

ALL ART
IS PROPAGANDA

Critical Essays

GEORGE ORWELL

Compiled by George Packer
With an introduction by Keith Gessen



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Foreword

BEFORE anything else, George Orwell was an essayist. His earliest published pieces were essays; so were his last deathbed writings. In between, he never stopped working at the essay's essential task of articulating thoughts out of the stuff of life and art in a compressed space with a distinctly individual voice that speaks directly to the reader. The essay perfectly suited Orwell's idiosyncratic talents. It takes precedence even in his best-known fiction: During long passages of *1984*, the novelistic surface cracks and splits open under the pressure of the essayist's concerns. His more obscure novels of social realism from the 1930s are marked, and to some extent marred, by an essayist's explaining; and his great nonfiction books, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Homage to Catalonia*, continually slip between particular and general, concrete and abstract, narration and exposition, in a way that would be alien to a storytelling purist and that defines Orwell's core purpose as a writer. As soon as he began to write something, it was as natural for Orwell to propose, generalize, qualify, argue, judge—in short, to think—as it was for Yeats to versify or Dickens to invent. In his best work, Orwell's arguments are mostly with himself.

Part of the essay's congeniality for Orwell is its flexibility. All a reader asks is that the essayist mean what he says and say something interesting, in a voice that's recognizably his; beyond that, subject matter, length, structure, and occasion are extremely variable. Orwell, who produced a staggering amount of prose over the course of a career cut short at forty-six by tuberculosis, was a working journalist, and in the two volumes of this new selection of his essays you will find book, film, and theater reviews, newspaper columns, and war reporting, as well as cultural commentary, literary criticism, political argument, autobiographical fragments, and longer personal narratives. In Orwell's hands, they are all essays. He is always pointing to larger concerns beyond the immediate scope of his subject.

Orwell had the advantage of tradition: He worked in the lineage of the English essay dating back to the eighteenth century, whose earlier masters were Samuel Johnson, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt, and whose last great representative was Orwell himself. Within this tradition it was entirely natural for a writer to move between fiction and nonfiction, journalism and autobiography, the daily newspaper, the weekly or monthly magazine, and the quarterly review; and between the subjects of art, literature, culture, politics, and himself. This tradition hasn't thrived in the United States. Our national literature was born with the anxieties and ambitions of New World arrivistes, and Americans have always regarded the novel as the highest form of literary art; if we recognize essays at all, it's as the minor work of novelists and poets (and yet some of the greatest modern essayists—James Baldwin and Edmund Wilson, to name two—have been Americans). As for journalism of the kind that Orwell routinely turned out, the word itself has suggested something like the opposite of literature to an American reader. The English essay comes out of a more workmanlike view of what it means to be a writer: This view locates the writer squarely within the struggles of his historical time and social place, which is where the essayist has to live.

A tradition in which the line between writer and journalist is hard to draw allows plenty of room for the characteristic qualities of the Orwell essay: his informal, direct prose style; his interest in sociological criticism that takes in both high and popular culture; his penchant for overstatement and attack; his talent for memorable sentences, especially his openings, which a journalist would call the lede: "In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me"; "Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent"; "There is very little in Eliot's later work that makes any deep impression on me"; "Dickens is one of those writers who are well worth stealing." The American critic

Irving Howe wrote in his autobiography *A Margin of Hope* that when he set out to learn to write essays in the 1940s, he turned to Orwell: "How do you begin a literary piece so as to hold attention? George Orwell was masterful at this, probably because he had none of the American literary snobbism about doing 'mere journalism.'"

Orwell lived in and wrote about interesting times: war, ideological extremism, intellectual combat, dilemmas over the role of the writer in a period of partisanship and upheaval. "In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties," he speculates in "Why I Write." "As it is I have been forced into becoming sort of pamphleteer." If it's true, then we can be grateful for the timing of Orwell's birth, since his talent was never going to lie in updating the nineteenth-century naturalistic novel. The work Orwell started doing to pay the bills while he wrote fiction—his reviews, sketches, polemics, columns—turned out to be the purest expression of his originality. "Pamphleteer" might suggest a kind of hack, but in Orwell's case it's an essayist with a cause.

Our times are interesting in similar ways and have opened up a space for writers who are similarly capable of thinking clearly about history as it's unfolding without surrendering their grip on permanent standards of artistic judgment, political idealism, and moral decency. In other words, our age demands essayists. So it's an odd fact that even readers who know *1984* well and have read one or two of Orwell's other books are likely to be unfamiliar with the most essential Orwell. Aside from "Politics and the English Language" and perhaps "Shooting an Elephant," none of his essays are widely read, and some of the best remain almost unknown. Those American readers who have read the essays are likely to have encountered only the single-volume *A Collection of Essays*, which includes just fourteen wonderful but somewhat randomly chosen pieces—not enough to give a sense of Orwell's growth as a writer, the range and evolution of his interests.

How should one conceive a more generous edition of Orwell's essays? A strictly chronological version would function as a kind of autobiography; a division by subject matter—socialism, the Spanish civil war, England—would offer a historical primer. But for contemporary readers, the particular content of Orwell's life and times can sometimes seem dated and remote, whereas the drama of a great writer mastering a form in countless variations is always current. The two volumes of this new edition are organized to illuminate Orwell as an essayist—to show readers how he made the essays his own. In them, you'll find Orwell engaged in two different modes of writing: The essays in *Facing Unpleasant Facts* build meaning from telling a story; the essays in *All Art Is Propaganda* hold something up to critical scrutiny. The first is based on narrative, the second on analysis, and Orwell was equally brilliant at both. He wrote more narrative essays early in his career, in the 1930s, when he was drawing on his personal encounters with imperialism, poverty, and war; and more critical essays later on, in the 1940s, when his most important experiences were behind him. But he never stopped writing either kind; one of his last essays was the posthumously published account of his schooldays, "Such, Such Were the Joys." The literary problems raised and the demands imposed by these two types of essay are sufficiently different that they distinguish the essays written across Orwell's career in a more fundamental way than subject, period, or publication.

This division shows the technical difficulties of the essay in especially sharp relief. Essays seem to offer almost limitless room to improvise and experiment, and yet their very freedom makes them unforgiving of literary faults: sloppiness, vagueness, pretension, structural misshapeness, an immature voice, insular material, and the nearly universal plague of bad thinking are all mercilessly exposed under the spotlight in which the essayist stands alone onstage. There are no props, no sets, no other actors; the essayist is the existentialist of literature, and a mediocre talent will wear out his audience within a couple of paragraphs. Orwell was a technical master whose essays are so clear and coherent that they act as guides to how they were put together. You can learn most of what you need

know about the steps by which a narrative essay arrives at a larger truth out of personal experience from "Shooting an Elephant," and about the way close reading in a critical essay can open up literary and philosophical commentary from "T. S. Eliot." Orwell's essays demonstrate how to be interesting line after line. The emphasis in these collections on the two kinds of essay he wrote is directed not just at readers who want to discover or rediscover his work, but at writers who want to learn from it.

Certain essays don't fit my scheme, such as the "As I Please" columns, which appeared in the weekly *Tribune*, and Orwell's short commentaries on English cooking, sports, toads, and coal fires. I've included these partly for the sake of their obscurity, to satisfy the aficionado along with the amateur, and partly because they show how much of life interested him. He could savor and mine the trivial and become partisan about things that have nothing to do with politics. On every subject he took up, Orwell quickly hit the target of something essential, making an insight that would occur to no other writer and would still resonate over half a century later. And it's often a short step from these slighter works to the themes of his most famous books. For example, "As I Please, 16," which sentences to death certain overused political terms, is the germ of the great essay "Politics and the English Language," which in turn crystallizes much of the intellectual content behind the nightmare vision of *1984*. Seeing the development of a writer's obsessions through his work is just one reason to read these two volumes of essays together.

