**DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON**

By George Orwell.
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Comments of Bob Corbett
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This autobiographical novel is told by an unnamed British writer. As it opens he is stuck in Paris with very little money, not enough to have both a bed and food each day. In this first section we follow him around Paris as he seeks day labor, hand outs or any other activity the might net both food and shelter. Life is little more than the pursuit of those items. Perhaps this is the singly most important lesson Orwell preaches – the lives of the down and out are little more than the constant struggle to eat and find a safe place to sleep.

After a while he gets a job as a dish washing in a restaurant working 11 hours a day six days a week. This provides a bit of money, but very little, and does allow him to have a secure bed and food with a bit left over for drink. However, with six work days of 11 hours, it is quite obvious that he has little other life. The long restaurant section is revealing and shocking if Orwell is telling the truth. He details the utter filth of the food preparation and even the deliberate sabotaging of food which carried on in those back rooms of these upscale restaurants. All that counts is the presentation of the food, not the food itself.

After he is exhausted with this work he heads back to his native England to what he believes is an awaiting job, but it turns out he will have more than two months to wait. Again, he is homeless as he was in Paris, on the bum. In this third section he details the situation of the desperately poor men in England at the time. Orwell argues that this situation of poverty is primarily a man’s world with less than 10 per-cent of those on the bum being women.

In the section on poverty in England Orwell spends more time in analysis as well than description. The character of Bozo enters. He has a mangled leg and earns a bit by drawing chalk paintings on the sidewalk. He struggles inside the world of desperate poverty to have some sense of dignity.

“He considered himself in a class above the ordinary run of beggars, who, he said, were an abject lot, without even the decency to be ungrateful.”

Bozo’s general notion is that a life on the bum is just as natural as any other and that straight working people feel superior to the bum, yet in most of their own work they produce little of any social value, thus are little better than the bum who produces either nothing in begging, or things of little worth as his sidewalk drawings. But Bozo rages against those beggars who give up on life and allow themselves to internalize the society’s view of them.

He lectures:

“Yet if one looks closely one sees that there is no *essential* difference between a beggar’s livelihood and that of numberless respectable people. Beggars do not work, it is said; but, then what is *work*? A navy works by swinging a pick. An accountant works by adding up figures. A beggar works by standing out of doors in all weathers and getting varicose veins, chronic bronchitis, etc. It is a trade like any other; quite useless, of course – but, then many reputable trades are quite useless. And as a social type a beggar compares well with scores of others. He is honest compared with the sellers of a Sunday newspaper proprietor, amiable compared with a hire-purchase tout – in short, a parasite, but a fairly harmless parasite. He seldom extracts more than a bare living from the community, and, what should justify him according to our ethical ideas, he pays for it over and over in suffering. I do not think there is anything about a beggar that sets him in a different class from other people, or gives most modern men the right to despise him.

“Then the question arises, Why are beggars despised? -- for they are despised, universally. I believe it is for the simple reason that they fail to earn a decent living. In practice nobody cares whether work is useful or useless, productive or parasitic; the sole thing demanded is that is shall be profitable.”

I think it is fairly clear that while the narrator is Orwell in the main, Bozo is the character who allows Orwell to preach and philosophize about poverty, and he is clearly the most interesting person in the novel. He rails for the dignity of humans, even the down and out beggars. When the narrator tells about “slummers,” various preachers who are allowed access to the homeless shelters to preach at people to reform their ways, Bozo says:

“It is curious how people take it for granted that they have a right to preach at you and pray over you as soon as your income falls below a certain level.”

Mainly, however, Orwell describes poverty as he saw it and experienced it. It is brutal, debilitating, full of suffering and demeaning to the core of one’s being. His account is well written, a bit preachy, often funny and yet touching at nearly every turn. He uses the novel’s form to allow him to tell the stories of men he meets and thus we get many short case studies, some very moving in the sadness of these relatively lost lives.

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| ***Politics and the English Language***  |
| **Essay**Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language--so the argument runs--must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes. Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written. These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad--I could have quoted far worse if I had chosen--but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer. They are a little below the average, but are fairly representative samples. I number them so that I can refer back to them when necessary: (1) I am not, indeed, sure whether it is not true to say that the Milton who once seemed not unlike a seventeenth-century Shelley had not become, out of an experience ever more bitter in each year, more alien (sic) to the founder of that Jesuit sect which nothing could induce him to tolerate. PROFESSOR HAROLD LASKI (Essay in FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION) (2) Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes such egregious collocations of vocables as the Basic PUT UP WITH for TOLERATE or PUT AT A LOSS for BEWILDER. PROFESSOR LANCELOT HOGBEN (INTERGLOSSA) (3) On the one side we have the free personality; by definition it is not neurotic, for it has neither conflict nor dream. Its desires, such as they are, are transparent, for they are just what institutional approval keeps in the forefront of consciousness; another institutional pattern would alter their number and intensity; there is little in them that is natural, irreducible, or culturally dangerous. But ON THE OTHER SIDE, the social bond itself is nothing but the mutual reflection of these self-secure integrities. Recall the definition of love. Is not this the very picture of a small academic? Where is there a place in this hall of mirrors for either personality or fraternity? Essay on psychology in POLITICS (New York) (4) All the "best people" from the gentlemen's clubs, and all the frantic fascist captains, united in common hatred of Socialism and bestial horror of the rising tide of the mass revolutionary movement, have turned to acts of provocation, to foul incendiarism, to medieval legends of poisoned wells, to legalize their own destruction of proletarian organizations, and rouse the agitated petty-bourgeoisie to chauvinistic fervor on behalf of the fight against the revolutionary way out of the crisis. Communist pamphlet (5) If a new spirit is to be infused into this old country, there is one thorny and contentious reform which must be tackled, and that is the humanization and galvanization of the B.B.C. Timidity here will bespeak canker and atrophy of the soul. The heart of Britain may lee sound and of strong beat, for instance, but the British lion's roar at present is like that of Bottom in Shakespeare's MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM--as gentle as any sucking dove. A virile new Britain cannot continue indefinitely to be traduced in the eyes, or rather ears, of the world by the effete languors of Langham Place, brazenly masquerading as "standard English." When the Voice of Britain is heard at nine o'clock, better far and infinitely less ludicrous to hear aitches honestly dropped than the present priggish, inflated, inhibited, school-ma'am-ish arch braying of blameless bashful mewing maidens. Letter in TRIBUNE Each of these passages has faults of its own, but quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of WORDS chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of PHRASES tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house. I list below, with notes and examples, various of the tricks by means of which the work of prose-construction is habitually dodged: DYING METAPHORS. A newly-invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically "dead" (e.g., IRON RESOLUTION) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness. But in between these two classes there is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves. Examples are: RING THE CHANGES ON, TAKE UP THE CUDGELS FOR, TOE THE LINE, RIDE ROUGHSHOD OVER, STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH, PLAY INTO THE HANDS OF, AN AXE TO GRIND, GRIST TO THE MILL, FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS, ON THE ORDER OF THE DAY, ACHILLES' HEEL, SWAN SONG, HOTBED. Many of these are used without knowledge of their meaning (what is a "rift," for instance?), and incompatible metaphors are frequently mixed, a sure sign that the writer is not interested in what he is saying. Some metaphors now current have been twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact. For example, TOE THE LINE is sometimes written TOW THE LINE. Another example is THE HAMMER AND THE ANVIL, now always used with the implication that the anvil gets the worst of it. In real life it is always the anvil that breaks the hammer, never the other way about: a writer who stopped to think what he was saying would be aware of this, and would avoid perverting the original phrase. OPERATORS, or VERBAL FALSE LIMBS. These save the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Characteristic phrases are: RENDER INOPERATIVE, MILITATE AGAINST, PROVE UNACCEPTABLE, MAKE CONTACT WITH, BE SUBJECTED TO, GIVE RISE TO, GIVE GROUNDS FOR, HAVING THE EFFECT OF, PLAY A LEADING PART (R�LE) IN, MAKE ITSELF FELT, TAKE EFFECT, EXHIBIT A TENDENCY TO, SERVE THE PURPOSE OF, etc., etc. The keynote is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as BREAK, STOP, SPOIL, MEND, KILL, a verb becomes a PHRASE, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purposes verb as PROVE, SERVE, FORM, PLAY, RENDER. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (BY EXAMINATION OF instead of BY EXAMINING). The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the '-IZE' AND 'DE-' formations, and banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the NOT 'UN-' formation. Simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as WITH RESPECT TO, HAVING REGARD TO, THE FACT THAT, BY DINT OF, IN VIEW OF, IN THE INTERESTS OF, ON THE HYPOTHESIS THAT; and the ends of sentences are saved from anti-climax by such resounding commonplaces as GREATLY TO BE DESIRED, CANNOT BE LEFT OUT OF ACCOUNT, A DEVELOPMENT TO BE EXPECTED IN THE NEAR FUTURE, DESERVING OF SERIOUS CONSIDERATION, BROUGHT TO A SATISFACTORY CONCLUSION, and so on and so forth. PRETENTIOUS DICTION. Words like PHENOMENON, ELEMENT, INDIVIDUAL (as noun), OBJECTIVE, CATEGORICAL, EFFECTIVE, VIRTUAL, BASIS, PRIMARY, PROMOTE, CONSTITUTE, EXHIBIT, EXPLOIT, UTILIZE, ELIMINATE, LIQUIDATE, are used to dress up simple statements and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgments. Adjectives like EPOCH-MAKING, EPIC, HISTORIC, UNFORGETTABLE, TRIUMPHANT, AGE-OLD, INEVITABLE, INEXORABLE, VERITABLE, are used to dignify the sordid processes of international politics, while writing that aims at glorifying war usually takes on an archaic color, its characteristic words being: REALM, THRONE, CHARIOT, MAILED FIST, TRIDENT, SWORD, SHIELD, BUCKLER, BANNER, JACKBOOT, CLARION. Foreign words and expressions such as CUL DE SAC, ANCIEN R�GIME, DEUS EX MACHINA, MUTATIS MUTANDIS, STATUS QUO, GLEICHSCHALTUNG, WELTANSCHAUUNG, are used to give an air of culture and elegance. Except for the useful abbreviations I.E., E.G., and ETC., there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in English. Bad writers, and especially scientific, political and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like EXPEDITE, AMELIORATE, PREDICT, EXTRANEOUS, DERACINATED, CLANDESTINE, SUB-AQUEOUS and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers. [Note 1, below] The jargon peculiar to Marxist writing (HYENA, HANGMAN, CANNIBAL, PETTY BOURGEOIS, THESE GENTRY, LACKEY, FLUNKEY, MAD DOG, WHITE GUARD, etc.) consists largely of words and phrases translated from Russian, German or French; but the normal way of coining a new word is to use a Latin or Greek root with the appropriate affix and, where necessary, the '-ize' formation. It is often easier to make up words of this kind (DE-REGIONALIZE, IMPERMISSIBLE, EXTRAMARITAL, NON-FRAGMENTARY and so forth) than to think up the English words that will cover one's meaning. The result, in general, is an increase in slovenliness and vagueness. [Note: 1. An interesting illustration of this is the way in which the English flower names which were in use till very recently are being ousted by Greek ones, SNAPDRAGON becoming ANTIRRHINUM, FORGET-ME-NOT becoming MYOSOTIS, etc. It is hard to see any practical reason for this change of fashion: it is probably due to an instinctive turning-away from the more homely word and a vague feeling that the Greek word is scientific. (Author's footnote.)] MEANINGLESS WORDS. In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning. [Note, below] Words like ROMANTIC, PLASTIC, VALUES, HUMAN, DEAD, SENTIMENTAL, NATURAL, VITALITY, as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader. When one critic writes, "The outstanding feature of Mr. X's work is its living quality," while another writes, "The immediately striking thing about Mr. X's work is its peculiar deadness," the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion If words like BLACK and WHITE were involved, instead of the jargon words DEAD and LIVING, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way. Many political words are similarly abused. The word FASCISM has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies "something not desirable." The words DEMOCRACY, SOCIALISM, FREEDOM, PATRIOTIC, REALISTIC, JUSTICE, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like DEMOCRACY, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of r�gime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. Statements like MARSHAL P�TAIN WAS A TRUE PATRIOT, THE SOVIET PRESS IS THE FREEST IN THE WORLD, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS OPPOSED TO PERSECUTION, are almost always made with intent to deceive. Other words used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly, are: CLASS, TOTALITARIAN, SCIENCE, PROGRESSIVE, REACTIONARY BOURGEOIS, EQUALITY. [Note: Example: "Comfort's catholicity of perception and image, strangely Whitmanesque in range, almost the exact opposite in aesthetic compulsion, continues to evoke that trembling atmospheric accumulative hinting at a cruel, an inexorably serene timelessness . . . Wrey Gardiner scores by aiming at simple bullseyes with precision. Only they are not so simple, and through this contented sadness runs more than the surface bittersweet of resignation." (POETRY QUARTERLY.) (Author's footnote.)] Now that I have made this catalogue of swindles and perversions, let me give another example of the kind of writing that they lead to. This time it must of its nature be an imaginary one. I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort. Here is a well-known verse from ECCLESIASTES: I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth Here it is in modern English: Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account. This is a parody, but not a very gross one. Exhibit (3), above, for instance, contains several patches of the same kind of English. It will be seen that I have not made a full translation. The beginning and ending of the sentence follow the original meaning fairly closely, but in the middle the concrete illustrations--race, battle, bread--dissolve into the vague phrase "success or failure in competitive activities." This had to be so, because no modern writer of the kind I am discussing--no one capable of using phrases like "objective consideration of contemporary phenomena"--would ever tabulate his thoughts in that precise and detailed way. The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness. Now analyze these two sentences a little more closely. The first contains 49 words but only 60 syllables, and all its words are those of everyday life. The second contains 38 words of 90 syllables: 18 of its words are from Latin roots, and one from Greek. The first sentence contains six vivid images, and only one phrase ("time and chance") that could be called vague. The second contains not a single fresh, arresting phrase, and in spite of its 90 syllables it gives only a shortened version of the meaning contained in the first. Yet without a doubt it is the second kind of sentence that is gaining ground in modern English. I do not want to exaggerate. This kind of writing is not yet universal, and outcrops of simplicity will occur here and there in the worst-written page. Still, if you or I were told to write a few lines on the uncertainty of human fortunes, we should probably come much nearer to my imaginary sentence than to the one from ECCLESIASTES. As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. The attraction of this way of writing, is that it is easy. It is easier--even quicker, once you have the habit--to say IN MY OPINION IT IS A NOT UNJUSTIFIABLE ASSUMPTION THAT than to say I THINK. If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don't have to hunt about for words; you also don't have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences, since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious. When you are composing in a hurry--when you are dictating to a stenographer, for instance, or making a public speech--it is natural to fall into a pretentious, Latinized style. Tags like A CONSIDERATION WHICH WE SHOULD DO WELL TO BEAR IN MIND OR A CONCLUSION TO WHICH ALL OF US WOULD READILY ASSENT will save many a sentence from coming down with a bump. By using stale metaphors, similes and idioms, you save much mental effort at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself. This is the significance of mixed metaphors. The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image. When these images clash--as in THE FASCIST OCTOPUS HAS SUNG ITS SWAN SONG, THE JACKBOOT IS THROWN INTO THE MELTING POT--it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming; in other words he is not really thinking. Look again at the examples I gave at the beginning of this essay. Professor Laski (1) uses five negatives in 53 words. One of these is superfluous, making nonsense of the whole passage, and in addition there is the slip ALIEN for akin, making further nonsense, and several avoidable pieces of clumsiness which increase the general vagueness. Professor Hogben (2) plays ducks and drakes with a battery which is able to write prescriptions, and, while disapproving of the everyday phrase PUT UP WITH, is unwilling to look EGREGIOUS up in the dictionary and see what it means. (3), if one takes an uncharitable attitude towards it, is simply meaningless: probably one could work out its intended meaning by reading the whole of the article in which it occurs. In (4), the writer knows more or less what he wants to say, but an accumulation of stale phrases chokes him like tea leaves blocking a sink. In (5), words and meaning have almost parted company. People who write in this manner usually have a general emotional meaning--they dislike one thing and want to express solidarity with another--but they are not interested in the detail of what they are saying. A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you--even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent-and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear. In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a "party line." Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestoes, White Papers and the speeches of under-secretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, home-made turn of speech. 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 a 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. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to political conformity. In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called PACIFICATION. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called TRANSFER OF POPULATION or RECTIFICATION OF FRONTIERS. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called ELIMINATION OF UNRELIABLE ELEMENTS. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, "I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so." Probably, therefore, he will say something like this: While freely conceding that the Soviet r�gime 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. The inflated style is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns, as it were instinctively, to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find--this is a guess which I have not sufficient knowledge to verify--that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years as a result of dictatorship. But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better. The debased language that I have been discussing is in some ways very convenient. Phrases like A NOT UNJUSTIFIABLE ASSUMPTION, LEAVES MUCH TO BE DESIRED, WOULD SERVE NO GOOD PURPOSE, A CONSIDERATION WHICH WE SHOULD DO WELL TO BEAR IN MIND, are a continuous temptation, a packet of aspirins always at one's elbow. Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against. By this morning's post I have received a pamphlet dealing with conditions in Germany. The author tells me that he "felt impelled" to write it. I open it at random, and here is almost the first sentence that I see: "[The Allies] have an opportunity not only of achieving a radical transformation of Germany's social and political structure in such a way as to avoid a nationalistic reaction in Germany itself, but at the same time of laying the foundations of a cooperative and unified Europe." You see, he "feels impelled" to write--feels, presumably, that he has something new to say--and yet his words, like cavalry horses answering the bugle, group themselves automatically into the familiar dreary pattern. This invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases (LAY THE FOUNDATIONS, ACHIEVE A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION) can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anesthetizes a portion of one's brain. I said earlier that the decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an argument at all, that language merely reflects existing social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of a language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail. Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority. Two recent examples were EXPLORE EVERY AVENUE and LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED, which were killed by the jeers of a few journalists. There is a long list of fly-blown metaphors which could similarly be got rid of if enough people would interest themselves in the job; and it should also be possible to laugh the NOT 'UN-' formation out of existence, [Note, below] to reduce the amount of Latin and Greek in the average sentence, to drive out foreign phrases and strayed scientific words, and, in general, to make pretentiousness unfashionable. But all these are minor points. The defense of the English language implies more than this, and perhaps it is best to start by saying what it does NOT imply. [Note: One can cure oneself of the NOT 'UN-' formation by memorizing this sentence: A NOT UNBLACK DOG WAS CHASING A NOT UNSMALL RABBIT ACROSS A NOT UNGREEN FIELD. (Author's footnote.)] To begin with, it has nothing to do with archaism, with the salvaging of obsolete words and turns of speech, or with the setting-up of a "standard-English" which must never be departed from. On the contrary, it is especially concerned with the scrapping of every word or idiom which has outworn its usefulness. It has nothing to do with correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one's meaning clear, or with the avoidance of Americanisms, or with having what is called a "good prose style." On the other hand it is not concerned with fake simplicity and the attempt to make written English colloquial. Nor does it even imply in every case preferring the Saxon word to the Latin one, though it does imply using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one's meaning. What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender them. When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning. Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. Afterwards one can choose--not simply ACCEPT--the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impressions one's words are likely to make on another person. This last effort of the mind cuts out all stale or mixed images, all prefabricated phrases, needless repetitions, and humbug and vagueness generally. But one can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases: (i) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print. (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do. (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active. (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent. (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous. These rules sound elementary, and so they are, but they demand a deep change of attitude in anyone who has grown used to writing in the style now fashionable. One could keep all of them and still write bad English, but one could not write the kind of stuff that I quoted in these five specimens at the beginning of this article. I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language-and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists--is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable. and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase--some JACKBOOT, ACHILLES' HEEL, HOTBED, MELTING POT, ACID TEST, VERITABLE INFERNO or other lump of verbal refuse--into the dustbin where it belongs. |

