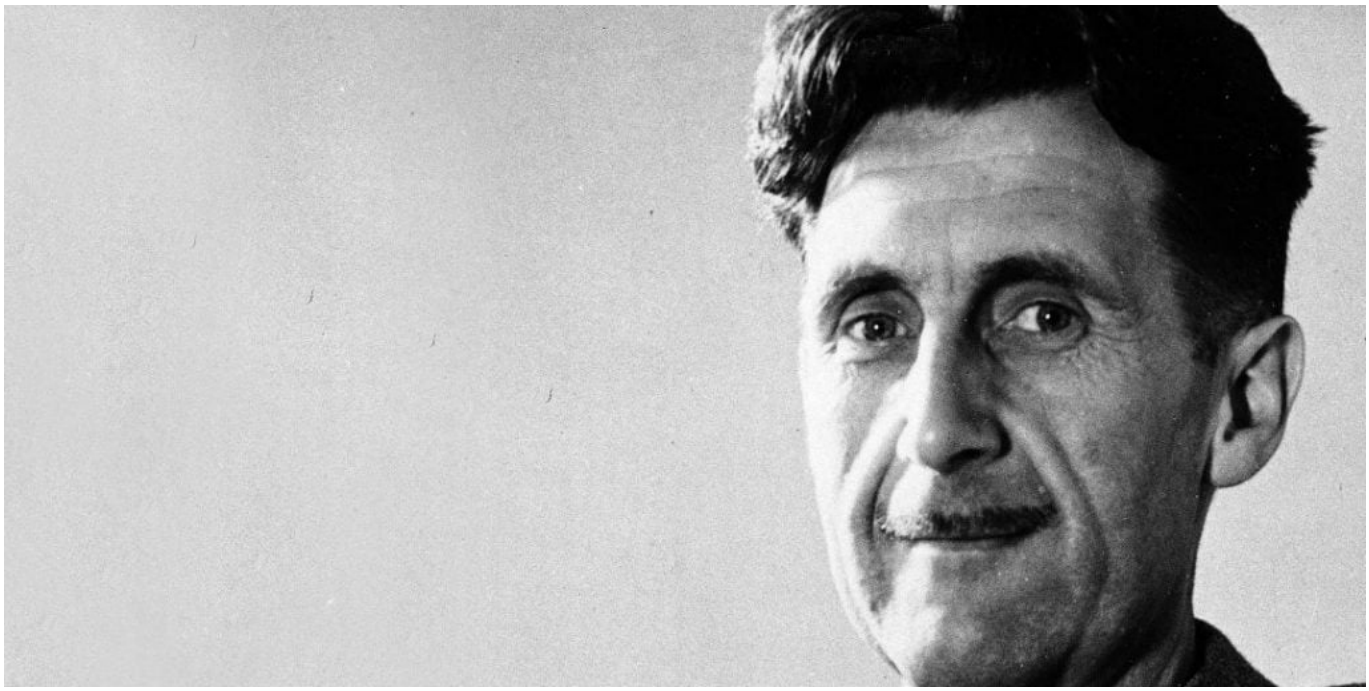
Orwell's Arresting Ambiguities

By Theodore Dalrymple

George Orwell said that Charles Dickens was an author well worth stealing, which is to say, attaching to one's cause whatever it might be. If you can say "Dickens would have thought likewise," you are claiming the approval not only of a genius, but of a man of deeply generous and humane nature (never mind any squalid revelations about his actual biography).



George Orwell has suffered something of the same fate: thanks to a kind of secular beatification, everyone wants to claim him. He is, so to speak, the voice of unvarnished truth in a world of prevailing untruth. Like George Washington, he could not tell a lie.

The problem with such beatification is that it easily provokes an equal and opposite effort at debunking, which is as unrealistic as the process of beatification itself. It

sometimes seems as if feet of clay are the modern biographer's favourite feature of whoever their subject may be. But in this brief but not shallow, well-written, and entertaining guide to the life and work of George Orwell, D. J. Taylor, who has written not one but two biographies of Orwell (no accumulation of evidence about so prolific and protean an author can ever be final), judiciously steers between hagiography and debunking. His Orwell is a complex man, tormented and conflicted to some degree but also, overall, admirable. The fact that Orwell was not all of a piece and contained contradictions within himself is what lends depth to his work. There may be better books about Orwell than this, but if so I do not know them.

Taylor, whose knowledge of both the life and work of Orwell is clearly profound, draws them seamlessly together so that they are mutually enlightening. This is, in my opinion, literary criticism as it ought to be. Completely free of the disfiguring jargon or ideology that makes so much academic criticism completely incomprehensible, unreadable, or not worth the effort of reading, Taylor's book encourages its reader to return to Orwell's books, or to read them for the first time. He convincingly treats his books prior to *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as interesting and worthwhile in themselves, and not merely as teleological stepping-stones to the two books that almost everyone knows who reads anything at all.

This last claim, incidentally, is of the type that Orwell made his own, of which Taylor gives several examples in his chapter on one of Orwell's obsessions, prose style (Taylor's book is cleverly organised both thematically and biographically, so that you cannot say which is uppermost). Thus Orwell wrote "If you want to know what a dead man's relatives think of him, a good rough test is the weight of his tombstone" and "Every intelligent boy of sixteen is a Socialist." These *ex cathedra* observations are not meant to be the conclusion of a

Pew-type survey in which, for example, a representative sample of intelligent sixteen-year-old boys has been canvassed for their opinions. They are, rather, statements that are part poetic, part philosophical, part abstract, and part empirical in nature, without being truths in the most absolute and literal sense. Orwell paid his readers the compliment of assuming that they would understand this, and indeed may have been instrumental in helping them to do so.

