# *Orwell Criticism*

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IN SPITE of the existence of a number of comprehensive critiques of Orwell,[1] it has seemed until recently that the most convincing and best organized critical material on Orwell was in fact to be found in early reviews of the individual books, written by such authors as Julian Symons, Cyril Connolly, Henry Judd, M. C. Hollis and Jerome Thale; or in introductory essays to individual works, such as Richard Hoggart's and Stephen Spender's introductions to the 1965 Heinemann editions of *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *1984* respectively; in short articles like D. J. Dooley's 'The Limitations of George Orwell', Michael Fixler's 'George Orwell and the Instrument of Language' and George Kateb's 'The Road to 1984'; or in the occasional section or chapter on Orwell found in such books as John Wain's *Essays on Literature and Ideas*, Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Writers and Politics* and L. J. Cohen's *The Diversity of Meaning*. And so collections of critical opinion, such as are contained in the tributory edition of *World Review* (June 1950) and Irving Howe's *Orwell's 1984: Text, Sources, Criticism* (1963), are particularly interesting.

[1] Tom Hopkinson, *George Orwell*: London (British Council Pamphlet), Longmans, Green & Co., first published 1953, new edition 1962, pp. 36; John Atkins, *George Orwell*: London, John Calder, 1954, pp. 348; Laurence Brander, *George Orwell*: London, Longmans, 1956, pp. 212; Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell, the Man and his Works*: London, Hollis and Carter, 1956, pp. 212; Richard Rees, George Orwell: *Fugitive From the Camp of Victory*: London, Secker and Warburg, 1961, pp. 160; Richard J. Vorhees, *The Paradox of George Orwell*: Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1961, pp. 127; S. J. Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists, Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley*: New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1965, pp. xi + 125; Edward M. Thomas, *Orwell*: Edinburgh and London, Oliver and Boyd, 1965, pp. x + 114; George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit, A Study of George Orwell*: London, Cape, 1967, pp. 287; B. T. Oxley, *George Orwell*: London, Evans Brothers Ltd., 1967, pp. 144; Jenni Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience: A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler*: London, Secker and Warburg, 1968, pp. 303; Keith Alldritt, *The Making of George Orwell: An Essay in Literary History*: London, Edward Arnold, 1969, pp. x + 181.

Although the comprehensive critiques contain much useful material and comment, they tend to lack the credibility and coherence of the shorter essays. This is largely because the writers have considered it necessary to write biographical criticism, thus burdening themselves with the problems of Orwell's biography; while those who discuss one work, or present a single argument, can ignore these with impunity.

The first five comprehensive studies of Orwell were all written by people who were friends or acquaintances of his: and it is in this role, rather than in that of the literary critic, that they appear in them. For although they clearly accept Orwell as a literary figure, it is equally evident that they do so with important reservations. On the one hand, they make comments like this:

> One thing that marked Orwell out as a genuine writer and not as a mere journalist was his intense interest in words . . . In later life Orwell spent more care and hard thinking on the English language and its possible developments than on any other single subject.[1] [His essay, 'The Prevention of Literature]' . . . should appear in all future anthologies on the nature of literary art, along with the earlier ones by Sidney and Shelley.[2]

But they also hold opinions like this:

> [Orwell] lived at a time when any man with the character and gifts which might make him a first-rate literary artist would be unlikely to devote his gifts exclusively to writing . . . What he decided to write about was politics, and from then on, although he was still certainly a literary artist, it was more in the sense that one can apply the term to Swift, for example, than to Turgenev . . .[3]
>
> I think his eminence is partly due to the fact that 'first he wrought and afterwards he taught'. The reader knows that the man who wrote the books lived and acted in a certain way and this reacts upon his feelings about the books.[4]

It is indeed Orwell the man, rather than Orwell the writer, who is at the centre of these studies.

The reason is not simply that Orwell's life 'proves' his works to an unusual degree, but that those who knew him felt the need to make an intellectual effort to come to terms with his personality.

[1] John Atkins, *George Orwell*, 1954, p. 308.
[2] John Atkins, ibid, p. 148.
[3] Sir Richard Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive From the Camp of Victory*, 1961, pp. 138–9.
[4] Sir Richard Rees, ibid., p. 138.

Perhaps they are not themselves aware of their bias, but it appears to the reader that these critics find their discussion of Orwell's works important mainly because of the light that it may give them in understanding the man they knew.

This is recognized by a later critic, George Woodcock, also a friend of Orwell, who felt a similar compulsion to make the man rather than the work central to his study. He thinks that the premise on which such studies are based, that 'the man they knew as George Orwell was more important as a personality than as a writer, for what he was then for what he said' — is a fallacy, for 'how else can the greatness of a writer better emerge than through his writings?' But this is, he argues, a fallacy which has been given a large degree of emotional acceptance.

