

FEATURED FOREMOST

In Celebration of George Orwell on the Fiftieth Anniversary of “Politics and the English Language”

Steve Kogan

But I tell you I don't care. I don't want the women, I don't even want to be young again. I only want to be alive. And I was alive that moment when I stood looking at the primroses and the red embers under the hedge. It's a feeling inside you, a kind of peaceful feeling, and yet it's like a flame.

—George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (1939)

Orwell's intellectual strength was in his “belly-to-earth attitude”¹ both to language and to life itself. Like the English poet John Donne, he too could feel a thought “as immediately as the odor of a rose,”² although in his case it would be more appropriate to say that he could feel a thought as immediately as the sound of a machine gun or propaganda barrage; for he came of age in 1921, and the effects of the Great War on his generation marked him for life. In *Coming Up for Air*, his narrator looks back “to the time before the war, before the radio, before aeroplanes, before Hitler” and can almost hear their sounds drowning out the language of the English pastoral world:

There's a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. Roach, rudd, dace, bleak, barbel, bream, gudgeon, pike, chub, carp, tench. They're solid kind of names. The people who made them up hadn't heard of machine-guns, they didn't live in terror of the sack or spend their time eating aspirins, going to the pictures and wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp.³

By the 1940s, Orwell was convinced that modern prose itself was largely bereft of “solid” words and that the practice of “slovenly” writing predisposed one to accept totalitarian ideas, observations that are as valid for our time as they were in 1946 when he wrote “Politics and the English Language.” Given the influence of modern literary theory on English studies and the teaching of writing, it is particularly appropriate on this anniversary date to review the

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lessons of his life and work, for the current condition in the academy has all the features of what he describes in the essay as a “reduced state of consciousness” that is “favorable to political conformity.”⁴

From the outset, Orwell viewed experience through the prism of language, and, like the “Sub-Sub” librarian at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, who has gone through “the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth,”⁵ he seems to have read everything. His discussions range from Shakespeare to Arthur Koestler and from political pamphlets to nineteenth-century personal ads, and there is even a reference to “the instructions on a packet of Crestona cake-flour,” which he uses as a metaphor for “synthetic,”⁶ or made-to-order, prose in contrast to writing that is vivid and direct.

Orwell reflected on both and was as drawn to mass communication and popular culture as he was to great literature, including advertising and the whole range of adventure stories from “Yank mags” to science fiction, which one could find in “any poor quarter in any big town” at “a small newsagent’s shop.” The shops themselves absorbed his attention, with their

posters for the *Daily Mail* and the *News of the World* outside, a pokey little window with sweet bottles and packets of Players, and a dark interior smelling of liquorice and festooned from floor to ceiling with vilely printed twopenny papers, most of them with lurid cover-illustrations in three colours.⁷

As the opening to “Boys’ Weeklies” (1939) suggests, Orwell’s abiding concern was the human context of writing and speech, and it came to the surface early in his career in his review of Jack Hilton’s *Caliban Shrieks* (1935), which he praises for

a quality which the objective, descriptive kind of book almost invariably misses. It deals with its subject *from the inside*, and consequently it gives one, instead of a catalogue of facts relating to poverty, a vivid notion of what it *feels* like to be poor. All the time that one reads one seems to hear Mr Hilton’s voice, and what is more, one seems to hear the voices of the unnumerable industrial workers whom he typifies. (1:173) [Orwell’s emphasis]

The interior side of human experience is as important to Orwell as the external world, the side that requires depth and authenticity of expression. Hence his high regard for the emotional accuracy of Henry Miller’s prose and the “maniacal logic”⁸ of Poe, whose lessons he incorporates in the “Fantasmagoric”⁹ effects of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

To a great extent, Orwell’s understanding of the power of words lies in his appreciation of their effect on our inner lives, especially the part that is “outside the world of words” (where everything is not a “text,” as modern literary theory claims): the “disordered, un-verbal world” of dreams and “dream-thoughts,” which are “never quite absent from our...waking-thoughts.”¹⁰ Orwell was a keen student of propaganda and its effect on atavistic emotions;

and he was also fascinated by the persistence of memory, as in *Coming Up for Air*, in which George Bowling has a Proustian moment on a busy street in London when he sees a news headline and is plunged into visions of his rural Edwardian childhood. Winston Smith has a similar moment in a junk-shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where a shabby room awakens in him “a sort of ancestral memory”¹¹ of a former London without Newspeak or thought police, before all personal and aesthetic values were forbidden, and before Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton began to be turned “into something contradictory of what they used to be” (47).¹²

These psychological and artistic concerns, as absent in modern literary theory as they were in the “proletarian criticism” of his time, attest to Orwell’s goal

to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience.... I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood. So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information.¹³

Postmodern critics fault him for his dread of systems and abstractions, but this core feeling is linked to his grounding in literature and places him in an intellectual tradition that runs from Blake and Goethe to his French counterpart Simone Weil. It also points to something stubbornly elusive in his character, which is bound up with the singular nature of his accomplishments.

