a problem of difference but as a problem of empire. The two cultural groups exhibit crucial differences from one another, yes, but more importantly they occupy distinct positions within an imbalanced power structure. The narrator’s descriptions of U Po Kyin’s recollections of childhood foreground this imbalance:

U Po Kyin’s earliest memory, back in the ’eighties, was of standing, a naked pot-bellied child, watching the British troops march victorious into Mandalay. He remembered the terror he had felt of those columns of great beef-fed men, red-faced and red-coated; and the long rifles over their shoulders, and the heavy, rhythmic tramp of their boots. He had taken to his heels after watching them for a few minutes. In his childish way he had

grasped that his own people were no match for this race of giants. To fight on the side of the British, to become a parasite upon them, had been his ruling ambition, even as a child. (5-6)

That this experience is selected as U Po Kyin's "earliest memory" is significant, for the narrative subtly suggests that he remains frozen in the stance of a child awed before the power of empire. His "ruling ambition," in any case, is formed in this context and does not evolve. When the narrator later offers commentary on U Po Kyin's interior monologue, noting how "all these thoughts flowed through U Po Kyin's mind swiftly and for the most part in pictures," there is a distinct echo of the child first confronted with empire whose memories are formed by vivid pictures – of "beef-fed men," "red coats," "long rifles," and "boots." The narrative, in this respect, performs the unusual function of explaining its own inadequacies by drawing attention to the structural (and political) foundations of its limited perspective. As a representative of empire, the narrator can only see Burmese culture through the lens of imperial domination.<sup>20</sup>

A reference to the representation of the native population in terms of the narrator's perspective makes clear that we have moved beyond seeing Flory as the sole participant observer figure in the novel, though he is the only "amateur ethnographer" in the sense meant by Snyder. In fact, the fullness of Orwell's engagement with the issue of ethnographic representation in *Burmese Days* only becomes clear when the interplay between author, narrator, and protagonist is considered in some depth.<sup>21</sup> The novel has

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<sup>20</sup> On this point it is worth noting, however, that Orwell makes clear in the opening chapter of the novel that the narrator is fluent in Burmese. When U Po Kyin momentarily attempts an impression of Kyauktada's Deputy Commissioner, Mr. MacGregor, we are informed that he "broke into English – "eet ees making perceptible progress"" (5).

<sup>21</sup> Here, again, when I refer to the "author" I am using it in the sense of "abstract author" as outlined by Wolf Schmid. To reiterate Schmid's formulation: the abstract author is "the correlate of all indexical signs

proved interpretively difficult in this respect, however, and a confusion between these distinct entities has persisted. Lynette Hunter, whose reading of *Burmese Days* is attentive to these distinctions, nonetheless observes of the novel that it is “all too easy to conflate narrator and character” (27). More commonly, the thoughts and views of both protagonist and narrator are aligned with those of the author. In part this has to do with the general sense of an autobiographical tendency in Orwell’s work, and indeed, to an undeniable extent, the views of his characters and narrators *do* correspond with his own stated positions.<sup>22</sup> But the point at which a correspondence ends and ironic distance begins is not easily discerned, and this impression of authorial cosiness in *Burmese Days* has for some proved troubling. David Seed, for instance, complains of Orwell’s “over-involvement with his protagonist” and believes that the proximity has a vitiating effect on his critique of empire (278). Rai is similarly critical of the way that “the narrative is interlarded with anti-imperialist diatribes in which the persona of the fictional Flory is barely maintained” (33). These readings have in common the general sense of an absence of control in Orwell with respect to his fictionalization of life experience.

Not all readers of *Burmese Days* have elected to conflate Orwell, Flory, and the narrator, though, and within the body of scholarship that observes distinctions between these figures interpretation can vary wildly. Responding to the critical tendency to trace elements of racial stereotyping in the novel back to Orwell, for instance, Anthony Stewart rejects the easy alignment of Orwell and narrator. “Is the racial attitude ‘obviously’ . . . that of Orwell?” he asks. “It seems more likely that the novel expresses the representative attitudes of a contemporaneous narrator of an anti-imperialist novel set in an outpost of

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in a text that point to the author. These signs delineate both an ideological position and an esthetic conception” (48).

<sup>22</sup> I examine the complex position that autobiography occupies in Orwell’s work in Chapter 4.

the empire” (146).<sup>23</sup> In subtle contrast, Michael Levenson casts the narrator in a less benighted role: “As the politically sceptical Flory succumbs to the infatuation of love,” he writes, “it is the voice of the narrator that alone remains free of illusion” (62). In both these interpretations the narrator’s level of awareness is measured against a specific theme in the novel: in Stewart’s argument, a progressive attitude towards race; in Levenson’s, an adherence to the “realist demand. . .for a life without illusion” (62). The divergence of the interpretations demonstrates the extent to which the precise relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist is a shifting one that depends very much on context.

With respect to the theme of ethnographic representation in the novel, the relationship between Orwell, his narrator, and Flory might be usefully explored by examining the varying levels of their immersion into Burmese culture. As the narrator’s approach to race can be measured on a scale of progressiveness, or his aversion to illusion gauged as an adherence to realism, so the positions of author, narrator, and protagonist might be considered in terms of how deeply they have managed to get ‘inside’ of Burmese culture. In his defence of a so-called ‘ethnographic’ reading of works of literature – *i.e.* in answer to the charge that *most* novelistic endeavours are inherently ethnographic – Buzard proposes that the term *ethnography* be used in a “stricter sense” – “in the twentieth-century sense of a study of a people’s way of life centering on the method of ‘immersion’ in extensive fieldwork and raising the issue of how, and how far, the outsider can become a kind of honorary insider in other cultures” (*Disorienting Fictions* 8-9). In the sense that cultural perspective in *Burmese Days* is shaped largely by

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<sup>23</sup> This is in reply to Guha’s assertion that Orwell “obviously perceived. . .[a] cultural and moral inferiority” in the Burmese (“Not at Home in Empire” 489).

degrees of immersion, it proves a fruitful way of interrogating the novel's approach to ethnographic representation.

To better illustrate what I mean by measuring the positions of author, narrator, and protagonist on a scale of cultural immersion, I turn to a section of the novel that takes up the issue directly. Chapter XI tracks the disastrous turn of events in which Flory escorts Elizabeth Lackersteen to the Kyauktada bazaar thinking that "it would amuse her to see it" (125). The chapter is especially relevant in that it provides a range of European perspectives of native culture – Flory's, Elizabeth's, the narrator's – each of whose efforts at representing Burmese culture constitutes a variety of inadequate ethnography. Considering these figures along a continuum of "insideness" helps to illuminate the precise nature of Orwell's critique of ethnographic authority.

Orwell signals the chapter's attention to the nuances of the European perspective by setting up an early contrast between Flory's and Elizabeth's interest in local culture. The dialogue, which foregrounds Flory's curiosity and his bewildering assumption that Elizabeth shares it, is set in ironic contrast to her responses, which are revealed in free indirect speech. When Flory misguidedly entreats her to enter the crowded bazaar, for instance – "Oh, it's all right, they'll make way for us. It'll interest you" (126) – we learn that "Elizabeth followed him doubtfully and even unwillingly," and that she is generally annoyed by his interest in Burmese culture: "Why was it that he always brought her to these places? Why was he forever dragging her in among the 'natives', trying to get her to take an interest in them and watch their filthy, disgusting habits? It was wrong somehow" (126). Inside the bazaar, we learn, "Elizabeth had recoiled from the stench and din, but [Flory] did not notice it, and led her deeper into the crowd" (127). Flory remains



oblivious to Elizabeth's racially-motivated aversion until it finally spills over in her hasty exit from the home of the Chinese grocer Li Yeik after a naked child there, spooked by the presence of white faces, urinates on the floor. "What absolutely *disgusting* people!" Elizabeth exclaims to Flory, after he has followed her outside (132). Flory responds to her disgust with what might be described as a classic cultural relativist position: "But honestly," he says, "you oughtn't to mind that sort of thing. Not in this country. These people's whole outlook is so different from ours. One has to adjust oneself. Suppose, for instance, you were back in the Middle Ages —" (133).<sup>24</sup> Earlier, in fact, Flory had spelled out his cultural relativism in more purely aesthetic terms in response to Elizabeth's revulsion of the artificially deformed feet of the Chinese women at Li Yeik's: "They're so horrible I can hardly look at them," she complains. "These people must be absolute savages" (129). To which Flory replies:

'Oh no! They're highly civilised; more civilised than we are, in my opinion. Beauty's all a matter of taste. There are a people in this country called the Palaungs who admire long necks in women. The girls wear broad brass rings to stretch their necks, and they put on more and more of them until in the end they have necks like giraffes. It's no queerer than bustles or crinolines.' (129-30)

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<sup>24</sup> Flory's reference here to the Middle Ages, coming as it does in the context of an espousal of cultural relativism, indicates an adherence to contradictory models of understanding foreign cultures. As Ronald Hendel notes, "An important strand of anthropological modernism is the turning away from evolutionary theories of human culture, which had, in good Victorian fashion, produced triumphal narratives of human ascent from primitive superstition to modern Western science" (3). In suggesting that the behaviour of Li Yeik and his family could be better understood by turning to an earlier point in civilization, while at the same time embracing the more progressive model of cultural relativism, Flory exemplifies a transition point for the discipline of anthropology. In the same breath, he characterizes non-European behaviour as a sign of *difference* and *backwardness*.

Against the philistinism of Elizabeth's easy adoption of the memsahib pose, Flory's alertness to cultural difference appears as a devastating critique. Not only does he not automatically judge difference in negative terms, he exercises a degree of interpretive imagination in finding an analogy in Western culture for the rituals that Elizabeth finds repulsive. In this respect, Flory's comments reflect an adherence to modernist anthropological practice. As Snyder observes, "a common justification for the ethnographic enterprise was the idea that studying the other could freshly illuminate one's own culture – an anthropological version of the modernist dictum 'make it new'." In Malinowski's view, Snyder explains, "the principal justification for anthropological fieldwork is that by studying other cultures, 'we shall have some light shed on our own'" (5). Flory thus makes a crucial theoretical move in noting the similarity between the practice of Burmese women who subject themselves to discomfort for purely aesthetic-cultural reasons and the rather odd European habit of using crinolines to maintain the bounce of a skirt.

And yet, despite this sharp contrast between Flory and Elizabeth in their approaches to native culture, it would be a mistake to interpret Flory's curiosity, or even his command of the language of cultural relativism, as evidence that Orwell is here casting him as an infallibly reliable ethnographer. In fact, despite his alertness to the nuances of local culture (he is privy to the knowledge, for instance, that the Chinese are "a favoured race" in Burma [130]), Flory reverts back to the very limiting perspective of the Pukka Sahib when he is confronted with crisis. Faced with the choice, after leaving Li Yeik's, of maintaining a reasoned cultural relativist stance or appeasing Elizabeth Lackersteen's racialized aversion to culturally unfamiliar ritual, he instinctively embraces

a parochial Eurocentrism and thus falls back unconsciously into a “pose” that effectively turns its back on the nuances of culture. “It’s getting beastly hot, isn’t it?” he remarks to Elizabeth to break the uncomfortable silence that has descended upon them in the wake of the incident at Li Yeik’s (133). This “silly, banal remark” about the weather constitutes a betrayal of sorts on Flory’s part and demonstrates how the moment of crisis is essentially a test of loyalty (133). He chooses to abandon the rigour of ethnography that he has displayed throughout the chapter so that he might rekindle his association with a fellow European.

Central to Orwell’s critique here is the unconsciousness of Flory’s about-face. Through free indirect speech we learn that Flory understands his desire to appease Elizabeth as an issue of “love,” but the language of uncertainty in the passage implies an absence of self-knowledge on his part. “*He did not realise,*” we are told, “that this constant striving to interest [Elizabeth] in Oriental things struck her only as perverse, ungentlemanly, a deliberate seeking after the squalid and the ‘beastly’. *He had not grasped* even now with what eyes she saw the ‘natives’” (133, my emphasis). These phrases indicating Flory’s lack of perception, particularly the reference to his failure to “grasp” Elizabeth’s point of view, serve as reminders that his own motives remain a mystery to him: neither does he grasp that while he shares none of Elizabeth’s virulent hatred for Burmese culture, he nonetheless shares her point of view in a fundamental way. The “eyes” with which she sees the natives are “Western eyes,” in Conrad’s term; and despite Flory’s fifteen years in Burma, he remains a part of an imperial power structure that fatally determines (and limits) his perspective. Hence his willingness to re-

instate the “reassuring atmosphere of Club-chatter” when the solidarity with a fellow imperial representative is threatened (133).

Flory’s banal reference to the hot weather is significant also in the way that it serves as a subtle reminder of the narrator’s Eurocentrism, which in turn provokes further scrutiny of how the spectacle of the bazaar is represented. Especially in the early chapters of the novel, the frequent references to the inhospitableness of the Burmese climate<sup>25</sup> signal the narrator’s affiliation with the Anglo-Indian community in Kyauktada. His references to the sun and the heat are invariably framed in terms of their oppressive, even antagonistic, qualities, the effect of which is to leave an impression of Asia as a hostile land:

They went out into the glaring white sunlight. The heat rolled from the earth like the breath of an oven. The flowers, oppressive to the eyes, blazed with not a petal stirring, in a debauch of sun. The glare sent a weariness through one’s bones. There was something horrible in it – horrible to think of that blue, blinding sky, stretching on and on over Burma and India, over Siam, Cambodia, China, cloudless and interminable. (35)

This is Orwell at his most Conradian, in terms of the rather ponderous prose style and more pointedly in terms of the strategy of using a narrator who resembles the author in so many ways but who simultaneously harbours prejudices over which the author has control. The narrator’s strong aversion to the Burmese climate operates in the most

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<sup>25</sup> The narrator’s remarks on the food in Burma also betray a distinct Anglo-Indian bias: “All European food in Burma,” he declares at one point, “is more or less disgusting – the bread is spongy stuff leavened with palm-toddy and tasting like a penny bun gone wrong, the butter comes out of a tin, and so does the milk, unless it is the grey watery catlap of the dudh-wallah” (52).

superficial sense as an objective correlative to the anti-imperialist sentiment that runs through the novel and that unquestionably reflects Orwell's own views: the sun and the heat are inhospitable precisely because the British do not *belong* there; and the unwelcoming climate mirrors the feelings of the Burmese towards their imperial rulers. Paradoxically, though, the narrator's Eurocentrism in this case is determined by the inferior degree of his cultural immersion compared to Flory. Analysing Orwell's use of the pronoun 'one' in an earlier example of the narrator's commentary on the Burmese climate ("It was nearly nine o'clock and the sun was fiercer every minute. The heat throbbed down on one's head with a steady, rhythmic thumping, like blows from an enormous bolster" [18]), Saunders argues that "the distinct impression given is that this is not Flory's head being baked, but the narrator's" (49). "The narrator occupies the same space as the protagonist," she continues, but in those moments when "one" is adopted, a perspectival space opens up and the narrator moves away from Flory in terms of what he seems to experience or, more precisely, how he responds to that experience (49). This opening of distance between Flory and the narrator makes perfect sense in the context of the negative references to the climate, and indeed, far from negating an impression of the narrator's Eurocentrism, serves instead to make clear that he and Flory occupy different levels of immersion into Burmese life. Having lived in Burma for fifteen years Flory does not suffer from, or even notice, the heat in the same way that a more recently-arrived European would. The narrator, shocked by the heat in a way that the long-acclimatized Flory could not be, thus inhabits the persona of a newer arrival to the country, one who is less "inside" than Flory and for whom the climate (and, by extension, the culture) remains strange.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Saunders detects in this widening of space between Flory and the narrator a merging of narrator and

Orwell, of course, oversees this contrast. The presence in the narrative of clear markers indicating that the narrator's perspective is in some respects more Eurocentrically limited than Flory's suggests that a controlling consciousness is at work presiding over a range of unreliable points of view. For, as we have seen, Flory's perspective is itself deeply flawed; his long-term immersion into Burmese culture proves not to be enough to rid him of his affiliations with imperial power. And yet, his fifteen years in the country do have the effect of ridding him of some of the prejudices that continue to afflict the narrator.

Trying to disentangle this range of perspectives in *Burmese Days* – between Flory, the narrator, and a controlling consciousness – and to ascertain where the voice of Orwell fits into this scheme, has preoccupied readers of the novel. Hunter, for one, posits the existence of a chorus of “contrasting voices” in the novel (22). “There is not only the main character in contrast with the narrator,” she writes, “but also the narrator in contrast with himself” (22). Hunter's interpretation suggests multiple “bases for evaluation” of the narrator's voice, but none of these pertains directly to either the issue of cultural immersion or to the element of Eurocentrism in the narrator's voice (23). Roger Fowler, who is also attentive to a range of voices in *Burmese Days*, summons the Bakhtinian notion of “heteroglossia” to make sense of Orwell's approach to narrative. “Against the linguistic constancy of the Orwellian point of view,” he writes, “Orwell displays a cacophony of . . . ‘voices of the other’” (88). The author's speech in this model is “orient[ed] towards the language and views of characters whose values are alien to those

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author, but there is no reason to suppose that Orwell shares the narrator's sense of both the inhospitableness *and* the strangeness of the Burmese climate. Having lived in the country for five years himself, Orwell (like Flory) would have grown somewhat accustomed to it – though, of course, the memory of its strangeness would have remained fresh in the novelist's mind.

of the central narrating point of view” (89). Fowler’s analysis is geared towards a discussion of ventriloquistic caricature as “an instrument of parodic attack” on the Anglo-Indian population of Kyauktada, but surprisingly he does not consider the possibility of ironic distance between Orwell and his narrator. Saunders, for her part, also detects an element of “Dostoevskyan heteroglossia” in Orwell’s use of a variety of voices in his narratives, but unlike Fowler she sees a contrast between the free play of “author-thinker” perspectives in Dostoevsky and Orwell’s more controlled authorial vision: “Whereas Dostoevsky seeks to proliferate meaning endlessly in a blaze of formidable artistic creation,” she writes, “Orwell seeks, rather soberly, to anchor meaning to the reach of a distinct authorial consciousness, and to keep it very much within the unity of an event; for his characters, quite deliberately, are at all times a vehicle for the author’s ideological position” (43).<sup>27</sup> To the extent that the novel presents a clear “ideological position” that Orwell clearly shares – *i.e.* they are both against empire – Saunders’s position seems irrefutable. The trajectory of Flory, the fates of colonial victims, the scathing parodies of the Anglo-Indian population, and, most disputably, the instances of Eurocentrism – all these elements of the novel issue from the perspective of an “author-thinker” who vehemently opposes imperialism.

And yet, on issues of greater subtlety and complexity, such as the attitude towards understanding (and representing) colonial subject peoples and culture, the ideological position of the novel is not so crystal clear. With respect to such matters it becomes increasingly difficult to draw sharp distinctions in the author-thinker/narrator/protagonist triad. It would be difficult to dispute, for instance, the existence of a dialogic element in the novel’s approach to the issue of ethnographic representation. Clearly, as I have been

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<sup>27</sup> This is an idea that is explored at length in Chapter 5’s analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

arguing, *Burmese Days* functions as a sweeping critique of the notion of ethnographic authority, that is, the peculiar authority that is ascribed to the participant observer figure who, following extended immersion into a foreign culture, steps back to record the experience with the authority of one who has been on the “inside.” Orwell, with the insight that imperial power structures compromise (and perhaps define) the participant observer position, implicitly rejects the notion of ethnographic authority on the grounds that the perspective of the imperial representative is always compromised. That said, within this overarching critique nuances emerge that give the novel a dialogic quality. In the contrast, for instance, between Flory’s (albeit failed) effort to maintain a stance of cultural relativism and the narrator’s tendency to see Burma as *strange* and *foreign* fundamentally different world views can be discerned, neither of which can be unambiguously attached to Orwell.

The impression that Burmese culture is perceived through the narrator’s eyes as a distinctly *foreign* phenomenon is at least partially conveyed in the chapter describing the visit to the bazaar. There are moments in the chapter, in fact, when the narrator’s perspective seems converge with Elizabeth Lackersteen’s. Most notable, perhaps, is the instance during the introductory sketch of the market stalls in which the narrator declares that “the merchandise was foreign-looking, queer and poor” (127). Analysing the use of language in the description of the bazaar, Fowler observes that Orwell frequently shows a tendency in the novel to employ an exotically tinged “impressionistic technique,” whereby the details of Burmese life perform a sort of “defamiliarization” exercise for the European observer (129). I quote at length the description of the bazaar in *Burmese Days* to provide context for Fowler’s commentary:



Elizabeth had recoiled from the stench and din, but he did not notice it, and led her deeper into the crowd, pointing to this stall and that. The merchandise was foreign-looking, queer and poor. There were vast pomelos hanging on strings like green moons, red bananas, baskets of heliotrope-coloured prawns the size of lobsters, brittle dried fish tied in bundles, crimson chilis, ducks split open and cured like hams, green coconuts, the larvae of the rhinoceros beetle, sections of sugar cane, *dahs*, lacquered sandals, check silk *longyis*, aphrodisiacs in the form of large, soap-like pills, glazed earthenware jars four feet high, Chinese sweetmeats made of garlic and sugar, green and white cigars, purple prinjals, persimmon-seed necklaces, chickens cheeping in wicker cages, brass Buddhas, heart-shaped betel leaves, bottles of Kruschen salts, switches of false hair, red clay cooking pots, steel shoes for bullocks, papier-mâché marionettes, strips of alligator hide with magical properties. Elizabeth's head was beginning swim. (127)

In response to this passage, Fowler writes:

By techniques such as Orwell's unusual and pointed similes, unexpected vocabulary, reference to unusual objects or familiar objects in unusual settings, the reader's view of the objects represented is freshened: they become strange, more perceptible when freed from the habits of everyday perception. Orwell's list of sights and of objects which are mundane in a Burmese bazaar offers to the European eye – the reader, Flory, Elizabeth – a kaleidoscope of strange images. (129)

Certainly, Fowler is right to see a defamiliarization technique at work in the above passage. Objects familiar to an English market (or a French one – Elizabeth’s most recent point of reference) become, in the description of the bazaar, strange. Bananas are now red, prawns are “the size of lobsters,” and ducks are split open in a way that resembles cured hams. The narrator introduces the description of these ‘strange’ objects by commenting on their “foreign-looking, queer and poor” appearance, but it is not entirely clear whose perspective is being represented or for whom the subsequent defamiliarization exercise is being performed. Indeed, to the extent that the narrator seems to inhabit both an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ position with respect to his familiarity with Burmese culture, he functions as both a contrast to Elizabeth’s cultural ignorance and a parody of a limited European perspective that cannot help but remark upon and, to an extent, recoil from the ‘strangeness’ of the foreign.

On one point in his analysis, at least, Fowler seems off the mark, however. The objects described in the bazaar appear strange (or are made strange) to the reader and to Elizabeth Lackersteen (and possibly to the narrator as well, who seems absorbed by their ‘strangeness’), but to the fifteen-year resident of Burma, Flory, the merchandise is not strange at all. Far from being subjected to a defamiliarization process, he has become thoroughly accustomed. As we are told at the outset of the passage, he “did not notice” the “stench and din” that causes Elizabeth’s “head...to swim.” Earlier in the novel, in fact, in the section that examines Flory’s history, we are told that he had “acclimatised himself to Burma” and that “his body [had grown] attuned to the strange rhythms of the tropical seasons” (66). The extent of his immersion in Burmese culture ensures that he is not

prone to the shock of the strange to which Elizabeth, the reader, and (possibly) the narrator are susceptible.<sup>28</sup>

As the evidence of Flory's deep-seated Eurocentrism demonstrates, however, extensive cultural immersion does not necessarily result in a sensitive and balanced understanding of another culture. Other mitigating factors can intrude to poison ethnographic representation. At the heart of Orwell's challenge to ethnographic authority in the novel, in fact, is a rejection of the notion that extensive participation in the rituals of another culture automatically grants a privileged vantage point of understanding to the 'observer'. The novel seeks to demonstrate with its survey of European perspectives that the power structures of empire exert a contaminating influence on the dynamics of representation. Fittingly, the ambivalence that underlies Flory's engagement with Burmese culture finds a neat analogy in the half-heartedness of his anti-imperialist stance. "I'm not seditious," he assures Dr. Veraswami. "I don't want the Burmans to drive us out of this country. God forbid! I'm here to make money, like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man's burden humbug" (39). As Ingle observes, Flory in declaring his own position to be "not so much anti-empire as anti-humbug . . . deludes himself for at base the humbug he attacks is the lubricant of the imperial machine, allowing both enthusiastic and reluctant imperialists to convince themselves that they are involved in a mighty enterprise for the good of all" (232). Flory's self-deception does not extend to a belief in the benevolence of empire, but his apparent conviction that imperial "humbug" can be safely extracted from imperial power without the system collapsing demonstrates

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<sup>28</sup> As I noted earlier (p. 33), the idea that ethnographic representation could incorporate a defamiliarizing agenda was not foreign to modernist anthropology. Snyder points out that, "if one impulse of modern ethnography was to demystify exotic others by showing that they are not so different from ourselves. . . an important secondary impulse could be characterized conversely as the discovery of the *bizarre* in the *ordinary*" (5).

a wilful misreading of the political context of Anglo-India that in some way mirrors his failure to grasp the “real nature” of his cultural vantage point. Part of Orwell’s aim with respect to his treatment of cultural immersion in *Burmese Days* is to demonstrate the dishonesty that arises inevitably from interaction with another culture that takes place against the backdrop of imperial domination. No matter how much ‘Burmese’ Flory acquires (money, language, cultural knowledge), his cultural immersion will always have been predicated on bad faith.

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As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Orwell’s attention in the Burmese writings to the power dynamics of ethnographic representation comes to exert a lasting influence on his approach to narrative. While the Burmese material offers the most obvious evidence of an ethnographic agenda, a concern with the difficulty of accurate representation lingers in Orwell’s work. As Ingle observes of Orwell’s *political* philosophy, however, it *evolves* from his anti-imperialism. A similar point can be made about the enduring role that his understanding of the limits of cross-cultural representation plays in his later narrative experiments. In his first two books of non-fictional reportage, *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, an adherence to an ethnographic structure is quite clear, but, as I show in the next chapter, these books, examined together, reveal an evolution in Orwell’s approach to narrative, and in particular with the ways that he employs multiple perspective as a strategic device. Most obviously, the domestic settings of both texts determine that race and cultural difference recede in importance, and that in their place emerges a concern with class. Beyond this, the two books display, in their contrasting approaches, an awareness of the

possibilities for adjusting (and limiting) perspective, and of adapting specific personas to serve specific narrative aims.

**CHAPTER 3:**  
 PERFORMANCE, TRANSFORMATION, AND THE FIGURE OF THE MASK  
 IN *DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON* AND  
*THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER*

As the challenge to ethnographic authority that appears in Orwell's Burmese writings comes to exert an influence on his later works, so the rhetorical and literary devices that he uses to elucidate the "real nature" of imperial power turn out to have an applicability beyond imperialism in its narrowest sense. The inside/outside tension at play in the Burmese writings is one such example of a metaphor with universal value being applied to the specific context of empire. Another is the figure of the mask. In "Shooting an Elephant," the mask is famously employed as an emblem for the corrosively dissembling nature of the imperial subject: the white man "wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it," the narrator observes at the moment of crisis, thus articulating not only the fluidness of the distinction between surface and depth but the performative dimension of imperial participation (*CEJL* 1. 239). The mask both conceals what lies hidden beneath it and ultimately alters that which it hides; in this sense, it functions as a metonym for the British empire, which tends on a global scale to conceal the real nature of its aims while at the same time transforming Britain decisively into a nation that is dependent upon and defined by its imperial ambitions. Indeed, the self-definition of the British Empire comes to function as a kind of "masking" in which its globally exploitative structure is concealed for the sake of a conception of itself as a proud (and self-sufficient) island.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In *Shrinking Island*, Jed Esty links the contraction of the British Empire to the emergence of narratives that display an "anglocentric turn in the 1930s and 1940s" (5). A decline in British power, Esty contends,

The character studies in Orwell's Burmese writings explore the psychological underpinnings of this large-scale 'masking'.

In Orwell's early writings that do not take Burma as their subject and do not treat imperialism directly, the figure of the mask continues to occupy a central position, but its assortment of meanings shifts perceptibly.<sup>30</sup> A recognition of grand-scale masking in the imperial metropolis appears, for instance, to have motivated Orwell to explore the underbelly of European society with a sharp sense of the dynamics of concealment and performance. Thus, in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, "masquerading" features as the means by which Orwell puts himself in a position to observe the decay of the metropolis (*Wigan Pier* 150).<sup>31</sup> In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, meanwhile, a trip to the north of England becomes an experiment in wearing a 'mask' of interpretive distance, which in turn enables a re-framing of the accumulated materials of reportage in a more objective light. In both books, the mask operates in a constructive capacity; it is mobilized not only to supplement a critique of spurious authority but to generate authority of another kind: the authority of the author who lays claim to knowledge and expertise that is not usually

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gave rise to an "anthropological turn" in literary production that was part of a "discursive process by which English intellectuals translated the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture" (2). Orwell, whose writing career reflects both an anthropological *and* anglocentric agenda, fits rather neatly into this narrative.

<sup>30</sup> A problem of chronology surfaces when the Burmese texts and the domestic reportage are considered alongside one another. Although Orwell's life experience of imperialism pre-dates his experiences 'tramping' in Paris and London, his literary treatment of 'tramping' comes before the key writings of empire, namely *Burmese Days* and "Shooting an Elephant." Thus, although the wisdom that a man "wears a mask and his face grows to fit it" seems to come directly from Orwell's experience of serving as an Indian Imperial Policeman, in fact it emerges through several stages of mediation. Most obviously, Orwell's application of the metaphor of the mask to the experience of empire can be seen as a *writerly* response undertaken from a significant temporal and geographic distance; less obviously perhaps, but equally important, Orwell's understanding of the 'mask' as a metaphorical construct appears to have been crucially shaped by his application of the figure to contexts and experiences of 'masking' that differ dramatically from those he encounters in the imperial realm. Orwell's experiences of disguising himself in Paris and London find an obvious precursor, of course, in the *uniform* of the Indian Imperial Policeman. Ingle, for one, refers to the "tramp's uniform" that Orwell dons in his forays amongst the urban poor (50).

<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, the term "masquerading" does not appear in *Down and Out in Paris in London*. Orwell adopts this term only retrospectively, in the commentary on his tramping experiences that appears in the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

available to members of the middle class. Indeed, one of the things these books together reveal is an evolution in Orwell's approach to representing the middle-class.

A distinction emerges, then, between the ways that Orwell employs the mask in the Burmese work and the ways it is used in the domestic reportage. In the Burmese writings, it figures primarily as an unhealthy symptom of imperialism. The imperial subject performs the rituals of empire by striking the pose of the Pukka Sahib and by donning a mask of poise and moral certainty. In contrast, in both *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the mask is called forth both to demystify a hierarchical power structure<sup>32</sup> and to reveal the inherent power in performance and concealment.<sup>33</sup> In the domestic reportage Orwell embraces the possibility that the subject

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<sup>32</sup> Orwell insistently draws parallels between the hierarchical structure of imperialism and the English class system, noting, for instance, in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that "here in England, down under one's feet, were the submerged working class, suffering miseries which in their different way were as bad as any an oriental ever knows" (148-9).

<sup>33</sup> The characteristics of the mask and the function and effects of masquerading are cast in both sets of texts as phenomena that are by nature performative. Indeed, the issue of performativity is raised in these texts in a way that anticipates, albeit in far less theoretical terms, its later appearance in the work of Judith Butler. In Orwell's Burmese writings, the mask constrains, restricts, and ultimately defines the imperial subject by effectively making it an extension of the ideology that it serves; in the domestic reportage, "masquerading" partially liberates Orwell from his restrictive middle-class existence by exposing him to a different network of influences. An echo of this dialectic can be heard in Butler's evolving definition of performativity. In *Bodies that Matter*, she offers a corrective to mis-readings of her previous book *Gender Trouble* that had overemphasized the potential of the individual subject to use performance strategically as a political tool. Butler's clarification of the precise nature of the performative helps to make sense of Orwell's evolving use of the figure of the mask. She writes:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (*Bodies That Matter* 95)

From the Burmese writings it is clear that Orwell was alert to the subject's limited power to escape a "regularized and constrained repetition of norms," or even, for that matter, its ability to exist outside this process. The "mask," in the sense it is used in "Shooting an Elephant," is essentially that network of iteration that Butler refers to. The mask acts *upon* the subject; it is worn by the white man, but it carries with it the "force of prohibition and taboo" and all that entails, so that in effect it is something that attaches itself to, and ultimately defines, the imperial subject. The mask, in Butler's terms, is not voluntarily donned but rather is forced upon its wearer. Moreover, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, a feature that is common to all Orwell's Burmese writings is a profound sense of the paralysis of the imperial



can be shaped by forces over which it exercises some control, that it can in effect *transform* itself. To varying degrees, both *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* advance the idea that class affiliation can be provisionally disrupted if not quite broken; one embraces the possibility of a clean break, while the other (more modestly) experiments with shedding a defining trait (class prejudice). Despite these important differences, however, both works subscribe to a conception of the individual subject as a malleable thing that simultaneously possesses a degree of agency in terms of defining its own formulation.<sup>34</sup>

As a number of commentators have observed, the narrative of Orwell's career, particularly in the early years, suggests a path of transformation. Thus Keith Alldritt concludes that "Orwell's story is essentially one of a continuing struggle to escape from the concept of self with which he was endowed by birth and background. It is the story of an attempted escape from an inherited set of attitudes, responses and feelings which made for pain, for vital impoverishment and for a sense of life as something unreal" (54). Stansky and Abrahams likewise see the notion of "transformation" as the central metaphor by which to understand the trajectory of Orwell's life and career. The adoption of a pseudonym, the authors contend, "was a first step – by which 'the essential second

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representative. In "A Hanging," *Burmese Days*, and "Shooting an Elephant," whatever insight is gained by the individual who perceives the "real nature" of imperialism is balanced against an absence of action. Agency in these works – the subject's ability to overcome the "ritualized production" of imperialism – is presented primarily as an elusive thing.

<sup>34</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' [and] that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (181). This somewhat paradoxical formula captures a key aspect of the rhetoric of Orwell's books of domestic reportage in the sense that they share an emphasis on the deed and on the ways in which the subject seeks to transform itself through action. The formula also describes the emergence of the pseudonym 'Orwell' in the early writings. A pseudonym is both a 'doer' and a 'deed', an author and an invented false name: a mask that is "constructed in and through the deed" of re-naming.

self was set free<sup>35</sup> – and what followed was a slow, arduous process of transformation”

(5). The evolution of voice and perspective that can be traced from *Down and Out in Paris and London* to *The Road to Wigan Pier* corroborates this trajectory of transformation. Although both books examine the implications of disguise, the later work employs a rhetoric of retrospection that reflects a shift in attitude. From the vantage point of his later (frustrated) efforts to infiltrate the working class in the north of England, Orwell’s earlier experiences of dressing down to walk amongst the urban poor are characterized as an absurdly naïve experiment. Indeed, to the extent that *The Road to Wigan Pier* attempts to convey an impression of honesty and candour, the book repudiates some of the key ideas that appear in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. The associated issues of performance, disguise, and transformation remain central, but they are viewed with increasing scrutiny. As I will try to show in this chapter, however, these books do not merely document a transformation; they are, simultaneously, interrogations of the very idea of transformation. They question the possibility of genuine transformation and investigate the extent to which it is inhibited by class affiliation. They ponder the degree to which the “regularized and constrained repetition of norms” that engender class prejudice can be overcome, and they question the role that disguise plays in the process of transformation. They ask what it means to wear a mask, and they consider the possibility of growing to fit it. Underlying, and indeed making possible, these investigations is an ongoing evolution in Orwell’s approach to narrative that is fuelled by his embrace of multiple perspectives as a narrative strategy.

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<sup>35</sup> Stansky and Abrahams take this phrase from Samuel Hynes, who, they point out, addresses the issue of pseudonyms in a *Times Literary Supplement* piece (21 December 1973, pp 1153-55).