# George Orwell ‘Why I Write’

![['Guernica' by Pablo Picasso]]()

From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books.

I was the middle child of three, but there was a gap of five years on either side, and I barely saw my father before I was eight. For this and other reasons I was somewhat lonely, and I soon developed disagreeable mannerisms which made me unpopular throughout my schooldays. I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life. Nevertheless the volume of serious — i.e. seriously intended — writing which I produced all through my childhood and boyhood would not amount to half a dozen pages. I wrote my first poem at the age of four or five, my mother taking it down to dictation. I cannot remember anything about it except that it was about a tiger and the tiger had ‘chair-like teeth’ — a good enough phrase, but I fancy the poem was a plagiarism of Blake's ‘Tiger, Tiger’. At eleven, when the war or 1914-18 broke out, I wrote a patriotic poem which was printed in the local newspaper, as was another, two years later, on the death of Kitchener. From time to time, when I was a bit older, I wrote bad and usually unfinished ‘nature poems’ in the Georgian style. I also attempted a short story which was a ghastly failure. That was the total of the would-be serious work that I actually set down on paper during all those years.

However, throughout this time I did in a sense engage in literary activities. To begin with there was the made-to-order stuff which I produced quickly, easily and without much pleasure to myself. Apart from school work, I wrote *vers d'occasion*, semi-comic poems which I could turn out at what now seems to me astonishing speed — at fourteen I wrote a whole rhyming play, in imitation of Aristophanes, in about a week — and helped to edit a school magazines, both printed and in manuscript. These magazines were the most pitiful burlesque stuff that you could imagine, and I took far less trouble with them than I now would with the cheapest journalism. But side by side with all this, for fifteen years or more, I was carrying out a literary exercise of a quite different kind: this was the making up of a continuous ‘story’ about myself, a sort of diary existing only in the mind. I believe this is a common habit of children and adolescents. As a very small child I used to imagine that I was, say, Robin Hood, and picture myself as the hero of thrilling adventures, but quite soon my ‘story’ ceased to be narcissistic in a crude way and became more and more a mere description of what I was doing and the things I saw. For minutes at a time this kind of thing would be running through my head: ‘He pushed the door open and entered the room. A yellow beam of sunlight, filtering through the muslin curtains, slanted on to the table, where a match-box, half-open, lay beside the inkpot. With his right hand in his pocket he moved across to the window. Down in the street a tortoiseshell cat was chasing a dead leaf’, etc. etc. This habit continued until I was about twenty-five, right through my non-literary years. Although I had to search, and did search, for the right words, I seemed to be making this descriptive effort almost against my will, under a kind of compulsion from outside. The ‘story’ must, I suppose, have reflected the styles of the various writers I admired at different ages, but so far as I remember it always had the same meticulous descriptive quality.

When I was about sixteen I suddenly discovered the joy of mere words, i.e. the sounds and associations of words. The lines from *Paradise Lost* —

So hee with difficulty and labour hard
Moved on: with difficulty and labour hee.

which do not now seem to me so very wonderful, sent shivers down my backbone; and the spelling ‘hee’ for ‘he’ was an added pleasure. As for the need to describe things, I knew all about it already. So it is clear what kind of books I wanted to write, in so far as I could be said to want to write books at that time. I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their own sound. And in fact my first completed novel, *Burmese Days*, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that kind of book.

I give all this background information because I do not think one can assess a writer's motives without knowing something of his early development. His subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in — at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own — but before he ever begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape. It is his job, no doubt, to discipline his temperament and avoid getting stuck at some immature stage, in some perverse mood; but if he escapes from his early influences altogether, he will have killed his impulse to write. Putting aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing, at any rate for writing prose. They exist in different degrees in every writer, and in any one writer the proportions will vary from time to time, according to the atmosphere in which he is living. They are:

(i) Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one. Writers share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers, successful businessmen — in short, with the whole top crust of humanity. The great mass of human beings are not acutely selfish. After the age of about thirty they almost abandon the sense of being individuals at all — and live chiefly for others, or are simply smothered under drudgery. But there is also the minority of gifted, willful people who are determined to live their own lives to the end, and writers belong in this class. Serious writers, I should say, are on the whole more vain and self-centered than journalists, though less interested in money.

(ii) Aesthetic enthusiasm. Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed. The aesthetic motive is very feeble in a lot of writers, but even a pamphleteer or writer of textbooks will have pet words and phrases which appeal to him for non-utilitarian reasons; or he may feel strongly about typography, width of margins, etc. Above the level of a railway guide, no book is quite free from aesthetic considerations.

(iii) Historical impulse. Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity.

(iv) Political purpose. — Using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.

It can be seen how these various impulses must war against one another, and how they must fluctuate from person to person and from time to time. By nature — taking your ‘nature’ to be the state you have attained when you are first adult — I am a person in whom the first three motives would outweigh the fourth. In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer. First I spent five years in an unsuitable profession (the Indian Imperial Police, in Burma), and then I underwent poverty and the sense of failure. This increased my natural hatred of authority and made me for the first time fully aware of the existence of the working classes, and the job in Burma had given me some understanding of the nature of imperialism: but these experiences were not enough to give me an accurate political orientation. Then came Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, etc. By the end of 1935 I had still failed to reach a firm decision. I remember a little poem that I wrote at that date, expressing my dilemma:

A happy vicar I might have been
Two hundred years ago
To preach upon eternal doom
And watch my walnuts grow;

But born, alas, in an evil time,
I missed that pleasant haven,
For the hair has grown on my upper lip
And the clergy are all clean-shaven.

And later still the times were good,
We were so easy to please,
We rocked our troubled thoughts to sleep
On the bosoms of the trees.

All ignorant we dared to own
The joys we now dissemble;
The greenfinch on the apple bough
Could make my enemies tremble.

But girl's bellies and apricots,
Roach in a shaded stream,
Horses, ducks in flight at dawn,
All these are a dream.

It is forbidden to dream again;
We maim our joys or hide them:
Horses are made of chromium steel
And little fat men shall ride them.

I am the worm who never turned,
The eunuch without a harem;
Between the priest and the commissar
I walk like Eugene Aram;

And the commissar is telling my fortune
While the radio plays,
But the priest has promised an Austin Seven,
For Duggie always pays.

I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls,
And woke to find it true;
I wasn't born for an age like this;
Was Smith? Was Jones? Were you?

The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it. It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects. Everyone writes of them in one guise or another. It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows. And the more one is conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual integrity.

What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. 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. Anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant. I am not able, and 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 a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information. It is no use trying to suppress that side of myself. The job is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us.

It is not easy. It raises problems of construction and of language, and it raises in a new way the problem of truthfulness. Let me give just one example of the cruder kind of difficulty that arises. My book about the Spanish civil war, *Homage to Catalonia*, is of course a frankly political book, but in the main it is written with a certain detachment and regard for form. I did try very hard in it to tell the whole truth without violating my literary instincts. But among other things it contains a long chapter, full of newspaper quotations and the like, defending the Trotskyists who were accused of plotting with Franco. Clearly such a chapter, which after a year or two would lose its interest for any ordinary reader, must ruin the book. A critic whom I respect read me a lecture about it. ‘Why did you put in all that stuff?’ he said. ‘You've turned what might have been a good book into journalism.’ What he said was true, but I could not have done otherwise. I happened to know, what very few people in England had been allowed to know, that innocent men were being falsely accused. If I had not been angry about that I should never have written the book.

