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**‘In Front of your Nose’: The Existentialism of
George Orwell**

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**PhD In Literature and Philosophy
University of Sussex**

April 2015

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted, whole or in part, to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

University of Sussex

Paul Richard Dulley

PhD in Literature and Philosophy

‘In Front of your Nose’: The Existentialism
of George Orwell

Summary

George Orwell’s reputation as a writer rests largely upon his final two works, selected essays and some of his journalism. As a novelist, he is often considered limited, and it is for this reason that his writing has perhaps received less serious attention than that of many of his contemporaries.

Some recent publications have sought to redress this balance, identifying an impressive level of artistry, not only in his more recognised works, but in the neglected novels of the 1930s. Yet, aside from studies focused upon his political beliefs, there has been a lack of attention given to the wider ideas underpinning Orwell’s writing, in particular, those which might be considered, in popular terms, ‘existential’.

Given its unusually firm grounding in the many experiences he underwent, Orwell’s thought, I argue, can be viewed profitably from this philosophical standpoint. By engaging his writing in a dialogue with that of the phenomenological-existentialist thinkers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Emmanuel Levinas, this project aims to make sense of the ideas implicit within his work. Where the work of the aforementioned figures is often opaque and highly abstracted, it will be shown that Orwell’s offers the reader literary and real-life exemplars as a means of making difficult ideas understood.

The study is divided into four two-part chapters, which track the Orwell canon in a broadly chronological fashion. In parallel with this, the ideas of the existential philosophers are, too, introduced chronologically: Heidegger, Sartre and, Levinas.

The thesis attempts to argue that understanding the implicit existentialism in the work of Orwell not only offers a more complete insight into the man, and the tensions inherent in his character, but also affords the reader many much-needed exemplifications, and in some cases augmentations, of some of the most important ideas in existentialist philosophy.

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Introduction

In one of his later ‘As I Please’ columns, written in 1947, George Orwell recounts an incident that took place on a liner travelling to Burma some twenty-five years earlier:

The deck was empty except for the fair-haired quartermaster, who was scurrying like a rat along the side of the deck-houses, with something partially concealed between his monstrous hands. I had just time to see what it was before he shot past me and vanished into a doorway. It was a pie dish containing a half-eaten baked custard pudding. [...] It took me some-time to see the incident in all its bearings: but do I seem to exaggerate when I say that this sudden revelation of the gap between function and reward – the revelation that a highly-skilled craftsman, who might literally hold all our lives in his hands, was glad to steal scraps of food from our table – taught me more than I could have learned from half a dozen Socialist pamphlets?¹

The account is of note not because of the socialist lesson that can be drawn from its particulars, but because it exemplifies the way in which Orwell’s mind worked. Bernard Crick, one of Orwell’s most celebrated biographers, notes how ‘it took him another ten years at least’ to see the incident ‘in such a specifically socialist perspective’.² And this is true of much of his writing: Orwell drew his political and social ideas from his own personal experiences, sometimes extrapolating a fundamental truth many years later from just a single, seemingly trivial incident. As Peter Stansky and William Abrahams observe, ‘for him, personal considerations (the particular experience) were more important than political considerations (the abstract experience) and [...] he had to move through the former to arrive at the latter.’³ Orwell’s writing, both fiction and non-fiction, is replete with the experiences that made his life. And so we find in his work accounts of witnessing a hanging, shooting a rogue elephant, working in a bookshop, teaching in a second-rate private school, hop-picking, tramping, being shot by a sniper,

¹ George Orwell, ‘As I Please #68’, in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. by Peter Hobley Davison, 20 vols (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), XIX, 5-8 (p.6).

² Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), p.79.

³ Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell* (London: Constable, 1972), p.141.

attending Left Book Club meetings, and visiting junkshops, to name but a handful of examples. George Woodcock describes this tendency as Orwell's 'special characteristic as a writer: that he invented very little, preferring to write from experience'.⁴ But there are even more subtle personal considerations underpinning Orwell's work. For not only does he frequently draw upon specific experiences, he often attempts to present those experiences in a way that mimics how they were originally perceived. Thus, as we see in Chapter One, Orwell writes in a manner that sometimes eschews temporal markers in order to present scenes holistically in a kind of *tableau vivant*. His fascination with and extensive use of dialect in his writing, feeds into this purpose, as does his development of a 'transparent' narrative voice, designed to allow the reader to more easily inhabit each scene.

That there exists this very personal substrate to Orwell's writing perhaps comes as some surprise given the political focus of so many studies into his work: it is often assumed that Orwell was concerned with the world at a 'macro' rather than 'micro' level. But the political approach can only take the reader so far. Daniel Lea has complained that much secondary writing has 'tended to follow well-worn lines of inquiry based largely upon issues of political, biographical and ideological import', leading to 'a telling stagnation in Orwell studies'.⁵ Indeed, Orwell is now principally recognised as a political writer, a notion reinforced through such institutions as the Orwell Prize, 'Britain's most prestigious prize for political writing', not to mention his own self-appraisals. When Orwell stated his intention to 'turn political writing into an art', he was inadvertently helping to restrict much future study into his work.⁶ One cannot deny that Orwell was a writer intensely interested in political questions, but to

⁴ George Woodcock, in *Remembering Orwell*, ed. by Stephen Wadhams (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada, 1984), p.v.

⁵ Daniel Lea, *Animal Farm/Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001), p.58.

⁶ George Orwell, 'Why I Write', in *The Complete Works*, xviii, 316-21 (p.319).

focus exclusively upon this aspect of his work is not only to ignore the personal considerations that inform it, but to eschew a great deal of existential insight that is implied throughout his body of writing. Given the eclectic range of topics that, as we shall see, found their way into his work, it is a great irony that studies of Orwell have proven to be so narrowly focused in this way.

It is not always easy, or desirable, to consider any one aspect of a writer in isolation. Studies of Orwell that attempt to focus exclusively upon the political risk offering a misleading picture of both the man and his work, but so would any account which ignored the political altogether. With Orwell, the political was bound up with the existential, which was in turn wedded to the biographical in an unusually strong way: imagination was not one of Orwell's strengths, and, as such, he often had to draw from the details of his own life for material. It is for this reason that Raymond Williams aptly noted how Orwell 'was one of those men whose life and writing were in practice inseparable'.⁷ Given how often the importance of raw experience to Orwell's work has been noted, it is surprising that it has attracted so little serious study. In a perceptive review written after Orwell's death, the poet Stephen Spender noted how 'he himself in his own life was an example of "the lived truth", which is perhaps the most valuable truth anyone can offer to humanity.'⁸ Orwell himself frequently alluded to the need for an experiential substrate for the writer, as in an article on Henry Miller, in which he claimed that 'A writer's work is not something that he takes out of his brain like tins of soup out of a storeroom. He has to create it day by day out of his contacts with people and things'.⁹ This carries the further implication that 'it is an unusual novel that does not contain somewhere or other a portrait of the author, thinly disguised as hero, saint,

⁷ Raymond Williams, *George Orwell* (London: Penguin, 1971), p.83.

⁸ Stephen Spender, 'Posthumous Review of "Homage to Catalonia"', in *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Jeffrey Myers (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.149-52 (p.152).

⁹ Orwell, 'The End of Henry Miller', in *The Complete Works*, xiv, 219.

or martyr'.¹⁰ But, if we acknowledge politics as simply the medium through which Orwell chose to interpret events in his life, how can we, as it were, step behind the political to approach those underlying raw experiences that informed his ideas?

As we saw with the incident involving the ship's quartermaster, and as will be demonstrated throughout this project, Orwell had an unusual ability to fasten onto particular experiences and draw wider conclusions from them. Sometimes, those experiences find their way into novels or essays in an unadulterated form, epiphanies through which the protagonist recognises some fundamental truth. On other occasions, we find an idea that suffuses the entire narrative, the play of character and situation serving to embody a certain existential insight. The term 'existential' is particularly instructive in this sense, since it is, rather counter-intuitively, the existentialist philosophers whose ideas resonate most readily with this aspect of Orwell. But where those figures tend to derive their insights from abstracted thought and reason, Orwell arrives at the same end-point from pondering his own lived experience. Nevertheless, it is helpful to place the existentialists in a dialogue with Orwell, not simply because of a kinship between their ideas, but because they furnish us with a terminology through which to make sense of his insights. By eschewing overtly political interpretations of events in Orwell's life in favour of those from existential philosophy, we thereby seek to understand his experiences at a more fundamental level: we might say that existentialism precedes politics. And there is good reason to think that this implicit existential substrate to his writing has always resonated with the reader. John Hammond, for example, notes how 'his writings continue to be in demand because he was preoccupied with fundamental human problems'.¹¹ By 'fundamental human

¹⁰ Orwell, 'Review of "The Democrat at the Supper Table" by Colm Brogan', in *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 101-02 (p.101).

¹¹ John R. Hammond, *A George Orwell companion: A Guide to the Novels, Documentaries and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.42.

problems', does Hammond mean politics? Given how unrecognisable the political landscape of Orwell's era is for the modern reader, it is difficult to believe that politics alone can account for this enduring appeal. And yet, the designation of Orwell as merely a vernacular, or realist writer, is similarly inadequate, for, as we shall see, Orwell possessed a vision that went beyond mere reportage. This study argues, therefore, that it is a bedrock of existential insight that is fundamental to Orwell's work, insight that is, by definition, universally applicable to human beings. It is this that truly endures. We therefore implicitly oppose Irving Howe in his assertion that Orwell is one of those writers 'who live most significantly for their own age.'¹²

In the proceeding chapters, we shall explore, for the first time, the existential ideas that underpin Orwell's writing, using three philosophers from the tradition – Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Emmanuel Levinas – to make sense of his raw insights. Chapter One traces Orwell's early development and his attempt to adequately share his experience of alien communities in a way that mimics their original perception. We question the classification of Orwell as merely a vernacular writer, and begin to examine some of the crafting that enables him to embody certain truths in his writing, and which separates him from his realist contemporaries. This raises the need to find an alternative standpoint from which to approach Orwell's work. The ideas of Heidegger are subsequently introduced as a means of understanding Orwell's preoccupation with language and praxis, and their role in both affirming and denying membership of different social groups. Our second chapter treats principally on Orwell's first two novels, *Burmese Days* and *A Clergyman's Daughter*, and seeks to uncover his insights into those forces which aim to dissolve the self, drawing one from autonomy into a state of inauthentic dependence. In order to appreciate the different

¹² Irving Howe, '1984: History as nightmare', in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp.41-53 (p.53).

insights at play in the two novels, we begin with a continuation of Heidegger's account of social dissolution through the language and practices of the nebulous '*they*' before introducing Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *bad faith*, which neatly meshes with the loss of a self to a specific other described in *A Clergyman's Daughter*. In Chapter Three, we look at Orwell's portrayal of others in several essays, as well as both the novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and the non-fiction account of his journey through the deprived North of England, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. By remaining with the thought of Sartre, we seek to not only account for the rather crude stereotyping that is found through Orwell's early work, but also those epiphanic moments in his writing where the barrier of otherness is bridged, and a genuine connection to another human being is momentarily felt to have obtained. We posit the idea that these two opposing methods of describing others are inextricably linked to the often-noted reactionary and progressive sides to Orwell's character. Our final chapter discusses *Coming Up For Air* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, using the later thought of Heidegger to account for the role of objects in Orwell's work and, specifically, their ability to preserve aspects of bygone societies and practices. The introduction of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, an often fierce critic of Heidegger, will allow us to see the limitations of Heidegger's – and by extension Orwell's – approach, and to understand the modifications to his thinking that took place by the time he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The work of Levinas, itself informed through first-hand experience of tyranny, will enable us to recognise the destruction of the self that Orwell so vividly depicts in this final work, but will also point towards an affirmation of humanity that is rarely noted in the text.

One noteworthy omission from this study is any lengthy focus on *Animal Farm*, arguably Orwell's most flawless work. Although the motivation for this exposé of Stalinist tyranny came in large part from Orwell's experience of communist purges

during the Spanish Civil War, the text itself is unusual in that it maps not onto specific events from Orwell's life, but events surrounding the Russian Revolution. Although one can take from this a further affirmation of Orwell's lack of imagination, and the need to pin his writing onto something external, the text itself is unprofitable for the purposes of extrapolating any underlying existential ideas. Whilst it is disappointing not to be able to use our methodology on one of Orwell's greatest textual achievements, its omission is a constant reminder that real, lived experiences are the substrate for his unique variety of existential insight. And a very unusual, and somewhat unexpected, existentialism it was. As we discuss below, Orwell held a lifelong antipathy towards intellectual abstraction, coupled with a deep suspicion of writers who used language for the purposes of obfuscation. This not only manifested itself in an indifference towards philosophy – and existentialism in particular – but it meant that he possessed little technical knowledge of the subject. Unfortunately, this prejudice leaves us with little but the raw expression of existential ideas in Orwell's work; whilst he certainly draws broad political conclusions, there is nowhere any attempt to set out his insights philosophically. Thus, the introduction of these existentialist thinkers is a necessary step in affording us a framework through which to interpret this aspect of his writing. Not only does this approach aim to uncover a raft of ideas left unexplored by traditional interpretations, but it affords us an alternative means of unifying his biography, fiction and non-fiction. But it will also be demonstrated how Orwell's 'lived existentialism' frequently goes beyond a mere resonance with the work of our philosophers, and on occasion actually augments their accounts with concrete examples of often difficult concepts. Given the range and complexity of ideas within existentialist philosophy, a project such as this can offer only a starting point for further study. Moreover, it must not be assumed that a clear philosophical progression in Orwell's thought is in any way suggested: it would be an error to draw the conclusion that Orwell went through a

Heideggerian phase, before embarking on Sartrean and Levinasian phases. On the contrary, the existential ideas underpinning Orwell's work have no clear unity of progression. Yet, in each case, one of the three philosophers has been selected because his own ideas happen to resonate with the aspect of existence that is implied in that particular Orwellian text. This, of course, points to the possibility, indeed the desirability, of placing the same textual ideas in dialogue with a different philosopher from the tradition. With the aforementioned stagnation that was so evident in Orwell studies until very recently in mind, it is to be hoped that this in itself will be of some value.

Chapter 1

We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Aitches

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.¹

In the winter of 1927, although in poor health following his return from five years as an Imperial Policeman in Burma, Eric Blair donned a suit of dirty clothes and embarked upon his first clandestine foray into London's East End, his aim to experience life amongst the 'alien and dangerous' species that was the homeless.² It was a bold undertaking for the aspiring writer. Blair's old-Etonian accent together with his naivety concerning working-class manners constantly threatened to betray his upper-middle class background, unmasking him as a voyeuristic outsider. The importance of this first gesture, however, is difficult to overstate. Throughout his subsequent literary career as George Orwell, spanning little more than twenty years, it was first-hand experience rather than the faculty of imagination that furnished the wealth of his subject matter. Orwell, it was later said, had sympathy for other human beings, but 'only in situations he could understand'.³ His own formative years – prep-school, Eton and then a servant of the British Raj in Burma – afforded him an understanding of privilege and social superiority, but almost exclusively from the perspective of the oppressor. This was hardly a broad basis for a literary career, and was perhaps why his first prose efforts were deemed risible by friends. Orwell was an author whose imagination rarely extended beyond the limits of his experience; he therefore needed greater familiarity

¹ George Orwell, 'Why I Write', p.318.

² Michael Sheldon, *Orwell: The Authorised Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p.120.

³ Lettice Cooper in *Orwell Remembered*, ed. Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984), pp.161-66 (p.164).

with the wider world before he was able to write about it. The desire for literary material, coupled with an impulse to expose social injustices, forced him to seek out situations that were beyond the limited milieu of his privileged Anglo-Indian background. But this was merely the first step. For Orwell also had to learn how to convey those experiences in all their shocking detail to a readership that shared his own middle-class insularity. In this chapter, we shall attempt to uncover some of the sophisticated, and often overlooked, techniques that he developed for this purpose, starting from his very first essays. We shall explore some early criticisms of his ‘vernacular’ approach to documentary and, by comparing his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, with two seemingly similar texts by Christopher Isherwood and Jack London, endeavour to highlight the inadequacy of the ‘realist’ designation so often used to define his work. A subsequent return to the question of Orwell’s method of narration will open the possibility that, in attempting to express his experiences in a mode that mimics their occurrence, his approach inadvertently coincides with that of the existential phenomenologists. His use of set-scenes, or what we will designate *tableaux*, to embody certain universal truths of existence will, it will be shown, offer a further point of convergence and suggest the profitability of a phenomenological approach to Orwell’s work, a challenge that will be taken up in the remainder of this project.

Orwell made the decision to become a writer after spending five years in the Indian Imperial Police, where he witnessed first-hand the brutal treatment meted out by the British towards the native Burmese. His long-held ambition to become a writer, present since childhood, was now married with a determination to raise awareness of oppression both abroad and at home, and in the process expiate some of the guilt he carried from his own privileged background. For these purposes, and as he reflected some nine years later, the British working class occupied much the same role as the

native Burmese. By his own admission, however, he ‘knew nothing about working-class conditions’.⁴ His only real experience of those lower down the social order had come from the Burmese, encounters with hired workers both at home and abroad, and the occasional working-class playmate as a child.⁵ In the name of research, and undoubtedly with the secondary purpose of salving his guilty conscience, Orwell planned therefore to ‘go among these people’, masquerading as a tramp in order to experience life at the very bottom of society. It was not the first time that he had slept rough: back in the summer of 1920, whilst still at Eton, Orwell had been forced to spend the night in a field after being stranded on his way to Cornwall for a family holiday. In a letter to school friend Steven Runciman, Orwell excitedly recounted the incident as his ‘first adventure as an amateur tramp’, his unawareness of the overstatement itself a reflection of his naivety at the time.⁶ Despite describing the experience as one that he would ‘not repeat’, Orwell was to leave the comforts of home once again just seven years later, this time with the focus more firmly upon others rather than himself.

Thanks to a hard-luck cover story he had concocted, Orwell quickly gained acceptance amongst the destitute and spent two or three informative days in a common lodging-house. Some weeks later, he took to the road once more, engaging in experimental tramping with a growing confidence of his ability to survive among the homeless. By the spring of 1928, Orwell had amassed enough source material for several potential newspaper articles, although it would not be until later in the year that he found himself published professionally for the first time. For reasons that remain

⁴ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 2001), p.139.

⁵ In *Wigan Pier*, he describes how he was forbidden to play with the local plumber’s children on account of their being ‘common’ (p.117). Interestingly, as Bernard Crick observes, one of the children in question appears later in his autobiographical essay, ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’, this time correctly designated as a girl, perhaps to highlight the young author’s burgeoning sexuality. As we shall see, Orwell would often modify minor facts to suit different literary purposes.

⁶ Orwell, ‘Letter to Steven Runciman’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 76-77. ‘My first adventure as an amateur tramp’: Is this phrase merely a light-hearted embellishment, or revealing of his intention, despite the later denial, to repeat the experience in the future?

somewhat unclear, Orwell then decided to go to Paris, where he would spend the next eighteen months with little or no money, writing and conducting further experimental social research. Perhaps he felt that the struggle to exist without money would be more heroic if undertaken in a foreign land (and all the better for assuaging his long-standing class guilt). Maybe there was an element of the romantic in his mind. What is certain is that, with a favourite maternal aunt, Nellie, also living in the city, Orwell felt able to continue his exploration of society's underclass knowing that, in an emergency, financial redemption would be nearby. Within six months of his arrival in Paris, and after submitting pieces to a variety of journals, Orwell had his first article published: '*La Censure en Angleterre*' ('Censorship in England') which appeared as a French translation in *Monde* on the 6th October, 1928. It was followed, over the course of the next six months, by four further articles: 'A Farthing Newspaper', his first English language article, published back home in *G.K.'s Weekly*, and three articles which were translated into French and published in *Le Progrès Civique* under the banner, 'An Inquiry into Civic Progress in England': 'Unemployment', 'A Day in the Life of a Tramp', and 'Beggars in London'. In his masterly biography, Bernard Crick dismisses these early efforts as 'pot-boiling articles', and not 'real writing', descriptions which, whilst perhaps offering an accurate evaluation of the work in comparison to his later journalism, fail to recognise in them the nascent technical features which would later be strongly identified with much of the Orwell canon.⁷

Orwell's first three articles, 'Censorship in England', 'A Farthing Newspaper', and 'Unemployment', published under his birth name E. A. Blair, are persuasive pieces, offering a series of arguments tending in a broadly socialist libertarian direction. Whilst fluently written, they are notable for the vagueness of their statistics, resulting in the

⁷ Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.111.

impression that the author is merely an armchair polemicist, perhaps not so inaccurate given Orwell's still somewhat limited experience. The hectoring tone of the final article, 'Unemployment', in particular appears to ape that of Jack London, who adopts a similar method in the latter pages of his *The People of the Abyss*. It was a kind of polemic to which Orwell would return with greater success (and a rather better grasp of facts) in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and many of his wartime essays. The other two parts of his triumvirate of *Progrès Civique* articles, 'A Day in the Life of a Tramp' and 'Beggars in London' are of more interest, however, insofar as they are Orwell's first attempts to distil his own singular experiences into their essential components. In these pieces, he attempts, not wholly convincingly, to use the power of description rather than argument to elicit sympathy for the condition of the homeless. 'Beggars in London' offers a taxonomy of the destitute, and the different ruses that were used by them, such as busking and pavement artistry, to 'legally' solicit money from passers-by. Of course, by modern standards, such a project appears rather crude, yet it is somewhat revealing of Orwell's unusual analytical thought processes. As we shall see in Chapter Three, throughout his life, Orwell felt the need to classify and index not only things, but also people to an almost obsessive degree.⁸ It is difficult to know what to make of this trait. The tendency to categorise objects is revealing of a logical mind attendant to factual detail, yet to extend this practice to human beings seems eccentric if not offensive – even when one takes into account the norms of the time. It has been speculated that Orwell may have had a disorder on the autistic spectrum, but whilst his occasional

⁸ Throughout Orwell's articles and diaries, one finds lists in abundance, covering everything from the racial types depicted in boys' comic books through to the symptoms of his own streptomycin overdose. His predilection for classifying and indexing found further expression in collecting, where he amassed large numbers of political pamphlets as well as comic postcards of the Donald McGill variety. As is shown in his correspondence, Orwell felt it necessary to pigeonhole acquaintances in his personal life too, usually on the basis of political beliefs, but not uncommonly according to religious persuasion or sexuality. After his death, he was even found to have compiled a list of suspected communist sympathisers, which was to be passed on to the British Secret Service. For a detailed analysis of this predilection, see Chapter Three. See also D.J. Taylor, *Orwell: The Life* (New York: Vintage, 2004) pp.408-10.

obtuseness towards others lends credence to such an explanation, his continued attempts to make an emotional connection with those he regarded as ‘other’, together with numerous documented instances of compassion towards aspiring writers, highlight the dangers of any such reductive diagnosis.⁹ What is clear is that he saw such objectifying practices as an effective methodology, both personally and professionally. However, as I argue below, Orwell’s belief in the efficacy of ordered empirical knowledge belied a very different kind of understanding, and one that was his true strength.

In ‘Beggars in London’, we witness Orwell falling back upon this predilection for taxonomy in order to produce a catalogue of beggarly ‘types’. From the beginning, he establishes a colloquial voice through which to smuggle a slew of generalisations and overstatements:

Any visitor to London must have noticed the large number of beggars one comes across in the streets. These unfortunates, often crippled or blind, can be seen all over the capital. You might say they are part of the scenery. In some areas one can see every three or four yards a sickly, ragged, tattered character standing at the kerb carrying a tray of matches which he is pretending to sell.¹⁰

The tone is authoritative yet oddly vague, as if he is afraid to refer more overtly to his own direct experience among the homeless:

How many are there in London? No-one knows exactly, probably several thousand. Perhaps ten thousand in the worst part of the year. Anyway, it is likely that among every four hundred Londoners there is one beggar who is living at the expense of the other three hundred and ninety-nine.¹¹

It is certainly the case that Orwell, conscious of familial respectability, felt the need for discretion regarding his tramping excursions, but there is an elusive quality to this writing, indicative of a writer trying to find his voice, yet uncertain of whether to

⁹ For an entire chapter devoted to Orwell, see Michael Fitzgerald, ‘The Genesis of Artistic Creativity: Asperger’s syndrome and the Arts’ (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), pp.87-97.

¹⁰ Orwell, ‘Beggars in London’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 133-38 (p.133).

¹¹ Ibid.

employ facts or literary description as his vehicle. Indeed, the picture conveyed to the reader, whilst replete with emotive adjectives, lacks the very crisp and incisive observation of his later work: characters are introduced, but only in abstract as archetypes; there is no reference to Orwell's specific experiences or to the many individuals that he would, by that time, have encountered on the streets. The following excerpt focusing on organ grinders, again, typifies the style:

The poor devil drags his instrument around from ten in the morning till eight or nine at night. Once he has paid for the hire of his piano organ, he will be left with about a pound sterling (about 124 francs) all in all at the end of the week. [...] They prefer to play in cafes and popular restaurants, setting up outside the door at mealtimes. One of them plays an instrument or sings in the street, while the other collects the money.¹²

Orwell strikes a sympathetic tenor, but one which feels strangely detached, as if he has derived his knowledge from a painting rather than concrete experience. In other parts, the tone quickly becomes waspishly critical:

To ask outright for money, food, or clothing is a crime, yet on the other hand it is perfectly legal to sell or pretend to sell any objects, or to annoy one's fellow citizens by pretending to entertain them. Their [the organ grinders'] dreadful music is the result of a purely mechanical gesture.¹³

As you can well imagine the pictures [of the pavement artist] are anything but masterpieces. Some of them would shame a ten-year-old.¹⁴

Even in the midst of his philanthropic endeavour, it appears that Orwell was still struggling to shake his long-standing prejudices. The irony, as Ian Slater has observed, is of course that, in his early work, Orwell 'failed to recognise his own snobbery whilst complaining bitterly about that of others'.¹⁵ The subtle undercurrent of homophobia in the text only adds to the sense of condemnation: 'in this confraternity, where old men rub shoulders with young men who are little more than adolescents, there are relatively

¹² Ibid., p.134.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.136.

¹⁵ Ian Slater, *The Road to Airstrip One* (New York: Norton, 1985), p.112.

few women.’¹⁶ As an attempt to shock the reader (remembering that homosexuality was still illegal at the time) it foreshadows much of Orwell’s later journalism, where just such a tactic is used to great polemical effect. Taken as a whole, the article presents a somewhat confused picture to the modern reader, however, attempting to elicit sympathy in equal measure to moral condemnation; an essay which purports to offer observations on the practices and conditions of the poor, but which is too vague, with its emphasis upon types rather than individuals, to give a sense that specific experience has been drawn upon. Many of the problems evident in ‘Beggars in London’ were undoubtedly the result of inexperience, and would be rectified in later work. However, some aspects – the tendency towards generalisation, the moral condemnation, and the detached narrative voice – would return as regular features of Orwell’s journalism until the end of his life. As we shall see, the latter of these quickly became one of his defining attributes.

‘A Day in the Life of a Tramp’, like its companion article, is an observational piece. This time, however, Orwell does not resort to crude taxonomy, but instead attempts to form a loose narrative based upon his own experiences. Once again, however, the sense of detached superiority is immediately evident:

First, what is a tramp? A tramp is a native English species. These are his distinguishing characteristics: he has no money, he is dressed in rags, he walks about twenty kilometres a day and never sleeps two nights together in the same place.¹⁷

As well as acknowledging the non-English audience, the mock-naturalist voice of the opening can perhaps be seen as an attempt to lampoon typical bourgeois attitudes towards the destitute. When one remembers Orwell’s own retrospective description of

¹⁶ Orwell, ‘Beggars in London’, p.133. As Seth Koven has pointed out, the fear of homosexuality has been a feature of such documentary writing since the earliest Victorian ‘social explorers’. For a full discussion of this, see Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp.43-44.

¹⁷ Orwell, ‘A Day in the Life of a Tramp’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 128-33 (p.128).

the working class as an ‘alien and dangerous’ species, however, the introduction appears merely to reflect the naivety of its creator. For, despite living in one of the poorest quarters of Paris, and having had the experience of a number of clandestine excursions amongst London’s destitute, Orwell still perceived the proletariat principally in terms of their ‘otherness’. The honest portrayal of this perception is admirable: there is no pretence of integration on the part of Orwell, something which must have been a temptation given the great efforts he went to in order to accomplish his infiltration. In fact, he was careful never to make any overt claim of acceptance amongst working class people, later confessing, ‘however much you like them, however interesting you find their conversation, there is always that accursed itch of class-difference, like the pea under the princess’s mattress.’¹⁸ His honest detachment from the proletariat, however, leads on more than one occasion into blunt generalisation: later in the article, he describes how ‘their faces make you think of the face of some wild animal’.¹⁹ As crude as it may sound today, the animalistic trope had been common in the descriptions of the ‘lower’ classes for some time and, together with metaphors comparing slum areas to ‘darkest Africa’, had a history stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ Fear – of violence, dirt and sexual deviancy – was a very common reaction among the middle and upper class towards those lower down the social order, and purportedly investigative literature offered both enlightenment and a degree of titillation to its readers, allowing them to travel to this ‘dark continent’ that was on their doorstep from the safety of their own armchairs. As if to follow this tradition, and in contrast to ‘Beggars in London’, ‘A Day in the Life of a Tramp’ sees Orwell portray the homeless in terms more befitting a modern wildlife documentary:

¹⁸ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.145.

¹⁹ Orwell, ‘A Day in the Life of a Tramp’, p.129.

²⁰ For a discussion of the use of such tropes, see Peter Keating’s introduction to *Into Unknown England, 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers*, (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1976).

There they wait, lying on the grass or squatting in the dust. The bravest prowl around the butcher's or the baker's, hoping to glean some scrap of food. But this is dangerous, because begging is against the law in England, so for the most part they are content to remain idle, exchanging vague words in a strange slang, the tramps' special language, full of bizarre and picturesque words and phrases which cannot be found in any dictionary.²¹

Again, there is no acknowledgement that events are based upon Orwell's own involvement with tramping; rather, it is as if the scene has been recorded from a respectable and safe distance. Once more, we sense that Orwell is too ashamed to overtly refer to his own experience. If we compare this article with one published in *The Adelphi* just two years later, 'The Spike', which touches upon similar events, the difference is marked:

It was late afternoon. Forty-nine of us, forty-eight men and one woman, lay on the green waiting for the spike to open. We were too tired to talk much. We just sprawled about exhaustedly, with home-made cigarettes sticking out of our scrubby faces. Overhead the chestnut branches were covered with blossom, and beyond that great woolly clouds floated almost motionless in a clear sky. Littered on the grass, we seemed dingy, urban riff-raff. We defiled the scene, like sardine-tins and paper bags on the seashore.²²

Here we have almost the same scene, but recast in a much more recognisably Orwellian style. One is immediately struck by Orwell's new-found confidence: gone is the reticent voice of 'A Day in the Life of a Tramp' and in has come a narrator who not only acknowledges his experience of living among the poor, but goes to great lengths to make a feature of it. The 'they' is now a 'we', lending the deprecating descriptions a far greater power, whilst Orwell's acknowledgement that he is now a part of this 'dingy, urban riff-raff', which 'defiled the scene', contains a sense of relish at both his act of belonging and the likely shock caused to the reader. And there is, too, the juxtaposition of the 'chestnut branches' and 'clear sky' with the litter-like poor, the seashore simile neatly expressing their regular appearance as if on some mysterious tide: very much a

²¹ Orwell, 'A Day in the Life of a Tramp', p.129.

²² Orwell, 'The Spike', in *The Complete Works*, x, 197-203 (p.197).

‘purple’ patch, but in this context, effective nonetheless. By the time of this essay, Orwell had had seven articles and a number of reviews published, which went some way to convincing his parents that his decision to become a writer was not a frivolous one. Perhaps this explains his more assured tone. The sheer technical improvement that is evident in the piece, however, suggests that he had simply found his literary voice.

By 1931, the rather blunt attempts to elicit sympathy for the poor evident in ‘A Day in the Life of a Tramp’, had given way to a much more subtle method. ‘The Spike’ is the first article in which the archetypal Orwellian voice appears (or rather, sometimes appears). The mode is first person, yet the narrator, Orwell, has little, except his ignorance of casual wards, to define him:

I had eightpence on me. “For the love of Christ, mate”, the old hands advised me, “don’t you take it in. You’d get seven days for going in the spike with eightpence!”

So I buried my money in a hole under the hedge, marking the spot with a lump of flint.²³

The naivety is of critical importance here: Orwell’s narrator shares the ignorance of his audience, pulling the reader in and encouraging him to occupy the vacuum left by the otherwise inconspicuous narrative voice. As the reader begins to inhabit the scene, Orwell is able to once more layer conversational value-judgements into the account, describing the ‘terrible Tramp Major’, the ‘disgusting sight’ of the bathroom, and the ‘cheap, noxious food’. In this manner, as in so much of his later reportage, Orwell modulates his narrative voice, allowing it to wax and wane in order to switch between description and comment. Indeed, not only does the transparency of Orwell’s narrator alter, but so too does the existential distance to its subjects. At times in the article, Orwell emphasises his involvement with the casual ward inmates; in other places, we

²³ Ibid., p.198.

find the return of the naturalist, observing these alien creatures with detached bemusement. This reversal is often accomplished within the same few lines:

We hurried into our clothes, and then went to the dining room to bolt our breakfast. The bread was much worse than usual, because the military-minded idiot of a Tramp Major had cut it into slices overnight, so that it was as hard as ship's biscuit. But we were glad of our tea after the cold, restless night. I do not know what tramps would do without tea, or rather the stuff they miscall tea. It is their food, their medicine, their panacea for all evils.²⁴

Indeed, on one occasion, Orwell feels the need to pull back completely from the experience, describing how the Tramp Major, having identified him as a 'gentleman', expresses his sympathy and thereafter treats him with a measure of respect. Perhaps this too is indicative of the advances Orwell had made in technique, carefully using his own privileged position to underline the differing attitudes towards the classes. It may also be further evidence of his discomfort at the thought of being mistaken by his readers as a member of the 'lower' classes, this being, after all, an article to which his real name was still attached. 'The Spike' represents an important evolutionary moment in Orwell's literary career. It is an article in which the reader is carefully drawn into this sordid underworld and allowed to conduct their own vicarious investigation through the eyes of the narrator. In this respect, it bears a family resemblance to the voluminous work of Victorian 'social explorers' such as James Greenwood and George R. Sims. As we shall see, Orwell's first published book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, attempted something similar. But this raises the question of why he decided to focus his efforts on such a well-worn field, using a methodology, that of the clandestine reporter, which had already become hackneyed by the end of the previous century. What did Orwell hope to add to this body of literature?

²⁴ Ibid., p.199.

The early newspaper articles were instrumental in providing Orwell with the opportunity to develop his literary talents, in particular his ability to skilfully modulate the narrative voice to allow the reader to inhabit the scenes depicted. This was part of a distinctive method which characterised much of his output during the 1930s, but in particular his first published book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Written during his stay in Paris, and appended with the 'London' sections once back in England (including much of his article 'The Spike' and part of an essay entitled 'Common Lodging Houses'), this work describes Orwell's experience of living in poverty and doing low-paid work in Parisian hotels, as well as his time living amongst tramps in London. The book was initially rejected by publishers Jonathan Cape, as well as Faber & Faber, leading Orwell to, rather rashly, give the manuscript to Mabel Fierz, a friend and patron of several years standing, with instructions to dispose of it but retain the paper clips. Fortunately, rather than throwing the work away, she passed it on to a contact, Leonard Moore, who was to become Orwell's literary agent for the rest of his life. Moore eventually placed the manuscript with Victor Gollancz Ltd., at the time a small left-wing publisher, who, subject to some alterations for legal reasons, agreed to publish the work. Not only did the book undergo a number of title changes during its gestation (including, 'Days in London and Paris', 'The Lady Poverty', 'A Scullion's Diary', and 'The Confessions of a Down and Out'), but it also marked the first use of the pseudonym 'George Orwell'.²⁵ Orwell's admission to Leonard Moore that he was 'not proud of' the book, suggests personal rather than professional reasons behind the decision to use a pen name, and perhaps an attempt to avoid the familial embarrassment that would undoubtedly be caused by some of its more salacious content.²⁶

²⁵ Stansky and Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell*, pp.252-54.

²⁶ Orwell, 'Letter to Leonard Moore', in *The Complete Works*, x, 242-43 (p.243).

Orwell clarifies his intentions early on in *Down and Out*, stating that ‘Poverty is what I am writing about’.²⁷ Here, unlike his early newspaper articles, we have an overt focus to the work, and one which hints at a certain authorial agenda within the reportage. Yet there is also a narrative of sorts running through the entire book, in which Orwell’s plight, from the kitchens of Parisian hotels through to sleeping rough on London’s Embankment, is charted. Added to this is an array of characters, based upon real encounters but, by the author’s admission, ‘intended more as representative types of the Parisian or Londoner of the class to which they belong than as individuals’.²⁸ The project itself is, to some extent, artificial when one considers that Orwell could have escaped poverty by borrowing money from his aunt, who lived nearby in Paris, at any time. The struggles detailed in the book are also somewhat absurd: as the basis of a planned novel, it was in Orwell’s interests to succumb to poverty, yet the account is marked by his, seemingly genuine, resistance to such a fate. This struggle gives the narrative tension and, ironically, a sense of realism, yet leaves its status as a text something of an enigma. Is it literature? Or is it reportage? Fiction or truth? In fact, it contains elements of a number of styles without being wholly identifiable with any of them: a mixture of fact, embroidered anecdote and outright fiction. To begin to understand some of the techniques used by Orwell in this book, we must place it not only, as with the early articles, in the context of Victorian social exploration, but also against a background of relatively recent innovations in photojournalism. Although photography, in the sense that the modern reader would understand it, had been used to embellish books and newspaper articles as far back as the late 1880s, it was a difficult process, restricted by the heavy and expensive equipment involved. Only with the development of ‘wirephoto’ – an early form of faxing – together with the 35mm Leica

²⁷ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Penguin, 2001), p.5.