A generation of students has gone to school on the banal truth that all literature is "constructed," and learned to scoff at the notion that words on the page might express something essentially authentic about the writer. The usefulness of this insight runs up against its limits when you pick up Orwell's essays. Open these books anywhere and you encounter the same voice. Orwell always sounds like Orwell: readier to fight than most writers, toughened but also deepened by hard, largely self-inflicted experience, able to zero in on what's essential about a poem or a politician or a memory, unsurprised without being cynical, principled without being priggish, direct and yet slightly reserved. It is not a clever or inventive voice, and occasionally it can sound a bit pedestrian. It doesn't seduce and exhaust you with literary dazzle; it persuades you with the strength of its prose and the soundness of its judgment. Exactly what relation this voice has to the private individual born with the name Eric Arthur Blair is unknowable. Within the confines of these pages, its integrity is consistent and enduring.

A career like Orwell's would be difficult to undertake today. There is too much specialization in writing, too little genuine independence, and not much room in the major newspapers and magazines for strongly individual essays. It was hard enough to make a living as an essay writer when Orwell was alive—in 1944, one of his most prolific years as an essayist, he earned less than six hundred pounds for his one hundred thousand words—and much harder now. Yet for any young writer willing to try, these essays don't merely survive as historical artifacts and literary masterpieces. In his openness to the world and his insistence on being true to himself, Orwell's essays show readers and writers of any era what it means to live by the vocation.

—GEORGE PACKER

Introduction By Keith Gessen

ORWELL published the essays collected here in the 1940s—and though he was just thirty-seven in 1940, this would be the last decade of his life. He had behind him four conventional "social" novels and, more significantly, three books of documentary reportage, each one better than the last, culminating in his classic account of the Spanish civil war, *Homage to Catalonia*. Gradually in the others but culminating in *Homage*, Orwell perfected his signature "plain" style, which so resembles someone speaking honestly and without pretense directly to you, and he had more or less settled on his political opinions: "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it." So he said in 1946.

But while this may have been settled, there were other matters Orwell was still working out in his mind. The subjects of these critical essays are almost all, in one way or another, things Orwell *doesn't like*. The essays are incessantly self-contradicting. First, Orwell declares that no great novel could not be written from a Catholic (or Communist) perspective; later he allows that a novel *could* be written from such a perspective, in a pinch; and then in his essay on Graham Greene he comes very near to suggesting that *only* Catholics can now write novels. At one point ("The Art of Donald McGill") he praises dirty postcards; at another he suggests that a different sort of dirty postcard ("that used to be sold in Mediterranean seaport towns") ought to be censored. In the essay on T. S. Eliot he writes that it is "fashionable to say that in verse only the words count and the 'meaning' is irrelevant, but in fact every poem contains a prose-meaning, and when the poem is any good it is a meaning which the poet urgently wishes to express. All art is to some extent propaganda." Several years later, in "The Prevention of Literature," in arguing for the idea that poetry might survive totalitarianism while prose would not, he writes that "what the poet is saying—that is, what his poem 'means' if translated into prose—is relatively unimportant even to himself." Early in the volume, which also means early in the war, he repeatedly points out that the insight of the great totalitarian ideologies (at another point, however, "smelly little orthodoxies") is that mankind needs more than simply a bit of pleasure to make life worth living. The scientific rationalist H. G. Wells, who insisted on belittling Hitler, "was, and still is, quite incapable of understanding that nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity. Creatures out of the Dark Ages have come marching into the present, and if they are ghosts they are at any rate ghosts which need a strong magic to lay them." Later in the volume, after the war, Orwell will repeatedly plead for a much more humdrum view of human life. What's particularly frustrating about these contradictions is that at each successive moment Orwell presents them in his great style, his wonderful sharp-edged plainspoken style, which makes you feel that there is no way on earth you could possibly disagree with him, unless you're part of the pansy left, or a sandal wearer and fruit-juice drinker, or maybe just a crank.

In a way I'm exaggerating, because the rightness of Orwell on a number of topics has been an albatross around his neck for sixty years. In truth, Orwell was wrong about all sorts of things. He is wrong in these essays about Eliot's "Four Quartets," a poem of more profound despair than he admits. He is howlingly wrong when he says that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will outlive the complete works of Virginia Woolf. These are minor things. A major thing he was wrong about was the inner logic of totalitarianism: He thought a mature totalitarian system would so deform its citizenry that they would not be able to overthrow it. This was the nightmare vision of *1984*. In fact, as it turned out in Russia, even the ruling elite was not willing to maintain mature totalitarianism after Stalin's death. Other totalitarian regimes have repeated the pattern. Orwell was wrong and Orwell contradicted himself. H

was more insightful about the distant dangers of Communist thought-control, in the Soviet Union, than the more pressing and durable thought-control of Western consumerism. Nor did he see the sexual revolution coming, not by a long shot; one wonders what the too-frequent taunter of the "pans left" would have made of the fact that the gay movement was one of the most successful, because most militant, of the post-1960s liberation struggles.

But there is a deeper logic to these essays, beneath the contradictions and inevitable oversights. The crisis that Orwell was writing himself through in the 1940s was the crisis of the war and, even more confusingly, the postwar. It involved a kind of projection into the future of certain tendencies latent in the present. Throughout these essays Orwell worries about the potential Sovietization of Europe, but also the infection by totalitarian thinking of life outside the Soviet sphere—not just specific threats to specific freedoms, but to deeper structures of feeling. As the philologist Syme says to Winston Smith in 1984: "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?...Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller." If Orwell was wrong in some sense about the long-term development of totalitarianism, he was right about its deepest intellectual intentions, about the rot it wished to create at the center of thinking itself. And he was right that this rot could spread.

One solution would be to cordon off literature from life and politics entirely: This was, in some sense, the solution adopted by the writers of the previous generation—Eliot, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound—whom Orwell calls the writers of the 1920s and we now call the high modernists. And yet Orwell did not want to make a special plea for literature; in fact, of all the writers of his time, Orwell was constitutionally the least capable of making this separation. His own writing and politics were the fruit of his specific experience—of imperialism in Burma, of the conditions in the English coal mines, of the war in Spain. He begins these essays with the insistence that "all art is propaganda" (he repeats this several times)—the expression of a particular world-view. In Dickens's case this is the worldview of a classic nineteenth-century bourgeois liberal, a worldview Orwell admires even as he sees its limitations. ("Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everybody and antagonizing nobody. Naturally this makes one wonder whether after all there was something unreal in his attack upon society.") In the case of boys' weeklies, it is a worldview that is in a sense incidental (precisely because they are *not* art): "These papers exist because of a specialised demand, because boys at certain ages find it necessary to read about Martians, death-rays, grizzly bears and gangsters. They get what they are looking for, but they get it wrapped up in the illusions which their future employers think suitable for them." Orwell was producing these essays contemporaneously with the great Western Marxist debates over "committed" literature, but Orwell is, to put it mildly, considerably more down to earth. In the case of the boys' weeklies he suggests some reforms: not that they become the *Daily Worker*, but, since it's all the same to the boys so long as the death rays are present, that a more leftist perspective couldn't hurt.

For the Orwell of the early essays, the case of Henry Miller is the tough one. Because while Dickens's politics are in the end congenial enough, Miller's quietism is less so. "I first met Miller at the end of 1936, when I was passing through Paris on my way to Spain," writes Orwell. "What most intrigued me about him was to find that he felt no interest in the Spanish war whatever. He merely told me in forcible terms that to go to Spain at that moment was the act of an idiot." Orwell nonetheless went to Spain, and fought there. He was a writer who felt it was vital to let politics animate his work; Miller was the opposite. As Orwell puts it in perfect Orwell deadpan: "When *Tropic of Cancer* was published the Italians were marching into Abyssinia and Hitler's concentration-camps were already bulging. The intellectual foci of the world were Rome, Moscow and Berlin. It did not seem to be a moment at which a novel of outstanding value was likely to be written about American dead-beats cadging drinks in the Latin Quarter." And yet, as Orwell suggests, someone this unfashionable had to

be working under the spell of a profound conviction. He contrasts Miller favorably to W. H. Auden, who at this time in the famous poem "Spain" was miming the thoughts of the good party man about the "necessary murder." Miller is so far removed from this sort of sentiment, so profound is his individualism and his conviction, that Orwell comes close to endorsing it—"Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism—robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale—or rather, admit that you are inside the whale (for you *are*, of course)." Except Orwell doesn't really mean this. He may be inside the whale but he does not intend to stop disturbing its digestion, he does not intend to be any more quietistic—in fact, just a few months later, in one of his eccentric moods, Orwell was drawing up a scheme for the guerrilla defense of the island, in case the Germans landed, and trying to get it to the government. What he admired above all in Miller was his willingness to go against the grain of the time. While all art is propaganda, it needn't necessarily propagandize something correct. The important thing is that the writer himself believe it.