*Down and Out in Paris and London*

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin points to the “intricate multiform symbolism of the mask” and traces an evolution of the mask’s network of meanings from “medieval and Renaissance folk culture” to “Romantic culture” (40). The shifting symbolic applications of the mask are not mutually exclusive in Bakhtin’s analysis, but they nonetheless correspond with specific cultural-historical configurations. Bakhtin contends, for instance, that the “theme of the mask [is] the most complex theme of folk culture.” In this symbolic context, he writes, the mask is “related to transition, metamorphoses, [and] the violation of natural boundaries”; in addition, it “rejects conformity to oneself” (39-40). In its old, folkloric sense the mask thus exhibits some affinity with the collective masking that Orwell insists takes place in the imperial context, with the crucial qualification that donning the mask for empire contains none of the “joy of change and reincarnation” that Bakhtin associates with the tradition of the mask in folk culture.<sup>36</sup> Despite these associations with a symbolic structure that has its roots in folk culture, though, Orwell’s application of the mask (both in the Burmese writings and in the domestic reportage) undoubtedly has more in common with what Bakhtin sees as its

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<sup>36</sup> At first glance, it might seem, the Burmese writings show little adherence to a model that sees the mask as any kind of communal activity; in foregrounding the tragic elements of the imperial experience, after all, these works focus on the experience of a single individual. Nonetheless, it is clear that the individuals in the Burmese work, however isolated or alienated from their communities, are meant to function as representative figures, particularly with respect to the necessity for dissembling and performance in the imperial theatre. The performance of empire, these works show, rests on the complicity of all its members. In “Shooting an Elephant,” the narrator’s ambivalence towards the Burmese and his role in ruling them is described primarily as an alienating emotion, but he is nonetheless part of an identifiable group: “Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism,” he tells us; “ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty” (*CEJL* 1. 236). In *Burmese Days*, Flory’s adoption of the Pukka Sahib pose likewise aligns him with his fellow members at the European Club, even if the experience of performing the role sickens him. At times, of course, Flory overcomes his queasiness of dissimulation to don the mask in a spirit of cynical opportunism. As I discussed in the last chapter, he retreats to the Pukka Sahib pose following the fiasco of the bazaar because he recognizes that it could alleviate the tension between him and Elizabeth Lackersteen.

incarnation in Romantic culture. “In its Romantic form,” Bakhtin writes, “the mask is torn away from the oneness of the folk carnival concept. It is stripped of its original richness and acquires other meanings alien to its primitive nature; now the mask hides something, keeps a secret, deceives” (40). This potentially corrupting element of the mask finds obvious expression in the Burmese writings with their emphasis on dissembling as a defining trait of the imperial subject. The aspect of secrecy, however, may not even be the most important feature of the post-folkloric mask for Orwell. “The Romantic mask,” Bakhtin continues, “loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it” (40). In Bakhtin’s analysis, the “nothingness” behind the mask is meant to signal the alienating experience of modern life; however, this very same quality hints dialectically at an opening up of possibility. The mask, in effect, creates a vacuum that the subject has some power to fill.

This symbolic configuration that intimates a blank slate behind the mask suggests the logic of the performative as it is articulated in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In contrast to the “terrible vacuum” that Bakhtin envisions, though, Orwell seems to have embraced symbolic “nothingness” as a path towards transformation. In his retrospective comments in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, at least, he declares that his decision to masquerade as a tramp was motivated less by a desire to gain access to another world than by a need to rid himself of the qualities that made him suitable for the one he was in. By his account, he wished to create a vacuum of sorts by discarding all the trappings of membership in the middle-class:

What I profoundly wanted, at that time, was to find some way of getting out of the respectable world altogether. I meditated upon it a great deal, I even planned parts of it in detail; how one could sell everything, give everything away, change one's name and start out with no money and nothing but the clothes one stood up in. (149-50)

The 'mask' of the tramp in this description appears as an attempt to disavow the "inherited set of attitudes, responses and feelings" that had come with a middle-class upbringing. In his retrospective account, at least, Orwell's motives for dressing up as a tramp emerge through a rhetoric of repudiation; he welcomes the opportunity to wear a mask because it creates a potentially cleansing "nothingness."

Crucially (and unlike the comparatively neutral adoption of a pseudonym), Orwell's tramp costume stands in sharp contrast to the appearance he is most accustomed to inhabiting. This characteristic of the disguise hints at what might be described as the structural irony of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. While the name 'Orwell' does not in itself distance the man from his middle-class background, the disguise of the tramp – a departure from middle-class decorum in every sense – stands as a virtual inversion of the man beneath. In her analysis of the masquerade in eighteenth-century British culture, Terry Castle highlights an essentially ironic socio-psychological dimension of the masquerade costume that helps to make sense of the ironic structure of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Of the customs that determined the costumes that were worn at the eighteenth-century masquerade, Castle observes, a "basic convention persisted underneath multiple reinscriptions":

the relationship between costume and wearer [she writes] expressed a conceptual antithesis, a secret paradox. One's disguise represented not just a skewing or modification of the truth, but its reversal. This was the endlessly repeated joke of disguise, its *sottisme*: that it held out a totalizing sartorial message, but falsified the subject in the most radical way possible. It defined a second self at the farthest remove from the actual. It was, in short, ironic. (76)

Castle's point here that the "second self" created by the mask exists in an ironic relationship with the subject that hides beneath it has obvious relevance for an examination of Orwell's tramping experiences.<sup>37</sup> For, although the context of Orwell's excursions among the urban poor has little in common with the 18<sup>th</sup> century masquerade of Castle's analysis, one of the underlying premises of *Down and Out in Paris and London* is that the man who tells the story is accustomed to more comfortable circumstances. Indeed, the title of the book implies this. Orwell's narrator, we are meant to see at the outset, finds himself outside a familiar context. He is *down* and *out* in the sense that he finds himself occupying a lower position in the social hierarchy that effectively makes him unrecognizable to his fellow members of the middle class.<sup>38</sup> "Masqueraders did not dress as themselves," Castle emphasizes. "Dukes did not disguise themselves as marquises, or footmen as apprentices . . . The conceptual gap separating true and false selves was ideally an abyss" (75). The *descent* into poverty that is tracked

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<sup>37</sup> The language Castle employs in her theorization of disguise – particularly her description of the costume as a "second self" – coincidentally echoes Samuel Hynes' characterization of the pseudonym as a kind of 'second self'.

<sup>38</sup> Orwell did not come up with the title of the book and seems not to have been initially fond of it. In a July 6, 1932, letter to Leonard Moore he suggests "The Lady Poverty" or "Lady Poverty" as potential titles (*CEJL* 1: 85), and then, as the book nears publication, he tells Eleanor Jacques that "Gollancz wants to call it 'The Confessions of a Down and Out'. I am protesting against this as I don't answer to the name of down & out, but I will let it go if he thinks seriously that it is a taking title" (*CEJL* 1: 105).

in Orwell's text is meant to provide a sense of the depth of this abyss, and in this respect the radical irony of Orwell's disguise is central to the book's rhetoric.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Orwell's masquerading is mediated through narration. The *persona* that emerges in *Down and Out in Paris in London* does not stand in the same relationship to the experience of poverty as does the man who wears the disguise of the tramp and walks among the poor. The narrative persona of *Down and Out* is itself a disguise that sometimes works in tension with the more obviously ironic disguise of the tramp. The narrator, more than simply a mirrored reflection of Orwell's experience, is a reflection of his sense of how this experience theoretically affects the subject. As such, the narrative persona disrupts the book's ironic structure.

Despite this crucial disruption, however, responses to the text have focussed principally on the ironic dimension of the tramp costume. Commentary on *Down and Out in Paris and London* typically conflates the disguised man and the writerly persona, and thus *over-emphasizes* the ironic structure of the book by insisting on the narrator's unwavering association with a middle-class readership. The 'Orwell' persona in this early book has been read as a representative of his class who simply disguises himself as one of the urban poor and reports back to his native class. "The most important aspect of the rhetoric of *Down and Out*," John P. Frazee writes, "is the creation of a narrator who resembles, and by resembling gains the trust of, Orwell's English, middle-class reader" (35). This narrator, Frazee contends, "draws readers into an experience designed to awaken their sleeping conscience and shake their complacent, liberal faith in social institutions to take care of human needs" (35). Lynette Hunter locates the narrator's

appeal to the English middle-class specifically in his “attempts to speak in the urbane, lightly humorous ‘gentlemanly’ tone of the literary magazines. He presents his readers with the clichés that a middle-class public of the early 1930s would know and expect” (*Search for a Voice* 15). “For these expected readers,” Hunter explains, “the narrator is acceptable; he can be trusted to come to the kinds of conclusions that they would themselves” (15).<sup>39</sup> John Newsinger, likewise, sees *Down and Out in Paris and London* as “a self-conscious attempt by literary means to introduce a middle-class readership to the experience of poverty” (27). Orwell, he insists, “intended to write about the way the poor lived from the inside, but for a middle-class audience” (20). In order to do this effectively, the argument goes, it was necessary for Orwell to occupy the role of middle-class writer in order to maintain the requisite authority to interpret and comment on the scenes that he observes.

The disguise, in these readings, signifies little more than a change of attire. It is something that can be taken off as easily as it is put on. To *dis-guise*, in its old sense, was merely to “dress in a fashion different from what has been customary or considered appropriate to position” (*OED*). And indeed, in a rudimentary sense, this *is* what Orwell does during his tramping expeditions. As Crick informs us, Eric Blair “had various ‘drops’ in London where he would leave his better clothes and don his rags, sallying out sometimes for a few days, sometimes for a week or two” (*A Life* 126). To read *Down and Out in Paris in London* as simply a loose chronicle of this life experience, however, is to grant the ironic dimension of the mask too prominent a position in the book’s rhetoric. It is also to adhere too strictly to a notion of stable identity that implicitly shuts down the

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<sup>39</sup> Hunter sees an evolution of the narrative “stance” in *Down and Out*, but her analysis does not consider the degree to which Orwell strays outside his middle-class background.



possibility of transformation. As Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace observes in a critique of Castle's analysis,<sup>40</sup> the notion of "true and false selves" is problematic. "To say that one went to the masquerade as one's opposite," she writes, "is to imply that someone knew precisely who she or he was" (426-7). It is possible to see, she continues, that "the 'true' self is nothing more than a provisional category; the mask neither covers an 'authentic' identity nor reveals the 'opposite' of the truth since the categories of a 'true' and 'false' identity collapse into one another" (427).

In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the narrator's association with a middle-class readership is, in any case, more tenuous and unstable than the interpretations mentioned above suggest. Orwell certainly adopts the stance of a middle-class narrator for substantial portions of the tale, but this stance should be viewed as one of a number of strategies in the text that are designed to generate a convincing depiction of poverty. There are other key instances when he abandons this stance and permits himself a more complete immersion – narratively speaking – into the world of poverty by pointedly adopting the perspective of the tramp.

The mistaken impression that a uniformly middle-class perspective controls the narration of *Down and Out in Paris and London* may stem from the fact Orwell reveals early on an awareness of the potential risk to his authority as both writer and witness that would result from his adopting the perspective of a member of the underclass. In the first chapter, he exhibits a degree of uneasiness at the notion of making literary entertainment of his encounters with the personalities of the Rue du Coq d'Or:

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<sup>40</sup> Kowaleski Wallace's analysis stems from a reading of Hannah Cowley's 1780 play *The Belle's Stratagem*.

It would be fun to write some of their biographies, if one had time. I am trying to describe the people in our quarter, not for the mere curiosity, but because they are all part of the story. Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum. The slum, with its dirt and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson in poverty, and then the background of my own experiences. It is for that reason that I try to give some idea of what life was like there. (9)

As an explanation of the book's ultimate purpose, this passage stands out for the multiple personae it employs to address the delicate topic of the writer acting as *voyeur* of the urban poor. The 'Orwell' persona at this point is a composite whose parts have yet to be fitted together, and as a result the narrator appears unsure of how best to establish his authority as a voice to describe and interpret the lives of the 'down-and-out'. Schmid's concept of the "abstract author" again proves useful as a way of clarifying the dynamics of representation in Orwell's narrative. In the passage above, one might say, the "symptoms" or "indexical signs" that are used to project an "image of the creator" are ambiguous and at times even in conflict with one another (Schmid 37). As a result, a number of voices are heard vying uncertainly for position: the detached writer who finds aesthetic value in the scenes he witnesses, the social-scientist who is careful to outline the parameters of his study, the humble man who insists that his own "experiences" are secondary, and, finally, the self-conscious middle-class 'slummer' who deflects attention from himself while at the same time justifying his literary impulse. If, as Schmid insists, the abstract author is the "correlate of all indexical signs in a text that point to the author," and that in turn "delineate both an ideological position and an esthetic

conception,” at this point in the narrative of *Down and Out in Paris and London* the abstract author that is projected is a decidedly blurry image of the author. Or, to put it another way, the physical manifestation of the disguise – the dirty threadbare clothes of the tramp – finds a corresponding impetus towards masquerade in the writing itself. The author’s voice is ‘disguised’, concealed beneath a chorus of voices that each convey the experience of poverty from a slightly different perspective.

The multiple perspectives that surface in this early passage can be at least partially explained by the nature of the exercise of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. As Newsinger points out, “inevitably, the project involved problems: [Orwell’s] expeditions were just that, temporary forays among the down-and-out, carried out by someone so far removed in background and upbringing as to be almost from another world” (20). His excursions among the poor therefore had a “‘colonial’ dimension,” Newsinger insists, in the sense that “Orwell was exploring darkest England (and Paris), and then returning to civilization with exotic tales to tell about the lives of the poor” (20). Newsinger’s parody of the language of anthropology here to describe the structural features of *Down and Out in Paris and London* suggests obvious correspondences between Orwell’s Burmese work and the domestic reportage. Most obviously, the domestic reportage can be understood as autoethnography. This is a point that is central to Patricia Rae’s discussion of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and to which I will return later in this chapter. Beyond drawing attention to this structural similarity, however, Newsinger’s point hints at the ways that Orwell’s recognition of the some of the problems of representation persist outside of a colonial context. The “dialectic of experience and interpretation,” in other words, Clifford’s characterization of the dynamics of participant-observation, continues to shape Orwell’s

narrative strategies, and the tension between “inside” and “outside” – or the sense of occupying both positions simultaneously – remains a central concern.

*Down and Out in Paris and London* contains numerous references, in fact, to the narrator’s status as visitor, one who is “down among the oppressed,” as Orwell later puts it in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, but not one of them (148). The narrator draws frequent attention to his background, and thus signals Orwell’s consciousness of the potentially exploitative nature of dressing down to learn about how the lower classes live. These gestures of acknowledgment emphasize the narrator’s outsider status and establish a crucial distance between him and the characters of his study (and between him and poverty itself), so that his initial contact with poverty is framed as a downward movement, a kind of fall from middle-class grace. ‘Poverty’ is treated as a mysterious realm for the middle-class traveller, and the narrator remains on its periphery. “It was now that my experiences of poverty began,” he declares, “for six francs a day, if not actual poverty, is on the fringe of it” (16). In a subsequent passage, the impression of a fall is more fully articulated:

It is altogether curious, your first contact with poverty. You have thought so much about poverty – it is the thing you have feared all your life, the thing you knew would happen to you sooner or later; and it is all so utterly prosaically different. You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated. You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring. It is the peculiar *lowness* of poverty that you discover first; the shifts that it puts you to, the complicated meanness, the crust-wiping. (16-17)

To be ‘down and out’, it seems, is for the narrator almost by definition to be cast out from the comforts of middle-class life, and so at this early point in the book at least a rhetoric of discovery characterizes his descriptions of what it is like to experience poverty. It is “so utterly prosaically different” from his preconceived notions because it had, until this moment of discovery, existed in a realm that was quite foreign to his middle-class sensibilities. By framing his observations of poverty as moments of sudden illumination, the narrator subtly reinforces the idea that his experiences represent an irrefutable truth.

The articulation of epiphany functions for Orwell as a rhetorical gesture designed to convey an impression of hard won authority,<sup>41</sup> and in this early passage the unexpected moment of insight, that poverty is not what one expected it to be, serves the dual purpose of making the descriptions of the experience seem more convincing, while at the same time ensuring that they are understood within the context of a narrative of descent.<sup>42</sup> The narrator, we are meant to accept, is a reliable witness precisely because he has fallen so dramatically and been so forcefully struck by the unexpectedness of the condition he encounters. Moreover, the epiphanic wisdom that the narrator advances to validate his authority to write about poverty is achieved through the perspective of disguise. He only sees the “*lowness* of poverty” at all because he has put on the mask of a poor man.

Importantly, however, this early epiphany in *Down and Out in Paris and London* also hints at the performative dimension of the experience of poverty. Crucial to the

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<sup>41</sup> In Keith Alldritt’s discussion of the influence of the symbolists (literary modernists) on Orwell’s 1930s writing, one of the features that he draws attention to is the central position of the epiphany within the “symbolist aesthetic” (12). Orwell’s frequent adoption of the epiphany as a rhetorical device could, in this sense, be interpreted as evidence of his modernist inheritance.

<sup>42</sup> Roger Ramsey argues that “the structure of ‘Down in Paris’ [the modified name he uses to describe the first half of the book] is governed by the idea of descent, an idea imbedded in our language... The narrator becomes ‘deeper’ in debt, more ‘deeply’ involved, in ‘deep’ trouble. The metaphor of descent, frozen in English clichés, is perfectly appropriate [...]” (164). Earlier, Ramsey characterizes the narrator’s description of his first day working as a *plongeur* as being framed in “unmistakable Dante-like terms; it is the descent into Hell” (162).

narrator's "discovery" of poverty is his recognition of the repetition that it entails.

Poverty, he realizes, is not a static condition that one falls into as into a pit. It is, rather, a seemingly endless re-enactment of the scramble for daily bread. Mundane repetition is emphasized throughout the book, the episodic structure of which is tied together by an ongoing quest to out-manoeuvre poverty. The chapters involving Boris, the down-and-out Russian officer, particularly convey this impression. Boris and the narrator together hatch "schemes" or "cunning plans" to get money or food, but they are usually foiled, and brief moments of excitement are followed by a sense of deflation. "After all our trouble, the receiver at the pawnshop again refused our overcoat," the narrator complains after a lengthy description of their absurd "escape" from the hotel where Boris had been staying (42). They walk interminably in search of work – "14 kilometres" one day, "12 kilometres" another – and their hours are stretched by the effort of conserving what little they have. Boris, in his eccentricity, functions in the narrative as a kind of comic relief, yet even the most colourful moments in the life of a poor man, we are supposed to see, are oppressively dull, futile attempts to elevate the tedious routine of poverty above the "prosaic" and "boring." Ultimately, a sense of inertia sets in: "Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition," the narrator laments, "more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one's blood had been pumped out and luke-warm water substituted" (38). Orwell's submergence in this network of iteration that differs so dramatically from the network of his middle-class background emerges ultimately as an experiment to determine whether the subject can actually effect its own transformation, and his narrator's claim to be surprised by the "utterly prosaically different" nature of the

experience of poverty signals the extent to which he has immersed himself in that network.

In keeping with the logic of performativity as it is theorized by Butler, it should, however, be emphasized that a good deal of the transformation that Orwell's narrator seeks is necessarily out of his hands. Once submerged into the world of poverty, it is inevitable that he would come under the sway of its "regularized and constrained repetition of norms." Some readers have detected evidence of this insidious influence in the text. Gayle Salamon, for instance, perceives in Orwell's slumming excursions a degree of authenticity that emerges from a more committed immersion into the lives of the poor than Orwell himself realized. Specifically, in the narrator's early insistence that his "subject is poverty" and *not* his own experiences, Salamon hears a denial that is characteristic of the genuinely poor:

Orwell declares . . . that the slum is encountered as a thing to be considered, an object to be understood, a lesson to be imparted, and only afterward as the stage for his own experience. And even then it is a 'background' rather than an essential feature, poverty as the variable stage against which his own experience is thrown into relief. He is proximate to poverty but not of it; poverty exists as his background. This separation between poverty and the self, between himself as a subject and poverty as the object of his study, this disinclination to see one as actually and truly part of the other, would seem, in fact, to confirm that Orwell is indeed poor, for as he describes in the text, this is a separation that the poor with whom he works, lodges, and tramps are constantly enacting. It may be

only the rich who look at the poor and see poverty. The poor certainly do not see one another that way. (172)

Evidence that Orwell has indeed undergone a transformation through the experience of disguising himself as one of the urban poor thus surfaces in *Down and Out in Paris and London* not in a record of candid self-examination (as in the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*) but rather in the author's strategy of deflecting attention away from the details of his descent into poverty. He has, in the process of separating himself from poverty, unconsciously incorporated the delusional pride of the poor man into his account of his experiences among the poor.

This subtle adoption of a character trait that one associates with the genuinely poor speaks to the complex way that transformation is treated in *Down and Out in Paris and London* and to the ways that it engenders a shifting of perspective. On the one hand, the book presents transformation as an underlying premise. "It is a feeling of relief," the narrator announces early on, "almost of pleasure, at knowing yourself at last genuinely down and out. You have talked so often of going to the dogs – and, well, here are the dogs, and you have reached them, and you can stand it" (21). 'Poverty', the narrator seems to suggest, is a metaphysical state as much as it is a mere absence of money; the mindset that poverty instills in this sense reflects a radically altered perspective of one's existential condition. Among the many things you "discover" when you encounter poverty for the first time is the fact that "a man who has gone even a week on bread and margarine is not a man any longer, only a belly with a few accessory organs" (19). The narrator further remarks that "when you are approaching poverty, you make one discovery which outweighs some of the others. You discover boredom and mean



complications and the beginnings of hunger, but you also discover the great redeeming feature of poverty: the fact that it annihilates the future” (20). In their insistence on the existence of a radical shift of perspective, these statements offer explicit evidence of the narrator’s intention to convey a sense of his own transformation.

Paradoxically, though, it is precisely when the narrator lays claim to this sort of radical transformation that he betrays a distinctly middle-class background. Because they do not really sound like the sentiments of a truly poor man, the sweeping claims about poverty’s essence (*e.g.* poverty “annihilates the future”) in effect lend support to interpretations of the book that emphasize the ironic contrast between the disguise of the tramp and the middle-class narrator. These grandly “self-conscious proclamation[s]” lead Alldritt, for instance, to assert that “it is obvious that Orwell is not, nor cannot be, of the submerged classes, and [that] there is something slightly ridiculous about his pretending that he is” (59). As Salamon’s observations suggest, however, and, I would argue, as Orwell’s text means to show, the nature of the transformation that is effected by an immersion in poverty is not something that can be fully grasped by examining the commentary of the individual who experiences poverty strictly at face value. The text of *Down and Out in Paris and London* confirms by less obvious means how the act of masquerading as a tramp ultimately effects a *genuine* transformation.

Certainly, the downward movement between classes in the book is framed as a kind of frontier-crossing, which in turn has the effect of highlighting Orwell’s awareness of the “colonial dimension” of the project (to use Newsinger’s phrase). In the sense that Orwell’s excursions among the urban poor constitute journeys across an imaginary border, they can be understood as having been undertaken in the wake of what James

Buzard describes as a “turn-of-the-century shift toward mobile forms of authority that can temporarily ‘become’ their objects of study” (*Disorienting Fiction* 9). In this late-imperial context, Buzard observes, “border-crossing subgenres” begin to flourish: “Fiction is peopled with scientists who experiment on themselves, detectives who mimic the criminals they pursue, imperial agents who merge with colonized peoples” (9-10). Buzard offers Kipling, Conrad, and Conan Doyle, each of whom influenced Orwell, as examples of writers who explored imperial anxieties with a specific focus on the issue of frontier crossing. “For fin-de-siècle writers,” Buzard insists, “the intensification of imperial rivalries, combined with numerous other factors political, technological, sexual, and aesthetic, gave new urgency and fascination to narratives about the danger that a frontier willingly but temporarily breached might vanish completely, stranding the explorer in the Other’s place” (10). For these writers, and for anthropologists of the period, the “deliberate blurring of boundaries between investigator and object” was, crucially, intended to be temporary. Always the aim was to make it back intact. “In this fraught context,” Buzard explains,

an insistence upon the maintenance of the boundary, upon the final self-identity of the investigator, is indispensable to the desideratum of a controlled self-alienation. In crossing over, the mobile authority lays claim to the ability to set aside identity for a time, implying that such identity is there to begin with and that it will be recovered, rather than invented in defining contrast to, and engagement with, the visited (often colonized and available-for-visiting) Other. In all these instances, authority derives from the demonstration not so much of some finally achieved ‘insideness’ in the

alien state, but rather from the demonstration of an *outsider's insideness*.

(10)

While the influence of this model on Orwell is obvious, it is equally clear that in *Down and Out in Paris and London* he rejects its underlying premise. For, not only does the book seem to dismiss the notion of a stable identity that is impervious to external forces, it advances the idea that identity is ever-malleable and can be altered by an immersion into foreign territory.

This sense of a radically transformed identity emerges most clearly in the book in those instances when the rhetoric of descent becomes muted, that is, when the narrator seems to deny the distinctions that exist between him and the ‘tramps’ he goes amongst, and when the boundary between the masked middle-class man and the tramp he plays dissolves entirely. In the second half of the book, particularly, a tendency to shift into the persona of the tramp and to conceal, or at least de-emphasize, his middle-class origins works in tension with the narrator’s efforts to make transparent his comparatively privileged outsider status. He readily admits, for example, after arriving in England and deciding to stay in a “casual ward,” or “spike,” that he “had very little idea how to set about this” (138); and he is forthright about the fact that he could, if necessary, borrow more money from his friend B. Moreover, when he encounters an old Irish tramp on the road to the Romton spike he lies about his background, hoping, he explains, that “this would make him accept me as a fellow tramp” (139). In each of these examples, the narrator explicitly tips off the reader to his middle-class affiliations and in so doing implies a fully-formed subject beneath the disguise of the tramp.

Against these gestures that adhere to the book's ironic structure, however, and that in effect reiterate the narrator's outsider status, there appears an opposing movement in the narration towards identification with the 'tramps'. This movement complicates the "true and false self" binary of Castle's analysis and opens the way for the text's nuanced exploration of the performative implications of disguise. The narrator's middle-class status recedes in this narrative shift; he affects the tone of one whose understanding of the down-and-out emerges less from observation than from association, and the adoption of a telling 'we' appears quite suddenly to signal a change in the narrator's presentation of himself. When the same Irish tramp leads the narrator to a place where they might receive "a free cup o'tay and a bun" for the price of enduring "a lot o'bloody prayers," the tone of the detached middle-class observer is abruptly replaced by an account that reflects a more complete immersion into the role of tramp:

Uncomfortably we took off our caps and sat down. The lady handed out the tea, and while we ate and drank she moved to and fro, talking benignly. She talked upon religious subjects – about Jesus Christ always having a soft spot for poor rough men like us, and about how quickly the time passed when you were in church, and what a difference it made to a man on the road if he said his prayers regularly. We hated it. We sat against the wall fingering our caps (a tramp feels indecently exposed with his cap off), and turning pink and trying to mumble something when the lady addressed us. (140)

In the effort to establish an authoritative narrative stance here the narrator presumes to grasp the psychological make-up of the tramps he has so recently joined. Having been

perceived by the woman at the church as a “poor rough man” like the others, he internalizes the characterization and allows it to shape his descriptions of the experience. He describes himself as the woman sees him, as one of the tramps, and being so observed he turns his attention to the way that it might feel to receive charity conditionally. His focus thus shifts from the material details of poverty to the sense of degradation it instils. Poverty ceases to be merely “squalid and boring” and becomes a more psychologically complex experience. The responses of the men to religious charity show a dialectic of humiliation and vestigial pride that Orwell attempts to dramatize in his first-person account. The narrator claims to feel “uncomfortable” by the situation, and he “hates” being made to listen to the evangelical speech. He even fingers his cap awkwardly because the gesture is meant to signify how “a tramp feels.”

If this sudden adoption of the voice of the seasoned tramp sounds a false note, it nonetheless reflects the book’s attempt to show how the gesture of donning the mask of the tramp transcends the superficial effects of disguise. In adopting this narrative stance, Orwell dramatizes the pervasive influence of the altered network of iteration that accompanies a descent into poverty. The middle-class subject undergoes a transformation as a consequence of its immersion, and so the detached middle-class perspective cannot be maintained. The result, as it is represented in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, is a fluctuating perspective that slips in and out of a middle-class point of view as it acquires certain characteristics of the poor.

This split perspective is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the recounting (significantly, near the end of the book) of a visit to yet another church that offers free tea to tramps. Upon first arriving at the place, the narrator sets himself apart from the poor

men who wait in the queue and thus aligns himself with a typically middle-class perspective of the scene. “Outside the church,” he writes, “quite a hundred men were waiting, dirty types who had gathered from far and wide at the news of a free tea, like kites round a dead buffalo” (182). Once he has joined these men in their quest for tea, though, he slips easily into the first-person plural: “Presently the doors opened and a clergyman and some girls shepherded us into a gallery at the top of the church. . . We ranged ourselves in the gallery pews and were given our tea” (182). When “the tramps” begin to “misbehave. . . [and] treat the service as a purely comic spectacle,” the narrator again retreats to a stance of detachment, reminding us that he is both observer and participant (182-3). But his detachment cannot be explained by any sort of squeamishness or judgment of the tramps’ behaviour because he soon re-affiliates himself with the tramps’ point of view: “We had set ourselves to guy the service,” he explains, “and there was no stopping us” (183). As the scene draws to a close, it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate the perspective from which the action is described, for the narrator seems to hover simultaneously *above* the scene, detached and yet attuned to its attack on middle-class decorum, and *in* it, affronted by the assumptions that underlie that sense of decorum:

It was a queer, rather disgusting scene. Below were the handful of simple, well-meaning people, trying hard to worship; and above were the hundred men whom they had fed, deliberately making worship impossible. A ring of dirty, hairy faces grinned down from the gallery, openly jeering. What could a few women and old men do against a hundred hostile

tramps? They were afraid of us, and we were frankly bullying them. It was our revenge upon them for having humiliated us by feeding us. (183)

After some brief description of the minister's response to the unruly behaviour of the tramps, the narrator steps back once more to assess the scene with the detached tone of a middle-class spy who scrutinizes from behind a mask that appears only superficially to alter his identity. But, again, the ironic structure that underpins this narrative stance is threatened by a re-emergence of the tramp's perspective:

The scene had interested me. It was so different from the ordinary demeanour of tramps – from the abject worm-like gratitude with which they normally accept charity. The explanation, of course, was that we outnumbered the congregation and so were not afraid of them. A man receiving charity practically always hates his benefactor – it is a fixed characteristic of human nature; and, when he has fifty or a hundred others to back him, he will show it. (184)

The abrupt shift of point-of-view again dramatizes the split perspective that is engendered by a sudden descent into poverty. The detached, middle-class perspective, though it does not disappear entirely, ceases to exert a controlling influence on the narrative. It is interrupted, and at times undermined, by a perspective that reflects an immersion into a network of influences that dramatically alter the subject's responses to given situations. The middle-class perspective in these passages is alert to the breach of decorum in the men's refusal to accept charity politely, while the perspective of the newly indoctrinated tramp reveals the shame and humiliation that fuel that breach, and so allows it to be

understood as a complex psychological phenomenon rather than simply a signifier of class difference.

Very near the end of the chronicle of ‘tramping’ that forms the bulk of the narrative of *Down and Out in Paris and London*,<sup>43</sup> Orwell offers a significant variation on the theme of split perspective that in effect qualifies the book’s exploration of the mask’s power to transform. In this respect, the text subtly anticipates a shift in attitude towards the issue of transformation that will surface in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Chapter XXXV of *Down and Out in Paris and London* documents the narrator’s experiences in the Lower Binfield spike and is drawn largely from Orwell’s 1931 essay “The Spike,” but there are crucial changes in the later text that speak directly to the author’s evolving understanding of the performative effects of prolonged immersion in an altered network of influences. In both versions, the narrator describes a conversation with “a rather superior tramp,” a young carpenter who “kept a little aloof from the other tramps” (198-9). This character is presented as an example of the resilience of class perspective, and when the narrator engages him in a discussion about the wastage of food in workhouse kitchens, the carpenter-tramp, ironically, exhibits a middle-class snobbery. “I saw that I had awakened the pew-renter who sleeps in every English workman,” the narrator tells us. Indeed, in an inversion of the narrator’s earlier adoption of the tramp’s perspective, the tramp offers an almost parodic example of middle-class snobbery:

‘These here tramps are too lazy to work, that’s all that’s wrong with them.... You don’t want to have any pity on these here tramps – scum,

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<sup>43</sup> Two polemical chapters and a sort of epilogue follow the book’s narrative of Orwell’s tramping experiences.



they are. You don't want to judge them by the same standards as men like you and me. They're scum, just scum.' (198)

This outburst of class prejudice leads the narrator to remark, "It was interesting to see the subtle way in which he disassociated himself from 'these here tramps.' He had been on the road six months, but in the sight of God, he seemed to imply, he was not a tramp" (199). The narrator's interpretation of the tramp's habit of disassociation betrays an obvious scepticism; he finds irony and delusion in the tramp's effort to hang on to his middle-class sensibilities and dissociate himself from the class to which he now so obviously belonged. In the earlier version of this incident that appears in "The Spike," however, the narrator goes on to add, "His body might be in the spike, but his spirit soared far away, in the pure aether of the middle classes" (*CEJL* 1: 42) – a statement that in effect acknowledges the possibility that some essential part of the man beneath the tramp's costume remains unchanged. In the book's version of the same incident, a scepticism at this prospect can be detected; the explicitly class dimension of the split in perspective is left out and a more banal explanation takes its place: "I imagine there are quite a lot of tramps who thank God they are not tramps," the narrator remarks (199). Presumably, Orwell recognized the potential contradiction of attributing to the narrator of *Down and Out in Paris and London* a belief in the possibility of maintaining a middle-class perspective. Having already demonstrated, through the narrator's adoption of the tramp's point of view, that perspective itself is susceptible to transformation through the performance of disguise, the narrator could not then explain the carpenter's delusion simply as a matter of body/soul dichotomy.

The second crucial change that Orwell makes to the description of the Lower Binfield spike experience in *Down and Out in Paris and London* involves the narrator's encounter with the Tramp Major – when he is effectively ‘unmasked’ and exposed as a “gentleman.” Again, the change from the version given in “The Spike” foreshadows a shift in thinking that will become more clear in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In “The Spike,” the Tramp Major is able to identify the narrator as a gentleman merely by “look[ing] hard” at him (*CEJL* 1: 37). The essay does not explain why it is that the Tramp Major is able to pick the narrator out of a group of tramps, and so the implication is that some indefinable quality sets him apart as a gentleman, some quality that is, ultimately, undisguisable. In the version that later appears in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, however, the reason given for the Tramp Major's discovery of the narrator's status as a gentleman is quite different. In the book, the narrator declares that he has mistakenly given his trade as “journalist” when he registers at the spike, and that it is this piece of *revealed* information that tips off the Tramp Major. The identifiable marker of middle-classness in the later version is the narrator's profession and not some ineffable essential quality that differentiates him from the other men. He presents himself as a journalist and is consequently given special treatment because it is assumed that only a gentleman would occupy that profession.

The revised descriptions of the Lower Binfield spike hint at an evolution in Orwell's strategy of representing the middle-class. As I have argued in this chapter, interpretations of *Down and Out in Paris in London* that put too much emphasis on the middle-class status of the narrator tend to overlook the book's nuanced treatment of the performative dimension of disguise and its relationship to the idea of transformation. An

important strand of that treatment is revealed in the subtle changes that Orwell makes to these passages from “The Spike” and his decision to place them at the end of the narrative of *Down and Out*. Even though the narrative perspective that is employed in these late passages is ostensibly a middle-class one, its focus is not (as the narrator insists in the early part of the book) on “poverty” but rather on the middle-class individual’s perception of poverty. The lens has, in effect, been inverted, so that the middle-class point of view is itself examined. Indeed, by book’s end, perspective has moved beyond being simply an issue of narrative strategy and has emerged as an object of inquiry.