His life-journey is unusual in itself and begins like a scene out of Kipling’s tales “in one of the more remote stations in Bengal,”¹⁴ where his father was posted. When he was four, his parents moved to England, where he later received an education in the classics, history, and French and English literature, first at St. Cyprian’s and afterward at Eton, by way of a scholarship. Still living as Eric Blair, Orwell then made the first of several radical moves, reminiscent of an earlier time when “Young men were not always tethered to safe jobs,”¹⁵ as he writes in his review of Lewis Mumford’s *Herman Melville*. This period begins with five years’ police work in British Burma and his first years of writing while living “down and out” in Paris and London, followed by the publication of three novels under fairly difficult conditions, an investigative trip to coal mining districts in the north of England for the Left Book Club, and close to six months in the Spanish Civil War, where he survived a bullet wound on the Aragon Front and then near-capture, together with his first wife, during the communist purges in Barcelona. He resumed journalism and fiction on his return to England, did wartime work for the Indian Service of the BBC from 1941 to 1943,¹⁶ and continued writing fiction during his final brief period, for which he is best known. After Eton, he was periodically hospitalized for pneumonia and increasing attacks of tuberculosis, from which he died at

the age of forty-six. Had he lived in the nineteenth century, his life would have resembled a chapter out of Chateaubriand's *Memoirs* or even several pages out of Melville and Rimbaud. During a six-month convalescence in Morocco, he even has the Rimbaud-like thought that "if I were here, say, on a gun-running expedition, I should immediately have the entrée to all kinds of interesting society," which he follows with reflections on his life "with the tramps."¹⁷ Among his contemporaries, his intensity suggests the passions of a low-profile T.E. Lawrence, with a similar fascination for obscure and dangerous byways of the world and the same Renaissance configuration of the scholar, soldier, and author, a type that was all but destroyed in the First World War, when Orwell was still at school. A writer of exquisitely balanced prose, he could nevertheless walk through London in the early 1940s with another veteran of the war in Spain, look up at the windows, and note which would make good machine-gun nests should the Germans invade.

As his biography suggests, there is little about Orwell's artistic nature that is literary in the conventional sense. He is not dedicated to art in the manner of Flaubert, has no desire to articulate a theory of literature like Eliot and Pound, and in his last years is primarily concerned with the relationship between politics and common prose.

And yet, like Franz Kafka, whose name has become synonymous with the idea of a cosmic bureaucratic nightmare, as his has with an "Orwellian" tyranny, he creates unforgettable works out of the most unpromising material—in his case modern political controversy, which is essentially inimical to art. On reading through his essays, one is surprised to discover that he is, in fact, rooted in literature down to his pores. V.S. Pritchett remarks that, from the beginning, people were struck by "his integrity, his unremitting sense of literary vocation,"¹⁸ an observation that recalls Kafka's statement to Felice Bauer that he was "made of literature."¹⁹ Moreover, among twentieth-century authors, Orwell is one of the few to have turned such forms of mass writing as documentary journalism and children's stories *into* literature, while the telescreens, the prying, insect-like helicopters, and the towering Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* take much of their inspiration from science fiction, in which he had a long and serious interest. If we consider that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm*, and "Politics and the English Language" were written in the last years of his life,²⁰ that he published a book a year from *Down and Out in Paris and London* in 1933 to *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), and that "Shooting an Elephant," "Marrakech" and "A Hanging" remain three of the finest personal essays in the English language, we begin to sense that there is something more profound at work in him than is generally associated with Orwell as the model of "simplicity and straightforwardness"²¹ in prose, an intellectual and emotional range that I can only describe as a kind of balanced intensity.

The most diverse subjects attract his attention. Where modern criticism attacks the literary "canon" in favor of "the rich and complex fabric"²² of social

experience, all in the same dead voice and with the same rancorous attitude to Western literature, Orwell shows us what it means to have a mind that is truly open to the world. His collected works include lyrical poems and savage political satires, intimately written essays on everything from the English classics and antisemitism in England to children's literature and Salvador Dali, newspaper columns on language and the price of cigarettes, and a body of correspondence with people as different as T.S. Eliot, Henry Miller, and veterans of the war in Spain, all of which pours out of him as from an unending inner stream, an image of some importance for him, as in an untitled poem he wrote in 1933, in which he speaks of "the stream / Of precious life that flows within us" (1:142).

Life and language are intertwined for Orwell, and his critical ear is apparent in everything he comments upon, often in a rich Dickensian style when his subject is popular culture, as in the following observations on an American fashion magazine:

A thin-boned, ancient-Egyptian type of face seems to predominate: narrow hips are general, and slender non-prehensile hands like those of a lizard are everywhere. Evidently it is a real physical type, for it occurs as much in the photographs as in the drawings. Another striking thing is the prose style of the advertisements, an extraordinary mixture of sheer lushness with clipped and sometimes very expressive technical jargon. Words like suave-mannered, custom-finished, contour-conforming, mitt-back, innersole, backdip, midriff, swoosh, swash, curvaceous, slenderize and pet-smooth are flung about with evident full expectation that the reader will understand them at a glance.²³

Given the significance that life experience holds for him, it is interesting to note his subsequent passage on the inorganic character of the magazine, in which he observes that there are hardly any suggestions of age, childhood, men, or animals, nothing that would interfere with its commercially erotic glossiness.