²⁸ Orwell, ‘Introduction to the French Edition of “Down and Out in Paris and London”’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 353-54 (p.354).

camera and more modern flashbulbs in the 1920s and 30s did the elements necessary for syndicated photojournalism come together. By the time that *Down and Out* was published in 1933, Orwell's readers would have been used to not only reading about the plight of the poor, but also seeing photographs and, increasingly, film footage of their conditions.²⁹ Of course, the power of photography lies not in its ability to provide a facsimile of reality, but rather to provoke the viewer by the manipulation of the image – through omission and framing. In this sense, Orwell can be seen to be competing with the new media, but relying upon words rather than pictures in order to direct and provoke his readers. The purpose of *Down and Out*, therefore, is to some extent circumscribed in Jenni Calder's observation that 'Orwell was concerned to produce a reaction in his readers'.³⁰ But how did he set about achieving this?

Like the social explorers of the Victorian era, Orwell was seeking to not just inform, but shock his predominantly middle-class audience out of their complacency. This is in evidence from the opening pages of the book and Orwell's animalistic description of his hotel as 'a dark, rickety warren of five storeys' – a sure indication that crime and debauchery cannot be far away. With the reader's sense of danger piqued, he immediately echoes the sexual fears of the Victorian social explorers in his ominous account of a local widower who 'shared the same bed with his two grown-up daughters'.³¹ Even this provocative piece of scene-setting appears tame, however, in comparison to the stories recounted by Orwell through the voices of various characters. The most shocking of these, particularly by modern standards, is that of Charlie. In his

²⁹ The 1930s were to see the emergence of the British documentary film, thanks in large part to the efforts of film-critic turned film-maker, John Grierson. Through his work with the Empire Marketing Board, which was later subsumed under the General Post Office, Grierson and his team produced a number of seminal documentary films, including 'Night Mail' and, in 1935, 'Housing Problems', one of the first films to feature its participants – residents of slum dwellings in London's East End - speaking directly to camera. See <<http://vimeo.com/4950031>> [accessed 29th December 2014]

³⁰ Jenni Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p.38.

³¹ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, pp.2-3.

first anecdote, Charlie recounts stealing the hefty sum of 1100 Francs from his brother in order to visit a secret bordello, whereupon he violently rapes a seemingly imprisoned young girl, all the while laughing:

‘More and more savagely I renewed the attack. Again and again the girl tried to escape; she cried out for mercy anew, but I laughed at her.

“‘Mercy!’ I said, “do you suppose I have come here to show mercy? Do you suppose I have paid a thousand francs for that?” I swear to you, messieurs et dames, that if it were not for that accursed law that robs us of our liberty, I would have murdered her at that moment...

...‘Ah yes, it is gone – gone for ever. Ah, the poverty, the shortness, the disappointment of human joy! For in reality – car in réalité, what is the duration of the supreme moment of love? It is nothing, an instant, a second perhaps. A second of ecstasy, and after that – dust, ashes, nothingness.’³²

At first, it is difficult to know what Orwell was intending with this account (described by him as ‘about the only good bit of writing in the book’).³³ Perhaps even more troubling is his annotation in a copy sent to his friend, Brenda Salkeld, that it was ‘Not autobiography. The fellow really did talk like this, tho’.’³⁴ Why did Orwell construct such an unpleasant fiction, and why did he hold it in such high regard? Lynette Hunter argues that the anecdote merely delineates the character of Charlie as ‘a crude stereotype of the “blue” Frenchman’.³⁵ But is this really all there is to it? What is clear is that, at this point, the narrative has moved firmly away from simple reportage. And perhaps in this, we see the method of the Victorian social explorer revised for the age of photojournalism. For, as tasteless as the anecdote is, there is a certain truth that is being communicated. Remembering how ‘poverty’ is the focus of the work, we see that the ‘joy’ experienced by Charlie, which is both fleeting and depraved, is founded upon his temporary empowerment through money: for Orwell, the girl is denigrated through her

³² Ibid., pp.10-11.

³³ Orwell, ‘Letter to Leonard Moore’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 252.

³⁴ Orwell, ‘Publication of “Down and Out in Paris and London”’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 299-300 (p.299).

³⁵ Lynette Hunter, *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1984), p.16.

destitution, her assailant given licence to engage in this dreadful act by virtue of his fleeting wealth. It is quite possible that what Orwell intended here was a kind of tableau – like a First World War propaganda illustration – of the rape of the poor by the moneyed classes. And it would certainly not be surprising to see a writer of this period utilise such methods, the First World War having left its impression upon so many authors who grew up in the early twentieth century.³⁶ Of course, the irony is that Charlie is an imposter, socially more akin to his victim than the genuinely wealthy – his money having been stolen from his brother. As is so often the case with Orwell, every carefully placed detail serves a purpose: the purloined cash, a comment upon the acquisition of wealth; the theft from a brother, emphasising capitalism's impropriety; and the imprisonment of the girl a metaphor for the shackles of poverty on a nation's youth. There is, accordingly, a high level of crafting present here. And the ability to repackage an idea in shocking form was one that Orwell himself identified with a note of approval in Jonathan Swift, commenting on the satirist's 'terrible intensity of vision, capable of picking out a single hidden truth and then magnifying it and distorting it'.³⁷ Yet some commentators have seen this skill as a weakness. Richard Hoggart notably alludes to Orwell's ability to form tableaux and then dismisses it, claiming that his picture of working class life in particular 'is too static, is set like a picture caught at a certain moment'.³⁸ Such a complaint is only possible if one positions Orwell within a rigidly realist framework, with verisimilitude a criterion for success. Unlike the social explorers, whose only deviation from facts was where innuendo and suggestion were

³⁶ Christopher Isherwood was to sum up the predicament of the inter-war writers by explaining that they 'were all suffering, more or less subconsciously, from a feeling of shame that we hadn't been old enough to take part in the European war.' Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (London: Methuen & Co., 1953), p.74.

³⁷ Orwell, 'Politics Vs. Literature', in *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 417-31 (p.430).

³⁸ Richard Hoggart, 'Introduction to "The Road to Wigan Pier"', in *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Raymond Williams (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp.34-51 (p.41).

forced to take the place of salacious realism, Orwell adopts the violent artistry of the photojournalist or, better, propagandist in order to shatter the social and economic complacency of his readers. Margery Sabin suggests just such an interpretation in stating that:

Orwell does not wish merely to enumerate evils and injustices, but to break through what he regards as middle-class oblivion, a state of false consciousness that, in his representation of it amounts to a kind of lying.³⁹

For Orwell, this ‘false consciousness’ can only be shattered via a more aggressive method, and that sometimes entails a departure from factual reportage into a very special kind of creative fiction. As we shall see, this method of emblemising a truth through a carefully constructed tableau was a technique that Orwell used periodically in both fiction and non-fiction for the rest of his life.

It has been claimed that Orwell’s style of writing was, if not derivative, then very nearly indistinguishable from a number of his contemporaries. Indeed, so pervasive is this view, espoused initially by Orwell’s school-friend, Cyril Connolly, that it could be said to constitute the standard interpretation, particular with respect to his non-fiction works. In his part-autobiographical book, *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly draws an historical distinction between a dry, reportage style of writing, termed ‘vernacular’, and more lyrical approaches, termed ‘Mandarin’, in order to expose the homogeneity of the former. ‘Mandarin’ is the style adopted by ‘writers whose tendency is to make their language convey more than they mean or more than they feel’,⁴⁰ whilst ‘vernacular’ writing is ‘journalistic’, expressing ideas in ‘the way people talk’.⁴¹ Although he claims

³⁹ Margery Sabin, ‘The Truths of Experience: Orwell’s Nonfiction of the 1930s’, in *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, ed. by John Rodden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.43-58 (p.45).

⁴⁰ Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Deutsch, 1973), p.13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

that no value judgement is present within this taxonomy, one quickly suspects where his own sentiments lay:

We have seen that there are two styles which it is convenient to describe as the realist, or vernacular, the style of rebels, journalists, common sense-addicts, and unromantic observers of human destiny – and the Mandarin, the artificial style of men of letters or of those in authority who make letters their spare-time occupation.⁴²

Connolly goes to great lengths to emphasise the historical nature of this distinction, comparing the two camps to political parties, where ‘each will seem in or out of office at a given moment’ (the vernacular style being in the ascendancy at the time of his writing in 1938).⁴³ The Mandarin camp boasts an extensive list of authors such as Donne, James, Proust and Woolf, whilst the vernacular writers include Gissing, Maugham, Forster, Lawrence – and Orwell. According to Connolly, the vernacular style emerged when prose ‘began to imitate journalism’, by using plain vocabulary, and avoiding complicated sentences and figurative language.⁴⁴ By his own admission, however, this classification, particularly on the Mandarin side, is not one with strictly demarcated borders – Joyce’s *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are described as being written in ‘a reformed Mandarin, influenced by French Realism’.⁴⁵ Yet Connolly is much bolder in his grouping of realist, vernacular writers. In order to highlight the supposed homogeneity of these ‘opponents of fine writing’, he constructs a passage comprising lines from Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Isherwood’s *Sally Bowles* and Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*:⁴⁶

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. There were generally four of us in the bedroom, and a beastly

⁴² Ibid., p.45.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.66.

place it was, with that defiled impermanent look of rooms that are not serving their rightful purpose. [Orwell]

One afternoon, early in October, I was invited to black coffee at Fritz Wendel's flat. Fritz always invited you to 'black coffee' with emphasis on the black. He was very proud of his coffee. People use to say it was the strongest in Berlin. Fritz himself was dressed in his usual coffee-party costume – a thick white yachting sweater and very light blue yachting trousers. [Isherwood]

You know how it is there early in Havana, with the bums still asleep against the walls of the buildings; before even the ice wagons come by with ice for the bars? Well we came across the square from the dock to the Pearl of San Francisco to get coffee. [Hemingway]⁴⁷

At a glance, the experiment certainly appears to emphasise the striking similarity in narrative technique, with the three 'I's' acting as seemingly interchangeable 'colourless reporters'. And yet, a closer analysis of these texts reveals that Connolly has engaged in a certain amount of chicanery with his selections, deliberately choosing excerpts where the convergence in style is unusually marked. Aside from the difference manifest by the lack of a proper narrative thread in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the writing of Isherwood and Hemingway is distinguished by a much more prominent narrative voice, highlighted through longer speeches and more conspicuous reactions to situations than in the work of Orwell. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Isherwood, the narrator, is even referred to by name, not just once but continuously (this never occurs in Orwell's non-fiction), which allows elements of his character to coalesce, bringing him more into the foreground of events. For Connolly, however, the similarity lies in the use of simple non-figurative language, a belief in 'informality and simplicity', which in turn arises from the impulse to write for the 'masses'.⁴⁸ It is, accordingly, a method most often

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.70. For a fascinating account of Orwell's brief meeting with Hemingway and the subsequent embellishment of the event by the latter, see John Rodden and John Rossi, 'The Mysterious (Un) meeting of George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway', *The Kenyon Review*, 31 (2009), 56-84.

⁴⁸ Connolly, p.63.

used by writers with left-wing sentiments. And herein lies the danger of writing for such a wide audience:

As the writer goes out to meet them half-way he is joined by other writers going out to meet them half-way and they merge into the same creature – the talkie journalist, the advertising, lecturing, popular novelist.⁴⁹

Aside from the rather haughty sentiments behind this argument ('them' can only mean the reader of average education or below), there is a sense, suggested also in the title of the book, that Connolly believes genuinely able writers adopting such a style are surrendering their talents to mediocrity: 'For a moment the canoe of an Orwell or an Isherwood bobs up, then it is hustled away by floating rubbish, and a spate of newspaper pulp.'⁵⁰ The reference to newspapers here is entirely deliberate since, for Connolly, the issue is not so much the rivalry between the Mandarin and vernacular styles as 'the struggle between literature and journalism'.⁵¹ In competing with the ever-growing popularity and immediacy of journalism, literature has been forced to abandon its more ornate trappings and, instead, attempt to appeal to the masses through a dry, utilitarian style, leaving itself impoverished as an art form. For Connolly, the consequence of striving for such mass appeal, is that the bare, vernacular style could dominate literature, furnishing works as disposable as the newspaper reporting upon which it is modelled.⁵² Accordingly, there would be a diminishing likelihood of vernacular writers producing works which have 'any hope of lasting half a generation'.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.71.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.18.

⁵² Orwell himself expressed sentiments regarding the homogeneity of the modern world in both *Coming Up For Air* and, later, *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, where books for the 'proles' are generated by machine. However, as I discuss in Chapter Four, his concern was, unlike Connolly, the dehumanisation that results from such practices.

⁵³ Connolly, p.80.

Perhaps the first response to the plaintive Connolly ought to be, ‘How does one gauge whether a work has lasted for a generation?’ Has a work endured if it remains popular in bookshops and lending libraries? Or is success somehow measured through its presence in the ‘public consciousness’, by regular citation in other works and across the wider mass media, for instance? Can a work be said to have ‘endured’ if it is still being taught in schools and universities a generation or more after its publication? Or does durability rely upon the continuing ‘reputation’ of the author of a work (however we may care to measure that)? On any of these criteria, a sizeable number of works and authors cited by Connolly as ‘vernacular’ could be said to have endured – and a significant proportion of those classed as ‘Mandarin’ could be said to have not. There is, accordingly, not quite the link between style and permanence for which Connolly hopes. But what of the charge that the vernacular writers – including Orwell – are indistinguishable from one another? Is Orwell’s work relegated to the mass of ordinary vernacular writing by virtue of its clear style alone? And if this is not the case, then how are we to approach his writing if not principally through this realist, vernacular lens?

In his reverence for the Mandarin approach, and tendency to view ‘style’ solely in terms of the opposition between figurative and plain language, Connolly fails to recognise the artistry and often sophisticated technical devices at work within vernacular writing, factors which allow him to collapse such works into a sort of lowbrow, homogenous journalism. In this sense, Connolly typifies the common approach to Orwell, his taxonomy serving to mask much that is distinctive in his work. The dangers of viewing Orwell solely in realist or vernacular terms were highlighted by his friend, Richard Rees, who observed that, ‘it was easy to underestimate the acuteness and power of Orwell’s mind; and his readers are equally likely to be misled by his

unpretentious and straightforwardly simple style.’⁵⁴ Peter Davison has recently echoed these concerns:

Orwell reads ‘too easily’. His work does not demand the kind of attention of scholarly interpreters that does, say, *Finnegans Wake*. Interpreting such a text seems to earn higher academic kudos than does Orwell’s work, especially that which seems to be based on ‘mere’ reportage. Hence, I believe, the careless inability to distinguish between the creative in Orwell’s writing and reportage [...] Orwell is often far more subtle than he is assumed to be.⁵⁵

Davison’s emphasis on the creative within what ‘seems’ to be reportage in Orwell is crucial, and an aspect that the labelling exemplified in *Enemies of Promise* risks concealing. To be sure, Orwell’s non-fiction does resemble reportage, notably in his use of simple language, and, as we have seen, in his construction of provocative ‘tableaux’ following the manner of the propagandist and photojournalist. However, it is misleading to suggest that Orwell’s *sole* method and purpose is that of the journalist. We have already identified a sophisticated modulation of the narrative voice at play in his work. And whilst Orwell’s tableaux share some common purpose with the photograph and the propaganda illustration, their construction, as we discuss further below, involves a distinctly literary method. But Orwell’s work is also, as we have seen, written from the standpoint of the first-hand observer – a mode which, coupled with his unusual vision, allows him to document his lived experience in a manner redolent of existentialist philosophy. Rather than a mere condescension to the ‘masses’, his plain style is a necessary vehicle for such insights, affording them an accessibility and durability that is often lacking in their opaque expression by other thinkers. In order to explore these aspects of Orwell’s work, we must first clarify the areas in which his writing differs, in both style and content, from that of other ‘vernacular’ writers, thereby further

⁵⁴ Richard Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive From the Camp of Victory* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), p.8.

⁵⁵ Peter Davison, ‘Hail to the Orwell Society’, <<http://www.orwellsociety.com/2011/10/27/hail-to-the-orwell-society-website/>> [accessed 29 December 2014].

undermining the limited realist/vernacular classification. We shall therefore take up Connolly's challenge directly by comparing sections from *Down and Out in Paris and London* and Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*. During the course of this analysis, further distinctive features of Orwell's writing will become apparent.

As we have indicated, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, like the essay 'A Day in the Life of a Tramp', certainly contains elements of both reportage and literary realism, although this time, with a narrative thread sustained for much longer. If we study the opening page, in which Orwell sketches the Rue du Coq D'Or in Paris (in reality, the Rue du Pot de Fer) bursting into life each morning, we at first find little with which to refute Connolly's charge of the homogenous 'colourless narrator'.

Madame Monce, who kept the little hotel opposite mine, had come out onto the pavement to address a lodger on the third floor. Her bare feet were stuck into sabots and her grey hair was streaming down.

Madame Monce: 'Sacrée salope! How many times have I told you not to squash bugs on the wallpaper? Do you think you've bought the hotel, eh? Why can't you throw them out of the window like everyone else? Espèce de traînée!'

The woman on the third floor: 'Va donc, eh! vieille vache!'

Thereupon a whole variegated chorus of yells, as windows were flung open on every side and half the street joined in the quarrel. They shut up abruptly ten minutes later, when a squadron of cavalry rode past and people stopped shouting to look at them.⁵⁶

Aside from the possessive 'mine', Orwell is seemingly absent from this description, the reader, once again, being invited to inhabit what Roger Fowler has described as an 'impressionistic' scene.⁵⁷ There is a level of literary crafting here which is not to be found in journalism of the 1930s. With fabrication of the French dialogue, we are immediately presented with the 'otherness' of these characters, the raised voices and street quarrelling jarring with the middle-class reserve of Orwell's readership.⁵⁸ Also

⁵⁶ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Penguin, 1940), p.1.

⁵⁷ Roger Fowler, *The Language of George Orwell* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1995), p.73.

⁵⁸ For an account of how this dialogue was constructed with the assistance of Orwell's French translator, see *The Lost Orwell*, ed. by Peter Davison (London: Timewell Press, 2006), pp.24-39.

present is the clever use of visual metaphor, the woman shouting down onto the street from her window embodying the subtle class divisions at the heart of capitalist society. The comedic bathos of ‘bugs on the wallpaper’ is typical Orwell, as is the acute observation of the residents distracted from their petty squabbles at the sobering sight of the cavalry – briefly another of his frozen ‘tableau’ moments. This is an opening displaying a sharp appreciation of the aggressive, yet herd-like, nature of individuals living amongst the impoverished mass; in its use of grotesques, comedic speech and the tableau, it is crafted prose and, quite obviously, more than colourless ‘reportage’. If we compare the start of Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin*, we can immediately appreciate a contrast in both style and purpose:

From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied façades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scroll-work and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle-class.⁵⁹

Once again, a view from a window features, although this time, the possessive ‘my’ indicates that it is very much our narrator’s perception of the scene. With the focus firmly upon the scenery, the reader is left to infer the characters represented by the facades. We no longer have a sense of bewildering otherness, but rather, a carefully sketched, and to a reader of the 1930s, familiar, picture of decay. As a prelude to Isherwood’s famous ‘I am a camera’ declaration and confession, the narrative voice, unlike Orwell’s, is strangely prominent, betrayed through the judgemental language emphasising decline – ‘dirty’, ‘tarnished’, ‘bankrupt’. Just as in *Down and Out*, we are surveying foreign lands, although this time the familiarity of description invites comparison with, and reflection on, our own world. Once again, as with Orwell, there is a degree of artistry present, but Isherwood’s method is quite different, with less

⁵⁹ Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Vintage, 1998), p.9.

grotesque exaggeration, and the more direct use of the narrative voice in order to pass judgement. In both cases, however, there is enough subtle meaning evident to cast doubt on the assertion, at the heart of Connolly's taxonomy, that only Mandarin writers 'make their language convey more than they mean or more than they feel'.

Two more excerpts, placed adjacently in the manner of Connolly, will help us to show how, far from being indistinguishable, differences in both style and purpose belie the surface similarities of these two authors. In each of them, the first from Orwell then Isherwood, we witness a drunken party involving a range of different characters:

Azaya, a great clumping peasant girl who worked fourteen hours a day in a glass factory, sang a song about, 'Elle a perdu son pantalon, tout en dansant le Charleston'. Her friend Marinette, a thin, dark Corsican girl of obstinate virtue, tied her knees together and danced the danse du ventre. The old Rougiers wandered in and out, cadging drinks and trying to tell a long, involved story about someone who had once cheated them over a bedstead. R., cadaverous and silent, sat in his corner quietly boozing. Charlie, drunk, half danced, half staggered to and fro with a glass of sham absinthe balanced in one fat hand, pinching the women's breasts and declaiming poetry.⁶⁰

From this point it did not take Sally long to persuade Frl. Mayr to sing Sennerin Abschied von der Alm, which after the claret cup and a bottle of very inexpensive cognac, so exactly suited my mood that I shed a few tears. We all joined in the repeats and the final, ear-splitting Juch-he! Then Sally sang 'I've got those Little Boy Blues' with so much expression that Bobby's mixer colleague, taking it personally, seized her round the waist and had to be restrained by Bobby, who reminded him firmly that it was time to be getting along to business.⁶¹

Here we see Orwell describing, with typical reserve, the debauchery of the poor. The detail that Azaya works 'fourteen hours a day' is almost causal to her scandalous song and a belly dance by another girl of 'obstinate virtue'. Charlie's 'sham absinthe' indicates both the character's aspirations and harsh economic reality, whilst also highlighting the counterfeit status of drunken euphoria. Stylistically, it is another moment in which Orwell the narrator is completely absent, perhaps revealing his feeling

⁶⁰ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, p.97.

⁶¹ Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, p.50-51.

of difference from the debauched protagonists. In terms of purpose, one is reminded of Marx's observation that, due to his debasement in the workplace, the worker 'feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions'.⁶² Orwell is depicting this fleeting escape from wage labour, using the excesses of his grotesque characters to underline the value of the few hours in which they have ownership over themselves. Whereas there is a clear social and political thrust to this piece, the excerpt from Isherwood is a sketch centred upon sexuality, in particular that of the character Sally Bowles. A similar level of drunken hysteria is in evidence, yet the only economic reference – the 'very inexpensive' cognac – serves as a measure of the narrator, Isherwood's, refined tastes as much as any wider social comment. Against this background, Sally is initially portrayed as childlike in insisting that Frl. Mayr sing the song about a dairymaid, a facet of character which jars with the sexual suggestiveness of – and reaction to – the song that she subsequently sings. The jovial communal atmosphere at the beginning of the extract also gives way, this time to tension caused by the proprietorial sexuality of Bobby's friend in the face of Sally Bowles's allure. There is, accordingly, a certain amount of development which takes place here, allowing Isherwood to present a disconcerting change in atmosphere. As such, it is a scene with a method and purpose markedly different from that of Orwell.

Of course, sexuality was seldom one of Orwell's principal topics, and, it will be objected, a difference in purpose is not sufficient to undermine Connolly's stylistic classification of these two writers. Yet, in addition to the numerous differences of technique we have outlined, one facet clearly, and crucially, delineates Orwell's approach. For Orwell's method here involves sketching his scene *in toto* – that is to say, describing events concurrently. The strict narrative order of realism has been collapsed

⁶² Karl Marx, 'Alienated Labour', in *The Portable Karl Marx*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1983), pp.131-46 (p.137).

in favour of an holistic, almost photographic, overview of the characters and their activities. Although necessarily described in sequence, the actions of Orwell's protagonists are presented as occurring simultaneously through the omission of temporal markers. This method of isolating certain scenes is to be found regularly in his work, and becomes integral to his depiction of the 'tableau' – the frozen, emblematic picture that so often the reader is invited to 'inhabit'. Whilst, in these early writings, the technique was used principally at the beginning of a scene as an establishing method, it can be found, as we shall see, in rather surprising places in many of his later works. Isherwood, by contrast, offers a much more conventional account, describing events in a sequential narrative fashion using temporal markers such as 'from this point', 'after', 'then' etc. This methodology is familiar enough to the reader, being a principal mode of narrative fiction, but because of this, it unfolds the scene in a way that appears divorced from real life: the world depicted is, overtly, artifice, each impression being neatly sequenced in a train of events not reflecting perceptual reality. Conversely, Orwell's disposal of temporal markers allows him to present his scene in a much more realistic manner, with an array of impressions simultaneously crowding the viewer's attention. This is realism, but not in the traditional literary sense. For Orwell is not merely reporting an experience, but attempting to present that experience in the mode that it is perceived.

This simultaneous depiction of actions becomes a defining feature of the Orwellian 'tableau'; it allows him to, as it were, bracket what would otherwise be sequenced through a conventional narrative in order to present scenes to the reader more holistically. The resulting descriptions thus possess the concentrated power of the propaganda image. Charlie's story can be seen as an embryonic example of this technique: the narrative sequence is here intact, so, in order for the tableau to take form,

events are instead ‘bracketed’ through their status as an anecdote. As we have seen, later in the book, and indeed in subsequent works, Orwell is more sophisticated, choosing to collapse the narrative sequence in order to ‘contain’ the image. In both cases, the effect is similar: the creation of a striking, and thought-provoking, scene, rather like a painting or poster. A corollary of dispensing with temporal order, is that, as with the current example, the created effect becomes, as Roger Fowler notes, impressionistic: the scene is sketched in a manner which mimics the way a human being apprehends its environment, a number of perceptions being conveyed with the illusion of simultaneity rather than strict sequence. It is hard to say whether this secondary effect is Orwell’s design, but it is true to say that it meshes rather neatly with his intention of conveying unfamiliar experiences: without a formal narrative sequence, the impressionistic tableau is allowed to envelop the reader, enabling him to view its contents as if they were his own, and not Orwell’s. However, the tableau, as we have seen, is not only a literary tool deployed by Orwell to present scenes and narratives in a realistic fashion. In the manner of Swift, it also allows Orwell to embody an underlying ‘truth’ or idea that he wishes to convey: in Charlie’s story, it is the brutal inequities created by wealth; in the bistro scene, it is the dehumanising effects of wage labour. The containment of specific scenes or incidents within a tableau is crucial in allowing the creation of such visual epigrams. It is a feature that is ubiquitous in Orwell’s non-fiction, and in subsequent chapters we shall trace its further development, as a means of uncovering important methodologies and purposes with which it becomes intertwined.

We have argued that, in his tendency to periodically collapse temporal narrative order, Orwell not only delineates a picture or tableau, but attempts to present experiences holistically, mimicking the manner in which a person encounters the world. Not only does this technique allow the reader to more easily inhabit particular scenes, it

also allows for an epigrammatic truth to be conveyed, in much the same manner as the pictures of the photojournalist or propagandist. These observations have a number of ramifications pertaining not only to Connolly's realist/vernacular distinction, but also the classification of Orwell's work in general. Stylistically, the tableau is one of a number of methods utilised in *Down and Out*: Orwell intersperses this technique between moments of investigative reportage (principally found in Chapters 11-14), editorial opinion (Chapter 22), literary fiction (the stories of Valenti, Charlie and others) and, of course, some plain, realist description which acts as a substrate for these more elaborate methods. Connolly's realist/vernacular classification of Orwell is based solely upon his use of vernacular, plain language in opposition to poetic and figurative writing. As such, it captures but one aspect of his work yet purports to label the entire canon. Far from being 'mere' reportage, Orwell's writing is often the result of a level of crafting equal to many 'Mandarin' contemporaries. The supposed homogeneity of Orwell and other 'vernacular' writers is merely a surface feature: from the passages examined, selected to allow style and purpose the greatest opportunity of convergence between Orwell and, our other 'realist' archetype, Isherwood, it has become apparent that a number of differences *are* present. Yet the Mandarin/vernacular distinction would collapse the work of Orwell, Isherwood, and other ostensibly realist writers, into a homogenous whole. Far from being a unifying feature, upon closer examination, we find that the use of 'simple' language by these authors belies a range of different creative methods and purposes, each of which goes beyond 'mere' journalism, particularly the kind found in the 1930s. In the case of Orwell, the realist/vernacular labelling advocated by Connolly, which has become so ubiquitous, is not merely a lazy classification, but one which disassembles much that is truly innovative in his work. The remainder of this project will seek to address this critical imbalance.

If we are to dispense with the ‘realist’ labelling of Orwell, we must find an alternative way of approaching his work. In order to do so, it will be necessary to briefly survey some contemporaneous currents of thought that resonate with the approach found in *Down and Out*. In its occasional abandonment of chronology in pursuit of the tableau, Orwell’s work has some small connection to the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique, popular during the inter-war period, in which writers attempt to convey the continuous flow of thoughts and perceptions as they are experienced by the human mind. Indeed, Orwell was known to have been deeply impressed by Joyce’s *Ulysses*, often seen as the archetype of this method.⁶³ However, whereas ‘stream of consciousness’ would often eschew punctuation and correct sentence structure – indeed, the sentence itself – in order to mimic the play of thoughts in the human mind, stylistically, Orwell is rarely that radical.⁶⁴ For what he is concerned to present is not a replication of thought itself, but rather his own *perspective* on the world. As Tosco Fyvel, a friend of Orwell in the 1940s, explained when looking back on his work:

Because he always looked at the world from the perspective of his personal situation, he could basically write only about himself and his own experiences and predicaments.⁶⁵

This limitation, whereby Orwell found it hard to escape his own viewpoint, was serendipitous in that it forced him to seek ways to honestly replicate his own experiences. We have seen aspects of that method in our examination of the early essays, and pages of *Down and Out*. But it must be understood as being quite distinct from simple first-person narrative. For, as we saw in Isherwood, by outlining the personality of the narrator, the traditional first-person approach inevitably introduces

⁶³ For Orwell’s correspondence relating to *Ulysses* (in which he uses the rather apt analogy of a picture in order to describe the novelist’s purpose) see George Orwell, ‘Letter to Brenda Salkeld’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 326-29.

⁶⁴ The exception to this being his attempt to ape the ‘nighttown’ scene from *Ulysses* in *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

⁶⁵ Tosco Fyvel, *George Orwell: A Personal Memoir* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1983), p.54.

some distance between the reader and the description. Orwell's method not only allows the reader to vicariously inhabit the narrative space, but also, it will be seen, delineates, from the perspective of the individual, a number of inescapable facets of social existence. It is an approach that can be understood as a kind of *phenomenology*.

Phenomenology was a broad philosophical movement, associated almost exclusively with continental Europe, which emerged from the work of Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century. In Husserlian phenomenology, the Cartesian problematic of somehow proving the existence of the 'external' world is deferred, by 'bracketing' the world outside and focusing attention on the study of the resulting ideas and perceptions of it as they appear in the human mind. For Husserl, the fact that every thought or idea 'points' to something in the external world, or to use his terminology, has 'intentionality' – an idea borrowed from the psychologist Franz Brentano – is enough to allow him to bridge the gap between the realms of the mental and the physical. Whilst Husserl tended to focus upon the epistemological ramifications of phenomenology, his successors, notably Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Emmanuel Levinas, were more concerned, according to that model, with describing the content of these intentional perceptions, and it is in these figures that one finds a resonance with Orwell's approach and, indeed, some of his insights.

In his seminal text, *Being and Time*, published in 1927, Heidegger was the first philosopher to break with the epistemological leanings of Husserl, arguing that our ability to even posit the question of a distinction between human subjects and physical objects, presupposes an understanding of certain beings, activities and practices. Rather than being founded upon some mystical relation between the mind and the world (which philosophers continue to attempt to prove), our ability to go about our everyday lives – to see and interact with things and others – precedes philosophical ideas about minds

and bodies. For Heidegger, our everyday knowhow and knowledge of things in the world ('beings') is prior to, and makes possible, any theory, philosophical or otherwise, which would seek to describe it. As Hubert Dreyfus has explained:

He [Heidegger] introduces the idea that the shared skills, discriminations and practices into which we are socialized provide the conditions necessary for people to pick out objects, to understand themselves as subjects and, generally, to make sense of the world and their lives.⁶⁶

Of course, in everyday life, the individual, or *Dasein* as Heidegger describes him – literally 'being-there' – can choose any number of different ways of living and being. Some of these involve making genuine choices and, in doing so, affirm the freedom that lies at the core of *Dasein*'s existence; others involve abdicating responsibility for choosing, instead allowing other people to guide one's future. Heidegger designates the former way of being 'authentic' and the latter, 'inauthentic'. It is part of his project in *Being and Time* to make more explicit the everyday practices in which we are immersed in order to clarify where the authentic and inauthentic reside. Of course, Heidegger himself is a '*Dasein*' and so must approach this task, as it were, from within, embracing his unique perspective and the insights that this affords. Taken as a whole then, existential phenomenology is the practice of describing the different ways in which *Dasein* can, and must, exist in the world from the inescapable standpoint of one who already is doing so.

This all appears to be a very long way from the writings of George Orwell and, indeed, given their usual reading, it is. Moreover, there is evidence to show that Orwell was, at best, indifferent to philosophy. At the end of the Second World War, he struck up a friendship with A.J. Ayer, the British philosopher of language, based upon a shared appreciation of Dickens, Kipling and Hopkins. According to Bernard Crick, Ayer noted

⁶⁶ Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), p.4.

that ‘Orwell had no interest whatsoever in philosophy’, and often implied that he thought it a futile practice whilst the future of humanity was in question.⁶⁷ Along with Bertrand Russell, another of Orwell’s acquaintances, Ayer was at the forefront of British Empiricism in the 1930s and ‘40s. In its insistence on logical and linguistic precision, and the debunking of metaphysical philosophy as nonsense, the empiricist movement would appear to have been more attuned to the no-nonsense thinking of Orwell than any contemporaneous thought from the continent. But if Orwell’s attitude towards British Empiricism was indifferent, it was often openly hostile to the existential phenomenologists. In a letter written to Julian Symons towards the end of his life, he said of one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s books,

I doubt whether it is possible to pack more nonsense into so short a space. I have maintained from the start that Sartre is a bag of wind, though possibly when it comes to Existentialism, which I don’t profess to understand, it may not be so.⁶⁸

Earlier, in a letter to his then publisher Fredric Warburg, Orwell had made the same accusation, claiming that in his forthcoming review of Sartre’s *Portrait of the Antisemite* he was going to ‘give him a good boot’.⁶⁹ In fact, throughout his life, Orwell remained deeply suspicious of the integrity of any writing in which meaning was occluded by opaque language, and the prose of thinkers such as Sartre, and indeed Heidegger, was anything but clear. His attitude towards continental philosophy was accordingly one of bewilderment verging on open hostility. How, then, is it possible that a writer with no known interest in philosophy – even the British Empiricism that seemed sympathetic to his own outlook – could arrive at an approach which resonated with the very branch of the subject that was anathema to him? In the next section, we

⁶⁷ Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.325.

⁶⁸ Orwell, ‘Letter to Julian Symons’, in *The Complete Works*, XIX, 460-62 (p.461).

⁶⁹ Orwell, ‘Letter to Fredric Warburg’, in *The Complete Works*, XIX, 456-57 (p.457).

shall attempt to answer this question by identifying a phenomenological subtext within *Down and Out* and several of Orwell's early essays.

No One Had Called Me Mate Before

In the previous section, we identified a number of differences between the writing of George Orwell and some of the realist authors with whom he is often associated. We saw how, through the use of carefully crafted tableaux, Orwell attempts to convey his own lived experience, often temporarily dispensing with narrative order as a means of mimicking the impressionistic workings of the senses. It was argued that, whilst this technique has some connection to 'stream of consciousness' literature of the 1920s and '30s, it has a greater resonance with the work of contemporary phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger. When one considers Orwell's well-documented antipathy towards philosophy, his commitment to clear prose, and the often opaque writing of French and German phenomenologists, this connection perhaps comes as something of a surprise. Yet there is much evidence for the presence of phenomenological methodologies and existential insights in Orwell's work. In this section, we shall attempt to explain how this seemingly alien mode of describing the world could become manifest in a writer without interest in or, by his own admission, understanding of philosophy. By subsequently comparing the second part of *Down and Out* with its realist precursor, Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, we shall not only further delineate Orwell's pseudo-phenomenological method, but also uncover two important concerns – *praxis* and *language* – which connect his work with that of Heidegger.

In his landmark early text, *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the principal task of philosophy is to uncover the meaning of 'Being', that is, to describe the unique ways in which we and other worldly entities can be said to exist. According to his account, it is a task that has been, for the most part, forgotten, or worse still, covered over and distorted, since the time of Plato. This has led philosophy into a number of dead ends, such as the problem of 'proving' the existence of the external world, which both Descartes and Kant optimistically claimed to have solved. For Heidegger, 'the scandal of philosophy is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*'.⁷⁰ Philosophical doubts such as these arise from a fundamental misunderstanding of the kind of beings that humans are, together with a number of mistaken assumptions about our relationship with the world. Thus, in his search for epistemological certainty, the Cartesian philosopher detaches himself from the world and is accordingly led to consider his relation to it as equivalent to that between two physical objects, or worse, mind and matter. Two irreconcilable realms are thus brought into being. On the Heideggerian model, however, the 'in' relation of our 'being-in-the-world' is of a rather different kind. For, whilst it is possible for the individual to withdraw from the world in a spirit of contemplation, the world itself remains an inescapable component of that person's existence. Far from existing as a mere object, the proof of whose reality is in doubt, the world is constitutive of what and who we are; our relation to it cannot be accounted for exclusively in spatial terms, and is instead a nexus of attitudes, concerns and involvements. Traditional epistemology masks these relations through the primacy it ascribes to the detached Cartesian ego contemplating the world: the human being is reduced to the status of *res cogitans* – an isolated mind. This is quite unlike a real human being. In *Being and Time*, this imbalance is redressed, and the exposition of our being is founded upon an engaged

⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1962), p.249.

involvement with the world. As Stephen Mulhall has put it, ‘Heidegger’s protagonists are actors rather than spectators.’⁷¹ And, given that humans have a conscious involvement with the world, it follows that we must possess, however distorted, some appreciation of the nature of the entities within it – some understanding of that which makes them what they are, their *being*. Moreover, if we have an understanding of different beings, it follows that an investigation into them will offer a path towards understanding the nature of Being in general. Heidegger argues that, within each of us, through our everyday involvements and, indeed, our ability to question the world in the first place, Being thus finds a ‘clearing’ that allows it to be naturally understood, albeit in a rough and informal fashion. Accordingly, an investigation into our own existence – the necessary and contingent facets of our being – would make an appropriate starting point for an analytic of Being in general. In the end, this exploration ended up occupying the entirety of *Being and Time*, and indeed, most of Heidegger’s early work, progressing little further owing to both the enormity of the subject matter and the hermeneutic manner of the investigation. Nevertheless, Heidegger’s writings on the topic were to help inspire a closely related branch of philosophy in the form of existentialism. In the proceeding decades of the twentieth century, figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas would focus solely upon the explication and analysis of lived human experience, eschewing the wider question of Being in favour of a subject matter intended only as a waypoint in Heidegger’s original project. In subsequent chapters, we shall explore how Orwell’s insights and manner of description echo the work of these figures at different points in his career. However, our first task is to establish the viability of this project by explaining how, what we might loosely call the ‘phenomenological’ attitude, is present in Orwell, a writer with seemingly neither

⁷¹ Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and “Being and Time”* (Routledge: London, 1996), p.39.

knowledge nor understanding of it. In order to accomplish this, it will be necessary to introduce some Heideggerian terminology.