### ***The Road to Wigan Pier***

In contrast to *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* does not examine the implications of disguise in any literal way, and so the related issues of performance, the mask, and transformation become more theoretical in character. In fact, Orwell comes to view his excursions amongst the urban poor as “absurd,” and he describes his “masquerading” experiments as essentially naive. The rhetoric of the later book is thus more characteristic of an *un*-masking; it is geared towards generating an impression of candour and honesty, which naturally suggests a rejection of the authority of disguise. “You do not solve the class problem by making friends with tramps,” he writes at the opening of the self-reflexive Chapter X. “At most you get rid of some of your class prejudice by doing so” (154). A passage found later in this important chapter further conveys the sense of a repudiation of some of the ideas that are found in *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

For some months I lived entirely in coal-miners' houses. I ate my meals with the family, I washed at the kitchen sink, I shared bedrooms with miners, drank beer with them, played darts with them, talked to them by the hour together. But though I was among them, and I hope and trust they did not find me a nuisance, I was not one of them, and they knew it even better than I did. (156)

Gone is the fluctuating perspective that characterizes the narrative voice of the earlier book, and in its place is a steady first-person singular point of view that remains anchored to a middle-class sensibility. The narrator is settled in his subjectivity, and betrays no inclination to adopt the perspective of the miners. Indeed, he is adamant to distance himself from their point of view on the grounds that genuine “difference” separates them, and that this difference cannot be concealed:

However much you like them, however interesting you find their conversation, there is always that accursed itch of class-difference, like the pea under the princess's mattress. It is not a question of dislike or distaste, only of *difference*, but it is enough to make real intimacy impossible. . . I liked them and hoped they liked me; but I went among them as a foreigner, and both of us were aware of it. Which ever way you turn this curse of class-difference confronts you like a wall of stone. (156)

Passages like these lend weight to the view that, as Newsinger writes, *The Road to Wigan Pier* represents “the informed, committed view of a middle-class visitor writing to influence a primarily middle-class readership” (34). The equivocation that characterizes the narrative mode of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the frequent moments of

slippage in which the voice of the underclass is adopted by the middle-class man who masquerades as a tramp, is replaced by a consistency in the narration. The narrator of *The Road to Wigan Pier* makes clear that he is a member of the middle class, to the extent that a substantial portion of the book is devoted to an autobiographical dissection of his background.

And yet, as the passages above indicate, the problem of infiltrating another class remains a central preoccupation for Orwell. The performative dimension of immersing oneself in a foreign environment continues to figure as a topic of inquiry, and the matter of whether one can truly transform oneself emerges as perhaps the central underlying question of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The investigations into these issues that were begun in *Down and Out in Paris and London* appear to proceed, despite the fact that Orwell has now settled upon a strategy of honesty and candour that almost unwaveringly foregrounds his middle-class background.<sup>44</sup>

The shift away from a fluctuating narrative voice is nonetheless a significant departure from the earlier book that reflects a different approach to the issue of disguise. The disappearance of the physical costume of the tramp coincides with a metaphorical un-masking in the approach to narration. The narrative persona that repudiates the gesture of masquerading as a member of another class is the same persona that refuses to speak ventriloquially. The narrator pointedly conveys the impression of speaking in his ‘own’ voice, and as he looks back upon his masquerading expeditions as absurd, so the text seems to frown upon the fluctuating point of view as a narrative technique.

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<sup>44</sup> In the chapter describing his descent into the coal mines, he writes of how “your miner friends notice the stiffness of your walk and chaff you about it,” and so faintly undermines his stance of detachment by implying a degree of familiarity (28). Even here, though, his point is to distance himself from the men working in the pits.

That the narrator strives to *convey* this impression, of course, does not mean that his ‘voice’ is entirely free of fluctuating elements. As Victor Gollancz observes his Foreword to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, although Orwell insists at a number of points in the second half of the book that “he is speaking merely as devil’s advocate and saying what other people say, quite often and quite obviously he is really speaking *in propria persona*, or perhaps I had better say ‘in his own person’” (xix-xx). The stable, non-fluctuating middle-class perspective that the narrator seeks to project, in other words, does not accurately represent the ‘voice’ of Orwell in all its contradictory and, indeed, *fluctuating* complexity. Noting the influence of some of Orwell’s contradictions on the narrative, Gollancz remarks that while Orwell “calls himself a ‘half intellectual’ ... the truth is that he is at one and the same time an extreme intellectual and a violent anti-intellectual.” Moreover, “he is a frightful snob ... and a genuine hater of every form of snobbery” (xvi). Orwell’s seemingly unresolved contradictions, in combination with the obvious *political* agenda of *The Road to Wigan Pier* – *i.e.* its intent to influence middle-class readers to interrogate their *own* prejudices – work to create an element of fluctuation in the narrative that is, in effect, concealed by the narrator’s candour and honesty. Despite this evidence of a fluctuating voice in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, however, the text nonetheless reflects a newfound wariness in Orwell’s approach that simultaneously seems to trigger a recognition of the possibilities of *limiting* the scope of narrative perspective.

The text’s rejection of the strategy of adopting the voice of the *poor* man has typically been explained in one of two related ways, both of which, I would argue, are in some way inadequate to the task of addressing the complexities of Orwell’s evolving attitude toward representing the poor. The most common explanation given is the one that

is offered in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, just prior to the comments I have quoted above. This is where Orwell makes a point of distinguishing the underclass of his first book from the working class in the north of England. “Tramps, beggars, criminals and social outcasts,” the narrator proclaims, “generally are very exceptional beings and no more typical of the working class as a whole than, say, the literary intelligentsia are typical of the bourgeoisie” (154). The world of tramps and social outcasts, Orwell seems to suggest, constitutes an impoverished class that is at the same time *class-less* in the sense that its poverty has an equalizing effect that erases any impression of difference between its assorted members. “Even when tramps are aware that you are of different origin from themselves,” his narrator insists, “it does not necessarily alter their attitude. From their point of view all that matters is that you, like themselves are ‘on the bum’” (155). “Once you are in that world and seemingly *of it*,” he continues, “it hardly matters what you have been in the past. It is a sort of world-within-a-world where everyone is equal, a small squalid democracy” (155).

The working class in the north of England emerges in contrast as an essentially impenetrable entity. “When you come to the normal working class,” the narrator declares, “the position is totally different” (155). The middle-class man trying to gain a grasp of working class life finds himself unable to infiltrate working class community in the same way he had infiltrated the networks of the urban poor. Efforts to penetrate working class culture, Orwell’s narrator insists, invariably confront a world that is closed to all but its own inhabitants. Practically speaking, the middle-class man, however well-intentioned, must remain outside its borders:

To begin with, there is no short cut into their midst. You can become a tramp simply by putting on the right clothes and going to the nearest casual ward, but you can't become a navvy or a coal-miner. You couldn't get a job as a navvy or a coal-miner even if you were equal to the work. Via Socialist politics you can get in touch with the working-class intelligentsia, but they are hardly more typical than tramps or burglars. For the rest you can only mingle with the working class by staying in their houses as a lodger, which always has a dangerous resemblance to 'slumming'. (155-6)

This idiosyncratic characterization of the working class has offended some readers, especially on the political left, who detect an attitude of reactionary class snobbery in Orwell's refusal to include in his definition the working class's most politically active members (*i.e.* its intelligentsia). Raymond Williams, for one, objects to the fact that Orwell's encounters with active socialists in the north (documented in the diary that provides the raw material for *The Road to Wigan Pier*) are "simply omitted" from the book (52). The assertion that "Socialism in its developed form is a theory confined entirely to the middle-class" (*Wigan Pier* 173), Williams contends, should therefore be understood less as good-faith analysis of Socialism than as a gesture that contributes to the creation of the Orwell persona – that is, of the "isolated writer exposed to a suffering but unconnecting world" (Williams 53). Beatrix Campbell, following Williams, complains that, "in *Wigan Pier*, Orwell seeks to sum up the working class in the archetypal proletarian group – the miners" (66). Campbell's critique is based largely on the somewhat reductive opinion that Orwell is a "misogynist," but her argument has the



merit of drawing attention to the way that Orwell's notion of the working class is rendered somewhat narrow by his fascination with coal-mining, that "most masculinised profession" (66).

The narrowness of Orwell's definition of the "normal working class" may explain his conviction that it cannot be infiltrated by a member of the middle class, but it does not adequately explain why he eschews the fluctuating narration that frequently surfaces in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In the earlier book, after all, there are numerous instances when the narrator adopts the voice of the tramp without quite relinquishing his middle-class affiliation. Orwell resists this sort of move altogether in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, however, even though his contacts with working class socialists and his stays in coal-miner's homes likely suggested many possibilities for shifting perspective. Instead, he resorts to a strategy of isolated detachment in which the possibility of ventriloquial narration is closed off entirely by a self-admonishing insistence on the absolute *difference* of the Other. The "normal working class" perspective is so foreign to the sensibilities of the middle-class observer, the text suggests, that the effort of representing it should not be undertaken. Given Orwell's previous willingness to experiment with multiple narrative perspectives, this strategy marks a surprising departure that suggests not an outright rejection of multiple perspective but rather a dialectically comparable exploration of limited perspective. Much as he sets a range of voices in motion in *Down and Out in Paris in and London* to demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining a detached middle-class perspective in the face of an altered network of influences, so in *The Road to Wigan Pier* he maintains the middle-class perspective to a fault as a way of demonstrating the constructedness of that pose.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, a number of readers have detected a tendency towards Dostoyevskian heteroglossia in Orwell's work. Fowler, for instance, notes the "plurality of individual and class voices" in operation, particularly in Orwell's novels. Orwell's narratives, he contends, frequently display an "orientation towards the language and views of characters whose values are alien to those of the central narrating point of view" (89). Lorraine Saunders, also focussing primarily on the novels, asserts the presence of a "distinct authorial consciousness" in Orwell, but she too finds in his works a proliferation of "narrative voices, which are subject to continual shifts in psychological perspective and narratorial positioning" (43; 41). The apparent turn towards a strictly monological approach to narration in *The Road to Wigan Pier* thus demands some consideration. Certainly, non-fiction poses different challenges (and opportunities) for the writer, but *The Road to Wigan Pier* is not easily relegated to that category. Noting the "inaccuracies and fabrications" that appear in the first half of the book, Robert Pearce, for one, argues that "it should be treated with caution and scepticism by historians," and that "several portions of part I should be considered little more than fiction" (412; 414). I do not join Pearce in seeing this as a flaw in *The Road to Wigan Pier*; however, his observations speak to the fact that the book is undeniably 'literary' in character and so should be read with an alertness to Orwell's specifically 'literary' strategies. Orwell's insistence in the book on the radical *difference* of the working class, as well as his claim that the working class cannot be infiltrated in the same way that the world of tramps and outcasts can be, should be understood in this light: as part of a larger narrative strategy and not simply as uncomplicated empirical observation.

One of the principal aims of this strategy is to establish the element of conjecture as a central feature of the narrator's rhetoric. By insisting on the essential impenetrability of the working class, the narrator foregrounds the limitations of his perspective and in effect forces himself into a posture of conjecture. The advantage of this rhetorical position is that it brings into play the interpretive faculties of the narrator. Whereas in *Down and Out in Paris and London* the narrator's attempts to capture the essence of poverty rest primarily upon a claim to the authority of experience, in *The Road to Wigan Pier* the most penetrating insights emerge through interpretation of the scenes of impoverished working class life. The text does not assert the narrator's limited knowledge exactly, but rather, more subtly, it highlights the narrator's conviction that he is barred from knowing the working class from the inside and so must resort to 'reading' the working class from a point of relative detachment.

This shift in approach from the earlier book marks an increased attention to what Margery Sabin describes as the "mediated, partial, and imaginative construction" that always characterizes "the representation of society's Other" ("In Search of Subaltern Consciousness" 177). In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Sabin contends, Orwell mobilizes the rhetoric of conjecture for a precise political purpose: "When [he]. . . presumes to know what the woman he sees from the train knows, he is intent on challenging comfortable middle-class commonplaces that the poor 'don't mind' their status. His mind-reading, in other words, is set against what he feels is the complacent denial of mind that underlies social indifference to the poor among his contemporaries" (179). Without contesting Sabin's point, I would add that Orwell's strategy of employing a rhetoric of conjecture in *The Road to Wigan Pier* does more than simply "challenge" middle-class prejudices; it

also dramatizes the middle-class individual's sense of distance from the working class, even as the narrator attempts to bridge that distance by conjecturing on a shared sentiment between himself and the woman. The rhetorical posture of the narrator – a deeply interested observer who nonetheless stands apart from the scenes he witnesses (and which he must interpret to make sense of) – can thus be understood as a kind of thinly-veiled mask of professional detachment. The narrator inhabits the point of view of the middle-class witness (epitomized by the journalist, a profession that functions as a clear signifier of middle-classness in *Down and Out in Paris and London*) so that he can demonstrate the imaginative leap required to bridge the distance between the classes.

Certainly, in the example offered by Sabin – the much discussed passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in which Orwell describes from the vantage point of a moving train a woman poking a stick into a clogged drainpipe – there is evidence of a masquerading impulse that is far more subtle than anything found in *Down and Out in Paris in London*. Indeed, among the many symbolic characteristics that have been attributed to the train window through which Orwell frames the scene, we might add the mask. As a membrane separating the observer from the ostensible reality of his observations, the train window is certainly mask-like in the sense that it partially conceals the observer's presence from the object of his scrutiny and at the same time profoundly influences his conception of himself as a detached witness. As numerous commentators have noted, some of the descriptions found in Orwell's diary of his travels to the north differ significantly from the versions that appear in published form in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The most frequently cited of these departures from the raw material of the diary is the description of the impoverished young woman seen from the train window. In the diary entry, in fact,

Orwell comes across the woman while he is “passing up a horrible squalid side-alley” (*CEJL* 1. 177). A sense of proximity defines the encounter, and the observer, moving through the crowded slum on foot, virtually stumbles upon the scene. Indeed, no sooner does Orwell pause to consider the scene before him than his reveries are interrupted by a kind of stirring to consciousness of the observed object. He writes:

I thought how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling in the gutter in a back-alley in Wigan, in the bitter cold, prodding a stick up a blocked drain. At that moment she looked up and caught my eye, and her expression was as desolate as I have ever seen; it struck me that she was thinking just the same thing as I was. (*CEJL* 1. 177-8)

In the version of this incident that appears in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the eye-contact between the narrator and the woman disappears: “She looked up as the train passed,” the narrator writes, “and I was almost near enough to catch her eye” (18). In a sense this marks a conceptual retreat, from the exposure of being unmasked as a voyeur who literally walks among the poor to an imagined position of detachment. Orwell adjusts the perspective, in other words, to *increase* the impression of distance and of the necessity for interpretation, a move that has some logical affinity with the perspectival adjustments that he makes in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, except that he now retreats from the poor’s point of view instead of adopting it as his own. Meanwhile, the impoverished woman is drawn into the perspective of the middle-class individual; she is perceived to think as a person of middle-class origin would think when confronted with such dismal circumstances. Sabin argues, reasonably enough, that “if one accepts that the book is *not* to be assessed as the detached, objective document that historical scholarship might

prefer, Orwell's ambivalences and visions can have their own value" ("Outside/Inside" 249). Certainly, there is abundant evidence to suggest that the text is not an "objective" account, but the narrator (in the first half of the book, at least) in many respects fashions himself as a "detached" witness in the sense of being *removed* or *disconnected* from the subjects of his observations; and Orwell exploits this element of detachment as a rhetorical device in much the same way that he had earlier exploited full immersion into the life of tramps in *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

An additional effect of the introduction of detachment as a rhetorical strategy is that the narrator's observations seem to acquire an ethnographic dimension. By freezing the woman in a framed image<sup>45</sup> as he departs on the train, the narrator effectively makes the woman a culturally representative figure.<sup>46</sup> "She had a round pale face," he writes, "the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery" (18). As Keith Williams observes of the altered version of the scene that appears in the book (and specifically of its placement at the *end* of the first chapter), "the image's relocation [gives] it more intense poetic connotations. Placing it at the end of Orwell's 'participant observation' of Wigan life [makes] it representative of the experience" (171). Corresponding with this strategic editing, Williams contends, is "a new emphasis on the anonymous woman's typicality" (171). In other words, the text has

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<sup>45</sup> In his analysis of *The Road to Wigan Pier* as an example of "Post/Modern Documentary" in the 1930s, Keith Williams argues that Orwell's book functions as a commentary (and critique) on the documentary movement in the 1930s, particularly its assumptions about being able to effect social change by 'capturing' reality with the lens of a camera. Orwell, Williams writes, "takes this startling snapshot from a train window – a transparency framing the woman exactly like a lens, but also a barrier to closer contact. . . It was an implicit admission that intertextual, camera-eyed witnessing of facts was not in itself enough to dismantle class-barriers" (171).

<sup>46</sup> Like Williams, Laura Marcus also sees *The Road to Wigan Pier* in dialogue with the documentary film movement of the 1930s. In particular, she sees the "representative" aspect of Orwell's depiction of the impoverished woman as typical of the genre. "The modes of synecdoche and metonymy," she writes, "in which parts stand for wholes, lie at the heart of the grammar of the medium, as contemporary writers were defining it: not only is vision fragmented into new parts and wholes but the single image can be imbued with symbolic and representative status" (203).

been manipulated in such a way that it comes to resemble in certain key respects an ethnographic account of the working class communities of the north.

This element has not escaped the notice of some readers of the book,<sup>47</sup> which is not surprising considering the fact that Orwell himself makes explicit the notion that the working classes of the north appear as a ‘foreign’ culture to middle-class southerners. (“I went among them as a foreigner.”) Indeed, it is important to recognize the degree to which the foreignness of the working class functions in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a trope that sets up a nuanced analysis of middle-class perception. As Patricia Rae points out, “Orwell’s perception of the analogy between British worker and colonial subject was far from original. The insight that the working class constituted a foreign country within Britain went back at least as far as 1845, with Disraeli’s declaration that Britain contained ‘two nations, Rich and Poor’ ( 76). Thus Adam Piette’s suggestion that *The Road to Wigan Pier* “is an essay on the resemblances between the great subject peoples of the Empire and the working-class population in the England of the Depression,” oversimplifies the rhetorical thrust of the book by reading the ethnographic parallel as Orwell’s central point rather than as a device that he uses to draw attention to the nature of the narrator’s interpretive impulses. For Rae, this manifests itself as a critique of ethnography itself. She writes:

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<sup>47</sup> While Patricia Rae asserts that “only Philip Toynbee has suggested the ethnographic monograph” as an appropriate generic classification for *The Road to Wigan Pier*, even the earliest responses to the book hint at an alertness to this dimension. In a *New Statesman* review, for instance, Hamish Miles writes, “I am no anthropologist, but I doubt whether the most rudimentary peoples of the New Hebrides or Papua could produce anything to match [Orwell’s description of a full chamber pot beneath the breakfast table at the Brookers’ lodging house]” (Quoted in Meyers 111). Admittedly, however, Toynbee’s comments offer a more direct generic classification in the sense that Rae means. The book, he writes, “reads like a report brought back by some humane anthropologist who has just returned from studying the conditions of an oppressed tribe in Borneo” (Quoted in Meyers 118).

Orwell appears to have taken seriously the project of representing Wigan as if it were an African village, or at least a village in the British colonies. [But] there was a key difference between the parallel developed in his text and the one inhabiting the productions of many of his predecessors and contemporaries. As his account of his first perception of the analogy indicates, he deployed the analogy . . . with a view to *critiquing* the parallel relationships between colonizer and colonized, middle-class *voyeur* and working man (or woman). Ultimately. . . his goal was to criticize ‘colonialist’ attitudes implicit in the ethnographic exercise itself.

(77)

Rae’s contention that *The Road to Wigan Pier* reflects a critique of ethnographic authority<sup>48</sup> coheres with the argument I make in Chapter 1. I would add, however, that this critique is in an important sense a rhetorical pose that draws attention not only to the narrator’s middle-class prejudices (as both Sabin and Rae in their different ways point out), but also to the constructed nature of the very perspective that exhibits these prejudices. The *journalistic* and the *ethnographic* are perspectives that are to a significant extent contrived by the author George Orwell. They are *masks* or *disguises* that he uses to achieve precise rhetorical ends. The middle-class narrator’s impression of the impenetrability of the “normal working class” is determined by this constructed perspective.

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<sup>48</sup> Central to Rae’s argument, following James Clifford’s assessment that “Anthropology *still awaits its Conrad*,” (see note 5 in Chapter 1) is the idea that “anthropology *has* had its Conrad – in Orwell.” “*The Road to Wigan Pier*,” she writes, is Orwell’s *Heart of Darkness*: first, in Clifford’s sense – it is a bluntly honest portrait of a fieldworker’s responses – and second, in a meta-anthropological sense, because it shares *Heart of Darkness*’s perspective on the general syndrome of ethnographic hypocrisy” (74).



The suggestion that *The Road to Wigan Pier* simultaneously contains both journalistic or ethnographic perspectives *and* a critique of these perspectives rests in large part, of course, on the fact that the book is split, between an account of Orwell's travels in the north of England in the book's first half and the self-reflexive discussion of his position as an "lower upper-middle class" observer in its second half. In other words, the constructed detachment of the first half of the book is in effect deconstructed in the second half of the book. The autobiographical narrative of the second half, especially those passages that examine the issue of class prejudice and admit to its insidious influence on Orwell himself, functions, as Rae observes, as a critique of the detached ethnographic perspective that is offered in the first half of the book. Indeed, much as *The Road to Wigan Pier* seems to distance itself from some of the key ideas put forth in *Down and Out in Paris in London*, so its autobiographical second half seems to repudiate the ostensibly detached narrative of the first half of the book. This pattern of repudiation is itself further evidence, of course, of a strategy of using multiple perspectives to interrogate the subject matter of Orwell's choosing. The repudiating voice that so frequently turns up in his narratives functions, almost by definition, as yet another perspective – albeit an ever-evolving one that encompasses the characteristics of cynicism, candour, and growth.

If the repudiating voice reflects a recurring tendency in Orwell's work, however, the cultivation of a stable middle-class narrative voice that pointedly resists lapsing into the role of ventriloquist of the working class nonetheless marks a strategic transition with respect to Orwell's sustained engagement with the related issues of disguise and transformation. Although the move has the appearance of a rejection of the legitimacy of

disguise, it in fact reveals a more subtle and sophisticated approach to altering one's characteristics for the purposes of inhabiting an altered perspective. By dismissing his "masquerading" experiences as "absurd," Orwell *disguises* his ongoing openness to the idea that inhabiting a costume of sorts, even if it be a writerly persona, might indeed effect a transformation.

The explorations of narrative perspective and the corresponding emergence of a writerly persona in these works anticipate issues that I will discuss in the subsequent chapters. The figure of 'Orwell' comes to occupy a central position in the author's non-fictional work, and yet, as the shifting approaches to the question of adopting a figurative mask in the two texts that I have examined here should indicate, the 'Orwell' persona is by no means an entirely stable entity. The figure will continue to evolve as his author's rhetorical and political agendas change over time.

**CHAPTER 4:**  
*HOMO SERIOSUS, HOMO RHETORICUS,*  
 AND THE DIALECTIC OF EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION  
 IN *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA*

Richard Lanham's well-known contrast, in *The Motives of Eloquence*, between the antithetical worldviews of *homo rhetoricus* (rhetorical man) and *homo seriusus* (serious man) echoes a tension that runs through George Orwell's *oeuvre* and that reaches an apex of productive opposition in his third book of reportage, *Homage to Catalonia* (1937). According to Lanham, "the Western self has from the beginning been composed of a shifting and perpetually uneasy combination of *homo rhetoricus* and *homo seriusus*, of a social self and a central self" (6). The serious view, Lanham explains, embraces a chain of "serious premises" that suggest an understanding of the world that is ultimately free of contingency. These are: "Every man possesses a central self, an irreducible identity. These selves combine into a single, homogeneously real society which constitutes a referent reality for the men living in it. This referent society is in turn contained in a physical nature itself referential, standing 'out there,' independent of man" (1). The "rhetorical view of life," Lanham argues, rejects these premises out of hand; indeed, it "threatens the serious view at every point" (6). Rhetorical man's "sense of identity, his self, depends on the reassurance of daily histrionic re-enactment. He is thus centered in time and concrete local event" (4). For *homo rhetoricus*, Lanham insists, "reality is what is accepted as reality," and in sharp contrast to *homo seriusus*, his understanding of the world is at every turn shaped by contingency. "Rhetorical man," Lanham concludes, "is trained not to discover reality but to manipulate it" (4).

*Homage to Catalonia* articulates a dynamic interaction between these two distinct worldviews. On the one hand, the book laments (and combats) the encroachment of manipulated reality into the political sphere; on the other, it recognizes that any meaningful engagement with reality involves interpretation, which, by its nature, tends to destabilize any fixed notion of reality. At first glance, this tension appears as a variation of the “perpetually uneasy combination” of *homo rhetoricus* and *homo seriusus* that Lanham suggests is essential to the constitution of the Western self: Orwell offers a hybrid epistemological and ontological system in which an endlessly malleable self operates against the backdrop of an irreducible referent reality. The text traces a transformation of the self through its built-in contrast between its youthful and experienced narrators, and at the same time announces its affiliation with a *serious* view of reality by repeatedly stating its aim to tell the ‘truth’ – an aim that Orwell himself acknowledges is lofty, particularly with respect to documenting the events of the Spanish Civil War.

My intention in this chapter is to examine *Homage to Catalonia* as a complex and productively ambivalent intervention in the *serious-rhetorical* dialectic. The enduring authority of the text, I argue, as a reliable document that chronicles a man’s experience of war, rests in large part on the rigorousness with which Orwell wrestles with the *serious-rhetorical* tension in the book. To the extent that, as Lanham insists, the “rhetorical view of life...conceives reality as fundamentally dramatic, man as fundamentally a role player,” it is clear that a wary embrace of the rhetorical view can be detected in Orwell’s work as early as the Burmese writings, where the drama of imperialism and the performance of participation in the power of empire are perceived to cast a pernicious

influence on the experience of living (4). In *Homage to Catalonia*, he further explores some of the implications of this tension by setting up a roughly analogous tension between political rhetoric and personal experience. The political backdrop of the Spanish Civil War and the personal narrative are juxtaposed in the text in a tension that emerges ultimately as the central concern of the work. *Homage to Catalonia*, I contend, does not only contain antithetical worldviews; it interrogates them in their turn, teasing out their weaknesses and strengths, as it offers a comprehensive account of the experience of an individual struggling to interpret the world. Although *Homage to Catalonia* sits, paradoxically, as the non-fictional work in Orwell's *oeuvre* that most eloquently dramatizes the difficulty of interpreting 'reality' with precision, it simultaneously asserts the authority of interpretation as an essential dimension of the individual's engagement with experience. The dynamic opposition that unfolds in the text between a *serious* and a *rhetorical* conception of reality manifests itself most pointedly in the way that the text asserts interpretation as a crucial element of the individual's response to personal experience.

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To the extent that *Homage to Catalonia* stands as a sustained argument against the cynical manipulation of reality for political gain, the book clearly aligns itself with the epistemological system associated with *homo seriosus*. One of the text's primary objectives is to assert the existence of a "referent reality" with respect to the Spanish Civil War, and Orwell's description of the fighting in Barcelona, for instance, though prefaced by an admission that "it will never be possible to get a completely accurate and unbiased account," announces itself nonetheless as an attempt to get to the bottom of

“what actually happened” (150). One of the book’s underlying premises is that events themselves (in contrast to their accounts) stand “independent of man” in the sense that they are impervious to rhetorical manipulation. A “completely accurate” account may always be elusive, the text suggests, but this does not negate the fact that some concrete, referential sequence of events has “actually happened.” Orwell reiterates this quintessentially *serious* position in his 1942 essay “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” where he reports having once asserted to Arthur Koestler that ““History stopped in 1936””:

We were both thinking of totalitarianism in general, [he continues,] but more particularly of the Spanish Civil War. Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. (*CEJL* 2: 256)

The sense of a totalitarian threat infuses this retrospective assessment of the rhetorical climate of the Spanish Civil War with a level of pessimism that exceeds anything found in *Homage to Catalonia*, but in its insistence on the existence of irreducible “event” and “fact” that are “out there,” beyond the influence of human accounting, the earlier text is no less adamant in its endorsement of the *serious* view of life.

Despite its apparent adherence to the worldview of *homo seriusus*, however, *Homage to Catalonia* shows itself to be the work of *homo rhetoricus*<sup>49</sup> in several keys

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<sup>49</sup> Peter L. Oesterreich objects that the term *homo rhetoricus* as it is used by Lanham “is oriented toward the artificially trained orator and is too narrow” (57). Oesterreich means to argue (following Nietzsche) that “the universality of rhetoric does not imply that every human being is a well-versed orator.” Rather, he writes, rhetoric is “situated in language itself” (50). The appeal of Lanham’s model for my analysis of

respects. The argument for the existence of a referent social reality is crucially qualified in the text by a recognition that “what actually happened” is always hidden beneath a nearly impenetrable sheen of rhetoric. *Reality*, the book shows, becomes for all practical purposes inaccessible the moment it has passed, and so we must always settle for a rhetorical approximation of “what actually happened.” Moreover, the fine-tuning of the construction of the “Orwell” persona reveals a strong tendency in the author towards “histrionic re-enactment.” That is to say, the movement from innocence to experience that is tracked in the narrative of *Homage to Catalonia* marks only the latest chapter in a writing career that chronicles the emergence of a rhetorically-created identity. The transformation of the man who was once Eric Blair into the literary figure “George Orwell” – from “odious little snob” (as he puts it in *The Road to Wigan Pier*), to reluctant Imperial Policeman, to tramp in disguise, to miners’ advocate, and finally to soldier of the revolution – can be read, among other things, as a rejection of the very idea of a “central self [and] an irreducible identity.” Rhetorical man, Lanham writes, “assumes a natural agility in changing orientations.... From birth, almost, he has dwelt not in a single value-structure but in several” (4). In obvious ways, this is a fitting description of the evolving figure of “Orwell”; and the self-mythologizing that characterizes his book about the Spanish Civil War, however modest and understated, reflects an enduring impulse towards a *rhetorical* view of life, in which the self, far from being irreducible, can be endlessly (and whimsically) recreated.

The suggestion that Orwell embodies the characteristics of both *homo seriousus* and *homo rhetoricus* goes against the grain of much Orwell criticism. For better and

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Orwell lies precisely in its narrowness, however; Orwell *is* a well-versed orator, and his conscious embrace of rhetoric as an interpretive tool, *i.e.* as something that facilitates a *persuasive* account of reality, works in productive tension with his conviction that a concrete reality exists outside of rhetorical tampering.

worse, Orwell has been characterized as a *serious* man who is wary of rhetoric. In part, this is because he himself consistently casts rhetoric in pejorative terms. As Simon Dentith observes, “associating Orwell with rhetoric” is something that he “would have been keen to repudiate, to judge by his own admittedly casual uses of the word” (203). “In various contexts,” Dentith writes, “[Orwell] can contrast ‘high-flown rhetoric’ to ‘brutal coarseness’ as the two extremes of the tonal range of English, can refer disparagingly to a ‘rhetorical trick’, and suggest an equivalence between ‘magnificent rhetorical verse’ and ‘pieces of ‘resounding nonsense’” (203).<sup>50</sup> These are, as Dentith points out, casual references that do not necessarily reflect a strict adherence to a worldview. Nonetheless, together with the scathing critiques of political rhetoric found in the late satires, Orwell’s comments have led a range of critics to categorize him as defiantly anti-rhetorical and to align him with the *serious* view of life.

Somewhat ironically, this designation has produced a split of a different sort in Orwell criticism: while some have celebrated his anti-rhetorical stance, others find in it the source of Orwell’s limitations as a political thinker. In his influential introduction to *Homage to Catalonia*, Lionel Trilling casts Orwell’s aversion to rhetoric and theoretical language in nearly heroic terms. “At a time,” Trilling writes, “when most intellectuals still thought of politics as a nightmare abstraction, pointing to the fearfulness of the nightmare as evidence of their sense of reality, Orwell was using the imagination of a man whose hands and eyes and whole body were part of his thinking apparatus” (xvi-xvii). In the distinctive pose of the cold warrior, Trilling argues that “the characteristic error of the middle-class intellectual of modern times is his tendency to abstractness and absoluteness, his reluctance to connect idea to fact” (xv-xvi). In contrast, Trilling insists,

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<sup>50</sup> These quotations are from *CEJL* III, p. 41; III, p. 262; and IV, p. 346 (Dentith).



the man who writes *Homage to Catalonia* is “interested only in telling the truth” and is therefore committed more to “the fact” than to “the abstraction” (xxii-xxiii).

Orwell’s perceived preference for the visceral over the theoretical has not always been greeted by such enthusiasm. For some readers, especially among what Christopher Norris calls the “post-war Left,” Orwell’s “deep-grained empiricist conviction: that intellect can only corrupt and distort the certitudes of common-sense knowledge,” represents an obstacle to productive utopian thinking (Norris 260). Orwell’s apparently strict adherence to a *serious* view of reality, the thinking goes, suggests an anti-intellectualism that restricts his political imagination. “From the standpoint of ‘Continental’ Marxism,” Norris writes, “[Orwell’s] case can be diagnosed as displaying all the blindspots and irrational regressions of empiricist ideology” (261). Moreover, “the empiricist conviction that reality exists independently of the mind which perceives or interprets it,” is an argument that “with Orwell takes a particularly bluff and dogmatic form” (Norris 243). Thus Orwell’s “Enlightenment inheritance,” as Dentith calls it, with its privileging of fact over theory, offends the utopian sensibilities of a certain variety of intellectual. Raymond Williams, for instance, in a well-known dismissal of Orwell’s celebrated honesty, scoffs at his “successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it” (quoted in Norris 242).<sup>51</sup> A similar mindset guides Terry Eagleton’s assertion (quoted in Chapter

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<sup>51</sup> As Christopher Norris points out, Williams’ rather violent reaction to Orwell betrays what might be considered a self-consciousness of his own adherence to a quintessentially British empiricism. In Norris’s analysis, “the causes of [Williams’s reaction to Orwell]. . . make up a whole complex chapter in the history of post-war British socialism” (261). Christopher Hitchens is far less forgiving of Williams’ ultimate rejection of Orwell. In his discussion of the left-wing critical response to Orwell, he singles out Raymond Williams for his dishonesty in interpreting Orwell’s positions. Of Williams’ statement, for instance, that Orwell was “a humane man who communicated an extreme of inhuman terror; a man committed to decency who actualized a distinctive squalor,” Hitchens complains that “what Williams means to imply, but is not brave enough to say, is that Orwell ‘invented’ the picture of totalitarian collectivism” (48, 50).

1[note 1]) that Orwell “suffered from the empiricist illusion that what was real was what you could smell with your own nose and feel with your own fingers” (“Reach-Me-Down Romantic”).<sup>52</sup>

As varied as these responses are, they share a tendency to downplay the *rhetorical* dimension of Orwell’s writing. Indeed, as Dentith observes, the Marxist critique of Orwell’s elevation of ‘the fact’ and the cold warrior’s celebration of the ‘plain speaking’ man are *both* “concerned with the absence of any analytical or theoretical perspective which might order or make more general sense of the empirical information which the text contains” (217).<sup>53</sup> Although responses to Orwell’s empiricist leanings vary widely, they share in common the assumption that his worldview leans decisively towards the *serious*. A potential problem with such readings, of course, is that they tend to cast Orwell as a man whose attitude towards rhetoric is settled, and ignore the dynamic ambivalences that characterize his treatment of the subject in his writings. They unduly emphasize the role that experience itself plays in generating authority for the text, as though the interpretation of that experience were simply a matter of recording it. With respect to *Homage to Catalonia*, especially, such readings ignore the degree to which the book asserts the authority of political interpretation as an essential element of the individual’s experience.

Not all readers, of course, have embraced the view that Orwell’s encounters with experience are unmediated. Dentith, for one, questions the degree to which “empiricist

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<sup>52</sup> Written in 2003, Eagleton’s remarks demonstrate that this split in Orwell criticism has endured long after the Cold War, which provided the initial context for the dispute.

<sup>53</sup> Dentith specifically compares Trilling’s remarks on Orwell with Robert Stradling’s contribution to the largely unsympathetic collection of essays in *Orwell and the Left*, ed. Christopher Norris.

Orwell” is a tag that applies to the author’s rendering of experience in *Homage to Catalonia*:

Is it the case...that the concrete and atomic facts of history are thought to yield a *universal* truth for Orwell? Rather these facts, particularly of the May 1937 street-fighting, are ordered in a particular, if rather confusing, narrative, and are explained, if at all, by the malign operations of the Communist Party and its allies. In other words, the absence of any more general or analytical account does not yield *no* explanation: that absence is filled by a combination of the cock-up theory and the conspiracy theory. Both these ‘theories’ of historical explanation – neither of them, surely, simply wrong – are congruous with Orwell’s rhetorical stance throughout the book, that is, with his stance of the plain man, with his own biases duly allowed for, trying to make sense of the events that happen across his path.

(217)

Dentith’s contention that Orwell’s effort to get to the bottom of the Barcelona fighting involves the adoption of a specific “rhetorical stance” suggests a compromise in Orwell’s thinking that challenges the view that *Homage to Catalonia* is dogmatically empiricist in its orientation. The tension between *homo seriusus* and *homo rhetoricus* is resolved, in Dentith’s reading, in the rhetoric of the ‘plain man’, who is both a seeker of hard fact and a rhetorical construction.