From his attacks against the "Money-God" of advertising in *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936) to his critiques of political propaganda, the whole bent of Orwell's critical judgment is against standardized thought and expression. His career itself is a testament to intellectual change and growth, as reflected in his thoughts on the occasion of Kipling's death in 1936:

In the average middle-class family before the war, especially in Anglo-Indian families, he had a prestige that is not even approached by any writer of today. He was a sort of household god with whom one grew up and whom one took for granted whether one liked him or whether one did not. For my own part I worshipped Kipling at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty, despised him at twenty-five, and now again rather admire him. (1:183)

In a subsequent essay, Orwell explores the qualities in Kipling that led to these changing views—on the one hand, his acceptance of colonialism and identifi-

cation with “the British ruling class,” which “led him into abysses of folly and snobbery,” on the other hand, the honesty with which he “at least tried to imagine what action and responsibility are like.”²⁴ As a “gutter patriot” (2:229), Kipling is indefensible, but he does not fit “the shallow and familiar” picture of Kipling the “Fascist”;²⁵ and Orwell particularly respects his insight into humanitarian hypocrisy, which attacks the existing social order while enjoying its benefits. Indeed, he sees it as

perhaps the central secret of his power to create telling phrases. It would be difficult to hit off the one-eyed pacifism of the English in fewer words than in the phrase, ‘making mock of the uniforms that guard you while you sleep’. (2:218)

It is Orwell’s capacity to weigh all sides of an issue that finally allows him to value authors such as Kipling, Poe, and Eliot, even when he rejects their views of the world. This capacity is his touchstone of intellectual and artistic freedom, which he finds largely absent as he looks back at the 1930s, a decade filled with “labels, slogans, and evasions.”²⁶ It is an equally apt summary of the condition of modern literary studies, as we shall shortly see.

Orwell’s rule for freshness in critical writing appears as early as 1930 in his review of Mumford’s study, in which he cautions against the urge “to be at the deepest meaning and cause of every act” in a literary work,

For one can only “interpret” a poem by reducing it to an allegory—which is like eating an apple for the pips. As in the old legend of Cupid and Psyche, there are times when it is wise to accept without seeking knowledge (1:141),

a fine Goethean principle on the need to balance the claims of intellect and the aesthetic regard for the immediacy of things, for the apple, not the pips. Orwell hones his “belly-to-earth attitude” even more sharply in “Politics” and in a critique one month later of the “pompous and slovenly” prose of a Marxist essay in *Modern Quarterly*, whose “long, vague words express the intended meaning and at the same time blur the moral squalor of what is being said.”²⁷

In light of Orwell’s biography, one of the interesting things about the passage is his choice of “moral squalor” as his term of judgment, for it carries the weight of authority of his actual life on the margins. For Orwell, there is in fact a parallel between verbal and social decay, between “stale phrases” that clog a writer’s thought, “like tea leaves blocking a sink,”²⁸ and the kitchen he records in “Hop-Picking” (1931), whose “sinks were blocked with rotting fish guts which stank horribly” (1:95).

Viewed in chronological sequence, the two passages aptly illustrate Eliot’s remark that “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience,” such as “the noise of a typewriter or the smell of cooking.”²⁹ Orwell’s career reflects this ongoing process of absorption and recalls my earlier point that he almost instinctively organizes his intellectual and felt responses in view of one another.

The “reduced state of consciousness” in modern literary studies becomes all the more apparent when one begins to examine the complex order of a mind such as Orwell’s. One can see the results in recent readings of Orwell himself, in which he is uniformly labelled a “Common-sense”³⁰ or “conservative empiricist”³¹ who opposes “the dialectical tradition”³² and favors a genre that cannot bring its “vivid particulars . . . into a coherent whole,”³³ meaning a Marxist orthodoxy of some kind. The pre-ordained nature of this line of argument is reflected in the fact that, whereas Orwell comes under attack for his “extreme preference for the particular,”³⁴ Eliot is often derided in politicized criticism because he *has* a philosophy (the problem being that it is the wrong one, i.e., “neoclassical” and “formalist”).³⁵ The emptiness of all these abstractions is underscored by Orwell’s sense of kinship with Eliot, not only because he valued his generation for having expanded the scope of English literature but also because he admired Eliot’s “Prufrock” and other early poems, which he praised for their “glowing despair.”³⁶ Put the following stanza from *Preludes* into prose and you very nearly have a passage from *Down and Out, The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands . . .
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.³⁷

The criticism that can stigmatize Orwell as a “conservative empiricist” and Eliot as an unmitigated reactionary³⁸ amounts to a species of academic propaganda, whose every catch-word “anaesthetizes a portion of one’s brain.”³⁹ Orwell’s relationship to Eliot shows even in this key line from “Politics,” which recalls Prufrock’s invitation to the reader to accompany him through just such a paralyzing void, “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table.”⁴⁰ The parallel to the current condition in the humanities is exact, for underneath the often convoluted exercises in postmodern studies to “deconstruct” Western literature, there is a persistent drive to demonize the West, like the twisting streets at the beginning of Eliot’s poem, “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent” (3).

If Orwell’s essay is nothing but a “how-to” manual on writing,⁴¹ it is therefore an unusual one indeed, for its central theme is the use of ready-made phrases as instruments of mind control. The idea that prefabricated language can transform a person into an automaton “is not altogether fanciful,” writes Orwell, for anyone “who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some way into turning himself into a machine” (4:165). Commenting on what he else-

where calls the “gramophone”⁴² effect, Orwell observes that the main feature of this style is the replacement of fresh turns of speech with vague, imposing words and monstrous abstractions, as in his hypothetical example of a statement written “by some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism”:

While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement. (4:166)

Orwell sums up the stark reality behind Stalinist rhetoric in the following crisp translation: “I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.”