In one form or another this problem comes up again. The problem of language is subtler and would take too long to discuss. I will only say that of late years I have tried to write less picturesquely and more exactly. In any case I find that by the time you have perfected any style of writing, you have always outgrown it. *Animal Farm* was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole. I have not written a novel for seven years, but I hope to write another fairly soon. It is bound to be a failure, every book is a failure, but I do know with some clarity what kind of book I want to write.

Looking back through the last page or two, I see that I have made it appear as though my motives in writing were wholly public-spirited. I don't want to leave that as the final impression. All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

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| *How The Poor Die*  |
| EssayIn the year 1929 I spent several weeks in the H�pital X, in the fifteenth ARRONDISSEMENT of Paris. The clerks put me through the usual third-degree at the reception desk, and indeed I was kept answering questions for some twenty minutes before they would let me in. If you have ever had to fill up forms in a Latin country you will know the kind of questions I mean. For some days past I had been unequal to translating Reaumur into Fahrenheit, but I know that my temperature was round about 103, and by the end of the interview I had some difficulty in standing on my feet. At my back a resigned little knot of patients, carrying bundles done up in coloured handkerchiefs, waited their turn to be questioned. After the questioning came the bath--a compulsory routine for all newcomers, apparently, just as in prison or the workhouse. My clothes were taken away from me, and after I had sat shivering for some minutes in five inches of warm water I was given a linen nightshirt and a short blue flannel dressing-gown--no slippers, they had none big enough for me, they said--and led out into the open air. This was a night in February and I was suffering from pneumonia. The ward we were going to was 200 yards away and it seemed that to get to it you had to cross the hospital grounds. Someone stumbled in front of me with a lantern. The gravel path was frosty underfoot, and the wind whipped the nightshirt round my bare calves. When we got into the ward I was aware of a strange feeling of familiarity whose origin I did not succeed in pinning down till later in the night. It was a long, rather low, ill-lit room, full of murmuring voices and with three rows of beds surprisingly close together. There was a foul smell, faecal and yet sweetish. As I lay down I saw on a bed nearly opposite me a small, round-shouldered, sandy-haired man sitting half naked while a doctor and a student performed some strange operation on him. First the doctor produced from his black bag a dozen small glasses like wine glasses, then the student burned a match inside each glass to exhaust the air, then the glass was popped on to the man's back or chest and the vacuum drew up a huge yellow blister. Only after some moments did I realize what they were doing to him. It was something called cupping, a treatment which you can read about in old medical text-books but which till then I had vaguely thought of as one of those things they do to horses. The cold air outside had probably lowered my temperature, and I watched this barbarous remedy with detachment and even a certain amount of amusement. The next moment, however, the doctor and the student came across to my bed, hoisted me upright and without a word began applying the same set of glasses, which had not been sterilized in any way. A few feeble protests that I uttered got no more response than if I had been an animal. I was very much impressed by the impersonal way in which the two men started on me. I had never been in the public ward of a hospital before, and it was my first experience of doctors who handle you without speaking to you or, in a human sense, taking any notice of you. They only put on six glasses in my case, but after doing so they scarified the blisters and applied the glasses again. Each glass now drew about a dessert-spoonful of dark-coloured blood. As I lay down again, humiliated, disgusted and frightened by the thing that had been done to me, I reflected that now at least they would leave me alone. But no, not a bit of it. There was another treatment. coming, the mustard poultice, seemingly a matter of routine like the hot bath. Two slatternly nurses had already got the poultice ready, and they lashed it round my chest as tight as a strait-jacket while some men who were wandering about the ward in shirt and trousers began to collect round my bed with half-sympathetic grins. I learned later that watching a patient have a mustard poultice was a favourite pastime in the ward. These things are normally applied for a quarter of an hour and certainly they are funny enough if you don't happen to be the person inside. For the first five minutes the pain is severe, but you believe you can bear it. During the second five minutes this belief evaporates, but the poultice is buckled at the back and you can't get it off. This is the period the onlookers enjoy most. During the last five minutes, I noted, a sort of numbness supervenes. After the poultice had been removed a waterproof pillow packed with ice was thrust beneath my head and I was left alone. I did not sleep, and to the best of my knowledge this was the only night of my life--I mean the only night spent in bed--in which I have not slept at all, not even a minute. During my first hour in the H�pital X I had had a whole series of different and contradictory treatments, but this was misleading, for in general you got very little treatment at all, either good or bad, unless you were ill in some interesting and instructive way. At five in the morning the nurses came round, woke the patients and took their temperatures, but did not wash them. If you were well enough you washed yourself, otherwise you depended on the kindness of some walking patient. It was generally patients, too, who carried the bedbottles and die grim bedpan, nicknamed LA CASSEROLE. At eight breakfast arrived, called army-fashion LA SOUPE. It was soup, too, a thin vegetable soup with slimy hunks of bread floating about in it. Later in the day the tall, solemn, black-bearded doctor made his rounds, with an INTERNE and a troop of students following at his heels, but there were about sixty of us in the ward and it was evident that he had other wards to attend to as well. There were many beds past which he walked day after day, sometimes followed by imploring cries. On the other hand if you had some disease with which the students wanted to familiarize themselves you got plenty of attention of a kind. I myself, with an exceptionally fine specimen of a bronchial rattle, sometimes had as many as a dozen students queuing up to listen to my chest. It was a very queer feeling--queer, I mean, because of their intense interest in learning their job, together with a seeming lack of any perception that the patients were human beings. It is strange to relate, but sometimes as some young student stepped forward to take his turn at manipulating you he would be actually tremulous with excitement, like a boy who has at last got his hands on some expensive piece of machinery. And then ear after ear--ears of young men, of girls, of negroes--pressed against your back, relays of fingers solemnly but clumsily tapping, and not from any one of them did you get a word of conversation or a look direct in your face. As a non-paying patient, in the uniform nightshirt, you were primarily A SPECIMEN, a thing I did not resent but could never quite get used to. After some days I grew well enough to sit up and study the surrounding patients. The stuffy room, with its narrow beds so close together that you could easily touch your neighbour's hand, had every sort of disease in it except, I suppose, acutely infectious cases. My right-hand neighbour was a little red-haired cobbler with one leg shorter than the other, who used to announce the death of any other patient (this happened a number of times, and my neighbour was always the first to hear of it) by whistling to me, exclaiming "NUM�RO 43!" (or whatever it was) and flinging his arms above his head. This man had not much wrong with him, but in most of the other beds within my angle of vision some squalid tragedy or some plain horror was being enacted. In the bed that was foot to foot with mine there lay, until he died (I didn't see him die--they moved him to another bed), a little weazened man who was suffering from I do not know what disease, but something that made his whole body so intensely sensitive that any movement from side to side, sometimes even the weight of the bedclothes, would make him shout out with pain. His worst suffering was when he urinated, which he did with the greatest difficulty. A nurse would bring him the bedbottle and then for a long time stand beside his bed, whistling, as grooms are said to do with horses, until at last with an agonized shriek of "Je fissel" he would get started. In the bed next to him the sandy-haired man whom I had seen being cupped used to cough up blood-streaked mucus at all hours. My left-hand neighbour was a tall, flaccid-looking young man who used periodically to have a tube inserted into his back and astonishing quantities of frothy liquid drawn off from some part of his body. In the bed beyond that a veteran of the war of 1870 was dying, a handsome old man with a white imperial, round whose bed, at all hours when visiting was allowed, four elderly female relatives dressed all in black sat exactly like crows, obviously scheming for some pitiful legacy. In the bed opposite me in the farther row was an old bald-headed man with drooping moustaches and greatly swollen face and body, who was suffering from some disease that made him urinate almost incessantly. A huge glass receptacle stood always beside his bed. One day his wife and daughter came to visit him. At sight of them the old man's bloated face lit up with a smile of surprising sweetness, and as his daughter, a pretty girl of about twenty, approached the bed I saw that his hand was slowly working its way from under the bedclothes. I seemed to see in advance the gesture that was coming--the girl kneeling beside the bed, the old man's hand laid on her head in his dying blessing. But no, he merely handed her the bedbottle, which she promptly took from him and emptied into the receptacle. About a dozen beds away from me was Num�ro 57--I think that was his number--a cirrhosis-of-the-liver case. Everyone in the ward knew him by sight because he was sometimes the subject of a medical lecture. On two afternoons a week the tall, grave doctor would lecture in the ward to a party of students, and on more than one occasion old NUM�RO 57 was wheeled in on a sort of trolley into the middle of the ward, where the doctor would roll back his nightshirt, dilate with his fingers a huge flabby protruber-ance on the man's belly--the diseased liver, I suppose --and explain solemnly that this was a disease attributable to alcoholism, commoner in the wine-drinking countries. As usual he neither spoke to his patient nor gave him a smile, a nod or any kind of recognition. While he talked, very grave and upright, he would hold the wasted body beneath his two hands, sometimes giving it a gentle roll to and fro, in just the attitude of a woman handling a rolling-pin. Not that NUM�RO 57 minded this kind of thing. Obviously he was an old hospital inmate, a regular exhibit at lectures, his liver long since marked down for a bottle in some pathological museum. Utterly uninterested in what was said about him, he would lie with his colourless eyes gazing at nothing, while the doctor showed him off like a piece of antique china. He was a man of about sixty, astonishingly shrunken. His face, pale as vellum, had shrunken away till it seemed no bigger than a doll's. One morning my cobbler neighbour woke me up plucking at my pillow before the nurses arrived. "NUM�RO 57!"--he flung his arms above his head. There was a light in the ward, enough to see by. I could see old NUM�RO 57 lying crumpled up on his side, his face sticking out over the side of the bed, and towards me. He had died some rime during the night, nobody knew when. When the nurses came they received the news of his death indifferendy and went about their work. After a long dme, an hour or more, two other nurses marched in abreast like soldiers, with a great clumping of sabots, and knotted the corpse up in the sheets, but it was not removed till some dme later. Meanwhile, in the better light, I had had time for a good look at NUM�RO 57. Indeed I lay on my side to look at him. Curiously enough he was the first dead European I had seen. I had seen dead men before, but always Asiatics and usually people who had died violent deaths. NUM�RO 57's eyes were still open, his mouth also open, his small face contorted into an expression of agony. What most impressed me, however, was the whiteness of his face. It had been pale before, but now it was little darker than die sheets. As I gazed at the tiny, screwed-up face it struck me that dlis disgusting piece of refuse, waiting to be carted away and dumped on a slab in the dissecting room, was an example of "natural" death, one of the things you pray for in the Litany. There you are, then, I thought, that's what is waiting for you, twenty, thirty, forty years hence: that is how the lucky ones die, the ones who live to be old. One wants to live, of course, indeed one only stays alive by virtue of the fear of death, but I think now, as I thought then, that it's better to die violently and not too old. People talk about the horrors of war, but what weapon has man invented that even approaches in cruelty some of the commoner diseases? "Natural" death, almost by definition, means something slow, smelly and painful. Even at that, it makes a difference if you can achieve it in your own home and not in a public institution. This poor old wretch who had just flickered out like a candle-end was not even important enough to have anyone watching by his deathbed. He was merely a number, then a "subject" for the students' scalpels. And the sordid publicity of dying in such a place! In the H�pital X the beds were very close together and there were no screens. Fancy, for instance, dying like the little man whose bed was for a while foot to foot with mine, the one who cried out when the bedclothes touched him! I dare say "JE PISSE!" were his last recorded words. Perhaps the dying don't bother about such things--that at least would be the standard answer: nevertheless dying people are often more or less normal in their minds till within a day or so of the end. In the public wards of a hospital you see horrors that you don't seem to meet with among people who manage to die in their own homes, as though certain diseases only attacked people at the lower income levels. But it is a fact that you would not in any English hospitals see some of the things I saw in the H�pital X. This business of people just dying like animals, for instance, with nobody standing by, nobody interested, the death not even noticed till the morning--this happened more than once. You certainly would not see that in England, and still less would you see a corpse left exposed to the view of the other patients. I remember that once in a cottage hospital in England a man died while we were at tea, and though there were only six of us in the ward the nurses managed things so adroitly that the man was dead and his body removed without our even hearing about it till tea was over. A thing we perhaps underrate in England is the advantage we enjoy in having large numbers of well-trained and rigidly-disciplined nurses. No doubt English nurses are dumb enough, they may tell fortunes with tea-leaves, wear Union Jack badges and keep photographs of the Queen on their mantelpieces, but at least they don't let you lie unwashed and constipated on an unmade bed, out of sheer laziness. The nurses at the H�pital X still had a tinge of Mrs Gamp about them, and later, in the military hospitals of Republican Spain, I was to see nurses almost too ignorant to take a temperature. You wouldn't, either, see in England such dirt as existed in the H�pital X. Later on, when I was well enough to wash myself in the bathroom, I found that there was kept there a huge packing case into which the scraps of food and dirty dressings from the ward were flung, and the wainscodngs were infested by crickets. When I had got back my clothes and grown strong on my legs I fled from the H�pital X, before my time was up and without waiting for a medical discharge. It was not the only hospital I have fled from, but its gloom and bareness, its sickly smell and, above all, something in its mental atmosphere stand out in my memory as exceptional. I had been taken there because it was the hospital belonging to my ARRONDISSEMENT, and I did not learn till after I was in it that it bore a bad reputation. A year or two later the celebrated swindler, Madame Han-aud, who was ill while on remand, was taken to the H�pital X, and after a few days of it she managed to elude her guards, took a taxi and drove back to the prison, explaining that she was more comfortable there. I have no doubt that the H�pital X was quite untypical of French hospitals even at that date. But the patients, nearly all of them working men, were surprisingly resigned. Some of them seemed to find the conditions almost comfortable, for at least two were destitute malingerers who found this a good way of getting through the winter. The nurses connived because the malingerers made themselves useful by doing odd jobs. But the attitude of the majority was: of course this is a lousy place, but what else do you expect? It did not seem strange to them that you should be woken at five and then wait three hours before starting the day on watery soup, or that people should die with no one at their bedside, or even that your chance of getting medical attention should depend on catching the doctor's eye as he went past. According to their traditions that was what hospitals were like. If you are seriously ill and if you are too poor to be treated in your own home, then you must go into hospital, and once there you must put up with harshness and discomfort, just as you would in the army. But on top of this I was interested to find a lingering belief in the old stories that have now almost faded from memory in England--stories, for instance, about doctors cutting you open out of sheer curiosity or thinking it funny to start operating before you were properly "under". There were dark tales about a little operating-room said to be situated just beyond the bathroom. Dreadful screams were said to issue from this room. I saw nothing to confirm these stories and no doubt they were all nonsense, though I did see two students kill a sixteen-year-old boy, or nearly kill him (he appeared to be dying when I left the hospital, but he may have recovered later) by a mischievous experiment which they probably could not have tried on a paying patient. Well within living memory it used to be believed in London that in some of the big hospitals patients were killed off to get dissection subjects. I didn't hear this tale repeated at the H�pital X, but I should think some of the men there would have found it credible. For it was a hospital in which not the methods, perhaps, but something of the atmosphere of the nineteenth century had managed to survive, and therein lay its peculiar interest. During the past fifty years or so there has been a great change in the relationship between doctor and patient. If you look at almost any literature before the later part of the nineteenth century, you find that a hospital is popularly regarded as much the same thing as a prison, and an old-fashioned, dungeon-like prison at that. A hospital is a place of filth, torture and death, a sort of antechamber to the tomb. No one who was not more or less destitute would have thought of going into such a place for treatment. And especially in the early part of the last century, when medical science had grown bolder than before without being any more successful, the whole business of doctoring was looked on with horror and dread by ordinary people. Surgery, in particular, was believed to be no more than a peculiarly gruesome form of sadism, and dissection, possible only with the aid of bodysnatchers, was even confused with necromancy. From the nineteenth century you could collect a large horror-literature connected with doctors and hospitals. Think of poor old George III, in his dotage, shrieking for mercy as he sees his surgeons approaching to "bleed him till he faints"! Think of the conversations of Bob Sawyer and Benjamin Alien, which no doubt are hardly parodies, or the field hospitals in LA D�B�CLE and WAR AND PEACE, or that shocking description of an amputation in Melville's WHITEJACKET! Even the names given to doctors in nineteenth-century English fiction, Slasher, Carver, Sawyer, Fillgrave and so on, and the generic nickname "sawbones", are about as grim as they are comic. The anti-surgery tradition is perhaps best expressed in Tennyson's poem, The Children's Hospital, which is essentially a pre-chloroform document though it seems to have been written as late as 1880. Moreover, the outlook which Tennyson records in this poem had a lot to be said for it. When you consider what an operation without anaesthetics must have been like, what it notoriously WAS like, it is difficult not to suspect the motives of people who would undertake such things. For these bloody horrors which the students so eagerly looked forward to ("A magnificent sight if Slasher does it!") were admittedly more or less useless: the patient who did not die of shock usually died of gangrene, a result which was taken for granted. Even now doctors can be found whose motives are questionable. Anyone who has had much illness, or who has listened to medical students talking, will know what I mean. But anaesthetics were a turning point, and disinfectants were another. Nowhere in the world, probably would you now see the kind of scene described by Axel Munthe in THE STORY OF SAN MICHELE, when the sinister surgeon in top hat and frock coat, his starched shirtfront spattered with blood and pus, carves up patient after patient with the same knife and flings the severed limbs into a pile beside the table. Moreover, the national health insurance has partly done away with the idea that a working-class patient is a pauper who deserves little consideration. Well into this century it was usual for "free" patients at the big hospitals to have their teeth extracted with no anaesthetic. They didn't pay, so why should they have an anaesthetic-- that was the attitude. That too has changed. And yet every institution will always bear upon it some lingering memory of its past. A barrack-room is still haunted by the ghost of Kipling, and it is difficult to enter a workhouse without being reminded of OLIVER TWIST. Hospitals began as a kind of casual ward for lepers and the like to die in, and they continued as places where medical students learned their art on the bodies of the poor. You can still catch a faint suggestion of their history in their characteristically gloomy architecture. I would be far from complaining about the treatment I have received in any English hospital, but I do know that it is a sound instinct that warns people to keep out of hospitals if possible, and especially out of the public wards. Whatever the legal position may be, it is unquestionable that you have far less control over your own treatment, far less certainty that frivolous experiments will not be tried on you, when it is a case of "accept the discipline or get out". And it is a great thing to die in your own bed, though it is better still to die in your boots. However great the kindness and the efficiency, in every hospital death there will be some cruel, squalid detail, something perhaps too small to be told but leaving terribly painful memories behind, arising out of the haste, the crowding, the impersonality of a place where every day people are dying among strangers. The dread of hospitals probably still survives among the very poor, and in all of us it has only recently disappeared. It is a dark patch not far beneath the surface of our minds. I have said earlier that when I entered the ward at the H�pital X I was conscious of a strange feeling of familiarity. What the scene reminded me of, of course, was the reeking, pain-filled hospitals of the nineteenth century, which I had never seen but of which I had a traditional knowledge. And something, perhaps the black-clad doctor with his frowsy black bag, or perhaps only the sickly smell, played the queer trick of unearthing from my memory that poem of Tennyson's, The Children's Hospital, which I had not thought of for twenty years. It happened that as a child I had had it read aloud to me by a sick-nurse whose own working life might have stretched back to the time when Tennyson wrote the poem. The horrors and sufferings of the old-style hospitals were a vivid memory to her. We had shuddered over the poem together, and then seemingly I had forgotten it. Even its name would probably have recalled nothing to me. But the first glimpse of the ill-lit murmurous room, with the beds so close together, suddenly roused the train of thought to which it belonged, and in the night that followed I found myself remembering the whole story and atmosphere of the poem, with many of its lines complete. |

