

A Reactionary Radical

The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. *Vol. I: An Age Like This, 1920-1940.* 574 pp. *Vol. II: My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943.* 477 pp. *Vol. III: As I Please, 1943-1945.* 435 pp. *Vol. IV: In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950.* 555 pp. *Harcourt, Brace and World.* Vols. I, II, IV, \$8.95 each; Vol. III, \$7.95. \$34.80 the set.

GEORGE ORWELL had no reputation as a writer until after he died. All Orwell's pre-war books were unobtainable, and, apart from a few circles, forgotten between the outbreak of war in 1939 and the appearance of *Animal Farm*. If one considers the reputation which Orwell now enjoys, this may seem unbelievable, yet a little investigation provides us with a clue. The truth is Orwell's pre-war books were for the most part dismal failures with the critics and the public alike. They were either ignored, as were most of his novels, or dismissed, like *Homage to Catalonia*, as politically and morally offensive to the whole spectrum of political opinion in England. They were not reprinted simply because, from a publisher's standpoint—indeed, from any standpoint—there seemed no possible reason to reprint them.

It was not until 1945 that Orwell began to emerge as a recognized writer. *Animal Farm*, though it hardly made much of a stir at first, started to be read after it was real-

ized what Russia's intentions were. People now began to recall certain of his essays, succinct reminders of clarity, truth, and sanity, which appeared in periodicals throughout the war years. Was it not possible that the virtues of the man might also be found in the earlier work—which until now had seemed to disappear without a trace? A shrewd and enlightened publisher (Secker and Warburg)—not the publisher with whom Orwell had started his career (Gollancz)—saw his chance. Orwell's *1984* was intended to underscore the message of *Animal Farm* with a vengeance and after its appearance in 1949, the new publisher must have reckoned that all Orwell's work would make a similar impact. He was right because Orwell's reputation has grown steadily since his death in 1950. Indeed, Orwell has now achieved not only a huge popular success but also substantial prestige, which shows no sign of slackening, among critics of all shades of opinion.

But what is the fascination which this writer, neglected or despised throughout his career and almost to his death, now exercises over us? This four-volume edition of his collected essays, journalism, and letters, which is explicitly designed to give us a portrait of the man and his work, provides us with several tentative answers. It is, in substance, a somber story we follow through these fat volumes. For even though much of the journalism was not meant to survive its particular occasion, and even though the essays are familiar and many of the hurriedly written letters are reticent almost to the point of parody, this is in no sense a disappointing or overblown collection.

On a rough calculation, a quarter of the material is to be found in previous collections of essays, half of it has been published but never collected, and a quarter has not been previously made available. This last part is made up of letters, the two war-time diaries, his notes for *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and a few essays of which the most important is the splendid piece "Clink," an account of 36 hours in police

custody after he was arrested in the East End of London in 1932. Although the editors have acted wisely in what they have chosen to exclude, they can be faulted for having omitted everything from Orwell's stint as correspondent of the London *Observer* in Germany in 1945, or drama critic for *Time and Tide* in the first year of the war: from these articles the editors quote twice in the footnotes and so perceptive were Orwell's comments on Max Miller and Falstaff that one longs for more.

Like Thackeray, one of his boyhood idols, Orwell requested in his will that there should be no biography of him and these four volumes are a substitute for it. The accumulation of detail here yields some access to the nature of the man, his obsessions, strengths, failings, hatreds, his essential consistency of attitude. But anyone who has read much of Orwell is certain to feel disappointed by whole stretches of his life incompletely documented in these volumes. What was his relationship with his parents, what made him join the Indian Police in Burma when he was nineteen, why in his twenties did he persistently search out tramps and those who lived on the periphery of society, what were his feelings for women, and how did they respond to him? To such questions the four volumes offer no reply.

Yet one essay, "Such, Such Were the Joys," is not only a description of his life at a prep school, but the most revealing exercise in autobiography: an analysis of the roots of his consciousness. As a scholarship boy, Orwell was singled out at school from the start as one who was expected to work several times harder than the fee-paying boys simply to earn his keep, and his young childhood was, as he describes it, a horrid round of beatings and humiliations—all of them centered on success in "the exam." Is this perhaps a patly casebook explanation of the later, guilt-racked industry about which Orwell writes in his notebook toward the end of his life?