Since the medieval era, it has been traditional for philosophers to draw a distinction between the existence (*existential*) and essence (*essential*) of worldly entities, including human beings. ‘Existence’ in this sense, refers simply to the brute fact of an entity’s presence in the world, whilst ‘essence’ is used to describe those properties which make it an entity of a particular kind, for example the four sides of equal length and 90 degree interior angles that are necessary qualities of a square. This way of thinking has led philosophers to offer numerous suggestions for what constitutes the ‘essence’ of man. For Heidegger, such an approach is misleading. In contrast to unthinking objects, individuals have no such permanent essence. Indeed, the only aspect of human being that is ‘fixed’ in this manner is the necessity to ‘take a stand’ over one’s existence, to choose *how* to lead one’s life, or even whether to continue it at all.

We are ourselves the entities to be analysed. The Being of any such entity is *in each case mine*. These entities, in their Being, comport themselves towards their Being. As entities with such Being, they are delivered over to their own Being. *Being* is that which is an issue for every such entity.⁷²

According to Heidegger, if we can be said to have any ‘essence’, it lies in existence, the unavoidable requirement to engage with our own life, and – an idea which was greatly expanded by Sartre – choose the precise course that it should take. Our Being ‘is an issue’ for us. Of course, the manner in which one lives alters one’s perception of the world; through our circumstances and culture, we each adopt, have forced upon us, or are born into ways of being that, although never necessarily permanent, afford us a means of understanding both ourselves and our environment. Heidegger describes this understanding as *existentiell*. Thus, an individual who has decided to join the armed

⁷² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.67.

forces might begin to understand himself in terms of his bravery and discipline as a soldier; a woman born in England in the nineteenth century might have her conception of the world and her place in it coloured by the patriarchy under which she lives; a waiter – another example used by Sartre – may begin to define himself based upon his refinement, and knowledge of food and wine. An investigation into such diverse ways of being is described as *ontic*. For Heidegger, whilst undoubtedly of interest, the realm of the ontic is solely the concern of disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and, more recently, sociology. In contrast, philosophy must concern itself not with the contingent aspects of existence pertaining to individuals, but rather the universal structures which found such ways of being in the first place. *Being and Time* therefore seeks to provide an *ontological* investigation into those ineluctable facts of Being which are common to all humans. The understanding that is obtained from such an inquiry is not *existentiell*, but *existential*. These ontological structures are, by definition, ubiquitous, and can be found in all aspects of our existence. However, Heidegger chooses to focus his attention upon the area of existence in which we have our most familiar, yet erroneous conceptions of Being: the everyday. His project accordingly involves a return to basic principles in order to uncover the truth in our everyday understanding. Heidegger's use of the German term *Dasein* can be seen as an attempt to adopt a neutral substrate for his ideas concerning generalised human experience: rather than traditional terms such as 'consciousness', 'self' or 'individual', each of which come loaded with a particular historical conception of 'Being' and an implied emphasis upon the localised individual, *Dasein* offers us a kind of *tabula rasa*. The decision to focus upon the everyday aspects of existence serves a similar purpose. For in our day-to-day lives, we find, not the detached theory of the Cartesian, but a 'preontological', practical understanding which, although somewhat distorted through the forces of social interaction and conformity, is unsullied by the philosophical tradition, having rarely

been the subject of study. As such, it too remains free from technical misconceptions and assumptions. It is for this reason that Simon Critchley offers the following description of the phenomenological philosopher:

A phenomenologist seeks to pick out and analyse the common, shared features that underlie our everyday experience, to make explicit what is implicit in our ordinary social know-how.⁷³

The descriptions of ‘ordinary social know-how’ presented in *Being and Time* were hugely influential, and continue to be so today. And perhaps there is no greater illustration of their felt universality than the review of Gilbert Ryle, the resolutely analytical philosopher of mind, which stated that they tell us ‘explicitly what we must have known “in our bones” all the time’.⁷⁴

Of course, if as a pre-condition of its existence and involvement with the world, *Dasein* has a preontological notion of Being, albeit an often misinformed one, we would expect this to manifest itself in different ways. Music, literature, art, science, even our everyday language – an understanding of Being and beings is implicitly expressed in each of them. Yet, as a more self-consciously interrogative method, Heidegger believes that his own fundamental ontology – the philosophical investigation into Being – is far less susceptible to misconception and error. What, then, would be the status of literature that adopted a similar scepticism towards received opinions and conceptions? And what if that literature comprised both fiction and non-fiction, but always grounded firmly within real, lived experience? Given that a large part of the Orwell canon could be described in this way, we must seriously consider whether it could be interpreted, at some level, from the perspective of phenomenological existentialism. Of course, as we

⁷³ Simon Critchley, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.1-32 (p.7).

⁷⁴ Gilbert Ryle, ‘Review of Sein Und Zeit’, in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp.58-64 (p.61).

have seen, Orwell knew very little about philosophy. He had a working knowledge of Plato and Aristotle from his classical education at Eton, enough knowledge of Nietzsche to be able to quote his work occasionally, and a familiarity with some of the less esoteric writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. However, if we accept the assertion from *Being and Time* that preontological knowledge precedes its formal delineation, it remains entirely possible for his work to exhibit this kind of understanding. We must therefore remain open to the possibility that the Orwell canon, grounded so deeply in lived experience, can be approached most profitably from the standpoint of existential phenomenology. Now, it will be objected that, if Orwell is capable of manifesting a preontological understanding through his writing by virtue of his status as an individual engaged with the world – in short, as *Dasein* – then surely this should be manifest in other authors with a realist tendency, perhaps even any individual who sets out to write. Accordingly, our claim would be, at best, quite unremarkable, and at worst empty. Our first response must be to embrace one aspect of this charge: that the understanding of Being *is* an inescapable part of all human action, including writing. However, activities such as writing or talking, through which an interpretation of the world in its broadest sense is expressed, reiterate merely the kind of everyday notions of Being which Heidegger believes to be so erroneous: they present an understanding that is, as we shall see in Chapter Two, flawed by virtue of its communal foundations, by the automatic process of ‘levelling down’ that is necessary to attain broad intelligibility. Given Heidegger’s suggestion that this ordinary shared understanding can vary by culture, epoch and even specific social class, one is tempted to ascribe it the status of a communal mind. Whilst certainly subject, like any individual including the philosopher, to such pernicious societal forces, Orwell’s work is distinctive. It stands apart from even those contemporary adherents to the plain style such as Maugham, Isherwood or Hemingway, with whom he is often associated. At its best, his independence of thought

affords his writing a greater distance from received opinions of the time – from the levelling effect – and this becomes manifest in his understanding of the world and other people.⁷⁵ In this respect, Orwell's refusal to simply adopt the belief systems of his peers can be equated to Heidegger's sceptical attitude towards historical notions of Being. And for both men, questions concerning existence need to be answered not from the spoken and written ideas of others, but instead worked out from one's own perspective and experiences as *Dasein*. The role of genuine lived experience is integral to this existential honesty. Unusually for a writer, Orwell had a relatively poor imagination. The consequences of this were, as Jeffrey Meyers has observed, that his own experiences permeate every aspect of both his fiction and non-fiction:

He did not have great powers of imagination and could write only about things he had actually observed, so he deliberately sought out material he could write about and used every scrap of experience in his books.⁷⁶

This limitation, so often used as evidence of Orwell's literary shortcomings, can be seen as a great strength, and the source of his distinctiveness as both an author and thinker. For it gives his writing an existential rectitude, and allows ontological facets of the structure of *Dasein's* Being to inadvertently emerge. To be sure, Orwell's fascination with what George Woodcock described as the 'concrete aspects of being',⁷⁷ specifically his own Being, is sometimes aesthetically harmful to his work: it leads him to do violence to literary form in order to incorporate his experiences; the depiction of others is often one-dimensional; and the world is typically described exclusively from his own partisan point of view. Yet it is these very aspects which raise the possibility of interpreting his work from an existential-phenomenological standpoint. And perhaps

⁷⁵ As we discuss in Chapters Three and Four, Orwell could also fall back into an habitual conservatism, proffering unqualified judgements which served to cloud his insights into the world and others.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Meyers, *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), p.18.

⁷⁷ George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p.23.

this symbiosis between life and work accounts for the fascination with Orwell biography which doggedly informs studies of his writing even today. Far from being, as John Wain has argued, ‘the error that has beset the most recent commentators’, the reference back to Orwell’s character and life experiences allows an even more complete existential perspective to emerge.⁷⁸ For, more than any author of his time, Orwell’s life and work *were* inextricably linked, with his insights and understanding being heavily founded on his own experiences. This aspect of his writing has been identified, although not fully explored, by Raymond Williams, who would develop into one of Orwell’s harshest critics:

All of Orwell’s writing until 1937 is, then a series of works and experiments around a common problem. Instead of dividing them into ‘fiction’ and ‘documentaries’ we should see them as sketches toward the creation of his most successful character, ‘Orwell’. This would not be so successful if it had not been so intensely and painfully lived.⁷⁹

Aside from the slightly unfair suggestion through the word ‘creation’ that his experiences themselves are fabrications, Williams comes close to identifying Orwell’s work as an account of a life as seen from the ‘inside’. Indeed, the replacement of the second ‘Orwell’ with the term *Dasein* would be enough for this account to echo our own contentions. One could argue that the writings of a Christopher Isherwood or even the essays of E.B. White possess a similar existential tenor, having also been based upon real experience. And this is entirely plausible: from their grounding in real-life, one could certainly attempt an existentialist reading of such authors. However, as we shall demonstrate, Orwell lends himself much more readily to such an interpretation by virtue of his uncanny ability to apprehend the ontological structures of existence in his writing: like Swift before him, Orwell had an almost inexplicable ability to find and

⁷⁸ John Wain, ‘George Orwell as a Writer of Polemic’, in *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Raymond Williams (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp.89-102 (p.90).

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams, ‘Observation and Imagination in Orwell’, in *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Williams, pp.52-61 (p.61).

latch on to existential truths. And in this sense, he once again stands apart from mere realism.

Whilst there are numerous areas in which Orwell's insights coincide with the ideas of contemporary phenomenologists and existentialists, this unlikely kinship is also subtly manifest in his method. Heidegger's investigation in *Being and Time* is hermeneutic in nature, that is, circular: the analytic of Being is undertaken on the basis of our everyday understanding and, at the end of the text, Heidegger restates the original question for deeper research, using his preliminary findings. Stephen Mulhall has said of this method:

We might interpret its author not (or not only) as posing a question to which he intends to provide a concrete answer elsewhere, in some other arrangement of words at some other time and place, but as posing a question which he expects us to answer [...] And as Heidegger understands his role as the voice of conscience in philosophy, his more important responsibility is to restore the autonomy of his readers, to wrest them away from an unquestioning reliance upon the deliverances of the tradition and their colleagues.⁸⁰

Mulhall's description of Heidegger as 'the voice of conscience' immediately brings to mind V.S. Pritchett's obituary, which called Orwell 'the wintry conscience of a generation'.⁸¹ Orwell's method makes similar Heideggerian demands upon his readership. In the political journalism, the satirical novels and the descriptive essays, one reads few solutions to the problems that he identifies. The commitment to democratic socialism is, of course, present from the mid-1930s, but very often in the background, the work being frequently expository in nature. Where Heidegger's project aims to make the reader aware of their everyday understanding of Being and existence, Orwell also seeks to point out what is 'in front of one's nose', and not simply, as most commentators have supposed, in a political sense. For, as William Cain has identified,

⁸⁰ Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time*, pp.194-95.

⁸¹ V.S. Pritchett, 'Obituary', in *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell*, ed. Meyers, pp.294-96 (p.294).

Orwell sought to expound his own experiences in order to ‘make readers more self-conscious, more aware of how we think and feel’.⁸² Heidegger defines phenomenology as a means ‘to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself’.⁸³ It is a method for uncovering that which is, at once, the closest, but the most obscure; those aspects of our existence which are familiar, yet the most alien. Where Heidegger’s phrasing would have been anathema to Orwell, he would certainly have appreciated the sentiment behind it.

If phenomenology, for Heidegger, involves uncovering what is present to consciousness, but overlooked or distorted, then existentialism can be broadly thought of as writing committed to describing human experience. There is, accordingly, a large overlap between the two disciplines. In his book, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann gives an even broader definition of existentialism, which could be lifted straight from the pages of an Orwell biography:

The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatsoever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism.⁸⁴

Existentialism, particularly on this kind of definition, is an extremely broad church, incorporating, according to Kaufmann, such diverse writers as Kafka, Malraux, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre. Orwell would certainly have been put into the same category by his long-time friend, Richard Rees:

As regards philosophy, he was typically English in possessing a natural positivist outlook [...] it might nevertheless be claimed that he was in real life a better

⁸² William E. Cain, ‘Orwell’s Essays as a Literary Experience’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Orwell*, ed. by John Rodden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.76-86 (p.76).

⁸³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.58.

⁸⁴ Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1975), p.12.

existentialist, more authentic and more 'engaged', than many philosophers whose existentialism exists mainly between the covers of a book.⁸⁵

Orwell's existentialism did exist 'between the covers of a book', but as Rees rightly points out, it was founded upon real, lived experience. Indeed, it is Orwell's commitment to engagement in the world, to going amongst different groups as the basis for his writing, that aligns him methodologically with these thinkers, an idea expressed by Mark Wrathall in his useful definition:

Existential phenomenologists all share the view that philosophy should not be conducted from a detached, objective, disinterested, disengaged standpoint. This is because, they contend, certain phenomena only show themselves to one who is engaged with the world in the right kind of way.⁸⁶

We have argued that, because of this, Orwell's method could be considered phenomenological; we shall endeavour to show that some of his resulting insights are existential, in that they describe aspects of common human experience. As a first step, it will be necessary to return once again to *Down and Out in Paris and London*. By comparing the second section of this work with Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, we shall attempt to highlight the different approaches and insights manifest in what many critics mistakenly class as two similar books.

The second part of *Down and Out* sees Orwell relocate from Paris to London on the pretext of a job opportunity as a private tutor. After the position falls through, so the narrative tells us, he is forced once more into poverty and an existence amongst the homeless. Some of the descriptions in this section of the book were simply reworked versions of the articles 'The Spike' and 'Common Lodging Houses', and this perhaps accounts for Richard Smyer's observation that they possess a sense of moral indignation

⁸⁵ Rees, *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*, p.12-13.

⁸⁶ Mark A. Wrathall, 'Existential Phenomenology', in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp.31-47 (p.32). Given the large overlap between the disciplines of phenomenology and existentialism, we shall follow Wrathall in using the term 'phenomenological existentialism' to refer to the practice, and 'existential' to refer to the tenor of Orwell's insights.

missing from the Paris chapters.⁸⁷ Yet, as in those earlier pieces, Orwell continues to describe each experience from his own individual perspective, placing his personality firmly into the background in order for the reader to better inhabit the scene. His literary inspirations for these clandestine ventures amongst the destitute were manifold, but he was clearly aware of the large body of Victoriana that began the trend of secretive reporting from East End slums,⁸⁸ and was known to admire Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, which in 1933 he placed on his list of 'best books'.⁸⁹ However, much of the journey recounted in the English section of *Down and Out* superficially recalls Jack London's 1903 description of his experiences in the East End, *The People of the Abyss*.⁹⁰ Unlike the latter chapters of *Down and Out*, London's narrative begins with a familiar play on the 'undiscovered country' trope of the Victorian explorers. In a pointed comment on bourgeois attitudes towards the poor, he bemoans how the travel agent, Thomas Cook could so easily send him 'to Darkest Africa or Innermost Tibet', but does not know the way to 'the East End of London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus'.⁹¹ In contrast to Orwell's account, one is immediately struck by the presence of London's own forceful character as a participant in the narrative, from the moment he steps into his hansom cab. It is a personality of such prominence, that there is little space for the reader:

⁸⁷ Richard I. Smyer, *Primal Dream and Primal Crime: Orwell's Development as a Psychological Novelist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p.14.

⁸⁸ One of Orwell's essays, *How the Poor Die*, gives an ironic twist to the title of George Sims' 1883 work, *How the Poor Live*. It is interesting to note that Sims went on to write a regular eclectic piece entitled *Mustard and Cress* for *The Referee*. On 6th September 1922, two days after his death, *The Times* newspaper wrote of his column: 'It was sprinkled with neat little epigrams in verse, patriotic songs or parodies, with jokes, puns, conundrums, catch-words. He talked politics with little belief in politicians; philanthropy, amusement, reminiscence, food and drink...And he contrived to do this without ever becoming egotistical or a bore'. This would make an apt description for Orwell's own *As I Please* column, which ran in *Tribune* from December 1943 to April 1947.

⁸⁹ This list, made for Brenda Salkeld and reported to Howard Fink, can be found in *The Complete Works*, x, 308-09.

⁹⁰ In a BBC radio broadcast on Jack London from 1943, part of a series entitled 'Landmarks in American Literature', Orwell drily comments on how 'various later books' were inspired by *The People of the Abyss*. See *The Complete Works*, xv, 3-8 (p.7).

⁹¹ Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (London: Hesperus Press, 2009), p.7.

'Drive me down to the East End,' I ordered, taking my seat.
 'Where, sir?' he demanded with frank surprise.
 'To the East End, anywhere. Go on.'
 The hansom pursued an aimless way for several minutes, then came to a puzzled stop. The aperture above my head was uncovered, and the cabman peered down perplexedly at me.
 'I say,' he said, 'wot plyce yer wanten go?'
 'East End,' I repeated. 'Nowhere in particular. Just drive me around anywhere.'
 'But wot's the haddress, sir?'
 'See here!' I thundered. 'Drive me down to the East End, and at once!'⁹²

As we find in Orwell, there is a certain amount of literary embroidery operating within the text, particularly in the detail of the cab driver's bewilderment, which is extended to personify the actual vehicle as it comes to a 'puzzled stop'. The perplexed cabbie himself sits in stark contrast to London's own aggressively confident character, a local expert becoming ironically subordinate to the outsider. Whilst his journey into the slums came about as a result of the cancellation of a literary project concerning the Boer War, London was clearly earnest in his desire to raise awareness of the conditions of the poor. This certainly accounts for the regular inclusion of his own rhetoric in the piece, although it is a feature which at the same time gives the narrative a disjointed feel (a fault and cause present in some of Orwell's early writing). The literary flourishes and embellishments, coupled with London's dominance as a character, are suggestive of an adventure in an exotic and bewildering land, and recall much of his own previous fiction set in the American wilderness. As Jeffrey Meyers put it, he 'explores the strange slums of the East End as if they were the Arctic tundra'.⁹³ As such, it is a clear appeal to what Jenni Calder has called the reader's 'instinct for drama'.⁹⁴ And there is, to be sure, a definite romanticism to some of the descriptions:

And I, walking head and shoulders above my two companions, remembered my own husky West, and the stalwart men it had been my custom, in turn, to envy there. Also, as I looked at the mite of a youth with the heart of a lion, I thought, this is the

⁹² Ibid., p.9.

⁹³ Meyers, *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell*, p.76.

⁹⁴ Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience: A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler*, p.39.

type that on occasion rears barricades and shows the world that men have not forgotten how to die.⁹⁵

Language is here allowed to get in the way of, what might otherwise be a pure statement of experience; the literary imagery and reminiscences of the author leave the reader browbeaten in their insistence on what one should think and feel. It possesses something of Cyril Connolly's Mandarin style, which informs and serves its polemical purpose. And it is principally such stylistic elements which pull the description of experience far from phenomenology.

As with Orwell in *Down and Out*, London encounters a wide variety of characters on his journey, each of whom are described in graphic physical terms. However, London cannot resist analysing his subjects and presenting his conclusions in a style almost akin to an editorial. One example of this appears shortly after his description of meeting a young alcoholic sailor:

Without going further with the speech of this young fellow of two-and-twenty, I think I have sufficiently indicated his philosophy of life and the underlying economic reason for it. Home life he had never known. The word 'home' aroused nothing but unpleasant associations. In the low wages of this father, and of other men in the same walk in life, he found sufficient reason for branding wife and children as encumbrances and causes of masculine misery. An unconscious hedonist, utterly unmoral and materialistic, he sought the greatest possible happiness for himself, and found it in drink.⁹⁶

The sympathy of the reader is elicited not through a phenomenological presentation of the sailor himself, but rather through the direction of London's voice, already well-established as strong and reliable by the text. It is writing with but a narrow purpose, which it attains very well: to garner sympathy for the poor and support for social reform. However, nowhere do we find the sort of existential insight or presentation of characters that typifies Orwell's work. The method is polemical reportage, not

⁹⁵ London, *The People of the Abyss*, pp.40-41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.30.

phenomenology: no hidden facets of the experience of *Dasein* are uncovered here, and one is not presented with events and characters precisely as London experienced them. Accordingly, one might describe London's insights as resolutely ontic rather than ontological in that they focus simply upon the sailor's own contingent mode of existence. On occasion, however, London comes close to escaping the confines of reportage or editorial comment and alighting upon observations of real existential import. Early on in the book, whilst negotiating with a local travel agent to act as guarantor of his identity, he describes his excitement at grasping certain aspects of the local dialect:

‘No, no,’ I answered; ‘merely to identify me in case I get into a scrape with the “bobbies”.’ This last I said with a thrill; truly, I was gripping hold of the vernacular.⁹⁷

There is the suggestion here that language plays an ontological role in establishing feelings of communality, although the point is not developed and so the cockney terminology ends up focusing the reader more on the adventurous spirit of London, the narrator, than *Dasein* in general. Later in the narrative, however, he does show an understanding of how both language and dress define our perception of others:

Presto! In the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them. My frayed and out-at-elbows jacket was the badge and advertisement of my class, which was their class. It made me of like kind, and in place of the fawning and too-respectful attention I had hitherto received, I now shared with them a comradeship. The man in corduroy and dirty neckerchief no longer addressed me as ‘sir’ or ‘governor’. It was ‘mate’ now – and a fine and hearty word, with a tingle to it, and a warmth and gladness, which the other term does not possess. Governor! It smacks of mastery, and power, and high authority – the tribute of the man who is under to the man on top, delivered in the hope that he will let up a bit and ease his weight, which is another way of saying that it is an appeal for alms.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.8.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.14.

There is much here to commend in London's observations. Not only does the excerpt show an awareness of how identity is bound together with appearance, but there is also a demonstration of the stratification of class identity through language. It has often been commented how similar this passage is to a particular moment in *Down and Out*:

My new clothes had put me instantly into a new world. Everyone's demeanour seemed to have changed abruptly. I helped a hawker pick up a barrow that he had upset. 'Thanks, mate,' he said with a grin. No one had called me mate before in my life – it was the clothes that had done it.⁹⁹

The general thrust of each piece is, indeed, similar – to show how one is socially defined by one's clothes and general appearance. Both extracts also highlight the role of language, in this case the word 'mate', in establishing feelings of community and kinship. However, it is important to note a fundamental difference in method: whereas London speaks in abstracted terms of generality, Orwell sees the necessity of founding his insight on a more specific experience. The 'man in corduroy and a dirty neckerchief' is not any particular man, he is a type; Orwell's hawker, on the other hand, appears to us as a real, albeit briefly sketched person together with his own direct speech and accompanying grin. As we shall see in Chapter Three, Orwell was not always able to resist falling back onto abstracted stereotypes. But where he grounds his non-fiction with specific characters and experiences, allowing the reader to feel they are vicariously experiencing events as he did, then his texts draw closer to existential phenomenology.

Although repeatedly prepared to digress into polemic, London does not pursue ideas concerning language or identity – and why would he? He is a writer with a definite purpose – to expose the conditions of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy – and he sticks to it unswervingly. This perhaps makes Orwell's existential digressions all the more surprising. One can be quite clear that he ventured amongst the poor with

⁹⁹ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, p.37.

similar intentions – to provide empirical evidence of their lives, and to persuade his readership of the need for reform. However, Orwell’s own peculiarities of mind led him to produce a document that was anything but reportage, let alone social science, and was instead informed by a fascination with existence – in phenomenological terms, with not only ontic, but also ontological considerations. Nowhere is this more evident than in his interest in the practices and activities of the ‘lower’ classes – what Heidegger followed Aristotle in referring to as *praxis* or know-how. *Down and Out* is full of admiring examples of tricks and dodges employed by those on the fringes of society, often rendered in an approximation of a particular character’s dialect. In the following excerpt, Orwell reproduces the speech patterns of a character named Bozo, who is a pavement artist:

‘I’m what they call a serious screever [pavement artist]. I don’t draw in blackboard chalks like these others, I use proper colours the same as what painters use; bloody expensive they are, especially the reds. I use five bobs’ worth of colours in a long day, and never less than two bobs’ worth. Cartoons is my line – you know, politics and cricket and that. Look here’ – he showed me his note book – ‘here’s likenesses of all the political blokes, what I’ve copied from the papers. I have a different cartoon every day. For instance, when the Budget was on I had one of Winston trying to push an elephant marked “Debt”, and underneath I wrote, “Will he budge it?” See? You can have cartoons about any of the parties, but you mustn’t put anything in favour of Socialism, because the police won’t stand it. Once I did a cartoon of a boa constrictor marked Capital swallowing a rabbit marked Labour. The copper came along and saw it, and he says, “You rub that out, and look sharp about it,” he says. I had to rub it out.’¹⁰⁰

As in *The People of the Abyss*, this sort of description of course adds colour to the narrative, but for Orwell it is much more than that. There is a surprising amount of detail here: the distinction between different classes of screever; an indication of the costs involved in the practice; information concerning popular subjects for the drawings; the unexpected knowledge and intelligence of the screever himself; and finally, in a very Orwellian flourish, a word of warning concerning political oppression. If we compare this with London’s description of the sailor, we see that, in both cases,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.173.

there is an ontic focus – the particular life of an individual. However, upon closer inspection, one notices that Orwell's account is the more phenomenological: rather than 'speaking for' the subject as London has a tendency to do, Orwell presents the reader with a rendition of his own encounter with the individual through direct speech. Now, one must proceed with caution at this point: the dialect of Bozo is, of course, presented to us *by* Orwell and, as such, may be more the product of literary embroidery than a faithful recitation of experience. Indeed, we have no concrete evidence that Bozo himself was not a figment. But this would be to miss the point. For the real existential import of Orwell's repeated use of spoken dialect is not what it tells us about a particular character (the ontic aspect) but, instead, what it says of the role of speech in mediating between *Dasein* and others – an ontological insight. It is not the existence or otherwise of any particular character that is important here: by presenting real, fictional and embroidered characters in a fashion which mimics his real-life experiences, Orwell invites the reader to reflect upon the manner in which such encounters occur – the *existentialia* of communality. Accordingly, one can treat the veracity of any character from Orwell's texts in the same fashion as Husserl treated the existence of the 'external' world, by 'bracketing' it and putting it to one side as an irrelevance for our present purposes. One finds in Dostoyevsky or Kafka that the fictional status of Raskolnikov or Fräulein Bürstner is entirely irrelevant; what matters is the reality of the text's existential concerns. No matter how outlandish the particular scene or situation, the reader is invited into a dialogue with certain existential aspects of the text which resonate with reality. Much of Orwell's writing exhibits the same quality. We previously argued that it is its grounding in reality, which allows us to interpret his writing phenomenologically. We can now say, more precisely, that Orwell's attunement to existentialia in his own life leads to their inclusion in much of his work, often in a

manner which mimics, phenomenologically, an equivalent experience. Let us examine more closely how this occurs with regard to dialect and praxis.

Orwell's inclusion and repeated focus upon dialect in *Down and Out* suggests an awareness of the role it plays not just in our everyday lives, but in delineating certain persons and groups as different from ourselves. But what is this role? In order to answer this question, we must return once again to the facts of Orwell's own life. As we have seen, Orwell was a man from a privileged background, whose only real contact with the 'lower' classes had been in Burma and, before then, as a very young boy playing with the local plumber's children. Whilst he had not been to university, everything about his demeanour, and particularly his way of speaking, marked him out as a gentleman.¹⁰¹ The world of the destitute was, therefore, thoroughly alien to him, and this is what emerges clearly from the text. Indeed, what is most apparent in both *Down and Out* and the earlier essays is the sense of difference, the very *otherness* of this underworld compared to that inhabited by Orwell and his assumed readership. One of the ways in which this sense of otherness emerges is through the shocking and outrageous stories which punctuate the work. Another is through the inclusion of dialect. Of course, dialect serves a purpose in *The People of the Abyss* too, but it is very much a literary one, exploited by Jack London as a source of scenic colour. For Orwell, by contrast, dialect is presented much more as a barrier to be bridged between himself (and by extension, the middle-class reader) and the poor. His fascination with speech even leads him to devote the whole of Chapter Thirty-Two of *Down and Out* to London slang. The intention behind this is never made entirely clear, yet its inclusion in the main body of the text rather than as an appendix suggests that it was of some import to him. An earlier, unpublished essay, 'Clink', in which Orwell describes getting himself

¹⁰¹ Indeed, it is Orwell's accent which betrays his class to the Tramp Major in the spike. See *Down and Out in Paris and London*, p.209.

deliberately incarcerated for drunkenness also contains a large section of dialect, this time spoken by two prisoners, Snouter and Charlie:

Charlie: "Oh, fuck off with yer tapping! Scrumping's what yer want this time of year. All them rows of turkeys in the winders, like rows of fucking soldiers with no clo'es on – don't it make yer fucking mouth water to look at 'em. Bet yer a tenner I 'ave one of 'em afore tonight."

Snouter: "What's 'a good? Can't cook the bugger over the kip-'ouse fire, can you?"

Charlie: "Oo wants to cook it? I know where I can flog (sell) it for a bob or two, though."

Snouter: "'Sno good. Chantin's the game this time of year. Carols. Fair twist their 'earts round, I can, when I get on the mournful. Old tarts weep their fucking eyes out when they 'ear me. I won't 'alf give them a doing this Christmas. I'll kip indoors if I 'ave to cut it out of their bowels."¹⁰²

This vulgar, expletive-filled conversation continues for an entire page, and is introduced only with the understated comment that 'Their conversation was rather interesting'. Fabrication or not, one is immediately hit with a barrier of otherness through the inclusion of slang, dialect and extensive swearing. Snouter and Charlie appear animalistic, as so many of the destitute must have seemed to a man of Orwell's class, and yet they are tied together through their vulgar dialect and similarity of accent, attributes which, as Partick Reilly correctly observes, represent a defiant refusal to annul oneself in the face of economic degradation.¹⁰³ There is a tremendous existential honesty to this: the characters are not romanticised, and their speech works, as with so much of Orwell's writing, impressionistically, allowing the reader to feel much as he must have felt. From the language of Snouter, Charlie and Bozo, one is forced to experience the insight that dialect both encompasses and excludes, that one's manner of speaking can evoke kindred feeling with one person and yet underscore difference from another. Orwell's repeated inclusion of dialect in his non-fiction suggests not only that

¹⁰² Orwell, 'Clink', in *The Complete Works*, x, 254-60 (p.259).

¹⁰³ Patrick Reilly, '1984: The Insufficient Self', in *George Orwell: New Casebooks*, ed. by Graham Holderness, Bryan Loughrey and Nahem Yousaf (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp.116-138 (p.126).

he experienced the latter of these feelings keenly, but that in language, he identified a method for gaining access to, and possibly acceptance by, the poor.

Orwell's fascination with language is but part of a larger ontological insight expressed in *Down and Out* concerning know-how or *praxis*. Slang, and in particular cockney rhyming slang, is presented as an exclusive code (what Roger Fowler, following M. A. K. Halliday calls an 'antilanguage') that reinforces feelings of camaraderie for its users but presents a sense of difference for the uninitiated.¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, the regular inclusion of slang in the text allows the reader to confront otherness in a manner mimicking the experience of Orwell himself. The use of such dialect is certainly a practice requiring specific know-how and, as such, can be considered alongside a number of other such practices described in *Down and Out*. In the following extract, Orwell describes the activities of a group of men in a lodging-house:

Ragged washing hung on strings from the ceiling. Red-lit men, stevedores mostly, moved about the fires with cooking-pots; some of them were quite naked, for they had been laundering and were waiting for their clothes to dry. At night there were games of nap and draughts, and songs – 'I'm a chap what's done wrong by my parents' was a favourite, and so was another popular song about a shipwreck. Sometimes late at night men would come in with a pail of winkles they had bought cheap, and share them out. There was a general sharing of food, and it was taken for granted to feed men who were out of work. A little pale, wizened creature, obviously dying, referred to as 'pore Brown, bin under the doctor and cut open three times', was regularly fed by the others.¹⁰⁵

Once again, the reader is confronted with a bewildering spectacle, in which high spirits and selflessness mingle with death and depravation. Yet it is interesting to observe how this world is presented to the reader. Instead of attempting to explain the activities and practices of the men, Orwell simply draws the scene without comment, in a manner resembling our previous description of the tableaux. On a Heideggerian reading, the

¹⁰⁴ Fowler, *The Language of George Orwell*, p.105.

¹⁰⁵ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, p.142.

activities of these men betray a certain comprehension of Being; their behaviour reveals the men's *existentiell* understanding – what they think of themselves, the world and their role within it. Yet, as Hubert Dreyfus has observed, one cannot fully access this understanding merely through a rule-based description of the practices it founds – a guide for how to act among the poor, for instance. For such practices are not founded upon articulated rules and, as such, do not constitute 'knowledge' in the ordinary sense of the word.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to 'knowing that' such and such is the case, know-how – and this includes both the practices and dialect of the poor – is learned over time not from books or rule-following, but by immersion within a particular society and culture. Although he occasionally attempts to describe the practices of the 'lower' classes, Orwell's reluctance to offer an explanation of their activities, coupled with the biographical fact that he felt the impulse to live amongst them, suggests at least some understanding of the priority that existence possesses over knowledge in this respect. Our next question must be, to what extent is Orwell successful in his quest to understand these practices?

How far Orwell managed to really understand the lives and practices of the poor through living amongst them is difficult to gauge. It would certainly be true to say that his was a precarious existence, the fear of a wrong word or a social blunder threatening to expose his status as an outsider at any time. One can gain a glimpse of this by searching the text for moments in which these faux pas occur. *Down and Out* is filled with such occasions – a fact which should answer our initial question. Indeed, the entire book achieves a certain tension through Orwell's anxiety of being exposed, and this becomes manifest through the phenomenon of embarrassment. When he is amongst the poor, he fears being exposed as an imposter; when he is in public, he is embarrassed to

¹⁰⁶ For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, pp.19-25.

be associated with the poor. In both cases, he fears exposure through both his appearance and, more importantly, his actions:

You have got to pretend that you are living quite as usual. From the start it tangles you in a net of lies, and even with the lies you can hardly manage it. You stop sending your clothes to the laundry, and when the laundress catches you in the street and asks you why you mumble something, and she, thinking you are sending the clothes elsewhere, is your enemy for life. The tobacconist keeps asking why you have cut down your smoking. There are letters you want to answer, and cannot, because stamps are too expensive [...] You have strayed into a respectable quarter, and you see a prosperous friend coming. To avoid him you dodge into the nearest café. Once in the café you must buy something, so you spend your last fifty centimes on a glass of black coffee with a dead fly in it. One could multiply these disasters by the hundred. They are part of the process of being hard up.¹⁰⁷

In this lengthy explanation, we witness the clash between the praxis of the destitute, and that of Orwell's lower-upper middle class. The 'net of lies' referred to in the text is only necessary for one who needs to maintain a pretence of respectability, and it is here that Orwell's masquerade is betrayed. By participating in the praxis of a member of the 'lower' classes, he is in perpetual danger of embarrassment: he is either exposed as belonging to that class or identified as a middle-class imposter, both of which outcomes are unsatisfactory. The latter fear becomes manifest when he is surrounded by fellow tramps:

When my turn came for the bath, I asked if I might swill out the tub, which was streaked with dirt, before using it. He [the porter] answered simply, 'Shut yet f – mouth and get on with yer bath!' That set the social tone of the place, and I did not speak again.¹⁰⁸

Orwell's subsequent silence here is a testament not so much to his fear of violence as the embarrassment caused by his ignorance of praxis. Peter Keating has described the middle-class social explorer's journey as being 'as much inwards as outwards, a laying naked of his own guilty conscience against which the demands and values of working-

¹⁰⁷ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, pp.14-16.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p155.

class life could be constantly tested'.¹⁰⁹ With its emphasis upon the importance of the dialect and practices of the poor to Orwell's masquerade, *Down and Out* presents the reader with just such a journey, one which offers ontological insight into how such existentialia establish identity and mediate our encounters with others. In this sense, the book is replete with existential insight expressed phenomenologically: with its emphasis upon dialect, practises and customs, it presents the reader with access to others in a manner replicating the experience of the author. And by creating an edge of embarrassment around those situations when praxis fails him, Orwell arrives at the fundamental truth that *Dasein* is forced to look to others for its understanding of itself. But who are these 'others'? In the next chapter, we shall attempt to answer this question as we discuss Orwell's first two novels, *Burmese Days* and *A Clergyman's Daughter*.

¹⁰⁹ Introduction to *Into Unknown England*, ed. by Peter Keating, p.29.