> Those who knew Orwell have never been able to perform that act of faith demanded by so many modern critics, to see the writings isolated from the man. Always that gaunt, gentle, angry and endlessly controversial image intervenes . . .[1]

And he adds that, in his own case:

> I had intended to write a merely critical study of Orwell's books, but I found that until I had — as it were — exorcized the memory of the man by committing my recollections to paper, I could not approach his writings with any degree of objectivity . . . Like these others I have written my introductory section on Orwell as I knew him out of a sense of inner necessity.[2]

Of the first five critics, Hollis seems to feel the need to justify his use of the method of biographical criticism, and uses familiar arguments to do so:

> We can assess more profitably even the writer who traffics in the most objective of ideas if we know a little of the background from which he came.[3]

And Rees becomes tortuous in a similar attempt:

> The book . . . is intended as an *introduction* to Orwell. To the books rather than the man, in so far as the two can be separated; but, as will appear very clearly in these pages, a proper appreciation of the books depends upon knowing something both about the man and about the period in which he lived.[4]

[1] George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit, A Study of George Orwell*, 1967, p. 7.
[2] George Woodcock, ibid., pp. 7–8.
[3] Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell, the Man and his Works*, 1956, p. vii.
[4] Sir Richard Rees, ibid., pp. 7–8.

The method itself however, needs little justification in this case, because it is made more than usually suitable by the close connection noted by his critics, which exists between Orwell's actions and his writings:

> He also tried to work out his theories in action and then to give his actions shape in literature. The triad of thought, act and artifact runs through the whole of Orwell's writing life; the pattern is not always so neatly arranged as I may appear to be suggesting, but it is never entirely absent, and one has difficulty in envisaging a future in which critics will ever be able to think of Orwell's writings separately from his life.[1]

> Dr Johnson immediately comes to mind as being the same type of force as Orwell, something which cannot be contained within the limits of merely literary judgement. Indeed, it is interesting that the adjective 'Orwellian' like 'Johnsonian,' should have passed into the language with the same ambiguity of referring to qualities both of the man and the work.[2]

> One . . . keeps thinking of the man behind the writing, not the craftsman; one has the experience that Pascal spoke of with such pleasure, the experience of opening a book expecting to find an author and finding a man.[3]

Although the method itself seems highly suitable, it is questionable whether it is equally unexceptionable in practice, for it seems that no one yet has been in a position to use it adequately.

Though Messrs Hopkinson, Atkins, Brander, Hollis and Rees knew Orwell, they were not adequately equipped for such studies of him. They do not draw on any biographical material other than that which was already available to the general public. As Vorhees has said of them:

> Although these books have the advantage of first-hand knowledge, this knowledge is limited by the respect of the authors for Orwell's wish that there be no biography of him; they have included in their books only those facts that have been previously recorded, some of them by Orwell's friends, but most of them by Orwell himself, here and there in his published work.[4]

As a result, their studies have a close resemblance; their method of approach is similar, and the information each draws on is the same.

[1] George Woodcock, ibid., p. 13.
[2] Edward M. Thomas, *Orwell*, 1965, p. 1.
[3] Richard J. Vorhees, *The Paradox of George Orwell*, 1961, p. 57.
[4] Richard J. Vorhees, ibid., p. 9.

Some individualities of emphasis occur, as well as differences of interpretation, but, none the less, these books are substantially much the same, in the general picture they give of Orwell.

There are problems: to begin with, it is possible that what Orwell says about himself in his works is not completely helpful. As Woodcock says:

> The autobiographical form of his works can be deceptive, if it is taken too literally, for Orwell rarely tells of his own experience except to make a point illustrating some general argument, usually of a political or social nature . . . Generally he was highly selective in the autobiographical material he used in his books or essays; there was rarely anything that could be interpreted as a romantic uncovering of the depths of the self . . .[1]

Like most writers of autobiography, Orwell tampered with facts in the interests of artistic proportion and didactic emphasis. He warns us of this in *The Road to Wigan Pier* when he remarks of *Down and Out in Paris and London* that 'nearly all the incidents described there actually happened, though they have been rearranged'.[2]

The autobiographical passages may not, however, be simply unhelpful, but they may be positively deceptive. For as a later critic, Edward Thomas, argues, the Orwell the reader meets in his works may be a consciously contrived literary *persona*:

> Evidence for his life inside his own works abounds, but it is precisely here that our difficulty arises. The figure we know as Orwell is almost entirely the figure projected in his autobiographical books and essays, which despite their easy colloquial manner, are far from being spontaneous self-expression. All the books in which Orwell speaks of himself have a serious social or political purpose, and were often re-written several times with regard for the passionate and convincing phrase; and it is therefore probable, perhaps inevitable, that the character presented there as Orwell should be a heightened version, a sharper definition, of the man his friends remember as quieter, more tolerant, and with more sides to his character. Like the stage character, who is not presented in every detail, but only in so far as the details are relevant to the dramatic purpose, so the character of Orwell is a series of positions taken up in front of the problems with which he chose to concern himself.
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> Even the name Orwell was something deliberately assumed: he chose it for himself when his literary character was already comparatively well formed.[3]

[1] George Woodcock, ibid., p. 32.
[2] George Woodcock, ibid., pp. 64–5.
[3] Edward M. Thomas, ibid., pp. 1–2.

Woodcock takes this view even further, in his suggestion that the image of Orwell derived by the reader from the *oeuvre* as a whole is a result of Orwell's conscious engineering:

> Orwell . . . the writer who built his major works around a single and enduring myth appropriate to the twentieth-century world, of the man of contradictory yet strangely consistent ideas, of the penetrating critic who turned his examination upon himself as well as on others and who in the process transformed himself by an almost conscious act of the will into one of the purest and finest prose writers of any English age.[1]

And Greenblatt similarly feels that:

> Orwell's claim that good prose must be 'like a window pane' through which one sees clearly into reality is simply a rhetorical device intended to induce the reader into a state of easy credulity and the suspension of disbelief.[2]

Woodcock, by speaking of 'the *persona* he revealed so guardedly to his friends', goes so far as to suggest that Orwell sustained the rhetorical projection of himself even outside his work; so that his friends knew only as much of his personality as everyone could know, from his works.

This is a view which cannot, however, be sustained; for these writers do comment on discrepancies between the man they knew and the man who emerges through the works:

> It is very easy to get a false impression of Orwell from his books. His literary personality often seemed to be divided from his daily-routine personality by a wide gap. Reading his books it was easy to imagine a man riddled with bitterness, one to whom the virtues of everyday life were anathema. All those who knew him discovered that this was a completely false picture. When he wrote he was possessed. As a writer he seemed to be driven by forces which were normally inhibited.[3]
>
> . . . so deeply indeed was writing a part of Orwell's nature that qualities are manifest in his work which do not reveal themselves in his life.[4]
>
> Below the surface it was conceivable that he might be 'awkward'. Actually, below the surface he was extremely reserved and undemonstrative, exceptionally endowed with *pudor*.[5]

[1] George Woodcock, ibid., pp. 7–8.
[2] S. J. Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists, Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley*, 1965, p. 47.
[3] John Atkins, ibid., p. 4.
[4] Tom Hopkinson, *George Orwell*, 1962, p. 5.
[5] Sir Richard Rees, ibid., p. 93.

Where these earlier critics do differ from Woodcock, however, is in their failure to suggest that the discrepancies that they see are the result of Orwell's conscious rhetorical intentions. If we assume, as do later critics increasingly that Orwell did have such conscious intentions, we must conclude that their understanding of him was, in some respects, inadequate. (Edward Thomas comments that, 'None of those who have written about him give the impression of having known him intimately'.)[1] It is unlikely, however, that they would dispute this view, for they themselves speak of Orwell's reticence, his 'pudor', his 'almost fanatical reserve', inevitably connecting these qualities with his request that no biography of him should be written.

Even though three of the next four comprehensive studies — those by Vorhees, Greenblatt, Thomas and Woodcock — contain comment on the flaws in their predecessors' method, all four of their authors still discuss Orwell the man in conjunction with his works. And, since none of them — except Woodcock — shows evidence of access to information not formerly used, the objections to the use of this method (as opposed to its theoretical suitability) are substantially the same. Vorhees alone of the three has the consistency to modify the form in which this dual discussion is presented; and, instead of following chronology, he pursues 'certain lines of paradox which run through Orwell's life and writing'.[2]

These studies do, however, contain the beginnings of new ways of presenting material now well and truly familiar. In the larger part of his book, Woodcock, like Vorhees in the whole of his, organizes the material around various theses, rather than presenting it in the strict chronological order that has been usual. Woodcock also suggests that critics should apply procedures based on modern psychology as a means of securing a greater understanding of the man from his works:

> His published statements and the *persona* he revealed so guardedly to his friends comprised all that he wished to be known about himself. Yet, as we shall see later on examining his books, that hidden self is rarely absent, and emerges most strongly in the various forms of personal alienation which he portrays and discusses.[3]

[1] Edward M. Thomas, ibid., p. 78.
[2] Richard J. Vorhees, ibid., p. 11.
[3] George Woodcock, ibid., p. 33.