His directness hit the mark. As Dmitri Volkogonov recently demonstrated in material drawn from Soviet archives, this was in fact the way that Bolshevik leaders often communicated with each other in committee speeches, letters, and directives, with none of the rhetorical disguises that they reserved for propaganda:

I’m sure the crushing of the Kazan Czechs and White Guards, as well as the kulak-bloodsuckers who support them, will be carried out with an exemplary lack of mercy.⁴³

We have to run a hot iron down the spine of the Ukrainian kulaks—that will create a good working environment.⁴⁴

... the plan for a mass collection of grain using machine-guns is a brilliant one...⁴⁵

...lock up the doubtful ones in a concentration camp.⁴⁶

Orwell’s ear for the truth told him that something was radically wrong, yet forty-five years after the purges and after a significant body of Russian literature had already appeared on the nightmare of Soviet rule, a comfortable English teacher at Yale University had no difficulty in divorcing language from reality and concluding that the passage by Orwell’s “imagined Stalinist” was intellectually more sound and “in important ways *better* English”⁴⁷ than Orwell’s terse translation. By the same argument, the nationalist rhetoric of Serbian intellectuals during the 1980s offers a better model of writing than Svetlana Slapsak’s observation that “We should have taken out the garbage when we first noticed the stench.”⁴⁸

As Carl Freedman’s reading of the essay demonstrates, nothing could be further from Orwell’s “belly-to-earth” clarity than the habits of mind in postmodern theory and criticism, whose arguments recall his own list of intellectual “swindles and perversions”⁴⁹ and are frequently derived from the leftwing

doctrines of his time. When a euphemistic defense of Soviet terror is read as “a genuine political argument” that is “more precise”⁵⁰ than the justification of mass murder that it disguises, when Orwell’s methodical essay is criticized for its *poor* writing,⁵¹ and when he is accused of attempting to “eliminate language altogether,”⁵² one can see the inadvertent truth of Fredric Jameson’s Marxist theories, whose “basic story” is “dialectical *reversal*, that paradoxical turning around of a phenomenon into its opposite.”⁵³ In this purportedly enlightening moment of shock, in which we lose our “older, more naive” reliance on objective argument and common sense, “there is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object oriented activity of the mind” that resembles “something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator’s fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner.”⁵⁴ Jameson’s analogies are truer than he knows; for the kind of mind that can champion a philosophy that resembles modes of transportation which are off their normal course is a mind that is itself in free-fall, a fall that leads into a void.

In one form or another, the schools of postmodernism all lead to a similar abyss of thought, whether they question “The representation of women in a novel where there are none,”⁵⁵ proclaim that “Shakespeare is a literary black hole” that “no longer transmits visible light,”⁵⁶ or attack Orwell for being blind “to the power . . . of words.”⁵⁷ It is not simply Melville, Shakespeare, and Orwell who are lost to view. It is the world itself that disappears.

Like Orwell’s *Newspeak*, whose purpose is to erase “objective truth,”⁵⁸ modern literary studies seem bent on obliterating the obvious: Shakespeare’s artistic growth is a hallmark of his career, yet the new view is that he “functioned in much the same way as others we call hack dramatists”;⁵⁹ *Billy Budd* is laced with references to naval warfare, religion, law, and history, yet Michael Rogin says that it retreats from “a realistic world outside”;⁶⁰ and David Wykes claims that Orwell’s standards for competent prose are tyrannical.⁶¹ In the language of *Newspeak*: GOOD WRITING IS BAD WRITING.

This marked tendency to erase reality is nowhere more apparent in contemporary Orwell criticism than in Terry Eagleton’s remark that “the rich precision of physical description” in *Burmese Days* (1934) is lost in *Coming Up for Air* as Orwell “shifts his attention to England, which cannot, as a physical place, be loved at all.”⁶² One could call up a dozen passages in the novel on the remembered loveliness of rural England, a thousand paintings from Gainsborough to Whistler, and the rich tradition of English topographical writing, but the exercise would be pointless, for Eagleton has armored himself against what Jameson and others in his wake have labeled “Anglo-American empirical realism,”⁶³ and one is left with A.C. Bradley’s remark on certain dense readers of Shakespeare that “anyone who can believe this seems to me beyond argument.”⁶⁴

It is one thing to deal with the normal run of obtuse readers, however, and another to encounter an entire generation of critics and scholars whose critical faculties seem to have been snatched away and replaced by imitations, like

the substitution of real people by their semblances in the 1950s science fiction classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Bradley's contemporaries were at least making an attempt, however limited, to understand a complex literary work. Postmodern academics, on the other hand, invade literature with their own prejudices to such an extent that one critic even faults Orwell for acknowledging his errors and asks us "to consider that he may be wrong even where he says he may be wrong."⁶⁵ At such moments, as Goethe says in *Conversations with Eckermann*, "our understanding comes to a standstill, and we no longer know what we are reading."⁶⁶

Indeed, one is not meant to know. Jameson's *Marxism and Form* is telling in this respect: echoing the concept of "indeterminacy" in modern literary theory, he warns the reader that his diagram of "Marxist class analysis" is

worse than misleading unless it is clearly understood that under the right circumstances, the same cultural fact may be seen as occupying any of these positions, or, indeed, as accomplishing a rotation through all of the available positions in succession. (389)

"Under the right circumstances" takes on frightening overtones when one considers the murderous results of the ever-shifting doctrines of the Soviet Communist Party. In fact, Jameson's thinking exemplifies what Orwell refers to as the "fantasmagoria" of propaganda in all modern totalitarian states, by which abstractions remain simultaneously rigid and in perpetual flux.⁶⁷ As the French religious philosopher Simone Weil states in "The Power of Words" (1934), "our political universe" is made up of words that seem "to represent for us an absolute reality," yet at the same time we make them mean "successively or simultaneously, anything whatsoever,"⁶⁸ so that all arguments in their name only contribute to the deepening of an intellectual void. It is not simply that the language is lifeless but that it leaves a wasteland in its wake, whether the object of criticism be individuals and public figures, whole classes of people, or social institutions, such as democratic government and education.