In an important sense, however, the rhetorically-constructed “plain man” argument mirrors the ‘empiricist Orwell’ argument in a way that detracts from the complexity of the book. Williams, after all, had described Orwell’s ‘plain man’ as “an

impersonation,” which is another way of saying that it is a rhetorical stance. Thus, while Dentith’s interpretation admirably teases out some of the nuances of Orwell’s practice of rhetoric, it does not capture the extent to which the *rhetorical* and the *serious* remain in “uneasy” tension in the book, and the way that tension is, in fact, foregrounded. The suggestion that a certain *congruousness* defines the theoretical aspects of *Homage to Catalonia* and its “plain speaking” narrator overstates the degree to which these antithetical modes exist in harmony in the text. Rather than conveying a harmonious resolution of antithetical perspectives, the juxtaposition in the text of a narrative of personal experience and detached, journalistic observations (of the political context in which that experience unfolds) instead brings to light a tension that is inherent to the problem of representing experience.

Asserting the rhetorically-constructed plain man, *i.e.* the “Orwell” persona, as the device that resolves the central epistemological and ontological tensions of the text thus by-passes the way that these tensions remain productively *unresolved*. A similar problem emerges from Richard Filloy’s reading of Orwell’s plain man persona as a “rhetorical construct” that reflects the creation of “an effective and enduring ethos in [Orwell’s] writing” (58; 48). “The character he created,” Filloy argues, “is different in important ways from the classical conception of an effective ethos for the rhetor...[and] the creation of this character was not a natural outcome of Orwell’s ‘real’ personality but the result of expert rhetorical and literary craftsmanship” (48-49). Contrasting the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* with Orwell’s rhetorical approach, Filloy observes that, in the classical sense, a successful *ethos* invariably involved traits which “set the speaker above the audience and thus made him a good guide for their opinions and actions.” The gifted rhetor, in

Aristotelian terms, “was a naturally superior sort, able to gain the audience’s assent partly through a display of his personal superiority...[and] from its beginnings, ethos as a means of proof depended on the speaker’s ability to seem a special sort of person” (51). Orwell, by contrast, “persuaded not on the strength of an exceptional personality but on the ordinariness of a commonplace one...By making his reports those of an ordinary person rather than those of a great man, he allowed his audience to put themselves in his position without imagining the impossible” (52). In this respect, Filloy concludes, Orwell’s “‘rhetoric of personality’ [is] especially well-suited...to the century of the common man” (49).

As with Dentith’s reading, Filloy’s analysis sheds light on a complex dimension of Orwell’s rhetorical approach, even as it by-passes a crucial element of the argument of *Homage to Catalonia*. Whereas Dentith finds harmony where none exists, Filloy underestimates the sophistication of Orwell’s political message. The rhetorical thrust of the book is aligned too closely in Filloy’s account to the sentiments of a rhetorically-constructed “ordinary person,” and he does not consider the ways that the text dramatizes an interplay between the “common man” perspective and a more sophisticated interpretive voice. The “basic arguments that Orwell advances,” Filloy writes, “are not new or startling. By themselves, they have little power to persuade most audiences” (50). He then goes on to offer a summary of the arguments that are advanced in Orwell’s work:

About the Spanish republicans [Orwell] tells us that ends do not justify means which pervert those ends. About the British Raj he reports that empire is unjust and corrupts imperialists and subjects alike. Of the unemployed he says that they are not poor and dirty by choice but as the

result of a system which forces those conditions upon them. Put in this way, it is easy to see why Orwell has no great reputation as an original political thinker. (50)

The mistake here is to assume that these are the *only* arguments that Orwell makes in his non-fictional narratives. Filloy is right to claim that “one personal story well told may be more affecting than many a statistical sampling,” but he is off the mark in suggesting that Orwell’s primary aim is to convince his readership of “commonplace” political positions (50). In *Homage to Catalonia*, especially, the “personal story well told” is itself interrogated and revealed as an insufficient measure of the meaning of experience. In privileging the “common man” persona in the narrative, Filloy aligns Orwell’s political thought to a populist simplicity that does not do justice to the political sophistication of the text.

Indeed, in its basic outlines, Filloy’s argument is a variation of an earlier one put forward by Williams, in which the superiority of Orwell’s non-fictional reportage is attributed to the emergence of the ‘Orwell’ figure, whom Williams deems “a successfully created character in every sense.” “Instead of diluting his consciousness through an intermediary,” Williams writes, “as the mode of fiction seemed to require, [Orwell] writes directly and powerfully about his whole experience. The prose is at once strengthened, as the alternation between an anxious impersonation and a passively impersonal observation gives way to a direct voice, in which there is more literary creation than in all the more conventionally ‘imaginative’ attempts” (49). Clearly, both Williams and Filloy admire the inventiveness of the rhetoric that results in the creation of

the “Orwell” persona,<sup>54</sup> but the emphasis they place on the cultivation of that persona has the effect of misconstruing the rhetorical thrust of *Homage to Catalonia* by not considering the ways that the book offers multiple perspectives. The narrator’s *temporary* adoption of the voice of the common man should not be perceived as the defining *ethos* of the book. If ‘Orwell’ is a creation, it is one that projects (rather than resolves) the tensions of the “divided Western self” that Lanham describes.

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The sense of a fluctuating attitude in *Homage to Catalonia* towards opposing epistemological and ontological systems is dramatized in the very structure of the narrative. The chapters of the book track a purposeful, back and forth shifting of emphasis that reflects an oscillation between a *serious* and a *rhetorical* understanding of the world. In certain chapters, the narrator focuses almost exclusively on the ‘facts’ of the events, while in others his attention is diverted to an assessment of their rhetorical accompaniment. What is most remarkable about this back and forth movement is the sharpness of the divisions between the chapters. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that the book’s chapters demarcate discrete units that strictly adhere to either a *serious* or a *rhetorical* worldview, there are, nonetheless, key markers that invite a scrutiny of the chapter divisions and that in turn reveal the unfolding of a *serious-rhetorical* dialectic. Indeed, in several instances, Orwell signals abrupt changes in the focus of the story with blunt interjections, as though it were his explicit purpose to highlight the seams in the narrative.

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<sup>54</sup> Filloy, more than Williams, makes a point of expressing his admiration for Orwell: “The insistence that Orwell’s appealing ethos be viewed as a rhetorical construct is not intended to demean him. On the contrary, it should enhance his literary reputation, for such an achievement bespeaks superb artistry. For this very reason, it is important not to accept Trilliing’s verdict [that Orwell was not a genius] at face value. If Orwell’s ethos is not a genius [sic], its creation may have been the work of one” (59).

Most obvious of these narrative interjections are those instances when the narrator addresses the reader directly to warn that he is about to embark on a discussion of politics. “If you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip,” he announces at the outset of chapter V. “I am trying to keep the political parts of this narrative in separate chapters for precisely that purpose” (46). He reiterates this cautionary note towards the end of chapter X: “As before,” he writes, “if you are not interested in political controversy and the mob of parties and sub-parties with their confusing names (rather like the names of the generals in a Chinese war), please skip” (149). In both these examples, the transition that is warned of sets up a contrast between sections of the narrative. Departing temporarily from the genre of the personal memoir, the narrator apologizes for his decision to introduce into his story a discussion of party politics. The closing lines of chapter X, in particular, convey a genuine distaste for the very prospect of having to wade through the mire of political rhetoric: “It is a horrible thing to have to enter into the details of inter-party polemics,” he laments; “it is like diving into a cesspool” (149).

On the face of it, these exhortations to “please skip” suggest a privileging in the narrative of one mode of interpreting reality and experience over another. The chapters devoted to analysis of the “political situation” are introduced with apparent reluctance; they are a grim necessity, the narrator implies, but they are less important than the concrete detail of the personal narratives that precede them. The political chapters require a special “interest”; they can be passed over altogether should the reader feel so inclined, which implies that these sections are not “essential” to the text as a whole. From a purely aesthetic perspective, Orwell later corroborates this hierarchy in “Why I Write,” where he



discusses the difficulty of “reconcil[ing] [his] ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us” (*CEJL* 1: 6).<sup>55</sup> In that essay, he refers to *Homage to Catalonia* specifically as a text whose aesthetic unity is compromised by the decision to include “a long chapter, full of newspaper quotations and the like, defending the Trotskyists who were accused of plotting with Franco.” “Clearly,” he admits, “such a chapter, which after a year or two would lose its interest for any ordinary reader, must ruin the book.” To the criticism, however, that he had “turned what might have been a good book into journalism,” Orwell insists that he “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” (*CEJL* 1: 6). As inspiration, he maintains, the political elements of the Spanish experience are crucial; aesthetically, they burden the narrative with topicality.

The *political/aesthetic* binary that Orwell addresses in “Why I Write” is not precisely the same, of course, as the *serious-rhetorical* dialectic that I identify in *Homage to Catalonia*, but the complex blurring of categories that he finds in his own motives for writing helps to make sense of how the Spanish book is structured. Just as “political purpose,” in Orwell’s estimation, weakens the book aesthetically but ultimately brings it into being, so his narrator’s professed reluctance to enter into discussions of party politics disguises the extent to which those parts of the narrative that do take political rhetoric as their subject operate in *productive* tension with the concrete ‘facts’ that are faithfully relayed in the chapters focussing on his personal experience. Orwell’s discussion of motive in “Why I Write” is deceptive in the sense that it hints at the possibility of

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<sup>55</sup> I discuss this essay at length in the next chapter.

aesthetic coherence were it not for the unfortunate intrusion into the narrative of an attention to political rhetoric. *Homage to Catalonia* is not merely motivated by injustices of political rhetoric, though; it is an inquiry into the very nature of political rhetoric and, specifically, into the ways it insidiously exerts an influence on the lives of individuals, especially those who are oblivious to it. Excising the ‘political’ content of *Homage to Catalonia* would undermine its exploration of a *simultaneous* unfolding of personal experience against a backdrop of often-unnoticed political rhetoric.

In fact, as Peter Davison points out, it was Orwell’s wish that, should a second edition of the book be published, extensive changes be made to the text, the most obvious being “the removal of chapters V and XI from the body of the book, transferring them as appendixes to the end of the book, where Orwell considered it was more appropriate to place historical and political discussion of what otherwise was a personal account of his experiences” (Davison 28-9). In his edition of Orwell’s *Complete Works*, Davison describes how he “endeavours to put into effect Orwell’s explicit instructions for the revision of *Homage to Catalonia* and to make these changes as discreetly as is practicable” (30). While Davison’s rationale for removing chapters V and XI from the body of the text adheres to Orwell’s instructions, however, the end result creates some confusion – inevitably, perhaps, because such excisions from the narrative were bound to create problems of coherence. In the opening paragraphs of the Davison-edited version of chapter V, for instance – *i.e.* the original chapter VI – the narrator emphasizes the boredom and inactivity that characterize life on the front lines. But in the original text, this description is explicitly set up as a contrast with the torrent of political activity that is described in the previous chapter (which is relegated to an appendix in Davison’s edition)

and that takes place unbeknownst to the troops. “Meanwhile,” the narrator laments at the opening of the original chapter VI, “the daily – more particularly nightly – round, the common task. Sentry-go, patrols, digging; mud, rain, shrieking winds, and occasional snow” (*Orwell in Spain* 64). This staccato cataloguing of concrete detail is in contrast with the ideological emphasis of the original chapter V, and so with the removal of that chapter the effect is lost altogether. Indeed, the excision means that when the narrator echoes his earlier sentiment by saying, “Meanwhile nothing happened, nothing ever happened,” the biting irony, that actually quite a lot has happened while the common soldiers wait for their orders, is also removed from the text. The use of “meanwhile” as a transitional phrase is rendered nonsensical.

The loss of this element of irony, I would argue, undermines a crucial element of the book. In this respect, I concur with Lynette Hunter, who argues that, “contrary to the writer’s fears, *Homage to Catalonia* gains and does not lose by those ‘intrusions’ of political discussion” (93), and with Margery Sabin, who asserts that the inclusion of chapters V and XI in the body of the text “is partially justified by the degree to which the intelligibility of Orwell’s final account of danger, violence and flight from Barcelona depends on more coherent understanding of the Spanish political situation than the brief intermittent comments within the narrative alone provide” (“Truths of Experience” 53-4). More than this, the decision to place the chapters at the end of the book as appendixes downplays the simultaneous unfolding of the political and the personal that is so deftly explored in the original narrative. In light of the multiple ways that the chapters augment the book’s central themes, Davison’s decision to follow Orwell’s instructions posthumously seems ill-conceived.

To suggest that Orwell was simply *wrong* in wanting to excise the political-historical material from the body of the text would be an oversimplification, of course. There is no denying that his instincts were at least partially sound, and that the assessment of the book that he offers in “Why I Write” has some merit. The chapters devoted to party politics *are*, in a sense, dead weight; they are dated and by no measure the most compelling parts of the narrative. That said, *Homage to Catalonia*’s strength and originality can be partially attributed to its ambiguous generic position: it is a document of political reportage that is both topical and enduring. This is something that Orwell could not really have anticipated – even if his statement in “Why I Write” about making “political writing into an art” suggests that he aspired to this end (*CEJL* 1: 5). He was, in other words, right that the minor details of those chapters might appear boring and topical in short order, but he could not see that the cataloguing of that material was essential to the dramatization of a dialectic. The political chapters emerge not simply as raw material, the excruciating details of party politics; they come down to us as evidence of a individual soldier turning his attention away from his own experience to the world of politics.

The invitations to “please skip” that appear near the beginnings of the original chapters V and VI thus serve a precise function in the narrative. As markers of a descent into the distasteful but ultimately very important world of politics, they subtly challenge the reader. In both instances, the instructions to skip a chapter are preceded by a qualifying phrase: “If you are not interested....” But the book makes quite clear that to be “not interested” in politics is to risk being surprised by its reach. In the opening pages, the narrator more or less announces that *Homage to Catalonia* will be centrally concerned

with the importance of being attentive to political nuance. Commenting on his initial impressions of revolutionary Barcelona, he declares, “I believed that things were as they appeared, that this was really a workers’ State and that the entire bourgeoisie had either fled, been killed, or voluntarily come over to the workers’ side; I did not realize that great numbers of well-to-do bourgeois were simply lying low and disguising themselves as proletarians for the time being” (5). The narrator’s retrospective suspicion of “things as they appeared” in Barcelona certainly answers the charge that Orwell suffered from an “empiricist illusion.” If, as Williams suggests, Orwell meant to cast himself as “the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way,” the book is clearly also intended as a critique of that man in the sense that it foregrounds from the outset the degree to which “experience” is mediated by what one “believes.” Experience, the text makes clear, is mediated through dynamic acts of interpretation that are always being reshaped by time and perspective.

As it turns out, of course, the narrator initially does “not realize” many things about the political situation in Spain, and so his personal narrative unfolds as a very limited perspective of the activity that is documented in the book. Part of the enduring appeal of *Homage to Catalonia* is that Orwell acknowledges that his account represents only one perspective, but the personal narrative is limited not only in the sense that Trilling celebrates – as a “truth. . .told in an exemplary way, quietly, simply, with due warning to the reader that it was only one man’s truth” (xxiii) – but in the sense of being *flawed* by the measure advanced by the text itself. The narrator’s initial failure to be attentive to the political climate of Spain nearly turns out, after all, to be a perilous error. In the chapters that follow the opening acknowledgment of his own admittedly naïve

interpretation of the Barcelona political climate, the narrator places the emphasis squarely on his personal experiences in Spain: his train journey to the Aragon front, the squalor of living in the trenches, the sheer boredom of awaiting orders. The invitation to skip chapter V that follows these descriptions of concrete personal experience stands in strategic counterpoint, for the narrator uses the occasion to admit again that “at the beginning [he] had ignored the political side of the war” (47). He chooses this moment in the narrative, we learn, to “give some account of the internal political situation of the Government side,” because in the chronology of his experience in Spain “it was only about this time that [politics] began to force itself upon [his] attention” (47). The obvious implication is: you may choose to “skip” the messy business of political rhetoric for a time (as the young narrator does), but soon enough it will forcefully assert its influence.

The instructions to “please skip” the chapters on party politics are in any case immediately contradicted by statements that in effect argue for their inclusion in the narrative.<sup>56</sup> In chapter V, Orwell complicates the gesture of trying to relegate the political elements of the narrative to a secondary (even optional) position by pointing out that “it would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish war from a purely military angle. No event in it, at any rate during the first year, is intelligible unless one has some grasp of the inter-party struggle that was going on behind the Government lines” (46). Similarly, at the end of chapter X, Orwell qualifies his distaste for the task of attending to the “details of inner-party politics” by asserting that “it is necessary to try and establish the truth, so far as it is possible” (149). “This squalid brawl in a distant city,” he writes, “is more important than might appear at first sight” (149). Again, the suggestion that facts

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<sup>56</sup> These statements provide further evidence that Davison’s decision (and Orwell’s wish) to relegate the chapters to appendixes was ill-considered.

may shift in appearance confutes Williams' charge that Orwell plays the role of the "plain man bumping into experience in an unmediated way." In this instance, a strongly worded argument for political engagement functions as a challenge both to the reader (to show the fortitude and imagination *not* to "skip" the political content) and to the validity of the strictly personal narrative as a viable approach to interpreting the world. The facts, the book implies, are (within parameters that are impossible to measure with certainty) malleable in the sense that their essential meaning can shift according to the surrounding circumstances – like an object whose colour changes depending on the light it is exposed to. The "squalid brawl" is an indisputable 'fact', but how it is interpreted, the measure of its importance, depends largely on the political context that surrounds it. The book's assertion of the authority of interpretation is founded on this principle.

So, while the "political situation" of Spain is effectively muted by the personal narrative of the opening chapters, this turns out to be an ironic imbalance because it is politics that eventually poses the greatest threat to the narrator. It is true that the personal narrative tracks the incident in which he is nearly killed by a bullet to the throat, but significantly the event is explained as a moment of bad luck, or pure chance. Describing the sensation of being struck from out of nowhere by a stray bullet, the narrator remarks, "I fancy you would feel much the same if you were struck by lightning"; he thus aligns the incident with a random act of nature that is impervious to the influence of human beings (185). A little while later, when he is convinced that he will die of the wound, he laments, "The stupid mischance infuriated me. The meaninglessness of it!" (186). And, finally, at the end of the chapter, he recounts how "various doctors examined [his wound] with much clicking of tongues and 'Qué suerte! *Qué* suerte!'" (194). "A man who is hit

through the neck and survives it,” he is repeatedly assured, “is the luckiest creature alive” (194). In contrast to the fatalistic aspect that is attached to this near-death experience, the political dangers of the book are framed as things that can be avoided. While the narrator waits impatiently for the dangerous encounter of war that seems to never come, he moves obliviously ever closer to the danger that is being stirred in the political pot of Barcelona and the world beyond. The text, paradoxically, treats a bullet wound as a random piece of bad luck; the danger that can be acted upon is political ignorance.

The narrator’s initial inability to grasp the nuances of the Barcelona political situation is not usually perceived as a failing, of course, but rather as a symptom of the climate of war in which the book is written. *Homage to Catalonia* is typically interpreted as the account of a casualty of both the military and political dimensions of the conflict. Jeffrey Meyers, for example, contends that it follows a tradition of books about the Great War by offering “a sensitive portrayal of a sympathetic victim” (65). “Like all victims,” Meyers continues, “Orwell is immersed in immediate events and confused about the political situation, and his perspective is not clarified until his political awareness gradually develops” (67). In this sense, Meyers believes, *Homage to Catalonia* can be read as a “*Bildungsroman der Realpolitik*” (67). The book, in this reading, tracks the political coming-of-age of a man who has had no first-hand understanding of totalitarianism; Orwell is excused for his initial ignorance of the Spanish political situation, and the insularity that accompanies his immersion in immediate events is perceived not as a weakness of character but rather as a consequence of sweeping historical forces over which he has no control. In short, he is a victim of politics.



The *Bildungsroman* interpretation, however, in certain respects echoes rather too closely the explanation offered by the narrator who recounts the experience of being insulated from the political activity that exercises so decisive an influence on his fate, and in so doing misses the element of *Homage to Catalonia* that urges a tenacious effort to get to the bottom of even the most murky political waters. In the way that Orwell's memoir of the Spanish Civil War tracks a movement from innocence to experience, of course, it reveals an ongoing interest in a tension that surfaces early on in his writing going back to the Burmese essays. The split narrative technique in operation both in the Burmese work *and* in the domestic reportage – in which the naïve impressions of an inexperienced (and/or prejudiced) narrator are played against the wisdom of a mature narrator who is able to put events and experience into perspective – finds its most mature manifestation, in fact, in *Homage to Catalonia*, where Orwell mobilizes the technique to demonstrate a range of difficulties that are confronted by the individual during the act of interpretation. In contrast to the earlier work, however, the inexperience of the 'younger' narrator in the Spanish memoir is not associated with youthful folly or political naïveté. In "A Hanging," the young narrator displays an absence of self-examination and as a result emerges in his dull adherence to an imperial code as a kind of blank, a man only in as much as he is a small part of a monstrous whole; in "Shooting an Elephant," likewise, the identity of the young narrator is wrapped up in his inability to separate himself from the expectations of an Imperial Policeman. In *Homage to Catalonia*, a sharp contrast remains between the older, more experienced narrator and his less enlightened self, but the Orwell who arrives in Spain and is transformed by the zeitgeist of revolutionary Barcelona should not be aligned too closely with that younger narrator. He goes to Spain

not as a representative of empire but as its critic; he is free of the network of constraints that defined the young Imperial Policeman's experience; he is older, married, and generally more self-assured. Moreover, he possesses a certain degree of political savvy.<sup>57</sup> He is not, in other words, the political innocent that Meyer makes him out to be. The *Bildungroman* interpretation needs to be qualified so that it takes into account the degree to which the politically naïve "victim" is a construct that Orwell has put in place, in part to dramatize the importance of attaining political wisdom. Meyer's observation that "Orwell is immersed in immediate events and confused about the political situation" overstates the innocence (and ignorance) of the author, whose immersion and confusion are never so complete as the young narrator of the book.

In a rhetorically-focussed reading of Orwell's work, Lynette Hunter offers a detailed analysis of the subtly varying narrative voices that are in operation in *Homage to Catalonia*. In the early chapters of the book, especially, Hunter observes, "there are two narrative voices: the earlier, immediately experiencing voice of the past, and the older, more reflective voice of the present" (72). This "dual perspective" has obvious implications for the *serious-rhetorical* tension that I have been discussing. The young narrator, to the extent that he represents an "immediately experiencing voice," has an obvious affiliation with *homo seriusus*; his engagement with reality appears unmediated by rhetorical texturing, and his personal narrative is presented in a way that appears uncomplicated. As Hunter observes, "he builds scenes with a straightforward sentence construction, internal repetition of words and few connectives, that creates a stasis, a

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<sup>57</sup> As Crick points out, "Orwell knew about the Moscow trials before going to Spain and shared the views of the I.L.P. Press that these were political murders," even though "he did not yet think that the whole international Communist movement was involved in or would condone these aberrant Russian terrors and follies; and still less did he suspect that Fascism and Bolshevism could have anything in common" (208).

picture, not a process” (72).<sup>58</sup> The older narrator, by contrast, can be aligned with *homo rhetoricus*. He draws on experience for his material, but experience is not the end point in his efforts; rather, his aim is to *construct* a coherent picture of the events. That is, he makes his experience and maturity most evident by his sense of the necessity to *interpret* his experience in a way that considers context in broad terms.

In the chapter describing his involvement in the Barcelona fighting, some sense of Orwell’s subtle manipulation of perspective is in evidence. As the narrator attempts to explain his impression of being consumed by immediate events, a complex oscillation of distance surfaces in the narrative:

I went back to my post on the roof with a feeling of concentrated disgust and fury. When you are taking part in events like these you are, I suppose, in a small way, making history, and you ought by rights to feel like an historical character. But you never do, because at such times the physical details always outweigh everything else. Throughout the fighting I never made the correct ‘analysis’ of the situation that was so glibly made by journalists hundreds of miles away. What I was chiefly thinking about was not the rights and wrongs of this miserable internecine scrap, but simply the discomfort and boredom of sitting day and night on that intolerable roof, and the hunger which was growing worse and worse. [...] If this was history it did not feel like it. It was more like a bad period at the front, when men were short and we had to do abnormal hours of guard-duty; instead of being heroic one just had to stay at one’s post, bored,

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<sup>58</sup> Obviously, this “straightforward” style of description *is* rhetorical; indeed, a paradox of the tension that Lanham observes is that *homo seriosus* can only be referred to in abstract terms. Once he is dramatized he becomes the creation of *homo rhetoricus*.

dropping with sleep and completely uninterested as to what it was all about. (139-40)

Something of the dynamic of immersion that is found in *Down and Out in Paris and London* is at play here in the narrator's adoption of the voice of the besieged soldier who is too tired and hungry to pay any attention to politics. In the earlier book, Orwell temporarily inhabits the perspective of the poor man as an attempt, by literary means, to convey some of the psychological complexities of being "down and out." He employs the device of fluctuating narration to articulate the transformative power of experience, and to show that the middle-class man who immerses himself, even fleetingly, in a world of tramps is susceptible to a profound shift in perspective. In his account of the Spanish Civil War, he adopts the voice of the powerless militiaman to similar effect, with the difference that the technique is now used as a way of dramatizing the sense of frustration that is felt by the common man who fights a futile battle against the backdrop of a political climate he is unequipped to understand. In this respect, there is some half-truth in Wyndham Lewis's claim that Orwell's spur of the moment decision to enlist was motivated by a "boyish sporting instinct [which] 'recognized immediately' that it would be great fun to be a 'Militiaman'" (170). Attributing Orwell's motives to a boyish instinct is clearly reductive, but Lewis is perhaps right to detect in Orwell's initial response to the situation in Barcelona a degree of enthusiasm that reflects more than simply a willingness to fight for the cause. Much as, in "Why I Write," Orwell insists that his motives for writing are "not wholly public-spirited," it seems likely that among the things he "recognized immediately" about revolutionary Barcelona was the fact that the experience of being a soldier would furnish him with a wealth of material about which he could write

(*CEJL* 1: 7). Specifically, it would provide him with a perspective other than the journalist's from which he could observe the war. "I had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles," Orwell declares in the opening pages of *Homage to Catalonia*, "but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do" (6). This statement foregrounds a political motive but at the same time makes clear that Orwell's journey to Spain was undertaken in his capacity as a writer. Orwell's experience as a militiaman sets up a formal dynamic that is present in much of his early work in the sense that his decision to immerse himself in the war as an active participant put him in position to adopt the voice of an individual whose perspective would otherwise have been quite foreign to him. As Fowler observes, "Orwell was conscious that Spain, like Wigan, Paris, Burma and the London of the destitute, was unknown territory to his middle-class English reader. In this book, Spain in civil war has to be communicated physically to those who have not had the privilege of direct experience" (79). In passages like the one quoted above, the narrator strives to communicate how such experience is precisely *not* a privilege, but the book's formal structure is nonetheless shaped by the same sort of inside/outside dialectic that exerts so strong an influence on the earliest work.

The rhetorical impetus of the rooftop passage reveals itself even more clearly in the literary devices that it uses to frame hunger and fatigue as 'universal' experiences for the common man who finds himself at the mercy of political forces outside his control. The enervation and indifference that accompany those states are re-cast, through a subtle shifting of pronouns, from conditions that characterize the direct personal experience of the narrator to more general commentary on the precise conditions that engender the act

of turning away from politics altogether. As Loraine Saunders observes, Orwell's "deployment of the generic pronouns 'one', 'you' and 'we' ... is not arbitrary, nor simply a fudge to avoid the problem of authorial control. They are placed with precision and demonstrate a commitment to spatial and psychological points of view" (47).<sup>59</sup> In the account of his time on the roof of the P.O.U.M Executive Building, Orwell displays a nuanced attention to the kinds of subtle shifts in perspective that can be achieved through shifting pronoun use. The passage opens with a first-person singular account of the young narrator's movements and state of mind at the height of the Barcelona fighting – "I went back to my post on the roof with a feeling of concentrated disgust and fury" – but then shifts immediately to the second-person to offer more general commentary on the sense of futility that is instilled in the heat of such events – "[Y]ou ought by rights to feel like an historical character. But you never do" – before returning to a first-person account. As Saunders points out, Orwell "was highly sensitive to class accents... and his use of 'you' reflects this" (48). "The variety of ways Orwell 'talks' to the reader through a prolific use of 'you'," she continues, "reflect that he is part of a modernizing force in English language usage, one that is consciously moving away from the upper-class accents of 'one'" (48). The momentary lapse into 'you' in the description of the rooftop scene signals this movement towards an Everyman perspective. The experience is framed as a politically enervating ordeal for the common militiaman, and the sheer physical and psychological effort of participating in the conflict gives rise to a heightening of sensory perception at the expense of the ability to interpret the situation. Crucially, though, it is for this imagined Everyman figure that "physical details outweigh everything else"; for

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<sup>59</sup> Saunders' discussion refers specifically to *Burmese Days* and *A Clergyman's Daughter*, but her analysis is (with some qualification) applicable to Orwell's non-fictional work as well.

Orwell, the writer who presides over the (partially) rhetorically-constructed immersion into the life of the militiaman, this is never entirely the case. His interpretive faculties remain intact.

*Homage to Catalonia* thus uses experience in a way that reflects its ambivalent engagement with the *serious* and *rhetorical*. Although the book elevates personal experience and the eyewitness account as the only truly reliable means of documenting events, it simultaneously points to the limitations of the personal narrative and to the necessity for measured interpretation. In the passage in which the narrator reflects upon his situation while at his post on the roof, the tension between these antithetical worldviews is particularly acute. Even as it seems with its argument that “physical details outweigh everything else” to endorse a *serious* view of the world (one that gives fuel to those who see Orwell as an empiricist to a fault), the text betrays a distinctly *rhetorical* impetus in its subtle assertion of the authority of interpretation. While it insists on the primacy of the empirically measurable – what you can “smell with your own nose and feel with your own fingers” – it alludes at several points to other issues that Orwell deems very important, not least the “rights and wrongs” of the affair, which ultimately, as he tells us in “Why I Write,” motivate the composition of the work, and which are, clearly, matters of interpretation. In this respect, Stephen Ingle’s remark on the transition that is marked by *Homage to Catalonia* is somewhat misleading: “Orwell,” he writes, “was no longer now the observer, the detached witness of *Wigan Pier* days: he was fully involved” (72). To a point this is undoubtedly true, but the form of the book reflects a dialectic of experience and interpretation (or participation and observation) that marks less of a departure from the earlier work than Orwell’s more committed “involvement”

would suggest. In both cases, the nature of the experience – whether it be the “detached” experience of the reporter or the “involved” experience of the soldier – is interrogated from an interpretive distance.<sup>60</sup>

Certainly, a strong element of irony is present in the rooftop account, particularly in the narrator’s professed failure to have “made the correct ‘analysis’ of the situation.”<sup>61</sup> The glib journalism that the narrator refers to is summarized by Orwell in his 1937 essay “Spilling the Spanish Beans,” where he writes that “the Spanish war has probably produced a richer crop of lies than any event since the Great War of 1914-1918” (*CEJL* 1: 269). The young narrator on the roof uses the word ‘analysis’ scathingly, as a term to describe the ways in which the ‘facts’ of the Spanish conflict are rearranged to produce a narrative that fits conveniently into Communist dogma or, more insidiously, that suits the current political agenda of the Communist Party.<sup>62</sup> ‘Analysis’ is not to be confused, however, with the sort of measured interpretation that is advocated by *Homage to Catalonia* – and, indeed, of which the book proves to be a superb example. As George

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<sup>60</sup> Raymond Williams says much the same thing as Ingle in his analysis of the special position that *Homage to Catalonia* occupies in Orwell’s *oeuvre*, though the break that he sees in the Spanish book is balanced by a sense of it marking an evolution from the earlier work: “Up to a point,” Williams writes, “there is a clear line from his experience in the years of poverty, exposure, and rejection of privilege – the wandering years – to the experience of shared hardship in Barcelona. But there is also a clear break, from a personal option to a common cause. What had been mainly a passive exposure to the worst kinds of hardship became an active involvement in the struggle to end them” (56-7). Both Ingle and Williams emphasize the issue of political involvement as the decisive feature of Orwell’s experience in Spain. The problem with this conclusion, however, is that it neglects the degree to which Orwell was politically “involved” in the Burmese work – albeit, not for the purposes of ending oppression but of perpetuating it. My intention here is not to wilfully ignore Williams’ and Ingle’s observations (or to ignore the distinctions between political commitment and indoctrination) but rather to point to the structural continuities that exist in Orwell’s work.  
<sup>61</sup> Orwell’s use of the word ‘analysis’ here is meant to be satirical. As in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his objection is to the sort of convoluted language favoured by Marxists and the alienating (or misleading) impact this has on the middle-class.

<sup>62</sup> As Orwell is at pains to point out in *Homage to Catalonia*, the Machiavellian political manoeuvring of the Communist Party during the Spanish Civil War was very much at odds with Marxist/Communist dogma. Later, in “Spilling the Spanish Beans,” Orwell writes, “It is unfortunate that so few people in England have yet caught up with the fact that Communism is now a counter-revolutionary force; that Communists everywhere are in alliance with bourgeois reformism and using the whole of their powerful machinery to crush or discredit any party that shows signs of revolutionary tendencies” (*CEJL* 1: 270).



Packer points out, “Almost seventy years after its publication, [Orwell’s] *Homage to Catalonia* holds up against all the recent revelations and controversies about the Spanish Civil War. Orwell was always able to sustain two ideas about it: one of betrayal, the other of hope. His encounter with reality in Spain was steady enough that these didn’t have to cancel each other out” (par. 19). Despite the claims of the narrator of *Homage to Catalonia* to have withdrawn under duress into the insularity of “physical detail,” its author appears not to have ever abandoned his interpretive faculties or to have become “completely uninterested.” The steadiness of his “encounter with reality,” as Packer puts it, seems from the outset to have involved an alertness to the interplay of politics and individual experience. The enduring authority of the text, in other words, resides not only in its ‘honest’ chronicling of the author’s experience but in its effectiveness as a document that rigorously interprets personal experience in light of political context.

In the closing pages of *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell’s narrator makes the deceptively simple point that “it is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes, and [that] consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan” (230-31). The suggestion of the certainty of the eyewitness account here has in no small part contributed to the enduring impression of Orwell’s adherence to a *serious* view of the world. And yet, his admission of partisanship, and in particular his acknowledgment that “distortion [is] inevitably caused by [his] having seen only one corner of events,” forcefully demonstrates that in fact Orwell does not endorse *settling* for what can be “seen with your own eyes” (231). The narrative of *Homage to Catalonia* shows that such a move constitutes an insularity that is perilous, and that what is “seen”

must be constantly re-evaluated and re-interpreted. This point is hammered home in the final paragraph of the book, where the narrator describes his return to England:

It is difficult when you pass that way, especially when you are peacefully recovering from sea-sickness with the plush cushions of a boat-train carriage under your bum, to believe that anything is really happening anywhere. Earthquakes in Japan, famines in China, revolutions in Mexico? Don't worry, the milk will be on the doorstep tomorrow morning, the *New Statesman* will come out on Friday. (231)

What stands out in this passage is the suggestion that visible reality, the reality of peaceful and safe England seen from the window of a passing train,<sup>63</sup> though empirically observable, is in fact susceptible to a re-interpretation that takes into account contexts that are not immediately apparent. After the narrator's experience in Spain, the invocation of an idyllic pastoral landscape rings false and even ironic. Indeed, a distinct echo of the contrast between the utopian socialist ideal that the narrator encounters on the Aragon front and the dystopian political turmoil that confronts him on his return to Barcelona can be heard in the description of an England fast asleep and oblivious to the violently disruptive forces that threaten it:

The industrial towns were far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth's surface. Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms

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<sup>63</sup> This device of making an interpretive point through the figure of the passing train echoes the passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in which the narrator observes a woman unclogging a blocked drainpipe.

of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policeman – all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs. (231-32)

The lengthy description here of observable reality, the pastoral landscape of southern England, mimics the soporific effects of settling for the immediately observable, and the closing lines of the book articulate Orwell's conviction that visible reality, that which can be "seen with your own eyes," should be approached with caution and is subject to interpretation. The vision of sleepy England, the text suggests, is an illusion waiting to be shattered by the encroachment of political turmoil.