But there are certain things—here is where Orwell begins to extend and then to contradict his thinking—that you simply can't believe. "No one ever wrote a good book in praise of the Inquisition," he asserts. Is that true? At almost the exact same moment, Jean-Paul Sartre (a writer Orwell thought, incorrectly, was "full of air"), in *What Is Literature?* was writing, "Nobody can suppose for a moment that it is possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism." Is *that* true? It seems to have been a problem that leftist writers of the 1940s were going to face by sheer bluff assertion. For Orwell the number of beliefs hostile to literary production seemed to expand and expand. Eliot's "Four Quartets" is labeled "Petainist"—a fairly strong term to hurl at a long experimental poem that doesn't even rhyme. And Salvador Dalí, in "Benefit of Clergy," is a "rat." Orwell wants to chart a middle course between the philistines who would dismiss Dalí out of hand for his outrages and the aesthetes unable even to acknowledge the problem, but Orwell's own trouble is that he loathes Dalí, above all for abandoning France in its moment of danger. After asserting that the painter is more talented than most of the people who would denounce his morals, Orwell proceeds to denounce those morals, and the morals of those who enjoy Dalí's paintings.

As the war goes on, then ends, Orwell's sense of peril grows sharper, and he looks at literature in a different way. He comes to think that no matter who wins, the world will find itself split again into armed camps, each of them threatening the others, none of them truly free—and literature will simply not survive. This is the landscape of *1984* and it is also the landscape of the later essays in this volume—"The Prevention of Literature," "Politics and the English Language," "Writers and Leviathan." There is even, momentarily, a kind of hallucination, in the curious short piece "Confessions of a Book Reviewer," where some of Orwell's old interest in the starving writer crops up, now mixed with the wintry gloominess of his later years: "In a cold but stuffy bed-sitting room littered with cigarette ends and half-empty cups of tea, a man in a moth-eaten dressing gown sits at a rickety table, trying to find room for his typewriter among the piles of dusty papers that surround it ... He is a man of 35, but looks 50. He is bald, has varicose veins and wears spectacles, or would wear them if only his pair were not chronically lost." Who is this but Winston Smith, the failed hero of *1984*, figured as a book reviewer? Or who, conversely, is Winston Smith, but a book reviewer figured as the prisoner of a futuristic totalitarian regime?

In the earlier essays Orwell sees totalitarian patterns of thought in the excuses made for Stalin by left-wing intellectuals; in the later essays he begins to see the same patterns in writers and thinkers of any political stripe who seek too much purity or too much goodness from the world. There is perhaps a biographical strain to this: widowed, tubercular, increasingly reclusive, and still brutally honest, Orwell was becoming a saint. Three of the late essays—on Leo Tolstoy, Graham Greene, and Mahatma Gandhi—deal with saints. Orwell doesn't like them. He had never particularly liked them: "If you look into your own mind, which are you, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza?" he had asked in the

great essay on dirty postcards. "Almost certainly you are both. There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man who sees very clearly the advantages of staying alive with a whole skin. He is your unofficial self, the voice of the belly protesting against the soul." But back then he thought the saint at least exercised a kind of good example for the fat little man inside us; by the end of his life he seems to have thought the saint a positive evil. Anything that would interrupt the free play of the mind, its commitment to the truth of experience as it actually is rather than as one would like it to be, was an evil. And saints, it turns out, are censorious—Gandhi wanted to throw out cigarettes and meat, which was bad enough, but Tolstoy wanted to throw out Shakespeare, which was even worse.

With great doggedness, then, Orwell keeps delving into the question of literature's position in society, and what might be done to keep it alive in a time of total politics. Eventually, the middle ground he'd managed to inhabit by admiring Henry Miller, Eliot's early poetry, and that essentially apolitical masterpiece, *Ulysses*, gives way beneath him. The pressure of totalitarianism is too great, and as he begins to contemplate the brutal unresolved reality of the postwar, with its two or three warring, nuclear-armed camps (Orwell was enough of a patriot to think that Britain might not actually be subsumed by the United States), he surrenders. In "Writers and Leviathan," dated 1948, he argues that writers must ultimately separate themselves from their political work. It's a depressing essay and it ends—one wonders whether Orwell was aware of this—with an echo of the line of Auden's he so reviled: The writer capable of separating himself from his political activity will be the one who "stands aside, records the things that are done and admits their necessity, but refuses to be deceived as to their true nature." Orwell was always a realist who knew that politics was a dirty business—but he was never quite such a realist as here. The realm of freedom had finally shrunk to a small, small point and it had to be defended. As Winston Smith says in *1984*, "Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull."

It's hard not to wonder whether the pessimism of this conclusion—its separation of art and politics, after so many attempts at an integration, or at least some kind of accord—was partly a response to the art (or propaganda) Orwell was himself creating in those years. He had published *Animal Farm* in 1945; weakened by the tuberculosis that would kill him, he was writing *1984* in 1947-48. After the reception of *Animal Farm*, and with the direction *1984* was taking, it must have been clear to him on some level that the world was going to use these books in a certain way. And it did use them that way. The socialist critique of Orwell's late work seems essentially correct—they were not only anti-Stalinist but antirevolutionary, and were read as such by millions of ordinary people (a fact that Orwell, who was always curious to know what ordinary people thought, would have had to respect). It cannot be entirely a case of devious propaganda that Orwell the avowed democratic Socialist came eventually to be claimed ("stolen," as he says here of Dickens) by the Right in the Cold War; that his "social patriotism" soon reverted, in the hands of many, into simple nationalism; that it was under the banner of Orwell, a convinced anti-imperialist, that some of the best intellectuals in Britain and the United States cheered on the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Writers write because they want to justify themselves to the world. Orwell's essays here, his final reflections on the separation of the politics of the man from the art of the man, can serve as a guide to the Orwell of the 1940s. Out of "necessity" he had chosen a position, and a way of stating that position, that would be used for years to come to bludgeon the antiwar, anti-imperialist left. That he had chosen honestly what seemed to him the least bad of a set of bad political options did not make them, in the long view of history, any better.

But what a wonderful writer he had become! That voice—once you've heard it, how do you get it out of your head? It feels like the truth, even when it's not telling the truth. It is clear and sharp but

unhurried; Orwell is not afraid to be boring, which means that he is never boring. He had been shot through the throat by a sniper's bullet in 1937. A tall man, well over six feet, he was standing up in a trench at night, telling his fellow soldiers—as they later recalled—about some brothels he'd visited in Paris, when the bullet hit. It missed Orwell's esophagus by millimeters. He survived, but contemporaries report that Orwell's voice changed. It became slightly flattened and metallic. Some people found it disconcerting.

Orwell's voice as a writer had been formed before Spain, but Spain gave him a jolt—not the fighting or the injury, though these had their effects, but the calculated campaign of deception he saw in the press when he got back, waged by people who knew better. "Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper," Orwell recalled, "but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed.... This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history."