One of the totalitarian abuses of language that particularly disturbed Orwell was the reversal of meanings themselves, a tactic that is widespread in modern literary theory and pedagogy, whose declared purpose is to deconstruct positive terms of judgment and turn them into negatives. Offhand, I can think of half a dozen standards that have been "subverted" into symbols of oppression, such as *merit*, *fairness*, *objectivity*, *coherence*, and even *context* and *precision*, as in Roland Barthes's "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers" (1971), in which he proclaims that "it is the very status of context to be reductive of meaning" and that "the precise phrase is truly a sentence, a *sententia*, an act of penal speech."⁶⁹ Barthes's position has filtered through the field. According to Sheree Meyer, for example, "many recent theorists have warned" us that objective analysis is "an act of aggression" in order to make works seem "whole" and "coherent."⁷⁰ The resulting guilt over what amounts to having human capabilities can be seen in Barthes's

ominous distress in being unable to make his own writing “fully liquidate speech.”⁷¹ Hence his destructive goal of transforming traditional classrooms into sites of disorientation, which he envisions as an academic utopia, comparable to “the experience of certain drugs.”⁷² Everything continues as before, “but *floating*” (215). Take away his theoretical optimism and you have the situation that obtains today in the atmosphere of unreality that pervades literary theory and in countless dysfunctional classrooms throughout America.

The spectral people of *The Body Snatchers* not only typify a disturbing aspect of Barthes’s “floating” university but also recall the figure of the party “hack” in “Politics and the English Language,” whose steady drumbeat of lies and distortions is intended to reduce and thereby control human consciousness, like the power of alien forces that one frequently finds in the literature of science fiction. Orwell, in fact, speaks of H.G. Wells as one of the formative influences in his early life, and one has only to think of Wells’s invisible man, with his vacant “blue spectacles,”⁷³ or the machinelike Martians in *The War of the Worlds* (1898) to appreciate how deeply Orwell felt the ultimate consequences of “Dying metaphors,” “Operators or verbal false limbs,” “Pretentious diction,” and “Meaningless words”:

When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—*bestial atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder*—one often has the curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker’s spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them.⁷⁴

It is the droning, above all, that is frightening, the sheer emptiness of language that has been drained of human expression, like the “indeterminate hum” of the “inquisitorial voices”⁷⁵ in Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum.” It is the indeterminacy of a void, marked by sensations of “nothingness” (155) and the prisoner’s fear of opening his eyes “lest there should be *nothing* to see” (158).

Poe’s story, a favorite of Orwell’s,⁷⁶ has particular relevance to my discussion, for the postmodern sensibility, like all nihilist thought, is attracted to sterility. Its resentment of great writers is symptomatic of this tendency, for it is precisely their capacity to revitalize a heritage that is the unspoken target of modern literary studies. Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (1968) is a prime symbol of this impulse, both in itself and in its reception in higher education, where critics and theorists continue to replay his idea that literature is a social construction inscribed on a writer’s consciousness.⁷⁷ The idea is not only false but exactly counter to the truth; for, as Borges observes in his essay on Kafka, great writers are not made by their precursors. They create them. “The Pit and the Pendulum” grows in stature in light of Orwell’s concerns.

Poe’s images are “Orwellian” indeed: the unbeliever in the presence of a faceless authority, a mechanical instrument whose main purpose is to destroy the

victim's sanity, the prisoner's sensations of a void, and the pit itself—the tale has all the elements of a miniature *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. One of the more profound aspects of the story is Poe's suggestive treatment of the potential for nihilism in dogmatic thinking, whose significance for Orwell is underscored in an epigram from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* to which he was particularly drawn: "He who fights monsters should beware lest he turn into a monster himself. And when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you."⁷⁸

This is the very condition that Orwell examines both in "Politics" and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, whose "eyeless" speakers have unconsciously turned themselves into the kinds of monolithic demons that they project onto their enemies. Their language is not only expressionless but also mindless, in the precise sense of the word, having erased what Weil calls "the elementary principles of rational thought," such as "limit, measure, degree," and "proportion," and replaced them with "myths and monsters... absolutes and abstract entities" (222). In their relentless attacks against "hegemonic" practices, "canonical" authors, and "patriarchal" standards, modern literary studies and composition pedagogy have been similarly saturated with political demons and with the same appeal to the irrational that propaganda exercises in the sphere of politics. If the lies and distortions of literary studies over the past thirty-five years had been exposed as quickly as they were published, our library shelves would be groaning under the weight of documentary evidence by now.

The transformation of Orwell into a "conservative empiricist" is just such a fraud and nowhere better refuted than in the portrait by his long-time friend Richard Rees:

I think that all Orwell's life, all his adult life anyway, he was really driven and obsessed by a kind of mania of the same sort that you find in a Tolstoy or Dostoevsky or in a Kierkegaard. But of course in Orwell it didn't take a religious form. It couldn't; his beliefs were not such that it could have taken a religious form. But nevertheless—it obviously was an obsession about some kind of value. And I wouldn't hesitate to say that this value was conceived by him as relating to the human soul. He does in fact use the word 'soul' a good deal more often than might be thought, though to use that word might suggest that Orwell believed in immortality and a whole lot of other things that he didn't believe in. And it seems to me he came nearer to describing the things that drove him all his life in one of his poems when he refers to it in an almost impersonal way as the crystal spirit.⁷⁹