It is now (1949) 16 years since my

first book was published and abt. 21 years since I started publishing articles in the magazines. Throughout that time there has literally not been one day in which I did not feel that I was idling, that I was behind with the current job and that my total output was miserably small. Even at the periods when I was working 10 hours a day on a book, or turning out 4 or 5 articles a week, I have never been able to get rid of this neurotic feeling that I was wasting time.

One certainly shies away from such an elementary diagnosis of Orwell's literary labors. And yet there is a sense in which one of Orwell's greatest strengths as a writer is precisely that his life does fit explanations of this kind. That is to say, it was a life that did have "turning points," key moments of experience which shaped the essentials of his personality for years to come.

Just as one hesitates to settle for the view that Orwell worked hard because he was beaten into working hard when he was young, so there is something objectionably complex in the notion that guilt over his activities with the Imperial Police in Burma was the sole trigger of his down-and-out, Road-to-Wigan-Pier phase of identification with the poor. And yet no other explanation tallies so satisfactorily with what occurred, and certainly Orwell himself believed it was that simple. And no explanation that did not point to something obsessive in his nature could account for the completeness with which he immersed himself in whatever new role his experience required. Such completeness led Orwell into rigid, unattractive postures: his sentimental elevation of "the ordinary," his blanket sneers at "intellectuals." But it furnished everything he wrote with a deep autobiographical conviction.

Thus the very quality of obsession that made Orwell write so much also helps to explain why nothing much that is new is revealed about him by the bulk of fresh material. When Orwell fell victim to a new moral passion, there was nothing in his

life to compete with it. The few private letters printed here are hardly private—most of them are concerned with professional or political matters; the journals he kept during the war are astonishingly free of any kind of introspection. It could be said that only a writer who was uninterested in exploring his own personality could have employed that personality as usefully as Orwell did, could have—as it were—sent his whole self out into the public world with such a firm sense of the moral and political reliability of its responses.

In his political writing it was this moral firmness, coupled with a marvelously lucid style and a rigorous intelligence, that had such a shattering effect on his opponents, and one of the many reasons for welcoming these volumes is that they make it possible for us to view Orwell's polemical activities in all their rousing detail. The turning point in Orwell's political life was the Spanish Civil War. Before this time he had been a Left-wing revolutionary, distinguished from other orthodox figures of the period by his eagerness to experience the lives of the deprived instead of writing about them as an unknown group shining with the collective halo of poverty and by his enlistment in the POUM. In Spain he had a glimpse of political infighting at its messiest and most disreputable. His determination to denounce Stalinism, whatever the cost, and to expose the dishonest reporting he had become aware of in Spain, led to his clash with the orthodox Left-wing intellectuals. (Kingsley Martin refused to publish his review of Borkenau's *Spanish Cockpit* in *The New Statesman*.)

His contacts with the workers in Spain reinforced his faith in the Socialist ideal. But he still clung to the original Communist interpretation of Fascism as a variant form of capitalism and he feared that the war, whoever won it, would lead to Fascism in Britain. "It is useless," he wrote, "to overthrow Tweedledum in order to set up Tweedledee." He told Herbert Read that

an anti-war resistance movement should be set up and that it should begin to stockpile paper and printing equipment.

As for many others, the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet pact marked a decisive turning point in his opinions. He now accepted the idea that the war was well worth fighting, and it was with considerable relief, as he makes clear in "My Country Right of Left," that at last he no longer felt it necessary to suppress his patriotic instincts. In the following years he never changed his attitude toward the war, and it influenced everything he wrote afterwards. Rejected for medical reasons by the Army, he joined the Home Guard, worked for the BBC, which he acknowledged to be a medium of capitalist imperialism, and attacked the pacifists as "objectively pro-Hitler" in a controversy recorded here in detail.

Intellectually, the *volte-face* was indefensible, and in such terms he never tried to defend it. Yet reading the letters and articles, one could never doubt that Orwell's conversion sprang from a deep and nostalgic patriotism, a belief in the need for what he called common decency (now reflected in the tenderness he began to show toward the Englishness of every day English life), a dominating hatred of all forms of totalitarianism, and a contempt for the silly-clever political theorists who refused to face awkward facts. Even after the Nazi invasion of Russia, Orwell's attitude toward Nazi Germany was not as hostile as it was to Russia; pro-Russian cant was no longer the prerogative of the Left—it had become part of the war effort—but Orwell continued to express his detestation of the Soviet dictator, "this disgusting murderer," and of the Stalinist system.