This insight reverberates through Orwell's work for the rest of his life. The answer to lies is to tell the truth. But how? How do you even know what the truth is, and how do you create a style in which to tell it? Orwell's answer is broadly consistent with the philosophical movements—of which he would have been only a little aware—of his time. There is no necessarily anterior truth; language creates it. Orwell lays out the method in "Politics and the English Language": You avoid ready phrases, you purge your language of dead metaphors, you do not claim to know what you do not know. Far from being a relaxed prose (which is how it seems), Orwell's is a supremely vigilant one. It's interesting that Orwell didn't go to college. He went to Eton, the most prestigious of the English boarding schools, but he loafed around there and, afterward, went off to Burma as a police officer. College is where you sometimes get loaded up with fancy terms whose meaning you're not quite sure of. Orwell was an intellectual and a highbrow who thought Joyce, Eliot, and Lawrence were the greatest writers of his age, but he never uses fancy terms.

These essays typically open with a very strong, flat, memorable statement: "Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful"; "Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent"; or even just, "There is very little in Eliot's later work that makes any deep impression on me." They often do a bit of summarizing—Orwell's style is perfectly adapted to dry, funny plot summary, because it often happens that if you summarize the contents of a novel straight they will sound very funny. (And much of the time Orwell means them to.) Typically, he moves on to a more general philosophical question—"Kipling is in the peculiar position of having been a by-word for fifty years. During five literary generations every enlightened person has despised him, and at the end of that time nine-tenths of those enlightened persons are forgotten and Kipling is in some sense still there." Why is that? Orwell goes on to explain that Kipling cannot be defended as a humanitarian or nonracist, or anti-imperialist—he was clearly on the wrong side of all those questions. But then Orwell shows the vividness of Kipling's descriptions of life, the singular musicality of his "good bad poetry," and you begin to see what has allowed Kipling to endure.

You could say that Orwell was not essentially a literary critic, or you could say that he was the only kind of literary critic worth reading. He was most interested in the way that literature intersects with life, with the world, with groups of actual people. Some of the more enjoyable essays in this volume deal with things that a lot of people read and consume—postcards, detective fiction, "good bad books" (and poetry)—simply *because* a lot of people consume them. Postwar intellectuals would celebrate (or bemoan) the "rise of mass culture." Orwell never saw it as a novel phenomenon. He was one of the first critics to take popular culture seriously because he believed it had always been around

and simply wanted attention. These essays are part of a deeply democratic commitment to culture in general and reading in particular.

His reading of writers who were more traditionally "literary" is shot through with the same commitment. Orwell had read a great deal, and his favorite writers were by many standards difficult writers, but he refused to appeal to the occult mechanisms of literary theory. "One's real reaction to a book, when one has a reaction at all, is usually 'I like this book' or 'I don't like it,' and what follows is rationalisation. But 'I like this book' is not, I think, a non-literary reaction." And the "rationalization," Orwell saw, was going to involve your background, your expectations, the historical period you're living through. Orwell often launches off on fairly long digressions—like the one on A. E. Housman's "Inside the Whale"—that no other literary critic would even consider, much less get away with. But he does get away with them (more or less), because they're so clearly in the service of trying to pin down a general view of life, and history, and politics. Nothing is ever separate from anything else in Orwell though at the same time nothing is ever allowed to overshadow the task at hand. "While I have been writing this book," he writes in the essay on Miller (the first three essays in this volume were published under the title *Inside the Whale*, in the spring of 1940), "another European war has broken out....What is quite obviously happening, war or no war, is the break-up of laissez-faire capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture." And this means we ought to read Henry Miller!

This is great, a belief in the tenacity of politics and bombs but the equally powerful tenacity of literature and personality. If we compare Orwell to his near-contemporary Edmund Wilson, who was in many senses a more sensitive critic and with whose range in literary interests and languages Orwell could not possibly compete, we see Orwell's peculiar strength. At almost the exact moment as Orwell in early 1940, Wilson published a psychobiographical essay on Dickens in which he traced much of Dickens's later development to his brush with poverty as a young man. Orwell's treatment is much more sociological and political, and in a way less dramatic than Wilson's. Yet at one point Orwell encapsulates Wilson's argument with a remarkable concision: "Dickens had grown up near enough to poverty to be terrified of it, and in spite of his generosity of mind, he is not free from the special prejudices of the shabby-genteel." This is stark, and fair, and that "terrified" is unforgettable.

It's possible to imagine a kind of tragedy to Orwell's style. He was a writer who saw both sides to every issue, and argued with himself about them, but whose style could only come down on one side at a time. You can imagine him trapped in that style, even as he used it to slash through cant and falsehood. You can imagine him trapped in it, too, whenever he expressed a vision of what the good society should be like; for it is, finally, a destructive style, peculiarly ill suited to expressing positive visions of anything. It's a funny, brutal, dry, destructive style. One of the slightly surprising things about these essays is how funny they are—in the elegant, deadpan plot summaries, but also in the retorts. To see Orwell slash through H. G. Wells, and Dalí, and Tolstoy—and to see his glimmer of self-recognition in contemplating the work of the fantastically misanthropic Jonathan Swift—is to learn a bit of what language is still capable of.

Orwell might not have admitted, as we would automatically admit today, that there were multiple subjective truths in the world, that a writer must negotiate the various possibilities of those many truths; and still, even while we know this and Orwell didn't, he always seems to be telling *the* truth. Part of the magic is that he never speaks from a point of view that is anything but his own, while at the same time he believes that any normal unprejudiced person—the "common man," the common Englishman—would see it the same way. The belief in a common man—in his existence as well as his decency—is a profound animating principle of these essays, and Orwell rarely misses an opportunity to stress this decency, as when he undramatically notes that anti-Jewish postcards disappeared from British newsstands after the rise of Hitler in Germany. Having established the common man's existence and his decency, Orwell is empowered to speak for him. There is a doubleness then to the

point of view: Orwell is telling us only what he himself has seen—in Spain, in the coal mines, in the books he's read—but he's also convinced that a whole mass of people, standing behind him, would see it the same way, if only they saw it as clearly. And his gift is to convince us that we are those ordinary people, and we see it that way, too.

You can tie yourself in knots—many leftist intellectuals have done this over the years—proving that Orwell's style is a facade, an invention, a mask he put on when he changed his name from Eric Blair to "George Orwell"; that by seeming to tell the whole story in plain and honest terms, it actually makes it more difficult to see, it *obfuscates*, the part of the story that's necessarily left out; that ultimately it rubber-stamps the status quo. In some sense, intellectually, all this is true enough; you can spend a day, a week, a semester proving it. There really are things in the world that Orwell's style would never be able to capture. But there are very few such things.

Orwell did not want to become a saint, but he became a saint anyway. For most of his career a struggling writer, eking out a living reviewing books at an astonishing rate, he was gradually acknowledged, especially after the appearance of *Homage to Catalonia* in 1938, to be a great practitioner of English prose. With the publication of *Animal Farm*—a book turned down by several of England's preeminent houses (including Eliot's Faber and Faber) because they did not want to offend Britain's ally the Soviet Union—Orwell became a household name. Then his influence grew and grew so that shortly after his death he was already a phenomenon. "In the Britain of the fifties," the great cultural critic Raymond Williams once lamented, "along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting. If you tried to develop a new kind of popular cultural analysis, there was Orwell; if you wanted to report on work or ordinary life, there was Orwell; if you engaged in any kind of socialist argument, there was an enormously inflated statue of Orwell warning you to go back." In any way the incredible posthumous success of Orwell has seemed one of the peculiar episodes in the cultural life of the West. He was not, as Lionel Trilling once pointed out, a genius; he was not mysterious; he had served in Burma, washed dishes in a Parisian hotel, and fought for a few months in Spain, but this hardly added up to a life of adventure; for the most part he lived in London and reviewed books. So odd in fact has the success of Orwell seemed to some that there is even a book, *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation*, devoted to getting to the bottom of it.