The poem to which Rees refers comes at the end of Orwell's essay "Looking Back on the Spanish War" (1943) and is a eulogy for an Italian soldier whom he met briefly "in the Lenin Barracks" on "the day I joined the militia" (2:303).⁸⁰ It should give pause not only to his leftwing critics but also to those who claim, on the opposite side, that "he would be taking his stand with the neoconservatives if he were alive today";⁸¹ for Orwell took a "stand" with no political party, except for the time he served with anarchist forces in Spain, where he saw "the crystal spirit" in the face of the Italian volunteer. Orwell's complexi-

ties show even in the intensity of his praise, "For the flyblown words that make me spew / Still in his ears were holy" (2:305). As his friend the English poet Ruth Pitter observed, Orwell's politics were "conscience socialism,"⁸² with the emphasis on conscience, and were informed by a "scientific honesty which is very rarely found in literature" (75).

The cant of postmodern academics is nowhere better illustrated than in the accusation that Orwell was an apologist for the "establishment"; for he understood the roots of "conscience socialism" all too well when he wrote in "Writers and Leviathan" (1948) that

the invasion of literature by politics was bound to happen. It must have happened, even if the special problem of totalitarianism had never arisen, because we have developed a sort of compunction which our grandfathers did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to do something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude to life impossible. (4:464)

It is precisely on the home ground of radical literary studies that Orwell poses a special challenge, for his career demonstrates that it is possible to be committed to social justice without sacrificing one's intellect to the "unadmitted contradictions"⁸³ that orthodoxies generate. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he puts it even more sharply when Syme tells Winston Smith that "Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness" (47).

Everything about Orwell speaks to the issue of awareness and to the fact that consciousness is a hard-won condition of mind. The success of postmodern theory may well be due to the fact that it holds out the promise of freedom from intellectual constraints, whose perfect expression is Barthes's "floating" university, with its deliberately disorienting premises about language and reason, "comparable to the experience of certain drugs." The widespread attempt to subvert both great literature and commonplace standards of writing has had just such a narcotic effect on American education, to the point where reality disappears into "floating signifiers" and "ultimate unintelligibility,"⁸⁴ while radical theorists proudly announce their discovery that "individual consciousness is necessarily heterogeneous, contradictory, and in process,"⁸⁵ as though they had never heard of Shakespeare's soliloquies, Montaigne's essays, or the European novel from Cervantes to Joyce. Modern English studies are indeed a record of intellectual "swindles and perversions," and they bear out the truth of Orwell's essay "In Front of Your Nose," which appeared one month before "Politics" and sums up a major lesson of his career: "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."⁸⁶

Notes

1. Orwell, Letter to Henry Miller (26 August 1936), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols. (Harmondsworth: Pen-

- guin Books Ltd., 1970), 1:257. All references to Orwell will be to this edition unless otherwise noted.
2. T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974), 2:2210.
 3. Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1950), 87.
 4. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," 4:165-66.
 5. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), 2.
 6. Orwell, Review of *The Calf of Paper* by Scholem Asch (12 November 1936), 1:279.
 7. Orwell, "Boys' Weeklies," 1:505.
 8. Orwell, "Inside the Whale" (1940), 1:573.
 9. Orwell, from the 1943 outline of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, under the heading "The Last Man in Europe," in Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 407-9. My biographical material is drawn from Crick and the appendices to *The Collected Essays*. On changing views in Orwell criticism, see John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St George' Orwell* (1989). On the sources of Newspeak, see Howard Fink, "Newspeak: The Epitome of Parody Techniques in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," *Critical Survey*, 5 (1971): 153-63.
 10. Orwell, "New Words" (1940), 2:18-19.
 11. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1949; The New American Library, Inc., 1961), 82.
 12. On the significance of art and aesthetic values in the novel, see Joan Weatherly, "The Death of Big Sister: Orwell's Tragic Message," *College Literature* 11 (1984), in *Critical Essays on George Orwell*, ed. Bernard Oldsey and Joseph Browne (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), 80-90.
 13. Orwell, "Why I Write" (1946), 1:28.
 14. Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 17. Shelden notes that Orwell's father served in the Opium Department and refers the reader to Richard Hughes, "The Opium War," in *The Horizon History of the British Empire* (1973), David Edward Owen, *British Opium Policy in China and India* (1934), and *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1909).
 15. Orwell, Review of *Herman Melville* by Lewis Mumford (March-May 1930), 1:43.
 16. See *Orwell: The War Broadcasts*, ed. W.J. West (London: Duckworth / British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985). The introduction contains fascinating material on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (60-67) and on Orwell's knowledge of radio propaganda.
 17. Orwell, Letter to Jack Common (29 September 1938), 1:391.
 18. V.S. Pritchett, "Doomed for Success," Review of *Orwell: The Transformation*, by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *New York Review of Books* (1 May 1980): 3.
 19. Franz Kafka, Letter to Felice Bauer (14 August 1913), *Franz Kafka: Letters to Felice*, ed. Erich Heller and Jurgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elizabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 304.
 20. Orwell began work on *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1943. He was born in June, 1903 and died in January, 1950.
 21. Norman Podhoretz, "If Orwell Were Alive Today," *Harper's Magazine* (1983), in Oldsey and Browne, 21.
 22. See, for example, Fredric Jameson's discussion of Ernest Hemingway in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971): "For the immense and complex fabric of American social reality is clearly inaccessible to the careful and selective type of sentence which he practices" (412).
 23. Orwell, from his *Tribune* column "As I Please" (8 November 1946), 4:273. "Pleasure Spots" and "Politics" date from the same year. The end of World War II marks the beginning of his final period, when language itself becomes a central concern, culminating in his appendix on Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
 24. "Rudyard Kipling" (1942), 2:229.
 25. *Ibid.*, 2:215. In "Twain on Tour," *New York Review of Books* (23 May 1996), Gore Vidal repeats the standard view that "Kipling's 'lesser breeds'" (26) is an expression of racist