**The Writing on the Wall**

##### [January 30, 1969](http://www.nybooks.com/issues/1969/jan/30/) [Mary McCarthy](http://www.nybooks.com/contributors/mary-mccarthy/)

The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell
edited by Sonia Orwell, edited by Ian Angus
Harcourt, Brace & World, Vol. IV, 521 pp., $40 the set

This collection of Orwelliana—essays, journalism, letters—is very sparse in letters. Orwell was not much of a correspondent, and the people he must have written to, e.g., his parents, evidently did not save his letters. In four thick volumes, only one to his mother turns up, one to his wife Eileen, one to Sonia Brownell, whom he married in his last illness, none to his father or his sisters. He writes his publisher that the older sister, Marjorie, has died and he will have to go up to Nottingham for her funeral, and footnotes let us in on the fact that the younger one, Avril, was actually living with him as his housekeeper after his wife’s death and taking care of his adopted son. Did he never leave a note on the kitchen table when he went out for a walk or write her during his absences to inquire how things were going? Not a word from Burma, where he spent more than five years in the Indian Imperial Police; four letters (one partly business) and a postcard from Spain, during the Civil War. It was mainly publishers, editors, his agent, his executor, writer friends—people with office space and the professional habit of filing documents—who duly kept his correspondence. This gives a bleak impression of a life.

From April 1939 to January 1940, there is a blank; you would never know that the war had broken out on September 3 and that he was trying to enlist in the army—quite a reversal since when last heard from he had been violently opposing a war with Germany, declaring that it would result in the “Fascization” of England and that the British Empire was worse than Hitler. Such epistolary blanks, like holes cut out by the censor, surround the principal events of his life, both in the private sphere (what led to his marriages? did he never write a love letter?) and in the sphere of politics, where so much of his passion as a writer and journalist centered.

Take Hiroshima. It is first mentioned in his regular “London Letter” to *Partisan Review*. You would expect some further reactions in letters to his friends on the Left. Nothing. Ten days after Nagasaki he is writing to Herbert Read about organizing a Freedom Defense Committee, *Animal Farm*, the death of his wife, which had happened some months before, a holiday he plans to take, Labor Party politics, the doings of common friends. Since he has been emphatically approving (May 1944, in a polemic with Vera Brittain in *Tribune*) the saturation bombing of German cities on the basis of military realism, the reader is curious as to how he will “take” the atom bomb. Later (October 1945, “You and the Atom Bomb”), he foresaw the enormous significance of nuclear weapons in maintaining an international balance of terror and a political status quo within the super-states, but what happened in between, what caused him to revise his common-sense, let’s-cut-the-cackle defense of the practice of total war, is not revealed in these volumes. There was something in Orwell that made him jib at the atom bomb, maybe what he called “decency,” yet whatever it was, quirk or deep moral sanity, remains to be guessed at.

Or take the gas chambers. Though he was in Germany as a reporter shortly after the surrender, he seems to have been unconscious of the death camps, which just then were being discovered further east. No letters, apparently, have survived from this period, or perhaps he did not write any. The dispatches he sent to *The Observer* and *The Manchester Evening News* have not been reprinted here (presumably for lack of interest), but in his regular journalism he continues to speak of “concentration camps,” as if he did not know about the extermination camps or as if unaware of a difference—impossible to tell which. You will not find “Auschwitz” or “Genocide” in the index, and Orwell’s attitude toward atrocity stories is sometimes that of the plain Englishman rendered suspicious of “propaganda”; the departure from the average represented by an atrocity put a tax on his powers of belief. At other times, while conceding that there *were* such things as war crimes, he tended to write them off as committed by both sides and hence, on the balance sheet, cancelling each other out. If the crucial fact of Auschwitz finally “got to him”—he lived, after all, until 1950—the record is amnesiac.

In view of the uncanny “natural selection,” which has decreed, as though according to his wish, that whatever was intimate or revealing in the private letters of the man who became “George Orwell” should perish, the survival of the first letter in this collection, dated 1920, is all the more extraordinary and dramatic. Of the hundreds of schoolboy “missives” he must have penned in his copper-plate handwriting, why should this one—and this one only—have come to light? Eric Blair, aged seventeen, is writing to a school friend from his family’s summer home in Cornwall: “My dear Runciman, I have little spare time, & I feel I *must* tell you about my first adventure as an amateur tramp. Like most tramps, I was driven to it….” He goes on to explain how, taking the train from Eton for his summer holidays, he unwisely got out of the carriage at a station, was left behind, missed his last connection, and was stranded for the night in Plymouth with seven pence ha’penny, where he had a choice of staying at the YMCA for sixpence with no supper or buying twelve buns for the same money and sleeping in a farmer’s field. He chose the second and passed a cramped, cold August night surrounded by neighboring dogs that barked at his every movement and risked getting him put in the clink for fourteen days—he understood that “frequently” happened if you were caught on somebody else’s property with no visible means of support. “I am very proud of this adventure,” he ends, “but I would not repeat it.”

Such a relatively unadventurous adventure has been granted to many middle-class children: missing your train, being stranded without money, sleeping or trying to sleep in a cold, uncomfortable, *illicit* place in great fear of detection. I once slept in a confessional box while running away from home and, another time, aged fourteen or fifteen, I spent most of a cold night roaming about the back yard of a university student I loved, dressed in my first evening gown (yellow chiffon with a silver belt and a bunch of cherries at the waist) with a bottle of poison in my hand. I too was unnerved by the barking of neighboring dogs and also by the clatter of garbage-can lids, which I must have jostled as I passed, in my new silver slippers, to match the belt; a bride of Death was the principle of my costume. Though eager to die, I was terribly fearful of being caught trespassing before I could swallow the iodine and be discovered on the premises as a corpse.

In that charade, no necessity was operating. I was not “driven” into an action that might have led a suspicious person to call the police. I could equally well have killed myself in my own bed or at the wash basin, leaving a note. Yet in fact the young Eric Blair did not *have* to pass the night in a farmer’s field in some “slummy allotment.” He must have known about the Salvation Army. Obviously an alert internal prompter notified him that here was his chance: *carpe diem*. Indeed, his letter to Steven Runciman sounds as if the idea of being a tramp was something they had often discussed at school. Now he had done it and was happy to furnish the details.

Ten years pass before Blair is heard from again, and now he is addressing an editor, enclosing an article he has written: “The Spike.” It is an account of one of the casual wards where he has been sheltering, with other derelicts, while tramping through the south of England. Soon, rearranged, it will turn up in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the first published book of “George Orwell,” who was contriving to bury Blair in more senses than one. Before assuming the identity of a part-time tramp in England, he had been working as a dishwasher and kitchen porter in Paris. He picked hops in Kent as a migratory laborer (described here in “Hop-Picking”) and made an effort to penetrate the inside of prison life by deliberately getting himself arrested as drunk and disorderly (“Clink”)—a failure; they let him out after forty-eight hours. From 1927 till 1932, in Paris, London, and southeast England, Blair was purposefully moving in the lower depths of society among the wrecks and the jetsam. He was conducting a sort of survey, the reverse of the traditional Grand Tour, of the geography and institutions of these nether regions: workhouses, flophouses, Salvation Army shelters, cheap lodgings, jail. It is clear that he was not doing this for “copy,” nor was he exactly forced to it by shortness of money; his favorite aunt was living in Paris all the time he was down and out there, but, so far as one can tell in the absence of any letters, he does not seem to have touched her for a loan.