*Homage to Catalonia* marks an important transition point both in Orwell's writing career and political evolution.<sup>64</sup> It is the last of his books to chronicle his personal experience in non-fictional form, and it is the last in which he employs to sustained effect the 'participant-observer' device that is so central to the form of his early work. The text also documents Orwell's first encounter with totalitarianism, the subject that will preoccupy the second half of his career. While it has become a commonplace of Orwell scholarship to link his experiences with empire to his response to the rise of

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<sup>64</sup> Raymond Williams sees *Homage to Catalonia* as "in some ways Orwell's most important and most moving book," even though "it has been less highly valued than some of his earlier and later writing" because it tends to offend both sides of the political spectrum. Williams writes: "His inevitably controversial accounts of the internal struggles have cut the book off, then and since, from many readers on the Left. But also, and less often noted, his open and moving commitment to revolutionary socialism has cut the book off from a different and much larger group of readers, who from his later work have a fixed idea of Orwell as the voice of political disillusion, of the inevitable failure of revolution and of socialism" (59-60).

totalitarianism,<sup>65</sup> less attention has been paid to the ways that Orwell's formal strategies in his early work prefigure his theoretical engagement with totalitarianism. In particular, the device of contrasting a narrator who is fully immersed in an event or situation with a more experienced narrator who has the advantage of distance and perspective mirrors the *homo seriosus-homo rhetoricus* contrast in the sense that it dramatizes competing epistemological and ontological systems: direct observation v. rhetorically-nuanced interpretation. This contrast has direct relevance to Orwell's engagement with totalitarianism. In Lanham's words, *homo rhetoricus* is "committed to no single construction of the world; much rather, to prevailing in the game at hand... Rhetorical man does not ask, 'What is real?' He asks, 'What is accepted as reality here and now?'"

(4). Rhetorical man sounds here very much like totalitarian man. As *Homage to Catalonia* demonstrates, however, interpretation is a rhetorical gesture that need not be totalitarian in orientation. The dialectic of experience and interpretation that the work endorses provides a useful model for understanding the dynamics of the central conflict that Orwell explores in his later work: between the individual who insists on the existence of observable, "concrete" reality and the totalitarian state that denies it.

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<sup>65</sup> Some readers of Orwell detect an aversion to totalitarian tendencies that pre-dates even his experiences in Burma. Christopher Hitchens, for one, traces Orwell's anti-totalitarianism to his school days. In an *BBC* interview with Andrew Marr, he comments that Orwell acquired an understanding of totalitarian systems "from noticing how boys in English boarding schools would cringe and sort of lick the headmaster's hand and thank him for being beaten, you know, in the hope of getting... awful masochism. And also the way only a very few English people were needed to hold down a whole population in Burma. None of these experiences were wasted in creating this awful sadomasochistic drama in 1984, and then of course he had seen what Stalin's police were capable of, in Spain" ("Christopher Hitchens on Orwell").

**CHAPTER 5:**  
 SELF-PORTRAITURE, “IMPLIED PERSONALITY,” AND THE REBEL WRITER  
 IN “THE PREVENTION OF LITERATURE,” “WHY I WRITE,”  
 AND “POLITICS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE”

In this chapter I will focus on three of Orwell’s mature essays, “The Prevention of Literature,” “Why I Write,” and “Politics and the English Language,” each of which makes extensive use of the figure of the rebel writer in ways that move beyond self-portraiture, and each of which dramatizes the individual’s plight in the totalitarian age. All three essays are written in 1946, a significant year for Orwell’s thinking in that it marks the beginning of the Cold War phase of his writing, when the spectre of totalitarianism begins to be framed in a context rather different from the one it had during the 1930s and through the Second World War. The Nazis now defeated, the totalitarian state, somewhat paradoxically, begins to take a more menacing and dystopian shape in Orwell’s imagination. The subtle and varied deployment of the rebel writer in these late essays anticipates and informs the appearance of the figure in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>66</sup>

In *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, John Rodden suggests that a composite “self-portrait” emerges from two decades of Orwell’s writings, a figure that can be summarized as “Orwell the autobiographer and rebel” (147). “The main documents,”

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<sup>66</sup> The figure of Winston Smith has, not surprisingly, been interpreted as a image of Orwell himself, a crucial if not defining contribution to the self-portrait that John Rodden refers to. Robert Plank, for instance, writes that, “because Winston is the person that Orwell felt he would have been if he had had to live in his *1984*, Smith is a distorted self-portrait of himself” (87). The portrait is “distorted,” in Plank’s view, because Winston “remains too small a man [compared to Orwell], without the spark of fire necessary to inflame anyone’s . . . passionate interest” (87). As in the essays, however, the central position that the rebel writer figure occupies in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* transcends any autobiographical tendency in Orwell and speaks directly to the strategic rhetorical stance that defines his response to totalitarianism. Winston Smith’s status as a rebel writer, in other words, marks only the culmination of Orwell’s deployment of this figure in his work.

Rodden writes, “are Orwell’s direct remarks on his background in Part II of *The Road to Wigan Pier* and in essays like ‘Why I Write’ (1946) and ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ (1952). The chief image which emerges ... is that of the schoolboy rebel and mature writer ‘daring to stand alone’” (147). As Rodden is well aware, self-portraiture occupies a rather complex position in Orwell’s work, not least because ‘Orwell’ is a multifaceted creation, not merely a pseudonym but a carefully crafted persona who exists in ambiguous association with the author’s life. And although the “main documents” that Rodden cites constitute the most overtly autobiographical of Orwell’s writings, they are by no means the only of his works that contribute to the self-portrait. In his 1939 essay “Charles Dickens,” for instance, Orwell famously concludes with a description of the great novelist that many have perceived as being equally applicable to Orwell himself:

In the case of Dickens I see a face which is not quite the face of Dickens’ photographs, though it resembles it. It is the face of a man of about forty, with a small beard and a high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry* – in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls. (*CEJL* 1: 460)

Oblique self-portraiture is not restricted to the closing lines of “Charles Dickens”; in the opening remarks of the same essay, in fact, Orwell observes of Dickens that “in his published work there is implied a personality ..., a personality which has won him far

more friends than enemies.” “It might well have been otherwise,” Orwell continues, “for even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical, one might truthfully say a rebel” (*CEJL* 1: 14). The portrait that Rodden alludes to – that of the rebel writer – is thus echoed in the characterization of Dickens. Orwell’s reading of the great nineteenth-century novelist provides the terms by which his own achievement can be described, and a vital feature of the “implied personality” of the ‘Orwell’ persona is his rebellious character.

The approving characterization of Dickens provides only an early example of a recurring tendency in Orwell to celebrate the iconoclastic and rebellious qualities of *other* writers in a way that contributes to a general sense of his own views on the ideal role that the writer should play in the totalitarian age. Philip Bounds notes “the handful of literary essays in which Orwell gave indirect expression to his well-disguised streak of antinomianism,” but in truth the streak is neither hidden nor restricted to only a “handful” of essays (103). Orwell hails Henry Miller, for instance, as “a man out of the common” who “proclaimed ... a long while before most of his contemporaries” the degree to which the individual writer in the age of totalitarianism was “sitting on a melting iceberg” (*CEJL* 1: 525).<sup>67</sup> Likewise, in “Politics vs Literature,” Orwell labels Jonathan Swift “a rebel and iconoclast” whose “greatest contribution to political thought, in the narrower sense of the words, is his attack, especially in Part III [of *Gulliver’s Travels*], on what would now be called totalitarianism” (*CEJL* 4: 216; 213). The eighteenth-century satirist emerges in Orwell’s reading as a kind of proto-adversary of totalitarian tendencies in society, one who has “an extraordinarily clear prevision of the spy-haunted ‘police-

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<sup>67</sup> In the same essay, in fact, Orwell refers appreciatively to A. E. Housman’s “blasphemous, antinomian, ‘cynical’ strain” (*CEJL* 1: 505).

State” (CEJL 4: 213). As with the example of Dickens, where a writer from the past is described in terms that might well be applied to Orwell himself, the characterization of Swift as a man with special insight into totalitarian tyranny anticipates later descriptions of Orwell as the writer who most penetratingly captures the essence of the totalitarian state.

A similar phenomenon is at play in Rodden’s reference to Orwell as a “mature writer ‘daring to stand alone’.” The phrase is drawn from Orwell’s 1946 essay “The Prevention of Literature,” a defence of intellectual liberty that opens with an allusion to John Milton and that asserts the “Protestant” writer as a model of integrity to be contrasted with the intellectual class of the totalitarian age.

In the past, [Orwell writes,] at any rate throughout the Protestant centuries, the idea of rebellion and the idea of intellectual integrity were mixed up. A heretic – political, moral, religious, or aesthetic – was one who refused to outrage his own conscience. His outlook was summed up in the words of the Revivalist hymn:

‘Dare to be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone;  
Dare to have a purpose firm,  
Dare to make it known.’

(CEJL 4: 60)

One of the “peculiarities” of the totalitarian age, Orwell laments in the essay, is that so-called rebels are now “rebell[ing] against the idea of individual integrity,” in part because the very notion of daring to “stand alone” has become “ideologically criminal as well as



practically dangerous.” As a consequence, “the independence of the writer ... is undermined by those who should be its defenders” (*CEJL* 4: 60). In speaking out against this turn towards conformity within the intellectual class, Orwell in effect sets himself apart from his peers and subtly aligns himself with courageous and rebelliously-inclined writers of the past. The description of Orwell as a man who dared to “stand alone” is thus informed by Orwell’s own account of the Protestant heretic who “refused to outrage his own conscience,” and the invocation of Milton that opens the essay works not only as a device to critique totalitarian tendencies in British intellectuals but as a gesture of flattering self-portraiture: John Milton, the exemplary rebel and defender of intellectual liberty, finds a worthy descendant in the totalitarian age: George Orwell.<sup>68</sup>

While the mobilization of the rebel writer figure in numerous of Orwell’s essays can appear initially as a gesture of self-authorization, however – that is, as an oblique if not so subtle contribution to the self-portrait that Rodden alludes to – in fact the figure functions in a more complex capacity in Orwell’s project. The centrality of the rebel writer in Orwell’s later work, especially in the material from 1940 onwards, suggests a *rhetorical* agenda, a strategic deployment of a *figurative* construct that reflects his understanding of the individual’s position in the age of totalitarianism: the lone writer figure, assailed on all sides by powerful and unfamiliar forces, comes to stand for the liberal tradition and for the liberal-democratic state in its historically unprecedented

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<sup>68</sup> Certainly, Orwell is to some extent guilty of this tactic of self-canonization by association. The very language that he uses to link rebellion and intellectual integrity in “The Prevention of Literature,” appears in the opening lines of “Why I Write” in only slightly altered form: “From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six,” he declares, “I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon the idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books” (*CEJL* 1: 1). To be conscious of outraging one’s nature is not the same as *refusing* to outrage one’s conscience; nonetheless, the similarity in the language reflects the degree to which the opening sections of “Why I Write” function as a portrait of the rebel as a young writer.

struggle against totalitarianism.<sup>69</sup> In this respect, the cultivation of the “Orwell” self-portrait coincides with the creation of a more universally emblematic figure, and the author’s seeming gesture of self-creation, through the establishment of a persona whose defining characteristics are rebelliousness and an independent nature, transcends the very idea of self-portraiture because it not only contributes to the establishment of Orwell’s rebel “reputation” – in Rodden’s terms, “the public perceptions and self-perceptions of the man and his work” – but also provides a model of conduct for the individual living in the totalitarian age (104).

Orwell’s extensive use of the rebel writer figure thus marks yet another chapter in his career-long exploration of narrative perspective. For, although the rhetorical emphasis that surfaces in his later work is anticipated in some of the documentary reportage of the 1930s – *i.e.* the trope of the rebel writer bravely confronting attacks on personal liberty that come with the age of totalitarianism – a discernible shift away from the experiential emphasis of the ‘Orwell’ persona can be detected in the mature essays, and in its place moves the less tangible presence of the *writer*. Certainly, the cultivation of the “Orwell” persona in *Homage to Catalonia* reflects an early manifestation of this rhetorical agenda. As I argued in the last chapter, while Orwell’s participation in the Spanish conflict is framed as a political gesture, it is clear that Orwell’s involvement moves from a writerly impulse to bear witness and to document. Moreover, although an *over*-emphasis on the “Orwell” persona tends to distract attention from the rhetorical nuances that emerge from the *multiple* voices in *Homage to Catalonia*, Raymond Williams’ claim that “Orwell” is the author’s “most successful” creation remains valid, and it is clear that an indispensable

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<sup>69</sup> In the following chapter I take up the issue of historical novelty as it pertains to Orwell’s conception of totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

feature of that creation is the sense of his willingness to ‘stand alone’, to inhabit the role of rebel in a way that anticipates his deployment of the figure in his later work. As Stephen Ingle suggests, “there seems to have been something quite natural about his siding with the party that would be treacherously attacked by its former allies and then generally demonised” (6). The historical fact of Orwell’s experience with the POUM in a sense prefigures his embrace of the rebel as a figurative construct.

The persona of the essays is, by comparison, a disembodied presence (and thus a more profoundly figurative one), and the “implied personality” that emerges, especially in the late essays, is cultivated by more sophisticated and flexible means. The “Orwell” of the 1940s essays is not yoked to the experience of the man who washes dishes in Paris, or tours the Wigan mines, or takes a bullet in Spain. As such, the visceral dimension of the Orwell persona recedes, and in its place emerges a more cerebral, ideological, and potentially symbolic presence. Thus, while there is some truth in Howard Wolf’s claim that “most of [Orwell’s] work bears the clear stamp of authorial presence and autobiography,” he is mistaken in conflating these two qualities (76); it would be more accurate to say that authorial presence and autobiography interact in Orwell’s work in complex and ever-evolving ways. Indeed, the shift *away* from the overtly autobiographical mode goes some way in explaining the phenomenon of Orwell absorbing the characteristics of other writers into his own self-portrait. He is able to make subtle comparisons between himself and, say, Charles Dickens or Jonathan Swift or John Milton, precisely because his approach to self-portraiture is no longer tied to the details of his life experience.

Thus, while the characterization of Orwell as a rebel is a commonplace, my argument here is that his late essays demonstrate a turning point in the cultivation of that figure that at the same time illuminates another dimension of Orwell's ongoing experiment with multiple perspective. The retreat from a writing strategy that foregrounds personal experience coincides with Orwell's increasing concern with totalitarianism and with the role that the writer plays in the face of the totalitarian threat to individual expression. As many of Orwell's essays examining totalitarianism show, his anxiety springs primarily from its *insidious* nature. The essence of totalitarianism, for Orwell, is found not only in its most obvious manifestations, in "concentration camps [and] rubber truncheons," but in the complacent embrace of a "totalitarian outlook," a willingness to "find[] excuses for persecution and the falsification of reality" (*CEJL* 4: 408, 71). Combating totalitarianism, for Orwell, involves both courage and an alertness of mind because the totalitarian threat is by its nature concealed by a sheen of ultra-rational justification. The three essays that I discuss in this chapter dramatize the sort of mental clarity and agility that is required to negotiate that threat.

### **"The Prevention of Literature" and the liberal tradition**

The central argument of "The Prevention of Literature" is established in the opening section of the essay with the trope of the solitary rebel who sees more clearly than his peers and who is contemptuous of their conformity. As I mentioned above, the image is first suggested with the invocation of John Milton, whose rebellious, antinomian streak is absorbed into the composite rebel writer persona of Orwell's mature essays. "About a year ago," the essay begins, "I attended a meeting of the PEN Club, the

occasion being the tercentenary of Milton's *Areopagitica* – a pamphlet, it may be remembered, in defence of freedom of the press” (*CEJL* 4: 59). In the rhetorical framework of “The Prevention of Literature,” Milton occupies a vital position, as both a historical and symbolic figure who stands in ironic counterpoint to the modern-day writers who attend the PEN Club meeting. As the great English poet who puts aside his vocation for two decades to become a pamphleteer during a time of civil strife, Milton provides for Orwell a model of the courageous and committed writer whose eloquence is channelled towards the purpose that his historical moment requires of him. Orwell makes the contrast with his modern-day peers explicit in a footnote to the essay, complaining that “an examination of the speeches [at the PEN Club meeting] ... shows that almost nobody in our own day is able to speak out as roundly in favour of intellectual liberty as Milton could do three hundred years ago – and this in spite of the fact that Milton was writing in a period of civil war” (*CEJL* 4: 59). Partly, the comparison means to suggest that an overall decline in the *possibility* of free speech has come with the age of totalitarianism, but Orwell's remarks are also accusatory in the sense that they convey his impression of the weakness and moral decrepitude of his fellow writers, and specifically of their failure to take the sorts of risks that Milton had in his own tumultuous time.

Orwell writes:

Out of this concourse of several hundred people, perhaps half of whom were directly connected with the writing trade, there was not a single one who could point out that freedom of the press, if it means anything at all, means the freedom to criticize and oppose. Significantly, no speaker quoted from the pamphlet which was ostensibly being commemorated.

Nor was there any mention of the various books that have been ‘killed’ in this country and the United States during the war. In its net effect the meeting was a demonstration in favour of censorship. (*CEJL* 4:59)

The imagery of stifled or inadequate expression here is insistent. A group of writers, we are made to see, fails to assert its right to speak freely. No one quotes the relevant text, no one mentions the prevalence of censorship, no one “could” point out the most essential fact of freedom of the press – an ironic point, since “not a single one who could” implies an inability or an ignorance, when in fact what Orwell means to say, and will say more directly later in the essay, is that his fellow writers *cannot bring themselves* to defend the right to criticize and oppose, either because they cannot muster the courage or, more insidiously, because they have been persuaded that it is not important. The impression left by the passage is of a hall full of cowards or conformists.<sup>70</sup>

In the next paragraph of the essay, the imagery shifts back again to the solitary writer, picking up the trope that is established by the invocation of Milton, but with an increased emphasis on the adversity that the role entails:

In our age, the idea of intellectual liberty is under attack from two directions....Any writer or journalist who wants to retain his integrity finds himself thwarted by the general drift of society rather than by active persecution. The sorts of things that are working against him are the concentration of the press in the hands of a few rich men, the grip of monopoly on radio and the films, the unwillingness of the public to spend money on books, making it necessary for nearly every writer to earn part

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<sup>70</sup> Orwell admits that the PEN meeting was not uniformly unimpressive and that he “happened to strike a bad day” (*CEJL* 4: 59).

of his living by hack work, the encroachment of official bodies like the M.O.I and the British Council, which help the writer to keep alive but also waste his time and dictate his opinions, and the continuous war atmosphere of the past ten years, whose distorting effects no one has been able to escape. Everything in our age conspires to turn the writer, and every other kind of artist as well, into a minor official, working on themes handed to him from above and never telling what seems to him the whole of the truth. But in struggling against this fate he gets no help from his own side. (*CEJL* 4: 59-60)

Against the earlier quoted passage, with its tone of bitter irony and admonishment, the language here reflects Orwell's sense of the difficulties that assail the individual writer: the writer is routinely "thwarted" in his efforts; circumstances are frequently "working against him"; he must earn his living (humiliatingly) by "hack work"; his time is "wasted"; the age "conspires against him"; he "struggles against this fate" and "gets no help." This imagery reiterates the effect created by the allusion to the poet-rebel Milton in the first paragraph of the essay and confirms that the opening section of "The Prevention of Literature" functions beyond its superficial capacity as an opening salvo for an argument defending the importance of free speech. The opening of the essay, in fact, in addition to providing context and argument, vividly sets a *scene*: the solitary writer, confronted with pressures to conform and effectively forfeit the right of free speech, must distinguish himself from the currents of his time in order to assert himself forcefully and truthfully.

Later in the essay, Orwell declares that “[t]o write in plain, vigorous language one has to think fearlessly, and if one thinks fearlessly one cannot be politically orthodox” (CEJL 4: 66). To “think fearlessly” is a suggestive phrase that in some respects captures the underlying agenda of a number of Orwell’s essays on totalitarianism. On the one hand, it refers to the importance of thinking *freely*, that is, without the imposition of fear; on the other, it implies the necessity of thinking *imaginatively*, of looking beyond the obvious and interrogating ideological dogma at its most seductive. The rebel writer figure performs the function of dramatizing the notion of “thinking fearlessly” in both these senses, and in this respect the figure is central to a process William E. Cain describes, whereby the essays “prompt and press readers toward independence of vision, uncommon common sense, and integrity of mind” (77). To read the 1940s essays, especially, Cain argues, is to “expose oneself to the dislocations and renewals of mind that [Orwell] intended to generate” (79). Cain’s comments, though astute, are of a general nature and do not stress the degree to which the “independence of vision” that the essays strive to stimulate reflects Orwell’s understanding of how freedom of thought is threatened by the influence of totalitarianism. While it is clear that the essays induce a “discomfiting, exploratory form of thought and feeling,” it is important to locate them in the context in which they were written and to recognize the degree to which the process Cain refers to is designed to mirror the demands that are placed upon the intellectual in the totalitarian age (83). As the above passages demonstrate, Orwell’s critique of English intellectuals takes two distinct but related rhetorical tacks: while he is quick to attack the failure of courage that underlies the turn towards conformity, he is nonetheless attentive to the challenges that are faced by individual writers and of the sheer difficulty of “thinking fearlessly.”



To some extent, the role that the rebel writer figure plays in Orwell's anti-totalitarian rhetoric can be explained by the position the free-thinking individual holds in liberal philosophy. Despite Orwell's claim in "Why I Write" that his serious work of the previous ten years had been written "against totalitarianism" and "for democratic socialism," his allegiance is often more clearly with the *liberal* tradition. This is certainly the case in "The Prevention of Literature," with its emphasis on the "autonomous individual" and "liberty of thought."<sup>71</sup> In "Writers and Leviathan," as well, he declares an allegiance to a distinctly *liberal* understanding of the individual's position in society. "[*W*]hat kind of State rules over us," he writes, "must depend partly on the prevailing intellectual atmosphere: meaning, in this context, partly on the attitude of writers and artists themselves, and on their willingness or otherwise to keep the spirit of liberalism alive" (*CEJL* 4: 407, emphasis in original). Neither of these late essays contain any obvious democratic socialist agenda; in both, in fact, even the collective enterprise of the literary tradition is framed as an amalgam of individual contribution. "Above quite a low level," Orwell insists, "literature is an attempt to influence the viewpoint of one's contemporaries by recording experience" – the implication being that experience is, by definition, a subjective phenomenon peculiar to individual consciousness (*CEJL* 4: 65). Orwell is, of course, fully aware of the tradition of thought from which he draws this emphasis on the experiences and contributions of autonomous individuals. Contemplating a hypothetical totalitarian future in which literature would not involve "individual feeling or truthful observation," he concludes that "[i]t seems much likelier that if the liberal

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<sup>71</sup> Orwell's views on the "autonomous individual" can occasionally seem contradictory. In "Literature and Totalitarianism," he remarks that "[t]he greatest mistake is to imagine that the human being is an autonomous individual" (*CEJL* 2: 134). I take this to mean that, in Orwell's view, the autonomous individual does not exist as a 'natural' phenomenon but rather emerges from social conditions, specifically the liberal society.

culture that we have lived in since the Renaissance actually comes to an end, the literary art will perish with it” (*CEJL* 4: 68-9). As Dentith observes, “Orwell’s Enlightenment inheritance is clear and explicit” (209). In one of his more pessimistic moments, in “Inside the Whale,” he laments that “[t]he literature of liberalism is coming to an end and the literature of totalitarianism has not yet appeared and is barely imaginable” (*CEJL* 1: 525).

The “liberal culture” Orwell has in mind is both the domain and in large part the by-product of the solitary writer, and for a variety of reasons it presents a more obvious (and vulnerable) opposition to the totalitarian threat than does *democratic socialism*; for, even with an emphatic qualification of a democratic component, socialism (in contrast to liberalism) has both a conceptual and rhetorical association with totalitarian tendencies in society. Orwell acknowledges this association at several points. In “Literature and Totalitarianism,” for instance, he finds a clear connection between the disappearance of “economic liberty of the individual” and the arrival of the “age of the totalitarian state” (*CEJL* 2: 135). In more innocent times, he contends, “it was never fully realised that the disappearance of economic liberty would have any effect on intellectual liberty. Socialism was usually thought of as a sort of moralised liberalism” (*CEJL* 2: 135). The rise of totalitarianism has shed new light, however, on the idea that “the state would take charge of your economic life and set you free from the fear of poverty, unemployment and so forth” (*CEJL* 2: 135). “On existing evidence,” Orwell concludes, “one must admit” that the utopian notion that “art could flourish just as it had done in the liberal-capitalist age, only a little more so, because the artist would not any longer be under economic compulsions” had been “falsified” (*CEJL* 2: 135). In a 1940 review of Franz

Borkenau's *The Totalitarian Enemy*, Orwell offers further incriminating commentary on the association between socialism and totalitarianism, though he is careful to emphasize the point that totalitarian regimes offer deviant forms of socialism. "Until the signing of the Russo-German Pact," he observes, "the assumption made on both sides was that the Nazi régime was in no way revolutionary" (*CEJL* 2: 25). The Hitler-Stalin pact, in his view, acted as an "eye-opener" that abruptly made absurd the "frantic efforts [of both socialists and fascists] to explain away the more and more striking resemblances between the German and Russian régimes" (*CEJL* 2: 25). Having already decided from his Spanish War experience that the two regimes were alike, Orwell adopts a tone of ironic epiphany to describe the jarring effect of the pact on the wartime political climate:

Suddenly the scum of the earth and the bloodstained butcher of the workers (for so they had described one another) were marching arm in arm, their friendship 'cemented in blood', as Stalin cheerily expressed it. Thereafter the Strachey-Blimp thesis became untenable. National Socialism *is* a form of Socialism, *is* emphatically revolutionary, *does* crush the property owner just as surely as it crushes the worker. The two régimes, having started from opposite ends, are rapidly evolving towards the same system – a form of oligarchical collectivism. (*CEJL* 2: 25)

Orwell's point here, quite obviously, is not to assert the emergence in Nazi Germany of a socialism geared towards the betterment of the people. Rather, his argument is that the Nazis have adopted certain of the strategies of socialism, notably a centralized economy, because it is expedient to do so and because it enables a further solidification of power. Nonetheless, as he later does in "Literature and Totalitarianism," he points to a clear

association between totalitarianism and socialism that in effect forces him to retreat, rhetorically at least, from his own socialist position in his attacks on totalitarianism and to embrace the figure of the embattled individual defending the *liberal* tradition. He adopts the position of the rebel writer, in other words. Orwell's ideal of socialism has a potent liberal component,<sup>72</sup> of course, but in marshalling his rhetorical energies to critique the totalitarian menace he inevitably confronts the problem of socialism's uncomfortably ambiguous association with totalitarianism.

The liberal tradition, in contrast, occupies no such ambiguous ground. As Michael Halberstam observes, liberalism exists in a more purely antithetical relationship with totalitarianism, especially with respect to the positions these systems assign to the individual. "Against totalitarianism," Halberstam writes, "liberalism argues that individuals can (and should) develop a self-understanding and an understanding of their relation to society out of their own resources." Further, "liberalism treats individuals *as if* they substantially instituted their own ends and meanings" (60). Totalitarianism, in contrast, "eradicates human freedom in all its dimensions. It categorically denies its subjects their right to self-determination" (Halberstam 39). Orwell's conception of democratic socialism cannot be said to contain a totalitarian component, but it is clear that he finds a more suitable rhetorical opposite to totalitarianism in the liberal conception of the individual. In strictly rhetorical terms, the individual (specifically, the individual's right to free expression) stands in an unwavering antithetical position to totalitarianism,

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<sup>72</sup> Orwell articulates his liberal notion of socialism in fairly clear terms in a 1944 review of two books, Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* and K. Zilliacus's *The Mirror of the Past*: "Between them these two books sum up our present predicament. Capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war. Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war. There is no way out of this unless a planned economy can be somehow combined with freedom of the intellect, which can only happen if the concept of right and wrong is restored to politics" (*CEJL* 3: 119).

whereas ‘socialism’ is somehow implicated by its association with totalitarianism, even if it is a spurious association, more an indicator of the cynicism of totalitarian regimes than of an inherent flaw in socialism. This rhetorical distinction helps to explain why Orwell pits the solitary writer against the totalitarian menace. He recognizes that, when he occupies an overtly anti-totalitarian stance, it is more effective to emphasize the threat faced by the individual than to assert an alternative social programme.<sup>73</sup>

Orwell’s recognition of the tactical advantage of gesturing to the liberal tradition in his anti-totalitarian rhetoric manifests itself in “The Prevention of Literature” in his strategy of aligning the plight of the individual with the threat to literature itself. The literary tradition, in its capacity as a repository of the most fully realized body of individual expression that liberal society has to offer, becomes the means by which that society understands and defines itself. Within liberal society, Halberstam explains, “[s]hared understandings are... considered as somehow arising out of the interplay and plurality of *individual expressions*” (60). For Orwell, the “somehow” of this process depends, first, upon conditions which enable individuals to express themselves truthfully. “What is really at issue,” he writes, “is the right to report contemporary events truthfully, or as truthfully as is consistent with the ignorance, bias and self-deception from which every observer necessarily suffers” (*CEJL* 4:65). The importance of this right has direct relevance for literature; as Orwell insists, “the imaginative writer is unfree when he has to falsify his subjective feelings, which from his point of view are facts” (*CEJL* 4: 65). Orwell’s position on this point clearly owes something to the “Enlightenment

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<sup>73</sup> Louis Menand overstates the point somewhat when he asserts that, “apart from the commitment to equality, there was not much about Socialism that was important to [Orwell],” but the often slippery treatment of socialism in his work can be at least partially understood as an indirect consequence of his overall rhetorical strategy to focus on totalitarianism’s impact on the individual (“Honest, Decent, Wrong”).

inheritance” that Dentith refers to, but his acknowledgment of the influence of “bias and self-deception” has the effect of privileging the importance of subjective expression over objective truth. If, as Dentith suggests, “the possibility of recourse to objective truth is [viewed as] an indispensable bulwark against the encroachments of totalitarianism” in Orwell’s writing, it is also true that objective truth is recognized as a lofty goal that is always out of reach (209). To speak “truthfully,” in other words, is not necessarily to gain access to objective truth but to be true to one’s own interpretation of the world; and so, from the “interplay and plurality of individual expressions,” some plausible notion of objective truth emerges.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> As Rorty understands Orwell’s Enlightenment inheritance, “it does not matter whether ‘two plus two is four’ is true, much less whether the truth is ‘subjective’ or ‘corresponds to external reality’. All that matters is that if you do believe, you can say it without getting hurt. In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true. If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself” (146). *Some* correspondence to external reality clearly “matters” to Orwell, however, and it is in part for this reason that he sees an especially perilous link between the totalitarian threat to free speech and the survival of the “literature of liberalism” (*CEJL* 1: 525). For, while it may be true that “what matters is your ability to talk to other people,” Orwell recognizes a hierarchy of individual expression. Despite his egalitarian streak and preference for demotic speech, great works of literature seem to occupy a special position in his conception of how society arrives at an approximation of objective truth through the collective exchange of individual expression. In his various comments on *Ulysses*, for example, he makes a repeated emphasis of Joyce’s ability to make visible a realm that had previously been concealed to human perception. “[N]ow and then there appears a novel,” Orwell writes, “which opens up a new world not by revealing what is strange, but by revealing what is familiar.” Joyce, in Orwell’s view,

dared ... to expose the imbecilities of the inner mind, and in doing so he discovered an America which was under everybody’s nose. Here is a whole world of stuff which you have lived with since childhood, stuff which you supposed to be of its nature incommunicable, and somebody has managed to communicate it. The effect is to break down, at any rate momentarily, the solitude in which the human being lives. (*CEJL* 1: 495)

As the example of *Ulysses* demonstrates, the sort of “individual expression” that emerges from the literary tradition seems, for Orwell, to hold an especially important position in the collective effort to reach some approximation of objective truth. He follows these comments from “Inside the Whale” with the observation that “there is some touch of this quality in Henry Miller,” but Joyce clearly held a privileged position in his reading (*CEJL* 1: 495). In a letter to Brenda Salkeld, Orwell laments, “I rather wish I had never read [*Ulysses*]. It gives me an inferiority complex. When I read a book like that and then come back to my own work, I feel like a eunuch who has taken a course in voice production and can pass himself off fairly well as a bass or a baritone, but if you listen closely you can hear the good old squeak just the same as ever” (*CEJL* 1: 140).

The threat to intellectual liberty as it manifests itself in the challenges faced by the journalist thus stands for Orwell as a signal of more sinister things to come. He sees a decline in freedom of the press as an evil in itself, but its real significance is the danger it poses to the constitution of the liberal society. Specifically, censorship anticipates a collapse of the foundation upon which the “interplay and plurality of individual expressions” is built. When Orwell declares that “the destruction of intellectual liberty cripples the journalist, the sociological writer, the historian, the novelist, the critic and the poet, in that order,” he does not refer to a hierarchy of degree or importance but rather to a chronology (*CEJL* 4: 68). If the freedom of the journalist is compromised, the impact on the others will soon follow. The invocation of Milton and *Areopagitica* that opens “The Prevention of Literature” is therefore crucial to the essay’s overall effect; it is a considered rhetorical gesture that provides an historic and symbolic parallel to the argument that Orwell subsequently puts forth in the essay. Milton’s pamphlet represents not only an eloquent defence of freedom of speech but a courageous and perceptive political response to the circumstances of his time. The poet-turned-pamphleteer was able to see, as Orwell does, the danger to poetry that lurked in the restrictions to free expression, and so he put aside his vocation temporarily, realizing that it was under siege anyway by the logic of censorship.

### **“Why I Write” and the dialectic of politics and art**

The rebel writer figure that emerges from “The Prevention of Literature” through the invocation of John Milton reappears in more explicitly autobiographical form in “Why I Write,” where Orwell makes clear the connection between himself and the great

poet by describing how the totalitarian age has driven him into politics and away from literature, as the English civil war had done for Milton. “In a peaceful age,” Orwell laments, “I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer” (*CEJL* 1: 4). Orwell’s choice here of the word “pamphleteer” is faintly anachronistic, as though he wanted to make obvious the association with the great Protestant poet-rebel, whose most famous pamphlet, *Aereopagitica*, Orwell cites at the outset of “The Prevention of Literature.” In “Why I Write,” the young man who was “outraging [his] true nature” in abandoning his desire to be a writer becomes, in Orwell’s account, the mature writer who will not “outrage his conscience,” who will “Dare to be Daniel” when confronted with the phenomenon of totalitarianism.

Despite the autobiographical tenor of “Why I Write,” however, the essay transcends the genre of self-portrait. The dialectic of politics and art that forms the backdrop of Orwell’s personal narrative simultaneously functions as a meditation on how the individual should live in the totalitarian age, and the discussion of “the four great motives for writing” on which Orwell bases his personal history operates in a figurative capacity even as it outlines a central tension that is specific to Orwell’s work. These motives, which “exist in different degrees in every writer,” can in fact be understood to represent the necessary ingredients that any individual must possess in combating the insidious encroachment of totalitarianism in liberal society (*CEJL* 1: 3). Thus, even in this most autobiographical of Orwell’s essays, the authorial presence shows signs of subtly effacing itself, of casting its particular circumstances and internal tensions in



universal terms. The story that Orwell tells in “Why I Write,” in other words, has a figurative applicability, even though the essay offers a coherent and persuasive account of Orwell’s writing life.

The first hint that “Why I Write” operates beyond its superficial capacity as a personal narrative that tracks the growth of the lonely child who “mak[es] up stories” and has a “power of facing unpleasant facts,” into the mature writer who strives “to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole,” appears in the essay’s shift to the third-person pronoun to describe the experience of the *writer* (*CEJL* 1: 1; 6). After introducing the essay with personal “background information,” Orwell goes on to say that he “does not think one can assess a writer’s motives without knowing something of his early development” (*CEJL* 1: 3). The primary purpose of this shift to the third person is to generalize Orwell’s experience as a writer so that his examination of the different motives for writing can be understood in a coherent context. Crucially, he maintains, a writer’s “subject-matter will be determined by the age he lives in – at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own” (*CEJL* 1: 3). As he later puts it in “Writers and Leviathan,” “[w]ar, Fascism, concentration camps, rubber truncheons, atomic bombs, etc. are what we daily think about, and therefore to a great extent what we write about, even when we do not name them openly. . . . When you are on a sinking ship, your thoughts will be about sinking ships” (*CEJL* 4: 407). Whatever the writer’s “background,” in other words, the political-historical *zeitgeist* will exert a defining influence on the writer’s output. Orwell thus situates his writing life in a shared context in which, however particular the circumstances of his early development, the “tumultuous” political conditions he encounters as a mature writer determine the content of his work.