The rewards of his unwavering attempt to be totally honest about his own motives can be seen in the thrust and clarity of the social criticism he produced in the last decade of his life. A review that caused quite a stir when he reprinted it in *Critical Essays* (1946) was that of V. K. Narayana

Menon's *The Development of William Butler Yeats*. This has been dismissed as "obtuse." But is it? Orwell admired Yeats' poetry, but did not revere it uncritically. He drew attention to a feature (it may be argued that it is a quality) of Yeats' verse that has been all but ignored by critics: its affectation. Worse still, he pointed out that Yeats' political attitudes were "feudal" and authoritarian, and concluded by remarking that "a writer's political and religious beliefs are not excrescences to be laughed away, but something that will leave their mark even on the smallest detail of his work." This is a fact that modern criticism, against fierce opposition, is slowly beginning to discover. As for Yeats, only Conor Cruse O'Brien (who is hardly an obtuse critic and who is, like Orwell, an admirer of Yeats' poetry) has begun to face the problem. For raising these questions he incurred similar odium; but until the matter is resolved Yeats will not be sufficiently understood.

Orwell was not a profound political thinker but his combination of ordinariness of feeling and unusual control over the resources of plain speech made him a very effective writer. He was, both by precept and by example, a great cleanser of the English language and the clarity and meticulousness with which he wrote inspire admiration. "To get a genuine spoken English onto paper is a complicated matter," he admitted, but "if you habitually say to yourself, 'Could I simplify this? Could I make it more like speech?'" the chances are that you will never again use phrases like "unprincipled violation of declared pledges" or "insidious threats to the basic principles of democracy."

When Harold Laski attacked T.S. Eliot for "writing only for the few," Orwell was pleased to quote first from Eliot:

"And nobody came, and nobody went,
But he took in the milk and he paid the rent."

and then from Laski's own abominable prose:

As a whole, our system was a compromise between democracy in the political realm—itsself a very recent development in our history—and an economic power oligarchically organized which was in its turn related to certain aristocratic vestigia still able to influence profoundly the habits of our society.

But plain writing is not just a literary virtue. It shows that the author is trying to write what he thinks—that he has overcome all the popular clichés and accepted fashions in jargon. This is the beginning of what is called integrity. It is the strength of Orwell's work. His plainness does not mean that he was always right. He could be wrong in his conclusions, as when he writes that Swift's "implied position is very similar to that of innumerable silly-clever Conservatives of today," or when he writes crossly of Graham Greene's character, Scobie, in *The Heart of the Matter*: "If he really felt that adultery was a mortal sin, he would stop committing it . . . If he believed in Hell, he would not risk going there merely to spare the feelings of a couple of neurotic women."

But the insights are far greater than the lapses in Orwell's work. Plain thinking made Orwell quite sharp-witted. One could read many books on King Lear by Shakespearean scholars without encountering a statement that sums up more about the play than Orwell's brief comment: "In his sane moments Lear hardly ever makes an intelligent remark."

An important charge against Orwell is that he did not create more than one-dimensional characters in his novels. The personages of his earlier novels are all, in E. M. Foster's terminology, vibrating discs. Winston Smith in *1984* hardly exists; *Animal Farm*, his one distinguished fictional success, is an animal fable. However, this collection which not only prints fugitive pieces but also traces his development as a creative writer, reveals that the charge is an oversimplification. "Such, Such Were the Joys" shows considerable interest in—and an aptitude for presenting—char-

acter. This is, of course, non-fiction; but it is non-fiction written from a new angle of vision.

In most of his writing Orwell felt the need to come to terms with the social facts of underprivilege and poverty. His unfashionable approach to the problem was never completely political, as *Down and Out in Paris and London* makes clear. In this book he could sketch a scene vividly, and leave it to one's imagination not merely as a scene but as a social comment. The shift from Paris to London, from the world of sweated kitchen workers and picturesque émigrés to the world of badgered human refuse, is conjured up with skill and economy. Nevertheless, Orwell's fiction is preoccupied with social comment rather than with character. At the end of his life he told his wife that he wanted to free himself from polemics and to write about "human relationships"—which would have involved the delineation of character. Thus *1984*, a book which has been underrated by intellectuals, may fairly be seen as his ultimate verdict on those who are not "interested in character": the apostles of power who make use of theory to mask their own sterile, anti-human motives.

It might be thought that the ravages of TB to which Orwell had been succumbing before his death led him to the extremities which found their most chilling expression in the effective but repetitive ugliness of *1984*. And perhaps—to choose a single aside in one of the letters—the pessimism might have been pathological, for it appears that he was for a time swallowing "M&B tablets." Given the period and his medical history, these would almost certainly have been M&B 693, a sulphonamide which had the unfortunate side effect of inducing immense depression in its wake.