When you return to these essays, the mystery evaporates. You would probably not be able to write this way now, even if you learned the craft: The voice would seem put-on, after Orwell; it would seem deliberately "hard-boiled." But there is nothing put-on about it here, and it seems to speak, despite the specificity of the issues discussed, directly to the present. In Orwell's clear, strong voice we hear a warning. Because we, too, live in a time when truth is disappearing from the world, and doing so in just the way Orwell worried it would: through language. We move through the world by naming things in it, and we explain the world through sentences and stories. The lesson of these essays is clear: Look around you. Describe what you see as an ordinary observer—for you *are* one, you know—you would see them. Take things seriously. And tell the truth. Tell the truth.

Inside the Whale, March 11, 1940

Inside the Whale and Other Essays was published in London by Victor Gollancz Ltd on March 11, 1940. It contained three essays: "Charles Dickens," "Boys' Weeklies," and "Inside the Whale."

1

Dickens is one of those writers who are well worth stealing. Even the burial of his body in Westminster Abbey was a species of theft, if you come to think of it.

When Chesterton wrote his introductions to the Everyman Edition of Dickens's works, it seemed quite natural to him to credit Dickens with his own highly individual brand of medievalism, and more recently a Marxist writer, Mr. T. A. Jackson,¹ has made spirited efforts to turn Dickens into a bloodthirsty revolutionary. The Marxist claims him as "almost" a Marxist, the Catholic claims him as "almost" a Catholic, and both claim him as a champion of the proletariat (or "the poor," as Chesterton would have put it). On the other hand, Nadezhda Krupskaya, in her little book on Lenin, relates that towards the end of his life Lenin went to see a dramatised version of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and found Dickens's "middle-class sentimentality" so intolerable that he walked out in the middle of a scene.

Taking "middle-class" to mean what Krupskaya might be expected to mean by it, this was probably a truer judgment than those of Chesterton and Jackson. But it is worth noticing that the dislike of Dickens implied in this remark is something unusual. Plenty of people have found him unreadable, but very few seem to have felt any hostility towards the general spirit of his work. Some years ago Mr. Bechhofer Roberts published a full-length attack on Dickens in the form of a novel (*This Side Idolatry*), but it was a merely personal attack, concerned for the most part with Dickens's treatment of his wife. It dealt with incidents which not one in a thousand of Dickens's readers would ever hear about, and which no more invalidate his work than the second-best bed invalidates *Hamlet*. All that the book really demonstrated was that a writer's literary personality has little or nothing to do with his private character. It is quite possible that in private life Dickens was just the kind of insensitive egoist that Mr. Bechhofer Roberts makes him appear. But in his published work there is implied a personality quite different from this, a personality which has won him far more friends than enemies. It might well have been otherwise, for even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical, one might truthfully say a rebel. Everyone who has read widely in his work has felt this. Gissing, for instance, the best of the writers on Dickens, was anything but a radical himself, and he disapproved of this strain in Dickens and wished it were not there, but it never occurred to him to deny it. In *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and, more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself. In its attitude towards Dickens the English public has always been a little like the elephant which feels a blow with a walking-stick as a delightful tickling. Before I was ten years old I was having Dickens ladled down my throat by schoolmasters in whom even at that age I could see a strong resemblance to Mr. Creakle, and one knows without needing to be told that lawyers delight in Serjeant Buzfuz and that *Little Dorrit* is a

favourite in the Home Office. Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everybody and antagonizing nobody. Naturally this makes one wonder whether after all there was something unreal in his attack upon society. Where exactly does he stand, socially, morally and politically? As usual, one can define his position more easily if one starts by deciding what he was *not*.

In the first place he was *not*, as Messrs. Chesterton and Jackson seem to imply, a "proletarian" writer. To begin with, he does not write about the proletariat, in which he merely resembles the overwhelming majority of novelists, past and present. If you look for the working classes in fiction, and especially English fiction, all you find is a hole. This statement needs qualifying, perhaps. For reasons that are easy enough to see, the agricultural labourer (in England a proletarian) gets a fairly good showing in fiction, and a great deal has been written about criminals, derelicts and, more recently, the working-class intelligentsia. But the ordinary town proletariat, the people who make the wheels go round, have always been ignored by novelists. When they do find their way between the covers of a book, it is nearly always as objects of pity or as comic relief. The central action of Dickens's stories almost invariably takes place in middle-class surroundings. If one examines his novels in detail one finds that his real subject-matter is the London commercial bourgeoisie and their hangers-on—lawyers, clerks, tradesmen, innkeepers, small craftsmen and servants. He has no portrait of an agricultural worker, and only one (Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*) of an industrial worker. The Plornishes in *Little Dorrit* are probably his best picture of a working-class family—the Peggottys for instance, hardly belong to the working class—but on the whole he is not successful with this type of character. If you ask any ordinary reader which of Dickens's proletarian characters he can remember, the three he is almost certain to mention are Bill Sikes, Sam Weller and Mrs. Gamp. A burglar, a valet and a drunken midwife—not exactly a representative cross-section of the English working class.

Secondly, in the ordinarily accepted sense of the word, Dickens is not a "revolutionary" writer. But his position here needs some defining.

Whatever else Dickens may have been, he was not a hole-and-corner soul-saver, the kind of well-meaning idiot who thinks that the world will be perfect if you amend a few by-laws and abolish a few anomalies. It is worth comparing him with Charles Reade, for instance. Reade was a much better-informed man than Dickens, and in some ways more public-spirited. He really hated the abuses he could understand, he showed them up in a series of novels which for all their absurdity are extremely readable, and he probably helped to alter public opinion on a few minor but important points. But it was quite beyond him to grasp that, given the existing form of society, certain evils *cannot* be remedied. Fasten upon this or that minor abuse, expose it, drag it into the open, bring it before a British jury, and all will be well—that is how he sees it. Dickens at any rate never imagined that you can cure pimples by cutting them off. In every page of his work one can see a consciousness that society is wrong somewhere at the root. It is when one asks "Which root?" that one begins to grasp his position.

The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence the utter lack of any constructive suggestion anywhere in his work. He attacks the law, parliamentary government, the educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their place. Of course it is not necessarily the business of a novelist, or a satirist, to make constructive suggestions, but the point is that Dickens's attitude is at bottom not even *destructive*. There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it *were* overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society as "human nature." It would be difficult to point anywhere in his books to a passage suggesting that the economic system is wrong *as a system*. Nowhere, for instance, does he make any attack on private enterprise or private property. Even in a book like *Our Mutual Friend*, which turns on the power of corpses to interfere

with living people by means of idiotic wills, it does not occur to him to suggest that individuals ought not to have this irresponsible power. Of course one can draw this inference for oneself, and one can draw it again from the remarks about Bounderby's will at the end of *Hard Times*, and indeed from the whole of Dickens's work one can infer the evil of *laissez-faire* capitalism; but Dickens makes no such inference himself. It is said that Macaulay refused to review *Hard Times* because he disapproved of its "sullen Socialism." Obviously Macaulay is here using the word "Socialism" in the same sense in which, twenty years ago, a vegetarian meal or a Cubist picture used to be referred to as "Bolshevism." There is not a line in the book that can properly be called Socialistic; indeed, its tendency if anything is pro-capitalist, because its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious. Bounderby is a bullying windbag and Gradgrind has been morally blinded, but if they were better men, the system would work well enough—that, all through, is the implication. And so far as social criticism goes, one can never extract much more from Dickens than this, unless one deliberately reads meanings into him. His whole "message" is one that at first glance looks like an enormous platitude: If men would behave decently the world would be decent.