Living in the age of totalitarianism, the threat of which is world-historical, his experience takes on a universal dimension that inevitably manifests itself in his writing.

Beyond generalizing his experience as a writer, however, Orwell's discussion of the different motives for writing works as a meditation on the internal tensions that any individual must confront in the age of totalitarianism. His list of motives, which includes "sheer egoism," "aesthetic enthusiasm," "historical impulse," and "political purpose," can easily enough be applied outside the context of writing; and indeed there is evidence in the descriptions of the motives that suggests a more universal applicability. Of the first of the four motives, for example, "sheer egoism," Orwell observes, "[w]riters share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers, successful businessmen – in short, with the whole top crust of humanity" (*CEJL* 1: 3). The widening of the target, from writers to humanity's "top crust" appears initially as self-approving elitism, but this is clearly not Orwell's intention. Rather, he means to distinguish society's more successful members by the degree to which they are driven by vanity or self-centredness. "The great mass of human beings are not acutely selfish," he writes. "After the age of about thirty they abandon individual ambition – in many cases, indeed, they almost abandon the sense of being individuals at all – and live chiefly for others, or are simply smothered under drudgery" (*CEJL* 1: 3). This sort of commentary to accompany the first motive on Orwell's list establishes a sense of the wide applicability of the discussion, so that when the four motives are viewed alongside one another it becomes clear that they represent more than simply the primary issues that drive the writer of prose. They function as shorthand for some of the key driving impulses that determine how an individual negotiates a social existence; and while the essay is, undeniably, about writing,

it transcends its subject matter by describing the writer's motives in terms that simultaneously outline a range of pressures that are faced by free-thinking liberal subjects.

The four motives that Orwell identifies are not mutually exclusive but rather are at play on a continuum, an overlapping, multi-dimensional dialectic in which certain features of any given motive can be found in the other motives in crucially altered form. This dialectical element is essential to the sense of the irresolvable tension that is triggered by the interaction of these motives within a single individual. The motive of "sheer egoism," for instance, shares a concern for posterity with the "historical impulse," but they differ from one another in their respective emphases on the personal vs. the public: the self-driven ego "desire[s] to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death," whereas the more socially-oriented historical impulse "desire[s] to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity" (*CEJL* 1: 3-4). Likewise, "aesthetic enthusiasm" and "political purpose" exist in explicit dialectical opposition to the extent that each is defined in such a way as to seem to contain the other. I quote Orwell's definitions of these two motives in their entirety as a way of bringing out this apparent dialogue:

*Aesthetic enthusiasm.* Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed. The aesthetic motive is very feeble in a lot of writers, but even a pamphleteer or a writer of textbooks will have

pet words and phrases which appeal to him for non-utilitarian reasons; or he may feel strongly about typography, width of margins, etc. Above the level of a railway guide, no book is quite free from aesthetic considerations. (*CEJL* 1: 3-4)

*Political Purpose* – using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude. (*CEJL* 1: 4)

Orwell’s description of these motives as “various impulses [that] must war against one another” reinforces the sense of an irresolvable tension between them, and indeed the definitions themselves support this (*CEJL* 1: 4). The “desire to share an experience” is countered by the “desire to push the world in a certain direction”; the emphasis on pleasure that characterizes aesthetic enthusiasm is contrasted with the implied sense of duty that drives political purpose; and, most strikingly, the claim that “no book is quite free from aesthetic consideration” is directly echoed by the assertion that “no book is genuinely free from political bias.”

The dialectical character of the warring motives outlined in “Why I Write” determines that the essay includes two distinct yet related narratives. Most obviously, a narrative of progression forms the central movement of the essay: from youthful, apolitical innocence to mature, politically-engaged experience. This is the autobiographically-inflected narrative of ‘Orwell’, the self-told tale of his development as

a writer, in which an inclination towards the aesthetic is eventually tempered by a political awakening. In a lengthy discussion of this tension in Orwell's writing between the aesthetic motive and the political motive, Lynette Hunter argues that an early belief in the possibility of sharply demarcating the realms of politics and art eventually gives way to a conviction of the inescapability of expressing political opinion. She writes:

As long as he could separate between form and content, pure art and propagandic meaning, the writer had a means of separating between private expression and political propaganda and excluding the artist from political commitment, at the same time as allowing him to comment politically (sincerely) without endangering his honesty. But it is increasingly obvious that the two are close, inextricably interdependent, if not actually taking place at the same time. The closer he comes to saying that the two aspects are inseparable, the more he realizes that the literary artist cannot write without expressing a political view. (135)

The trajectory that Hunter traces in this passage adheres fairly closely to the predominant narrative of "Why I Write." The impression the essay conveys, in other words, is of a dominant impulse towards an "aesthetic motive" to write in effect thwarted by the political circumstances of the mid-twentieth century. The rise of totalitarianism gradually stifles the purely aesthetic impulse and subordinates it to the political impulse. "*Every line*" of his serious work, Orwell emphasizes, has been directed towards this impulse, as though his political engagement could be discerned even at the level of the sentence. This trajectory is reiterated in the essay's closing lines as well, where Orwell offers a final comment on how his work can be understood in terms of a progression towards the

politically motivated. “I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest,” he claims, “but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally” (*CEJL* 1: 7). Again, despite the irresolvable (and dialectical) tensions that characterize the interplay of the four motives that are central to Orwell’s discussion in “Why I Write,” the essay nonetheless tracks a clear narrative of progression, in which the young man who aspires to write “enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their own sound,” eventually matures into a writer of more lean prose, who grasps the rhetorical value of the plain style. The “purple passages” that, in Orwell’s view, diminish an early work such as *Burmese Days* disappear from his later writing precisely because he has moved decisively towards the political, and this movement towards “political purpose” is central to the cultivation of Orwell’s rebel writer persona because the political provides the most potent means by which he may inhabit the stance of writing “against.” In the narrative of progression that underpins “Why I Write,” totalitarianism serves as the defining and decisive motive, the object that gives Orwell’s political purpose an unambiguous clarity.

It would be a mistake, of course, to downplay the influence of the spectre of totalitarianism on Orwell’s post-Spain work; however, the narrative of progression outlined in “Why I Write” is in an important sense misleading, or it should at least be understood against the backdrop of *figurative* self-portraiture that runs through Orwell’s

work. As Chris Hanley rightly points out, evidence of political purpose can be found throughout Orwell's writing, *including* the earliest work, despite the claims in "Why I Write" that he had been guided principally by aesthetic considerations ("Beyond Calculation"). Certainly, *Burmese Days*, with its scathing critique of British Imperial society, must be considered a political novel; and the sustained focus on the urban underclass in *Down and Out in Paris in London* is at least partially politically motivated. Likewise, as Hanley observes, "several of Orwell's characteristic political themes emerge in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, which is concerned with vagrancy and poverty, with social inequality and the vested interests that sustain it," while *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* can be read as "an obvious forbear of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" ("Beyond Calculation").<sup>75</sup> Indeed, to the extent that these earlier novels "should be situated firmly within his trajectory of political purposefulness," Hanley contends that "the explanation in 'Why I Write' which Orwell provides of his aesthetic impulses, can be seen as a failed attempt to put into words what was 'really' going on in these early works." "His later statement that these books 'lacked political purpose'," he continues, "is a misunderstanding of his own aesthetic ideas and practice" ("Beyond Calculation"). Hanley's observations usefully challenge the validity of "Why I Write"'s status as a fragment of unfiltered autobiography, in which Orwell's writing life is framed as a progression from apolitical innocence to politically-committed experience, but he is probably off the mark in suggesting that Orwell's mobilization of this cliché in the essay constitutes a "misunderstanding." Rather, it seems more likely, given the complexly figurative position

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<sup>75</sup> Hanley means here that, in the sense that *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* comments on "the same destitute social landscape," it anticipates *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. On this point Hanley draws on the analysis of Gordon Bowker, who contends that Orwell's last novel "'stands in a long continuity of thought', for which the characters, structure, themes, and 'mental topography' of *Aspidistra* are significant predecessors, 'as if Orwell thought 'I can tell this story better the second time around'" ("Beyond Calculation").

that the rebel writer occupies in Orwell's work, that the innocence-to-experience trajectory the essay charts is itself part of a rhetorical strategy that should be understood alongside (or as a crucial part of) the central rhetorical undertaking of Orwell's writing career: the creation of the 'Orwell' persona, the figure whom Raymond Williams describes as a "successfully created character in every sense" and whose predominant characteristic is his rebellious spirit.

If part of the rhetorical agenda of "Why I Write" is to articulate an image of the rebel writer in the age of totalitarianism as a direct descendant of John Milton, however – that is, as an aesthetically-inclined writer who abandons his craft to become a "pamphleteer" – the essay's complex dialectic of politics and art nonetheless suggests an unresolved attitude towards the question of commitment.<sup>76</sup> And a recognition that the dominant narrative of progression in "Why I Write" is itself a strategic construct ultimately has the effect of elevating in importance the competing, or secondary, narrative of the essay. Indeed, even as the essay tracks a progression from innocence to experience, it offers a more subtle and less linear narrative. This is the narrative that dramatizes the condition of the free-thinking liberal subject, the necessarily ongoing engagement with certain tensions that come with the role of being a citizen in liberal society. The four motives that occupy a central position in "Why I Write" in this way dramatize what Orwell earlier describes in "Literature and Totalitarianism" as "the struggle that always goes on between the individual and the community" (*CEJL* 2: 134).

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<sup>76</sup> As Bounds observes, Orwell's attitude towards the issue of political commitment in a number of his mature essays, including "Why I Write," reveals an "interestingly ambiguous" argument. "On the one hand," Bounds writes, "[Orwell] insisted that all works of literature are intrinsically political and have definite political effects. On the other hand, suspicious of the excessively partisan approach of some of his Marxist contemporaries, he also warned that certain types of political commitment can end up having a disastrous effect both on literary criticism and on literature itself" (86).



On the one hand, “Why I Write” undeniably asserts the “political motive” as the dominant motive of Orwell’s writing life; on the other, the essay undermines this narrative by demonstrating that the political motive should remain in dialectical tension with other motives.

Orwell’s comment near the end of “Why I Write,” that “one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one’s own personality,” can appear wildly ironic in the context of an essay that is largely devoted to tracking the evolution of the author’s writerly personality. In an odd way, though, the piece does in fact adhere to that dictum, albeit in a rather subtle and roundabout way. Indeed, the essay succeeds, or at least is made more rich and enduring, precisely because it transcends the self-portrait that it initially appears to be.

### **“Politics and the English Language” and the rejection of dogma**

Orwell’s oft-quoted remark at the end of “Why I Write,” that “good prose is like a window pane,” is ironically contradicted by his most famous exposition on the plain style, “Politics and the English Language.” In that essay, buried beneath a seemingly ‘plainspoken’ discussion of the plain style, a rhetorical dynamism emerges whose primary purpose is to undermine some of the very advice that the essay has to offer. The anti-totalitarian thrust of “Politics and the English Language” is clear, but less obvious is the way the essay dramatizes a resistance to totalitarian tendencies in language through a mobilization of the rebel writer figure. Although the essay presents itself on the one hand as a meditation on the pernicious influence of politics on the English language, and on the other as a practical guide to how to combat both the “abuse” and the “decline” of the

language, it also (in the way Cain describes) “prompt[s] and press[es] readers toward independence of vision.” Indeed, “Politics and the English Language” invites the reader to reject the very argument it puts forth and to occupy the role of rebel writer.

As numerous critics have noted, of course, Orwell’s plain style – or, perhaps more accurately, his reputation for clear, plain prose – conceals a stylistic complexity. Orwell’s prose, as some have recognized, is often misleadingly straightforward, cloaked in layers of sophistication that require an effort to decipher. As Richard Rees observes, Orwell’s style “can be deceptive...[...] It is so swift and simple and unpretentious, that his best arguments sometimes appear much easier and more obvious than they really are” (qtd. in Cain, “Orwell’s Perversity” 222). Nils Clausson, rejecting the notion that Orwell exhibits “a normative expository style that is ‘clear and simple as the truth’,” maintains that “[w]hen we read Orwell, just as when we read any writer who takes a delight in the sheer aesthetics of language, we need to keep at least one eye firmly on the glass – glass that is not transparent like a windowpane but opaque, brightly colored and carefully crafted, like the translucent glass in the stained glass windows of a beautiful cathedral” (319-20). These observations of a stylistic complexity in Orwell’s prose share an emphasis on the *rhetorical* dimensions of his style, that is, on the ways that his plain style is designed to achieve precise rhetorical ends. As Cain puts it, Orwell is “an exceptionally honest writer, but he is indeed a writer, agile and crafty; he is attuned from start to finish to the expectations and responses of readers to his sentences, and he is working with *that* every step of the way” (“Orwell’s Perversity” 222). This dimension of Orwell’s writing is explored in some detail in Hugh Kenner’s essay “The Politics of the Plain Style,” where he argues that the ‘plain style’ is precisely that, a style, a way of writing that is no less

constructed or rhetorical than the most ornate or grand of styles. Plainness and grandeur, Kenner insists, stand not in opposition to one another but rather to improvised speech. “The plainest prose is a counterfeit of natural utterance,” he writes (60); for prose itself is the written art whose norms include “feigned casualness and hidden economy” (59). This aspect of the plain style, Kenner believes, attracted Orwell: “He wanted its mask of calm candour from behind which he could appeal, in seeming disinterest, to people whose pride was their no-nonsense consciousness of fact” (62). Kenner does not doubt Orwell’s candour, but he nonetheless maintains that his version of the plain style functioned not in some essential relation to an external truth or concrete reality but rather as “a written simulacrum of candour” (62). Orwell, Kenner concludes, “chose a linguistic ground: plain talk versus dishonesty,” that is untenable for the simple reason that, “linguistically, fiction can’t be told from ‘fact’. Its grammar, syntax, and semantics are identical” (63; 64).

The recognition that ‘plain’ style could in fact constitute some sort of “mask” or “simulacrum of candour” has, not surprisingly, opened the way for criticism of Orwell’s remarks on style. One of these, Carl Freedman’s 1981 reading of “Politics and the English Language,” argues that “much of what Orwell says [in that essay], and even more of what he logically (if unconsciously) implies, is...false and dangerous” (328).<sup>77</sup> Freedman’s critique of “Politics and the English Language” is especially useful to the discussion here because it indirectly (and inadvertently) illuminates an especially subtle and complex manifestation of the rebel writer figure in Orwell’s work. One aspect of Freedman’s argument, in particular, pertains to the plain style’s role in Orwell’s

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<sup>77</sup> Julian Barnes, for instance, insists that, “for all his moral clarity about totalitarian language, [Orwell’s] own prescriptiveness is sometimes severe, sometimes woolly” (“Such, Such Was Eric Blair”).

engagement with totalitarianism. This has to do with what Freedman identifies in “Politics and the English Language” as a “distrust of generalization and an extreme preference for the particular” (331).<sup>78</sup> He refers specifically to one of the central ideas put forth in Orwell’s essay: the notion that simplified diction leads to better, more clear-sounding prose. For Orwell, a wide range of words and phrases are deemed “pretentious” or “meaningless” because they “do not point to any discoverable object” (qtd. in Freedman 331). Freedman describes this preference in Orwell for the concrete and the particular as a “dogmatic evasion of complexity and generalization” (331).<sup>79</sup> To clarify his point Freedman offers a comparative reading of “Politics and the English Language” with the essay-form Appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “The Principles of Newspeak,” and makes the rather provocative claim that strong echoes of the earlier essay can be heard in the totalitarian ideology of Newspeak. In Orwell’s aversion to the abstract, for instance, and in his partiality to the concrete, Freedman detects a stylistic position that resembles the one later described in the Appendix, with the key difference that in the case of Newspeak the style is explicitly associated with totalitarian ideology. In Orwell’s stylistic preference for brevity and economy, Freedman also hears a similarity to Newspeak. “As a stylistic dictum,” he observes, “Orwell had proposed, ‘If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out’; in Newspeak, somewhat similarly, ‘reduction of

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<sup>78</sup> Scrivener and Finkelman describe Freedman’s attack as representative of “the leftist ‘case’ against Orwell’s essay” (20), but to the extent that it demonstrates the potential for the plain style to function in a range of political capacities (including the totalitarian), this characterization seems unduly limiting.

<sup>79</sup> Freedman is not the only reader of Orwell to detect a strain of dogmatism. Reviewing a recent collection of Orwell’s essays, Julian Barnes observes that “[o]ne of the effects of reading Orwell’s essays en masse is to realize how very dogmatic – in the nonideological sense – he is.” The sense that Barnes means, of course, is the rhetorical. Orwell’s dogmatic streak reflects his style more than his politics. “This is another aspect of his Johnsonian Englishness,” Barnes writes. “From the quotidian matter of how to make a cup of tea to the socioeconomic analysis of the restaurant (an entirely unnecessary luxury, to Orwell’s puritanical mind), he is a lawgiver, and his laws are often founded in disapproval. He is a great writer *against*” (“Such, Such Was Eric Blair”).

vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself” (333). The polemical nature of Freedman’s argument is most apparent in the implicit suggestion that, not only is Orwell’s stylistic advice theoretically inadequate, it contains within itself the seeds of what Orwell himself later identifies as a totalitarian approach to language. Freedman acknowledges that, “obviously, the antitotalitarian author of the earlier piece would be horrified by Newspeak,” but he nonetheless draws a clear line between the theoretical foundations of “Politics and the English Language” and the explicitly totalitarian principles of Newspeak. He writes:

Yet the construction of Newspeak does represent a serious attempt to put into practice both Orwell’s linguistic voluntarism and the tendency of the detailed advice that is based on it. Every step – the preference for the more particular words, the elimination of the more general ones, the purging of ambiguities, the reduction in vocabulary – seems to be a step in the right direction until the next step – the necessary introduction of words like *goodthink* – at once negates all the ‘progress’ that had been made thus far. (333-4)

This suggestion of a tipping point at which Orwell’s sound advice drops into the realm of totalitarian dogma indicates that Freedman is, at least in part, wilfully misreading “Politics and the English Language.”<sup>80</sup> The essay is clearly more a call to *think* about language than to blindly adhere to a list of stylistic dictums or “steps.” Nonetheless, in an

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<sup>80</sup> Oliver Conant complains that Freedman’s approach to “Politics” entirely misses the essay’s intention: “I find that at almost every turn the article differs in spirit from the essay – it is theoretical where Orwell is personal, ‘radical’ in a position-taking way where Orwell is politically sensible, abstruse where Orwell is accessible. At times indeed it seems almost to be a commentary on some completely different text” (410). Further, he finds Freedman’s interpretation of the essay misguided: “Only a critic determined to offer a perverse interpretation of this essay could profess to find Orwell’s examples of vague, euphemistic writing praiseworthy” (410). Of Freedman’s effort to read “The Principles of Newspeak” as a “parody” of “Politics,” Conant dismisses this as “fancy logic” (412).

important respect, Freedman's misreading is illuminating, for it leads him into a fruitfully creative, if somewhat less emphatic, misreading of the Appendix as well. "The Principles of Newspeak," he writes, "is, I think, best read as a devastating, if unconscious, satire on 'Politics and the English Language'" (333). The "perfectly logical extreme" of the earlier essay, in Freedman's estimation, becomes in the Appendix the material for a satiric treatment of the plain style.

The correspondences that Freedman finds between these two generically distinct pieces, the one an appendix to a satiric novel and the other a prescriptive expository essay, raise a number of issues with respect to both the ways that satire operates in Orwell's work and, by extension, the generically varied strategies that Orwell brings to bear on his writings about totalitarianism. If Freedman displays insight in hearing a satire of "Politics and the English Language" in "The Principles of Newspeak," however, he is probably mistaken in suggesting that it is unconsciously achieved. More plausible, considering the centrality of these issues to Orwell's work, is an interpretation that recognizes the satiric dimension of "Politics and the English Language." More than simply a straightforward defence of the plain style, as Freedman seems to see it, the essay displays a rhetorical sophistication that ultimately contains and anticipates Freedman's critique.

While "Politics and English Language" is clearly not itself primarily satire, it is certainly generically more complex than simply a prescriptive discussion of the uses and abuses of the English language (as it is most commonly read).<sup>81</sup> A tension runs through the essay, in fact, between what Freedman calls Orwell's "dogmatic" stance and his habit

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<sup>81</sup> Conant notes the "satiric sweep" of the essay, but he appears to locate the satire in its examples and not in its larger rhetorical patterns (412).

of admitting the exception. For example, after describing at length bad habits of writing to avoid, Orwell freely admits to breaking the rules himself. “Look back through this essay,” he writes, “and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against” (*CEJL* 4: 138). In addition, as I mentioned above, his list of lengthy, “abstract” words to steer clear of includes several – such as *socialism*, *democracy*, *patriotic*, and *totalitarian* – that, in effect, form the subject matter of Orwell’s most important work. Finally, and most strikingly, this essay that is rhetorically geared towards shedding light on a totalitarian infiltration of language betrays at times a surprisingly rigid outlook towards composition.

Without overstating the degree to which a satiric component can be read into “Politics and the English Language,” it is possible to discover in the essay a hint of the imagination and complexity with which Orwell approaches the subject of totalitarianism, including yet another manifestation of his use of the rebel writer figure. Scrivener and Finkelman’s contention that its argument is essentially one of moderation, that it offers, “not a dichotomy of abstract and concrete, but a continuum between them,” appears reasonable at first glance but crucially misses some of the essential dynamism of the essay, the *purposeful* extremism that is designed to illuminate by example the necessarily rigorous exercise of thought that is required to resist a totalitarian drift in language (21). The opposition that exists in “Politics and the English Language,” between its dogmatic strain and its simultaneous rejection of orthodoxy reveals an ironic tension in the essay’s rhetoric, a sense of an internal contradiction, that in fact has the paradoxical effect of doubly authorizing its underlying rhetorical thrust. The author first convinces with a persuasive account of the most common errors in writing, errors that should be avoided at

all costs; he then demonstrates why one should resist the sort of strict advice that he offers. The hint of a fundamental need to resist at the level of language, which is vital to the essay's underlying rhetorical thrust, makes "Politics and the English Language" one of the key works in Orwell's canon that deploys the figure of the rebel writer.

The crucial irony at play in the piece rests specifically in the disjunction between Orwell's exhortation to make *thought* an essential part of the writing process and the prominence in the essay of stylistic dictums, rules of conduct, and an aggressively didactic tone. On the one hand, it is impossible to read "Politics and the English Language" and miss Orwell's central point, that "if one gets rid of [bad writing] habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration" (*CEJL* 4: 128). At the same time, certain of the essay's rhetorical features effectively discourage the free play of the mind during the writing process. Primarily, this is because "Politics and the English Language" takes the superficial form of a treatise on the plain style. Although Orwell claims near the end of the essay that a "defence of the English language ... is not concerned with fake simplicity and the attempt to make written English colloquial," at various points he seems intent on demonstrating precisely how to achieve these goals (*CEJL* 4: 138). His denial that he aims for a "fake simplicity" is particularly surprising, given that the essay appears to argue that there is no idea, at least no political idea, that is too complex to be written in simple and straightforward language. "Politics and the English Language" is more than a treatise, of course, but in its capacity as such its tone and structure invariably tend towards the dogmatic. The division of the essay under headings that outline the primary infractions of bad prose writing, for example, together with the extensive use of examples demonstrating exactly what kinds



of bad habits to avoid, lends it an air of authoritative and unchallengeable instruction. This sense is further conveyed by the list of rules that close the essay (about which I will say more shortly). Orwell's language, meanwhile, occasionally reflects what Cain describes as the "persistently oppositional and contradictory turns in [Orwell's] thinking" (115). He does not hesitate, for instance, to assert that a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose," or that the examples of bad writing practice he identifies in the early part of the essay are "swindles and perversions" – as though to emphasize both their insidiousness and the dubious characters of their authors (*CEJL* 4: 133). Indeed, this dimension of "Politics and the English Language" seems to corroborate John Wain's characterization of Orwell as essentially "a writer of polemic" (90), whose ultimate aim is "to implant in the reader's mind a point of view, often about some definite limited topic ... but in any case about an issue over which he felt it was wrong not to take sides" (89).<sup>82</sup> The polemicist, Wain writes, "uses his work as an instrument for strengthening the support of that side" (89). In the case of the English language, for Orwell the side to take was clear: "Anyone who talked or wrote in vague, woolly language ... – language which tended to veil the issues it claimed to be discussing – [Orwell] denounced as an enemy. The language of free men must, he held, be vivid, candid, *truthful*" (Wain 95).

While "Politics and the English Language" has a strong polemical component, however, its rhetorical complexity raises it above the level of mere argument. As Crick observes, "a natural essayist like Orwell ... enjoys the play of imagination and the actual

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<sup>82</sup> Perhaps consciously emulating Orwell's distaste for foreign words, Wain insists on drawing a distinction between the Anglo-Saxon *kind* and the French *genre* in his characterization of Orwell as a writer of polemic. He does not explain, however, why *polemic*, a word of Greek origin, cannot be understood as a *genre*.

act of writing too much ever to be ... a reliable polemicist” (xi). The rhetorical thrust of “Politics and the English Language,” far from being easy to pin down and summarize in a compact formula (as Wain does), has the sophistication and ambiguity of literature, and this is perhaps most apparent in the well-known stylistic dictums that appear towards the end of the piece, the “rules that one can rely on when instinct fails,” as Orwell puts it (*CEJL* 4: 139). Nowhere in the essay does the tension between dogmatic instruction and encouragement of independent thought emerge more prominently or more sharply.

Commenting on Orwell’s many contradictions, Rodden observes that “[t]he writer who loved the richness and nuances of Oldspeak was also the one who advocated clarity, directness, and simplicity even to the point of offering six easy writing ‘rules’ which he expected ‘will cover most cases’” (40). In fact, though, the contradiction lies *within* the rules, which are effectively self-contradictory, the free-thinking final rule cancelling out the dogmatic five that precede it. With rule *vi.* – “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous” – Orwell seems to be saying: Here are some rules for “when instinct fails,” but, ultimately, instinct *must not ever fail* when it comes to writing; it must always stand as the final barrier to barbarousness. An “effort of the mind” must always come into play if one is to avoid producing “stale and mixed images, [...] prefabricated phrases, needless repetitions, and humbug and vagueness generally” (*CEJL* 4: 139). Constant vigilance must over-ride an adherence to any group of stylistic dictums.

Delaying this emphasis on the importance of the exception to the rule has an obvious influence on the rhetorical impact of the six dictums, of course, and raises questions of what Orwell hoped to achieve exactly by undercutting and thus diminishing in importance rules *i.–v.* on the list. An obvious alternative to this strategy would have

been to simply tweak the language of the first five rules so as to eliminate their dogmatic thrust and thus remove altogether the necessity for any sort of qualification. Rule *i.*, for instance, “Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print,” might have been worded instead as “*Avoid* using metaphors, etc.” Likewise, rule *ii.* could have been expressed as “Do not use a long word if a short one will do” instead of the more insistent “*Never* use a long word where a short one will do.” The first five dictums are dogmatic by design, however, and their emphatic repetition of restrictive adverbs – *never, never, always, never, never* – suggests no allowance for exception. Hunter is right to suggest that, “[a]though guidelines are proposed to achieve simplicity, they are presented in negative terms as a warning, not as a prescription that might lead to yet more unthinking imitation” (139), but her analysis does not address the possible reasons for Orwell’s decision to phrase his dictums in the language of rigid dogma. In part, of course, the restrictive adverbs of the rules are meant to make the list more memorable; more importantly, though, they set up rule *vi.*’s dramatic rejection of dogma. The effect of this last-moment rejection is to alter the rhetoric of the essay by making clear that Orwell’s underlying purpose in the piece is not merely to offer a polemic against complacent and unthinking orthodoxy but rather to demonstrate exactly how one goes about resisting it. Confronted with instruction that is apparently sound but that is nonetheless dogmatic in its essence, one must be vigilant and always willing to disregard the rule. “Politics and the English Language” thus maintains a rhetorical consistency by reinforcing its central message – that independent thought should be incorporated into the writing process – even as it simultaneously satirizes itself, encouraging (and then abruptly discouraging) the adherence to a set of rules. The effect

of this strategy is not to contradict the essay's rhetorical thrust but to infuse it with a dynamism that elevates it to the status of literature.

This interpretation of "Politics and English Language" that emphasizes its literary-rhetorical aspects (as against its more strictly polemical or even instructional elements) has some affinity with Homi Bhabha's reading of the essay. Bhabha takes the view that, rhetorically speaking, "Politics and the English Language" possesses a degree of complexity that tends to be overlooked because of the attention that is typically paid to its ostensibly 'plainspoken' advocacy for the plain style. He detects in Orwell's language an undercurrent of violence that is at odds with the anti-totalitarian stance of the essay, specifically in the figures of contamination and extermination that pepper Orwell's sentences describing the state of the English language: the imagery of an "invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases" and, crucially, of the resistance to this tendency by "the conscious action of a minority" (Qtd. in Bhabha 30-31). Orwell's metaphors, Bhabha maintains, "are suffused with the imagination of totalitarian violence, even a kind of eugenicist enthusiasm" (30). And yet, this "narrative identification with extreme violence," he insists, is a vital source of Orwell's rhetorical power: "[I]t is precisely when he narrates the vicious that the virtuousness of Orwell turns into a kind of virtuosity. It is when the proselytizer tips over into the paranoid in the service of the good cause that Orwell is at his most inventive and insightful" (31). Bhabha overstates his case somewhat with wordplay, but the core of his argument – that a central conceit in Orwell's writing turns on a rhetorically constructed image of a sane individual who is assailed on all sides by totalitarian lunacy (and who, quite reasonably, uses language that is tinged with paranoia and violence) – provides a useful entry point to understanding the literary-

rhetorical operations in a number of Orwell's essays. Bhabha's remarks go some way, in fact, towards explaining Orwell's efforts to cultivate the plain style over the course of his writing career. More than simply a stylistic device that is meant to facilitate 'clarity' or 'truth', the plain style, for Orwell, works to rhetorically convey an impression of sanity, of an individual voice that resists the contradictions and lies of totalitarian-speak.

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These essays that take up the subject of totalitarianism rely for their rhetorical impact on a frequent use of the rebel writer figure. "The Prevention of Literature," which appeared only a few months prior to "Politics and the English Language," anticipates the later essay thematically in its treatment of language and literature, though if the rhetorical subtext of "Politics and the English Language" is meant to demonstrate by example how one goes about resisting a totalitarian drift in language, "The Prevention of Literature" dramatizes the individual's stubborn opposition to political orthodoxy. Within Orwell's conception of an intimate relationship between language and politics, these gestures of rebellion are not unrelated but rather distinct aspects of a single comprehensive strategy of resistance. The essays each draw upon an image of the individual standing against a complacent, dishonest, or naive consensus majority that has passively accepted, enthusiastically embraced, or simply been fooled by orthodoxies of politics and language. "Why I Write," for its part, dramatizes the ambivalence that necessarily comes with the gesture of "standing against." Thus, while the figure of the rebel writer contributes to the self-portrait of Orwell himself as a rebel, it should be clear that this is not its primary purpose. Rather, the rebel writer is a manufactured trope that performs a central function in Orwell's rhetorical engagement with totalitarianism. As Bounds observes, "Orwell had

a typical outsider's regard for people who openly defy the most cherished values of their age, seeing them (arguably at any rate) as hard-line defenders of personal liberty from whom less adventurous souls can learn valuable lessons in independent thinking" (103). In the rebel writer figure, Orwell found an emblematic iconoclast and a model anti-totalitarian, and much of his work is dedicated to examining what it means to occupy that role.

**CHAPTER 6:**  
**TOTALITARIAN THEORY AND MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVE**  
**IN *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR***

“No one ever wrote a good book in praise of the Inquisition”

“The Prevention of Literature”

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the rebel writer also figures prominently. Winston Smith’s resistance to totalitarian tyranny is initiated by the act of writing; he becomes a rebel, in effect, at precisely the moment he becomes a writer. He purchases from a “frowsy little junk-shop in a slummy quarter of the town” a diary that, “[e]ven with nothing written in it ...[is] a compromising possession” (8-9). “To mark the paper,” we learn, “was the decisive act” (9). Winston understands at once that his decision to write, “to transfer to paper the interminable restless monologue that had been running inside his head, literally for years,” makes official his opposition to Party orthodoxy. Although O’Brien later insists that the Party is not content with mere compliance and must possess the thoughts of its victims, Winston’s diary writing actualizes his conscious resistance. For all practical purposes, his rebellion against totalitarianism is set in motion by this act of transferring his true feelings about the Party to paper.

The dual position that Winston Smith occupies in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as both protagonist and *author*, reflects the central thematic position that writing and authorship and, by extension, perspective hold in the book’s exploration of totalitarianism. One of the more striking features of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is its inclusion of a range of perspectives from which to interpret the totalitarian landscape of Oceania. Winston’s

subjective response as a victim of totalitarian tyranny emerges in an important sense as a very limited perspective of the phenomenon of totalitarianism, in large part because totalitarianism, in Orwell's treatment, sets out to eliminate, or at least render meaningless, the very idea of a shared historical memory. Winston's position as a writer for the Party makes this clear; he is granted a first-hand view of the ways that history is manipulated and indeed manufactured to preserve the Party's dominance. His reading of the tyrannous regime under which he struggles is thus presented as radically subjective, an interpretation that he himself recognizes is ultimately unverifiable.

While Winston Smith's perspective is presented as being crucially limited by his circumstances, however, the book's multiple perspectives of the phenomenon of totalitarianism work to create a rounded and complex picture, an expansive and distinctly literary version of totalitarianism that exists in ambiguous dialogue with the many discussions of totalitarianism found elsewhere in Orwell's writings. Totalitarianism is, in effect, theorized from a variety of perspectives in the book, ranging from O'Brien's 'education' of Winston during his torture sessions, to the excerpts from Goldstein's Book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, to the Appendix that closes the novel, "The Principles of Newspeak." In addition to these direct and yet complexly satirical invocations of contemporary analyses of totalitarianism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers a rendering of the totalitarian state that is generically ambiguous: the book is both naturalistic and satirical, simultaneously an articulation of Orwell's reading of the emerging power dynamics of the post-war environment in which he lived and a dystopian fantasy with an uncertain relationship to the real world.<sup>83</sup> These productively conflicting

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<sup>83</sup> Orwell's post-publication statements regarding his intentions for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* indicate that he was at least intuitively aware of a tension in the novel between an imaginative mode of writing and a poli-



genres offer competing conceptions of totalitarianism. Despite its title, the totalitarian state that is depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not a strictly future-oriented phenomenon; rather, it is infused with elements of both Orwell's present and, especially with respect to the way that the novel employs the Spanish Inquisition as a figure, of Europe's dark history. This dynamic combination of old and new – a product of both the novel's generic flexibility and its strategic use of the Inquisition as both a metaphor and a structural device – speaks directly to Orwell's conception of totalitarianism as something that is both unprecedented and a continuation of Europe's barbarous history. In this and other ways the totalitarianism that is offered in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a paradoxical phenomenon, an ambiguous and distinctly literary version that reflects the ongoing dialectic of politics and art in Orwell's work.

This dialectic unfolds in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* largely through its heteroglossic structure. As Roger Fowler observes in his analysis of the novel's complex use of language, a heteroglossic agenda is central to Orwell's rendering of a totalitarian atmosphere. "A considerable range of voices," Fowler argues, "bombard Winston's

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scientific one – that is, between the satirist's tendency towards *exaggeration* and the political scientist's adherence to a model of *extrapolation*. In a 1949 letter, Orwell offers an explanation of his intentions for the novel that in some respects complicates rather than clarifies the book's relationship to real-world totalitarian regimes:

I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. (*CEJL* 4: 502)

A similar tension surfaces in a press release issued in 1949:

It has been suggested by some reviewers of NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR that it is the author's view that this, or something like this, is what will happen inside the next forty years in the Western world. This is not correct. I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR *could* happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation. (qtd. in Crick 395 )

In these statements there is a suggestion of a model of quasi-poli-scientific "extrapolation" from deep-lying trends of the current socio-political moment; and yet, in both instances, Orwell offers a crucial qualification: the book is a satire, and it is "after all a parody."

consciousness and are objects of Orwell's parody" (203). Winston is "surrounded [by a] vast menagerie of grotesque caricatures" who display features such as "small stature, thinness or fatness, eccentric hair or eyes or other facial features" (Fowler 205). These "grotesque miniatures," Fowler contends, function as "the physiognomical equivalent of heteroglossia" in the sense that they "enliven and diversify the texture of the novel," while at the same time conveying the impression that Winston "lives in a world peopled by a variety of strange monsters" (205). In Fowler's view, this strategic deployment of "voices" reflects a tendency in Orwell's approach that can be traced through much of his written work. The mimicry of Cockney slang in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for instance, has numerous precedents in Orwell's oeuvre – in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, for example, or in *The Clergyman's Daughter*. Likewise, some of the demonically grotesque parodies in his final novel (the "strange monsters") are not that far removed from the scathing portrayals of the members of the European Club in *Burmese Days*.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond simply "enlivening" or "diversifying" the text, the heteroglossic elements of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* play a significant role in the book's more direct analytic engagements with totalitarianism. For not only does *Nineteen Eighty-Four* attempt to present a vivid picture of a super-totalitarian future world – that is, by populating Oceania with human beings whose grotesquely caricatured features are meant to satirize totalitarianism's anti-humanist tendencies – it also takes up contemporary discourses of totalitarianism. In his non-fictional work, of course, Orwell was deeply immersed in this discourse. He reviewed books by early theorists of totalitarianism Friedrich Hayek and

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<sup>84</sup> In his chapter on Orwell in *Three Modern Satirists*, Stephen Greenblatt makes the case that Orwell's satirical impulse is ever apparent and that, "[e]ven when [he] asserts that his prose is devoid of satiric intent, his work assumes the forms of ironic fantasy or myth, not of realism" (58). In his capacity as a satirist, Greenblatt argues, he "takes the vast mass of empirical data and, consciously or unconsciously, selects those details, almost always grotesque and ugly, which justify his attitude toward experience" (57).