Writing about Orwell's subject matter in such a way that every last statement was backed up by a panoply of statistical evidence would be intolerably dull and would not necessarily be more accurate as a result. Intuition as well as data is necessary, though of course relying too much on the former carries the risk of merely confirming one's prejudices. Judgment is what is necessary, and Orwell often, though not always, had it. Incidentally, to say that every intelligent sixteen-year-old boy is a socialist is not necessarily unreserved praise of socialism, though Orwell meant it as such, to imply that socialism was merely a matter of common sense.

Occasionally Taylor, whose own judgment is pretty good, misses something important. For example, he describes the effect that Orwell's time in Spain had on him:

> *Spain, it is safe to say, politicised Orwell in a way that his exposure to homegrown socialism in the previous five years had not. To begin with, it offered him a vision of how an alternative world, founded on the principles of freedom and equality, might work.*

Orwell told the general litterateur, Cyril Connolly, who had been with him at Eton, that he had seen "wonderful things" in Barcelona, then a revolutionary city in the control of the Trotskyist *POUM*. Taylor continues:

> *It was, he declared, "the first time that I had ever been in*

> *a town where the working class was in the saddle." Churches were being systematically demolished by gangs of workmen. Shops and cafes bore inscriptions saying that they had been collectivised. Tipping was forbidden by law, all private motor cars had been commandeered, and all the trams and taxis had been painted in the anarchist colours of red and black. "In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist."*

Everyone dressed the same too, in drab overalls, Maoist *avant la lettre*.

Barcelona, then, was a Catalonian Pyongyang: and it is important to recall that Orwell *approved* of it. At this stage of his development, he was an enthusiastic totalitarian, and the shallowness of his belief that such uniformity was a triumph for freedom and equality is rather startling in a man who, a very few years later, was to be the greatest literary scourge of totalitarianism in the world. It was all to the credit of Orwell that he changed his opinion of totalitarianism so diametrically, but had he died just after the publication of *Homage to Catalonia*, not living long enough to write his anti-totalitarian masterpieces, he would have been remembered, if he was remembered at all, as a literary forerunner and praise-singer of some of the worst features of communist regimes. It had to be remembered too that his underlying objection to Stalin's policy in Spain was that it was not revolutionary enough, that he promoted the Popular Front, albeit as a mere tactic, rather than the immediate revolution, *à la* Barcelona, as Orwell would have liked.

There is another important omission that occurs in the discussion of Orwell's somewhat po-faced essay on boy's weeklies, in which he severely criticised the work of Frank Richards (whose real name was Charles Hamilton, and who probably wrote more words than any other man in history, up to 30,000 a day, highly stylised as they were). Richards invented

a character, Billy Bunter, a fat, lazy, boastful, stupid, greedy schoolboy whom generations of English children came to love not despite, but because of, his vices—an important moral lesson, one might have thought. Orwell attacked Richards' work on political grounds, since Bunter attended a fictional private school, Greyfriars, a kind of which most of Richards' readers could have had no experience. Orwell thought that this was reactionary, in effect a prop to the unjust status quo.

He probably imagined that Richards was just a hack, but in fact, Richards was an ardent classicist who read Horace for pleasure, and he proved a formidable controversialist who got much the better of Orwell in his reply to the article. In this instance, Orwell had picked an argument that he could not win.

But of course, it is no criticism of a relatively short book like this that it does not say all that it might have said. What is so admirable in it is the author's ability to descry threads running through Orwell's books that speak to his character. Orwell was as much a romantic conservative as a socialist radical, his occasional lapses into blood-curdling revolutionism notwithstanding (as late as 1941, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he wrote that it might be necessary to shoot a few reactionaries in order to establish a new socialist order in England, apparently not realising how quickly in such circumstances a few become many).

Taylor brings out very well the ambiguities in Orwell's thought and, especially, in his emotions. He was almost a golden ageist with respect to the Edwardian era (in which he had his early childhood), and if he had lived at a different time, he might well have been a writer such as Gilbert White who wrote *The Natural History of Selbourne*. He had a real knowledge of, and feeling for, natural history: his essay on the common toad is a small masterpiece. Although Orwell thought that A. E. Housman's poems were "tinkling" (a judgment I think mistaken), the sentiment expressed by Housman in the mouth of a twenty-year-old boy in *A Shropshire Lad* could very

much have been his:

> *And since to look at things in bloom*
> *Fifty springs are little room,*
> *About the woodlands I will go*
> *To see the cherry hung with snow.*

Orwell did not have fifty years to live, let alone seventy. Perhaps for the good of his subsequent reputation, he died at the very acme of his career, having just completed an undoubted masterpiece that, notwithstanding the implosion of the Soviet Union, remains, alas, of strong current resonance.

I recommend this book unreservedly. It deals most sensitively with Orwell's multiple ambiguities without trying to fit them into a Procrustean bed. It informs, enlightens, and entertains. It restores one's faith in the value of criticism.

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