It is as though, once he had resigned from the Indian Service, he wished to be acted *upon*, rather than to act, that is, to follow the line of least resistance and see where it led—a quite common impulse in a writer, based on a mystical feeling that the will is evil. Blair-Orwell detested and resented every form of power; in politics, he loved rubbing his opponents’ noses in reality, the opposite of the corporate or individual will, just as in language he hated abstraction, the separation of mental concepts from the plurality of the concrete. The line of least resistance, obeying a law of social gravity, led him naturally downward to gauge the depths of powerlessness and indignity, and the knowledge he brought back made it impossible for him ever to eat a meal in a smart restaurant again, in the same way as, later, after going down into the English coal mines, he wrote “I don’t think I shall ever feel the same about coal again.” Every now and then, in those four or five years of vagrancy, Blair surfaced, working as a tutor to a defective boy, staying with his older sister and her husband, staying with his parents, only to plunge back again into anonymity. Was this “coming up for air” a simple manifestation of the life-instinct or some complicated testing of his forces of resiliency? By coming to the top he kept his freedom to sink once more, when the spirit moved him. He refused to drop definitively out of sight by an act of choice.

Certainly he was not averse to abrupt decisions: the resolve to fight in Spain (we do not see the resolve forming; here is another of those blanks—he suddenly writes to his agent that he will be going to Spain in about a week, though up to then—December 15, 1936—the war in Spain has not even been mentioned), the resolve to write the book about the coal mines, living in with the miners’ families, the resolve to rent a farmhouse on the remote island of Jura in the Hebrides.

That last decision was probably fatal, but for the reader, gifted with foresight, every move, starting with that first juvenile “adventure,” has been fatal and fateful—a succession of coffin nails hammered home. It was in the cards: death of pulmonary tuberculosis, aged 46, London University Hospital. Q.E.D. Like a spectator at a play of preternaturally tight construction, the reader is gripped with horror, admiration, anger, pity, revulsion as he races through the early accounts (sometimes printed here for the first time) of Orwell’s experiments in crossing the class barrier, experiments conducted ruthlessly on his own frame, in a scientific spirit, for though he was a strong believer in individual difference and came to fear, above all, the thought that people would become interchangeable parts in a totalitarian system, he seems to have felt that as a subject for study himself he was a universal, i.e., a fair sample of his kind, capable of normative reactions under dissection. His end has something macabre in it, like the end of some Victorian pathologist who tested his theories on his own organs, neglecting asepsis. In his last letters, he speaks of his appearance as being “frightening,” of being “a death’s head,” but all along he has been something of a specter at the feast. He was prone to see the handwriting on the wall, for England, for socialism, for personal liberty; indeed, his work is one insistent *reminder*, and his personal life—what we glimpse of it—even when he was fairly affluent seems to have been an illustrated lesson in survival techniques under extreme conditions, as though he expected to be cast adrift in a capsule.

Survival interested him greatly, yet the punishment he gave his own body almost insured its rapid decline. It was a miracle he lasted as long as he did, considering. An undiscovered lesion in his lung contracted in his Dickensian boarding-school (“Such, Such Were the Joys”), a bout with pneumonia in the Hôpital Cochin in Paris (“How the Poor Die”), the throat wound from a sniper’s bullet during the Spanish Civil War, the first sanatorium, in Kent, the winter in a warm climate—Marrakech—prescribed by the doctors, another illness, the War, rejection by the Army as medically unfit, service in the Home Guard, austerity, poverty, assiduous overwork, the cold winter of 1947, the second attack, the sanatorium in Glasgow, the Crusoe-like severities of the primitive island of Jura, which was often cut off from the mainland, near-drowning in a whirlpool and exposure while waiting for rescue, the third attack…. When his first wife, Eileen, aged 39, died while he was abroad just after the German surrender, he ought, one feels, to have taken it as a warning signal to himself: what was the cause of her unexplained “poor health”? He does not seem to have wondered. “When Eileen and I were first married,” he had written a few years earlier to his friend, Jack Common, “… we hardly knew where the next meal was coming from but we found we could rub along in a remarkable manner with spuds and so forth.” More than once he speaks of how women of the working class age early in comparison to middle-class women, and it sounds as though Eileen O’Shaughnessy, a doctor’s daughter, had embraced a working-class fate in marrying Eric Blair. “Yes, she was a good old stick,” he said after her death to a friend who was expressing sympathy.

The consumption that carried off Orwell used to be considered a disease of the industrial poor. It cannot be an accident that so many of the best writers of our century have been consumptive: D.H. Lawrence, Kafka, Silone, Simone Weil, Camus, but also Thomas Mann and Katherine Mansfield, who do not appear to “belong” to this company of prophets and holy outcasts, although Katherine Mansfield was often desperately poor. Tuberculosis, for artists of this century, is what syphilis was for the nineteenth, a sign, almost, of election. But whereas venereal disease was the mark of commerce with Venus (now fully licensed), a lesion of the lung appears among modern writers as a sort of Franciscan stigmata, a mark of familiarity with privation; after all, poverty today, at least in the West, is a “stigma.” Most of those tubercular writers can be imagined as constituting a brotherhood or third order outside ordinary society, a brotherhood of intractables. Simone Weil going to work in a factory and eventually starving herself to death in order to share the diet of the people of occupied France was answering the same “call” as Orwell living among the derelicts and hop-pickers or as Silone militating in the underground, in clandestinity. It may be significant that no American writer, so far as I know, has contracted tuberculosis, and no American writer of this age has been an inspired “voice,” like Camus, like Orwell, like Lawrence, like Simone Weil, like Silone, like Kafka.

A copy of *1984*, translated into Hungarian and secretly passed about, is said to have been the catalyst of the Hungarian Revolution. *Animal Farm*, a precious text too in Eastern Europe, became a classic the day it was published. But surely Orwell’s best work is that of his heroic early period: *Down and Out in Paris and London*, “A Hanging,” “Shooting an Elephant,” *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and finally *Homage to Catalonia*, which ends his novitiate. These terse writings resemble loose-leaf pages from a diary, which has *survived* to tell the tale. Or they are like polished driftwood, not intended for the coffee-table. There was always something unwelcome in Orwell’s revelations: the return of the repressed. This note was struck again, hard and fierce, in two of his later essays, jotted down, it would seem, for his own satisfaction when he was already famous and successful: “How the Poor Die” and “Such, Such Were the Joys.” He would not forget having touched bottom, which assured him of having his feet on the ground.

His book reviews and literary essays (“Inside the Whale,” “Dickens, Dali and Others”) are not especially acute, except in flashes. His penetration was less literary than moral; he was on the lookout for the hidden flaw in an author. More important historically are “Boys’ Weeklies,” “The Art of Donald McGill,” “Raffles and Miss Blandish.” The criticism of popular culture was a genre he virtually invented; it is hard to remember that, before him, it scarcely existed, though there were anticipations of it in the early Rebecca West and in Q. D. Leavis (*Fiction and the Reading Public*). “I have often thought,” he wrote to Geoffrey Gorer in 1936, “it would be very interesting to study the conventions etc. of *books* from an anthropological point of view…. It would be interesting & I believe valuable to work out the underlying beliefs & general imaginative background of a writer like Edgar Wallace. But of course that’s the kind of thing nobody will ever print.” This gloomy forecast no doubt pleased him; he would not have liked to know that he would be starting a fashion for that “kind of thing.”

He was on to something new in “Boys’ Weeklies” (1939), but not exactly new to him. He had done something like it, though he may not have been aware of the parallel, in his masterpiece, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I.e., he was making a *descent*. An exploratory plunge into the limbo of sub-literature, sub-art: cheap stories for boys, comic postcards, thrillers. He was also very much interested in a category which Chesterton had named “good bad books”; he was an avid collector of pamphlets and he had a great memory for hymns and music-hall songs. He enjoyed this type of material and believed that everyone else did, if they would only confess the truth, and, as happens with sports and hobbies, his enjoyment was solemnized by expertise, the rites of comparing, collating, a half-deliberate parody of scholarship, like the recitation of batting averages (cf. Senator McCarthy).

If there was anything he despised, it was fashion; whatever was “in” affected him with a kind of violent claustrophobia. He wanted out. His first escape attempt was to Burma. On the surface this looks natural enough. He was born in Bengal; his father was in the Indian Service, and his mother was the daughter of a tea-merchant in Burma. Yet if he was following family tradition (he had “worshipped” Kipling as a boy), he was also eluding the career open to his talents; the next step after Eton ought to have been Cambridge or Oxford, then the London literary world. Instead, he became a policeman. Whatever his parents thought, from the point of view of his contemporaries at Eton he could have sunk no lower. Empire was out of fashion. But from his own point of view the colonial society he found in Burma must have been preferable to the London literary cliques, if only because the second looked down on and snickered at the first.

He hated intellectuals, pansies, and “rich swine,” as he called millionaires, and nothing made him angrier during the War than the fact that repairs were being made to the empty grand houses in the West End. He was also incensed at the suggestion that rationing should end. His extreme egalitarianism involved cutting down to size any superior pretensions. He was quick to catch the smell of luxury, material or intellectual; he sneered at Joyce for trying to be “above the battle” while living in Zurich on a British pension, at Gandhi for playing “with his spinning-wheel in the mansion of some cotton millionaire.” The luxury of being a pacifist (“fascifist”) in wartime drove him into furies of invective; at different times he compared Gandhi to Frank Buchman, Pétain, Salazar, Hitler, and Rasputin. He was capable of making friends with individual plain-living pacifists and anarchists, e.g., George Woodcock, having attacked them in print, but he continued to regard anarchism as at best an affectation (at worst it was “a form of power-worship”); the pretense that you could do without government was mental self-indulgence. What he really had against intellectuals, pansies, and rich swine was that they are all fashion-carriers—a true accusation. Fashion is an incarnation of wasteful luxury (nobody *needs* a mini-skirt), and one thing he liked about the poor was that they could not afford to be modish—a somewhat tautological point.

He did not mythicize the poor (he loathed myths too); he saw them rather dourly as they were. Their imperviousness to middle-class ideas was both an argument in their favor and a reason for despair since they showed no signs of inventing a socialism of their own, and he did passionately want socialism for everyone, on moral and rational grounds; as he pointed out, the machine had changed everything: “So long as methods of production were primitive, the great mass of the people were necessarily tied down to dreary, exhausting manual labor: and a few people had to be set free from such labor, otherwise civilization could not maintain itself, let alone make any progress. But since the arrival of the machine the whole pattern has altered. The justification for class distinctions, if there is a justification, is no longer the same, because there is no mechanical reason why the average human being should continue to be a drudge.” Yet the poor and the working class, slow to change their habits (and maybe because of this), possessed at any rate “common decency”—a quality Orwell found absent in many intellectuals and well-to-do people. “One has the right,” he says despondently, speaking of Pound, “to expect ordinary decency even of a poet.” The “even” sums up his feelings. Having no vanity himself, though plenty of angry pride, he disallowed the claim of the artist to be exceptional in any way, and here he was flying in the face of reality. The artist *is* an exception and hence indulged and forgiven (also mistreated). But Orwell did not have much forgiveness. It is surprising, for instance, to find him indulgent to Sir Osbert Sitwell. His egalitarian strictness made him an incipient philistine mistrustful of the vagaries of art, not to mention the vagaries of the artist.

Indeed, he *was* a philistine, of a peculiar kind, that loved beauty, flowers, birds, Nature; this curmudgeon even loved poetry, not just good bad poetry, but the real thing. But it was a love crossed by misunderstandings, like the love, in some fable, of one species for another, a mastiff for a rose. He wrote bad poetry himself and sometimes in his early book reviews a schoolboy purpled prose. His genius was for precise observation of data and for quantifying, which made him a better analyst of the art of Frank Richards, author of boy’s stories, than of the art of Tolstoy. It is easier to quantify “the underlying beliefs & general imaginative background” of a Frank Richards than to apply these rule-of-thumb measurements to Tolstoy or Swift or Dickens.

Though aware of the impossibility of this, he would have liked to find some acid test to subject works of art to which would tell the investigator demonstrably whether they were good or bad. In fact he devised one for characters in fiction: a character in a novel “passes” if you can hold an imaginary conversation with him. In his own novels, only Big Brother, probably, would meet that eccentric requirement. He was a Sherlock Holmes fan and a lover of puzzles and brain-twisters, also of the odd fact of the “Believe It or Not” variety. His literary criticism often smacks of police detection, as when he discovers—quite astutely—that the fault of Koestler is “hedonism,” something that is not apparent to the untrained eye. He was not a natural novelist, having no interest in character or in the process of rising or sinking in ordinary society or in a field of work—a process that engaged the sympathies not just of Proust or Balzac but of Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Conrad, Zola, Dickens, Dreiser. He would have been indifferent both to success and to failure. It is hard to imagine the long family-chronicle novel in several volumes he was planning to write just as the War was breaking out. Maybe he did not have enough human weaknesses to be a real novelist.

He was interested in institutions, in whatever could be measured, counted, surveyed, in the mechanics of work, in cost. He inventories his books to find how much reading has cost him over the past fifteen years and gets a figure of 25 pounds a year. Calculated out at nine and ninepence a week, this equals 83 cigarettes (Players). Most of his books, he notes, he bought second-hand. He was always totting up. He maintained careful records of the minute profits of the small village shop he kept (about one pound a week), of crops planted in his garden, of the milk produced by his goats and eggs laid by his hens. When the War comes, he reckons that he can grow half a ton of potatoes in one year, which ought to see them through the all-but-certain food shortage. And shortly after Munich, he tries to enlist Herbert Read in a scheme to buy printing presses to be ready to get out clandestine leaflets when England goes fascist; estimated cost probably three or four hundred pounds. He is sure fascism is coming because he has added up the possibilities and he “cannot believe that the time when you can buy a printing press with no questions asked will last forever.”