Naturally this calls for a few characters who are in positions of authority and who *do* behave decently. Hence that recurrent Dickens figure, the Good Rich Man. This character belongs especially to Dickens's early optimistic period. He is usually a "merchant" (we are not necessarily told what merchandise he deals in), and he is always a superhumanly kind-hearted old gentleman who "trots" to and fro, raising his employees' wages, patting children on the head, getting debtors out of jail and, in general, acting the fairy godmother. Of course he is a pure dream figure, much further from real life than, say, Squeers or Micawber. Even Dickens must have reflected occasionally that anyone who was so anxious to give his money away would never have acquired it in the first place. Mr. Pickwick, for instance, had "been in the city," but it is difficult to imagine him making a fortune there. Nevertheless this character runs like a connecting thread through most of the earlier books. Pickwick, the Cheerybles, old Chuzzlewit, Scrooge—It is the same figure over and over again, the good rich man handing out guineas. Dickens does however show signs of development here. In the books of the middle period the good rich man fades out to some extent. There is no one who plays this part in *A Tale of Two Cities*, nor in *Great Expectations*—*Great Expectations* is, in fact, definitely an attack on patronage—and in *Hard Times* it is only very doubtfully played by Gradgrind after his reformation. The character reappears in a rather different form as Meagles in *Little Dorrit* and John Jarndyce in *Bleak House*—one might perhaps add Betsy Trotwood in *David Copperfield*. But in these books the good rich man has dwindled from a "merchant" to a rentier. This is significant. A rentier is part of the possessing class, he can and, almost without knowing it, does make other people work for him, but he has very little direct power. Unlike Scrooge or the Cheerybles, he cannot put everything right by raising everybody's wages. The seeming inference from the rather despondent books that Dickens wrote in the 'fifties is that by that time he had grasped the helplessness of well-meaning individuals in a corrupt society. Nevertheless in the last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (published 1864–65), the good rich man comes back in full glory in the person of Boffin. Boffin is a proletarian by origin and only rich by inheritance, but he is the usual *deus ex machina*, solving everybody's problems by showering money in all directions. He even "trots," like the Cheerybles. In several ways *Our Mutual Friend* is a return to the earlier manner, and not an unsuccessful return either. Dickens's thoughts seem to have come full circle. Once again, individual kindness is the remedy for everything.

One crying evil of his time that Dickens says very little about is child labour. There are plenty of pictures of suffering children in his books, but usually they are suffering in schools rather than in factories. The one detailed account of child labour that he gives is the description in *David Copperfield* of little David washing bottles in Murdstone & Grinby's warehouse. This, of course, is autobiography. Dickens himself, at the age of ten, had worked in Warren's blacking factory in the

Strand, very much as he describes it here. It was a terribly bitter memory to him, partly because he felt the whole incident to be discreditable to his parents, and he even concealed it from his wife till long after they were married. Looking back on this period, he says in *David Copperfield*:

...it is matter of some surprise to me, even now, that I can have been so easily thrown away at such an age. A child of excellent abilities, and with strong powers of observation, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt bodily or mentally, it seems wonderful to me that nobody should have made any sign in my behalf. But none was made; and I became, at ten years old, a little labouring hind in the service of Murdstone & Grinby.

And again, having described the rough boys among whom he worked:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship ... and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my bosom.

Obviously it is not David Copperfield who is speaking, it is Dickens himself. He uses almost the same words in the autobiography that he began and abandoned a few months earlier. Of course Dickens is right in saying that a gifted child ought not to work ten hours a day pasting labels on bottles, but what he does not say is that *no* child ought to be condemned to such a fate, and there is no reason for inferring that he thinks it. David escapes from the warehouse, but Mick Walker and Mealy Potatoes and the others are still there, and there is no sign that this troubles Dickens particularly. As usual, he displays no consciousness that the *structure* of society can be changed. He despises politics and does not believe that any good can come out of Parliament—he had been a Parliamentary shorthand writer, which was no doubt a disillusioning experience—and he is slightly hostile to the most hopeful movement of his day, trade unionism. In *Hard Times* trade unionism is represented as something not much better than a racket, something that happens because employers are not sufficiently paternal. Stephen Blackpool's refusal to join the union is rather a virtue in Dickens's eyes. Also, as Mr. Jackson has pointed out, the apprentices' association in *Barnaby Rudge*, to which Sim Tappertit belongs, is probably a hit at the illegal or barely legal unions of Dickens's own day, with their secret assemblies, passwords and so forth. Obviously he wants the workers to be decently treated, but there is no sign that he wants them to take their destiny into their own hands, least of all by open violence.

As it happens, Dickens deals with revolution in the narrower sense in two novels, *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. In *Barnaby Rudge* it is a case of rioting rather than revolution. The Gordon Riots of 1780, though they had religious bigotry as a pretext, seem to have been little more than a pointless outburst of looting. Dickens's attitude to this kind of thing is sufficiently indicated by the fact that his first idea was to make the ringleaders of the riots three lunatics escaped from an asylum. He was dissuaded from this, but the principal figure of the book is in fact a village idiot. In the chapters dealing with the riots Dickens shows a most profound horror of mob violence. He delights in describing scenes in which the "dregs" of the population behave with atrocious bestiality. These chapters are of great psychological interest, because they show how deeply he had brooded on this subject. The things he describes can only have come out of his imagination, for no riots on anything like the same scale had happened in his lifetime. Here is one of his descriptions, for instance:

If Bedlam gates had been flung open wide, there would not have issued forth such maniacs as the frenzy of that night had made. There were men there who danced and trampled on the beds of flowers as though they trod down human enemies, and wrenched them from the stalks, like savages who twisted human necks. There were men who cast their lighted torches in the air, and

suffered them to fall upon their heads and faces, blistering the skin with deep unseemly burns. There were men who rushed up to the fire, and paddled in it with their hands as if in water; and others who were restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their deadly longing. On the skull of one drunken lad—not twenty, by his looks—who lay upon the ground with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, white hot, melting his head like wax ... But of all the howling throng not one learnt mercy from, or sickened at, these sights; nor was the fierce, besotted, senseless rage of one man glutted.

You might almost think you were reading a description of "Red" Spain by a partisan of General Franco. One ought, of course, to remember that when Dickens was writing, the London "mob" still existed. (Nowadays there is no mob, only a flock.) Low wages and the growth and shift of population had brought into existence a huge, dangerous slum-proletariat, and until the early middle of the nineteenth century there was hardly such a thing as a police force. When the brickbats began to fly there was nothing between shuttering your windows and ordering the troops to open fire. In *A Tale of Two Cities* he is dealing with a revolution which was really *about* something, and Dickens's attitude is different, but not entirely different. As a matter of fact, *A Tale of Two Cities* is a book which tends to leave a false impression behind, especially after a lapse of time.

The one thing that everyone who has read *A Tale of Two Cities* remembers is the Reign of Terror. The whole book is dominated by the guillotine—tumbrils thundering to and fro, bloody knives, heads bouncing into the basket, and sinister old women knitting as they watch. Actually these scenes only occupy a few chapters, but they are written with terrible intensity, and the rest of the book is rather slow going. But *A Tale of Two Cities* is not a companion volume to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.² Dickens sees clearly enough that the French Revolution was bound to happen and that many of the people who were executed deserved what they got. If, he says, you behave as the French aristocracy had behaved, vengeance will follow. He repeats this over and over again. We are constantly being reminded that while "my lord" is lolling in bed, with four liveried footmen serving his chocolate and the peasants starving outside, somewhere in the forest a tree is growing which will presently be sawn into planks for the platform of the guillotine, etc. etc. etc. The inevitability of the Terror, given its causes, is insisted upon in the clearest terms:

It was too much the way ... to talk of this terrible Revolution as if it were the one only harvest ever known under the skies that had not been sown—as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that had led to it—as if observers of the wretched millions in France, and of the misused and perverted resources that should have made them prosperous, had not seen it inevitably coming, years before, and had not in plain words recorded what they saw.

And again:

All the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realisation, Guillotine. And yet there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced this horror. Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms.