Franz Borkenau, maintained a long-standing correspondence with Arthur Koestler, and wrote numerous important essays that either take totalitarianism as their primary subject or consider other subjects from a distinctly “totalitarian” angle. As he famously asserts in “Why I Write,” “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism” (*CEJL* 1: 8). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* amply demonstrates, however, that the totalitarianism Orwell wrote against was at least in part a literary phenomenon – that is, like so much of his material, an idea whose conception stems from a dialectic of aesthetic and political impulses.<sup>85</sup> In the speeches of O’Brien, the excerpts from Goldstein’s book, and in the Appendix, direct echoes of the discourse of totalitarian theory can be heard, often taking

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<sup>85</sup> An emphasis on the poli-scientific authority of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has at times threatened to overshadow its literary dimensions. In an early review, for instance, Philip Rahv insisted that “it will not do to judge [the book] primarily as a literary work of art.... *Nineteen Eighty-Four* chiefly appeals to us as work of the political imagination” (qtd. in Meyers 267-8). Later critics, less immediately constrained by the ideological dynamics of the Cold War, have continued to assert the poli-scientific authority of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by emphasizing the degree to which it constitutes a “logical consequence” of real-world political trends. Commenting on the differences between the totalitarian societies of Orwell’s time and the one rendered in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, David Sisk remarks that “Orwell was not exaggerating, but extrapolating” (41). Michael Zuckert likewise insists that “Orwell’s theory or explanation of twentieth-century totalitarian societies takes the form of an extrapolation of their features into a more perfected version of themselves” (46). Orwell’s book, Zuckert adds, “could be at once a theory of totalitarianism and a warning or prediction about totalitarianism because, at the deepest level, he argued that the nature of totalitarianism derives from the nature of modern politics altogether” (46). Erika Gottlieb offers a radical version of this reading. The totalitarian vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *corroborated*, in her view, by “testimonies of writers like Milan Simecka and Czeslav Milos who felt amazed that Orwell ‘who never lived in Russia should have so keen a perception into its life’,” while “later highly acclaimed studies analysing Nazi and Stalinist forms of terror, such as Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956)” function as “scholarly confirmations that Orwell’s original ‘anatomy’ of totalitarianism was an accurate diagnosis of reality” and not a “fantasmagorical ‘invention’” (196).

Louis Menand, for his part, shows a particular disdain for the intellectual exercise of tracing “tendencies” to their “logical consequences”: “If ideas were to stand or fall on the basis of their logically possible consequences,” he writes, “we would have no ideas, because the ultimate conceivable consequence of every idea is an absurdity – is, in some way, ‘against life’. We don’t live just by ideas. Ideas are part of the mixture of customs and practices, institutions and instincts that make human life a conscious activity susceptible to improvement or debasement. A radical idea may be healthy as a provocation; a temperate idea may be stultifying. It depends on the circumstances. One of the most tiresome arguments against ideas is that their ‘tendency’ is to some dire condition – to totalitarianism, or moral relativism, or to a war of all against all. Orwell did not invent this kind of argument, but he provided, in *1984*, a vocabulary for its deployment” (“Honest, Decent, Wrong”).

the form of a pseudo-documentary style that incorporates elements of Orwell's plain style, and indeed sometimes echoing sentiments that are expressed in his non-fictional work. But in a book so complexly infused with satire, parody, and novelistic invention, one must be cautious about aligning the author's views with those of his creations, particularly when, as in the case of O'Brien, the ideas issue from the mouth of a committed totalitarian. Because they are sometimes filtered through a distinctly 'totalitarian' perspective or are purposefully distorted for satirical purposes, Orwell's analyses of totalitarianism are transformed when they surface in his great novel of totalitarianism. The discourse of totalitarian theory that appears in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* emerges through a prism of irony and satire and multiple perspectives that render Orwell's reading of totalitarianism ambiguous and less easy to define but at the same time richer and more enduring.

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“[I]n the last third of *1984*,” Richard Rorty argues, “we get something different – something not topical, prospective rather descriptive” (171). Rorty contends that, “[a]fter Winston and Julia go to O'Brien's apartment, *1984* becomes a book about O'Brien, not about twentieth-century totalitarian states... It is no longer a warning about what is currently happening in the world, but the creation of a character who illustrates what might someday happen” (171). The shift in the third section of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is undeniable, but the suggestion that the book abandons its “topicality” overlooks the degree to which the character of O'Brien dramatizes the conversation surrounding totalitarianism in Orwell's time. The novel becomes in a certain respect more firmly rooted in its own time by the mere fact of O'Brien's presence, precisely because he

performs the task of dissecting the totalitarian state in terms that echo contemporary political analyses in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>86</sup> A substantial portion of the interrogation sessions with Winston is in fact devoted to an exegesis on the nature and origins of the totalitarian state:

“The first thing for you to understand [O’Brien tells Winston] is that in this place there are no martyrdoms. You have read of the religious persecutions of the past. In the Middle Ages there was the Inquisition. It was a failure. It set out to eradicate heresy, and ended by perpetuating it. For every heretic it burned at the stake, thousands of others rose up. Why was that? Because the Inquisition killed its enemies in the open, and killed them while they were still unrepentant. Men were dying because they would not abandon their true beliefs. Naturally all the glory belonged to the victim and all the shame to the Inquisitor who burned him. Later, in the twentieth century, there were the totalitarians, as they were called. There were the German Nazis and the Russian Communists. The Russians persecuted heresy more cruelly than the Inquisition had done. And they imagined that they had learned from the mistakes of the past; they knew, at any rate, that one must not make martyrs. Before they exposed their victims to public trial, they deliberately set themselves to destroy their dignity. They wore them down by torture and solitude until they were despicable, cringing wretches, confessing whatever was put into their

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<sup>86</sup> In this respect, Irving Howe’s observation, that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “does not pretend to investigate the genesis of the totalitarian state, nor the laws of its economy, nor the prospect for its survival,” is slightly off the mark (235). These issues, especially the questions of genesis and survival of the state, are directly taken up both in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* and in O’Brien’s education of Winston during the sessions of torture.

mouths, covering themselves with abuse, accusing and sheltering behind one another, whimpering for mercy. And yet after only a few years the same thing had happened over again. The dead men had become martyrs and their degradation was forgotten. Once again, why was it? In the first place, because the confessions that they had made were obviously extorted and untrue. We do not make mistakes of that kind.” (290-1)

O’Brien’s remarks on totalitarianism here highlight the temporal ambiguity of the novel’s treatment of totalitarianism. On the one hand, his references to earlier totalitarian systems have the effect of drawing attention to the futurity of the nightmare vision that he describes (of “a boot stamping on a human face – for ever”), and as such the passage supports Rorty’s point that the third section of the novel is “prospective” in nature (307). There are many backward glances in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – Winston’s nostalgic reminiscences of his childhood, for instance – but none so dramatically reduces the contemporary present context out of which it was written to a preliminary detail. Nowhere else (telescreens notwithstanding) is the novel so futuristic in orientation, and nowhere else is Oceania so sharply distinguished from Orwell’s present. O’Brien’s *we/they* dichotomy reflects the classic dystopian contrast between a deeply flawed *present* and a madly perfected *future*, and the contemporary historical moment, the present from which Orwell draws his raw material and inspiration – war-torn London and the geopolitical dynamics of the new Cold War – is, in this future-oriented dystopian mode, glossed as nothing more than an earlier stage of civilization. Its nuances and subtleties are not deemed important. The *we/they* contrast of O’Brien’s speech emphasizes the distinction between the old and the new, and any differences that may

have existed between the oligarchies of old are swept aside because, for the purposes of the *future/present (we/they)* comparison, it is their sameness that matters. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists are, in O'Brien's assessment, of a kind; they are both flawed *proto*-versions of the totalizing state that finds its ultimate realization in Oceania. Likewise, within the logic of this assessment, the Spanish Inquisition is framed as a chapter of European history that is remote and no longer relevant.

Even as O'Brien attempts to put a distance between Oceania and the totalitarian states that served, for Orwell, as models for Oceania – *i.e.* the German Nazis and the Russian Communists – the terms by which he sets out to establish that contrast ensure that his speech retains a distinct “topicality.” His assertion of Nazi-Stalinist equivalence, as well as his gesture of using the figure of the Spanish Inquisition to emphasize the unprecedented character of the advanced version of totalitarianism found in Oceania, situates his speech squarely in the context of mid-twentieth century discussions of totalitarianism. These familiar *topoi* of totalitarian discourse – commonplaces of totalitarian theory, one might even say – anchor the novel in its time. Thus, O'Brien may well represent, as Rorty suggests, the creation of a new kind of man (a new “breed,” as Orwell puts it elsewhere [*CEJL* I. 380-1]), but when he undertakes the task of answering Winston's question of *why* the Party exercises such brutal control over the population of Oceania, his explanation draws heavily on analyses of totalitarianism that would have been familiar to Orwell's contemporaries.

Two central tenets of Western totalitarian theory that are crucial to an understanding of Orwell's writings on totalitarianism generally are the notions of historical uniqueness and Nazi-Stalinist equivalence. These premises are expressed with

memorable clarity in Carl Friedrich's influential 1954 essay "The Unique Character of Totalitarian Society": "It is the concern of this paper," Friedrich begins, "that (a) fascist and Communist totalitarian society are basically alike, that is to say are more nearly alike to each other than to any systems of government and society, and (b) totalitarian society is historically unique and *sui generis*" (47). Orwell's writings on totalitarianism are in many respects anchored by these two ideas, which turn up in one form or another in his essays, his reviews, his reportage, and his fiction. Likewise, the position that the Spanish Inquisition occupied in discussions of totalitarianism, and in particular the figurative role that it played in conceptualizing the issue of totalitarianism's historical novelty, was a topic that Orwell frequently visited in his work from the late-1930s onward.

In adopting the Inquisition as a trope by which one could interrogate totalitarianism's "unique character," Orwell was in fact following a current of thought that had become fairly standard in the 1930s: Europe's barbarous history could be invoked as a way of understanding the horrors of the political present. As Edward Peters observes, "In a series of imaginative literary works, studies in the social sciences, and in the common usage of journalists and politicians alike, the myth of *The Inquisition* returned, stripped of its original functions and redesigned to provide a framework for explaining some of the most problematic features of public life in the twentieth century" (297). A number of important twentieth-century writers, Peters notes, drawing on Dostoyevski's famous depiction of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, embraced the Inquisition myth as "a flexible metaphor for a number of aspects of twentieth-century life" (300). "[N]othing in Europe's past," Peters contends, "appeared to be as effective a metaphor as *The Inquisition* to explain the horrors of totalitarian states"



(301). For a range of twentieth-century writers, including D. H. Lawrence, Evgeny Zamyatin, Arthur Koestler, and, of course, George Orwell, the *Inquisition* metaphor was embraced as a hybrid figurative-historical construct that could be deployed in analyses of the totalitarian state. The metaphor occupied an especially important position in Orwell's writings on totalitarianism. It turned up in countless of his essays and seems to have been particularly vital to his thinking on the question of totalitarianism's "unique character." The central position that it holds in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as both a metaphor and as a structural device, is in a sense a natural progression, for the Inquisition was by its nature well-suited as a figurative construct to interrogate the historical position of totalitarianism, something that is of obvious thematic importance to Orwell's future-oriented yet backward-glancing dystopia.

An invocation of the Inquisition surfaces early on in Orwell's engagements with the problem of totalitarianism, in his 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air*, a book that also reflects an interest in the dialectic of historical novelty and historical precedent as a way of understanding mid-century European politics. When protagonist George Bowling visits his friend, the retired school-master, Porteous, to ask his opinion of the phenomenon of Nazism, for instance, the passage evolves quickly into a dialogue on the *sui generis* character of totalitarianism. Porteous doubts the Führer's historical uniqueness:

‘I see no reason for paying any attention to him. A mere adventurer.

These people come and go. Ephemeral, purely ephemeral.’

[...]

‘I think you’ve got it wrong,’ [Bowling replies]. ‘Old Hitler’s something different. So’s Joe Stalin. They aren’t like these chaps in the old days who crucified people and chopped their heads off and so forth, just for the fun of it. They’re after something quite new – something that’s never been heard of before.’

‘My dear fellow! There’s nothing new under the sun.’ (523)<sup>87</sup>

The difficulty of ascertaining Orwell’s position from an examination of his fictional work is made especially clear in this exchange, for in the context of *Coming Up for Air* both sides of the debate are being satirized, albeit to varying degrees. Porteous, quite obviously, is a naïve fool whose immersion in the Classics has blinded him to the historically unique conditions of mid-twentieth-century Europe. Bowling’s response to those same political conditions cannot, however, be entirely disentangled from his tendency to indulge in a nostalgia for an idyllic past that never really existed. As Crick points out, “the gross nostalgia of George Bowling may well have been intended to show both what held him back from being an effective man and what prevented his class from fulfilling an active and distinct political role.” In this respect, the nostalgic tone of the novel can be understood as being “deliberately ambivalent” (*A Life* 254). Bowling’s nostalgia necessarily colours his assessments of the political present; and while his assessment of Hitler and Stalin is clearly closer to Orwell’s than is Porteous’s, his politically enervating nostalgic impulse puts him at some distance from his creator. This subtle hint of narrative distance is enough to raise doubts about the degree to which Bowling’s precise articulation of the historical uniqueness argument mirrors Orwell’s. At

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<sup>87</sup> *Coming Up for Air* also takes up the issue of Nazi-Stalinist equivalence. When Bowling contemplates all the people who are “after” him, that is, who object to his returning to Lower Binfield for a temporary reprieve, he includes on his lengthy list “Hitler and Stalin on a tandem bicycle” (534).

the very least, the ambiguity highlights the difficulty of aligning Orwell's views with those expressed by characters in his fictional work, even when they seem to function as mouthpieces for the author.<sup>88</sup>

The exchange between Bowling and Porteous also demonstrates that questions of political analysis have a distinctly moral component: Bowling's interpretation of totalitarianism is tied up in his desire to escape to an imagined past. This convergence of morality and interpretation has obvious implications for an understanding of how to read those passages in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which O'Brien appears to act as an analytical mouthpiece for Orwell. Even when he seems to reiterate ideas that can be found in Orwell's non-fictional work, his totalitarian orientation must be taken into account as a factor that influences his analysis in sometimes subtle ways.

Not surprisingly, a comparison of O'Brien's speech with analyses of totalitarianism found in Orwell's non-fictional work reveals that their respective analyses are not in perfect accord. Although they seem to agree on the basic premises outlined by Friedrich, on some of the finer points of the analysis of totalitarianism – particularly on the issue of its historical novelty – subtle differences in their outlooks can be detected. The fine distinctions between the speeches of O'Brien and his creator's sentiments are especially apparent when one examines the ways that the Spanish Inquisition is taken up in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* alongside how it is taken up by Orwell in his non-fictional work. As the above excerpt from O'Brien's education of Winston makes clear, the Inquisition occupies a vital rhetorical position in the torturer's efforts to convince his victim of the unprecedentedness of the system of state tyranny that is practised in Oceania. The

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<sup>88</sup> This point, as I noted in the Introduction, is central to Lorraine Saunders' argument that Orwell's fictions are "layer[ed]...with different voices" that function to "distan[c]e the omniscient narrator and bring[] in a fallible human voice" (41).

Inquisition, in O'Brien's explanation, is a "failure," a comparatively vulgar early example of state terror: "It set out to eradicate heresy, and ended by perpetuating it." Orwell expresses a similar sentiment in discussions of totalitarianism found elsewhere in his writings, but his analyses display a level of nuance that is absent from the totalitarian O'Brien's. In a 1939 review of N. de Basily's *Russia under Soviet Rule*, for instance, Orwell offers a reading of the Inquisition (and its comparative value for an interpretation of totalitarianism) that bears a strong resemblance to ideas found later in O'Brien's lecture to Winston; however, Orwell's analysis goes further and, as a result, emerges as a more refined explanation:

The terrifying thing about modern dictatorships is that they are something entirely unprecedented. Their end cannot be foreseen. In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of 'human nature', which as a matter of course desired liberty. But we cannot be at all certain that 'human nature' is constant. It may be just as possible to produce a breed of men who do not wish for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows. The Inquisition failed, but then the Inquisition had not the resources of the modern state. The radio, press-censorship, standardized education and the secret police have altered everything.

(CEJL 1: 380-1)

Orwell's reference to the Inquisition in the above passage finds an initially disconcerting echo in O'Brien's explanation to Winston of how the Party has refined the practice of weeding out heretics. In both instances, the Inquisition is described as a failure, and in both the failure is attributed to a problem of technique or method. In O'Brien's view, the

burning at the stake of heretics amounted to an error of strategy. Ostentatious torture gives rise to martyrdom, and, worse, killing the unrepentant (as even the later Russian Communists did) works to keep alive a sense of opposition to the regime. That mistake is not made by the Party. As O'Brien tells Winston, "we do not allow the dead to rise up against us" (291). To the extent that O'Brien's explanation dramatizes an "unprecedented" approach to history and reflects the psychology of a new kind of man, *i.e.* 'totalitarian man', it accords with Orwell's own views on the historical novelty of totalitarianism.

In O'Brien's account of the Inquisition's failure, however, an element of delusion appears to influence his analysis, specifically in the way that he neglects to mention a crucial distinction between the old and the new: technology. Orwell's explanation, in contrast, gives "the resources of the modern state" as the reason why the totalitarian state differs from the tyrannies of history. Orwell speculates on the emergence of a new "breed of men" who might, like O'Brien, differ fundamentally from the liberty-seeking men of history, but the historically novel *psychological* dimension of totalitarianism is not advanced as its own root cause as it is in O'Brien's account. Rather, totalitarianism's novelty is thought to be generated by a timeless impulse to rule and control *combined with* modern technology and coercive technique. O'Brien believes that the historical novelty of the Party is achieved through a sheer act of collective will; his more astute (and modest) creator recognizes that, although the psychologically novel aspect of 'totalitarian man' threatens to extend totalitarian rule indefinitely, it is a confluence of will-to-power and special historical circumstances – *i.e.* modern technology – that makes totalitarianism unprecedented.

Thus, in Orwell's non-fictional writing, the Inquisition is held up not simply as a model of failed tyranny (as O'Brien describes it) but as a kind of apotheosis for the encroachment of the 'nightmare' on human civilization. In this sense, the Inquisition performs a vital role for Orwell in his efforts to render in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* what Halberstam describes as a "metaphorical construction of totalitarianism as a nightmare" (118). The Inquisition serves as a figurative model for an earlier moment in European civilization when a dystopian atmosphere came to define the day-to-day activities of human affairs. Orwell's conception of the past in this way determines the texture of his conception of the totalitarian future. The Inquisition functions for him as the frame of reference by which the most nightmarish elements of totalitarian societies of the present can be understood, and it simultaneously fuels his future-oriented dystopian imagination. A reiteration of this view surfaces in a 1940 "Notes on the Way" entry, where Orwell takes stock of the direction in which Western civilization has moved in recent decades:

It is as though in the space of ten years we have slid back into the Stone Age. Human types supposedly extinct for centuries, the dancing dervish, the robber chieftain, the Grand Inquisitor, have suddenly reappeared, not as inmates of lunatic asylums, but as the masters of the world.

Mechanisation and a collective economy seemingly aren't enough. By themselves they lead merely to the nightmare we are now enduring: endless war and endless underfeeding for the sake of war, slave populations toiling behind barbed wire, women dragged shrieking to the block, cork-lined cellars where the executioner blows your brains out from behind. (*CEJL* 2: 15-6)

A bleak assessment of the political landscape of 1940 takes the form here of a distinctly literary description of the regressive tendencies of totalitarianism. Slaves “toiling,” women “dragged,” “cork-lined cellars” – it is all very evocative, as though the intention were not only to make an analytical point but to vividly describe a nightmare world, much as he later does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The reference to the Grand Inquisitor also anticipates a device that is central to the novel. As Daphne Patai observes, “although Orwell explicitly breaks with [a] pattern [set by Zamyatin’s *We* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*] by presenting a vision of the immediate future in which no moral justification of any kind is offered for the control exercised by the Party,” *Nineteen Eighty-Four* nonetheless adheres to a convention of dystopian literature that “owes much to the legend of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov*” (48; 47). In this formula, Patai explains, “there is typically a scene in which the key authority figure explains the logic of domination to the rebellious protagonist” (47). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of course, this ‘scene’ is fleshed out to encompass almost the entire third part of the novel, with O’Brien’s lengthy interrogation and torture of Winston acting as a direct literary response to Dostoyevski. This conscious nod to a precursor further ensures that O’Brien’s references to the failures of the Inquisition be read through a filter of irony. By insisting that the Party departs from the Spanish in both its methods and its motives, O’Brien unwittingly participates in the same ritual as the Grand Inquisitor, indeed plays his part, and thus contradicts himself, linking the methods of the Party to the past’s most notorious “failed” tyranny even as he asserts its unprecedentedness. In this way, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* blurs the lines between the Inquisition of history and the Inquisition of

fiction, and offers a vision of totalitarianism that is, paradoxically, equal parts barbarous past and novel present.

In an important way, this interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* departs from Peters's account of the way that the Inquisition myth was used as a "flexible metaphor" to understand totalitarianism. Peters identifies a shift in the perceived relevance of the Inquisition to understanding the character of totalitarianism, arguing that as totalitarian systems became more entrenched and advanced in the 1930s political landscape writers began to sense its limited value as a metaphor. In Lawrence's influential reading,<sup>89</sup> Peters notes, Dostoyevski's Grand Inquisitor "anticipated and personified the impersonal, pervasive, and total control exercised by a growing number of twentieth-century states" (298).<sup>90</sup> Even among the earliest writers who adopted the Inquisition myth as a useful metaphor, however, there was, Peters argues, a realization that "the mechanical revival of *The Inquisition* had limited applicability to twentieth-century totalitarian regimes" (302). For later writers, in particular (namely, Arthur Koestler and George Orwell), a growing sense of the Inquisition's limitations as a useful metaphor, that could effectively capture the *essence* of totalitarianism, ultimately engendered a shift in the ways that the myth was deployed. "[L]ater novelists who took up the theme," Peters writes, "tended to use *The Inquisition* and inquisitor-figures rather as primitive evolutionary stages of twentieth-century political culture in its most fearsome aspects rather than as direct metaphors" (303).

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<sup>89</sup> Lawrence's interpretation is found in his 1930 introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov*.

<sup>90</sup> "For Lawrence, as for many others," Peters contends, "the Grand Inquisitor and the dilemma he proposed challenged all earlier images of good and reasonable state authority. He embodied instead a new and lethal form of coercion which exercised itself in the name of humanity in the only form that humanity itself was capable of accepting, maintaining itself by fulfilling humanity's demands for miracle, mystery, and authority in its terrible flight from the freedom offered by Jesus or by states that proposed to live according to other standards" (298).



Peters's account of the declining importance of the Inquisition to Orwell's conception of totalitarianism is not entirely inaccurate, but it relies in part on a problematic conflation of Orwell's words and those of O'Brien, and thus does not take into adequate account the ways that the analyses of totalitarianism that appear in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might be filtered through ironic distance. In his summary of Orwell's reading of the Inquisition and its figurative-historical relationship to twentieth-century totalitarianism, Peters draws on material from Orwell's essays, as well as from quotations from both *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* and from the speeches of O'Brien. He does not distinguish, in other words, the sentiment of what is quoted by the context in which it appears. Thus, he writes: "[I]n his masterpiece, *1984*, [Orwell] discards the past as a standard by which to measure the atrocities of the present: 'Even the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages was tolerant by modern standards'" (305). Material from Goldstein's book is used here to support a claim for Orwell's position. As I will discuss later in this chapter, attributing the Book's sentiments to Orwell is perhaps less problematic than attributing O'Brien's speech to Orwell – the Book is initially presented, after all, as the work of a dissenter – but such a move nonetheless risks overlooking the complexly parodic elements of the Book. Interpreting *O'Brien's* remarks on the Inquisition as representative of Orwell's views, however (as Peters goes on to do), potentially results in a serious misunderstanding of the conception of totalitarianism that is presented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* because it validates a distinctly ahistorical perspective, which is at odds with Orwell's nuanced approach to the problem of totalitarianism and is more fitting of a megalomaniacal totalitarian perspective. Peters seems at first to grasp this crucial distinction; he is initially attentive to the source of the

material, and O'Brien's sentiments are identified as belonging to Orwell's "protagonist".<sup>91</sup> "When Orwell's protagonist O'Brien does mention the inquisitions," he writes, "he is contemptuous of them" (305). When Peters examines at length the passage in which O'Brien characterizes the Inquisition as a "failure," however, its content is attributed not to O'Brien but rather to Orwell himself :

The new horror state [Peters writes] has a sharper purpose and better means, and consequently the Inquisition is relegated to the dustbin of history, a history that itself will soon be utterly eliminated. For Orwell, Lawrence's and Zamyatin's metaphor is no longer adequate to contain the horrors of the present and the even greater horrors of the possible future. In the wake of Fascism and the Holocaust the anti-Semitism of the early Spanish Inquisition appeared paltry and inefficient; in the wake of examples of total state control, other Inquisitions appeared arbitrary and worked on far too small a scale to be interesting. (305)

While there is clearly some truth in the claim that Orwell viewed "the new horror state" as just that, *i.e.* as something unprecedented, a novel form of state control that differed substantially from tyrannies of the past, it is misleading to suggest that for Orwell the Inquisition had been "relegated to the dustbin of history." The record indicates, rather, that it served a vital function in his meditations on the subject of totalitarianism almost from the moment that he was seized by the recognition that it was the central problem of his age. He turns to the Inquisition repeatedly in his work, from the late-1930s up to and including *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as the figure of choice to evoke the 'nightmarish' character of totalitarianism. The Inquisition, for Orwell, may not have "contained" the

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<sup>91</sup> Identifying O'Brien as the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, of course, also problematic.

horrors of the totalitarian present (or future), but it was central to his efforts to render, as Howe puts it, “the essential quality of totalitarianism” (240).

The real error in attributing O’Brien’s views on the Inquisition to Orwell, of course, is that it neglects to take into account the fact that O’Brien himself dramatizes the central myth of the Inquisition for Western literature. O’Brien’s easy dismissal of the Inquisition as a “failure” is fundamentally ironic in this sense; for, even as his explanation of the Party’s self-serving motives constitutes, in Mason Harris’s view, a “dramatic departure” from the “anti-utopian tradition [in which] the Inquisitor provides a model for authority-figures who justify the oppressive future world,” he operates within the structure of the Inquisitor-victim dynamic (46). Even in his abject, tortured state, Winston displays a weary recognition of the fact that he and O’Brien are re-enacting a familiar ritual. Winston, we are told, “knew in advance what O’Brien would say”:

That the Party did not seek power for its own ends, but only for the good of the majority. That it sought power because men in the mass were frail cowardly creatures who could not endure liberty or face the truth, and must be ruled over and systematically deceived by others who were stronger than themselves. That the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great bulk of mankind, happiness was better. That the Party was the eternal guardian of the weak, a dedicated sect doing evil that good might come, sacrificing its own happiness to that of others. (300-1)

Winston has fallen into a trap here, of course. He assumes that O’Brien will adhere to the clichés of authoritarian justification, when in fact O’Brien’s aim is really to distance

himself from such rhetoric. He inhabits the role of Inquisitor so that he might show Winston how different he is from past Inquisitors – a strategy that is bound to be a partial failure. Harris argues that “Orwell introduces this explanation [that the Party is only interested in power] with a clearly-marked revision of the tradition of anti-utopian fantasy, indicating that he wants to make his own fantasy more extreme than those of his predecessors” (46). As with Peters’ analysis, though, this reading conflates Orwell and O’Brien in a way that misleadingly attributes the sentiments of the totalitarian protagonist to his author. Harris could, after all, just as easily be referring to *O’Brien’s* “fantasy” or *O’Brien’s* “predecessors,” a scenario that suggests an anxiously self-conscious dimension to O’Brien’s adoption of the Grand Inquisitor role. That is, his insistence on the historical novelty of the Party betrays an awareness that the Party can nonetheless be located within a deep tradition of tyranny in European civilization. The fact that the last third of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* adheres to the structure of the Grand Inquisitor scene as established by Dostoyevski demonstrates that Orwell had not arrived at the conclusion that the myth had lost its relevance in the age of totalitarianism. On the contrary, his reading of totalitarianism continued to be shaped by Inquisition mythology, particularly in terms of how it influenced his conception of the totalitarian state as the manifestation of the ‘nightmare’ in the political sphere.

In the same 1940 “Notes on the Way” entry that I quoted earlier, Orwell makes explicit reference to the Spanish Inquisition as a model for understanding the nightmarish character of totalitarianism. In part as a dismissal of a Huxley-style dystopian hedonism, he insists that a totalitarian future will be defined by a regressive barbarism:

Mr Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was a good caricature of the hedonistic Utopia, the kind of thing that seemed possible and even imminent before Hitler appeared, but it had no relation to the actual future. What we are moving towards at this moment is something more like the Spanish Inquisition, and probably far worse, thanks to radio and the secret police. (*CEJL* 2: 17).

A dialectic of historical precedent and historical novelty is played out in this discussion of the nature of totalitarianism. Echoing his earlier remark that “the resources of the modern state” play a decisive role in determining totalitarianism’s historical uniqueness, Orwell again points to characteristics of the totalitarian state that distinguish it crucially from the Spanish Inquisition, *i.e.* “radio and the secret police.” And again, as Friedrich does in his detailed and definitively poli-scientific anatomy of totalitarianism, Orwell emphasizes the importance of mass communication and terroristic police control to modern dictatorships. Crucially, though, he does not relegate the Inquisition to the distant past, as a failed tyranny that was ultimately overthrown, but instead frames it as an especially dark moment in European civilization, one that haunts (and even defines) the age of totalitarianism. Orwell’s repeated references to the Inquisition in his discussions of totalitarianism qualify his claim that “modern dictatorships ... are something entirely unprecedented” in a way that puts his views in subtle opposition to O’Brien’s insistence on the will of the Party as the sole mover of history. In Orwell’s view, the totalitarian state is historically unique because it has the advantages of modern technology and because it seems to have the potential to hold power indefinitely, but it is simultaneously

*familiar* in the sense that it reflects a regressive tendency in human civilization, a *return* to an earlier and darker time in European history.

The conception of totalitarianism as a dynamic combination of the old *and* the new, that is, of ancient barbaric practices of domination enhanced by the resources of the modern world, is reflected in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s generic range as well. The book's odd mixing of genres – the bleak, naturalistic depiction of post-war London in a dystopian future-world setting – further contributes to the general sense that Orwell conceived totalitarianism as a combination of barbarous European history and unprecedented state power. As numerous commentators have observed, the prevailing atmosphere of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contains little of the sleekness of science fiction; it is, as Kumar points out, “a drab, mean world, instantly recognizable to any of Orwell's contemporaries” (296). Orwell's friend Julian Symons remarks that “[i]n one of its aspects *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was about a world familiar to anybody who lived in Britain during the war that began in 1939. The reductions in rations, the odious food, the sometimes unobtainable and always dubiously authentic drink, these were with us still when the book appeared” (qtd. in Kumar 296). There is also a near absence of technological sophistication in the novel, which, in Kumar's view, strategically conveys “a world in which progress has deliberately been halted” (297). “Orwell,” he writes,

wanted to create a sense of familiarity in his readers, to establish a point of contact with their own world, so that the discovery of a brutal political system working within it would come with shocking force. By using the familiar background of his own times, and setting the novel in the near rather than – like Wells and Huxley – the distant future, he made it

impossible for the reader to escape into the realm of exoticism or science fiction. It could happen here; it *had* happened here. *De te fabula narratur.*”

(297)

While it is undeniable that Orwell means to suggest in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that “Of you the tale is told,” it should be obvious that his warning is not directed only at the citizens of post-war London. Kumar’s commentary in this respect places too much emphasis on the naturalistic elements of Orwell’s depiction of London at the expense of overlooking the ways that this atmosphere of post-war drabness is juxtaposed with futuristic elements. As Freedman points out, “towering above and dominating, both visually and politically, this neo-Dickensian cityscape, are four buildings – the four Party Ministries – that represent a very different London” (“London as Science Fiction” 8). These buildings, we learn, “dwarf the surrounding atmosphere” and are “startlingly different from any object in sight” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 6). “[D]rab London and futuristic London,” Freedman contends, reflect a “fundamental antithesis” in the novel, an antithesis that is never resolved because “futuristic London” emerges ultimately as “an estranging and baffling problem for author, protagonist, and reader alike” (“London as Science Fiction” 8). For Freedman, the futuristic elements of the novel’s setting are analogous to Winston’s question of *why* the Party exercises such a brutal form of control over its population: neither are ever adequately explained. A coherent synthesis emerges from the antithesis of ‘drab’ London and ‘futuristic’ London, however, if one considers them in terms of Orwell’s conception of totalitarianism. As his 1940 “Notes on the Way” comments make clear, the notion of barbarous regression is central to his understanding of how the totalitarian state appears: “Human types supposedly extinct for centuries...have suddenly

reappeared”; “We are moving towards...the Spanish Inquisition.” The invocation of bombed-out post-war London as a figurative construct is thus designed not only to evoke *London* but to evoke a London that has itself witnessed a return to barbarism. War-torn London (surrounding a futuristic centre) functions symbolically, as a reflection of the primitive character of the totalitarian state. It is an objective correlative that works alongside the Spanish Inquisition myth to convey the idea that a dialectic of ‘old’ and ‘new’ is essential to the “unique character” of totalitarianism.

Not surprisingly, the satirical nature of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* determines that this dialectic unfolds in complex and sometimes ambiguous ways. It is not always clear, in fact, what manifestation of totalitarianism is being subjected to analysis, an exaggerated, satirical version or its real-world models. In part this has to do with the fact that, in those passages in which O’Brien makes direct reference to the totalitarian systems of mid-twentieth-century Europe, the very question of what is ‘old’ and what is ‘new’ is complicated by the dynamics of looking at European history from an imagined point in the future. An example of this can be found in O’Brien’s explication to Winston of the Party’s motives and its methodical pursuit of power:

“The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past, in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their



methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that.” (301-2)

The primary purpose of this speech, for O’Brien, is to distinguish the Party from the totalitarian regimes of old. “We are not like that,” he insists. “We do not make mistakes of that kind.” More jarring than the kind of departure from satiric convention that Thomas Pynchon observes<sup>92</sup> – in which Big Brother and Goldstein “do not quite line up” with their real-world models (vi) – Orwell’s decision to introduce the real-world objects of his satire as historical phenomena within his invented future complicates any clear sense of what he means when he insists that the book is “after all a parody.” The very mention of the “Russian Communists,” especially, disrupts the sense, so purposefully conveyed in the novel’s early chapters, that the book is a satire directed at a specific real-world target, *i.e.* Stalinist Russia. As a consequence of this inclusion, the Party’s version of totalitarianism appears both as something familiar – albeit in exaggerated form – and as something quite unique, not because O’Brien says so but rather because Orwell inserts the earlier models into the narrative. The crucial if obvious point here is that, as O’Brien insists on the unprecedentedness of Oceania’s system of state tyranny, he simultaneously undermines the rhetoric of historical novelty that was so central to analyses of

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<sup>92</sup> In his 2003 Introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Pynchon writes, “from the minute Big Brother’s moustache makes its appearance in the second paragraph of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” many readers have tended to see the book as a “simple condemnation of Stalinist atrocity” (vi-vii). However, as Pynchon further observes, “Big Brother’s face certainly is Stalin’s, just as the despised Party heretic Emmanuel Goldstein’s face is Trotsky’s, [but] the two do not quite line up with their models as neatly as Napoleon and Snowball did in *Animal Farm*” (vi). The book thus offers frames of reference that are unstable in the sense that they establish only temporary connections to real-world referents before moving on to other subject matter and disrupting any clear sense of the targets of the book’s satiric lens.

totalitarianism in Orwell's time by relegating the Russian Communists and German Nazis – the real-world objects of Orwell's satire – to a primitive stage in the evolution of totalitarianism. In a subtle way, in other words, by aligning the totalitarians of mid-century Europe to the “failure” that was the Inquisition, O'Brien re-writes the narrative of totalitarianism as a *sui generis* phenomenon, in Friedrich's phrase, and locates it on a continuum of European history. Or, put another way, O'Brien's attempt to assert the unprecedentedness of Oceania is undermined by the very gesture of aligning the totalitarians of old with the Spanish Inquisition, precisely because in doing so he links the rhetoric of historical novelty to a totalitarian perspective, which, by the logic of the book, turns out to be a caricature of reasoned analysis.