In his political speculations he thought in terms of futures and sought out “laws” to ease the labor of prediction (wars break out in the autumn, after the harvest has been got in; the decline of the British Empire was attributable to the invention of the telegraph, which killed off individual initiative and centered decisions in Whitehall), just as when arriving at a spike he sought to find its characteristic defect—every spike had one. He was fascinated by the inner workings of institutions and would have liked to take them apart, like a watch. His inventiveness was of an old-fashioned, hard-headed, utilitarian kind. At one time he “tried to devise an envelope which couldn’t be opened without the fact becoming apparent.” After a tabulation and breakdown of famous cases, he amused himself constructing a model of the popular idea of the perfect murder. Some similar ratiocination must have led to the construction of the “model” societies of *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Building these ingenious, air-tight, neat worlds based on a few simple principles such as double-think and “but some are more equal than others” must have appealed to his sardonic imagination.

He was an unsociable bird and so far as one can tell he held little communion with himself, except to the extent that he was a source of data, the nearest one at hand. He used himself, as I said, as an experimental animal in the course of his social researches. Or as a “control.” Hence he had to keep himself under observation with impartial scientific rigor, and this is especially evident in his early period, when he was a “pure” recording instrument and his writing was most delicate and exact. His celebrated honesty was a workmanly quality. It is a question of keeping your tools clean. A precision tool must be “true,” straight as a die.

Later he formed the habit of making avowals to his readers, often in a truculent manner. For instance he admits suddenly that he has never been able to dislike Hitler. Such a confession “expects” that the reader feels the same but has not had the bravado to declare it. The part of himself that Orwell exposes to his readers—and the only part that interests him—is the common man, the man on the street, You and I, insofar as we are capable of honesty. Nigel Dennis said that Orwell’s appeal was “to what everyone knows in his heart,” but this is less a soft appeal than a challenge, a species of blackmail or bullying: if you think you dislike Hitler, you are a hypocrite or a toady of fashion and you had better think again. The same with such phrases as “the pansy Left,” “the successive literary cliques which have infested this country,” “hordes of shrieking poseurs,” Blimpish summons to the boor in the reader’s heart to emerge with a safe-conduct. “To write in plain vigorous language one has to think fearlessly,” he declared. It is true that he did not care what people thought of him, but this may not always be such a virtue as he imagined; the opinion of others is a corrective.

Possibly Blair-Orwell was corrected too often in youth to brook it afterwards. Though he tots up afterwards, for the record, the mistakes in prophecy he has made in his “London Letter” to *Partisan Review*, he is generally convinced of his own rightness and never repents an error with a truly contrite heart. Once he has changed his mind he seems to be unconscious of having done so and can write to Victor Gollancz early in 1940, “The intellectuals who are at present pointing out that democracy & fascism are the same thing depress me horribly,” evidently forgetting that he has been saying that himself a year earlier. On the occasions when, conscious of a possible previous injustice, he starts out to write a reappraisal, as in the cases of Gandhi and Tolstoy, he slowly swings around to his original position, restated in less intemperate language. In “Why I Write,” he declared “I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world view that I acquired in childhood.” This is loyal and admirable in the man, but it is a grave limitation on thinking. Lacking religion and mistrustful of philosophy, he stayed stubbornly true to himself and to his instincts, for which he could find no other word than “decency,” as if no further definition was needed. The refusal to examine this concept (is it innate or handed down and if so what is the source of its binding power?) makes Orwell an uncertain guide to action, especially in the realm of politics, unless he is taken as a saint, that is a transmitter of revelation—a class of person he had a great distaste for.

It is impossible, at least for me, to guess how he would have stood on many leading questions of our day. Surely he would have opposed the trial and execution of Eichmann, but where would he be on the war in Vietnam? I wish I could be certain that he would not be with Kingsley Amis and Bernard Levin (who with John Osborne seem to be his main progeny), partly because of his belligerent anti-Communism, which there is no use trying, as Conor Cruise O’Brien does, to discount, and partly because it is modish to oppose the war in Vietnam: we are the current “pinks.” I can hear him angrily arguing that to oppose the Americans in Vietnam, whatever their shortcomings, is to be “objectively” pro-totalitarian. On the other hand, there was that decency. And what about CND? He took exception to the atom bomb, but as a “realist” he accepted the likelihood of an atomic confrontation in a few years’ time and computed the chances of survival: “If the show does start and is as bad as one fears,” he wrote from Jura to a friend, “it would be fairly easy to be self-supporting on these islands provided one wasn’t looted.” I cannot see him in an Aldermaston march, along with long-haired cranks and vegetarians, or listening to a Bob Dylan or Joan Baez record or engaging in any of the current forms of protest. The word protest would make him sick. And yet he could hardly have supported Harold Wilson’s government. As for the student revolt, he might well have been out of sympathy for a dozen reasons, but would he have sympathized with the administrators? If he had lived, he might have been happiest on a desert island, and it was a blessing for him probably that he died.

If he is entitled to be called “the conscience of his generation,” this is mainly because of his identification with the poor. He was not unique in tearing the mask off Stalinism, and his relentless pursuit of Stalinists in his own milieu occasionally seems to be a mere product of personal dislike. Nobody could say that Orwell had sold out or would ever sell out for money; honors, women, pleasure; this gave him his authority, which sometimes, in my opinion, he abused. His political failure—despite everything, it *was* a failure if he left no ideas behind him to germinate—was one of thought. While denouncing power-worship in just about everybody and discovering totalitarian tendencies in Swift (the Houynhnhnms have a totalitarian society), Tolstoy, and gentle local anarchists and pacifists, he was in fact contemptuous of weakness—ineffectuality—in political minorities. Apparently he did not consider how socialism, if it was to be as radical and thorough-going as he wished, could secure a general accord or whether, failing such an accord, it should achieve power by force.

Actually during the War he was in favor of arbitrary measures, such as the seizure and requisitioning of empty mansions for housing the bombed-out poor—a sound enough notion but unlikely to be accepted by the Churchill government, as he of course knew. Would he have organized and led a committee of the homeless to storm and occupy those mansions? If not, why rail? It is a question whether Orwell’s socialism, savagely felt as it was, was not an unexamined idea off the top of his head: sheer rant.

In reality, though given to wild statements, he was conservative by temperament, as opposed as a retired colonel or a working-man to extremes of conduct, dress, or thought. He clung to the middle-class values which like himself in his early period had sunk to the bottom of society. His main attacks were launched against innovations, including totalitarianism, a “new” wrinkle in the history of oppression, and this may explain his revulsion from the atom bomb. “Man,” he wrote, “only stays human by preserving large patches of simplicity in his life,” a good dictum but hard to carry out unless some helpful Air Force general will bomb us back to the Stone Age. The longing to go back to some simpler form of life, minus modern conveniences, is typical of a whole generation of middle-class radicals whose loudest spokesman was Orwell. On the subject of socialism and progress, Orwell indulged in a good deal of double-think; in fact he hated the technology which he counted on to liberate the majority and loved working the land which in any rational socialist economy would be farmed by tractors. When the War finally came, he found an unsuspected patriot in himself via the agency of a dream. He had completed a circle: his first published writing, printed in a local paper (and not reprinted here), was a patriotic poem: “Awake, Young Men of England.” The date was October 2, 1914.

**Down and Out in Paris and London**

April 30, 2009 [We’ll Always Have Paris](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/well-always-have-paris.html) Posted by [*Ligaya Mishan*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/ligaya_mishan/search?contributorName=Ligaya%20Mishan)



The original manuscript of “Down and Out” took the form of a diary and bore the blander—but winkingly ironic, in its cheery touristic tone—title “Days in London and Paris.” (Note that Orwell revived this theme for his first novel, “Burmese Days.”) The book underwent several name changes, at one point being called “A Scullion’s Diary,” in a version that was rejected by T. S. Eliot, then an editor at Faber & Faber:

We did find it of very great interest, but I regret to say that it does not appear to me possible as a publishing venture.

The publisher who finally accepted the manuscript lobbied for a different title. Orwell suggested “Lady Poverty,” which was promptly dismissed. (Saved, like F. Scott Fitzgerald from “Trimalchio.”) The publisher parried with “Confessions of a Down and Out”; Orwell countered with “Confessions of a Dishwasher”; and in the end they compromised.

But Orwell’s uneasiness over how to label the work is telling. The jacket copy for the first edition brands it a novel, and it certainly reads like an autobiographical one, if not an outright memoir—as opposed to an anthropological study or political tract. As Dervla Murphy explains in the introduction to the 1989 edition of the book, Orwell went to Paris in 1928 with the intent of writing fiction:

He settled into a cheap hotel at 6 Rue du Pot de Fer, in the Latin Quarter, and within fifteen months had written two novels and several short stories, all repeatedly rejected and subsequently destroyed….

During this period of essential but apparently unrewarded hard work, Orwell sold only a few articles to obscure journals. Later he recalled, ‘My literary efforts in the first year barely brought me in twenty pounds.’ Then came the theft of the meagre remains of his savings, which had been irregularly augmented by giving English lessons. Probably the thief was not the young Italian described in Down and Out. Orwell subsequently confided to his friend Mabel Fierz that he had been stripped of all his money and most of his possessions by ‘a little trollop he’d picked up in a cafe’, a girl with whom he had had a relationship for some time. But consideration for his parents’ sensibilities would have required the suppression of this misadventure.

Should we mourn the unwritten? NewYorker8 finds the book “a tad too self-abnegating as well as utterly lacking in romance” (“certainly the sex was bad”—oh, for the little trollop), and wonders what Celine might have done with the material. DriedChar argues (and, as Keith Gessen [points out](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/reading-orwell-keith-gessen.html), Orwell agreed) that Henry Miller essentially wrote a better “Down and Out” in “Tropic of Cancer.” But where DriedChar considers Orwell’s style somewhat “proletarian,” Harp calls the book a page-turner and likens Orwell’s young voice to Holden Caulfield’s.

The echo makes sense: as in a coming-of-age tale, Orwell ventures out into the world, and is changed by it. My colleague Vicky Raab (to whom I owe the title of this valedictory post) writes,

To me, “Down and Out” read mostly like a classic bildungsroman: an unsentimental education and a bit of a slog. Orwell (before he becomes “Orwellian”), a peripatetic but not entirely purposeless young man, with an enviable writing style and an open mind (within the limitations of an Etonian education), immerses himself quasi-voluntarily among the working poor of Paris and London, and writes about it. Whether it is more of a diary in situ than a recollection in solitude, more fact than fiction, more Brechtian than Shavian, I, as a sympathetic reader, wondered about it but didn’t really care.

“Down and Out,” as published, may not be the book Orwell intended, first expanded from novella length (which would probably have been more acceptable in France) and then censored, stripped of its rawer language, the lens smeared for a softer focus. The two halves don’t quite fit: his tramping about England feels a bit mechanical, inflected with the gloomy single-mindedness of investigative journalism, while his life on the Rue du Coq d’Or is more of a spontaneous freefall—he plummets to the bottom with almost a giddiness, arm in arm with comrades who never seem to lose their capacity for glee, hatching mad schemes even when on the brink of starvation. (It’s hard not to conclude that it’s better to be poor in Paris than in London.) I do miss the little trollop, as well as the terrifying hospitalization that nearly two decades later became the subject of his essay “[How the Poor Die](http://www.literaturecollection.com/a/orwell/470/).” Still, I yearn for what’s not in these pages precisely because what’s there is so vivid; I simply wish for more.

Let’s end here as Orwell does: first with his self-deprecating (and oh-so-British) claim that this is but “a fairly trivial story” and his acknowledgment that he has experienced no more than “the fringe of poverty,” and then, casting off his beggar’s cloak, a call to arms:

I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy, nor subscribe to the Salvation Army, nor pawn my clothes, nor refuse a handbill, nor enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant. That is a beginning.

### [Reading Orwell: James Wood](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/reading-orwell-james-wood.html)

Posted by [*The New Yorker*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/the_new_yorker/search?contributorName=The%20New%20Yorker)

Earlier this month, readers submitted questions for James Wood about his [essay](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/13/090413fa_fact_wood) on George Orwell. The [answers](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/ask/2009/04/questions-for-wood.html) are now up, on topics ranging from political euphemism to Orwell’s statement that “Good prose is like a window pane”—which Wood translates as Orwell’s desire “to snatch reality, without too much obvious aesthetic fussing.”

One response seems particularly apropos for our discussion of “Down and Out in Paris and London”:

You write, “The real struggle for this puritan masochist, the one that was personal—the one that was, ironically, enough, inherited—was the struggle to obliterate privilege, and thus, in some sense, to obliterate himself.” Why?Daniel RodgerNew York, New York

I simply meant that Orwell seems to have been quite obsessed by the need to do away with privilege. In effect, that meant doing away with his own privilege, and thus effacing himself. Here was an upper class Old Etonian who went to live like a pauper in Paris; who tramped around England with the homeless; who fought with workers and radicals in Spain; and who, even when he was working as a journalist in London, lived simply, without much luxury. There is a religious dimension to this, almost—a need to take a kind of vow of poverty, to dismantle his own privilege and luxury, to be other than his social background. I find it admirable, though no doubt it drove his friends mad. V. S. Pritchett came from a working-class background, and found Orwell’s proletarian affectations rather irritating…

April 24, 2009

### [Reading Orwell: Keith Gessen](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/reading-orwell-keith-gessen.html)

Posted by [*Keith Gessen*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/keith_gessen/search?contributorName=Keith%20Gessen)

One of the best and most challenging books about Orwell is by the socialist literary critic Raymond Williams. As a critic—and in some ways as a figure, at least within the academy—Williams was what England had in the generation after Orwell, and toward the end of his life he became more critical of his predecessor. This has allowed Williams’s critics, in turn, to pretend that he took a quasi-Stalinist line with regard to Orwell—which is not the case.