Illness will certainly corrode even the most resilient of spirits, but too much can be made of this in Orwell's case. He was completely without self-pity (as the letters show in convincing fashion) and most of his attitudes had been formed long before his illness. In 1934, for example, he wrote,

only half-jokingly, to a friend that "this age makes me so sick that sometimes I am almost impelled to stop at a corner and start calling down curses from Heaven like Jeremiah or Ezra or somebody." Very often this feeling recurs, as the idiocies of international politics began to weigh upon him.

Yet Orwell's writing retained a combative kind of gaiety almost to the last. He disliked the modern world, but met it without wincing. Sometimes a wistful remark would float out of his conservative romanticism, his self-induced but inevitably equivocal nostalgia for other (and better) days, his distaste for most manifestations of modern industrialism and his angry longing for order, stability, and discipline.

One of the short essays reprinted here, "Riding Down to Bangor," a description of American nineteenth-century "good-bad books," gives Orwell the chance to reveal his basic nostalgia—a nostalgia for the safer world of pre-1914 mingled with that of his own childhood. Discussing the impression "not only of innocence but a sort of native gaiety, a buoyant, carefree feeling" that one receives from nineteenth-century American children's books, he shrewdly grasps the cause. With all its own troubles, he says, the nineteenth century was still fortunately outside the mainstream of modern history and was free from the nightmares besetting modern man—the nightmares of war, state interference, and mass unemployment. Orwell's conviction that the year 1914 was like an historic watershed shutting off modern man from a safer, more innocent past was probably his strongest emotional belief.

It was such an emotional belief that brought him to *1984*. The tendentious critics are in a sense right to claim the final horror fable as the logical culmination of his previous works, but only because *1984* is much more the last exhausted expression of the hatred he felt for the modern world. Whether by accident or design, its hero is given the name Winston: the good old days are conjured up to discover the real horrors of totalitarianism, and humanity is cele-

brated by Smith's struggle to remember an old tune.

Orwell's decency and honesty forced him to reduce almost all abstract doctrines, however huge and liberating, to "smelly little orthodoxies," and even to diminish past grandeurs down to the proportions of unpleasant reality.

Columbus sailed the Atlantic, the first steam engines tottered into motion, the British squares stood firm under French guns at Waterloo, the one-eyed scoundrels of the nineteenth century praised God and filled their pockets; and this is where it all led—to labyrinthine slums and dark back kitchens with sickly, aging people creeping round and round them like blackbeetles. It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist.

Biologists can identify a species by its smell, but it must be a unique characteristic to be able, as Orwell was, to recognize orthodoxy and priggishness by their smell and to single out the British workers by their distinct odor as well as their stunted configurations.

Louis XI, according to a passage in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, had a conceit that "everything did stink about him, all the odoriferous perfumes they could get would not ease him, but still he smelled a filthy stink." The unlikely parallel cannot be applied to Orwell, who sometimes gave the impression that he felt the slime clinging to his skin in terrible anguish, but who never sought the familiar deodorant of self-deception or the sweetened balms of elegant literary evasion. He sniffed and wrote in the same quivering reflex, tracking down the stench of hypocrisy and the disease of intellectual dishonesty. This was an impressive man, a formidable writer, a rare controversialist. In the end the word "honesty" overshadows all the other epithets one might apply to Orwell, and it will not be denied.

Reviewed by GABRIEL GERSH

Approach to Avernus

Journey Through Despair, 1880-1914: Transformations in British Literary Culture, by John A. Lester, Jr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968. 211 pp. \$6.00.

AN EVER-INCREASING number of books—biographies, correspondence, critical studies—now being published shows that European civilization in the years before the Great War is being scrutinized from divers cultural angles. It is a period often associated with crisis, with coming crises, internal and external, and with some tremendous but, for the most part, vaguely defined breakthrough. Clearly, it is a period which exerts its fascinations. Some writers look back to the three or four decades before 1914 in order to determine the disintegration of particular human values. Other writers look back to this period in an attempt to contrast some of the brave new directions taken by modern society. Some reflect nostalgically on this period. Others welcome man's release from what are considered its archaic ways. Such interest is possibly symptomatic of this generation's own state of soul and attitude of mind, as well as its quest for identity or for self-understanding or for a better comprehension of its roots, or its uprootedness.

Focusing on "transformations in British literary culture" from the death of Thomas