- bigotry. See Orwell's critique (2:215–16) of this "instance of the way in which quotations are parroted to and fro without any attempt to look up their context or discover their meaning." His essay carefully examines the alleged parallel between British colonialism and fascism.
26. Orwell, "Inside the Whale," 1:569.
 27. Orwell, "Editorial to Polemic" (1946), 4:188. The main focus of the article is "Belief and Action," by the English Marxist scientist J.D. Bernal.
 28. Orwell, "Politics," 4:164.
 29. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," 2:2210.
 30. Carl Freedman, "Antimonies of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30 (1984), in Oldsey and Browne, 93: "Common-sense naturalism... was Orwell's native literary genre." He also calls him "a congenital empiricist" (101). See, also, Freedman's "Writing, Ideology, and Politics: Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language' and English Composition," *College English* (April 1981), in which he claims that Orwell's focus on self-improvement in writing is a species of "voluntaristic empiricism" (331) and "linguistic empiricism" (333).
 31. The habit of labelling is pervasive in left-wing Orwell criticism, as it is in postmodern studies in general. See Malcolm Evans, "Text, Theory, Criticism: Twenty Things You Never Knew about George Orwell," *Inside the Myth: Orwell. Views from the Left*, ed. Christopher Norris (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1984), in which Evans speaks of the "strain of conservative empiricism" in Orwell (24). Norris similarly attacks "the delusions of a common-sense empiricist idiom" (8).
 32. Freedman, "Writing, Ideology, and Politics," 331.
 33. Freedman, "Antimonies," 93.
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. See "Guest Column," *PMLA* (May 1996), in which Geoffrey Hartman writes that he has consistently resisted "efforts to foreclose interpretation," including "the attempt to judge literary works in terms of a belated neoclassicism strongly influenced by T.S. Eliot" (384). Eliot, in fact, opened English poetry to significantly new influences, among them the *non-classical* schools of English metaphysical poetry and French symbolist literature. Moreover, he "is one of the few writers of our time who have tried seriously to write English as it is spoken" (3:164), as Orwell rightly notes in "Propaganda and Demotic Speech" (1944).
 36. Orwell, Review of *Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages* by T.S. Eliot (October–November 1942), 2:275.
 37. T.S. Eliot, "Preludes II," *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. [1930], 1971), 12.
 38. See Cynthia Ozick, "T.S. Eliot at 101," *The New Yorker* (20 November 1989). In her eulogy on the eclipse of Eliot's fame, Ozick writes that, "In the wake of the last forty years, it is now our unsparring obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot" (154), even as the poetic Eliot recedes from view. For gratuitous attacks on Eliot the imperialist, see, for example, James Fenton, "Goodbye to All That?" in *New York Review of Books* (20 June 1996). On Eliot the antisemite, see the latest in Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1996). As Orwell says of Kipling's colonialist jingoism, Eliot's antisemitism is disgusting, but it is not central to his poetry, no more than antisemitism is integral to English literature, despite its appearance from Chaucer through Eliot, Huxley and others, as Orwell writes in "Antisemitism in Britain" (1945), 3:385. Toward the end, Orwell invites intellectuals to examine their own prejudices, and elsewhere notes that Eliot-bashing was common in his time (2:335 and 3:189).
 39. Orwell, "Politics," 4:167.
 40. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), in *Complete Poems*, 3.
 41. See George Y. Trail, "Teaching Argument and the Rhetoric of Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language,'" *College English* (September, 1995), in which Trail goes so far as to claim that Orwell deliberately sprinkled the essay with errors as "reader involvement devices" (578), since Orwell observes that the reader will "for certain" find examples of the very faults in writing that he deplores. Orwell's point is obviously that these errors