Chapter 2

He Wears a Mask, And His Face Grows to Fit it

Down and Out in Paris and London sold out its first impression of 1500 copies, a second print run of 500, and eventually a further impression of 1000, indicating to Gollancz that its author was a man of considerable potential.¹ His decision in 1934 to decline publication of Orwell's first work of fiction, *Burmese Days*, for fear of litigation therefore appears somewhat surprising, but affirms for us that once again events, places and characters from the narrative must have been recognisably grounded in real life experiences. Fortunately, the novel was accepted and published by Harper Brothers in New York on 25 October, 1934, although it was not until 1935 that Gollancz decided to publish a heavily-edited English version. *Burmese Days* is, of course, a work of fiction, although as with *Down and Out* it draws freely upon Orwell's own experiences, specifically his time in the Indian Imperial Police. It is also one of the more successful novels in the canon, featuring a tightly constructed narrative and a protagonist, John Flory, who like so many Orwellian leads, epitomises the individual in existential crisis, rebelling against a tyranny but ultimately succumbing to its overwhelming power. In this section, we shall explore how Orwell uses the setting of Burma to illustrate the sense of subjugation felt by both the oppressed and, counter-intuitively, the oppressor under the British Raj. By addressing how the ideas in this text continue to resonate long after the dissolution of the Empire, we shall attempt to uncover the existential insights at their heart, offering a reading of *Burmese Days* which draws upon Martin Heidegger's description of *das Man* or the 'they' in *Being and Time*. A subsequent discussion of Orwell's seminal 1936 essay, 'Shooting an Elephant', will provide further evidence of

¹ Gordon Bowker, *George Orwell* (London: Little Brown, 2003), p.148.

this concept, enabling us to link his understanding of the *pukka sahib* back to the concept of embarrassment we previously found in *Down and Out*. In the second part of this chapter, we turn to *A Clergyman's Daughter*, exploring how, in this very experimental work, Orwell's implicit existentialism takes a turn that aligns it more closely with the early thought of Jean-Paul Sartre than Heidegger.

Since its publication in England in 1935, *Burmese Days* has been, quite rightly, classed among Orwell's most successful works of fiction. In a review published in *The New Statesman and Nation*, Cyril Connolly lauded the socio-political aspects of the novel, describing it as 'a crisp, fierce and almost boisterous attack on the Anglo-Indian'.² Gordon Bowker has more recently echoed these sentiments, calling the work 'an attack on the moral decadence and injustice of the British Raj'.³ Christopher Hitchens, meanwhile, identified the centrality of John Flory to the narrative, describing it as 'a white-man's-grave novel masquerading fairly plausibly as an anti-colonial one'.⁴ However, any account of *Burmese Days* which seeks to describe the work merely in terms of its anti-colonial message must also explain how it can accordingly be viewed as anything other than a relic, albeit an often thought-provoking and moving one, in the modern age. What is the source of this work's continuing appeal? With respect to this, Hitchens comes closest to accounting for its durability as a text. For *Burmese Days*, like so much of Orwell's fiction, focuses upon the plight of the individual, and, as such, offers a number of insights into *Dasein's* self-understanding and relationship with others. Long after many of the immediate concerns surrounding colonial power have faded, the novel still resonates, and it does so by virtue of the universal structures of existence – the *existentialia* – that it successfully reveals.

² Cyril Connolly, *New Statesman and Nation*, 6 July 1935, p.18.

³ Bowker, p.156.

⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p.180.

Burmese Days begins in unpromising fashion with a sketch of the principal antagonist, U Po Kin, a Burmese magistrate in the town of Kyauktada, as he plots to gain membership to the European club through the systematic discreditation of his only rival, the subservient Dr Veraswami.⁵ Orwell's hackneyed description in this first chapter, as Peter Hitchens has so amusingly identified, brings to mind something resembling Fu Manchu had he been written by Ian Fleming: U Po Kyin is characterised as 'a great porcelain idol',⁶ with 'small, perfect teeth, blood-red from betel juice',⁷ and his laugh 'a disgusting bubbling sound deep down in his belly'.⁸ This opening character sketch concludes in typically wry Orwellian fashion with the corrupt magistrate waddling down the road towards the court, the reader being left to consider just what kind of justice lay in store for the ordinary Burmese who await him. By way of mirroring U Po Kyin, Orwell then switches the narrative to the character of John Flory, a timber merchant, leaving for the European-only Club that same morning, the two men's journeys immediately emphasising the respective centres of the Burmese and British worlds. The tendency to draw parallels between Orwell and his protagonists is an unfortunate one, and has been criticised as reductionist by Loraine Saunders.⁹ In this instance, however, it is perhaps understandable when one considers the manner in which Flory is introduced:

He had very black, stiff hair growing low on his head, and a cropped black moustache, and his skin, naturally sallow, was discoloured by the sun [...] his face

⁵ Fearing potential libel suits, Gollancz, Orwell's publisher, forced him to invent the locale of Kyauktada as a substitute for the real-life setting of Katha.

⁶ Orwell, *Burmese Days* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.1.

⁷ Ibid., p.6.

⁸ Ibid., p.9. It is worth considering the source of these somewhat hackneyed descriptions. Such is the hyperbole within them that it is possible that Orwell was drawing upon his childhood love of comic books, particularly their manner of sketching foreign characters. In his celebrated 1939 essay discussing 'Boys' Weeklies', Orwell bemoans the tendency of children's comics to portray, among others, Chinese men with 'a saucer-shaped hat, pigtail and pidgin-English'. Such was his understanding of these popular stereotypes that one cannot rule out the possibility that the character of U Po Kyin is a deliberate and knowing parody and, as such, an example of the humour that is prevalent but so often overlooked in Orwell's work. For more on this essay, see Chapter Three below.

⁹ Loraine Saunders, *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.2.

was very haggard in spite of the sunburn, with lank cheeks and a sunken, withered look round the eyes.¹⁰

Flory's most noticeable feature, however, is a 'hideous birthmark' looking very much like a bruise, running from his eye to his mouth across his left cheek.¹¹ Of course, this immediately paints him as something of an outsider, and Orwell is quite explicit that the mark also affects him psychologically, leading to a 'sidelongness' about his movements as he manoeuvres to keep it out of sight.¹² The fabrication of the ugly word 'sidelongness', as Peter Davison has observed, helps draw attention to the hideousness of the birthmark, as well as reflecting much of Flory's resulting awkward social behaviour.¹³ One might add that, being both fictitious and clumsy, the word affords the reader a sense of unease which mirrors that of Orwell's protagonist – another instance whereby Orwell forces the reader to vicariously feel as another does. Flory is a man marked physically and irrevocably from birth. His disfigurement also stands as a metaphor. But for what?

Orwell's introduction of the European Club initially presents the reader with a number of colonial 'types': Westfield, the District Superintendent of Police, is a lightly sketched character typifying the soldierly young Englishman, convinced of his own racial superiority, and yet with his convictions challenged at a time of increasing nationalism; Lackersteen, who manages a local timber firm, is a cartoonish drunkard who lives in fear of his wife; Maxwell, a Forest Officer, a young and inexperienced

¹⁰ Ibid., p.13. Of course, Orwell did not quite have his characteristic haggard appearance at this stage in his life, that being undoubtedly caused by his many years of tubercular problems. Nevertheless, the description of Flory remains oddly prophetic.

¹¹ Ibid., p.14.

¹² Still considered a province of India until its separation as a new colony in 1937, Burma was viewed as a less prestigious posting by most of the British. Its problems, as Crick explains, were seen to be 'peripheral to those of the great sub-continent' – perhaps an apt backdrop for a low-status outsider such as John Flory. It is more likely, however, that Orwell simply chose Burma to once again draw from his own experiences: at the end of his Imperial Police examination with the India Office, he stated a preference to be posted in Burma ahead of India on the grounds that he had relatives there. (Crick, pp.77-78).

¹³ Peter Davison, 'Orwell Goes East', (unpublished article), p.3

hanger-on; and Ellis the timber merchant, a sarcastic cockney racist, perpetually outraged at the suggestion of any natives encroaching upon British territory. As these characters become established, we learn that Mr Macgregor, the Deputy Commissioner and secretary of the Club, intends to hold a meeting to discuss the possible admission of 'Orientals' to this hitherto strictly European space, in line with changes taking place in the rest of India.¹⁴ Upon discovery of the proposal, Ellis unleashes a torrent of racial abuse with the psychological goal of both parading his own orthodoxy, and eliciting a similar affirmation from his peers. The subsequent revelation that Flory is the best friend of the native Dr Veraswami, the principal candidate for membership to the club, not only marks his difference from the group, but also allows Orwell to introduce the first moment of dramatic tension, as we wonder whether his protagonist will submit to the hectoring prejudice of Ellis or defend his friend. It is a struggle that endures throughout the novel and which forms the cornerstone of Orwell's effort to raise questions concerning social and cultural identity. For Flory is a man who belongs to the world of the British ex-patriot, where playing the role of the cultured and superior *pukka-sahib* affords acceptance among one's peers, and projects a public justification for the Raj itself. And yet his tendency to question those tenets of appearance and respectability in *Burmese Days* results in a crisis of identity, one in which he feels alien in the company of every character, including his friend Dr Veraswami. As Orwell once was, Flory is a man dislocated, unable to support the ideas of racial superiority implicit within British rule, and yet separated by his physical and cultural otherness from the Burmese. This seeming contradiction extends to the narrative voice itself, where Flory is described to the reader with a sense of intimacy through the third person and yet, from the very beginning of the novel, is branded as Other by Orwell through the

¹⁴ As Peter Davison points out, 'Orwell served in Burma when unrest was at its height'. Initiatives offering selected Burmese symbolic membership to European Clubs were seen as a way to calm anti-British sentiments in the 1920s. See *The Complete Works*, XVI, 362n.

presence of his birthmark. It is a somewhat crude literary device, and yet one which perfectly fits the insuperable nature of Flory's predicament, serving metaphorically to underline his role as an outsider.

One can begin to understand Orwell's wider intentions here by observing that the two paragraphs subsequent to the revelation of the birthmark describe first the British Club and then the Burmese pagoda:

Beyond that was the European Club, and when one looked at the Club – a dumpy one-storey wooden building – one looked at the real centre of town. In any town in India the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain [...] The spire of the pagoda rose from the trees like a slender spear tipped with gold. Kyauktada was a fairly typical Upper Burma town, that had not changed greatly between the days of Marco Polo and the Second Burma War, and might have slept in the Middle Ages for a century more if it had not proved a convenient spot for a railway terminus.¹⁵

Not only does Orwell juxtapose the two centres of spiritual power in these sections – the Club and the pagoda – but he also laces the description with irony, the 'dumpy one-storey building' proving a much more formidable power base than the beautiful 'slender spear tipped with gold'. In his descriptions of all things British in the novel, Orwell seeks to extend this idea of decay and dilapidation, as if the all-consuming tendrils of the Empire are beginning to wither:

Inside, the Club was a teak-walled place smelling of earth-oil, and consisting of only four rooms, one of which contained a forlorn 'library' of five hundred mildewed novels, and another an old and mangy billiard-table – this, however, seldom used, for during most of the year hordes of flying beetles came buzzing round the lamps and littered themselves over the cloth.¹⁶

The Club is the power base of the British ideal, an embodiment of the tired and anachronistic notion of racial superiority that supports the continuing Empire, the baselessness of which is inadvertently emphasised by the regular tirades of Ellis.

¹⁵ Orwell, *Burmese Days*, pp.14-15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.17.

‘My God,’ said Ellis a little more calmly, taking a pace or two up and down, ‘my God, I don’t understand you chaps. I simply don’t. Here’s that old fool Macgregor wanting to bring a nigger into this Club for no reason whatever, and you all sit down under it without a word. Good God, what are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we aren’t going to rule, why the devil don’t we clear out? Here we are, supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who’ve been slaves since the beginning of history, and instead of ruling them in the only way they understand, we go and treat them as equals. And all you silly b___s take it for granted. There’s Flory, makes his best pal of a black babu who calls himself a doctor because he’s done two years at an Indian so-called university [...] And there’s Maxwell, spends his time running after Eurasian tarts.’¹⁷

Through the words of Ellis, Orwell magnifies the world-view popular among many British at that time, a view in which other races are little more than savages incapable of self-government, and whose accomplishments are viewed with contempt. As with the essay ‘Clink’, Orwell demonstrates how language is capable of not only affirming comradeship – the repeated use of ‘we’, for example – but also reducing the subjectivity of others into mere objectivity. Ellis in particular uses prejudicial vocabulary – ‘nigger’, ‘babu’, even ‘Eurasian’ – which serves to resolve the complex individual to a single facet, usually founded upon race.¹⁸ Yet it is the very use and ownership of the English language itself which helps to reinforce the positions of ruler and subject. In a later scene, Ellis’ proprietorial feelings for his language come comically to the fore as he castigates a servant for his prowess in English:

‘Don’t talk like that, damn you – “I find it very difficult!” Have you swallowed a dictionary? “Please, master, can’t keeping ice cool” – that’s how you ought to talk. We shall have to sack this fellow if he gets to talk English too well. I can’t stick servants who talk English.’¹⁹

There is a keen understanding here of the role of language in the oppression of a race: English is for the masters, Burmese for the natives. Ellis expects his servants to remain true to their British-assigned role in this sorry drama, playing the part of the subjugated at all times. By speaking English in a competent fashion, the servant threatens to upset

¹⁷ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁸ As I discuss in Chapter Three, Orwell was not above such practices himself on occasion.

¹⁹ Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.23.

this comforting hierarchy of roles and assignments just as much as Flory befriending a 'native'.

That so many of Ellis' tirades are founded largely upon gossip and hearsay is by no means coincidental. For, in representing the common British sentiment, albeit one which was not always vocalised, Ellis' speech and thought exemplifies what Heidegger refers to as *idle talk* (*Gerede*). *Idle talk* is an irreducibly social phenomenon, and is the language of 'everydayness': through it, a picture of the world is expressed and disseminated, a picture which exhibits a level of high intelligibility, but limited insight. The subject under discussion is understood only 'approximately and superficially' and an 'average intelligibility' is passed along from person to person.²⁰ Although an everyday phenomenon, it is critical to our ability to understand one another, and has the corollary of reinforcing feelings of identity and camaraderie. The necessity to 'level down' the understanding of the world expressed in *idle talk* results from the need to ensure universal intelligibility. Yet, in altering its content thus, it detaches itself from its original object. *Idle talk* is therefore the counterpoint to knowledge through first-hand experience; it purports to offer access to the world without the necessity for *Dasein* to see it for himself. So far removed is it from the world that, eventually, our fascination lies not with the object of the discussion, but rather the vapid talk itself. As Stephen Mulhall eloquently explains:

Rather than trying to achieve genuine access to the object as it is in itself, we concentrate upon what is claimed about it, taking it for granted that what is said is so, simply because it is said, and passing it on – disseminating the claim, allowing it to inflect our conversations about the object, and so on. We thereby lose touch with the ostensible object of the communication; our talk becomes groundless. And the ease with which we then seem to ourselves to understand whatever is talked about entails that we think of ourselves as understanding everything just when we are failing to do so.²¹

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.212.

²¹ Mulhall, p.106.

For Heidegger, the groundlessness of *idle talk* is the very mechanism which allows ‘the possibility of understanding everything without previously ‘making the thing one’s own.’²² Thus, whilst Ellis lives amongst the Burmese, his understanding of them is drawn from unquestioned prejudices that are perpetually passed around among the British: he is a man who has never attempted to test his ideas concerning racial superiority, instead seeking only those experiences in which he expects their confirmation, such as his relationship with his bullied servants. As a character, Flory often stands in stark opposition in this respect, a man who, like his creator, draws his understanding from genuine interactions with the Burmese and their culture rather than the mere acceptance of second-hand thought.

Shortly after meeting Elizabeth Lackersteen, a young English woman upon whom he pins his hopes for future happiness, Flory underlines his commitment to first-hand experience by taking her to a Burmese *pwe*, a ‘cross between a historical drama and a revue’.²³ Although the Burmese treat the couple with deference and respect, even giving up their seats next to U Po Kyin, Elizabeth is revolted by the prospect of going ‘among that smelly native crowd’.²⁴ For the reader, this is an immediate confirmation of the gulf between the two characters. Elizabeth is a young woman governed by simple whims and prejudices, whose binary conception of the world has been fixed through formative *idle talk* at her expensive boarding-school:

There is a short period in everyone’s life when his character is fixed for ever; with Elizabeth, it was those two terms during which she rubbed shoulders with the rich. Thereafter her whole code of living was summed up in one belief, and that a simple one. It was that the Good (‘lovely’ was her name for it) is synonymous with the expensive, the elegant, the aristocratic; and the Bad (‘beastly’) is the cheap, the low,

²² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.213.

²³ Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.104.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.105.

the shabby, the laborious [...] Everything from a pair of stockings to a human soul was classifiable as 'lovely' or 'beastly'.²⁵

Elizabeth's very language, inherited from the wealthy and reinforced by unthinking repetition over many years, limits her ability to genuinely apprehend any new experience. *Idle talk* has afforded her a dualistic framework for her perceptions of the world, and through it the experience of the pwe is merely a verification of her worst prejudices. And yet, as Orwell shows us, *idle talk* colours not only *Dasein*'s perceptions and expectations of other races – of those immediately identifiable as 'Other' – but also of one's peers. For the very act of attending the pwe clashes violently with Elizabeth's notions concerning English propriety:

But the whole expedition - the very notion of wanting to rub shoulders with all those smelly natives – had impressed her badly. She was perfectly certain that that was not how white men ought to behave.²⁶

Elizabeth is revolted not only by the Burmese, but by Flory's desire to go amongst them in a manner unbefitting her rigid conception of British masculinity. Her association with Flory, accordingly, appears doomed to the reader from this moment onwards, with him forever associated with the 'beastly'. For Orwell, the phenomenon which we have referred to as *idle talk*, in which opinions and understanding are spread and adopted unquestioningly, seems wholly pernicious in its propensity to disseminate prejudice, and one which is at odds with his own commitment to experiencing the world for oneself. Curiously though, for Heidegger, the term is not used in a 'disparaging' sense.²⁷ On the contrary, *idle talk* is an unavoidable consequence of *Dasein*'s Being-with-others, arising from the inescapable possibility, if not always the actuality, of existing in an

²⁵ Ibid., p.92.

²⁶ Ibid., p.110.

²⁷ Ibid., p.211.

interacting community.²⁸ It is, accordingly, an *existentiale*, and not something from which *Dasein* can wholly refrain. And yet, throughout *Burmese Days*, the possibility of eschewing *idle talk* is continually hinted at through the unorthodoxy of Flory, as if succumbing to it is merely an *existentiell* choice. His resulting dislocation from his community becomes a key source of his unhappiness and eventual downfall. In order to explain the mechanism behind this, we must place *idle talk* within a wider phenomenon exposed in both *Burmese Days* and *Being and Time*, in which every aspect of the individual is called into question.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes the suggestion that *Dasein*'s self-image is determined by the way in which it enters into relations with others. When we encounter others,

there is constant care as to the way one differs from them, whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one's own *Dasein* has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's *Dasein* already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed.²⁹

Thus, we are often confronted, phenomenologically speaking, with a sense of difference: our own behaviour, lifestyle, speech, and opinions are thrown into relief by the corresponding attributes of the people we meet. This may lead us to alter our manners and behaviour to better conform, or we may, instead, seek to emphasise our own individuality by consciously distinguishing ourselves yet further. Where a sense of similarity rather than difference is present in our dealings with others, an equivalent set of apparent choices is available. In each situation, *Dasein*'s behaviour is prompted not

²⁸ Heidegger's notorious association with the Nazi party in the 1930s raises a number of questions concerning the philosophy espoused in *Being and Time*. In his reluctance to classify *idle talk* pejoratively, does one find the roots of a philosophy which extolls the fascist ideal of a national mind-set? Does Orwell's implicit criticism of *idle-talk* reveal his own libertarian awareness of the dangers of this phenomenon? It is an intriguing possibility that each writer's stance on the question of *idle talk* could be both cause and symptom of their respective political inclinations. See Chapter Four for further discussion of Heidegger's politics.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.164.

by its own independent thoughts and desires so much as the orientation of others, to whom it compares itself. It is crucial here to understand that, in referring to the other, Heidegger is not speaking of specific individuals, less still any single definable group, but rather what Stephen Mulhall has called a ‘consensual hallucination’ of public values and opinions, which tempts *Dasein* away from itself and into the crowd.³⁰ The name given by Heidegger to this nebulous public entity is *das Man* or the ‘they’.³¹ It is a phenomenon with great implications for the freedom of the individual. For if *Dasein* allows his existence to be determined in this way, then he could be said to be abrogating the responsibility to make his own choices – ‘choice’ or ‘taking a stand’ on one’s life being the very existentials which Heidegger identifies as a defining feature of *Dasein*. By becoming what he calls a ‘they’-self, *Dasein* is said to be acting inauthentically. And because the ‘they’ is no single definable group or individual, the responsibility for *Dasein*’s existence is not transferred so much as disposed of in this surrender. The phenomenon of *idle talk* can now be seen as the vehicle through which the ideas and opinions of the ‘they’ are disseminated. In a similar way to shared behaviours, the content of *idle talk* is circulated with no clear possibility of ascribing its origin to any specific individual. As we shall now see, *Burmese Days* conveys Orwell’s intuitive understanding of the ‘they’, one which both draws from and extends beyond the confines of the novel’s colonial setting.

Throughout *Burmese Days*, the ideal of the perfect Anglo-Indian gentleman – the so-called *pukka sahib* – hangs over each of the British characters, but

³⁰ Mulhall, p.68.

³¹ There is no direct equivalent for the German expression *das Man*, the ‘they’ being the accepted English rendering of the term instigated by the original translators of *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. However, Hubert Dreyfus has more recently argued against this particular translation because it suggests that *Dasein* is somehow separate from this public consciousness, when, in fact, Heidegger’s point is that the norms and practices of *das Man* are applicable to anyone. Dreyfus’ suggestion that the term be rendered as ‘the one’, in the sense that ‘one’ does this or that is convincing, but alas has remained unconventional. For the purposes of this study, we shall therefore adopt the more orthodox translation of the ‘they’.

particularly the sceptical Flory. After a heated argument with Ellis and Westfield concerning a lenient sentence given to a Burmese newspaper editor for libel, Flory has the five ‘chief beatitudes’ of the *pukka sahib* recounted to him:

Keeping up our prestige,
The firm hand (without the velvet glove),
We white men must hang together,
Give them an inch and they’ll take an ell, and
Esprit de corps.³²

In expounding this code, Orwell demonstrates an awareness of the nature of the ‘they’. For whilst such precepts were commonly understood among Anglo-Indians, their source is indeterminate, and rarely were they written down. As Flory explains later in the story after signing a discriminatory notice at the club:

No, you don’t understand. You couldn’t. You don’t realise just what *kind* of pressure is put on one to make one do things like that. There was nothing to make me sign the notice. Nothing could have happened if I’d refused. There’s no law telling us to be beastly to Orientals – quite the contrary. But – it’s just that one daren’t be loyal to an Oriental when it means going against the others.³³

The others in this account coincide well with Heidegger’s impersonal ‘they’, whilst Flory’s emphasis of the word ‘kind’, demonstrates that the doctor is incapable of understanding Flory’s ‘they’-self by virtue of his status as a non-British outsider.³⁴ Yet, the stated beatitudes are more than just precepts: through them, an entire world view is implied which not only espouses an ideal for the *pukka sahib* to meet, but also sets him in opposition to others, in this case, women and non-whites. As Praseeda Gopinath

³² Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.198.

³³ Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.151.

³⁴ Given that the ‘they’ is an inescapable existentielle, this of course raises the intriguing possibility that Dr Veraswami is immersed in a different ‘they’.

notes, this ideal, founded upon a more ancient notion of ‘the gentleman’, for the most part challenges and destroys any competing world-view of the individual:

The pukka Sahib is an imperial mediation of the domestic ideal of the gentleman, where the ethno-national or the racial/tribal code takes precedence over the personal-ethical code: race becomes the defining factor of the Englishman.³⁵

Orwell certainly witnessed the power of the ‘they’ during his time in Burma, and once again, it is this grounding in real experience that gives the novel a phenomenological honesty.³⁶ In what is perhaps revealing of his inexperience as a novelist, Orwell even allows his own thoughts on the subject to break into the narrative in a manner that recalls our earlier observation of Jack London:

It is a stifling, stultifying world in which we live. It is a world in which every word and every thought is censored [...] Free speech is unthinkable. All other kinds of freedom are permitted. You are free to be a drunkard, an idler, a coward, a backbiter, a fornicator; but you are not free to think for yourself. Your opinion on every subject of any conceivable importance is dictated for you by the pukka sahibs’ code.³⁷

There is a foreshadowing of the suffocating doctrine of Ingsoc from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* here in Orwell’s description of the stifling ‘pukka sahibs’ code’. And yet, it is really a manifestation of the ‘they’ which is at work. Not only does the ‘they’ determine permitted modes of thought, it offers *Dasein* an illusion of behavioural freedom, all the while using *idle talk* to furnish the acceptable archetypes – ‘drunkard’, ‘idler’, ‘coward’, ‘backbiter’, ‘fornicator’ – through which that illusion is conceptualised. It thus removes the need to think and reflect, effectively taking on responsibility for some of our most

³⁵ Praseeda Gopinath, ‘An Orphaned Manliness: The Pukka Sahib and the End of Empire in A Passage to India and Burmese Days’, *Studies in the Novel*, 41 (2009), 201-23 (p.205).

³⁶ There is strong evidence to link a number of incidents from *Burmese Days* to Orwell’s actual experiences. Flory describes ‘the murder of an elephant’ (p.87), an act which spawned one of Orwell’s most famous essays, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, discussed below. The moment in which Ellis attacks a young Burmese with his cane ‘right across the boy’s eyes’ (p.252), mirrors a similar experience in which Orwell responded to a crowd of students bumping into him at a train station (recounted by one of the boys, Maung Htin-Aung, in Crick, p.87). As Crick summarises, ‘Katha [his last posting in Burma] was undoubtedly the landscape of *Burmese Days*, although the characters had been picked up all along the road from Mandalay and the heat had been intensified’. Crick, p.98.

³⁷ Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.69.

difficult tasks as *Dasein*. Christopher Macann expresses this nicely when he states how, through the 'they', 'the self lets itself be absorbed in the world in order precisely not to have to come to terms with itself.'³⁸ No character recognises the dangerous allure of the 'they' more than John Flory, and it is the British Club – the 'spiritual citadel' of the town – that is its epicentre. In the characters of Ellis and Westfield, Orwell expresses the ideals of the 'they' through an *idle talk* laden with prejudice and a distinctive conception of manliness:

'It's all very well, but I stick to what I said. No natives in this Club! It's by constantly giving way over small things like that that we've ruined the Empire. This country's only rotten with sedition because we've been too soft with them. The only possible policy is to treat 'em like the dirt they are.'³⁹

The ferocity of Ellis' rant, in which he sees an attack on the *pukka sahib* ideal as a slur on his very identity, emphasises the extent to which *Dasein* surrenders itself to the 'they'. It was, as Orwell clearly shows, a sense of identity that many Anglo-Indians of the time felt was under threat from burgeoning Indian nationalism.

Historically, the role played by the European Club in preserving and perpetuating *pukka-sahib* behaviour was a critical one, and this accounts for its centrality in the narrative of *Burmese Days*. As Mrinalini Sinha explains, the exclusive nature of these establishments was instrumental in constructing the *pukka-sahib* ideal:

It was precisely this generative role of the clubs - in fashioning a white British self - that implicated the cultural politics of clubbability in a specific enactment of "whiteness" in colonial India. The European social clubs in India, indeed, formed part of an elaborate set of mechanisms that articulated the legitimate boundaries of an acceptable image of "whiteness."⁴⁰

³⁸ Christopher Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.93.

³⁹ Ibid., p.29.

⁴⁰ Mrinalini Sinha, 'Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India', *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), 489-521, (p.504).

The ‘they’ ideals of whiteness and manliness perpetuated by the European club converged through the notion of the *pukka-sahib*, with individuals’ ‘clubbability’ measured against this formula. In *Burmese Days*, the Club is certainly a centre of power for the colonial ‘they’-self, and yet Orwell also ensures that an absence of harmony is regularly manifest between the various Anglo-Indian patrons. Ben Clarke has recently argued that, rather than being an extension of the community, ‘a site within which it is strengthened and reproduced’, the working-class pub is ‘an attempt to compensate for its absence’.⁴¹ Whilst the rather different establishment featured in *Burmese Days* is the principal wellspring of the ‘they’-self, it too is evidence of an absence of authentic community. By ensuring that the Club brings together a somewhat disparate set of characters, Orwell not only allows for dramatic conflict, but also emphasises the inauthentic, ‘they’ origin of the factors that superficially bind them together – race, nationality, gender. This is, at once, an existential and political insight, one which casts serious doubt on Robert Colls’ assertion that each of Orwell’s novels up to 1936 ‘have no political point other than that England is wrong’.⁴² Only Flory, it would seem, is able to recognise that Anglo-Indian life is founded upon ‘lies’. In his efforts to extricate himself from the Club and the ‘they’, he seeks refuge in the company of his friend, Dr Veraswami, a regular ‘black mass’ that, for Flory, almost takes the place of a confessional.

‘I don’t want the Burmans to drive us out of this country. God forbid! I’m here to make money, like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man’s burden humbug. The pukka sahib pose. It’s so boring. Even those bloody fools at the Club might be better company if we weren’t all of us living a lie the whole time.’⁴³

⁴¹ Ben Clarke, ‘“The poor man’s club”: The Middle Classes, the Public House, and the Idea of Community in the Nineteen-Thirties’, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 45 (2012), 39-54, (p.51).

⁴² Robert Colls, *George Orwell: English Rebel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.39.

⁴³ Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.37.

The admission that the lie, evinced through the ‘pukka sahib pose’, is lived by ‘all of us’ illustrates his understanding of the pervasiveness of the ‘they’. Accordingly, Flory’s visits to the doctor leave him with a guilt that makes him feel ‘like a Nonconformist minister dodging up to town and going home with a tart’.⁴⁴ For Flory, the ‘lie’ that is lived by Anglo-Indians involves the very adoption of the role of the pukka sahib rather than its use in exploiting a people. In a phenomenological sense, it is the lie to oneself, the surrender of one’s freewill to the ‘they’ under the guise of the pukka sahib, which is the act of inauthenticity in *Burmese Days*. Although not European, Dr Veraswami is a character who has been seduced by the ‘they’ and notions of the pukka-sahib. And yet, Orwell uses this character to ironically underscore just how little one can understand the ‘they’-self from without:

Why iss it that always you are abusing the pukka sahibs, ass you call them? They are the salt of the earth. Consider the great things they have done – consider the great administrators who have made British India what it is [...] And consider how noble a type iss the English gentleman! Their glorious loyalty to one another! The public-school spirit!⁴⁵

The notion of the ‘noble’ pukka-sahibs demonstrating ‘glorious loyalty’ to each other sits uneasily with our knowledge of events inside the European Club. And like the content of their *idle talk*, the ties which bind together the patrons of the Club are superficial in their inauthenticity. From this perspective, *Burmese Days* can be read as a novel documenting a ‘they’-self in crisis, a crisis in which it is struggling to adapt its world-view in the face of a burgeoning nationalism beyond its control. Veraswami, like so many of the Burmese, fails to recognise this weakness, instead becoming tricked by the pukka-sahib lie. As a result, his desperation to flee from life as a victim of oppression and gain access to this ‘they’-self results in him pantomiming the role of an

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.35.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.36-37.

Anglo-Indian, denouncing his country as ‘filthy’ and its people as ‘ignorant savages’.⁴⁶ Through this dynamic, Orwell presents the reader with the image of two men desperately seeking an impossible escape from their own worlds.

Perhaps aware that the doctor can offer only temporary respite from the ‘they’, Flory seeks marriage with the completely unsuitable Elizabeth Lackersteen. Orwell uses the character of Elizabeth not only to furnish the novel with a romantic interest, but also to emphasise the pervasiveness of the *pukka-sahib* ideal beyond the white, clubbable male. Elizabeth is a character repulsed by the thought of mixing with the ‘natives’, and whose attraction to Flory seems to wax only when he is indulged in acts of manliness. Thus, he creates a good first impression by saving her from a harmless water buffalo. And her excitement elicited by this masculine world is depicted in clear sexual terms when, at the end of a hunting expedition, she holds a dead pigeon:

She could hardly give it up, the feel of it so ravished her. She could have kissed it, hugged it to her breast. All the men, Flory and Ko S’la, and the beaters, smiled at one another to see her fondling the dead bird [...] She was conscious of an extraordinary desire to fling her arms round Flory’s neck and kiss him; and in some way it was the killing of the pigeon that made her feel this.⁴⁷

If we accept Douglas Kerr’s assertion that there is a ‘direct link in Orwell’s imagination [...] between animals and the poor’, then this scene neatly presents Elizabeth’s ideology, wedded to a false model of manliness that is affirmed through the subjugation of the Burmese.⁴⁸ For her, any prospective husband must be measured against this ‘they’ ideal of the *pukka-sahib*. However, in contrast to the manly young cavalry officer, Verrall (perhaps a play on the word ‘virile’), with whom she has an affair, Flory’s attempts to flee from the ‘they’ regularly result in his public fall from the *pukka-sahib* stance, each time leading to Elizabeth’s revulsion. Their trip to watch the pwe theatre, an excursion to a Chinese tea shop, a scene when Flory falls from his horse –

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.150.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.172.

⁴⁸ Douglas Kerr, ‘Orwell, Animals and the East’, *Essays in Criticism*, 49 (2009), 234-55 (p.238).

each of these moments repulse Elizabeth in their divergence from the pukka-sahib ideal. Like his refuge in the company of Dr Veraswami, Flory seeks an impossible salvation from Elizabeth, a woman who embodies the very behaviour and thought of the 'they' from which he is fleeing. And yet Flory's dream is more hopeless still. For through Elizabeth, he seeks not only the instrument of extrication, but a private sphere of meaning – his own 'they'. In his pursuit of this, he reaches a moment of crisis, in which the absence of Elizabeth, combined with his alienation from British ideologies, throws the paucity of his, now-colourless, world into relief. 'Everything – birds, trees, flowers, everything – was deadly and meaningless because she was not here,' Orwell informs us.⁴⁹ 'Only by marrying her could his life be salvaged.'⁵⁰

Towards the end of the novel, having been abandoned by Verrall and smarting at an unwanted pass from her uncle, Elizabeth agrees to marry Flory in an act of desperate compromise. And yet, for him, the birthmark and the 'sidelongness' remain, reminding us that this is a man dislocated from the 'they', and its ideals of manliness and the pukka-sahib. As the novel reaches its climax, Flory is publically disgraced in church, courtesy of an embarrassing spectacle of sobbing and pleading by his estranged Burmese mistress, Ma Hla May, herself prompted by the devious U Po Kyin. It is this desecration that finally condemns him in Elizabeth's eyes, an incident during which his birthmark tellingly 'glows'.⁵¹ Shunned by his own people, betrayed by the Burmese, and unwilling to play the role demanded of him by the 'they', Flory takes his own life. Orwell tells us early on in the novel, 'you've got to be a pukka sahib or die', mirroring Heidegger's assertions that continued extrication from the 'they' is an impossibility.⁵² In the end, it was this birthmark, the symbol of his free-thinking individuality, 'that had

⁴⁹ Ibid., p 223.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.184.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.280.

⁵² Ibid., p.42.

damned him',⁵³ its hideous symbolic scar fading from Flory's face only in death, and leaving 'a faint grey stain'.⁵⁴

Orwell's projection of the 'they' in *Burmese Days* describes the unavoidable surrender of *Dasein*'s very individuality, the Anglo-Indians being seduced into the 'consensual hallucination' of the *pukka sahib* ideal, and the protagonist searching for an impossible means of extrication from it. It was a preoccupation and method of exposition to which he would return in his literary career. Richard Vorhees has played down the significance of the novel in comparison to the acclaimed *A Passage to India*, asserting that 'Orwell's insights are inferior to Forster's'.⁵⁵ For Vorhees, Orwell does scarcely more than 'despise one character [...] a little less than another', in contrast to Forster, who 'sees something sympathetic about most of the people, both Indian and British'.⁵⁶ But, of course, this kind of criticism assumes from the start that both *A Passage to India* and *Burmese Days* are similar books. Aside from the setting, they really are not. Terry Eagleton is one commentator who has sought to downplay the critique of Imperialism implicit within the novel, interpreting the text as an 'exploration of private guilt, incommunicable loneliness and loss of identity'.⁵⁷ He is certainly correct to identify the priority given to individual identity in *Burmese Days*, but his line of reasoning leads him into the erroneous conclusion that 'Burma becomes at points little more than a setting'.⁵⁸ This is not exactly the case. For, unlike *A Passage to India*, which uses its setting to comment upon the rectitude of Imperial rule, and the possibility of personal relationships that bridge the resulting inequalities, the backdrop of British

⁵³ Ibid., p.290.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.294.

⁵⁵ Richard Vorhees, *The Paradox of George Orwell* (West Lafayette: Indiana University Press, 1961), p.76.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Terry Eagleton, 'Orwell and the Lower-Middle Class Novel', in *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Williams, pp.10-33 (p.17).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Imperialism in Burma is used by Orwell to magnify the existentialia common to *Dasein* as a whole. As Steven Patterson explains:

Individually, imperialists of all classes almost always had more power than Britons back home of equal rank, and imperial lives, with their heightened sense of power, seemed to be much more dramatic because of this superiority, which was itself dutifully cloaked in Kiplingesque terms of the burden of ruling others fairly for little reward.⁵⁹

Thus, by placing the character of Flory in a situation of Imperial dominance that he himself knew all too well, Orwell is able to plausibly magnify the existentialia of *idle talk* and the ‘they’. By putting such ontological concerns at the heart of *Burmese Days*, Orwell ensures that the work continues to fascinate even the modern reader, long after the demise of much of the British Empire. This pattern, which we first identified in *Down and Out*, is maintained throughout his novels, and many of his essays, and is a feature that we shall continue to trace for the remainder of this project.

Two years after *Burmese Days* was first published, Orwell returned to these themes and their colonial setting for what would become one of his most famous essays, ‘Shooting an Elephant’. Like *Burmese Days*, ‘Shooting an Elephant’ draws heavily upon Orwell’s own experiences, and recounts an incident which, Peter Davison suggests, we have every reason to believe actually took place.⁶⁰ The narrative begins with a reminiscent montage of the jeering animosity that would follow Orwell in his role as an officer in the Imperial Police. Aside from an individual who purposely trips Orwell on the football field, and the referee who overlooks the incident, the native Burmese are carefully portrayed as a homogenous Other. And so we hear how Orwell was ‘hated by large numbers of people’, how his misfortune on the football field meant

⁵⁹ Steven Patterson, ‘The Imperial Idea: Ideas of Honor in British India’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 8 (2007), <http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v008/8.1patterson.html> [accessed 20 January 2015] (para. 2 of 68).