Williams does, however, frame Orwell’s life as a tragedy: specifically, the tragedy of someone who tried with all his might to leave the class into which he was born, and failed. To Williams, Orwell was destined to fail—because you can’t escape the class you’re born into. When push comes to shove, you’ll relapse into a defense of strong tea, the asphidistra plant, and Her Majesty’s Royal Navy. The tragedy was in the trying.

But when the trying takes up your entire life—when that becomes your life and your work—it’s something more than trying. The opening lines of “The Road to Wigan Pier,” the next book of reportage Orwell produced after “Down and Out”:

The first sound in the mornings was the clumping of the mill-girls’ clogs down the cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I was never awake to hear.

Orwell knew very well that for all the clarity of his vision there were things he simply could not see (or hear, as in this case, and have to wake up for). [George Packer points to what Orwell said](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/reading-orwell-george-packer.html) about his guilt over his service in Burma, but it didn’t end there. It never ended. If you look at the three books of reportage he wrote—“Down and Out,” “Road to Wigan Pier,” then “Homage to Catalonia”—there is a progression not just in their quality but in the danger and discomfort Orwell put himself in.

It’s true that, during the period when he wrote “Down and Out,” he might have gone home to his family (though it was by no means a wealthy family), the way Thoreau used to come home occasionally from Walden; but when he went to Spain, for the book that became “Homage to Catalonia,” he went to shoot fascists. I would defend Orwell from the charge of slumming, at least from the charge of unconscious or self-congratulatory slumming, in “Down and Out,” but I would do it at least partly on the grounds that when he was being shot at in Spain, those were real bullets. (And one of them hit him.) The early experiences vouch for the honesty of the later ones, and vice versa—this is what Orwell did with his life. He saw for himself.

In 1939, Orwell wrote a long essay titled “[Inside the Whale](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/whale/english/e_itw),” about modernism, the nineteen-thirties, Henry Miller, and “Tropic of Cancer.” It’s sometimes treated as a literary-historical oddity that, as the Second World War was starting (“While I have been writing this essay,” Orwell says toward the end, “another European war has broken out”), Orwell would speak as well of Miller as he does.

But if you look at “Down and Out,” it’s perfectly natural. Keep in mind Orwell’s honesty, of which perhaps enough has been said but is worth mentioning again here, in the case of him giving unstinting praise to someone who’d managed to write a superior version of his first book. Orwell had seen Miller’s Paris with his own eyes, and in the essay he gets some jabs in, of the sort that he probably felt unready for when he was still an apprentice writer. (“It has been reckoned,” the older Orwell writes, “that in the late twenties there were as many as 30,000 painters in Paris, most of them impostors.”)

But at the same time, despite his memories, Orwell finds his enjoyment of “Tropic of Cancer” something of a mystery. “No material could be less promising” during a time of worldwide crisis, he says. In fact, he is insistent on how poor the material is, especially for a non-native Parisian. Still, he argues, Miller manages to produce a remarkable effect:

It is as though you could hear a voice speaking to you, a friendly American voice, with no humbug in it, no moral purpose, merely an implicit assumption that we are all alike. For the moment you have got away from the lies and simplifications… and are dealing with the recognizable experiences of human beings.

Orwell was a very different writer, but, working with very similar material (some of the characters in “Down and Out” almost seem to reappear in “Tropic of Cancer”), he produced in “Down and Out” a very similar effect. It was not so much a matter of writing about something that had never been written about before as of treating a topic that had in fact been much covered over in (what was in those years Communist) tendentiousness. I think that the basement where Orwell washed dishes in Paris was his first lesson in anti-humbug—and part of the lesson is that you have to keep renewing it. And Orwell did that.

April 23, 2009

### [Reading Orwell: George Packer](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/reading-orwell-george-packer.html)

Posted by [*George Packer*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/george_packer/search?contributorName=George%20Packer)

To judge “Down and Out in Paris and London” and the motives of its author, consider the context of how it came to be written. Orwell began “tramping” and staying in shelters in 1928, when he was twenty-four years old and had just returned from five years as a colonial policeman in Burma. This period (which the critic V. S. Pritchett described as “going native in his own country”) continued—including the year and a half Orwell spent as a dishwasher and English tutor in Paris—for the better part of four years.

That’s a long time to be poor and living as hard as Orwell did. It suggests more seriousness of purpose and staying power than some comments would grant him. It’s true that he came from some rung of the English middle class (“lower upper middle” he once called it, subcategory military), but it wasn’t a social world that leant itself to sponging off your parents. His decision to become poor was just that, but it wasn’t a joyride that he could easily have gotten off once under way, and it carried psychological as well as financial dangers. So why did he do it?

Orwell’s explanation, given a few years later in “The Road to Wigan Pier” (which is a far more sociological and political book, about the unemployed poor in northern England), connects the experience to his years as an imperial cop in Burma:

I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. I suppose that sounds exaggerated; but if you do for five years a job that you thoroughly disapprove of, you will probably feel the same…I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man’s dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed; to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants. And, chiefly because I had had to think everything out in solitude, I had carried my hatred of oppression to extraordinary lengths. At that time failure seemed to me to be the only virtue. Every suspicion of self-advancement, even to “succeed” in life to the extent of making a few hundreds a year, seemed to me spiritually ugly, a species of bullying.

So Orwell’s own account of his motives is political—but it’s politics at a very primitive stage, where it’s pretty much the sum of his psychological impulses. He had not been living in the kind of circles in which he would have gotten a sophisticated political education of any kind. He was fumbling his way in solitude toward an identification with the downtrodden, but without any theories or proposals—which, to my mind, is one of the strengths of “Down and Out,” not a weakness. A book by an apprentice writer about why the poor are poor and what should be done about it would probably not be a book you’d want to read today. This is a book that shows no fear of what you’re supposed to think.

As a result, it includes a fair amount of unreflective bigotry—no denying the anti-Semitism and other taints of an early-twentieth-century Englishman’s world view. But I don’t think the book is snobbish, which would mean a belief that the poor are inferior. There is disgust, prejudice, amusement, even horror, but what “Down and Out” shows is the start of Orwell’s harsh and prolonged regimen of self-mortification, with the goal of stripping himself of his class prejudices and privileges. That’s a long way from slumming.

The other point about the circumstances of “Down and Out” is that it’s a first book, and Orwell pursued the experiences it describes in order to learn to write. So the second motive was literary. Another comment he made several years later:

I gave in my resignation [as an imperial policeman] in the hopes of being able to earn my living by writing. I did just about as well as do most young people who take up a literary career—that is to say, none at all.

His literary beginnings were full of failures and wrong turns. He was far from a natural at the kind of work he really wanted to do, which was fiction-writing. But recording experience without flinching or sentimentalizing or self-aggrandizement or self-laceration—this is what Orwell seems to have known how to do from the start, and it’s what makes “Down and Out” a classic early work. It shows all the strengths of the nonfiction writing to come, in books like “Wigan Pier” and “Homage to Catalonia,” and also in his essays. (Compare “Down and Out” to an essay he wrote fifteen years later, but about the same period of his life, “[How the Poor Die](http://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/Poor_Die/english/e_pdie),” or to “Such, Such Were the Joys,” one of his final essays, about his school days. The power of portraiture and description, the casual directness of the voice, the assertions and overstatements, the zeroing in on difficult truths: the whole arsenal of the Orwell style is already apparent from the very start.)

Orwell did not write naturally from the imagination (which isn’t to say that every word of “Down and Out” is factual), but his observations from life and his prose were in sync. In later work he formed his own political beliefs (“against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism”), and readers who want more hardheaded analysis might look at “Wigan Pier,” “Homage,” and his Second World War book “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius,” which James Wood [wrote](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/13/090413fa_fact_wood) about at length in his excellent essay in the magazine a couple of weeks ago, and which includes the closest thing to an Orwell policy agenda.

But “Down and Out in Paris and London” is not policy, and it’s not politics. It’s a vivid record of life at society’s lower depths by a writer who’s learning the art of narrative and descriptive prose. The closest thing to an idea in it is something like this:

You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated. You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring. It is the peculiar /lowness/ of poverty that you discover first; the shifts that it puts you to, the complicated meanness, the crust-wiping.

Those sentences will be wonderfully readable no matter what the current view about the causes of poverty. “Down and Out” doesn’t completely hold together as a narrative—it was cobbled from two separate manuscripts, and it lacks a single guiding storyline—which might explain why one commenter grew bored. But every page has tremendous vitality, and this is directly related to the frank brutality of Orwell’s account of poverty.

The undeniable ugliness of his portraits of the poor is bound to put off some contemporary readers. To me, this probably reveals how soft we’ve become, how euphemistic we expect such writing to be, how many silent taboos and directives we carry around in our heads. The harshness of this book is an expression of its basic sympathy. If Orwell had made the poor nobler and more touching (or, worse, turned them into the heroes of nineteen-thirties socialist realism), he would have made their lives less true and therefore less damning of those of us who live in comfort.

April 22, 2009

### [Special Guests](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/special-guests.html)

Posted by [*The New Yorker*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/the_new_yorker/search?contributorName=The%20New%20Yorker)

Tomorrow and Friday, [George Packer](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/) and Keith Gessen will join us (from New York and Moscow, respectively) to share their thoughts on “Down and Out”—how the book came to be and what it tells us about Orwell as a writer, as a political thinker, and as a man. They’ll also respond to your comments from the past couple of weeks, addressing such issues as whether Orwell was just “slumming it,” the blurring of fact and fiction, and the rawness of his portrait of the poor.



Packer is a New Yorker [staff writer](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/george_packer/search?contributorName=george%20packer), author, and novelist, and the editor of a recently released two-volume edition of Orwell’s narrative and critical essays, “[Facing Unpleasant Facts](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Facing-Unpleasant-Facts/George-Orwell/e/9780151013616)” and “[All Art Is Propaganda](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/All-Art-Is-Propaganda/George-Orwell/e/9780151013555).” Gessen wrote the introduction to the latter; he is a literary critic, novelist, and the co-editor-in-chief of the literary journal [n+1](http://www.nplusonemag.com/).

April 22, 2009

### [The Finer Sensibilities of Love](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/the-finer-sensibilities-of-love.html)

Posted by [*Ligaya Mishan*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/ligaya_mishan/search?contributorName=Ligaya%20Mishan)

One scene in “Down and Out” that nearly fell to the editor’s blue pencil is the monologue at the end of Chapter Two, in which Charlie—described by our reader Vrizzy as the “friendly neighborhood rapist”—rapturously recalls a savage encounter with a prostitute. As Orwell explained in a note to his literary agent, his publisher, Victor Gollancz, asked that the offending passage be

either changed or cut out. It's a pity, as it is about the only good bit of writing in the book, but he says the circulation libraries would not stand for it.

At a time when publishers could be jailed for printing obscene material, Gollancz may have been concerned more with the sex than with the violence. In the end, Orwell simply “crossed out or altered the phrases that seemed to show too definitely what was happening.”

It’s always intriguing—and sometimes, as here, slightly dismaying—to discover what a writer likes best about his own work. In the introduction to the 1986 edition of “Down and Out,” Dervla Murphy cited Orwell’s “only good bit of writing” as one of the book’s flaws:

Often we witness Orwell losing his nerve, as at the end of that clumsily inserted and hackneyed account of Charlie's rape of a prostitute when he lamely explains, “I describe him [Charlie] just to show what diverse characters could be found flourishing in the Coq. d'Or quarter.”

Murphy points out that Orwell wants to have it both ways: to tell a shocking story and then dance away from it, assuming the innocent guise of an objective journalist. It’s this failure to take a stand that may have put off our reader HilaryM, who wonders if Orwell was himself a misogynist.

I found the monologue more peculiar than troubling. To me, it’s all a young man’s bravado—Charlie is a mere twenty-two-year-old, whom we are instructed to picture

very pink and young, with the fresh cheeks and soft brown hair of a nice little boy, and lips excessively red and wet, like cherries. His feet are tiny, his arms abnormally short, his hands dimpled like a baby’s.

Certainly Orwell seems to be dripping with disdain here. He takes pains to note that Charlie is well educated but has chosen to lead a wastrel’s life, subsidized by “occasional remittances” from his family. We are told, in short, that Charlie is not quite a man. (And there is a judgment call: before Charlie even launches into his nasty tale, Orwell says outright, “He is, somehow, profoundly disgusting to see.”)

Charlie’s oratory is an attempt to make himself appear worldly and louche, already “utterly worn out and finished.” He steals a thousand francs from his brother, which he plans to squander at a bordello. But as a “civilised man,” he requires more than “some vulgar debauchery.” I took this to mean a higher class of whore, one of extraordinary beauty or sexual gifts; or else a menage à trois; or the chance to deflower a virgin, or a prepubescent girl, or—and this is really where I thought things were heading, especially when Charlie fell in with “a very smart youth of eighteen, dressed en smoking and with his hair cut à l’américaine”—a prepubescent boy. (Charlie goes on to say of his newfound friend: “We understood one another well, that youth and I. We talked of this and that, and discussed ways of diverting oneself.” Am I the only one to read into this?)

It turns out that my imagination is more vivid than Charlie’s: he winds up with a single, of-age prostitute in a blood-red bedroom straight out of a pulp novel. He has paid for the right to do whatever he wants, short of murder, to her; but surely he could have had this experience for less than a thousand francs, from a streetwalker? The encounter that Charlie describes—and that Orwell faithfully (or not?) records—is nasty and brutish (and, one suspects, short). But are we meant to believe it? Taken as a whole, Charlie’s story seems unlikely, embellished and belabored to the point of absurdity.