- are hard to avoid, even for a careful writer. Trail also claims that Orwell's critique of communist rhetoric promoted the aims of the English "establishment" (573), even though Orwell elsewhere observes that pro-Russian sentiment was still high in the English press and among intellectuals in 1946.
42. See *Coming Up for Air* (171), "Arthur Koestler" (1944), 3:277, and Review of *The Communist International* by Franz Borkenau (1938), 1:388. The image appears early in his career in a poem set near "His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory" (1934).
 43. Lenin, telegram to Trotsky, in Dmitri Volkogonov, *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary*, trans. and ed. Harold Shukman (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 176.
 44. *Ibid.*, Trotsky, Report to the Central Committee on Ukraine, 183.
 45. Lenin, message, in Volkogonov, *Lenin: A New Biography*, trans. and ed. Harold Shukman (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 271.
 46. *Ibid.*
 47. Freedman, "Writing, Ideology, and Politics," 332.
 48. Svetlana Slapsak, "Bestial Words, Bestial War," Op-Ed, *New York Times*, 25 May 1993.
 49. Orwell, "Politics," 4:162.
 50. Freedman, "Writing, Ideology, and Politics," 332.
 51. Trail calls several paragraphs in "Politics" a "mess" and pretends to revise them, although he seems pleased with his own writing: "The reader who is encouraged to respond personally to a written argument without consideration of whether she can be considered to be within the parameters which define the warrants and appeals to which the target audience is assumed to be responsive is encouraged not to learn, but to defend only that which she takes as given" (582).
 52. Freedman, "Writing, Ideology, and Politics," 333. In his comments on Stuart Chase toward the end of "Politics," Orwell rightly calls this argument absurd.
 53. Jameson, 309.
 54. *Ibid.*, 308.
 55. Myra Jehlen, "Theory and the English Professor," *ADE Bulletin* (Fall 1994): 21. Her point about *Moby-Dick* is, in fact, not true. Women are part of the congregation in the crucial seventh chapter ("The Chapel"); and the image of a grieving mother of Biblical proportions is present in the very last line of the novel: "It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan." In "The Death of Big Sister," Weatherly notes similar feminist misreadings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
 56. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 411.
 57. Freedman, "Writing, Ideology, and Politics," 332. Freedman calls him "necessarily blind," "necessarily" because of his "voluntaristic empiricism."
 58. Orwell, the 1943 outline of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in Crick, 408: "The nightmare feeling caused by the disappearance of objective truth."
 59. Leah S. Marcus, "Renaissance/Early Modern Studies," *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gun (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 48. The argument is that Shakespeare "produced for his company a steady supply of material over which he exerted none of the rights of ownership" (48-49). Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and other renowned Elizabethan dramatists also fall under the first or second category and are presumably the other "hack dramatists" that new historicists have in mind.
 60. Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 302.
 61. David Wykes, *A Preface to Orwell* (London: Longman, 1987), 88.
 62. Terry Eagleton, "Orwell and the Lower-Middle-Class Novel," *Exiles and Emigres* (1970), in Oldsey and Browne, 117.
 63. Jameson, 367.
 64. A.C. Bradley, Note P. "Did Emilia Suspect Iago?" *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1905), 440.

65. Robert Stradling, "Orwell and the Spanish Civil War: A Historical Critique," in Norris, 122.
66. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann (1823–1832)*, trans. John Oxenford (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 141.
67. Orwell, "Literature and Totalitarianism" (1941): "The peculiarity of the totalitarian state is that though it controls thought, it does not fix it. It sets up unquestionable dogmas, and it alters them from day to day" (2:163).
68. Simone Weil, "The Power of Words," *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), 222.
69. Roland Barthes, op. cit., *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 191.
70. Sheree L. Meyer, "Refusing to Play the Confidence Game: The Illusion of Mastery in the Reading/Writing of Texts," *College English* (January 1993): 48.
71. Barthes, 205. I want to thank Dr. Theodor Sitea for drawing my attention to the apt parallel between postmodern theory (notably the deconstruction of the concept of identity) and the disembodied utopia envisioned by the alien figures in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, who literally deconstruct human presence into a semblance of itself.
72. *Ibid.*, 214.
73. H.G. Wells, *The Invisible Man* [1897] (New York: Bantam Classic, 1983), 7. See, also, the character's "inscrutable blue glasses" (3), "monstrous goggle eyes" (7), and "huge blue lenses staring fixidly" (9).
74. Orwell, "Politics," 165. See, also, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "As he watched the eyeless face with the jaw moving rapidly up and down, Winston had a curious feeling that this was not a real human being but some kind of dummy. It was not the man's brain that was speaking; it was his larynx. The stuff that was coming out of him consisted of words, but it was not speech in the true sense" (48).
75. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1843), *The Portable Poe* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1945; reprint, 1987), 154. The sound is like the mechanical "burr of a mill-wheel." George Bowling hears the same "burr-burr-burr" (171) in the hate-filled voice of a political speaker in *Coming Up for Air*.
76. There are numerous references to Poe in the first two volumes of *The Collected Essays*, and an interesting comment on the pendulum itself (1:161).
77. Roland Barthes, "The death of the author," in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988): "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (170).
78. Friedrich Nietzsche, Epigram 146, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 89. Orwell refers to the line in his review of Koestler's *Spanish Testament* (1938) and again in his column "As I Please" (8 September 1944).
79. Richard Rees, Extract from the BBC *Omnibus* Programme, *Orwell Remembered*, ed. Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick (New York: Facts on File Publications), 126. See, also, Rees's study *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (1966). There are striking similarities between Orwell's career and Weil's. "Analysis of Oppression" (1934), "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force" (1940), and "The Power of Words" have many parallels to "Politics" and *1984*, and highlight the intellectual poverty of leftwing scholars, who assume that Marxism offers the only ethical and systematic analysis of power politics.
80. Orwell wrote the poem two years later, "when the war was visibly lost" (2:305).
81. Podhoretz, 29. As George Woodcock observes, "When people of widely differing viewpoints—conservatives and Anarchists, Socialists and liberals... find encouragement for their attitudes in a single author's work, we can reasonably assume that each of them is missing something," in *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 55.
82. Ruth Pitter, "Like a Cow with a Musket," in Coppard and Crick, 71.
83. Orwell "Writers and Leviathan," 4:465.

84. Bruce K. Martin, "Teaching Literature as Experience," *College English* (April 1989): 385: "Literature never achieves an authoritative grasp on life. Life is always ahead, in terms of both chronology and ultimate unintelligibility."
85. Min-Zhan Lu, "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or preconditions of Basic Writings?" *College English* (December 1992): 888-89. Lu is commenting on an assumption "underlying various feminist, marxist, and poststructuralist theories of language" that compositionists have found "useful."
86. Orwell, "In Front of Your Nose" (22 March 1946), 4:154.

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