⁶⁰ See *The Complete Works*, x, 506n.

that ‘the crowd yelled with hideous laughter’, and how there were seemingly ‘several thousand’ Buddhist priests in the town, each of them enjoying standing on street corners, mocking the Europeans.⁶¹ An exposition of his own disillusion with the British Empire follows, during which the reader is successfully manoeuvred into a position of empathy towards his plight. The narrative itself begins with Orwell’s recollection of how he was told of an elephant which had gone ‘must’, his duty, in the absence of its mahout, being to investigate. As he arrives in the quarter where the elephant was last seen, he is met with a number of confused accounts, which almost result in his return to base until his attention is drawn to the back of a hut from which a group of women are shoos some local children:

He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back, and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony [...] The friction of the great beast’s foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit.⁶²

At once, from the homogenous Other, Orwell has allowed an individual to emerge. The facial descriptions create a sense of horror, yet work to break down the Otherness of this character, whilst the details outlining the violent manipulation he has undergone from the elephant introduce a disconcerting existential tension, pulling this *Dasein* back towards the status of an object, a rag doll. As a tableau expressing our relation to the dead – the unnerving paradox of being faced with both a subject and object concurrently – it is a notable achievement, and one that typifies what has been described as Orwell’s

⁶¹ Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 501-06 (p.501). It has been claimed that Orwell ‘identifies himself openly with the Burmese’ – an odd assertion in the light of these descriptions. See Adriaan De Lange, *The Influence of Political Bias in Selected Essays of George Orwell* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1992), p.54.

⁶² Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, pp.502-03.

‘superior vision’.⁶³ The detail that the man had not been dead ‘many minutes’ brings forth our discomfort at the idea of *Dasein*, the subject, becoming instantly transformed into something which is no longer *Dasein* – an object. The reader is finally left in no doubt about either the power of the elephant, or this man’s innocence from the detail of his ‘lying on his belly with arms crucified’.

Orwell is prompted to call for an elephant gun for the purposes of self-defence before attempting to track the beast. It is at this stage that he notices that ‘practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me’.⁶⁴ Immediately, the focus has switched back from the individual victim to the homogenous Other. As well as seeking the meat from any potential kill, the villagers march behind Orwell for the purposes of fun, making him feel ‘a fool’.⁶⁵ Upon sighting the elephant, he realises that it is calm and that he ‘ought not to shoot him’.⁶⁶ And then the reader is met with a perfect literary-phenomenological moment:

I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes – faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjuror about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realised that I should have to shoot the elephant after all.⁶⁷

Having previously set up the mocking power of the crowd, Orwell brings it back in a manner reminiscent of the fear of embarrassment which pervades *Down and Out*. Just as Orwell’s failure to follow customs and practices in Paris threatened to unmask him as a middle-class imposter, here the Burmese crowd calls into question his status as a

⁶³ Nils Clausson, ‘Clarity, George Orwell, and the Pedagogy of Prose Style; or, How Not to Teach “Shooting an Elephant”’, *Pedagogy*, 11 (2011), 301-23 (p.306).

⁶⁴ Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, p.503.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp.503-04.

pukka-sahib. The irony, of course, as Barry Hindess observes, is that he is an officer of the Imperial Police, but one who, by virtue of his role, ‘finds himself responding to the approval and disapproval of those who are beneath him’.⁶⁸ Suddenly, through this tableau, we realise it is he who is Other – an Englishman in a ‘sea of yellow faces’. Yet he is also Other to himself, pressured into maintaining the role of the pukka-sahib in an act of inauthenticity. This is, once more, the power of the ‘they’. And yet, paradoxically, the ‘they’ is not the enormous crowd, but rather the nebulous ideal of the pukka-sahib hanging over the protagonist and the local Burmese. It is here that Orwell muses on a very Sartrean idea: that by tempting the Anglo-Indian to act out a role, the ‘they’ seduces him into abrogating his freedom:

I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib [...] He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.⁶⁹

This is a typical Orwellian epiphany – the ‘sudden realisation’ is a recurring motif in his work, which, as we discuss in Chapter Three, often misleadingly suggests that his authentic understanding arose during the events of the text itself rather than upon later reflection. In ‘Shooting an Elephant’, the epiphany is that there is a kind of self-delusion involved, not only in fleeing oneself to seek comfort in the ‘they’, but in actually following a role assigned by others. The very notion of the mask implies a difference between it and reality, between an inauthentic and an authentic self-understanding. In narrow terms, the essay, as James Tyner correctly identifies, illustrates that ‘whiteness itself is an act’.⁷⁰ More broadly, by repeatedly acting out any role in this way, pretending to be something not of our choosing, we very soon anaesthetise ourselves to

⁶⁸ Barry Hindess, ‘Not at Home in the Empire’, *Social Identities*, 7 (2001), 363-77 (p.373).

⁶⁹ Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, p.504.

⁷⁰ James A. Tyner, ‘Landscape and the Mask of Self in George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant”’, *Area*, 37 (2005), 260-67 (p.266).

the inauthenticity of our actions, identifying with that which we are not. As if to underscore this, Orwell eventually sets about shooting the elephant, fearing that the crowd ‘would laugh’ at him if he failed this test of manliness. In its death throes, this ‘grandmotherly’ creature eventually, and reluctantly, succumbs, but only after Orwell has ‘poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat’.⁷¹ The imagery of the dying elephant mirroring a perishing grand empire is obvious here, yet powerfully written: as Charles Holdefer observes, such large beasts are often a sign of ‘not strength but vulnerability’ in Orwell.⁷² Such metaphor would be taken up memorably nearly ten years later through the hapless shire horse, Boxer, in *Animal Farm*. And it is those phenomenological dimensions of the earlier essay which help it to endure, and are, arguably, its greatest achievement. In the next section, we shall explore how Orwell’s literary style developed in the mid-1930s through an examination of what is widely regarded as his least successful work, *A Clergyman’s Daughter*. By introducing concepts from the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, we shall explore how Orwell evolved his ideas to account for *Dasein*’s loss of selfhood to specific others.

To Drift in Rootless Freedom

Following the modest success of *Burmese Days*, Orwell set about writing his second novel, *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, which was published in 1935. In a letter to his agent, Leonard Moore, dated 1933, Orwell expressed his hope that the novel would ‘be better’ than his previous work.⁷³ That optimism soon proved to be unfounded. Within a year, he was complaining that, instead of going forwards, his work was going

⁷¹ Orwell, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, p.506.

⁷² Charles Holdefer, ‘Orwell’s Hippopotamus, or The Writer as Historical Anachronism’, *New England Review*, 32 (2011), 101-08 (p.102).

⁷³ Orwell, ‘Letter to Leonard Moore’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 324.

‘backwards with the most alarming speed’.⁷⁴ By the time he had sent the manuscript to Moore, his covering letter included a confession that ‘it was a good idea, but I am afraid I have made a muck of it’.⁷⁵ A year after publication, in a letter to Henry Miller, he was denigrating the work as ‘bollox’ [*sic*].⁷⁶ Despite several positive reviews upon its publication in 1935, Orwell came to view the work with a sense of shame and, towards the end of his life, refused permission for it to be reprinted or translated.⁷⁷ Although Bernard Crick is right to point out that *A Clergyman’s Daughter* is ‘better, in parts, than many, including Orwell himself, were to believe’, it is often considered the nadir of Orwell’s career as a novelist. And yet, it embodies an important shift in his thought, from a Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*’s dependence upon the nebulous ‘they’, to a more Sartrean conception of an individual in denial of her true essence, fleeing into the comforting objectivity offered through a role constructed by others. In this section, we shall trace how, through a modification of this earlier notion of ‘playing a role’, evident in *Burmese Days*, *Down and Out*, and the essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’, Orwell is able to raise questions concerning the very cohesiveness of the self. With reference to Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of *bad-faith*, we shall trace how Orwell subsequently employs the protagonist of *A Clergyman’s Daughter* in an attempt to meditate upon the concepts of both freedom and authenticity. An investigation into the latter will allow us to identify a tension in his thinking that is never completely resolved, and one which allows us to approach, in a new way, the supposed structural failure of this novel, as well as casting light upon Orwell’s much-discussed conservatism.

A Clergyman’s Daughter, described retrospectively by Orwell as a mere ‘exercise’, is an experimental novel that, once again, is ‘awash with personal

⁷⁴ Orwell, ‘Letter to Brenda Salkeld’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 348-49 (p.348).

⁷⁵ Orwell, ‘Letter to Leonard Moore’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 351-52 (p.351).

⁷⁶ Orwell, ‘Letter to Henry Miller’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 495-97 (p.496).

⁷⁷ Orwell, ‘Letter to George Woodcock’, *The Complete Works*, xviii, 410-11 (p.411).

preoccupations and personal experiences'.⁷⁸ It is the first and only time in which he attempted to draw a female protagonist. As the title of the novel suggests, Dorothy Hare, the principal character, is a young woman defined principally in relation to her father, the Rector of St. Athelstan's Church in Knype Hill, Suffolk (inspired by his parents' home town of Southwold). The novel begins with an echo of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Dorothy being awoken from 'the depths of some complex, troubling dream' by her 'horrid little bomb' of an alarm clock.⁷⁹ Yet, unlike Gregor Samsa, Dorothy's existence has undergone no transformation, her awakening on this occasion being merely a physical act. Indeed, through the description of numerous rituals, Orwell soon establishes that this is a day identical to every other:

With care – for the kitchen table had a nasty trick of reaching out in the darkness and banging you on the hip-bone – Dorothy felt her way into the kitchen, lighted the candle on the mantelpiece, and, still aching with fatigue, knelt down and raked the ashes out of the range

The Kitchen fire was a 'beast' to light. The chimney was crooked and therefore perpetually half choked, and the fire, before it would light, expected to be dosed with a cupful of kerosene, like a drunkard's morning nip of gin.⁸⁰

The repeated use of personification adds not only a lightly comedic tone to the piece, but also a sense that the world into which Dorothy has been thrown is wilfully set against her. Although the family employs a 'maid of all work', Orwell ironically depicts her snoring as the morning chores are completed, suggesting that it is actually Dorothy who fulfils this role. In a manner foreshadowing the omnipresent Big Brother from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the personality of the Rector looms over events of the opening chapter, even in his absence: Dorothy's reaction to her alarm clock turns to fear as she remembers the danger of waking her father prematurely, a motivation which also causes

⁷⁸ Taylor, p.137.

⁷⁹ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.2.

her to fill her bath ‘as slowly as possible’.⁸¹ And yet, for such an irascible and domineering character, the Rector is strangely passive, hiding from his creditors and conducting his affairs by proxy through his daughter. In addition to preparing meals and readying his shaving water each morning, Dorothy is obliged, through her assigned role as ‘Clergyman’s Daughter’ to write the Rector’s sermons, manage the household expenditure, organise fundraising activities for the church, and undertake visits to infirm parishioners in a manner more akin to a district nurse. It is through the latter that Orwell is able to introduce the reader to the wider community, a disparate collection of individuals who possess little of the Christian ethos.

Far from exemplifying what Daphne Patai sweepingly calls the ‘habitual disdain for women evident in all his work’, Dorothy Hare is one of Orwell’s most sympathetic characters, albeit one that fits a rather old-fashioned template of feminine passivity.⁸² The reader’s sympathy is gained in no small part by her juxtaposition with the oppressive and, often, vindictive community in which she lives. As he did with *Burmese Days*, and as he would go on to do most successfully in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell creates a sense of stifling oppression early on in the text. Echoing the structure of his previous novel, he identifies two centres of power within the town:

The two pivots, or foci, about which the social life of the town moved were the Knype Hill Conservative Club (fully licensed), from whose bow window, any time after the bar was open, the large, rosy-gilled faces of the town’s elite were to be seen gazing like chubby goldfish from an aquarium pan; and Ye Olde Tea Shoppe, a little further down the High Street, the principal rendezvous of the Knype Hill ladies.⁸³

Once again, Orwell’s awareness of the ‘they’ is brought to the fore by means of specific community buildings, with the automata-like *idle talk* and vacuous lives of the ‘Olde Tea Shoppe’ patrons in particular cruelly parodied:

⁸¹ Ibid., p.3.

⁸² Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p.239.

⁸³ Orwell, *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, p.12.

My dear, he had nine spades to the ace-queen and he went one no trump, if you please. What, my dear, you don't mean to say you're paying for my coffee again? Oh, but, my dear, it is simply too sweet of you!.⁸⁴

Orwell's use of italicisation here helps to underline the disingenuousness of the patrons, a trait further emphasised by the detail that they live in 'sham-picturesque villas'. Like the Club from *Burmese Days*, this 'community' is merely an aggregate of self-absorbed individuals. Beyond the world of the Olde Tea Shoppe, Dorothy's duties lead her to spend half of each day visiting an assortment of parishioners, few of whom 'have even a conception of the Christian life that she was trying to help them lead'.⁸⁵ Her forbearance and steadfast commitment to helping others in such circumstances, marks her as one of Orwell's most selfless and genuinely humane characters. In contrast, his depiction of several more prominent parishioners allows him to indulge a passion for quirky Dickensian character sketches, as well as affording a method of tracing Dorothy's steadily eroding sense of faith. To these ends, Orwell's depiction of the elderly and decaying Mrs Mayfill during Holy Communion is surely among his most grotesque of creations:

Miss Mayfill was creeping towards the altar with slow, tottering steps. She could barely walk, but she took bitter offence if you offered to help her. In her ancient, bloodless face, her mouth was surprisingly large, loose and wet. The under lip, pendulous with age, slobbered forward, exposing a strip of gum and a row of false teeth as yellow as the keys of an old piano. On the upper lip was a fringe of dark, dewy moustache. It was not an appetising mouth; not the kind of mouth that you would like to see drinking out of your cup. Suddenly, spontaneously, as though the Devil himself had put it there, the prayer slipped from Dorothy's lips: 'O God, let me not have to take the chalice after Miss Mayfill!'⁸⁶

Although perhaps somewhat overwritten, this caricature effectively illuminates the existential crisis that is building within Dorothy, torn as she is between the demands of

⁸⁴ Ibid. Orwell's sister, Avril, was the proprietor of a tea-shop in the town of Southwold at the time this novel was written: clearly, Orwell was, once again, drawing upon personal experience for his fiction.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.49.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.9.

playing a role and acting upon her true emotions. As ‘clergyman’s daughter’, it is incumbent upon her to behave in a non-judgemental, selfless manner, and yet her feelings of revulsion betray the fact that, like John Flory, and Orwell himself in ‘Shooting an Elephant’, she is merely pretending. The persona that has been thrust upon her no longer coincides with her inner emotions, resulting in a kind of hollow role-play. In the midst of this, Dorothy attempts to lose herself in prayer as a means of abrogating the freedom that would allow her to reject the soiled chalice. And yet, upon doing so, we are told that ‘it was quite useless attempting to pray; her lips moved, but there was neither heart nor meaning in her prayers’.⁸⁷ As with all of Orwell’s novels, the narrative has opened at a moment of existential crisis for its protagonist. In this instance, however, one must search hard for her motivation. Given the suggestion that the twenty-seven year old Dorothy has undergone the same rituals since childhood, there seems little reason to suppose a spontaneous loss of faith and motivation. But a closer reading of the text indicates that Orwell has provided a number of clues that Dorothy has been unstable for some time. Her interior monologues, in which she repeatedly exhorts herself to action through the use of biblical verse (‘Now then, Dorothy! No snivelling, please! It all comes right somehow if you trust in God. Matthew vi.25’) are not a demonstration of her religious zeal so much as testament to her faltering belief – self-exhortation in the absence of God.⁸⁸ With her masochistic use of cold baths, pins stuck into her arm and pinching herself to punish Christian transgressions, Orwell provides not simply moments of darkly comic relief, but further indication that it is only through mechanical acts of will that Dorothy is able to maintain her present mode of existence.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.30.

⁸⁹ Dorothy’s tendency towards masochism is an indication of just how perceptive Orwell’s psychological observations could be. Nowadays, we would probably describe such actions as falling into the ‘obsessive-compulsive’ category, a type of behaviour typified by those who seek to regain some control because of a perceived impotence in the face of events. Despite the appearance of a life that is

As an individual defined by her Christian role, Dorothy's very sense of self is threatened by such religious doubts. Unlike the character of John Flory who, as we previously saw, is defined by the 'they'-given identity of the *pukka-sahib*, this time Orwell has drawn a character whose existence is determined by two specific others: an absent God and an all-too-present tyrannical father, both of whom are submitted to in a wilful sacrifice of individual freedom. Whilst religious ideas can be viewed as particular manifestations of the 'they', it is crucial to note that, through the introduction of both Dorothy's father and the demanding townsfolk of Knype Hill, Orwell is attempting to push the idea of *Dasein's* submission further than in *Burmese Days*, suggesting that individuals can play a similar role in drawing away our freedom. The novel, then, can be interpreted as tracing Dorothy's attempt to renounce both of these oppressive influences – the 'they' and the Other – and, in so doing, regain both her freedom and her own sense of self. Michael Carter has argued that *A Clergyman's Daughter* is Heideggerian in its focus since 'For Dorothy, the renunciation is strictly personal, in that she has only herself to save; whereas, for Flory, it extended beyond the self to the alleviation of an oppressed people'.⁹⁰ Whilst the assessment of Dorothy's task is correct, Carter's ascription of a Heideggerian focus to the text overlooks the centrality of freedom and its submission to individuals (rather than simply the 'they') in the narrative, two ideas about which Heidegger says relatively little. Moreover, whereas *Burmese Days* follows Heidegger in asserting that only through death can complete extrication be accomplished, *A Clergyman's Daughter* posits a scenario in which a kind of personal freedom is achieved. As we shall see, this gives the work a focus that resonates more readily with the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre.

ordered and controlled, Orwell portrays Dorothy as falling very much into this category, her parishioners, her father, Mr Warburton, even the very household itself, all resisting her attempts at control and order.

⁹⁰ Michael Carter, *George Orwell and the Problem of Authentic Existence* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p.91.

For Sartre, the world can be divided into two types of being, *being-in-itself* (*l'être-en-soi*) and *being-for-itself* (*l'être-pour-soi*). Whereas *being-in-itself* refers to what we would ordinarily call the world of 'objects', *being-for-itself* is an inalienable part of human being. *Being-for-itself*, often written simply as the *for-itself*, designates the type of being peculiar to human consciousness and, as such, is broadly equivalent to Heidegger's *Dasein*:

Certainly we could apply to consciousness the definition which Heidegger reserves for *Dasein* and say that it is a being such that in its being, its being is in question.⁹¹

As is the case with *Dasein*, the *for-itself* is characterised by a perpetual need to reach beyond its Being, to carve its own mode of existence in the world. Why is this the case? For Sartre, this active striving is crucial if the *for-itself* is to remain differentiated from the *in-itself* – the field of inert, brute objects. Put another way, a human being comprises elements of both the *in-itself* (the body) and the *for-itself* (consciousness). The task of our existence is to acknowledge that the *for-itself* and not the *in-itself* is our 'essence'. A key characteristic of the *in-itself* is its 'facticity' – that it is identical with itself: an object is what it is, and nothing more. Therefore, in order to differentiate itself, the *for-itself* must wilfully and perpetually deny this 'facticity' – that is, reach beyond itself in an attempt to deny the brute objectivity at its heart. This involves introducing a distinction – a nothingness – between itself and the *in-itself*. Importantly, for Sartre, this nothingness, or negation, is not merely a logical function introduced through judgement, but is found in the world. Thus, in a well-known example, Sartre describes phenomenologically the realisation that a friend, Pierre, has failed to arrive in a café as not an act of judgement, but the result of a 'flickering of nothingness' in the world:

⁹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 1969), p.xxxviii.

Pierre absent haunts this café and is the condition of its self-nihilating organization as ground. By contrast, judgements which I can make subsequently to amuse myself, such as, “Wellington is not in this café, Paul Valéry is no longer here, etc.” – these have a purely abstract meaning; they are pure applications of the principle of negation without real or efficacious foundation, and they never succeed in establishing a real relation between the café and Wellington or Valéry.⁹²

Whilst certainly not present, Pierre’s absence, from a phenomenological perspective, imbues the café with a particular quality – a nothingness, which infuses the room. It is this negative state of affairs, what Sartre refers to as a ‘négativité’, which precedes, and indeed founds, judgements such as ‘he has not arrived’. However, it is important to understand that, in such situations, nothingness is not an extra quality which exists alongside being; we do not ‘see’ nothing, but rather imbue being – in this case the café – with the quality of nothingness. In the absence of Pierre, the being of the room is, to quote the words of Sebastian Gardner, ‘reconstituted with negativity’.⁹³ Crucially, whilst such négativités lie within ‘the world’, the agent that reveals them is, and must always be, us: the human being is ‘the being by whom négativités are disclosed in the world’.⁹⁴ Sartre goes yet further than this to claim that, as nihilating agent, the *for-itself*, or consciousness, is characterised as nothingness. This is of great importance with respect to our freedom. For if the *for-itself* is a nothingness, then it follows that it is not part of a causal chain of events. Moreover, it cannot be said to possess an ‘essence’ in the same way as mere objects – a fixed template that determines what it is. These two discoveries lead Sartre to the conclusion that human consciousness, as *for-itself*, is characteristically and inexorably free.

It was mentioned above that human beings are constituted of both the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*. We are now in a position to understand how human freedom, and its

⁹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.10.

⁹³ Sebastian Gardner, *Sartre’s Being and Nothingness* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), p.65.

⁹⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.47.

denial, is founded upon the play between these two modes of Being. For Sartre, it is desirable for us to embrace what we essentially are. Of course, he has now shown that, insofar as we can be said to possess an 'essence', it is a kind of emptiness which lies at the centre of us: the only element of our existence which is fixed is, paradoxically, the nothingness of potential and possibility. As human beings, we exist with the necessity to 'take a stand' on our existence and indulge in free choices about our future. It is for this reason that Sartre sometimes claims that, for human beings, 'existence comes before essence.'⁹⁵ And yet, for many of us, the responsibility of this freedom is a daunting burden. As *for-itself*, there is a lack of causality between me and my past, meaning that, as Christopher McCann explains, 'I live under the obligation of constantly remaking my Self'.⁹⁶ In the face of this onerous responsibility, many of us attempt to flee into our objectivity, denying our freedom and allowing our choices and decisions to be taken from us. Sartre gives the famous example of a waiter to illustrate this.

His movement is quick forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game [...] But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café.⁹⁷

In his commitment to role, the waiter attempts to define himself in the manner of the *in-itself*: he is a waiter and nothing more (recalling how the *in-itself* is characterised by its self-identification). This is, of course, an impossibility: human beings are not, for Sartre, objects, and their potential to exist in different ways must always outstrip any attempt to designate them in such monolithic terms. And so, for the waiter, a kind of self-deceiving

⁹⁵ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1974), p.26.

⁹⁶ Macann, p.120.

⁹⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.59.

role-play is required in order to pretend that his essence is nothing more than his job.

Sartre tries to imagine what this must involve:

What I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself of the café waiter, as if it were not just in my power to confer their value and their urgency upon my duties and the right of my position, as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o'clock or to remain in bed, even though it meant getting fired. As if from the very fact that I sustain this role in existence I did not transcend it on every side, as if I did not constitute myself as one beyond my condition.⁹⁸

A particular type of self-deception surrounds such behaviour, the doomed attempt to deny one's possibility by fleeing to the *in-itself*, and this is referred to by Sartre as '*bad-faith*'.

If we return now to *A Clergyman's Daughter*, we can see at once how Dorothy's behaviour falls into a similar pattern. In allowing herself to be defined by her role as the daughter of a rector (and, of course, Orwell uses the novel's title to underline this fact), she immediately gives her actions a motivation that absolves her of thought and the necessity of utilising the freedom that she possesses as a human being. As with Sartre's waiter, there is no irresistible power forcing Dorothy to get up early, to cook breakfast, to administer to her parishioners' ailments, and yet she compels herself to do these things by a commitment to her role which is tantamount to *bad faith*. As Michel Haar explains, the existence of such roles is explained by the objectifying action of an Other:

For Sartre, the conflict is between me and *an Other*, who gives me a possibility of bad faith, which consists of interiorizing the objective being that he makes of me. I can either submit to or refuse the objectification he imposes upon me, the way he defines me from without.⁹⁹

And so it is that both the parishioners and Dorothy's father objectify her with their expectations that she will conform to the template of 'clergyman's daughter'. Yet it is

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.60.

⁹⁹ Michel Haar, 'Sartre & Heidegger', in *Sartre: Contemporary Approaches to His Philosophy*, ed. by Hugh J. Silverman and Frederick A. Elliston (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980), pp.168-87 (p.178).

Dorothy herself, through her acquiescence in this scenario, her desire to flee from the responsibility of human freedom into the supposed solidity of an *in-itself* definition, who is acting in *bad faith*. Rather than affording her a concrete sense of identity, however, the opposite is true. For, as Carter observes, her *bad faith* is ‘so deep and pervasive that she can hardly distinguish the outlines of a self’.¹⁰⁰ One is reminded here of Sartre’s portrait of the café manager in his novel, *Nausea*, an individual whose role defines him to such an extent that his head ‘empties’ when the patrons leave.¹⁰¹ By continually surrendering herself to her father, the parishioners, and indeed, God, she denies her intrinsic human freedom, and allows her existence to be, not an issue for herself, but for others. Of course, as Sartre points out, such a practice will always fail to accomplish a full retreat from consciousness, for in allowing others to dictate our choices and objectify us in certain roles, one still makes the decision to let it happen. Even in *bad faith*, we can never achieve equivalence with the mindless *in-itself*: a residue of freedom, choice and possibility always remains. In the case of Dorothy, one might describe her adoption of a role as a case of unthinking acquiescence. Loraine Saunders perceptively notes how Orwell emphasises this rigid and robotic lack of thinking through the use of the exclamation marks in Dorothy’s self-exhortations, referred to earlier.¹⁰² The fact that each one of these is invariably followed by reference to a passage from the Bible emphasises how Dorothy has tried to lose herself not just to a role created by others, but also the ‘they’-given ideals of religion. By describing the misery involved in acting out such a designation, Orwell thereby sets the scene for a story of existential crisis and redemption.

¹⁰⁰ Carter, p.86. For an interesting discussion of how many modern psychotherapists are adopting the Sartrean line of refusing to acknowledge causal character traits in human behaviour, see Gilbert Harman, ‘Skepticism about Character Traits’, *The Journal of Ethics*, 13 (2009), 235-42.

¹⁰¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.16.

¹⁰² Saunders, p.47.

A Clergyman's Daughter is a novel with a clear three-part structure, albeit a somewhat disjointed one. After an opening section in which the residents of Knype Hill are sketched (with an almost Dickensian eye for caricature), Orwell carefully depicts how the stresses of playing such a demanding role for others lead Dorothy to a kind of mental breakdown. At the end of a long day, matters reach a climax when her friend, Mr Warburton, a bohemian artist and estranged father of three children, makes the latest in a series of unsuccessful passes at her, an action witnessed by the vindictive town gossip, Mrs Semprill. Arriving back at the rectory some time later, Dorothy realises that she still has costumes to make for the Church School play and, as midnight strikes on the grandfather clock, finds herself still working. The chapter ends here, only for the next to begin with an obviously amnesiac Dorothy sitting disorientated and destitute on a London street. This abrupt shift, seemingly without proper explanation or motivation, has been assumed by most critics to be one of the novel's most egregious flaws. Many commentators have taken Dorothy's amnesia and subsequent descent into destitution as merely an excuse for Orwell to make use of his own tramping experiences, something which he indeed does in Chapter Two. However, more recent criticism has attempted to encourage a re-evaluation of this section and, indeed, the book as a whole. In her spirited defence of Orwell's craft, Loraine Saunders has observed that the clues for Dorothy's breakdown are very much present in the preceding pages. And this is certainly the case: Orwell repeatedly tells us of Dorothy's exhaustion and how, on her final night, she was 'dreadfully, overwhelmingly tired'.¹⁰³ He mentions how she felt 'in an almost literal sense of the words, washed out' and experienced 'a very strange feeling as though her mind had been entirely emptied', indications not simply of exhaustion, but a sense of self dissolved into the demands of others.¹⁰⁴ By ending the

¹⁰³ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, p.83.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.84.

chapter with the description of her ‘mechanically’ pasting strips of paper onto costumes and ‘pinching herself every two minutes to counteract the hypnotic sound of the oil-stove singing beneath the glut-pot’, a dreamlike atmosphere is effectively conjured.¹⁰⁵ And this is the key to understanding the subsequent narrative jump which occurs. If we interpret the text on a wholly literal level, there is no doubt of its implausibility: whilst overwork can lead to, what in Orwell’s time, would be called a ‘breakdown’, that it could lead to amnesia seems unlikely. However, when we notice that Chapter Two begins with Dorothy emerging from ‘a black, dreamless sleep, with the sense of being drawn upwards through enormous and gradually lightening abysses’, we should recall the similarities with the opening of the novel. What Orwell is clearly trying to do here, with only partial success, is to add a figurative dimension to his realism. If we look back on the narrative up to this point, it has been established how, in accepting the role thrust upon her by others, Dorothy has attempted to flee into the *in-itself*, living an inhuman, automata-like existence. Indeed, as Saunders perceptively remarks, such is the insignificance of her sense of Self that, when she first awakes, ‘looking into the darkness in extreme exhaustion’, Orwell shows her to almost merge into the background of her room.¹⁰⁶ Her wilful project of depersonalization – the attempt to eschew the *for-itself* – is thereby alluded to metaphorically very early on in the novel. By subsequently introducing the idea of amnesia, Orwell returns to the figurative mode in order to present the reader with the contrasting Sartrean ideal of freedom: a Self which is forced to embrace the *for-itself*, with no past to act upon the present and a mind empty of outside influence and determinations. Dorothy’s re-awakening is therefore more of a re-birth. And, in contrast to the beginning of the novel, this time change has occurred. Her previous sense of Self, as prefigured in words such as ‘emptied’, ‘washed-out’,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Saunders, p.60.

‘hypnotic’ in the climax of the chapter, has dissolved, revealing the authentic nothingness of the *for-itself*. In a manner which echoes a different Dorothy, Orwell has effected not a jarring or unconvincing shift, but, marked by the whimsical fairy-tale detail of the clock striking twelve, a skilful and figurative segue into a different world.

If we pursue the interpretation that was outlined above, then Chapter Two of the novel must be seen as outlining an alternative to the *bad faith* and inauthenticity of Dorothy’s former life. Accordingly, Orwell sets about emphasising the altered sense of Self that will characterise Dorothy’s new existence by explaining, in a very Sartrean manner, the emergence of her reformed consciousness:

It was only now, after becoming aware of most of the things about her, that she became aware of herself. Hitherto she had been as it were a pair of eyes with a receptive but purely impersonal brain behind them. But now, with a curious little shock, she discovered her separate and unique existence; she could feel herself existing; it was as though something within her were exclaiming ‘I am I!’ Also, in some way she knew that this ‘I’ had existed and been the same from remote periods in the past, though it was a past of which she had no remembrance.¹⁰⁷

Dorothy’s amnesia forces her to sever her link with her past and the inauthentic determinations of her previous role. The subsequent detail that ‘her gold cross was missing’ serves to underline the renunciation of faith that is a corollary to this.¹⁰⁸ In a manner drawn heavily from the first encounter between Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger, Dorothy soon falls in with two youths and a girl, their interest piqued when she reveals that she has a half-crown. The use of dialect in this encounter, as we saw in both *Down and Out* and the article, ‘Click’, is a technique which allows Orwell to illustrate the otherness of the individuals:

‘You on the beach, kid?’

‘On the beach?’

¹⁰⁷ Orwell, *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, p.86.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94.

‘Well, on the bum?’

‘On the bum?’

‘Christ, she’s batty,’ murmured the girl, twitching at the black-haired one’s arm as though to pull him away.¹⁰⁹

However, it is also used extensively in the chapter to depict a world more colourful and, in a sense, humane, than the dry, conservative middle-class existence from which Dorothy emerged. Before long, and in the continued absence of memory, Dorothy marks the reconstitution of her Self by adopting the name of ‘Ellen’ and is soon tramping her way to Kent with the three youths, intent on going hop-picking. It is worth noting the detail that Dorothy wakes up in ‘New Kent Road’ and that Kent, we are told, is her birthplace. As Carter has observed, the return to that county is clearly Orwell’s way of emphasising that a rebirth is indeed taking place.¹¹⁰

Drawing heavily once again from his own experience, Orwell imbues the sections detailing Dorothy’s hop-picking adventure with a sense of colour, vivacity and, freedom that is deliberately omitted from Chapter One. One senses within such descriptions Orwell’s own admiration for the authenticity of working-class life:

In each lane of vines a family of sunburnt people were shredding the hops into sacking bins, and singing as they worked; and presently a hooter sounded and they knocked off to boil cans of tea over crackling fires of hop vines. Dorothy envied them greatly. How happy they looked, sitting round the fires with their cans of tea and their hunks of bread and bacon, in the smell of hops and wood smoke!¹¹¹

Before long, Dorothy is accepted by the working-class families, and experiences hop-picking first-hand, again, lyrically described by Orwell:

Looking back, afterwards, upon her interlude of hop-picking, it was always the afternoons that Dorothy remembered. Those long, laborious hours in the strong

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.90.

¹¹⁰ Carter, p.102.

¹¹¹ Orwell, *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, p.105.

sunlight, in the sound of forty voices singing, in the smell of hops and wood smoke, had a quality peculiar and unforgettable. As the afternoon wore on you grew almost too tired.¹¹²

In his descriptions of this community, one must notice the emphasis upon the difficulty of the work: Orwell is keen to show that it was not the hardness of Dorothy's previous life that was at issue, but rather the manner of her existence. In contrast with the citizens of Knype Hill, the hop-pickers constitute an authentic community, albeit a rather romanticised one, in which outsiders are not judged and controlled but, rather, accepted. Orwell's emphasis on social activities in these two descriptions – singing, communal working, cooking and drinking – is testament to this spirit of acceptance, but also a means of drawing a marked contrast with the self-absorbed patrons of the Olde Tea Shoppe and the dismal congregations at St. Athelstan's. As we saw in *Burmese Days*, Orwell often utilises such meeting places in order to ironically underscore the genuine lack of community prevalent in middle-class society. And, by underlining the difference, he presents the reader with a positive alternative to the patterns of *bad faith* prevalent in Knype Hill. For, even in their designated roles as 'hop-pickers', the colour and vivacity of these characters ensures that they outstrip the boundaries of their employer's definitions. As such, this section supports Jenni Calder's assertion that 'Orwell found a more decent, vital and attractive kind of humanity amongst working class people than he ever did amongst the class to which he belonged'.¹¹³ The sense of freedom which prevails is further enhanced through the note that hop-picking families use the experience as a summer holiday. In a narratorial aside, Orwell concludes that the 'natural effect' of such a life was that it 'narrowed the range of your consciousness to the passing minute'.¹¹⁴ Unlike the Self in *bad faith*, determined wholly by a pre-existing

¹¹² Ibid., p.113.

¹¹³ Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience*, p.43.

¹¹⁴ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, p.121.

role created by others, this working-class existence affords an authentic freedom in allowing Dorothy to live ‘for the moment’; the Sartrean ideal of a nothingness between oneself and one’s past is thereby upheld. Indeed, it is notable that none of her acquaintances whilst tramping probe her regarding her background, suggesting that such details are unimportant to them. As Ellen, amnesia has not only allowed her to shake off the designations surrounding her previous life, but offered an *authentic* alternative through the communities of the working class.

Dorothy’s journey into the underclasses from a position of relative privilege mirrors that undertaken by Orwell and, in these descriptions, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to suggest that some of the author’s own slightly romanticised sentiments regarding the working-class – sentiments that would be revisited in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – are evident. And yet, as the narrative separates Dorothy from her friends, leaving her to return to London alone, Orwell is honest in depicting the hardships of life outside the middle classes. In an infamous section taking place following her failure to secure lodgings for the night, Orwell attempts to mimic the ‘nighttown’ scene from Joyce’s *Ulysses* by describing Dorothy’s experience sleeping rough in Trafalgar Square, almost wholly through play-script. Whilst Orwell himself described it as the only part of the book with which he was ‘pleased’, it is a scene that has divided commentators.¹¹⁵ The majority of critics have denigrated the section as a poor quality pastiche.¹¹⁶ Yet, perhaps it is the brazenness of Orwell’s theft from Joyce which is the source of much of this vitriol, for the section is a clever and stylistically effective interlude. Written as an attempt to create polyphony, a number of conversations are allowed to overlap as the cold night draws on, forcing the reader to experience what Roger Fowler aptly calls ‘a

¹¹⁵ Orwell, ‘Letter to Brenda Salkeld’, in *The Complete Works*, x, 382-84 (p.382).

¹¹⁶ Despite his broad defence of the book, even Crick describes the Trafalgar Square scene as ‘astoundingly awful’. See Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.166.

senseless cacophony', which, for Dorothy, is 'a symbol of her alienation'.¹¹⁷ The resulting text combines satire, bathos and comedy to often nightmarish effect:

DOROTHY Oh, this cold, this cold!

SNOUTER Well, I don't do no more _____ starries this side of Christmas. I'll 'ave my kip tomorrow if I 'ave to cut it out of their bowels.

NOSY WATSON Detective, is he? Smith of the Flying Squad! Flying Judas more likely! All they can bloody do – copping the old offenders what no beak won't give a fair chance to.

GINGER Well, I'm off for the fiddle-de-dee. 'Oo's got a couple of clods for the water?

MRS MCELLIGOT (waking) Oh dear, oh dear! If my back ain't fair broke! Oh holy Jesus, if dis bench don't catch you across de kidneys! An 'dere was me dreamin' I was warm in kip wid a nice cup o' tea an' two o' buttered toast waitin' by me bedside. Well, dere does me lask wink o' sleep till I gets into Lambeth public lib'ry tomorrow.

DADDY (his head emerging from within his overcoat like a tortoise's from within its shell) Wassat you said, boy? Paying money for water! How long've you bin on the road, you ignorant young scut? Money for bloody water? Bum it, boy, bum it!¹¹⁸

Far from the embarrassment that Crick claims it to be, the Trafalgar Square scene is a splendid demonstration of Orwell's increasing ability to mix humour and pathos in a broad, collage of homeless life, and one which expands upon the impressionistic descriptions of *Down and Out*.¹¹⁹ Before long, a sense of camaraderie is once again emphasised as the destitute characters form themselves into 'a monstrous shapeless clot' in order to keep warm.¹²⁰ As the scene continues, Orwell's intention that this should be

¹¹⁷ Fowler, p.118.

¹¹⁸ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, p.155-56. It is interesting to note how a number of characters from Orwell's early tramping articles and experiences feature in this section: 'Daddy' ('The Spike'), 'Snouter' ('Clink') and Deafie (who features in Orwell's 'Hop Picking Diary') all make an appearance. Rather than the result of a lack of imagination, it seems likely that Orwell is, once again, drawing heavily from first-hand experience.