Despite the initial impression of accord, then, between Orwell and O'Brien on the question of what position the Spanish Inquisition should occupy in discussions of totalitarianism, crucial distinctions in their respective analyses reveal that the megalomaniacal psychological profile of O'Brien colours his political-analytical skills and puts him at some ironic distance from his author. In this respect, at least, Rorty is right that the final section of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is about O'Brien and not twentieth century totalitarianism. Although Part III is very much in dialogue with contemporary totalitarian theory, its contributions to that dialogue are filtered through the warped sensibility of one of the new “breed of men,” of whom O'Brien is a representative. In O'Brien's dismissal of the Inquisition as merely a “failure,” Orwell appears to be suggesting (by limiting the scope and acuity of O'Brien's analysis) that the ‘totalitarian’ perspective in some way diminishes the ability to interpret the political and historical

conditions that lead to the Party's consolidation of power. O'Brien is deluded by a sense of the Party's infinite power, and as a result his analysis lacks the nuance and sophistication of his anti-totalitarian author. As a totalitarian, O'Brien's conviction of the human ability to control history blinds him to historical forces that lie outside the control of the Party.

O'Brien's analytical shortcomings are partially concealed by the frequent reminders in the text of his "intelligence," but these also can be understood through a filter of irony. In the opening description of O'Brien, for instance, we learn that Winston sees intelligence "written in his face." Winston's impression is influenced, however, by a "secretly-held belief – or perhaps not even a belief, merely a hope – that O'Brien's political orthodoxy was not perfect" (13). Winston's judgment is thus skewed by the bleakness of his circumstances. Isolated by an awareness of his own heresy, he hopes irrationally to see it in the faces of others. Later, when O'Brien is revealed as a pillar of orthodoxy and has become Winston's torturer, Winston's judgment is further impaired by the psychological trauma of interrogation. O'Brien both inflicts pain and alleviates it, manipulating Winston's sense of their relationship and at the same time numbing his powers of perception. After receiving medication from O'Brien to neutralize the effects of the torture device, Winston, we are told, "had never loved him so deeply as at this moment, and not merely because he had stopped the pain. The old feeling, that at bottom it did not matter whether O'Brien was a friend or an enemy, had come back. O'Brien was a person who could be talked to" (289). Clearly, the impression of O'Brien's intelligence is conveyed through the distorted subjective point of view of Winston and corresponds with his steady movement towards abject defeat. Winston's response to O'Brien's mad

explanation of the Party's motives for torture captures the degree to which he cannot be relied upon as a judge of O'Brien's intelligence:

He is not pretending, thought Winston; he is not a hypocrite; he believes every word he says. What most oppressed him was the consciousness of his own intellectual inferiority. . . . O'Brien was a being in all ways larger than himself. There was no idea that he had ever had, or could have, that O'Brien had not long ago known, examined and rejected. His mind *contained* Winston's mind. (293)

Despite his suspicion that O'Brien is mad, Winston is driven in his abject state to question his own sanity and even to perceive in O'Brien a level of omniscience.

O'Brien's face strikes Winston as being "full of intelligence and a sort of controlled passion before which he felt himself helpless" (302). Later still in the interrogation, reference is made to Winston's "peculiar reverence for O'Brien, which nothing seemed able to destroy" – and again his sense of abject inferiority finds expression in his awed assessment of O'Brien's mental capacities: "How intelligent, he thought, how intelligent! Never did O'Brien fail to understand what was said to him" (313). The idea that O'Brien possesses a superior intelligence is generated in the novel primarily by Winston's desperate wish to find a like-minded individual in the oppressively isolating atmosphere of Oceania and, later, by his torture-impaired perspective, so that the only objective proof of O'Brien's intelligence is his membership in the Inner Party – if that can be counted as a reliable indicator – and his dialogue, which reveals more than anything an ability to impress upon his helpless victim a sense of his own (and the Party's) superiority, and to offer political commentary which is at times contradictory and analytically limited.

Despite this evidence that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents O'Brien's superior intelligence in ironic terms, it is his madness and absence of morality, and not his limitations as a political analyst, that are typically advanced as the focus in Orwell's satiric treatment of the totalitarian intellectual. Crick, for instance, contends that "those who believe in 'power for the sake of power' are not just condemned morally by the satirist but, in the portrayal of O'Brien, shown to be driven mad by power-hunger" ("Context and Controversy" 147). For Rorty, the notion that O'Brien provides a model for "a gifted and sensitive intellectual living in a posttotalitarian culture" is central to his argument that Part III of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the pivotal thrust of Orwell's warning of a dystopian "alternative scenario" for Western culture (180). O'Brien's apparent civility, Rorty argues, is meant to dramatize Orwell's contention that so-called 'human nature' is a social construct that could be moulded in any which direction (*i.e.* to create a new "breed of men"). His status as a 'civilized torturer' drives home the idea that "intellectual gifts – intelligence, judgment, curiosity, imagination, a taste for beauty – are as malleable as the sexual instinct" (187). While it may be the case that O'Brien qualifies as a "sensitive intellectual" by the standards of the Party, though, it is clear that this new breed of man's understanding of the nature of power is flawed and that this in turn limits his ability to accurately assess the Party's historical position. As his mad ramblings to Winston make evident, his thirst for power has distorted all rational sense of limitation:

We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to

establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. (302)

In describing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a warning of something that *could* happen, Orwell may well have invited a reading of the novel that sees O'Brien's exegesis on total power as the substance of the warning. As a result, what O'Brien says *has* happened is taken to be the very thing that Orwell thought *could* happen. It is not at all clear, however, that this accurately describes the relationship between the author and his creation. As Crick points out, "Orwell wavered, influenced by and yet critical of James Burnham, as to whether regimes based on 'power' for its own sake divorced from ideology were ever possible" (*A Life* 322). In Crick's view, this question remained unresolved for Orwell. "Are we meant to think that O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has revealed a secret that the Inner Party stand for nothing except possession of power? Or are we meant to think that such a belief is absurd and part of the 'satire'?" (322). Close examination of O'Brien's speech would suggest a satirical reading, for at least one of the tautologies that he advances – "The object of torture is torture" – is contradicted by O'Brien himself, only pages earlier when he provides a detailed answer to Winston's unspoken question of why he is being tortured. "You are a flaw in the pattern, Winston," he answers. "You are a stain that must be wiped out" (291). As he continues to explain the Party's motivations, it becomes clear that the object of torture is *not* simply torture:

We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. . . . We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and all illusion out of him;

we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. We make him one of ourselves before we kill him. It is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be. (292)

This explanation is not entirely “divorced from ideology,” nor is it simply an ideology of power. The language of religious zeal betrays a complex of motives that extends beyond the quest for power. As O’Brien makes quite clear in this passage, the Party is *not* satisfied with mere power: the “most abject submission” of its victims is not enough, and an “erroneous thought,” even a “powerless” one, is “intolerable.” And, again, even as O’Brien seeks to put distance between the Party and the tyrannies of old, he does so in a way that draws attention to the Inquisition’s ongoing relevance to its programme. The dissenter is described as a “heretic,” the Party’s efforts to impose an ideology are framed as a “conversion,” and the process by which the conversion is enacted supplies a direct invocation of the *auto-de-fé*: “We burn all evil and illusion out of him.” Thus the Inquisition continues to haunt the Party’s conception of itself, despite this Inner Party member’s insistence that the system he represents is without precedent. In offering this hint of an anxiety of influence in O’Brien’s bold assertions that the Party is utterly distinct from the tyrannies of the past, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* subtly asserts a more nuanced view: that totalitarianism is in key respects a paradoxical phenomenon, both a terrifyingly new form of state power and a continuation of a tradition of barbarous tyranny that has deep roots in European civilization.

The echoes in the speeches of O'Brien of views expressed elsewhere by Orwell in non-fictional contexts initially suggest an unlikely common ground between the anti-totalitarian author and his totalitarian creation, even if closer examination reveals that they part ways on some of the key points of the analysis of totalitarianism. These are not the only instances in which Orwell's non-fictional work is echoed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of course. Certain passages of *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, especially, seem to be lifted almost directly from Orwell's non-fictional work. The description of the return to barbarism in mid-century Europe, for instance, found in the excerpt from "Chapter 1: Ignorance is Strength," bears a striking resemblance to the description found in the 1940 "Notes on the Way" entry that I quoted earlier (and that I quote again here for ease of comparison), with the important difference that mid-twentieth-century totalitarianism is described in Orwell's essay in the present tense and in Goldstein's book in the past tense:

"[I]n the general hardening of outlook that set in round about 1930, practices which had been long abandoned, in some cases for hundreds of years – imprisonment without trial, the use of war prisoners as slaves, public executions, torture to extract confessions, the use of hostages, and the deportation of whole populations – not only became common again, but were tolerated and even defended by people who considered themselves enlightened and progressive." (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 234)

It is as though in the space of ten years we have slid back into the Stone Age. Human types supposedly extinct for centuries, the dancing dervish,



the robber chieftain, the Grand Inquisitor, have suddenly reappeared, not as inmates of lunatic asylums, but as the masters of the world.

Mechanisation and a collective economy seemingly aren't enough. By themselves they lead merely to the nightmare we are now enduring: endless war and endless underfeeding for the sake of war, slave populations toiling behind barbed wire, women dragged shrieking to the block, cork-lined cellars where the executioner blows your brains out from behind. ("Notes on the Way" *CEJL* 2: 15-6)

Further on in the "Ignorance is Strength" chapter, the commentary on the differences between totalitarianism and older forms of tyranny presents a direct echo of remarks that Orwell makes in "The Prevention of Literature":

"By comparison with that existing today, all the tyrannies of the past were half-hearted and inefficient. The ruling groups were always infected to some extent by liberal ideas, and were content to leave loose ends everywhere, to regard only the overt act and to be uninterested in what their subjects were thinking." (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* 235)

[A]s has often been pointed out, the despotisms of the past were not totalitarian. Their repressive apparatus was always inefficient, their ruling classes were usually corrupt or apathetic or half-liberal in outlook. ("The Prevention of Literature, *CEJL* 4: 65-66)

Indisputably, some of the analytical points being made in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* sound very much like sentiments Orwell expresses elsewhere,

in non-fictional work that is intended to be free of ambiguity and ironic distance. The assertion of a crucial difference between the new “breed of men” and the rulers of old accords with Orwell’s thinking, as does the paradoxically opposing commentary that sees totalitarianism as a *return* to barbarism. When the author of the Book comments that “as a whole the world is more primitive today than it was fifty years ago,” the sentiment not only echoes remarks that Orwell makes in his non-fictional work, but in a vital way hints at one of the central points that is articulated through *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s generic range: the bleak naturalistic elements of the novel highlight the degree to which regressive tendencies characterize the dystopian future-world. The totalitarians who populate Oceania are, as Orwell puts it in “Wells, Hitler, and the World State,” simultaneously “[c]reature[s] out of the Dark Ages [who] have come marching into the present” (*CEJL* 2: 144). Beyond these correspondences of analysis, the Book also bears some stylistic similarities to Orwell’s non-fictional work. The plain-speaking voice of the Book sometimes sounds like the voice of Orwell himself, and the nostalgic commentary on the condition of pre-WWI England, framed as it is in a discussion of the rise of totalitarianism, nicely emulates Orwell’s ambivalent reading of the past as a measure of the political present.

One needs to be cautious about equating the ideas put forth in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* with those of Orwell, however. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the Book should be understood within the framework of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s heteroglossic agenda, as part of an elaborate experiment with perspective that functions to provide a complexly nuanced and even ambiguous conception of totalitarianism. For one thing, certain of the excerpted passages of the Book

suggest a degree of authorial distance. As Crick observes of “Goldstein’s testament,” it is “difficult to know how far, if at all, to take [it] seriously as social analysis since it is a mixture of truth and parody” (*A Life* 263). Irving Howe insists that some of “the best passages” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “are those in which Orwell imitates Trotsky’s style in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*.” Orwell, he writes, “caught the rhetorical sweep and grandeur of Trotsky’s writing, particularly his fondness for using scientific references in non-scientific contexts... [and he] beautifully captured Trotsky’s way of using a compressed paradox to sum up the absurdity of a whole society” (243).

Beyond the isolated instances of parody that Howe observes, however, it is important to keep in mind that Goldstein turns out to be a fictional construct of the Party, which means that, by the logic of the narrative, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* is itself a parody. This information is revealed quite late in the text, as something that contributes to the crushing of Winston’s spirit, but more than simply a plot device, the news that the Party has authored the Book figures into the exploration of perspective that is thematically central to the novel. The delayed revelation that Goldstein is not the real author sets up a crucial distinction between the speeches of O’Brien and those passages of the Book that echo Orwell’s non-fictional work. Despite O’Brien’s late claim to partial authorship of *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, it is initially introduced as “Goldstein’s book,” *i.e.* the writings of a fellow rebel and anti-totalitarian. As such, the continuities between the Book and Orwell’s non-fictional writings adhere to a certain narrative logic; the excerpts are initially meant to *seem* like the writings of a fellow dissenter. As Howe’s observations make clear, though, even though this fact theoretically frees Orwell to write in his own voice, he elects nonetheless

to pepper the Book with identifiably parodic elements. The obvious explanation for this decision is that the Book is not simply a reflection of the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s satirical impulses but of the *Party*'s. Thus, while Howe's observation that "Orwell imitates Trotsky's style" is perceptive, it would be more accurate to say that the *Party*, in its parody of a dissenting text, has captured the tone of a certain kind of intellectual. Orwell, it goes without saying, presides over these complex and ambiguous registers of parody.

O'Brien's speeches contain no trace of this sort of ambiguity, of course. When O'Brien undertakes to 'educate' Winston on the pre-history of Oceania-style post-totalitarianism, it is clear that he represents what Orwell had earlier described as one of a new "breed of men," a totalitarian with no regard for the utopian dreams of earlier revolutionary parties. In fact, when O'Brien surprises Winston with the information that *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* is a *Party*-controlled publication, he offers an assessment of the Book that indirectly functions as a commentary on its authority as a work of political analysis. This moment occurs well into Winston's interrogation:

'You have read *the book*, Goldstein's book, or parts of it, at least,' [says O'Brien]. 'Did it tell you anything that you did not know already?'

'You have read it?' said Winston.

'I wrote it. That is to say, I collaborated in writing it. No book is produced individually, as you know.'

'Is it true, what it says?'

'As description, yes. The programme it sets forth is nonsense.'

(300)

It is tempting to let the distinction that O'Brien draws here for Winston serve as a guide by which we might read O'Brien's own reflections on the Party and on totalitarianism in general. That is, while he is obviously a totalitarian whose "programme" is essentially demonic, we might conceivably read his "descriptions" of Oceania's pre-history and of the Party's *sui generis* status as being essentially accurate. Some readers of the novel have adhered to O'Brien's distinction. In his analysis of the treatment of class in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, Robert Paul Resch invokes O'Brien's assessment as partial justification for using *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* to understand Orwell's politics. "Goldstein's account," Resch writes, "is intended to be taken as a substantially accurate account of the history and structure of Oceania... [in part because] O'Brien himself states that, although the revolutionary program it sets forth is 'nonsense', the book is correct 'as description'" (161).<sup>93</sup> The totalitarian's dismissal, by this logic, serves as a kind of validation for the Book's political position. As I pointed out earlier, however, with the example of George Bowling, whose reading of contemporary politics cannot be disentangled from his nostalgia for an imagined past, moral perspective invariably exerts an influence on analysis. The distinction that O'Brien makes between description and prescription is therefore spurious in the sense that his reading of the past is determined by how he envisions the Party's future. Because its "programme" is one of never-ending power, he must necessarily describe the tyrannies of old (including the mid-century "totalitarians") as "failures." If he were to entertain any thought of the Party's demise, he would be forced to retreat from the teleological rhetoric that characterizes his

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<sup>93</sup> Resch, to be fair, recognizes the problematic nature of using the book in this way and acknowledges that it is "itself a prop in an elaborate counter-revolutionary operation controlled by the Inner Party" (161).

analysis of European history and abandon the claim that Oceania constitutes an end point, a perfected version of all the tyrannies that preceded it.

On the question of the unassailability of the Party's power, of course, O'Brien is not given the last word in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The book's Appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," offers yet another perspective on the phenomenon of totalitarianism that works to tease out the element of delusion in O'Brien's megalomaniacal boasts of the Party's perfected form of state power. As with the speeches of O'Brien and the excerpts from 'Goldstein's' book, the Appendix contains passages that provide direct echoes of Orwell's non-fictional work. Freedman, as I mentioned in the last chapter, goes so far as to describe "The Principles of Newspeak" as a "devastating, if unconscious, satire on 'Politics and the English Language'" (333). As such an interpretation tends to overlook some of that essay's rhetorical subtleties, however – in particular, the demands it puts on the reader to think against its apparent dogmatism – so I would suggest that reading the Appendix as an "unconscious satire" does not take into account how it fits into the novel's heteroglossic structure and as a result potentially misses its crucial contribution to the vision of totalitarianism offered in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The most important thing to note about the Appendix, in terms of how it fits into the novel's heteroglossic agenda and, more particularly, how it contributes to *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* engagement with totalitarian theory, is that it is written in the past tense. As Resch observes, the Appendix occupies a distinct temporal space in the book; together with the footnote that appears very early on in the narrative,<sup>94</sup> it "serves to inform us that we are reading a historical novel written sometime after the demise of Oceania" (158).

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<sup>94</sup> Only pages into the novel, after The Ministry of Truth is glossed in the text as "Minitrue, in Newspeak," we are directed to this footnote: "Newspeak was the official language of Oceania. For an account of its structure and etymology see Appendix" (6).

“The Principles of Newspeak” thus serves as evidence of a “utopian frame” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: taking the form of a “scholarly monograph looking back on Oceania as an extinct and almost incomprehensible civilization,” it is the work of an “author” from a “post-totalitarian, socialist future” (Resch 158; 139). The presence of this document that describes Oceania as a historical phenomenon, that is, as yet another “failed” tyranny in Europe’s long history of failed tyrannies, further signals the novel’s complex engagement with the dialectic of historical novelty and historical precedent. The very thing upon which O’Brien bases his claims of Oceania’s *sui generis* quality, after all – its permanence – is proved by the Appendix to be an illusion. The presence of the Appendix in the novel thus has the effect of locating the super-totalitarianism of Oceania on a continuum of European history. As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, this is an idea that is subtly hinted at in the novel’s engagements with totalitarian theory in the speeches of O’Brien, especially, and in the excerpts from *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*. The Appendix provides further evidence that the analyses of totalitarianism that issue from these sources should be understood through a filter of irony.

As I have been trying to make clear, while the novel takes up a number of issues that reflect analyses of totalitarianism familiar to Orwell and his contemporaries, the point at which Orwell’s views end and those of his characters begin is often difficult to ascertain. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, to state the obvious, a novel and not simply a document of political analysis. Beyond this rather obvious distinction, though, there remains the question of the specific nature of the analysis of totalitarianism that is found

in the novel. My focus has been on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s engagement with what Crick calls the "totalitarian hypothesis" – that is, the dual propositions as expressed in the opening of Friedrich's influential essay: the equivalence of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, and the historical uniqueness of totalitarianism itself – and, in particular, with the position that the Spanish Inquisition occupies in that discussion. Clearly, though, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s contribution to the subject of totalitarianism reaches further than these conventional premises of totalitarian theory. The book also offers a speculative exploration of the subjective response of an individual to the experience of living under a totalitarian regime.

Winston Smith's reading of Oceania, as I suggested at the outset, offers yet another perspective on the prospects for the totalitarian state, and as such his subjective response can be understood as another of the "voices" that can be heard in the novel. In this capacity, Winston emerges as a competing perspective that at times serves to qualify and even undermine the totalitarian perspective that O'Brien articulates in the third section of the novel. An example of this competing perspective can be heard early on when Winston contemplates the dreary squalor of life in Oceania:

It struck him that the truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness. Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve. Great areas of it, even for a Party member, were neutral and non-political, a matter of slogging through dreary jobs, fighting for a place on the Tube, darning a worn-out sock, cadging a



saccharine tablet, saving a cigarette end. The ideal set up by the Party was something huge, terrible, and glittering -- a world of steel and concrete, of monstrous machines and terrifying weapons -- a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting -- three hundred million people all with the same face. The reality was decaying, dingy cities where underfed people shuffled to and fro in leaky shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and bad lavatories. He seemed to see a vision of London, vast and ruinous, city of a million dustbins, and mixed up with it was a picture of Mrs Parsons, a woman with lined face and wispy hair, fiddling helplessly with a blocked waste-pipe. (85)<sup>95</sup>

Clearly, Winston gets some things wrong here. At this point in the novel, before his ‘education’ at the hands of O’Brien, he does not really understand what the Party is “trying to achieve.” He is still under the mistaken impression that the “ideals” of the Party are ideological in a conventional sense, that they are rooted, however distantly, in some utopian conception of society; he has not yet been made to see that the Party conceives of itself as essentially non-ideological, that its primary objective is to remain in power. He is therefore wrong in assuming that the squalid daily existence he sees everywhere around him is somehow at odds with the Party’s aims. The Party, at least as it

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<sup>95</sup> The reference to the blocked waste-pipe marks another instance of Orwell borrowing imagery from his own non-fictional work to add texture to the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this instance, a distinct echo can be heard of the well-known description (discussed in Chapter 2) of the poor woman he sees from the window of a passing train in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

is represented by O'Brien, is indifferent to the conditions of the state so long as the status quo is maintained.

Winston's commentary hits the mark in other ways, however. Despite his misconceptions of the Party's motives, his analysis of life in Oceania is in some respects more penetrating than O'Brien's megalomaniacal boasts of the Party's omniscience and total control. Although O'Brien's claim, that "the proletarians will never revolt, not in a thousand years or a million," seems plausible enough by the logic of the portrayal of daily life offered in the novel,<sup>96</sup> neither does it seem, from Winston's observations at least, that the Party will ever penetrate every corner of human thought. The "great areas" of "non-political" space, however dismal and dreary, represent areas of life that lie outside the Party's control. Despite O'Brien's remark that "[i]t is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world," Winston's observations would seem to suggest that the Party possesses neither the means nor the will to pursue such fanaticism. Winston's identification of "non-political" space in Oceania thus stands as a recognition of a potential weakness in the totalitarian state, a sign that its quest for 'total' control will always be elusive. In this respect, his analysis of totalitarianism suggests a glimmer of hope, even as it emerges from a recognition of the dismal state of affairs in Oceania. A hint of Orwell's own "voice" can perhaps be heard in this note of heavily qualified optimism.

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<sup>96</sup> Orwell may have been influenced by Arthur Koestler on this point. In his essay on Koestler, Orwell writes, "Koestler records some fantastic conversations with fellow victims in the concentration camp, and adds that till then, like most middle-class Socialists and Communists, he had never made contact with real proletarians, only with the educated minority. He draws the pessimistic conclusion: 'Without education of the masses, no social progress; without social progress, no education of the masses'" (*CEJL* 3: 241). In fact, one of Winston's diary entries expresses virtually the same sentiment: "Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious" (81).

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION:

Attempting to discover a unifying narrative of Orwell's writing career presents a number of challenges, not least of which is a suspicion that his work is best understood as a series of trials and errors. Even the adoption of the pseudonym 'Orwell' – which I see as an important key to understanding its author's approach to issues of narrative, including the central position that perspective occupies in his writing – has the appearance of something that is half-planned and half-stumbled upon. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, for instance, Simon Leys has this to say about Eric Blair's adoption of the pseudonym George Orwell:

Contrary to what some commentators have earlier assumed (myself included), his adoption of a pen name was a mere accident and never carried any particular significance for himself. At the time of publishing his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), he simply wished to spare potential embarrassment to his parents: old Mr. and Mrs. Blair belonged to "the lower-upper-middle class" (i.e., "the upper-middle class that is short of money") and were painfully concerned with social respectability. They could have been distressed to see it publicized that their only son had led the life of an out-of-work drifter and penniless tramp. His pen name was thus chosen at random, as an afterthought, at the last minute before publication. But afterward he kept using it for all his publications—journalism, essays, novels—and remained somehow stuck with it.

(“The Intimate Orwell”)

Although it is certainly plausible that the young writer Eric Blair was motivated to take a pseudonym to avoid embarrassing his parents, it may be overstating the case to say that the adoption of ‘Orwell’ was a “mere accident and never carried any particular significance for himself.” In Orwell’s letters leading up to the publication of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, at least, a more complex picture emerges. “I think if it is all the same to everybody I would prefer the book to be published pseudonymously,” he writes to Leonard Moore in 1932. “I have no reputation that is lost by doing this and if the book has any kind of success I can always use the same pseudonym again” (*CEJL* 1: 85). The tone of this letter is not quite indifferent, but something in the “if it is all the same to everybody” remark suggests a feigned casualness, as though he were a bit embarrassed about wanting to adopt a pseudonym at all. In a subsequent letter to Moore, he takes up the subject again: “I have no objection to the title, but do you think that ‘X’ is a good pseudonym? The reason I ask is that if this book doesn’t flop as I anticipate, it might be better to have a pseudonym I could also use for my next one. I leave this to you and Mr Gollancz to decide” (*CEJL* 1: 104). Again, a faint note of affected indifference can be heard. He will leave it to Gollancz and Moore to decide, but he is clearly not happy with the suggested pseudonym “X.” He is looking ahead, and “X” would not be suitable should he become a successful author. Something stronger is needed. In a follow-up letter, he offers some possible alternatives:

As to a pseudonym, a name I always use when tramping etc is P. S.

Burton, but if you don’t think this sounds a probable kind of name, what about

Kenneth Miles,  
 George Orwell,  
 H. Lewis Allways.

I rather favour George Orwell.

(*CEJL* 1: 105)

An element of deference can be heard in Orwell's tone throughout this exchange – the posture of a young unpublished writer perhaps not wishing to appear too demanding – but there is also a persistence in his efforts to establish a suitable pseudonym. If using a false name was motivated initially by a wish to save his parents embarrassment, he appears to have quickly latched on to the idea. The pseudonym might have surfaced first an “afterthought,” but in short order it is embraced with enthusiasm. If these letters do not on their own convincingly confute Leys' suggestion that the adoption of the pseudonym was little more than an accident of circumstance, Orwell's tramping expeditions could themselves serve as further evidence of a predilection towards disguise. As that last letter to Moore tells us, ‘George Orwell’ is not even the first pseudonym that the man adopted. He had already experienced the strangeness and the possibility of wearing a different name during his expeditions among the urban poor.

Whether “mere accident” or calculated strategy, however, the striking thing about the pseudonym is that it *does* serve as an effective unifying figure through which we might understand some of the central preoccupations of Orwell's work. Most obviously, as the reference to Eric Blair's ‘tramping’ alias P. S. Burton makes clear, the pseudonym fits the narrative of reading Orwell's life and work as kind of escape from his middle-class background. The adoption of another name for the purposes of writing books, in this

reading, is triggered by the historical fact of the author having already placed himself in a position where he must conceal his identity. The pseudonym can thus be understood as a *disguise* or *mask* in the sense that it facilitates the gesture of self-creation. It helps him to get “out of the respectable world altogether,” as he puts it in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (149-50).

Understanding the pseudonym primarily as a “mask” or “disguise” – or even as an authorial correlative to the masks and disguises that surface in Orwell’s narratives – may oversimplify its figurative relationship to Orwell’s writing, however. As I have insisted at various points in this thesis, the ‘Orwell’ persona that results from the adoption of the pseudonym is a fluid, ever-evolving entity. It does not settle into the incarnation for which it was initially created – the middle-class slummer – but rather moves on, taking on new characteristics and even at times purposefully dissociating itself from previous versions of itself: the ‘Orwell’ of *The Road to Wigan Pier* repudiates the ‘masquerading’ that is described in *Down and Out in Paris and London*; the ‘Orwell’ of *Homage to Catalonia* turns away from the political naivety of its younger self (a movement that is dramatized more explicitly in the Burmese essays); and the ‘Orwell’ of the mature essays distances itself from the personal experience that was so crucial to the construction of ‘Orwell’ in the 1930s. Thus ‘Orwell’ is re-created again and again, each time serving a precise narrative function and reflecting new dimensions of political engagement. The pseudonym, understood this way, begins to appear less important than the gesture that it represents. More than a mask, or even a series of masks, it reflects an aesthetic of ever-becoming, a refusal to settle into one role or perspective.

In a limited sense, this interpretation of the adoption of the pseudonym echoes the observations of Stansky and Abrahams, who, as I mention in Chapter Three, see the idea of *transformation* as central to an understanding of Orwell's life and writing – though the biographical emphasis of their work, as one would expect, determines that their analysis is geared more towards an understanding of the life than of the work. I would argue, however, that a more profound notion of transformation is in operation in much of Orwell's writing, a conviction of the malleability of individual identity that both reflects and at the same time transcends his own experiences and development as a writer. I offer here a brief, almost randomly chosen, selection of passages from four of the texts that are discussed in the previous chapters to demonstrate how an alertness to the ways that individuals undergo dramatic shifts in understanding and perspective is a unifying feature of Orwell's writing:

One night, in the small house, there was a murder just beneath my window. I was woken by a fearful uproar, and, going to the window, saw a man lying flat on the stones below; I could see the murderers, three of them, flitting away at the end of the street. Some of us went down and found that the man was quite dead, his skull cracked with a piece of lead piping. I remember the colour of his blood, curiously purple, like wine; it was still on the cobbles when I came home that evening, and they said the school-children had come from miles round to see it. But the thing that strikes me in looking back is that I was in bed and asleep within three minutes of the murder. So were most of the people in the street; we just made sure that the man was done for, and went straight back to bed. We

were working people, and where was the sense of wasting sleep over a murder?

*(Down and Out in Paris and London 91)*

It was in this way that my thoughts turned towards the English working class. It was the first time that I had ever been really aware of the working class, and to begin with it was only because they supplied an analogy. They were the symbolic victims of injustice, playing the same part in England as the Burmese played in Burma. In Burma the issue had been quite simple. The whites were up and the blacks were down, and therefore as a matter of course one's sympathy was with the blacks. I now realized that there was no need to go as far as Burma to find tyranny and exploitation. Here in England, down under one's feet, were the submerged working class, suffering miseries which in their different way were as bad as any an Oriental ever knows.

*(The Road to Wigan Pier 148-49)*

When the Fascists told us that Malaga had fallen we set it down as a lie, but next day there were more convincing rumours, and it must have been a day or two later that it was admitted officially. By degrees the whole disgraceful story leaked out—how the town had been evacuated without firing a shot, and how the fury of the Italians had fallen not upon the troops, who were gone, but upon the wretched civilian population, some of



whom were pursued and machine-gunned for a hundred miles. The news sent a sort of chill all along the line, for, whatever the truth may have been, every man in the militia believed that the loss of Malaga was due to treachery. It was the first talk I had heard of treachery or divided aims. It set up in my mind the first vague doubts about this war in which, hitherto, the rights and wrongs had seemed so beautifully simple.

*(Homage to Catalonia 44-5)*

Looking back through the last page or two, I see that I have made it appear as though my motives in writing were wholly public-spirited. I don't want to leave that as the final impression. All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books

and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

(“Why I Write” *CEJL* 1: 7)

Because the Orwell persona is a fluid construction, it is not surprising to find several of its incarnations in the above passages. In the passage from *Down and Out in Paris in London*, for instance, we see the sort of clearly-signaled fluctuations in the narrative voice that I discussed at length in my earlier analysis of the book. The shift from the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’ to the first-person plural ‘we’ signals a subtle shift in perspective, from the middle-class writer describing in detail a particularly gruesome event – and even recounting the colour of the murdered victim’s blood in self-consciously literary terms (“curiously purple, like wine”) – to the seasoned tramp who is unfazed by the event, even hardened.

Examined alongside one another the above passages reveal another dimension of fluidness that is best described as the ‘maturing’ of the ‘Orwell’ voice. The ‘Orwell’ persona that provides an account of growing disillusionment in Spain undeniably strikes us as a more fitting “representative of truth-telling, objectivity and verification” than does the persona that (somewhat disingenuously) occupies the perspective of one of the “working people” after witnessing a murder (Hitchens 193). Admittedly, in identifying a movement towards maturity, one is drawn to the sort of reading of Orwell’s work that is offered by Lynette Hunter, whereby the evolution of the ‘Orwell’ persona is seen a trajectory towards a “valid voice.” As I mentioned in the Introduction, however, I resist this interpretation on the grounds that it diverts attention from the multiple voices at play in Orwell’s writing.

What is most interesting to note about the above passages, in fact, is that they actively *draw attention* to the fluidness of the individual subject. That is, while the passages reveal an evolution of the ‘Orwell’ persona, it is perhaps more important, at least in terms of gaining a grasp of Orwell’s narrative practices, to observe the ways that they dramatize shifts in individual perception and understanding. Certain key phrases are worth noting in this regard, especially those that signal a shift of focus and a coming-into knowledge, or that adopt a rhetoric of epiphany. “[T]he thing that *strikes me looking back*,” the narrator of *Down and Out in Paris and London* writes, “is that I was in bed and asleep within three minutes of the murder.” The narrator of *The Road to Wigan Pier* tells of how his “*thoughts turned*” towards the English working class, how it was “the first time that [he] had ever been really aware” of that class, and how “he *now realized* that there was no need to go as far as Burma to find tyranny and exploitation.” A coming-into knowledge is a central feature of *Homage to Catalonia*’s narrator, of course, and in this passage he sums up his growth away from revolutionary innocence by telling us that the news of treachery had “*set up in [his] mind* the first vague doubts about this war in which, *hitherto*, the rights and wrongs *had seemed* so beautifully simple.” Finally, in the passage from “Why I Write,” the mature ‘Orwell’, occupying the position of the retrospectively-inclined writer, opens the final paragraph of the essay with an observation that crucially qualifies what he has previously written: “*Looking back* through the last page or two, *I see* that I have made it appear as though my motives in writing were wholly public-spirited.” In each of these examples, the narration in effect draws attention to itself by foregrounding a moment of realization or a shift in perspective. The new

opinions and perspectives of the respective narrators are not merely described; rather the process of a change is itself narrated.

The phrases that I have highlighted in the above passages could be read simply as stylistic tics, variations of which appear throughout Orwell's work; or they could be taken as further evidence of the "rhetoric of personality" that Orwell seeks to project in his writing, his "pose of ordinariness," as Richard Filloy puts it (60). I am more inclined to interpret the ubiquity of these phrases in his prose as a reflection of a career-long conviction of the possibility for human beings to change, to embrace new perspectives and to inhabit ever-evolving personas. In this respect, Orwell demonstrates an adherence to the notion of an "unfinalizable" self – to return again to the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin writes, "The catharsis that finalizes Dostoevsky's novels might be ... expressed in this way: *Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future*" (166). The abundant evidence of a deeply pessimistic streak in Orwell does not diminish the sense that his writing embraces a conception of human beings and human society as ever-becoming entities – inconclusive and "unfinalizable." This may explain why (in Christopher Hitchens' admiring assessment) Orwell was able to overcome a litany of "inherited prejudices" and thus transcend his "upbringing and instincts" to become a "great humanist" (9). It may also explain why his final work warned of the possibility of a totalitarian future.

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