Another way to read the story, though, is to see Charlie as a stand-in for Orwell, who was only a few years older and from a similar class background. Perhaps Orwell, too, wanted to show his bona fides, in his case as a writer—to prove that he’d been in the trenches, mingled with dangerous characters, and acquired a dark knowledge of the world.

April 17, 2009

### [Flesh, Bone, Desire](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/flesh-bone-desire.html)

Posted by [*Ligaya Mishan*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/ligaya_mishan/search?contributorName=Ligaya%20Mishan)

On the question of whether Orwell was exploiting the poor for the purposes of art, our readers seem to be siding with the writer. Even if you grant that Orwell acted as a sort of undercover agent, stealthily recording the foibles and failures of his unsuspecting comrades, Hennessey points out that “any journalist or photographer in the current era is exploiting the subject he is writing about or taking a photo of, and if all were to be persecuted for their exploitation, there would be no news.” “Can we really hold it against him?” LFCNYCYNWABECK3 asks. “Sometimes, in order to make a great story, or article or any piece of good work, it may require stepping out of the moral boundaries that we abide by in our every day lives.”

Once again, I’m reminded of James Agee. Like Orwell when he first went to Paris and began observing the lives of the poor, Agee was only twenty-six years old when he went down South to document the conditions of tenant farmers during the Depression. Unlike Orwell, Agee was on a magazine assignment, which made him acutely conscious of his status as an intruder:

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of “honest journalism” (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbias…

Is it possible to write about poverty without turning it into a kind of exhibit, for the edification of those better off, who are able to read with furrowed brow and feel as if they’ve done something? Agee won’t let himself, or us, forget

that these I will write of are human beings, living in this world, innocent of such twistings as these which are taking place over their heads; and that they were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings, in the employment of still others still more alien; and that they are now being looked into by still others, who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book, and who were actuated toward this reading by various possible reflexes of sympathy, curiosity, idleness, et cetera, and almost certainly in a lack of consciousness, and conscience, remotely appropriate to the enormity of what they are doing.

Where Orwell, even on the verge of starvation, is still a master of the sly anecdote, dashingly told, Agee’s prose boils over the pages, in headlong sentences that go on for days, as if desperately trying to forestall the quietus of a period. Writing in The New Yorker in 2006, David Denby [compared the voices of the two writers](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/01/09/060109crbo_books):

So often in Orwell there is a strong sense of the sordid—the scandal of meanness, decay, filth. And he was appalled by sloth and inanition….Orwell is a chronicler of man as actor, and the second half of [“The Road to Wigan Pier” (1937)] is a call for action in the form of socialist reform. But Agee chronicles being. He evokes the farmers and their families not just in sleep but at rest, sitting on a porch, or staring shyly and saying nothing. And he was incapable of physical disgust. For him, there is only an endless variety of shapes, textures, and dispositions, none of them beyond redemption in words.

Still, there’s a hint of the younger Orwell of “Down and Out” in Agee’s determination to present his subjects as honestly as possible. For Agee, Denby writes,

The point was not that these families suffered from atrocious social conditions. The point was that they existed. In an age concerned largely with the “masses,” Agee was impressed by the notion that other human beings idiosyncratically are what they are, in every ornery fibre. Flesh, bone, desire, consciousness—in almost every way, the farmers were different from him and therefore obdurate in their singleness and as capable of pleasure and misery as he.

The difference is that Orwell is unconflicted about plying his trade as a crafter of stories and a literary stylist—indeed, he revels in it—whereas Agee declaims (somewhat ingenuously for a writer prone to incantatory rhetoric),

If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement….

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

Do these fiery words absolve Agee of the exploitation he feared he was committing? And if Orwell’s prose is cooller in tone, is it also more persuasive?

April 13, 2009

### [Subject to Lunacy](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/subject-to-luna.html)

Posted by [*Ligaya Mishan*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/ligaya_mishan/search?contributorName=Ligaya%20Mishan)

Is there a strain of anti-Semitism in “Down and Out”? DavidLevine detects it, in “incipient” form; HilaryM concurs, but wonders if Orwell is simply “allowing his characters to express attitudes prevalent at the time.”

I didn’t take offense at the stories that Orwell presented secondhand—of Boris’s cheat of a roommate, of the drug dealer who passes off face powder as cocaine—because I accepted them as part of Orwell’s unairbrushed record of the landscape of his time. I did find the casual repetition of the word “Jew” jarring, but no more so than Orwell’s slapping nationalistic labels on everyone he meets. While his intent was no doubt to reflect the cosmopolitan nature of Paris, the hammering of nouns—the Pole, the Magyar, the Jew—has the whiff of essentialism. (The adjectival form seems softer, less reductive, just one among many possible descriptors.)

But I came to a halt at this sentence:

In the corner by himself a Jew, muzzle down in the plate, was guiltily wolfing bacon.

Oh, my. There’s so much to cringe at here, isn’t there? The worst of it is that you can sense the young Orwell blithely delighting in his literary flourish—wolfing down his own bacon, as it were.

The Orwell biographer D. J. Taylor [acknowledges the difficulty](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/aug/13/biography.highereducation) of addressing this aspect of his subject’s life:

My own particular biographer’s dilemma started with the discovery, in the files of the publisher Victor Gollancz Ltd, of a letter sent to Gollancz himself in the spring of 1933. The writer, Mr GM Lipsey, had read a copy of George Orwell’s newly published Down and Out in Paris and London. He was furious, not only with Orwell but also with his publisher. “On its merits or otherwise I have no desire to comment,” he commented. “But I am appalled that a book containing insulting and odious remarks about Jews should be published by a firm bearing the name ‘Gollancz’.” A spirited correspondence followed. There were threats of legal action, and finally the row fizzled out. Its shadow, though, hangs over much of Orwell’s early writings, and indeed his whole attitude towards Jews, Jewishness and, later on, the foundation of a Zionist state.

Taylor, too, winces at the wolf image. But, he argues,

It would be idle to classify Orwell as “anti-semitic”. He had dozens of Jewish friends and kept a vigilant eye out for evidence of anti-semitism, both on theatre stages and in print. In fact, the complexities of what he thought and wrote about Jews defy easy summary (although it is worth pointing out that in an argument with Aneurin Bevan, he once referred to Zionists as “a gang of Wardour Street Jews” with a controlling interest over the British press.)

Taylor concludes that Orwell’s “dirty secret” both does and doesn’t matter—it’s just one more piece of information that helps us as readers to contextualize and understand the writer’s work:

Orwell’s fixation with doling out the word “Jew” like a kind of party badge raises fundamental questions about the social milieu he inhabited and the upbringing that put stereotypes of this sort into his head. Above all, perhaps—and this is a man regularly marked down by posterity as a secular saint—it makes him seem human in a way that much of the posthumous embalming of his reputation does not.

It’s worth considering Orwell’s own thoughts on the matter, from his 1945 essay “[Antisemitism in Britain](http://orwell.ru/library/articles/antisemitism/english/e_antib)”:

The point is that something, some psychological vitamin, is lacking in modern civilisation, and as a result we are all more or less subject to this lunacy of believing that whole races or nations are mysteriously good or mysteriously evil. I defy any modern intellectual to look closely and honestly into his own mind without coming upon nationalistic loyalties and hatreds of one kind or another.

April 8, 2009

### [Exotica](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/exotica.html)

Posted by [*Ligaya Mishan*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/ligaya_mishan/search?contributorName=Ligaya%20Mishan)

What were Orwell’s intentions in “Down and Out”? That’s the subject of much debate in the comments on the [previous post](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/common-people.html#comments). DavidLevine decries the writer’s “obvious loathing of the unemployed poor” and argues that Orwell “is more interested in exploiting the poor for their colorful oddities than in identifying the causes of poverty.” A number of readers have rallied to Orwell’s defense, among them MattMedia, who sees the book as a bid to make the upper classes “take notice.” But TerryLev seems to agree with DavidLevine, puzzling over Orwell’s portrayal of “the noble poor”:

All the characters, all the associates with few exceptions tend to be thieving scoundrels, racists and bigots, dreaming fools in constant pursuit of a quick feed. Most of their ambitions are just to get through the next day. What really characterises this sewer-rat lack of sensibility for me is the fact that almost nowhere is there an apparent oppressor. This is simply the poor getting one over the rest of the poor.

I would counter that it’s precisely Orwell’s refusal to ennoble the poor that gives the book its power. He shows us real people, dogged by failure but still bristling with desire; he insists that the drunk in the gutter has a story worth knowing. It’s the “colorful oddities” that make us believe in, and feel for, the strugglers he meets, and find a kind of heroism in their stunted aspirations.

Writing about Orwell this week in the magazine, James Wood addresses this issue:

Orwell claimed that in a peaceful age he might have been a harmless, ornamental writer, oblivious of political obligation. “As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer,” he wrote in 1946. “First I spent five years in an unsuitable profession (the Indian Imperial Police, in Burma), and then I underwent poverty and the sense of failure.” That verb, “underwent,” suggests not coercion but voluntary self-mortification. The truth is that in 1928 Orwell went to Paris, like many other poor, aspiring artists, to see what he could produce. He ran out of money, and ended up working as a dishwasher, or plongeur, in a Paris hotel. He contracted influenza, and spent two weeks in the public ward of a hospital in Paris, in hideous circumstances—an experience he wrote about in “How the Poor Die.” He returned to England, and tramped around London and Kent with the down-and-out, living like the homeless, on bread and margarine and cups of tea, and putting up for the night at doss-houses, or “spikes.” But he chose to do all this rather than, say, go and live with his parents, because he was scouting for material.

And what material! “Down and Out in Paris and London,” his first book, which was published in 1933, is in some ways his best. There is a young man’s porousness to impressions, a marvellous ear for speech, and a willingness to let anecdotes play themselves out. Four years later, in “The Road to Wigan Pier,” he wrote again about the poor, this time the miners, steelworkers, and unemployed of towns like Wigan and Sheffield, but in that book they are hardly ever allowed to speak. As there are no voices, so there are no stories in the later book, no movement, just the tar of deprivation, which glues his subjects into their poverty. Orwell has become a pamphleteer. The earlier book, curiously, is a joyful, dynamic one.

(For more of Wood’s take on Orwell, read the [article](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/13/090413fa_fact_wood)—[subscription](https://magazine.newyorker.com:443/ecom/subscribe.jsp?oppId=1100267&tgt=/atg/registry/RepositoryTargeters/NYR/NYR_global_navBar&placementId=1200058&logOppId=true) required—and [submit a question](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/ask/2009/04/questions-for-wood.html) for the literary critic.)

Still, joyful or sympathetic, is Orwell’s representation of the poor exploitative simply by virtue of him being a privileged outsider? I’m reminded of James Agee, just a few years after the publication of “Down and Out,” tying himself in knots over the writing of what would become “[Let Us Now Praise Famous Men](http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Let-Us-Now-Praise-Famous-Men/James-Agee/e/9780618127498),” that howling hymn to the grim lives of tenant farmers during the Depression—how fearful he was that any attempt to impose art on such suffering would be a falsification and betrayal. More on that later this week.

April 2, 2009

### [Common People](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/04/common-people.html)

Posted by [*Ligaya Mishan*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/ligaya_mishan/search?contributorName=Ligaya%20Mishan)

Who is the “I” of “Down and Out in Paris and London”? Reading the book today, we know it’s George Orwell, with all that name signifies, but little is revealed of the narrator’s life within the book’s pages. He’s an Englishman of unspecified age, and a writer, although whether nascent or failed we aren’t told; we can glean, from his diction, a proper (that is to say, British-public-school) education, which at that time signalled at the least a middle-class background. (Orwell was a scholarship student at Eton, and described his family, tongue partly in cheek, as “lower-upper-middle class.”)

In other words, he is not a man without prospects. As Louis Menand [writes](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/01/27/030127crat_atlarge) in his critical reconsideration of Orwell, from the January, 27, 2003, issue,

“Down and Out in Paris and London” is a powerful book, but you are always wondering what this obviously decent, well-read, talented person is doing washing dishes in the kitchen of a Paris hotel.

Were this a novel or a memoir, we might conjecture some dark secret that brought the writer low, to be revealed in due course. But the book is neither: it is the work of a journalist intent on going beyond observation to document actual experience. Orwell is, in a sense, an undercover agent, an anthropologist who has gone native to better observe his subjects in their natural habitat.

Doubtless the readers of Orwell’s day would have taken his social status as a given, presuming that no one genuinely down and out would have the wherewithal to write such an eloquent book, let alone get it published. Should his silence bother us? Menand notes,

Orwell would take time off to rest and write in the homes of family and friends, something he does not mention in “Down and Out in Paris and London,” where the narrator is sometimes on the verge of death by starvation.

It does take the edge off the desperation if you know that you’re just one telegram away from a square meal and a comfy bed. But, Menand advises,

The point is not that Orwell made things up. The point is that he used writing in a literary, not a documentary, way: he wrote in order to make you see what he wanted you to see, to persuade. During the war, Orwell began contributing a “London Letter” to Partisan Review. In one letter, he wrote that park railings in London were being torn down for scrap metal, but that only working-class neighborhoods were being plundered; parks and squares in upper-class neighborhoods, he reported, were untouched. The story, Crick says, was widely circulated. When a friend pointed out that it was untrue, Orwell is supposed to have replied that it didn’t matter, “it was essentially true.”

Is “essentially true” good enough? “Down and Out in Paris and London” is an unsentimental and extraordinary record of life on the margins, and one can argue that the precision of its details and the beauty of its prose justify any artistic liberties. Have we gone overboard in our day and age in our zeal for absolute fact, if there can even be such a thing? Should we grant Orwell his elisions, since what matters is present and vital on the page?

Read more: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/down-and-out-in#ixzz2EhKQxwUU>