In other words, the French aristocracy had dug their own graves. But there is no perception here of what is now called historic necessity. Dickens sees that the results are inevitable, given the causes but he thinks that the causes might have been avoided. The Revolution is something that happens

because centuries of oppression have made the French peasantry subhuman. If the wicked nobleman could somehow have turned over a new leaf, like Scrooge, there would have been no Revolution, no jacquerie, no guillotine—and so much the better. This is the opposite of the "revolutionary" attitude. From the "revolutionary" point of view the class-struggle is the main source of progress, and therefore the nobleman who robs the peasant and goads him to revolt is playing a necessary part, just as much as the Jacobin who guillotines the nobleman. Dickens never writes anywhere a line that can be interpreted as meaning this. Revolution as he sees it is merely a monster that is begotten by tyranny and always ends by devouring its own instruments. In Sidney Carton's vision at the foot of the guillotine, he foresees Defarge and the other leading spirits of the Terror all perishing under the same knife—which, in fact, was approximately what happened.

And Dickens is very sure that revolution *is* a monster. That is why everyone remembers the revolutionary scenes in *A Tale of Two Cities*; they have the quality of nightmare, and it is Dickens's own nightmare. Again and again he insists upon the meaningless horrors of revolution—the mass-butcheries, the injustice, the ever-present terror of spies, the frightful blood-lust of the mob. The descriptions of the Paris mob—the description, for instance, of the crowd of murderers struggling round the grindstone to sharpen their weapons before butchering the prisoners in the September massacres—outdo anything in *Barnaby Rudge*. The revolutionaries appear to him simply as degraded savages—in fact, as lunatics. He broods over their frenzies with a curious imaginative intensity. He describes them dancing the "Carmagnole,"³ for instance:

There could not be fewer than five hundred people, and they were dancing like five thousand demons ... They danced to the popular Revolution song, keeping a ferocious time that was like a gnashing of teeth in unison ... They advanced, retreated, struck at one another's hands, clutched at one another's heads, spun round alone, caught one another and spun round in pairs, until many of them dropped ... Suddenly they stopped again, paused, struck out the time afresh, formed into lines the width of the public way, and with their heads low down and their hands high up, swooped screaming off. No fight could have been half so terrible as this dance. It was so emphatically a fallen sport—a something, once innocent, delivered over to all devilry....

He even credits some of these wretches with a taste for guillotining children. The passage I have abridged above ought to be read in full. It and others like it show how deep was Dickens's horror of revolutionary hysteria. Notice, for instance, that touch, "with their heads low down and their hands high up," etc., and the evil vision it conveys. Madame Defarge is a truly dreadful figure, certainly Dickens's most successful attempt at a *malignant* character. Defarge and others are simply "the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old," the revolutionary courts are presided over by "the lowest, cruellest and worst populace," and so on and so forth. All the way through Dickens insists upon the nightmare insecurity of a revolutionary period, and in this he shows a great deal of prescience. "A law of the suspected, which struck away all security for liberty or life, and delivered over any good and innocent person to any bad and guilty one; prisons gorged with people who had committed no offence, and could obtain no hearing"—it would apply pretty accurately to several countries to-day.

The apologists of any revolution generally try to minimise its horrors; Dickens's impulse is to exaggerate them—and from a historical point of view he has certainly exaggerated. Even the Reign of Terror was a much smaller thing than he makes it appear. Though he quotes no figures, he gives the impression of a frenzied massacre lasting for years, whereas in reality the whole of the Terror, so far as the number of deaths goes, was a joke compared with one of Napoleon's battles. But the bloody knives and the tumbrils rolling to and fro create in his mind a special, sinister vision which he has

succeeded in passing on to generations of readers. Thanks to Dickens, the very word "tumbrel" has a murderous sound; one forgets that a tumbrel is only a sort of farm-cart. To this day, to the average Englishman, the French Revolution means no more than a pyramid of severed heads. It is a strange thing that Dickens, much more in sympathy with the ideas of the Revolution than most Englishmen of his time, should have played a part in creating this impression.

If you hate violence and don't believe in politics, the only major remedy remaining is education. Perhaps society is past praying for, but there is always hope for the individual human being, if you catch him young enough. This belief partly accounts for Dickens's preoccupation with childhood.

No one, at any rate no English writer, has written better about childhood than Dickens. In spite of all the knowledge that has accumulated since, in spite of the fact that children are now comparatively sanely treated, no novelist has shown the same power of entering into the child's point of view. I must have been about nine years old when I first read *David Copperfield*. The mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined they had been written *by a child*. And yet when one re-reads the book as an adult and sees the Murdstones, for instance, dwindle from gigantic figures of doom into semi-comic monsters, these passages lose nothing. Dickens has been able to stand both inside and outside the child's mind, in such a way that the same scene can be wild burlesque or sinister reality, according to the age at which one reads it. Look, for instance, at the scene in which David Copperfield is unjustly suspected of eating the mutton chops; or the scene in which Pip, in *Great Expectations*, coming back from Miss Havisham's house and finding himself completely unable to describe what he has seen, takes refuge in a series of outrageous lies—which, of course, are eagerly believed. All the isolation of childhood is there. And how accurately he has recorded the mechanisms of the child's mind, its visualising tendency, its sensitiveness to certain kinds of impression. Pip relates how in his childhood his ideas about his dead parents were derived from their tombstones:

The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "*Also Georgiana, Wife of the Above*," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine ... I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

There is a similar passage in *David Copperfield*. After biting Mr. Murdstone's hand, David is sent away to school and obliged to wear on his back a placard saying, "Take care of him. He bites." He looks at the door in the playground where the boys have carved their names, and from the appearance of each name he seems to know in just what tone of voice the boy will read out the placard:

There was one boy—a certain J. Steerforth—who cut his name very deep and very often, who, I conceived, would read it in a rather strong voice, and afterwards pull my hair. There was another boy, one Tommy Traddles, who I dreaded would make game of it, and pretend to be dreadfully frightened of me. There was a third, George Dimple, who I fancied would sing it.

When I read this passage as a child, it seemed to me that those were exactly the pictures that those particular names would call up. The reason, of course, is the sound-associations of the words (Dimple—"temple"; Traddles—probably "skedaddle"). But how many people, before Dickens, had ever noticed such things? A sympathetic attitude towards children was a much rarer thing in Dickens

day than it is now. The early nineteenth century was not a good time to be a child. In Dickens's youth children were still being "solemnly tried at a criminal bar, where they were held up to be seen," and it was not so long since boys of thirteen had been hanged for petty theft. The doctrine of "breaking the child's spirit" was in full vigour, and *The Fairchild Family* was a standard book for children till late into the century. This evil book is now issued in pretty-pretty expurgated editions, but it is well worth reading in the original version. It gives one some idea of the lengths to which child-discipline was sometimes carried. Mr. Fairchild, for instance, when he catches his children quarrelling, first thrashes them, reciting Doctor Watts's "Let dogs delight to bark and bite" between blows of the cane, and then takes them to spend the afternoon beneath a gibbet where the rotting corpse of a murderer is hanging. In the earlier part of the century scores of thousands of children, aged sometimes as young as six, were literally worked to death in the mines or cotton mills, and even at the fashionable public schools boys were flogged till they ran with blood for a mistake in their Latin verses. One thing which Dickens seems to have recognised, and which most of his contemporaries did not, is the sadistic sexual element in flogging. I think this can be inferred from *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. But mental cruelty to a child infuriates him as much as physical, and though there is a fair number of exceptions, his schoolmasters are generally scoundrels.