¹¹⁹ Edouard Roditti, a novelist and poet who met Orwell through their work at the *Adelphi*, has claimed that, during a walk through London, Orwell stopped for a long time to listen to the conversations in Trafalgar Square. 'And later, when I read his book, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, it was like having these conversations played back to me, as if he had recorded them and included them in the novel.' See *Remembering Orwell*, p.49.

¹²⁰ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, p.174.

Dorothy's 'dark night of the soul' becomes apparent in a surreal and disturbing turn, described through the use of stage directions:

There is a rolling sound, as of thunder, and the landscape changes. Dorothy's feet are very cold. Monstrous winged shapes of Demons and Archdemons are dimly visible, moving to and fro. Something, beak or claw, closes upon Dorothy's shoulder, reminding her that her feet and hands are aching with cold.¹²¹

Rather than presaging a re-union with God, however, this scene signifies an impending return to middle-class civility. Very soon, the characters have finally fallen asleep, allowing Orwell to foreshadow another modification to Dorothy's circumstances. After a short interlude, in which the reader is informed that she spent another ten nights living in this fashion, eventually spending a night in the cells, Orwell shifts the narrative temporarily to Knype Hill. Unable to accept the return of Dorothy in the face of the scandal caused by Mrs Semprill's rumours of an elopement, the Rector arranges for his wealthy cousin – the unlikely character of Sir Thomas, described memorably, courtesy of his overgrown moustaches, as a 'well-meaning but exceptionally brainless prawn' – to contact her and find her a position.¹²² This third, and final, section of the book is where Orwell's project appears to go furthest awry.

Having now regained her memory, thanks in part to several lowbrow newspapers featuring her photograph and details of the scandal, Dorothy's cousin finds her a position teaching in a poor quality girls' school in West London. Not only is this section a chance for Orwell to rail against the swindling nature of such establishments (drawing upon his own experiences teaching in Hayes), it once again offers an opportunity for him to indulge in Dickensian characterisation. Mrs Creevy, the cruel and vindictive headmistress, is portrayed in a manner which strongly echoes that of Wackford Squeers. From her matter-of-fact explanations of the school's subterfuge, to

¹²¹ Ibid., p.176.

¹²² Ibid., p.191.

her persecution of the children whose parents are ‘bad payers’, and her comical attempts to poach children from other schools, almost the entire roster of Squeers’ character traits is present. But this section also marks Dorothy’s return into the mean-spirited world of middle-class respectability and *bad-faith*. After initially finding a sense of freedom through creativity in her role as schoolteacher, Dorothy very soon falls foul of both Mrs Creevy and several sets of parents for not following the rigid and stultifying curriculum they expect. Tellingly, the situation comes to a head during a lesson on *Macbeth*, when Dorothy teaches the children about the processes of childbirth in reference to Macduff. At this stage in the narrative, the children, previously schooled on a diet of repetitive copying and handwriting, like Dorothy have undergone a kind of rebirth: no longer automata, they have been allowed to nurture their creativity through Dorothy’s progressive teaching methods. However, the discovery that they have been taught about the principles of reproduction reveals the extent to which Dorothy has broken with both Mrs Creevy’s protocols and the parents’ wishes. In a clear instance of Orwellian irony, there is uproar from these middle-class characters, who insist that their children be taught via the automatic rote methods of before. As with Dorothy, a freedom which was once attained, appears in danger of slipping away. The pupils, no longer allowed the self-expression of creative activities, return to their roles as passive schoolchildren copying from a board, yet with added behavioural difficulties. Dorothy is now in danger of falling back into the same pattern of *bad faith*, only this time inhabiting the role defined by Mrs Creevy – that of unthinking schoolteacher. It is here that one can detect a certain ambivalence on the part of Orwell. Whilst meditating upon her loss of religious belief, Dorothy starts to defend the *bad faith* action of going to church on the grounds that it is ‘better to follow in the ancient ways, than to drift in rootless freedom’.¹²³ At this stage in the narrative, it would appear that Orwell is pulling away

¹²³ Ibid., p.249.

from the Sartrean ideal of free *authenticity* exhibited by the working-class characters in the novel, and towards the safer, less onerous ideals of *bad faith* associated with his middle class creations. In this way, and despite its flaws, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, remains a critical text in exemplifying the progressive and conservative tensions at work in the mind of Orwell as both a man and an author. Our suspicions that it will be the conservative impulse which finally dominates are piqued when we are informed that, whilst unhappy with the situation, Dorothy fully intends to continue in her role, thereby returning to a variation of the *bad faith* in which she started the narrative. Her intentions are soon thwarted, however, when Mrs Creevy suddenly fires her from her position. In what is certainly the novel's most wildly improbable scene, Dorothy meets Mr Warburton as she leaves the school, who tells her that the rumours of Mrs Semprill have been discredited and that her father would like her to return to Knype Hill. Before long, Warburton has proposed to Dorothy and offered her an alternative to the *inauthentic* existence that awaits her return to the rectory. Although momentarily tempted by the offer, Orwell disappoints us with her refusal, which seems to allow a return to her previous life of *bad faith*. And yet, a change has taken place. For now it is Dorothy's own decision to undertake her former duties. As she explains her choice to Mr Warburton, it is evident that she no longer will allow the past to determine her present self:

She had been about to tell him how she had had to beg for her food; how she had slept in the streets; how she had been arrested for begging and spent a night in the police cells; how Mrs Creevy had nagged at her and starved her [...] Such things as these, she perceived, are of no real importance; they are mere irrelevant accidents, not essentially different from catching a cold in the head or having to wait two hours at a railway junction. They are disagreeable, but they do not matter. The truism that all real happenings are in the mind struck her more forcibly than ever before.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.272.

Despite her return to the rectory, Dorothy has embraced the contingency of the *for-itself* in acknowledging the nothingness between her and her past. In her subsequent admission that ‘I’ve lost my faith’, we see a disavowal of religious control from the ‘they’, and also the Other.¹²⁵ The role of ‘clergyman’s daughter’, formerly constructed by both her father and the parishioners, is to be reformed through her own hand, a project which leaves the reader somewhat uncertain of the extent of her liberation. In a manner suggesting his own reticence to embrace the contingency of complete personal freedom, Orwell expresses his contradictory thoughts in a narrative aside:

Where had she gone, that well-meaning, ridiculous girl who had prayed ecstatically in summer-scented fields and pricked her arm as a punishment for sacrilegious thoughts? And where is any of ourselves of even a year ago? And yet after all – and here lay the trouble – she was that same girl. Beliefs change, thoughts change, but there is some inner part of the soul that does not change.¹²⁶

Indeed, in places, Orwell appears to move away from a championing of unbridled freedom and towards a more conservative resolution:

Perhaps it’s better – less selfish – to pretend one believes even when one doesn’t, than to say openly that one’s an unbeliever and perhaps help turn other people into unbelievers too.¹²⁷

Orwell’s reluctance to fully embrace the Sartrean ideal of freedom, an ideal that he himself had delineated as involving a repudiation of middle-class values, is most evident in the air of resigned melancholy which seems to hang over this concluding section. It could be, however, that the narrative seeks merely to reflect the uneasy onus that comes with freedom for, as Dorothy herself says, ‘The point is that the beliefs I had are gone, and I’ve nothing to put in their place.’¹²⁸ Mirroring the awakenings of

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.273.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.292.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.277.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.275.

Chapters One and Two, as well as the Macbeth scandal, the emptiness of Dorothy's previous existence is underlined in her conclusion that 'I've got to begin my life all over again'.¹²⁹ In a final narrative flourish, symptomatic of Orwell's reticence to fully embrace Sartrean freedom, the limited scale of Dorothy's transformation is ironically shown through the admission that she would now 'kneel down on Miss Mayfill's right instead of on her left'.¹³⁰

In criticising Orwell's reluctance to embrace Sartrean *authenticity* at this stage of his literary career, we must be mindful of a possible alternative reading of the text. Throughout the novel, Dorothy's sexuality provides an intriguing subplot to the story, and perhaps offers the motivation for her character that so many commentators struggle to identify. Through the introduction of Warburton, Orwell not only presents the reader with an alternative to the pattern of *bad faith*, but raises the issue of sexual freedom. After a previous attempted rape (a detail that Orwell was forced to remove from the original transcript), Dorothy is understandably wary when she realises that Warburton has invited her to his house on the pretext of seducing her. In order to avoid dealing with his advances directly, she takes refuge in thoughts of her role, and the church procession for which she has to make costumes:

The spectre of the unmade jackboots stalked back into Dorothy's mind. She would, she suddenly decided, make two jackboots tonight instead of only one, as a penance for the hour she had wasted. She was just beginning to make a mental sketch of the way she would cut out the pieces of brown paper for the insteps, when she noticed that Mr Warburton had halted behind her chair.¹³¹

Although Dorothy's continued friendship with this man is, perhaps, verging on the improbable, her attempt to mentally flee in the face of such a seduction is

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p.286.

¹³¹ Ibid., p.76.

psychologically and existentially plausible. Sartre himself gives a similar example of a young woman's act of *bad faith* when her male friend decides to take her by the hand:

This act of her companion risks changing the situation by calling for an immediate decision. To leave the hand there is to consent in herself to flirt, to engage herself. To withdraw it is to break the troubled and unstable harmony which gives the hour its charm. The aim is to postpone the moment of decision as long as possible. We know what happens next; the young woman leaves her hand there, but she does not notice that she is leaving it. She does not notice because it happens by chance that she is at this moment all intellect [...] the hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion – neither consenting nor resisting – a thing.¹³²

Just like Sartre's young woman, Dorothy seeks to flee from the situation – from the necessity to make a conscious decision in the face of Warburton's seduction – by becoming 'all intellect'. Whilst it has become standard practice to denigrate *A Clergyman's Daughter* as something of a literary disaster, within sections such as this, one can find not only pockets of psychological depth and imagination, but a writing that is, as we shall see, brave for its time. As a structured whole, the novel fails, but to claim, as do Stansky and Abrahams, that at this time, Orwell's 'power of imagination was deficient', is to follow the notices rather than the text: Orwell was rarely as bold, imaginative and experimental as in *A Clergyman's Daughter*.¹³³ Fortunately, and unlike the woman in *Being and Nothingness*, Dorothy does resist Warburton when he finally takes hold of her. And yet her motivations are intriguing. Her submission to God and the rector through her role as 'clergyman's daughter', of course, offers her the pretext to reject the idea of pre-marital sex in an unthinking act of *bad faith*. And yet, Orwell introduces a further layer of psychological depth to her decision. After Warburton's final attempt at seduction on her way to the front gate, Dorothy's wariness of men is explained in great detail:

And unfortunately this was no more than the literal truth; she really could not bear it. To be kissed or fondled by a man – to feel heavy male arms around her and thick

¹³² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp.55-56.

¹³³ Peter Stansky & William Abrahams, *Orwell: The Transformation* (London: Constable, 1979), p.48.

male lips bearing down upon her own – was terrifying and repulsive to her. Even in memory or imagination it made her wince. It was her especial secret, the especial, incurable disability that she carried through her life.¹³⁴

It is clear that Dorothy's rejection of Warburton is based not simply upon his personal attributes. Indeed, Orwell explains that Dorothy views men in general as 'dreadful and a little disgusting'.¹³⁵ The account takes an almost Freudian turn when it is revealed that, as a child, she had witnessed her parents having sex, and that, in her earlier years, 'she had been frightened by some old steel engravings of nymphs pursued by satyrs.'¹³⁶ Her fear of sex with men is further underlined when the reader is told of a curate whom she would have agreed to marry if it had not been for 'all that'. Dorothy's rejection of Warburton and the young curate is generally taken as evidence that she is, to use an unpleasant word from the era, frigid. But let us look once again at the language used to describe her inner self. Orwell tells us that she had an 'especial secret', that she found men 'repulsive' and that the curate had 'never known why' she rejected him and that it was 'impossible to tell'. The 'secret' itself is said to be an 'incurable disability' that she carried through life. At the end of the novel, when Warburton proposes marriage to her, Dorothy exclaims:

'But I can't, I can't! exclaimed Dorothy. 'You know I can't! I'm not – like that. I thought you always knew. I shan't ever marry.'¹³⁷

Given the moral atmosphere of the 1930s, it seems likely that Dorothy's 'affliction' is not so much that she is 'frigid' as that she is homosexual. If we accept this interpretation, and it is my suggestion that the textual evidence, coupled with Orwell's own description of the work as 'experimental' points us towards doing so, then A

¹³⁴ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, p.80.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.81.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p.82.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.279.

Clergyman's Daughter must be viewed not as a complete failure, but as a bold, flawed work of existential and psychological exploration. Dorothy's struggle to regain her own sense of Self in a world that criminalises homosexuality, at once gives us a motivation for her *bad faith* that is lacking from so many other interpretations. Her eventual compromise, in which she willingly returns to her previous inauthentic lifestyle is not only typically Orwellian in signalling but a small victory for the protagonist, but perhaps an admission that, for the majority, the Self is a construct of the values of others, and ergo of society as a whole. It may be objected at this juncture that Orwell's attitude towards homosexuality was anything but progressive. As we discuss in Chapter Three, he habitually used words such as 'pansy' to refer to the poets of the Auden Circle, and, as late as 1944, refers to homosexuality as a 'vice' and 'perversion' in his essay 'Benefit of Clergy'.¹³⁸ But this, as is so often the case, risks oversimplifying the man: as we shall see, Orwell's use of offensive language did not entail that he had any genuine feelings of animosity towards different groups. Indeed, given the progressive, socialist ideas that permeated so much of his outlook, the trait of homophobia would be somewhat incongruous. We must therefore consider the possibility that *A Clergyman's Daughter* is a kind of tragedy, one that demonstrates how adopting a role in *bad faith* was an often ineluctable choice in a world where homosexuality was criminalised. The final detail of the novel, in which Dorothy continues her costume making 'in the penetrating smell of the glue pot', serves to emphasise the broadest version of this thesis, depicting through metaphor how ideals of authenticity become subservient to a sometimes necessary, and eventually anaesthetising, absorption in the world.¹³⁹ Perhaps Dorothy's return to a species of *bad faith* is a sign of Orwell's conservatism. Given the climate of the time, it may also be the case that pragmatic considerations prevailed.

¹³⁸ Orwell, 'Benefit of Clergy', in *The Complete Works*, XVI, 233-41 (p.235).

¹³⁹ Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, p.297.

Chapter 3

A Sort of Caricature

In 1940, Orwell published 'Boys' Weeklies', the first of his many essays to explore the political aspects of popular culture. Appearing both in the anthology of essays *Inside the Whale* and, in abridged form, in Cyril Connolly's magazine 'Horizon', it is a piece that is of interest not simply as a seminal work in what would now be referred to as 'cultural studies', but because it attributes the use of crude social and racial stereotypes to an insidious conservatism pervasive within children's comic books. It therefore allows the careful reader to identify a locus at which Orwell's existential conception of others meets his socialism. For Orwell, weekly papers such as 'Gem' and 'Magnet', both of which were to publish their final issues within a year of his essay, assume through their portrayals 'not only that foreigners are comics who are put there for us to laugh at, but that they can be classified in much the same way as insects'.¹ In an amusingly ironic step, Orwell himself subsequently tries to classify the typical methods by which different races are portrayed in these comics:

FRENCHMAN: Excitable. wears beard, gesticulates wildly.

SPANIARD, MEXICAN etc.: Sinister, treacherous.

ARAB, AFGHAN etc.: Sinister, treacherous.

CHINESE: Sinister, treacherous. Wears pigtails.

ITALIAN: Excitable. Grinds barrel-organ or carries stiletto.

SWEDE, DANE etc.: Kind-hearted, stupid.

NEGRO: Comic, very faithful.²

¹ Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies', in *The Complete Works*, XII, 57-79 (p.66).

² Ibid.

To make matters worse, he observes, the working class only enter into the stories ‘as comics or semi-villains (race-course touts etc.)’.³ From these observations, Orwell draws the conclusion that there is a pernicious conservatism at work within such comic papers, and ends his essay postulating whether a socialist equivalent would be possible. The seeming progressiveness of Orwell’s thought is of some note here: at the beginning of World War Two, the objectification of other races, although not as widespread as during the previous conflict, was nevertheless ingrained within British culture through the use of derogatory expressions and, in the case of the boys’ weekly papers, imagery. And yet, as we shall see, as late as 1945 Orwell himself regularly indulged in the very kind of stereotyping he identifies in this essay, a practice which gave parts of his own work the same hint of conservatism. It is a strain of Orwell’s thinking that has often been commented upon, but rarely dissected. In this section, we shall attempt to uncover the motivation behind this tendency of thought and, in doing so, explain how Orwell sought, with mixed results, to modify both his ideas and portrayals of other people in the years leading up to and including World War II. We shall explore how Orwell’s journey to the North investigating working-class conditions, together with his time fighting in the Spanish Civil War, were formative periods which went some way to remedying his own conservative tendency towards stereotyping. By subsequently analysing his depiction of others from the perspective of first Martin Heidegger, and then Jean-Paul Sartre, we shall endeavour to identify Orwell’s widely acknowledged political ‘turning’ of the years 1936 and 1937 as part of a much more extended process grounded in a phenomenological rather than strictly political epiphany.

Although generally considered by both himself and his principal biographers, Crick and Davison, to be one of his worst novels, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, published

³ Ibid.

one year after *A Clergyman's Daughter* in 1936, is of interest insofar as it exemplifies Orwell's tendency to objectify others, reducing them to crude, and often offensive, stereotypes. Where *A Clergyman's Daughter* is, as we have seen, a novel of experimentation, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, despite several well-written humorous scenes, is fully deserving of Orwell's description of 'potboiler'. It was to be the last of his early attempts at fiction, and its publication coincided with his seminal journey to the North of England researching material for *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The narrative follows Gordon Comstock, a disillusioned advertising executive, as he throws up his job and embarks upon life as a struggling poet. In Comstock's rejection of capitalism and the 'Money God', we see once again the familiar theme of *Dasein* in the inexorable thrall of the 'they': through his very attempt to escape the world of bourgeois values and ideals, Comstock affirms their hegemony over his existence. Aside from a painfully well-written sequence in which Gordon wastes a one-off royalty cheque on a very public drinking binge, the novel's main point of interest for our present study is in its portrayal of others. Soon after leaving his respectable job in advertising, Comstock secures a position working in a bookshop in a somewhat ridiculous renunciation of his previous existence as a servant of raw capitalism. And it is here, once again, that Orwell is able to draw upon his own experiences for the purposes of fiction, having himself worked in a Hampstead bookshop, 'Booklovers' Corner', from 1934-5 when writing the novel. As well as commenting extensively on this experience through the mouthpiece of Gordon Comstock, Orwell put his observations into an essay, 'Bookshop Memories', printed in *Fortnightly* the very same year that the novel was published. What is striking when comparing Orwell's fictional and non-fictional descriptions of life as a bookseller is the similarity between both texts. In each account, the customers of the bookshop are described through offensively crude stereotypes, their existence and value purportedly

encapsulated in their physical attributes, as in this excerpt from *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*:

Fruity-face overwhelmed him with a smile, but curry-face decided to treat the question as an impertinence [...] Curry-face had the voice of a drill-sergeant. She was no doubt a colonel's wife, or widow. The Nancy, still deep in the big book on the Russian ballet, edged delicately away [...] Another customer arrived, for the library. An ugly girl of twenty, hatless, in a white overall, with a sallow, blithering, honest face and powerful spectacles that distorted her eyes.⁴

If one were to be charitable, as Roger Fowler has been, one might describe these representations as 'grotesques in the Dickens tradition'.⁵ In her recent study, Loraine Saunders has even argued that these offensive descriptions, redolent of both sexism and homophobia, are written using the technique of 'free indirect thought', a method which, liberated from the obstruction of attributive tags, represents not the thoughts of the narrator, but directly those of the protagonist.⁶ Given such a reading, the portrayal of characters in this way might demonstrate how intersubjectivity through the constraints of a commercial transaction leads us to focus upon others more as objects than as individuals. It is an interpretation that offers the novel some much-needed substance. However, when one compares the descriptions with the contemporary essay, 'Bookshop Memories', the similarity is such as to suggest that, in both cases, the thought processes are, in actual fact, those of Orwell at the time:

First edition snobs were much commoner than lovers of literature, but oriental students haggling over cheap textbooks were commoner still, and vague-minded women looking for birthday presents for their nephews were commonest of all [...] Apart from these there are two well-known types of pest by whom every second-hand bookshop is haunted. One is the decayed person smelling of old breadcrusts who comes in every day, sometimes several times a day, and tries to sell you worthless books. The other is the person who orders large quantities of books for which he has not the smallest intention of paying [...] In a town like London there are always plenty of not quite certifiable lunatics walking the streets, and they tend to gravitate towards bookshops.⁷

⁴ Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.17.

⁵ Fowler, p.142.

⁶ See Saunders, pp.63-69.

⁷ Orwell, 'Bookshop Memories', in *The Complete Works*, X, 510-13 (pp.510-11).

Despite this clearly being a light-hearted, whimsical account written in a very different era, the inclusion of such generalisations focused upon women, ‘orientals’, and the mentally ill is troubling for any admirer of Orwell’s values and politics, and bears uncomfortable comparison to the tendencies that he later criticised in the ‘Boys’ Weeklies’ essay. Given the intersection between experience and non-fiction in Orwell’s work which, as we see both here and in our previous examples, is marked to the point of being a characteristic, we must look further to both biographical and literary details in order to make sense of this impulse. By analysing first *The Road to Wigan Pier* and, in the following section, *Homage to Catalonia*, we shall attempt to explain not just Orwell’s tendency towards objectifying others, but also his efforts to turn from this attitude through a commitment to first-hand experience over abstracted depictions.

Towards the end of 1935, Orwell’s publisher, Victor Gollancz, a committed social reformer, devised a plan for the publication of an educational book detailing the living conditions of working class families in the North of England. He decided to offer the commission for this, together with a generous advance, to Orwell based upon his good opinion of the two – soon to be three – books of his that he had already published.⁸ At about this time, Gollancz was also planning to launch the Left Book Club, along with John Strachey and Stafford Cripps, who was at the time a Labour member of parliament. As a further incentive to Orwell, Gollancz suggested that any book resulting from his subsequent investigative trip to the North might also be selected for the Club, thereby guaranteeing sales in the tens of thousands, albeit at a concessionary price.⁹

⁸ The publication of *Burmese Days* in England was delayed by Gollancz for fear that Orwell’s liberal use of former acquaintances as the basis of its characters would bring the threat of litigation; its publication by Harper & Brothers in the USA in 1934 went some way to allay Gollancz’s fears, although the version eventually published in England was still heavily bowdlerised, with Orwell forced to change many of the names.

⁹ See Stansky and Abrahams, *Orwell: The Transformation*, p.123.

Orwell agreed to the proposal and, having given up his job at ‘Booklovers’ Corner’, left London on January 30th 1936 on a tour of the industrial North, which was to last until April 2nd. During his time in the North, Orwell kept an extensive diary outlining his observations, and was to use this as the basis of Part One of the resulting book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Written between April and December 1936, it was published simultaneously on March 8 1937 in both Left Book Club and higher-priced trade editions. According to Peter Davison, by November 1939, 47,079 copies of the book had been printed, over 90% of which were through the Left Book Club.¹⁰ On its publication, it caused considerable controversy – and continues to do so. Split into two sections, the first part combines impressionistic, descriptive writing, outlining Orwell’s experience of living among working class people of the North, with a slew of facts and figures explaining the cost of living for such families. However, it is Part Two of the book that proved to be the most controversial, and it is this to which we shall first turn our attention.

Where the first section of *Wigan Pier* recalls both *Down and Out* and Orwell’s earliest essays through its keen descriptions of squalor, the second part of the book is formed almost entirely of a polemical essay, through which Orwell sets out the challenges facing socialism as it seeks to widen its appeal. Whilst maintaining that socialism is the only solution to the social problems outlined in the earlier part of the book, Orwell argues that it is the movement itself, or rather, the way that it is presented, that most ‘ordinary’ people find repellent. For Orwell, there are three aspects to this repugnance: socialism’s apparent rejection of tradition and infatuation with the machine; the denigration of the lower middle-classes and exaltation of the working class; and the ‘crankishness’ of the average proponent of the movement. Rather

¹⁰ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.xiii.

unsurprisingly, it is through the last two of these arguments that Orwell shocked and outraged a number of people on the Left. One of the chief sources of controversy was the assertion that, in his own experience, the reason why the European bourgeois cannot view the ‘working man’ as his equal, is that the middle classes are brought up to believe that ‘the lower classes smell’.¹¹ Sensing the level of outrage that this and similar statements were likely to cause, quite correctly as it emerged, Gollancz wrote his own introduction to the Left Book Club edition of *Wigan Pier*, publically taking Orwell to task in an attempt to ameliorate the expected repercussions of his assertions. Nevertheless, a feeling of indignation persisted, particularly among communist readers. The most vitriolic response to Orwell’s claims came from Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, reviewing the book in the *Daily Worker*:

I gather that the chief thing that worries Mr Orwell is the “smell” of the working class, for smells seem to occupy the major portion of the book. [...] One thing I am certain of, and it is this – if Mr Orwell could only hear what the Left Book circles will say about his book, then he would make a resolution never to write again on any subject that he does not understand.¹²

Not only does this review express the sense of outrage among some members of the Left against what Orwell had written, but it also betrays how Pollitt, along with many other commentators, had failed to read the text carefully: in a letter to Gollancz from August of that year, Orwell made clear that he stated that ‘middle class people are brought up to believe that the working classes “smell”, which is simply a matter of observable fact’.¹³ Gollancz duly passed Orwell’s rebuttal onto the Communist Party’s offices in London, with whom he had several contacts, and the ‘filthy’ attacks

¹¹ Ibid., p.119.

¹² *The Daily Worker*, 17 March 1937, quoted in Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.229.

¹³ Orwell, ‘Letter to Victor Gollancz’, in *The Complete Works*, XI, 72-73 (p.72).

stopped.¹⁴ And yet, this example is by no means an isolated one: throughout the second part of *Wigan Pier* Orwell indulges in descriptions of others which, even today, continue to cause deep offence. He describes how, as a boy, ‘common’ people seemed ‘almost sub-human’.¹⁵ He laments the fact that ‘Socialism, in the form in which it is now presented, appeals chiefly to unsatisfactory or even inhuman types’.¹⁶ And, perhaps most notorious of all, he sets out a list of the ‘cranks’ to whom socialism is attractive and who, accordingly, ‘turn off’ the ordinary man:

One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words ‘Socialism’ and ‘Communism’ draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist and feminist in England.¹⁷

This is followed up with an anecdote of two ‘chubby’, ‘short’ and ‘obscenely bald’ men wearing khaki shorts who had the misfortune to get on Orwell’s bus and who, conspiratorially, are labelled as ‘Socialists’ by the man sitting next to him.¹⁸ Now, of course, there is much more at work in these examples than simple prejudice. Orwell was clearly attempting to present his case – that the face of Socialism at the time was unattractive to ordinary people – in the strongest way possible. Indeed, it is clear that Part Two of the book is also fuelled by Orwell’s personal delight at shocking his readership in this way, a task given purpose by his self-appointed role as ‘a diagnostician of the Left’s ills’.¹⁹ However, what is rarely noticed is the connection between this polemical act of diagnosis and the earlier autobiographical section of the book. For, rather than comprising two separate elements, it is the case that the entirety of this part of the book belongs, in some sense, to the autobiographical: Orwell is

¹⁴ Ibid., p.74.

¹⁵ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.116.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.169.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.161.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.161-62

¹⁹ Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p.5. Writing in 1943, Orwell memorably stated that ‘it is a pamphleteer’s duty to attack the Right, but not to flatter the Left.’ ‘Who Are the War Criminals? Review of “The Trial of Mussolini” by “Cassius”’, in *The Complete Works*, xv, 292-97 (p.296).

presenting a ‘devil’s advocate’ argument that is almost phenomenological in the way that it operates from within the restricted viewpoint of a member of the upper-middle class. By using his own prejudices as typical of those of that class (and it is perhaps here, that Orwell’s argument is at its weakest), he is able to truthfully outline those aspects of socialism that he, and by implication his middle-class peers, find repugnant. His emphasis on the word ‘believe’ in the rebuttal of Pollitt is crucial here: he is not proposing that these insults have an external, objective truth, but rather that they are an honest statement of belief, with the implication of their irrationality. Patricia Rae has described Part One of the text as representing Orwell’s ‘Heart of Darkness’, in its ‘honest portrait of a fieldworker’s responses’.²⁰ And yet, a closer analysis of this often neglected second part of the work indicates that it also operates from a subjective yet phenomenological perspective. Rae’s description can therefore rightly be applied to the entire text.

Around halfway through *Wigan Pier*, Orwell describes how he went to the industrial North because he ‘wanted to see what mass-unemployment is like at its worst, partly in order to see the most typical section of the English working class at close quarters’.²¹ This much is true, yet it is also the case, as we shall see, that his trip afforded him another opportunity to confront his own worst prejudices, and that the resulting book was, at least in part, a method of very publicly challenging the conservatism that had occluded his outlook since childhood. When Orwell informs his reader that ‘to get rid of class distinctions you have got to start by understanding how one class appears though the eyes of another’, it is a clear signal that he intends to lay bare his own prejudices as the exemplar material.²² This aspect of the text is rarely

²⁰ Patricia Rae, ‘Orwell’s Heart of Darkness: The road to Wigan pier as Modernist Anthropology’, in *Prose Studies*, 1999, 22:1, 71-102, (p.74).

²¹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.113.

²² *Ibid.*, p.122.

commented upon yet, without acknowledging it, one is unable to account for not only the otherwise incongruous autobiography at the beginning of Part Two, but also the bigotries with which one is presented. In this sense, *Wigan Pier* is brutal in its authorial honesty: Orwell presents to the reader the very prejudices with which he struggles because these are precisely the obstacles that socialism must overcome if it is to have mass appeal for the middle classes. As Dwight MacDonald, the former editor of *Partisan Review* – for which Orwell contributed a regular ‘London Letter’ – perceptively noted, this approach differed from most writers’ tendency to ‘exclude their own reactions, because of a mistaken idea of scientific objectivity’.²³ However, it was a methodology that seemed to be lost on Gollancz who, in his palliative foreword asserted that Orwell’s ‘emotional socialism must become scientific socialism’.²⁴ For Orwell, in a very Sartrean as opposed to ‘scientific’ manner, the objectivity of his text stemmed precisely from the truth of these subjective feelings: the observations and assertions were a faithful account of phenomena as perceived by him. Indeed, in his celebrated essay, ‘The Prevention of Literature’, written much later in 1946, Orwell discusses the feelings of the writer, ‘which from his point of view are facts’.²⁵ It is for this reason, as the historian Robert Pearce has observed, that the second part of *Wigan Pier* can be said to possess perhaps an even greater verisimilitude than the heavily embroidered first section.²⁶ Understanding this involves a reversal of the usual approach to the text, which

²³ Dwight MacDonald, ‘Trotsky, Orwell and Socialism’, in *Discriminations, Essays and Afterthoughts 1938-1974* (New York: Grossman, 1974), pp.330-44 (p.336). Orwell and Macdonald corresponded regularly, with the latter even sending Orwell a large pair of sturdy shoes when he was unable to find any of a correct size in England. According to David Costello, the two men were drawn to each other by ‘their underlying moral compass’. David R. Costello, “My Kind of Guy”: George Orwell and Dwight Macdonald’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), 79-94 (p.93).

²⁴ Victor Gollancz, foreword to the Left Book Club edition of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in Myers, *A Reader’s Guide to George Orwell*, pp.91-99 (p.98).

²⁵ Orwell, ‘The Prevention of Literature’, in *The Complete Works*, xvii, 369-81 (p.375).

²⁶ See Robert Pearce, ‘Revisiting Orwell’s *Wigan Pier*’, *History*, 82 (1997), 410-428. In this convincing account of the text’s status as a primary historical source, Pearce deftly illustrates how Orwell polemicalizes Part One of *Wigan Pier* through skilful omission, exaggeration and the presence of composite rather than ‘real’ characters. For Pearce, Orwell’s ‘*Wigan Pier Diary*’, to be found in Volume X of Davison’s ‘*Collected Works*’ (see reference 66 below) is a far more reliable source, with

treats Part One as a reliable historical document and Part Two as a largely embarrassing tirade. Indeed, where the obvious biographical sections of Part Two have been drawn from extensively by Orwell's commentators in the years since his death, little except partisanship has been expressed concerning the rest of the section: the assertions contained within are either a scandalous display of snobbery and elitism, or a brave attempt to say what so many were afraid to. It is my contention that each of these views, whilst possessing an aspect of truth, overlooks what is suggested by consideration of Part Two as a whole: that Orwell is offering himself up to the readership as a case study in prejudice. And given the similarities between his fictionalised and autobiographical accounts of others, we have good reason to believe that Orwell writes honestly about his feelings in this instance. Through the objectivity of subjective experience, therefore, Part Two of *Wigan Pier* becomes for us a confirmation of how Orwell perceived others – at least, in his less enlightened moments. Of course, Orwell himself did not get particularly far in accounting for these prejudices beyond the suggestion that they were indoctrinated through his privileged upbringing. Yet one must remember that his purpose in the text was merely to illustrate the kinds of barrier that socialism must pass in order to achieve mass appeal. Because of the decision to present his feelings in a similarly pseudo-phenomenological fashion elsewhere in his writing, we are afforded the opportunity of doing what was beyond the scope of *Wigan Pier*, namely, to evaluate the extent to which he was genuinely guilty of prejudice and, more importantly, to derive an underlying philosophy of alterity in his work. In order to do so, it will be necessary to look for a pattern of prejudice in the wider canon. A survey of criticism from the past thirty years indicates that the prejudices Orwell is most often accused of are anti-Semitism and homophobia. We shall therefore briefly examine each of these

entries often written on the day that events occurred rather than described a matter of weeks afterwards, as was the case with the final text.

charges in an attempt to understand his unique manner of relating to others, before returning to consider the legacy of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

There is evidence, particularly from his early writings, that Orwell may have been guilty of anti-Semitic feeling. As we noted previously, *Down and Out*, through its numerous stories and anecdotes, is notoriously full of references to 'the Jew'. In a posthumous review of the book in 1950, the critic Edmund Fuller descried 'the grossest, most flagrant anti-Semitism' that he had seen 'in years' running through the work.²⁷ Malcolm Muggeridge, a close friend of Orwell's in the 1940s, remarked casually in his diaries that it was 'interesting...that George should so have attracted Jews [to his funeral service] because he was at heart strongly anti-Semitic.'²⁸ Bernard Crick also refers to the 'mild and conventional' anti-Semitism evident in both *Down and Out* and Orwell's early wartime diaries.²⁹ In exploring Orwell's attempts to address these supposed prejudices, David Walton cites examples of shocking anti-Semitic sentiment in, among others, the essays 'Hop Picking' and 'Clink' together with the books *Down and Out* and *A Clergyman's Daughter*. For Walton, although Orwell attempted to understand his own prejudices, and encouraged others to do the same,

his efforts at self-awareness were not altogether successful. He understood nevertheless that while it is not always possible to change subjective feelings, one can ensure they do not 'contaminate' one's mental processes and prevent one acting decently.³⁰

²⁷ Myers, *Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, p.162.

²⁸ *Like It Was: The Diaries of Malcolm Muggeridge*, ed. John Bright-Holmes (London: Collins, 1981), p.376. In an interesting development of this idea, Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* (the *Portrait of the Anti-Semite* section of which was scathingly reviewed by Orwell in 1948) claims that, 'The sadistic attraction that the anti-Semite feels toward the Jew is so strong that it is not unusual to see one of these sworn enemies of Israel surround himself with Jewish friends.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p.34.

²⁹ Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.307.

³⁰ See David Walton, 'George Orwell and Anti-Semitism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 16 (1982), 19-34 (p.34).

That these prejudices ‘contaminated’ Orwell’s writing at times is certainly evident, but any examination of his anti-Semitism must take into consideration the most revealing first-hand account written by Tosco Fyvel.

Fyvel met Orwell through the publisher Frederic Warburg (both men were Jewish), and went on to work with him at the left-wing magazine ‘Tribune’ and as a co-editor of ‘Searchlight Books’. Prefacing his account by disagreeing with Muggeridge’s assertion that Orwell was ‘strongly anti-Semitic’, Fyvel nevertheless goes on to recall his disgust at the language used in Orwell’s 1945 *Tribune* article, ‘Revenge is Sour’, in which a Jewish soldier is described taking revenge on a captured SS officer:

What was Orwell’s point in referring to this particular man throughout the article simply as ‘the Jew’ – ‘the Jew’ did this, ‘the Jew’ did that, or worse, ‘the little Jew’ did the other? Did this naming not imply that the man was not a Viennese, as he had been born, not the American officer he had become, but simply ‘the Jew’ and so an alien.³¹

According to Fyvel, Orwell’s reaction at being taken to task ‘was one of sheer astonishment’ that anyone could be so sensitive as to be offended by this use of language.³² Quite tellingly, however, Fyvel asserts that Orwell took his point and ‘never again referred to anyone simply as “the Jew”’.³³ For Orwell, the problems faced by Jewish people in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth-century were, in Fyvel’s words, ‘an unreal world with which he had no concern’,³⁴ a sentiment that foreshadowed John Newsinger’s suggestion that Orwell ‘did not connect [anti-Semitism] with his own attitudes’.³⁵ Once again, one suspects that Orwell’s sheltered upper-middle-class upbringing was formative for this impulse. Kristin Bluemel has in

³¹ Fyvel, p.180.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p.182.