To some extent, Woodcock uses this approach himself, which while it makes his book refreshing reading, does not give a very different picture of Orwell from that drawn by the other critics.

B. T. Oxley focuses on Orwell as a literary figure. His concern is to establish Orwell's motives and aims as a writer, and the genres to which his work as a whole, and the novels in particular, belong. His conclusion — that Orwell's work as a whole is that of a pamphleteer — may be a commonplace; his suggestion that the novels belong to a genre that may be called 'concentration-camp literature' may be unhelpful and rather bizarre, but his method is lively. Furthermore, the essentials of his attitude are adopted by the next two critics — Jenni Calder and Keith Alldritt — whose books constitute a new departure in Orwell criticism.

Jenni Calder is less interested in working through all the material, than in arguing two major points. She views Orwell's work as that of a conscious propagandist and rhetorician. In her view, Orwell 'geared his attempt to communicate to the public's refusal to believe'.[1] And she places Orwell against a much more cosmopolitan and literary background than is usually drawn, thereby considerably weakening the claustrophobia that was beginning to oppress students of Orwell.

Whereas the tendency has been to consider Orwell's personality and work in the light of his English schooling, of his experience both as an administrator of the British Empire and as an expiator of that experience; to consider him with reference to the English class-structure, English politics and English intellectuals, she refers his work to a literary and cultural context that is, at its narrowest, European, and at times extends across the Atlantic.

While the earlier critics, in spite of occasional notice of Orwell's affinites with Zamiatin or Simone Weil, emphasized Orwell's position as an isolated individual, Jenni Calder establishes the fact that the autobiographical sections of Orwell's work combined, as they usually are, with documentary reportage, are part of a widespread literary movement. She connects Orwell not only with Koestler, but with writers such as John Dos Passos, Rex

[1] Jenni Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience: A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler*, 1968, p. 50.

Warner, Steinbeck, Malraux and Silone, J. B. Pick, B. L. Coombes, and Mark Benney.

She considers that this movement began about ten years after the end of the First World War, when accounts of war experiences began to appear:

> In these accounts the rendering of personal experience inevitably becomes a chronicle of events, and documentary reports become centred on personal experience . . . never before had autobiographical documentary become so legitimate and common a means of reflecting the stresses of the times.[1]

The genre was adopted by the socialist movement. In many of the Left Book Club publications (of which Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* was one) the writer was 'often the hero of his own documentary'.[2] Then, with the outbreak of the second World War, the genre was further modified, with the loss of its propagandizing impluse. It 'became part of an effort to make sense of the War not in terms of political creed but of the individual's identity'.[3]

Jenni Calder forces the reader to view the autobiographical part of Orwell's *oeuvre* in a new perspective. She also presents us with a more complete and coherent view, of the standards by which Orwell's work should be judged, arguing for its simultaneous assessment in terms of its success both as propaganda and as literature:

> If the propaganda methods used by . . . Orwell are morally acceptable . . . their ultimate defence rests on whether they were compatible with the literary forms in which they were used, and on whether they in fact produced results.[4]

Altogether, she has made considerable departures from the premises that her predecessors used in assessing Orwell's work.

Keith Alldritt's book resembles Jenni Calder's in that it also refers Orwell's work to an appropriate literary context. The frame of reference is not, however, the same. While he bases his study mainly on the autobiographical part of Orwell's *oeuvre*, he acknowledges only briefly its affinity with 'reportage of the kind

[1] Jenni Calder, ibid., pp. 12–13.
[2] Jenni Calder, ibid., p. 19.
[3] Jenni Calder, ibid., p. 28.
[4] Jenni Calder, ibid., pp. 276–7.

that was so much in vogue during the thirties'.[1] He places Orwell in the context of such writers as Auden, Spender, Isherwood and MacNeice, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence; Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme and Proust.

He is interested in the 'autobiography' largely because he is interested in Orwell as an individual. He is, however, unlike the earlier critics, in that he has been more successful in fusing a study of the man with a study of his works. And he has achieved this precisely by his constant reference to Orwell's position vis-a-vis the symbolist movement and its pervasive influence on contemporary attitudes.

He maintains that Orwell's problems, both as an individual and a writer, arose from the fact that he had an antipathy for the prevailing literary orthodoxy, which was symbolism.