Except for the universities and the big public schools, every kind of education then existing in England gets a mauling at Dickens's hands. There is Doctor Blimber's Academy, where little boys are blown up with Greek until they burst, and the revolting charity schools of the period, which produced specimens like Noah Claypole and Uriah Heep, and Salem House, and Dotheboys Hall, and the disgraceful little dame-school kept by Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt. Some of what Dickens says remains true even to-day. Salem House is the ancestor of the modern "prep. school," which still has a good deal of resemblance to it; and as for Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, some old fraud of much the same stamp is carrying on at this moment in nearly every small town in England. But, as usual, Dickens's criticism is neither creative nor destructive. He sees the idiocy of an educational system founded on the Greek lexicon and the wax-ended cane; on the other hand, he has no use for the new kind of school that is coming up in the 'fifties and 'sixties, the "modern" school, with its gritty insistence on "facts." What, then, *does* he want? As always, what he appears to want is a moralised version of the existing thing—the old type of school, but with no caning, no bullying or underfeeding, and not quite so much Greek. Doctor Strong's school, to which *David Copperfield* goes after he escapes from Murdstone & Grinby, is simply Salem House with the vices left out and a good deal of "old grey stones" atmosphere thrown in:

Doctor Strong's was an excellent school, as different from Mr. Creakle's as good is from evil. It was very gravely and decorously ordered, and on a sound system; with an appeal, in everything, to the honour and good faith of the boys ... which worked wonders. We all felt that we had a part in the management of the place, and in sustaining its character and dignity. Hence, we soon became warmly attached to it—I am sure I did for one, and I never knew, in all my time, of any boy being otherwise—and learnt with a good will, desiring to do it credit. We had noble games out of hours, and plenty of liberty; but even then, as I remember, we were well spoken of in the town, and rarely did any disgrace, by our appearance or manner, to the reputation of Doctor Strong and Doctor Strong's boys.

In the woolly vagueness of this passage one can see Dickens's utter lack of any educational theory. He can imagine the *moral* atmosphere of a good school, but nothing further. The boys "learnt with a good will," but what did they learn? No doubt it was Doctor Blimber's curriculum, a little watered down. Considering the attitude to society that is everywhere implied in Dickens novels, it

comes as rather a shock to learn that he sent his eldest son to Eton and sent all his children through the ordinary educational mill. Gissing seems to think that he may have done this because he was painfully conscious of being under-educated himself. Here perhaps Gissing is influenced by his own love of classical learning. Dickens had had little or no formal education, but he lost nothing by missing it, and on the whole he seems to have been aware of this. If he was unable to imagine a better school than Doctor Strong's, or, in real life, than Eton, it was probably due to an intellectual deficiency rather different from the one Gissing suggests.

It seems that in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure. It is hopeless to try and pin him down to any definite remedy, still more to any political doctrine. His approach is always along the moral plane, and his attitude is sufficiently summed up in that remark about Strong's school being as different from Creakle's "as good is from evil." Two things can be very much alike and yet abysmally different. Heaven and Hell are in the same place. Useless to change institutions without a "change of heart"—that, essentially, is what he is always saying.

If that were all, he might be no more than a cheer-up writer, a reactionary humbug. A "change of heart" is in fact *the* alibi of people who do not wish to endanger the *status quo*. But Dickens is not a humbug, except in minor matters, and the strongest single impression one carries away from his books is that of a hatred of tyranny. I said earlier that Dickens is not *in the accepted sense* a revolutionary writer. But it is not at all certain that a merely moral criticism of society may not be just as "revolutionary"—and revolution, after all, means turning things upside down—as the politico-economic criticism which is fashionable at this moment. Blake was not a politician, but there is more understanding of the nature of capitalist society in a poem like "I wander through each charter'd street" than in three-quarters of Socialist literature. Progress is not an illusion, it happens, but it is slow and invariably disappointing. There is always a new tyrant waiting to take over from the old—generally not quite so bad, but still a tyrant. Consequently two viewpoints are always tenable. The one: how can you improve human nature until you have changed the system? The other, what is the use of changing the system before you have improved human nature? They appeal to different individuals, and they probably show a tendency to alternate in point of time. The moralist and the revolutionary are constantly undermining one another. Marx exploded a hundred tons of dynamite beneath the moralist position, and we are still living in the echo of that tremendous crash. But already, somewhere or other, the sappers are at work and fresh dynamite is being tamped in place to blow Marx at the moon. Then Marx, or somebody like him, will come back with yet more dynamite, and so the process continues, to an end we cannot yet foresee. The central problem—how to prevent power from being abused—remains unsolved. Dickens, who had not the vision to see that private property is an obstructive nuisance, had the vision to see that. "If men would behave decently the world would be decent" is not such a platitude as it sounds.

2

More completely than most writers, perhaps, Dickens can be explained in terms of his social origin, though actually his family history was not quite what one would infer from his novels. His father was a clerk in government service, and through his mother's family he had connections with both the army and the navy. But from the age of nine onwards he was brought up in London in commercial surroundings, and generally in an atmosphere of struggling poverty. Mentally he belongs to the small urban bourgeoisie, and he happens to be an exceptionally fine specimen of this class, with all the

"points," as it were, very highly developed. That is partly what makes him so interesting. If one wants a modern equivalent, the nearest would be H. G. Wells, who has had a rather similar history and who obviously owes something to Dickens as a novelist. Arnold Bennett was essentially of the same type, but, unlike the other two, he was a midlander, with an industrial and Nonconformist rather than commercial and Anglican background.

The great disadvantage, and advantage, of the small urban bourgeois is his limited outlook. He sees the world as a middle-class world, and everything outside these limits is either laughable or slightly wicked. On the one hand, he has no contact with industry or the soil; on the other, no contact with the governing classes. Anyone who has studied Wells's novels in detail will have noticed that though he hates the aristocrat like poison, he has no particular objection to the plutocrat, and no enthusiasm for the proletarian. His most-hated types, the people he believes to be responsible for all human ills, are kings, landowners, priests, nationalists, soldiers, scholars and peasants. At first sight a list beginning with kings and ending with peasants looks like a mere omnium gatherum, but in reality all these people have a common factor. All of them are archaic types, people who are governed by tradition and whose eyes are turned towards the past—the opposite, therefore, of the rising bourgeois who has put his money on the future and sees the past simply as a dead hand.

Actually, although Dickens lived in a period when the bourgeoisie was really a rising class, he displays this characteristic less strongly than Wells. He is almost unconscious of the future and has a rather sloppy love of the picturesque (the "quaint old church," etc.). Nevertheless his list of most-hated types is like enough to Wells's for the similarity to be striking. He is vaguely on the side of the working class—has a sort of generalised sympathy with them because they are oppressed—but he does not in reality know much about them; they come into his books chiefly as servants, and comic servants at that. At the other end of the scale he loathes the aristocrat and—going one better than Wells in this—loathes the big bourgeois as well. His real sympathies are bounded by Mr. Pickwick on the upper side and Mr. Barkis on the lower. But the term "aristocrat," for the type Dickens hates, is vague and needs defining.

Actually Dickens's target is not so much the great aristocracy, who hardly enter into his books, as their petty offshoots, the cadging dowagers who live up mews in Mayfair, and the bureaucrats and professional soldiers. All through his books there are countless hostile sketches of these people, and hardly any that are friendly. There are practically no friendly pictures of the landowning class, for instance. One might make a doubtful exception of Sir Leicester Dedlock; otherwise there is only Mr. Wardle (who is a stock figure—the "good old squire") and Haredale in *Barnaby Rudge*, who has Dickens's sympathy because he is a persecuted Catholic. There are no friendly pictures of soldiers (i.e. officers), and none at all of naval men. As for his bureaucrats, judges and magistrates, most of them would feel quite at home in the Circumlocution Office. The only officials whom Dickens handles with any kind of friendliness are, significantly enough, policemen.

Dickens's attitude is easily intelligible to an Englishman, because it is part of the English puritan tradition, which is not dead even at this day. The class Dickens belonged to, at least by adoption, was growing suddenly rich after a couple of centuries of obscurity. It had grown up mainly in the big towns, out of contact with agriculture, and politically impotent; government, in its experience, was something which either interfered or persecuted. Consequently it was a class with no tradition of public service and not much tradition of usefulness. What now strikes us as remarkable about the new moneyed class of the nineteenth century is their complete irresponsibility; they see everything in terms of individual success, with hardly any consciousness that the community exists. On the other hand, a Tite Barnacle, even when he was neglecting his duties, would have some vague notion of what duties he was neglecting. Dickens's attitude is never irresponsible, still less does he take the money-grubbing Smilesian⁴ line; but at the back of his mind there is usually a half-belief that the whole

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