³⁵ John Newsinger, ‘Orwell, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Orwell*, pp.112-25 (p.114).

part echoed these assertions, arguing that, owing to his experiences in Burma, Orwell persistently prioritised the Indian over the Jewish question. She goes on to suggest that Orwell's intellectual error lay in equating race with colour: viewing non-white races as victims, led Orwell into assuming that the Jews in Palestine were equivalent to the white sahibs in India.³⁶ Unfortunately, Bluemel's overall argument is weakened by a series of misinterpretations. In referring to Orwell's two 1945 essays that deal with the subject, 'Antisemitism in Britain' and 'Notes on Nationalism', Orwell's words are somewhat stretched. Regarding the former essay, Bluemel claims that Orwell's stated aim 'is to encourage processes that will root out anti-Semitism', implying that he is embarking upon a crusade designed to somehow conceal his own prejudices.³⁷ In actual fact, Orwell's purpose is nothing of the sort. Indeed, insofar as his rather sprawling essay has any unified aim, it is to argue for a connection between anti-Semitism and 'nationalism' – a word that Orwell admits broadening to mean something closer to generalised bigotry – and to also gain some 'clues' as to the 'psychological roots' of anti-Semitism.³⁸ It is clear from one of her footnotes that Bluemel is against this:

While it is obvious that the risks of unofficial, as well as official, censorship are significant, I am critical of Orwell's position because it does not take into account what life would be like for Jews living in England during the Hitler age if individuals were encouraged to express their anti-Semitism in any circumstance for any reason in any way. Orwell's argument is also weakened by his utter lack of reference to Anglo-Jewish history; one need not look too far back to find the free anti-Semitic speech Orwell advocates, yet such free speech had never led to greater understanding of the so-called "Jewish problem."³⁹

Taken at face value, Bluemel's sentiments are admirable: a society in which every racist, homophobe and anti-Semite felt free to voice their feelings on the matter would be intolerable, and probably would not advance our understanding of the issue very

³⁶ For this interesting, if somewhat biased argument (the article contains extensive endnotes in which Bluemel partially retracts certain points in the face of further textual details), see Kristin Bluemel 'St. George and the Holocaust', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 14 (2003), 119-47.

³⁷ Ibid., p126.

³⁸ Orwell, 'Antisemitism in Britain' in *The Complete Works*, XVII, 64-70 (p.70).

³⁹ Bluemel, p.142.

much. But is this really what Orwell is advocating? Of course not. Indeed, rather than arguing for ‘free anti-Semitic speech’, Orwell advocates a very general sort of investigation into patterns of prejudice with particular reference paid to, what we have characterised as, the phenomenological aspect, that is, the nature of prejudice as experienced from ‘within’. It is worth quoting Orwell’s own words on this matter at length in order to clarify this point:

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. It is the fact that he can feel the emotional tug of such things, and yet see them dispassionately for what they are, that gives him his status as an intellectual. It will be seen, therefore, that the starting point for any investigation of anti-Semitism should not be, “Why does this obviously irrational belief appeal to other people?” but “Why does this obviously irrational belief appeal to me? What is there about it that I feel to be true?” If one asks this question one at least discovers one’s own rationalizations, and it may be possible to find out what lies beneath them. Anti-Semitism should be investigated – I will not say by anti-Semites, but at any rate by people who know that they are not immune to that kind of emotion.⁴⁰

The standout danger in this argument is Orwell’s call for investigation into what is felt to be ‘true’ about anti-Semitism, and perhaps this is the source of Bluemel’s apprehension. Yet it is palpable that Orwell does not mean any finding in this regard to go unchallenged – this much is clear from his reference to it as an ‘obviously irrational belief’. It is also apparent from this excerpt that Orwell is implying that he himself has previously felt the ‘emotional tug’ of anti-Semitism. Indeed, given the evidence of his early books and essays, it would be brazenly dishonest for him to deny such an impulse. In a review for the *Observer* the previous year, he made almost exactly the same call for a ‘cold-blooded investigation’, and once again alluded to his own failures in stating that ‘educated people are not in the least immune’ from anti-Semitism.⁴¹ Whatever one thinks about the naivety of this call for investigation by those who have themselves held prejudices at some point, it is a stretch to interpret it as an invite to ‘free anti-Semitic

⁴⁰ Orwell, ‘Antisemitism in Britain’, p.70.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.85.

speech'. Instead, what is apparent is that this is a call for individuals to confront their own patterns of prejudice (just as Orwell himself attempted to do in *Wigan Pier*) on the grounds that 'the general conspiracy of silence probably helps to exacerbate it'.⁴² Orwell's detached, almost sociological approach to the issue of anti-Semitism is apparent in many of his less formal writings. His 'wartime diary', for instance, discusses a 'Jew joke' that he heard at the Players' Theatre, observing that, whilst a 'mild one', it was still 'anti-Jew in tendency'.⁴³ And the purpose of his call for an investigation into anti-Semitism is made clear in one of his last 'As I Please' columns, where he comments:

Anti-Semitism is only one variant of the great modern disease of nationalism. We know very little about the real causes of nationalism, and we might conceivably be on the way towards curing it if we knew more.⁴⁴

The reactions of the manifold outraged reviewers of *Wigan Pier* mirror those of Bluemel in misunderstanding the nature of Orwell's project. Far from indulging in 'free anti-Semitic speech', the evidence, as we will now see, suggests that Orwell often sought to acknowledge and challenge such prejudices, particularly in the 1940s.

Despite the argument with Fyvel over the use of the word 'Jew', Orwell's wartime journalism is punctuated by a heightened sensitivity towards the risks of offensive racial epithets. As early as 1943, in a letter to Penguin Books concerning a reprint of *Burmese Days*, Orwell instructed that 'Chinaman' should be altered to 'Chinese' and 'Oriental' or 'native' to 'Burmese' on the grounds that nearly all 'orientals' now object to such terms and 'one does not want to hurt anyone's feelings'.⁴⁵ The use of the word 'orientals' in a letter asking for such terms to be replaced gives an

⁴² Orwell, 'Notes on Nationalism', in *The Complete Works*, xvii, 141-57 (p.152).

⁴³ Orwell, 'Wartime Diary', in *The Complete Works*, xiv, 114.

⁴⁴ Orwell, 'As I Please #79', in *The Complete Works*, xix, 91-93 (p.92).

⁴⁵ Orwell, 'Letter to Production Department, Penguin Books', in *The Complete Works*, xv, 338.

almost comical indication of just how naïve Orwell could be in such matters: beyond the fact that these words upset people when used in public, he did not seem to grasp why they were unacceptable, less still how they cast individuals in the role of alien or Other (something Fyvel would soon point out to him). In the same year, he dutifully wrote in his 'As I Please' column for *Tribune* that avoiding such 'insulting nicknames' as 'negro', 'native' or 'Chinaman' does a little to 'mitigate the horrors of the colour war'.⁴⁶ It was a message that he was reiterating in the same column four years later, asking, 'is it really necessary in 1947 to teach children to use expressions like "native" and "chinaman"?'⁴⁷ Again, Orwell recognises that such words offend people, but one suspects that he still has to actively fight their 'emotional tug', perhaps because they were such an habitual part of his formative years. And there remains the suspicion that he had yet to include the word 'Jew' in this category of insulting 'nicknames', possibly because, as Bluemel argues, he did not equate Jews with the 'subservient' non-white races. However, he used one of his 1944 'As I Please' columns to descry Ezra Pound's racist broadcasts from Italy as 'intellectually and morally disgusting', declaring that 'anti-Semitism [...] is simply not the doctrine of a grown-up person'.⁴⁸ And, in May 1943, Orwell devoted half of his 'London Letter' in *Partisan Review* to the subject of anti-Semitism whilst,⁴⁹ in the same year, he planned a whole section on the subject for *The Last Man in Europe*, the working title of what was to become *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁵⁰ All of this suggests that Orwell's relation to anti-Semitism, and prejudicial language in general, was not, *pace* Bluemel, Muggeridge et al, a simple one. It is true that he had a concern and, indeed, fascination with prejudice, but one that was fuelled by impulses split between the rational and the emotional: on the one hand, he saw that

⁴⁶ Orwell, 'As I Please #2', in *The Complete Works*, xvi, 23-24 (p.24).

⁴⁷ Orwell, 'As I Please #75A', in *The Complete Works*, xix, 50-51 (p.51).

⁴⁸ Orwell, 'As I Please #9', in *The Complete Works*, xvi, 80-83 (p.81).

⁴⁹ Orwell, 'London Letter c. 23 May 1943', in *The Complete Works*, xv, 106-10.

⁵⁰ Orwell, 'Notes for "The Last Man in Europe"', *The Complete Works*, xv, 367-70 (p.368).

other people became upset by the use of certain epithets; on the other, possibly owing to his sheltered upbringing in a colonial upper middle-class family, he was unable to empathise with the hurt caused, and habitually used offensive terms in what could appear a callous manner. The charge of anti-Semitism stems from the second of these tendencies, but also a failure to locate the term 'Jew' within the realm of racial terms deemed offensive by the first. His predilection for, on occasion, using such offensive descriptions, is a strong indication that he saw just how powerful they could be, but perhaps also suggests that he was unable to truly identify with the hurt caused in anything other than an abstracted way.

An interesting example of Orwell's understanding of prejudicial language as a weapon, and indeed his somewhat unfeeling recourse to it, is found in his early attitudes towards the poet Stephen Spender. As we have noted, throughout the mid-1930s, Orwell habitually poured scorn upon the entire Auden Group of poets, not through an engagement with their work, but with crude allusions to their sexuality as a means of denigrating their supposed 'parlour bolshevism'.⁵¹ In an angry rebuttal to activist and heiress Nancy Cunard, who was seeking partisan responses from authors for a pamphlet concerning the Spanish Civil War, Orwell refers witheringly to the group as 'fashionable pansies' and to Cunard's 'pansy friend' Spender.⁵² The following year, Orwell entered into a correspondence with Spender, immediately referring to the letter and apologising, 'I'm afraid I mentioned you uncomplimentarily, not knowing you personally at the time.'⁵³ The prior lack of a personal dimension was, for Orwell,

⁵¹ It has been mistakenly asserted that these slurs stemmed from Orwell's outrage at Auden's poem 'Spain 1937', and its description of the 'necessary murder' that was taking place in the civil war. In fact, Orwell's references to the 'nancy' poets, as my subsequent citations show, pre-date his criticisms of Auden, which only appeared in print in the 1940 essay, 'Inside the Whale'. See Ander C. Long, 'Eric's Dirty Double: George Orwell and the Pamphleteer', *Prose Studies*, 28 (2006), 267-90 (p.279).

⁵² Orwell, 'Unpublished Response to "Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War"', in *The Complete Works*, XI, 66-68 (p.67).

⁵³ Orwell, 'Letter to Stephen Spender', in *The Complete Works*, XI, 130-31 (p.131).

enough to explain his recourse to stereotype: where first-hand knowledge was absent, generalised terms would be introduced in its stead. In his reply, Spender stated,

I am puzzled as to why when knowing nothing of me you should have attacked me; and equally puzzled as to why when still knowing nothing of me, but having met me once or twice, you should have withdrawn these attacks.⁵⁴

In a telling response, Orwell explained that, not having met Spender at the time, he could regard him as a ‘type & also an abstraction’.⁵⁵ Later, in the same letter, he revealed his feeling that ‘when you meet anyone in the flesh you realise immediately that he is a human being and not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas.’⁵⁶ For Orwell, the targets of his various prejudices were, in his mind, precisely that – two-dimensional figures beyond the world of real people. The various allegations of prejudice that are still levelled against him are founded upon the assumption that a conferment of sub-human status on groups of people preceded and grounded his use of such epithets, that his literary language derived from real-world discriminations. However, when one considers the lack of evidence that Orwell treated others in such a way in his personal relations, it seems likely that this formulation is back to front: Orwell’s use of stereotypical labelling in his texts allowed him to more readily push others into that non-human realm in the first place. This process enabled him to attack individuals without compunction, the use of labelling relegating them to the unreal status of Other rather than *Dasein*.⁵⁷ Thus, Orwell concludes his self-defence in the letter to Spender by admitting that

⁵⁴ Stephen Spender, ‘Letter to Orwell’, summarised in *The Complete Works*, XI, 132.

⁵⁵ Orwell, ‘Letter to Stephen Spender’, in *The Complete Works*, XI, 132-33 (p.132).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ In his ‘London Letter’ for winter 1944, Orwell confesses to this aspect of his character, but also demonstrates his humility by admitting to having made a number of ‘spiteful’ remarks in previous columns. See Orwell, ‘London Letter’, in *The Complete Works*, XVI, 411-16 (p.411).

It is partly for this reason that I don't mix much in literary circles, because I know from experience that once I have met & spoken to anyone I shall never again be able to show any intellectual brutality towards him, even when I felt that I ought to.⁵⁸

The mode of thinking in which recourse is made to crude stereotypes as a primary weapon is, of course, precisely that seen in Part Two of *Wigan Pier*, and we can be reasonably sure from that text's phenomenological leanings that it represented something of a natural disposition for Orwell. Indeed, it is clear that he had an habitual tendency throughout his work to categorise others through the means of such crude labels – communist, fascist, Catholic, feminist, fellow-traveller, Blimp, Quisling, Jew and, of course, the many 'types' identified in Part Two of *Wigan Pier*. Fredric Warburg, Orwell's publisher after his split with Gollancz perceptively noted how this tendency pervaded his entire mode of thinking:

Orwell placed people and events and structures in categories – sort of platonic ideas. And to him a Jew was a man who was primarily interested in making money, and a Communist was a man who followed Stalin, and everything – a Frenchman, a Russian, a Jew, a Christian, a Trotskyist – everybody in his mind had a pattern, a rigid pattern, and it was very difficult for him to believe that they could ever depart from this pattern [...] this was the strength and the weakness of Orwell as a thinker and a writer: that everything in his mind was arranged rather tidily in closely-knit, clearly-defined ideas.⁵⁹

Sometimes this classificatory practice is symptomatic of the limits of Orwell's own experience – a handy label to mask the lack of real knowledge concerning different people; on other occasions he used it wilfully as a means of interpolating a critical distance towards others. These, broadly, are but two of the motivations behind Orwell's use of offensive labelling. However, his assertion that 'nationalism' – of which he labelled anti-Semitism a species – stems partially from 'the habit of assuming that

⁵⁸ Orwell, 'Letter to Stephen Spender', in *The Complete Works*, XI, 132-33 (p.132).

⁵⁹ Transcript of reminiscences of Orwell for BBC Third Programme, 2nd November 1960, in The Orwell Archive.

human beings can be classified like insects', reveals a further impulse in this regard.⁶⁰ In those moments when he describes 'inhuman types', 'fruit juice-drinkers' and 'feminists', Orwell, as Warburg suggested, is indulging in the same type of behaviour as when he uses epithets such as 'Jew' or 'native', a tendency we shall refer to as 'objectification': the individual is treated not as a subject but, to use Orwell's own words, as a 'type' or, to return to the language of phenomenology, not *Dasein*, but something more like Sartre's *being-in-itself*, an object, stripped of all possibility other than its brute existence. For Sartre, such acts of objectification constitute a type of violence, in which the individual is dehumanised by an Other who prioritises their own subjectivity. (We shall explore this idea in the next section.) The tendency to consider others in this mode is prevalent throughout Orwell's early books, essays and letters and clearly has a fundamental connection with the allegations of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and even sexism that continue to be levelled towards him. John Newsinger has argued that Orwell's supposed homophobia 'had more to do with his objection to the social and political position of the Auden circle as it did with their sexual preferences'.⁶¹ And one senses with all of these insults and stereotypes, that, as well as maintaining the distance required to attack somebody in print, Orwell is reaching for, what was to him, an intuitive means of classification without necessarily grasping the emotional implications of such language. This is all the more unfortunate given that, as Ian Williams has noted, Orwell's untimely death in 1950 has left him and his views effectively frozen, and a 'stationary target' for critics.⁶² Our investigation does not, of course, seek to excuse his prejudices, but merely to locate them in a more generalised tendency towards objectification, something which will afford us a better understanding

⁶⁰ Orwell, 'Notes on Nationalism', p.141.

⁶¹ John Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p.28.

⁶² Ian Williams, 'Orwell and the British Left', in *The Cambridge Companion to Orwell*, pp.100-11 (p.110).

of both the man and his work. As we shall now see, by operating at this abstracted level, Orwell's prejudices often opposed his commitment to first-hand experience.

Orwell's dependence upon crude categories to classify people as types, is by definition a process of abstraction and reduction: the individual is stripped of his status as *Dasein* by means of an all-defining label. In this mode of encounter, Orwell collapses individuals together into amalgamated caricatures necessarily inhabiting the 'unreal world' of 'no concern' identified by both Newsinger and Fyvel. This tendency towards external objectification has been glimpsed by a number of commentators. Daphne Patai, whose particular concern is androcentrism, argues that Orwell finds it hard 'to attribute a full consciousness like his own to people he assigns to the category of "Other"'.⁶³ In a precursor to this insight, Julian Symonds wrote in his obituary that Orwell 'catches only the outward aspect of human beings, though he does that marvellously well'.⁶⁴ And, on a more personal level, Susan Watson, Orwell's housekeeper in the 1940s, observed that she 'found him a curious mix of caring for people and being obtuse about their motivations and sensibilities'.⁶⁵ Orwell once said of Dickens that when he 'gives a detailed description of someone working, it is always someone seen from the outside'. We might note that the remark applies equally to its author.⁶⁶ This way of denigrating the Other was surely ingrained in Orwell through his blinkered middle-class upbringing (and reinforced through the conservative pages of various Boys' Weeklies), but it was an impulse that he challenged ever more frequently through the 1930s and 40s. Of course, if such abstracted stereotyping is founded upon a lack of personal knowledge, then its remedy must be a commitment to first-hand experience, where the Other is encountered more immediately as an individual rather than an unreal type. And here we

⁶³ Patai, pp.104-05.

⁶⁴ Julian Symonds, in *Orwell Remembered*, pp.271-75 (p.274).

⁶⁵ Susan Watson, in *Orwell Remembered*, pp.217-25 (p.222).

⁶⁶ Orwell, 'Letter to Humphrey House', in *The Complete Works*, XII, 139-42 (p.140).

see perhaps a key motivation for Orwell's excursions beyond the comfort of his class. As a means of confronting the conservatism that pervaded his world-view from childhood, in which anybody considered Other was objectified through the use of crude labelling, Orwell sought to go amongst different people in search of more authentic encounters. These two opposing modes of apprehension were recognised by Stephen Spender, who commented,

I think Orwell's reasons for coming to conclusions were either the immediate results of his experience within a limited area, which he then extrapolated, or were sort of intuitive.⁶⁷

The commitment to first-hand experience was successful in Burma, where Orwell's middle-class, colonial sensibilities were overturned. But it is interesting to note that, in *Wigan Pier*, Orwell presents the reader with both modes of apprehension.

As we have seen, Part Two of *Wigan Pier* presents the reader with numerous amalgamations of types in an effort to convey the prejudices that socialism must overcome. Yet it is also a confession of sorts, Orwell offering his own shortcomings up for the purpose. Because of this, it represents a fall back into a certain 'Boys' Weekly' conservatism for the writer, the thoughtlessly reactionary labels recalling the *idle talk* of Ellis and Elizabeth Lackersteen from *Burmese Days*. Part One of the book appears to offer the remedy to this in its documentation of encounters with real working class people. However, one must exercise caution: whilst Orwell was forced into more authentic interactions with others during the process of researching his material, the characters in the finished book are often amalgamations of several real people and, as such, also represent the author falling back on his habit of objectification. In an

⁶⁷ Stephen Spender, in *Orwell Remembered*, pp.106-06 (p.104).

interesting account of *Wigan Pier*, Raymond Williams posits a clear dichotomy between the two parts of the book based upon Orwell's authorial perspective:

The key point is the persona, the 'outside observer' – that is, Orwell. An essential link between the two parts is indeed this character: 'inside' and then 'outside' the experience.⁶⁸

For Williams, the second part adopts the pattern of polemical essay, commenting upon others from a perspective of objectivity, whilst Part One of the text follows a more literary form, using first person description as Orwell attempts to get closer to the working class. There is some validity to this interpretation. However, Williams fails to notice the phenomenological perspective that we identified earlier, one which prevents Orwell from ever getting entirely 'outside' his experiences in the scientific manner suggested. There is, in this sense, no binary opposition between the two sections: the real difference is in the degree of abstraction, Part One having much more of a grounding in everyday experience, away from the types that so often drew Orwell's thought away from reality. The question we must ask is, to what extent was Orwell successful in confronting his conservative tendencies and gaining authentic access to others in Part One? Within the text, there are few promising signs. On a single page, Orwell describes one individual he meets as 'the cap touching type', and another as 'the type who tells you oilily that he is "Temperance" and votes Conservative'.⁶⁹ A few pages later, we are told of his meeting with a man who is 'the shopkeeper-commercial-traveller type'.⁷⁰ Again, we see the use of generalisation – in this case via a favourite Orwellian word, 'type' – as a means of creating existential distance between the author and his subject (and presumably with the same intention of allowing a critical, and

⁶⁸ Raymond Williams, 'Observation and Imagination in Orwell', in *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp.52-61 (p.60).

⁶⁹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.77.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.90.

therefore objective, appraisal). Such language is also present in Orwell's *Wigan Pier* diary, yet here there is far more of a commitment to each person as an individual rather than a type. Joe Kennan, an electrician to whom Orwell was introduced is described as, 'A very short, stout, powerful man with an extraordinarily gentle, hospitable manner and very anxious to help.'⁷¹ The secretary of the local National Unemployed Workers' Movement, Paddy Grady, is

A tall lean man about 35, intelligent and well-informed and very anxious to help. He is a single man getting 17/- bob a week and is in a dreadful state physically from years of underfeeding and idleness. His front teeth are almost entirely rotted away.⁷²

Elsewhere, George Garret, an unemployed seaman and sometime writer for *Tribune* is described as a 'bigish hefty chap of about 36, Liverpool-Irish, brought up a Catholic but now a Communist', a sketch which precedes an extensive biography of the man.⁷³ Each of these descriptions relies upon the now-familiar insect-like physical classifications that were present from Orwell's very earliest essays, but there is also a far greater commitment to individuality than is evident throughout almost the entire final work.⁷⁴ This can perhaps be accounted for by the text's status as a diary and the need to set down observations in as much detail as possible to provide adequate material for the resulting book. Furthermore, the focus on physical features helps to indicate the effects of poverty, offering the kind of literary embellishment for which Orwell was, by this time, known. And behind it all, is his eye for classificatory detail, a predilection evident throughout his diaries, in which the minutiae of life, from the number of eggs laid by a chicken, through to the dimensions of a Moroccan peasant's plough are treated

⁷¹ Orwell, "'The Road to Wigan Pier' Diary', in *The Complete Works*, x, 419-22 (p.421).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.422.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.439.

⁷⁴ That several of the descriptions of people in both the diary and the final book are somewhat negative should not necessarily be taken as a sign that Orwell is once again dealing with surface features only. On the contrary, according to Lorraine Saunders, the negative sketches allow Orwell to avoid idealising his subjects and so allow for a greater 'humanisation'. See Saunders, p.126.

in the same fashion as personal characteristics. But there is, over and above, an attempt to engage with individuals rather than types. One senses that, in a change from basing his ideas upon stereotypes and objectifications, Orwell is enjoying the opportunity to interact with those outside his milieu here, a process during which one's 'middle-class ideals and prejudices are tested'.⁷⁵ As such, his diary enables him to avoid what Harold Laski has described as the tendency 'to make of living and suffering men and women a kind of composite picture, which easily becomes a concept fitting into the habitual mental picture of the world we carry about with us.'⁷⁶ But a sense of frustration is nevertheless evident, and elsewhere Orwell laments the inability to integrate still further: the diary contains his complaint that, whilst the men of the N.U.W.M were 'very friendly', they will not treat him as an 'equal', and that they called him 'either "Sir" or "Comrade"'.⁷⁷ Indeed, such frustration is even evident in the final text, where Orwell bemoans the 'pea under the mattress' that is class difference, and the 'plate glass pane of an aquarium' preventing access to the working classes (this once again suggesting that they, as a group, exist principally to be classified like animals).⁷⁸ In response to his experience watching coal miners at work, Orwell underlines his sense of separation still further, remarking that it makes 'you realise momentarily what different universes different people inhabit'.⁷⁹ However, one well-known moment in both the diary and the finished book stands out as, momentarily, overcoming this barrier in very human terms.

The incident occurred in Wigan, as Orwell was walking along a street adjoining a row of slum dwellings:

⁷⁵ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.106.

⁷⁶ Harold Laski, 'Review of "The Road to Wigan Pier"', in *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Meyers, pp.104-07 (p.104).

⁷⁷ Orwell, "'The Road to Wigan Pier' Diary', p.422.

⁷⁸ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.145.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.29.

Passing up a horrible side-alley, saw a woman, youngish but very pale and with the usual dragged exhausted look, kneeling by the gutter outside a house and poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe, which was blocked. I thought how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling in the gutter in a back-alley in Wigan, in the bitter cold, prodding a stick up a blocked drain. At that moment she looked up and caught my eye, and her expression was as desolate as I have ever seen; it struck me that she was thinking just the same thing as I was.⁸⁰

What begins in the usual descriptive classificatory fashion ends with a moment in which Orwell achieves a mutual moment of understanding with the young woman and her situation. The event was important enough to be included in the final text, and whilst it is interesting to note there how Orwell alters the anecdote metaphorically so that he is passing on a train, the principal moment of eye contact and mutual understanding survives intact. Given the sometimes obtuse approach to others that we have identified in so much of Orwell's work, this epiphany stands out as extremely unusual. Having explicitly expressed his frustration at being unable to connect with the working classes, what is it that enables Orwell to feel that he has achieved a mutual understanding with this young woman? In the following section, we shall discuss the importance of this incident for deriving an underlying approach to alterity from Orwell's work, and locate it as analogous to two other experiences described elsewhere in the canon. By considering our findings from the perspective of Heidegger, and then Sartre, we shall be in a position to deepen our understanding of Orwell's approach to the Other.

One Mind Less, One World Less

We have observed how *Wigan Pier*, along with *Down and Out*, represented an attempt by Orwell to counter his congenital conservatism through a commitment to first-hand experiences beyond his social milieu. Although his diaries, typically written

⁸⁰ Orwell, "'The Road to Wigan Pier' Diary", p.427.

soon after each event, suggest some success in this endeavour, the finished works based upon these experiences often lack the same immediacy, falling back into a familiar pattern of objectification and stereotyping, perhaps as a corollary of reflection and rationalisation. However, we have noted how one experience, that of the girl in the alleyway, survives the transition from world to diary to book almost intact, this, together with the manner of Orwell's description, suggesting that it is a rare moment in which he felt he succeeded in connecting with a person perceived as 'Other'. How does this incident differ from Orwell's previous encounters with members of the working class? And how can one account for it using the phenomenological framework with which we have explored his previous writing? In this section, we shall attempt to answer these questions by drawing once again on the work of Heidegger and Sartre. Our analysis of this moment from *Wigan Pier* will lead us to consider two analogous scenes from Orwell's writing in which he felt he was able to similarly grasp the subjectivity of an Other. By introducing further ideas from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre in a study of Orwell's next book, *Homage to Catalonia*, we shall attempt to derive insights on alterity implicit in Orwell's writings, insights which augment the philosophical ideas under consideration, and which will help establish connections between his tendency towards objectification, his conservatism and his status as a member of the lower upper-middle class.

Although Orwell embellished the anecdote of the girl in the alleyway by describing himself as being on a train in the final text, one is struck, in both accounts, by the emphasis placed upon eye-contact between the two parties. For it is only when the eyes of the two parties meet that Orwell achieves his epiphany. In the final text, the content of this realisation is spelt out:

It struck me that we are mistaken when we say that 'It isn't the same for them as it would be for us', and that people bred in slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.⁸¹

With reference to this paragraph, Robert Pearce has questioned Orwell's 'ability to find the mind's construction in the face and to empathise with people from backgrounds very different from his own'.⁸² From the point of view of an historian, the objection makes perfect sense: Orwell's assumptions concerning the girl's feelings cannot be corroborated in any way. Yet this is to rather miss the point of the incident. What is apparent from his account is that, despite his intense feeling of pity, Orwell has achieved a certain parity with the young woman, viewing her not simply as a slum-dweller, but rather, a fellow subject. Given Orwell's tendency to view and portray others in an objectified manner, stripping them of their subjectivity, it is not surprising that this incident therefore took on significance for both him and so many of his commentators. And it is precisely because the girl with whom he empathises has a background 'very different from his own' that the incident is of importance. Pearce's objection only arises if one erroneously assumes that the account stands upon whether the girl in the alleyway was actually thinking the thoughts ascribed to her. This, again, is to miss the point, for it is the change that has occurred in Orwell at this moment that is, phenomenologically, all important. Here, for one moment, he felt he had overcome the class barrier, achieving an authentic engagement with the Other and the apprehension of her subjectivity. As we have seen throughout his early writing, the default relation to the Other for Orwell was one of objectification: empathy and the acknowledgment of other subjectivities had to be striven for. Through this moment of

⁸¹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.15.

⁸² Pearce, p.419.

eye-contact, Orwell does not acquire some previously hidden knowledge of the girl, but instead is manoeuvred into a comportment whereby his normal relations are interrupted and a certain empathy is facilitated; Orwell is not guessing the thoughts of the young woman here so much as describing a temporary change within himself.

The early work of Martin Heidegger contains an interesting analogue to this process, whereby an interruption temporarily alters the comportment of *Dasein*. Heidegger describes how the world of objects appears to *Dasein* principally not as an aggregate of separate entities, but rather a field or nexus of references:

My encounter with the room is not such that I first take in one thing after another and put together a manifold of things in order then to see a room. Rather, I primarily see a referential totality as closed, from which the individual piece of furniture and what is in the room stand out.⁸³

In its everyday being, *Dasein's* attention is directed not towards individual objects per se, but rather the involvements [*Wobei*] or relations between them. Things 'constantly step back into the referential totality or, more properly stated, in the immediacy of everyday occupation they never even first step out of it.'⁸⁴ To consider an individual object in a room, for example, is an act of abstraction founded upon a prior apprehension of the room as a totality of relations and purposes. In a slightly later lecture series, Heidegger explains similarly how the philosopher inviting one to think of 'the wall' is immediately violating our phenomenological relation to such entities by considering it in isolation:

For in our natural comportment towards things we never think a single thing, and whenever we seize upon it expressly for itself we are taking it out of a contexture to which it belongs in its real content: wall, room, surroundings.⁸⁵

⁸³ Martin Heidegger, *A History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.187.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.162.

Heidegger claims not that it is impossible to conceive of a single object, but rather that such thinking is a secondary abstraction, our everyday comportment towards such entities instead dwelling in their relations to one another and our self instead. He describes such objects as *equipment* [*Zeug*], implying through this term not only a plurality, but also that each item has a specific purpose and relates to other items in the nexus. Thus,

Equipment – in accordance with its equipmentality – always is in terms of [aus] its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, room. These ‘Things’ never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves, so as to add up to a sum of realia and fill up a room. What we encounter as closest to us (though not as something taken as a theme) is the room; and we encounter it not as something ‘between four walls’ in a geometrical spatial sense, but as equipment for residing. Out of this the ‘arrangement’ emerges, and it is in this that any ‘individual’ item of equipment shows itself. Before it does so, a totality of equipment has already been discovered.⁸⁶

Taken in its broadest sense, Heidegger is outlining here a phenomenology of ‘circumspection’, an account of how *Dasein* focuses its attention during everyday existence. In day-to-day encounters with equipment, *Dasein* is focused not upon the items being used, but rather, on the purpose towards which they are directed. Thus, as one enters a room, one is not focused upon the door-knob as such, but instead the purpose of opening the door, not on the desk, but the task of writing the letter, and so on. Crucially, however, Heidegger entertains the question of what happens when equipment breaks, or is missing, or even obstructed by unneeded items. In such circumstances,

Our circumspection comes up against emptiness, and now sees for the first time *what* the missing article was ready-to-hand *with*, and *what* it was ready-to-hand *for*. The environment announces itself afresh.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Heidegger, *Being & Time*, pp.97-98.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.105.

Thus, it takes some kind of interruption in the use of equipment for our everyday circumspection to shift and allow both individual objects and their position in the referential totality to, in Heidegger's words, 'light up'.

On the surface, this description appears to have little in common with Orwell's encounters with the Other. However, we must remember that Heidegger's argument is not about objects themselves so much as it is about *Dasein*. His achievement here is in explaining how our circumspection can be modulated by interruptions to the everyday: just as he described our everyday, unreflective being as residing within the 'they', he posits a similar unthinking comportment as governing our dealings with objects. In both cases, *Dasein's* attention can be forced to drop away from the mass and onto individuated entities through some interruption to the flux of everyday concern.⁸⁸ We have already argued that Orwell habitually perceived individuals through the lens of generic terms, unable – and sometimes unwilling – to grasp their subjectivity, a trait particularly evident in his abstracted, polemical work, as well as those first-hand accounts separated from their experiential basis by some interregnum. Yet the incident of the girl in the alleyway represents a challenge to this everyday comportment. Just as a broken hammer upsets the individual's dealings with equipment, some aspect of the eye-to-eye contact between Orwell and the young girl refocuses his attention, allowing him to enter a different mode of apprehension. What was 'lit up' for Orwell was the girl's status as an equivalent *Dasein*: at once, she was differentiated from the proletarian mass and perceived by the author as a fellow subject. Whilst structurally resembling Heidegger's account of interruptions to the 'equipmental totality', Orwell's description is both interesting and original in its suggestion that a similar mechanism may mediate

⁸⁸ Heidegger is famously ambiguous in describing exactly how *Dasein's* absorption in the 'they' is interrupted. However, Hubert L. Dreyfus puts forward a convincing explanation of 'the call' from the 'they'. See Dreyfus, *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time, Division I"*, pp.315-22.

our encounters with the Other. It is an idea which goes beyond any description of intersubjectivity contained in *Being and Time*. In order to further understand how this process occurs, it will be necessary to turn again towards the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, a thinker who sought to introduce a sophisticated account of intersubjectivity to the phenomenology of Heidegger.

It is tempting to assume that what allowed Orwell to apprehend the girl in the alleyway as an equivalent *Dasein* was simply the act of making eye-contact. Indeed, that he is careful to acknowledge this aspect of the experience in both the diary and *Wigan Pier* versions hints at its importance. However, to infer that the girl revealed her subjectivity simply because they made eye contact is problematic. We know from Orwell's letters, in particular the incident with Stephen Spender, that he found it easier to ascribe subjectivity to people whom he had actually met. Yet, the *Wigan Pier* encounter sees Orwell empathise in a way that goes well beyond even his diary accounts of face-to-face meetings: an unusual intimacy has occurred. To conclude that Orwell's eye-contact with the girl was the distinguishing feature raises the question of why this did not happen with his other acquaintances, and the eye-to-eye contact he would have had with them. If we answer that it probably did occur, then this 'epiphany' is not as singular as the author makes out – but that does not fit its status in either the diary or the published book. It therefore seems unlikely that the simple act of eyes meeting was a sufficient condition of this change in comportment. What was it, then, that made this experience unique?

The answer can be found in *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre's seminal work, which contains a decisive critique of Heidegger's own early account of intersubjectivity. Heidegger uses the term *Mitsein* (Being-with) to describe our relation with others. The use of the single term is intended to signify that *being-with-others* is an

inescapable aspect of *Dasein*'s being – an *existentiale*. For Sartre, and, as we shall see in Chapter Four, Emmanuel Levinas, this is not only misleading, but also a potentially dangerous way of approaching intersubjectivity. By making *being-with* others an *existentiale*, Heidegger equalises our relationships, reducing the plurality of *Dasein* to what Sartre disparagingly refers to as a 'crew', homogenous and undifferentiated:

The original relation of the Other and my consciousness is not the you and me; it is the we. Heidegger's being-with is not the clear and distinct position of an individual confronting an individual; it is not knowledge. It is the mute existence in common of one member of the crew with his fellows, that existence which the rhythm of the oars or the regular movements of the coxswain will render sensible to the rowers and which will be made manifest to them by the common goal to be attained, the boat or the yacht to be overtaken, and the entire world (spectators, performance, etc.) which is profiled on the horizon.⁸⁹

It is not difficult to see what Sartre is driving at here, if we recall that the work was written under Nazi occupation: Heidegger's manner of perceiving humanity in homogenous terms automatically favours the group and denigrates the individual. *Dasein* is described as undifferentiated, and Otherness is seemingly disallowed, a mode of thought with a clear and direct connection to National Socialism. We shall observe in the next chapter how Levinas expanded upon this idea in great detail. For Sartre, however, Heidegger's account fails to register the existential disparity, the ever-changing power relations between *Dasein* and others (indeed, we should note that Orwell's non-fiction itself is enough to call Heidegger's conception into doubt). As Joseph Fell succinctly asks: 'is communal being the essential ontological relation of *Dasein* and Other?'⁹⁰ The answer, for Sartre, is a clear negative: *being-with* is merely an ontic state, one of many ways of comporting with the Other.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp.246-47.

⁹⁰ Joseph Fell, *Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.306.

⁹¹ Interestingly, Sartre takes issue with Heidegger's entire practice of deriving ontic states from ontological ones since no proof of the viability of this process is ever provided. Worse still, the net

According to Sartre, there are numerous modes in which, *pace* Heidegger, the relationship between different *Dasein* is *not* one of equivalence. In order to elucidate this, he asks the reader to consider the phenomenon of shame, a by-product of a process he refers to as 'The Look':

I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it or blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of the for-itself. But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed[...] The Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other.⁹²

Shame, which for Sartre is almost synonymous with embarrassment, is only possible in a world with the Other, for it is the Other's gaze (or the potential of it) that leaves me 'touched to the quick'.⁹³ It is, accordingly, a species of recognition: 'I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.'⁹⁴ In shame, our epiphany is that we have become an object of the Other's judging perception. This, for Sartre, has the corollary of instantly revealing the Other's subjectivity or his status as *being-for-itself* (since *being-for-itself* alone is capable of such judging perception). Indeed, 'it is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject.'⁹⁵ This insight helps Sartre to sidestep the old Cartesian problem of proving the existence of other minds. Yet, shame not only points towards other subjectivities, it forces our own sense of self-awareness to be mediated by the Other. As Katherine J. Morris has argued, there is both an epistemological and an ontological dimension to this 'mediation': not only does the Other's gaze teach me 'who I am' at any moment, it also

result of doing so is to create 'two incommunicable levels and two problems which demand separate solutions' (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.248).

⁹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp.221-22.

⁹³ Ibid., p.222.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.256.

helps to constitute my self-image in the future.⁹⁶ In shame, we momentarily see ourselves as we imagine we are seen, by another who has their own rival viewpoint on the world. This phenomenon is, for Sartre, enough to disrupt the Heideggerian notion of homogenous *being-with* as an *existentiale*.