> Orwell's true (and very traditional) purpose as a novelist . . . was to describe social life and to identify the valuable in social terms. The symbolist aesthetic is, of course, totally irreconcilable with such intentions.[2]

He sees Orwell, uneasily influenced by the symbolists early in his career, later escaping into modes of expression more suited to his own predispositions, and ultimately reabsorbed into orthodox ways of thought. Indeed, he finds that Orwell's

> autobiography and his fiction are interesting chiefly as a continuing attempt to find a viable alternative to the symbolist assumptions that dominated the literary life of his time.[3]

He feels that Orwell the man was ultimately trying to 'make a personality, a selfhood, which will allow of relationships that are morally and emotionally satisfactory'.[4] This was the reason for his socialism. For him, it was 'not so much a political system as the prospect of a unity of being in society that will promote a similar unity within the self'.[5] His faith in the possible realization of this vision which enabled him to break away from the orthodoxy of symbolism, with its insistence on the supreme importance of the

[1] Keith Alldritt, *The Making of George Orwell: An Essay in Literary History, 1969*, p. 43.
[2] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 177.
[3] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 17.
[4] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 5.
[5] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 84.

inner world of the individual. But as soon as Orwell doubted his earlier, hard-won, conviction, he became 'fully susceptible to the standard modern forms'.[1]

> Even on those few occasions when his excursions in quest of valuable social experience were rewarded, he was always . . . tormented by doubts about his ability as a writer to do justice to the occasion. These difficulties must in great part be attributed to the fact that his endeavour could find no support from the literary methods of the age. Orwell's quest for new experience entailed a further problem of new forms. On the other hand, in his moment of doubt the age was with him; the forms were there, as they always had been, to recommend themselves . . . His most creative and original vision struggled awkwardly for expression; his moment of doubt was confirmed and specified by the pervasive categories of the time.[2]

Alldritt's basic premise has led to some interesting readings of Orwell's works: his view of *Animal Farm*, in particular, is unusual, for he sees it as 'a piece of literary self-indulgence'[3] in that the form used 'allows only of simple ideas, easy responses and obvious conclusions'.[4] The importance of his study, nevertheless, lies above all in the success and coherence of its approach. Not only does he set Orwell's work in its literary context, but he justifies the critical feeling that Orwell's life and work must be discussed together to an extent that none of the other critics have done.

The form of the last three, and particularly of the last two, critiques of Orwell suggests that critics no longer feel it adequate to adjust their focus to view Orwell's life alone, as a means of answering the questions which any reading of Orwell's work seems to suggest. Perhaps the would-be biographical critic is waiting for the appearance of new material, which will better enable him to grapple with the inward consciousness of a man whose public mask seems to make his personality so elusive.

If so, his frustration is likely to be of long duration. For the only new material to appear recently (in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*),[5] contains nothing to

[1] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 177.
[2] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 178.
[3] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 150.
[4] Keith Alldritt, ibid., p. 149.
[5] *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, Secker and Warburg, 1968.

satisfy such a critic. Mary McCarthy, for instance, laments that the Collection is, 'very sparse in letters', which 'gives a bleak impression of a life'.[1] And Mrs Orwell has confirmed that this Collection does contain all the surviving material that is not repetitious or ephemeral, apart from two letters that might upset people still living. 'There are no dark secrets lurking in the Orwell Archive . . .'.[2] And, as Mrs Orwell also says, 'on the evidence of Orwell's letters that have survived it is doubtful that the missing ones contain many revelations'.[3]

It seems likely, however, that the biographical critic will not accept his disappointment easily. There was definitely a myth among Orwell students, about 'the letters that Mrs Orwell will not allow to be seen', before the publication of the Collection. So it is quite likely that Mrs Orwell's feeling about Mary McCarthy applies to many critics:

> But even if every single word Orwell wrote that has been preserved had been published in these volumes, Miss McCarthy would still want the non-existent letters. It is as if she feels obscurely the victim of a plot, that something has been withheld from her that, to quote her again, the editors had been trying to 'protect' Orwell in some way and of course she is not going to be hoodwinked like that![4]

On the whole, it seems likely that critics may find it more valuable to abandon the biographical approach; and to follow the lead given by Jenni Calder and Keith Alldritt in establishing Orwell's literary affinites and his relationship to the various movements and coteries which formed the cultural situation of his day.

[1] Mary McCarthy, 'The Writing on the Wall', *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Jan. 30, 1969, pp. 3–6, p. 3.
[2] Sonia Orwell, 'Unfair to George', *Nora*, June-July, 1969.
[3] Sonia Orwell, ibid.
[4] Sonia Orwell, ibid. See also *Nora*, May-June, 1969.