The Sartrean description of shame allows us to finally account for Orwell's epiphany involving the girl in the alleyway. For it is clear from each of Orwell's descriptions that it was he who was looking at her first and subsequently spotted. First the account from the diary:

Passing up a horrible squalid side-alley, saw a woman, youngish but very pale and with the usual draggled exhausted look, kneeling by the gutter outside a house and poking a stick up the leaden waste pipe, which was blocked [...] At that moment she looked up and caught my eye.⁹⁷

And then the final text:

I had time to see everything about her – her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed.⁹⁸

One would perhaps expect it to be the girl who felt ashamed in this situation, being on her knees unblocking a waste pipe in view of an obviously middle-class person. Indeed, it is telling that, where the diary account ends abruptly with the thought that 'she was thinking just the same thing as I was', the final text, spends six lines outlining her 'dreadful destiny'.⁹⁹ This clear textual artifice, serves to ensure that it is the working-class subject whom the reader believes to be in the shameful situation. Perhaps Orwell's intention was to maintain his class status as narrator; more likely the incident was embroidered to ensure a focus on the misery of slum conditions and thus mesh more

⁹⁶ Katherine J. Morris, 'The Graceful, the Ungraceful and the Disgraceful', in *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Jonathan Webber, (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.130-44 (p.137).

⁹⁷ Orwell, "'The Road to Wigan Pier' Diary', p.427.

⁹⁸ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p.15.

⁹⁹ Orwell, "'The Road to Wigan Pier' Diary', p.427.

clearly with the book's overall purpose. Yet, the fact that the girl is suddenly apprehended as a fellow subject strongly suggests, according to the Sartrean model, that the opposite was true: it was Orwell who felt shame at being caught staring. In this sense, both the presence of the epiphany and the obvious embellishments transferring shame onto the girl are decisive pieces of evidence.¹⁰⁰ Through this incident, Orwell's objectifying pre-conceptions are clearly shaken, resulting in the momentary recognition that he exists as an object for the Other. The girl's subjectivity is, accordingly, 'lit up'. Eye-contact is indeed necessary for this to happen, but would have been insufficient without the existential disparity of one party secretly observing the other. That this account is only a very small section of the finished book (and, indeed, Orwell's diary) should not detract from its significance as an insight. For it is entirely in fitting with Sartre's account of shame that the experience is fleeting. As Sebastian Gardner explains,

as soon as I have regained enough self-possession to reflect on my gesture - which was perhaps not so vulgar after all - the Other in his immediacy has been expelled from my consciousness.¹⁰¹

Orwell's account, if only by implication, offers a real-world exemplification that goes beyond the mere 'thought experiments' of Sartre. It is this which allows him to momentarily 'turn the silent faces of strangers into expressions of consciousness'.¹⁰² The temperamentally conservative, objectifying narrator, so often the unintended feature of Orwell's non-fiction, has, in this section of *Wigan Pier*, himself been momentarily objectified. Through shame, Orwell's own judging tendency is temporarily reversed in startling fashion. As we shall now explore, this Sartrean play of statuses,

¹⁰⁰ There is another example of this obfuscating process of shame transference in Orwell's 1939 essay, 'Marrakech', in which a 'tall, very young negro' catches his eye and elicits a very similar epiphany. See George Orwell, 'Marrakech', in *The Complete Works*, XI, 416-421 (420). And for a reversal of the situation, note Orwell's description of the inhuman 'man from the fiction department' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who is revealed to have 'two blank discs instead of eyes' as the light reflects off his glasses. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.62.

¹⁰¹ Gardner, p.128.

¹⁰² Margery Sabin, 'In Search of Subaltern Consciousness', *Prose Studies*, 30 (2008), 177-200 (p.177).

with the individual modulating from subject to object, has profound implications for the narrative voice throughout much of Orwell's work.

Wigan Pier is indicative of Orwell's middle-period writing, in which the eye for existential details present from his earliest work is maintained, but with an emerging commitment to socialism evident, albeit one based upon moral decency over rigorous doctrinal knowledge. Yet the insight implicit within the alleyway episode – that *Dasein* can, in a sense, modulate between subject and objectivity – is present in both earlier and later work. In his celebrated 1931 essay, 'A Hanging', Orwell describes his part supervising the execution of a prisoner whilst working as a member of the Indian Imperial Police.¹⁰³ As with so much of his non-fiction of the 1930s, the essay delineates Orwell's experience of this event chronologically, allowing the reader to share the author's journey from, in John Hammond's words, 'ignorance to enlightenment'.¹⁰⁴ The narrative follows a young Indian prisoner being taken for his final journey towards the gallows. During the short walk, and amidst the increasing horror and tension experienced by the narrator, a nightmarish moment of bathos occurs as a dog runs playfully onto the scene and is only restrained after 'several minutes' with Orwell's handkerchief tied through its collar.¹⁰⁵ Shortly before reaching the gallows, we have the key Orwellian epiphany: the prisoner, being held closely on either side by warders,

¹⁰³ There is scepticism among commentators such as Peter Marks and Stansky and Abrahams as to whether Orwell did actually witness a hanging. *Wigan Pier*, written several years later, includes Orwell's admission that he 'watched a man hanged once' (pp.136-37) and Dennis Collings (*Orwell Remembered*, p.77) recounts Orwell describing such an event. However, this was not a regular aspect of an Imperial Policeman's role and it would be unusual if Orwell had seen such an execution occur. The fact that Orwell's writing is, almost exclusively, based upon real experiences is, perhaps, the strongest evidence in his favour: 'A Hanging' would be an unusual part of the canon indeed if it proved to be fictional. See 'The Ideological Eye- Witness: An Examination of the Eye-Witness in Two Works by George Orwell', in *Subjectivity and Literature from the Romantics to the Present Day*, ed. by Philip Shaw and Peter Stockwell (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), pp.85-92.), and Stansky and Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell*, p.224.

¹⁰⁴ Hammond, p.44.

¹⁰⁵ Orwell, 'A Hanging', in *The Complete Works*, x, 207-10 (p.207).

moves aside to avoid stepping into a puddle. Only at that moment, Orwell tells us, did he realise

what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full stride. [...] His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned – reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone – one mind less, one world less.¹⁰⁶

The prisoner is duly executed (the sight of which repulses even the previously playful dog), and the anecdote ends with an example of Orwell's dark literary morbidity as he describes how he and the rest of the officials subsequently enjoyed a light-hearted drink. As Peter Marks has observed, Orwell skilfully uses the narrative voice in this essay to cast the protagonists within ever-changing categories, a 'process of momentary individualisation, followed immediately by subsumption in a group'.¹⁰⁷ Orwell, the narrator, in particular is only occasionally individuated through the pronoun 'I'. Throughout the rest of the essay, he is variously a member of the Imperial Police, part of the corps of human beings during his epiphany, and finally one of the men guiltily socialising after the execution takes place. Marks implicitly, and rather oddly, criticises Orwell's narrator for himself defining each of these groups, seeing it as a rather obvious example of reader manipulation. However, this practice surely only adds to the essay's phenomenological veracity, for it is *Dasein* who is the ultimate judge of which groups others belong to. This issue is central to our elucidation of Orwell's Sartrean insights, since casting the individual as belonging to any social group is to engage in a process of broad objectification, in which the Other is necessarily reduced to a category. That

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp.208-09.

¹⁰⁷ Marks, 'The Ideological Eye-Witness: An Examination of the Eye-Witness in Two Works by George Orwell', p.87.

Orwell is willing to repeatedly do this in ‘A Hanging’ with every character, including his own narrator, is perhaps indicative of his natural predilection in this respect – the same tendency that was outlined in the previous section. But the epiphany of the prisoner stepping to avoid the puddle shows us, once again, an awareness that the Other can be momentarily revealed in their true subjectivity by actions and events. Until he steps to avoid the puddle, Orwell perceives the man as something less than human by virtue of a slew of objectifying categories: he is a ‘prisoner’, a ‘Hindu’, a ‘puny wisp of a man’, a ‘comic man on the films’.¹⁰⁸ Only when he engages in a small and spontaneous human act – stepping aside to avoid getting his feet wet – is Orwell’s objectifying perception interrupted, and modulated to acknowledge this individual as a subject. It is interesting to observe how this small act functions in similar fashion to the girl who caught Orwell staring, particularly when the phenomenon of shame was seemingly not involved. Marks has criticised ‘A Hanging’ for drawing away from explicit criticism of the British Empire, and instead expressing an argument against capital punishment in general:

Instead of being the outcome of imperial domination, this ‘unspeakable wrongness of cutting short a life’ is considered in universal terms [...] The narrator functions to deflect attention from, rather than to focus attention on, the reality of the situation.¹⁰⁹

He is absolutely correct to conclude that the issue is considered in ‘universal terms’, but this must be considered a strength and not a weakness of the work, for, as Rodden and Rossi have recently observed, Orwell’s intention in this essay is to illustrate ‘a greater truth’, and one which goes beyond politics.¹¹⁰ Orwell’s profound insight in ‘A Hanging’ is that small, spontaneous actions can be enough to break the wall of unthinking objectification and allow the Other to ‘light up’ as *Dasein*. If there is a criticism of this

¹⁰⁸ Orwell, ‘A Hanging’, p.207.

¹⁰⁹ Marks, p.88.

¹¹⁰ John Rodden and John Rossi, *The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.65.

essay, it must be that the Burmese setting becomes, in a sense, incidental (although one notes its necessity in maintaining the essay's 'lived-experience' credentials).

One finds a similar experience described in Orwell's 1942 essay, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War'. Taking the form of a retrospective of his time fighting on the republican side in the Spanish Civil War, this essay is notable for the presence of yet another moment of Orwellian 'epiphany'. The incident takes place early in the morning as Orwell, along with a comrade, has gone into the trenches outside Huesca for the purpose of sniping at fascists:

At this moment, a man, presumably carrying a message to an officer, jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran [...] I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists'; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist', he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him.¹¹¹

The fact that Orwell introduces this incident as 'not proving anything in particular', is perhaps illustrative of his own ignorance concerning philosophical ideas: as we argued earlier, his insights were instinctive, and it was their solid foundation in lived experience rather than any philosophical knowledge that allowed them to coincide with the thought of various phenomenologists.¹¹² That Orwell believed it worthy of a whole page within the essay, however, should tell us he believed that it had some kind of importance. When considered alongside the events of *Wigan Pier*, and 'A Hanging', it is clear that this is another example of the Other's status modulating from object to subject. The event has more in common with the description of the Indian prisoner than

¹¹¹ Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', in *The Complete Works*, XIII, 497-511 (p.501).

¹¹² Ibid. This remark is indicative of Orwell's ignorance concerning the value of such philosophical insights. In a book review written near the end of his life, he denounced Sartre as 'one of those writers who set on paper the process instead of the results of thought, and, after many pages of feverish cerebration, end by stating the obvious.' Nobody could accuse Orwell of neglecting the results of thought, however, this remark demonstrates that Orwell was oblivious to a similar existential undercurrent within his own work. See 'Review of "The Novelist as Thinker" ed. by B. Rajan', in *The Complete Works*, XIX, 416-18 (p.417).

the girl from Wigan, however, given that there is an absence of shame and a clear focus on the role of language – in this case, ‘Fascist’ – to objectify the man before the existential epiphany. In both cases, the ordinary actions of the subject are enough to break the objectifying illusion of linguistic thought, if only momentarily: the ‘prisoner’ transforms into a human being when he avoids wetting his feet, and likewise the ‘fascist’ when he is pulling up his trousers. In each instance, the spontaneous act performed is inconsistent with the objective description that Orwell attempts to apply. Douglas Kerr is one of the few commentators to notice this aspect of Orwell’s work, and he neatly sums up the pattern:

The other is perceived as being of a lower order, irredeemably alien, instinctual, mindless, either dangerous or pathetic. But then, through some shift in viewpoint, the object of observation is seen to be inhabited by an independent inner life and integrity and makes a claim on the observer that he can no longer ignore; they belong after all together.¹¹³

It is, I suggest, this mysterious ‘shift in viewpoint’ that the ideas of Sartre and Heidegger allow us to understand.

Being and Nothingness contains an interesting adjunct to the description of shame as a means of fully elucidating ‘The Look’, one that is highly relevant to the incidents described in both ‘A Hanging’ and ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’. Where shame posits us as the (unintended) object of the Other’s attention, Sartre explores the reciprocal relation, whereby we make the Other the focus of our gaze, an account which introduces a dynamic element to the intersubjective relationship. To illustrate this, the reader is invited to imagine that they are in a public park:

Not far away there is a lawn and along the edge of that lawn there are benches. A man passes by those benches. I see this man; I apprehend him as an object and at the same time as a man.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Douglas Kerr, *George Orwell* (Tavistock: Northstock House, 2003), p.9.

¹¹⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.254.

Immediately, Sartre begins to imply the possibility of perceiving others as both subjects and objects. When I apprehend the Other as subject, it has a dramatic impact on my perception of the world. For the Other constitutes a second reference point in the scene, such that my relation to the lawn, the bench etc. is challenged by his rival perspective. Suddenly, the objects of the world are no longer simply for me:

There unfolds a spatiality which is not my spatiality; for instead of a grouping toward me of the objects, there is now an orientation which flees from me.¹¹⁵

Given that this rival perception of the world is hidden from me, 'within' the Other, Sartre refers to the phenomenon as a 'drain hole' through which the universe threatens to escape.¹¹⁶ The Other must, accordingly, be contained, and this, as Sebastian Gardner explains, is accomplished by objectification through language:

This 'decentralisation of the world' undermines my own centralization of it, but it is brought to a halt as soon as I contain the Other within his empirical determinacy - I fix the Other as 'that man at a distance from me on that bench reading that newspaper, etc.'. The Other is thereby consolidated for me as a 'partial structure of the world', i.e. as an object.¹¹⁷

Our relation to the Other can therefore, on Sartre's model, be seen as a kind of struggle: the Other threatens my centralised position in the world by presenting a rival perspective. Only through the use of objectifying language can I reduce him to the status of 'object' and thus preserve my own privileged position as *Dasein* or, to return to Sartre's terminology, *being-for-itself*. Whilst Sartre admits that 'at least one of the modalities of the Other's presence to me is object-ness', he denies that this is the 'fundamental relation', for the process of objectification occurs only after my world

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.256.

¹¹⁷ Gardner, p.136.

begins to escape towards another subject.¹¹⁸ If this is indeed the case, then Orwell's predominant habit of objectification would mark him as a rather unusual individual.

In both 'A Hanging' and 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', we can clearly see this play of subject and objectivity at work. As we saw in the previous section, Orwell habitually used generic terms focused upon racial, sexual or gender characteristics to describe those he considered to be Other. We previously suggested that this allowed him to, variously, keep a professional distance from people, feed his innate need to classify elements of his world, and also to launch attacks upon his enemies; we therefore implicitly contested the argument that, underlying this tendency, was genuine prejudice. It is now possible to understand these impulses in broader philosophical terms: as in the Sartrean model, Orwell uses objectifying language in his work to maintain his privileged position as subject and narrator. For the most part, we find him accomplishing this task with some ease – the Orwell canon, as we have observed, is typified by its use of generalised terminology to describe the Other. However, in those works based upon real-life experiences, occasionally a challenge to this privileged position occurs, one which structurally resembles Sartre's account of 'the Look': the Other reacts in an unexpected manner – meeting Orwell's gaze, or performing a spontaneous everyday action – that refuses the confines of his narrative descriptions and so allows their subjectivity to 'light up'.¹¹⁹ As with the broken hammer in Heidegger's account of our dealings with objects, this is enough to break through the wall of objectivity with which Orwell often attempts to, as it were, encrust the Other, if only temporarily.

¹¹⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp.252-53.

¹¹⁹ This insight, of course, contains the implicit suggestion that the Other presents a face capable of modulating between subject and objectivity.

We have repeatedly observed how important the narrative voice is in Orwell's work, with his insights increasingly being focused phenomenologically inwards to centre upon his own reactions to people and situations. It was fortunate, therefore, that he wrote about those he could cast in this role of subordinate Other, since this automatically allowed for the subjectivity of Orwell's narrator to be prioritised: to this extent, the homeless, the Burmese and the working class made perfect subjects. Moreover, it was structurally crucial, on a Sartrean reading, for Orwell to describe those Others in objective terms. For, in objectification, the Other is forced to behave as a 'clouded' mirror that 'no longer reflects anything', allowing every insight to come from the narrator as privileged observer.¹²⁰ And yet, paradoxically, Orwell's very determination to gain first-hand experience beyond the English middle-class itself challenged this narratorial hegemony by introducing an element of unpredictability into his studies. Through spontaneous everyday acts, acts which went beyond Orwell's blinkered expectations, these Others periodically refused the labels used to designate them and so revealed their subjectivity in, what we have termed, 'epiphanies'. That it was these moments which resulted in the kind of authentic access that Orwell was seeking in the first place – an experience that penetrated that 'plate glass pane' of the aquarium to reveal a fellow human – is an irony, but one that also illustrates the author's naivety. For Orwell incorrectly believed that simply going amongst and writing about people designated as 'Other' would be enough to attain authentic knowledge of them. In reality, he found that his own objectifying tendencies, perhaps present from childhood, frequently scuppered this secondary aim. Ironically, it is only where Orwell's objectifications fail, where the Other acts in a way that goes beyond the label, that his aim of an authentic encounter is realised. It is possible to locate the two competing sides of Orwell as both a writer and a man in this contradiction. On the one hand, there is the

¹²⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.242.

Orwell of birth; a member of the lower upper middle-class with limited breadth of social experience; the old Etonian of Tory, reactionary tendency; the writer certain of his own societal superiority and instinctively ready to maintain it by subordinating the Other in objective, generalised terms. On the other there is the aspiring socialist, attempting to combat his ingrained prejudices through a commitment to first-hand experience; the subordinate everyman narrator, ready to acknowledge his lack of understanding by keenly observing the lives and practices of Others. However, as Peter Wilkin observes, ‘the distinction between these two aspects of Blair/Orwell is never neat and precise.’¹²¹ Orwell’s use of objectifying labels are moments when he regresses towards the reactionary side of this equation, refusing or unable to acknowledge the Other as a fellow subject. Conversely, when he draws attention to various epiphanies, we witness the fleeting dissolution of the barriers of race, class and gender, and the emergence of a common humanity – a momentary success in his attempt to escape from an ingrained conservatism. As we look now at Orwell’s next book, *Homage to Catalonia*, we shall observe in concrete terms how these conflicting tendencies work to mould a text.

Orwell travelled to Spain in December 1936, some eight months after returning from his journey to the north of England, and mere days after submitting the typescript for *Wigan Pier*.¹²² Intending to ‘gather materials for newspaper articles’, he also possessed ‘some vague idea of fighting if it seems worthwhile’.¹²³ Spain was, of course, a country in the midst of civil war, and it was difficult for outsiders to enter for such purposes. Orwell sought the help of his acquaintance, John Strachey, to gain admittance, and was taken by him to see Harry Pollitt, secretary of the British

¹²¹ Peter Wilkin, ‘George Orwell: The English dissident as Tory anarchist’, *Political Studies*, 61 (2013), 197-214 (p.202).

¹²² Orwell ‘Letter to Leonard Moore’, *The Complete Works*, x, 528.

¹²³ Orwell, ‘Notes on the Spanish Militias’, in *The Complete Works*, xi, 135-45 (p.136).

Communist Party. After deciding that Orwell was ‘politically unreliable’, Pollitt declined to help, but advised him to get a ‘safe-conduct’ from the Spanish Embassy in Paris. Having duly done so, Orwell, armed with a letter of recommendation from the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.), with whom he had some connections, set out for Barcelona by way of Paris and used this opportunity to briefly meet with Henry Miller for the first time, a writer whose *Tropic of Cancer* he greatly admired.¹²⁴ Orwell presented his letter of introduction to John McNair, who ran the I.L.P. office in Barcelona and, after expressing a by-now more definite desire to ‘fight against fascism’, was taken to the local militia barracks where he signed up on the spot.¹²⁵ Crucially for Orwell, he had chosen to join the P.O.U.M. (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista) militia, an anarcho-syndicalist movement on the Republican side, regarded as the sister party of the I.L.P. Orwell spent the next six months in Spain, both on the front line and back in Barcelona during the infamous May Day purges, was shot through the throat almost fatally, and was eventually lucky to escape the country with his life, having found his way onto a communist death list. *Homage to Catalonia*, published in 1938, attempts to recount these events as they appeared to Orwell. According to Crick, the book is ‘closer to a literal record than anything he wrote; for in order to controvert the many existing false accounts [...] he had to get the facts right and give himself no artistic licence.’¹²⁶ And yet, if one compares it to Franz Borkenau’s *The Spanish Cockpit* or Arthur Koestler’s *Spanish Testament*, two contemporary works which purported to a similar degree of factual accuracy, *Homage to Catalonia* is a very different book indeed. Borkenau in particular aimed to produce a ‘descriptive scientific field-study of events’, and as a result, despite describing his arrest by Franco’s forces in very personal terms, is more of a detached observer of the war, placing the focus clearly

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.210.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.211.

upon the testimony of various witnesses rather than his own narrative voice.¹²⁷ In this sense, his account offers the opposite of the ‘clouded mirror’ effect, subjugating his own status to that of others. Koestler offers a narrative that is much closer to Orwell’s insofar as it is extremely subjective. Featuring an extensive account of his own time in a fascist prison, it appears to offer a pseudo-phenomenological perspective similar to the one we have observed in much of Orwell’s non-fiction. And yet, for all its merits, Koestler’s artistry is ever-present, giving his version of events a lyrical tenor not found in Orwell:

When the door has been slammed behind him for the first time, the prisoner stands in the middle of the cell and looks round. I fancy that everyone must behave in more or less the same way.

First of all he gives a fleeting look round the walls and takes a mental inventory of all the objects in what is now to be his domain:

the iron bedstead,

the wash-basin,

the W.C.,

the barred window.

His next action is invariably to try to pull himself up by the iron bars of the window and look out. He fails, and his suit is covered with white from the plaster on the wall against which he has pressed himself.¹²⁸

In comparison, Orwell’s account of his time in Spain has a grounded quality which allows the reader to place their trust in the narrator’s version of events. Alex Zwerdling has bemoaned the fact that *Homage to Catalonia* ‘tells us more about Orwell than about the Spanish Civil War’.¹²⁹ However, this objection supposes that there is no value in phenomenological or subjective accounts. On the contrary, where an ‘objective’ account such as Borkenau’s may have value for the student of the war itself, Orwell’s more subjective version of events has value as a document of experience, an existential account of one man’s encounter with the Other under wartime conditions.

¹²⁷ Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit: An Eye-Witness Account of the Political and Social Conflicts of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p.237.

¹²⁸ Arthur Koestler, *Spanish Testament* (London: Gollancz, 1937), p.234.

¹²⁹ Zwerdling, p.163.

On the very first page of the book, Orwell recounts his arrival at the barracks, and immediately sets about describing his meeting with an Italian militiaman:

He was a tough-looking youth of twenty-five or –six, with reddish-yellow hair and powerful shoulders. His peaked leather cap was pulled fiercely over one eye [...] Something in his face deeply moved me. It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend – the kind of face you would expect in an Anarchist, though as likely as not he was a Communist.¹³⁰

We have here a curious mix of Orwell's two tendencies. His initial descriptions of the man's physicality function on a rather superficial level, but it is the face of the Other once again that lights up his humanity. Richard Rees has mistakenly described this incident as 'the first occasion in any of Orwell's books in which one feels that he really looked at, saw, and paid attention to another human being'.¹³¹ Yet we have seen just this pattern of epiphany before, and the idea of a person's face offering an inroad to their humanity was, as we observed earlier, an important moment in *Wigan Pier*. As Michael Sheldon has perceptively noted, Orwell 'is constantly stressing the importance of the human face – faces speak to him more powerfully than do words'.¹³² However, his objectifying tendency still attempts to break in to this particular description, the political labels of 'Anarchist' and 'Communist' being invoked as perhaps the only means he has of categorising this very human epiphany.

Orwell's subsequent effusive celebration of this moment in the text, exclaiming how 'his spirit and mine had momentarily succeeded in bridging the gulf of language and tradition and meeting in utter intimacy', is testament to its importance in his search for authentic encounters with the Other.¹³³ Even after *Wigan*, he was still searching for a

¹³⁰ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.1.

¹³¹ Rees, p.70.

¹³² Sheldon, *Orwell: The Authorised Biography*, p.314.

¹³³ Indeed, this incident was significant enough for Orwell to compose a poem, 'The Crystal Spirit'. See 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', in *The Complete Works*, XIII, 497-511 (pp.510-11).

means of breaching the barrier of Otherness. Very soon, however, this narrative voice recedes momentarily as he reflects on his status as an outsider at the barracks:

All this time I was at the Lenin Barracks, ostensibly in training for the front. When I joined the militia I had been told that I should be sent to the front the next day, but in fact I had to wait while a fresh *centuria* was got ready.¹³⁴

In this mode, Orwell allows himself to appear as the everyman, under the clear control of others and subject to the lack of information concerning the ‘bigger picture’ that would typify the average militiaman’s experience. As Jeffrey Meyers has noted, this allows his narrator to function as ‘a person with whom we may identify, through whom we may discover, and against whom we may measure and judge’.¹³⁵ When he writes in this manner, Orwell minimises his role as narrator, allowing, as we observed in his very earliest essays, the reader to inhabit the scene in his stead: in its passivity, it is the antithesis to the judging, superior narrative voice that we have witnessed elsewhere. Throughout the text, Orwell alternates this everyman method of description with the objectifying tendency that was endemic in his work. The latter is particularly apparent in the narrative when he is given a position of responsibility, owing to his previous experience in the Indian Imperial Police and in the Officer Training Corps at Eton:

I had been made a corporal, or cabo, as it was called, as soon as we reached the front, and was in command of a guard of twelve men. It was no sinecure, especially at first. The *centuria* was an untrained mob composed mostly of boys in their teens. Here and there in the militia you came across children as young as eleven or twelve [...] sometimes they managed to worm their way to the front line, where they were a public menace. I remember one little brute throwing a hand-grenade into the dug-out fire ‘for a joke’.¹³⁶

Whilst maintaining the deeply personal, phenomenological perspective on events, Orwell’s voice has none of its former humility here. The young soldiers are cast as

¹³⁴ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, p.5.

¹³⁵ Meyers, *A Reader’s Guide to George Orwell*, p.10.

¹³⁶ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, pp.26-27.

Other through generic terms such as ‘untrained mob’, ‘public menace’ and ‘little brute’, their actions denigrated as ‘worming’. Orwell’s sense of class superiority soon wells as he alludes to his own public school background in bemoaning the lack of weaponry:

It needs an effort to realize how badly the militias were armed at this time. Any public school OTC in England is far more like a modern army than we were. The badness of our weapons was so astonishing that it is worth recording in detail.¹³⁷

Aside from the obvious sense of class and racial superiority that is implied in this extract, it becomes clear that Orwell is writing for an audience of similar social standing to himself by only providing the abbreviation for ‘Officer Training Corps’.

Further on, in his description of a section of Andalusian soldiers, we see again the conservative tendencies of Orwell in evidence:

Certainly the Andalusians were very ignorant. Few if any of them could read, and they seemed not even to know the one thing that everybody knows in Spain – which political party they belonged to. They thought they were Anarchists, but were not quite certain, perhaps they were Communists. They were gnarled, rustic-looking men, shepherds or labourers from the olive groves, perhaps, with faces deeply stained by the ferocious suns of further south.¹³⁸

Once more, the Other is described in homogenous terms with no attempt to delineate individuals. The Andalusians are cast as ‘They’, with even Orwell’s evocative physical descriptions serving not to individuate, but to collapse each of them into a single, objectified Other. This is the Orwell from childhood speaking, the old Etonian of limited social experience, the servant of Empire, used to the subservience of other races and classes. A similar attitude is manifest when Orwell describes his participation in a raid on a fascist position:

Benjamin leapt to his feet and shouted: ‘Forward! Charge!’ we dashed up the short steep slope on which the parapet stood. I say ‘dashed’; ‘lumbered’ would be a better word; the fact is that you can’t move fast when you are sodden and muddled from

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.35.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp.84-85.

head to foot and weighed down with a heavy rifle and bayonet and a hundred and fifty cartridges. I took it for granted that there would be a Fascist waiting for me at the top. If he fired at that range he could not miss me, and yet somehow I never expected him to fire, only to try for me with his bayonet.¹³⁹

There is a certain ‘Boys’ Weeklies’ quality to this section of the book, and perhaps this type of wish-fulfilment was one of the things Orwell had in mind during its inception. By shaping part of his account in these terms, he gives the impression that he truly valued the friendship and camaraderie that were part of life on the front line. D. J. Taylor has explained his tendency to describe fighting in this way – almost like a game for boys – as harking back to his Etonian background in the Officer Training Corps, ‘the only terms on which Orwell could respond to the experience’.¹⁴⁰ Ben Clarke takes the argument further, suggesting that, by emphasising qualities such as strength and courage, Orwell viewed the war as a ‘test’ of whether he was ‘really a man’.¹⁴¹ However, it is hard to agree with this conclusion when one observes the self-deprecation – describing his movements as ‘lumbered’, for example – that is interspersed with Orwell’s account of the raid. Indeed, whilst *Homage to Catalonia* certainly contains many sections in which Orwell presents himself as socially, and even racially, superior, there are numerous instances where he reverts back to the everyman narrator, cast in a situation to which he is unaccustomed and ill-suited. His use of everyday, almost bathetic, similes in order to convey the realities of war to the reader is but one example of this tendency:

There were the two batteries of Russian 75-mm guns which fired from close in our rear and which somehow evoked in my mind the picture of a fat man hitting a golf-ball [...] Behind Monflorite were two very heavy guns which fired a few times a day, with a deep, muffled roar that was like the baying of distant chained-up monsters. Up at Mount Aragón, the medieval fortress which the Government troops had stormed last year [...] there was a heavy gun which must have dated well back

¹³⁹ Ibid., p.72.

¹⁴⁰ Taylor, p.209.

¹⁴¹ Ben Clarke, *Orwell in Context: Communities, Myths, Values* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.73.

into the nineteenth century [...] A shell from this gun sounded like nothing so much as a man riding along on a bicycle and whistling.¹⁴²

This deeply subjective account of shell fire is careful to make use of prosaic references as a means of allowing the reader to relate to and inhabit the scene. To be sure, there is a certain detached casualness about the manner of the descriptions, and perhaps this kind of thing is the source of accusations that the text is an androcentric war fantasy. But to categorise the entire book in any such homogenous terms would be a mistake. For, as we have seen, Orwell's internal conflicts refuse to allow him a voice which is that consistent. *Homage to Catalonia* continues to exemplify the traits – objectification, phenomenological description, epiphany, the superior narrator, the ephemeral narrator – that we have observed repeatedly in Orwell's non-fiction. It is a clear example of what Roger Fowler, following Mikhail Bakhtin, has praised as the 'heteroglossic' style, a style in which a multitude of different voices and perspectives issue forth from the narrator.¹⁴³ We have suggested that, as well as describing the struggle of the republican forces in Spain, *Homage to Catalonia* presents Orwell's internal struggle against his own conservatism. But did this heteroglossia occur by design or was it merely an unintended eruption of the author's own conflicted sensibilities?

In his introduction to *Homage to Catalonia*, Julian Symons has commented that 'the main feeling behind the narrative is [Orwell's] exultation at finding himself part of a workers' army'.¹⁴⁴ This underlying emotion, so evident within the text, is often taken to signify Orwell's growing commitment to the socialist cause.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, it is clear that he himself felt as much, famously commenting in a letter to Cyril Connolly from

¹⁴² Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, pp.63-64.

¹⁴³ Fowler, p.63 (see also p.89).

¹⁴⁴ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, pp.vi-vii.

¹⁴⁵ It is for this reason that some commentators have suggested that the Spanish Civil War represented the transition whereby Eric Blair 'became' Orwell. See D. Lebedoff, *The Same Man: George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh in Love and War* (New York: Random House, 2008), p.87.

Barcelona in June 1937 that, “I have seen wonderful things and at last really believe in Socialism, which I never did before”.¹⁴⁶ That he was able to write this after witnessing the systematic persecution of his P.O.U.M. comrades by supposed allies from the Communist Party is testament to the strength of his feeling: upon arrival in Barcelona some six months prior, before the purges and tensions helped ruin the dream, Orwell felt he really had witnessed the ‘overwhelming’ sight of a ‘town where the working class was in the saddle’.¹⁴⁷ But this exaltation of the working class sits uneasily with Orwell’s conservative objectifications: throughout *Homage to Catalonia*, those perceived as Other by way of race or class are repeatedly homogenised and, on occasion, denigrated through objectifying language. But although he fell back into this tendency time and again, it is clear that Orwell aspired to something more. His showcasing of the meeting with the Italian militiaman, placing the episode at the front of the book (not to mention writing a poem about the incident), his enthusiasm for the burgeoning social equality of Barcelona on his first arrival, the value he places on friendship and camaraderie in the text – each of these aspects points to a desire for a more authentic relationship with those he perceived as Other. The presence of epiphany in Orwell’s writing not only informs us that he successfully achieved moments of fellowship with Others, but that he placed great value upon those occasions, perhaps by virtue of their scarcity, perhaps because his excursions frequently made him feel like an outsider. That we have been able to locate these epiphanies in work that predates *Down and Out* suggests a long-standing and deeply felt impulse to make connections with other people. Whilst this was often thwarted by his ingrained conservatism, it surely acted as an impulse for Orwell’s socialist beliefs. In the next chapter, we shall use the thought of Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas to explore more precisely how these

¹⁴⁶ Orwell, ‘Letter to Cyril Connolly, in *The Complete Works*, XI, 27-28 (p.28).

¹⁴⁷ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, p.3.

seemingly humanistic concerns fed into Orwell's socialism and his emerging hatred of totalitarian systems.

Chapter 4

The Sancho Panza View of Life

In January 1940, less than three years after returning from Spain, Orwell wrote to Geoffrey Gorer informing him that he was ‘incubating an enormous novel, the family saga sort of thing’.¹ Three months later, in April, he revealed in an autobiographical note for an American magazine that this work was to be ‘in three parts, to be called either *The Lion and the Unicorn* or *The Quick and the Dead*’, and that he hoped to produce the first part by 1941.² A 1943 notebook of approximately twenty pages contains Orwell’s only notes for this saga and includes an outline of *The Last Man in Europe* (his original title for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). As Bernard Crick has pointed out, it is strange that there are no other references to this, presumably voluminous, trilogy in his letters or wider writing. He goes on to suggest, quite reasonably, that *The Last Man in Europe*, an account of a rigidly totalitarian society, could therefore have been conceived as the final volume in the trilogy. This would mean that volume two, would likely have had to show how the revolution that led to totalitarianism came about, something that fits neatly with the plot of *Animal Farm*, Orwell’s penultimate novel. And since the notes for *The Quick and the Dead* give an account of an impoverished middle-class childhood, together with lists of sayings that very much recall those discussed by Winston Smith and Mr. Charrington, the junk-shop owner in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Crick speculates that this could have been the first part of the trilogy – an account of the collapse of the old order through the eyes of Winston’s father.³ It is an intriguing possibility, and one which neatly resolves Orwell’s uncharacteristic lack of

¹ Orwell, ‘Letter to Geoffrey Gorer’, in *The Complete Works*, XII, 6-7 (p.7).

² Orwell, ‘Letter to Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft’, in *The Complete Works*, XII, 147-48 (p.148).

³ Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p.262-63.

reference to these projected works in his correspondence. Perhaps even more interesting is the resemblance between the few details pertaining to part one of the trilogy and the extended reminiscences of George Bowling, the protagonist of Orwell's 1939 novel, *Coming Up For Air*, a resemblance that has led some commentators to imply that this too had a connection to the abandoned text.⁴ We will, of course, never know exactly what Orwell was planning, yet the importance of Crick's speculation is not so much in its attempted recovery of a lost saga as it is in pointing to a family resemblance spanning the period of nearly ten years between Orwell's last three novels. As the first of these, *Coming Up For Air* gives voice to Orwell's concerns about the homogenising and destructive effects of modern capitalism, a system which, as we shall see, necessarily involves a virulently perverse conception of technology. Through the novel's portrayal of a society in which both the past and the individual are steadily effaced by the demands of mass-production, Orwell offers an embryonic picture of the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the process of totalisation reaches completion. From this perspective, whether it was Orwell's original intention or not, *Coming Up For Air* belongs with his final novel, both conceptually and as precursor. Over the course of this chapter, we shall therefore attempt to uncover a progression of thought running between these two works.⁵ We shall chart Orwell's developing sense of the individual's place in modern society, as well as his increasingly sophisticated ideas concerning the nature and mechanisms of totalitarianism. By drawing widely on the thought of Heidegger, as well as introducing ideas from the work of Emmanuel Levinas, we shall attempt to account for Orwell's fascination with objects, placing it alongside his

⁴ Vincent Sherry appears to make such a suggestion in his essay, 'George Orwell and T. S. Eliot: The Sense of the Past', *College Literature*, 14 (1987), 85-100 (pp.94-5).

⁵ As discussed in the Introduction, *Animal Farm* will be referred to only in passing given that the narrative is a transfiguration of events surrounding the Russian Revolution rather than based on Orwell's lived experiences. In the spirit of Crick's speculations, however, it is interesting to reflect that Orwell's decision to make the story of a 'revolution betrayed' an allegorical tale centred upon animals may have been a key motivation in his abandonment of the proposed 'family saga'.

championing of the ‘ordinary man’ as part of an, arguably conservative, attempt to preserve aspects of the traditional, and authentic, past. As we move our focus onto *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we shall explore how Orwell presents an obverse account of *Dasein*, stripped of all such humanity through the mechanisms of totalitarianism. Levinas’ notions of both the object-like *il y a* and the *face* will be shown to be exemplified through the descriptions of the citizens of Oceania and the account of Winston Smith’s destruction.

In 1938, barely a year after returning from Spain, Orwell’s health had once more begun to deteriorate, a fact revealed in a letter to Cyril Connolly in which he admitted, ‘I’ve been spitting blood again’.⁶ As a result of an anonymous donation from the novelist L. H. Myers, Orwell was able to spend the autumn and winter of 1938/39 in Marrakesh, where it was hoped the more temperate climate would aid his convalescence. During this time, in addition to keeping a detailed diary, and producing an essay named after the city, he also wrote his next book, the novel entitled *Coming Up For Air*. Like *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, it was something of an experiment for Orwell. It was the only time that he was to employ a first-person narrator; it attempted to weave a socio-political message into the narrative in a much more overt fashion than any of his previous novels; and, once again, it took inspiration from several authors for whom Orwell had a high regard, specifically Wells, Joyce, and, as I argue below, Henry Miller. Published in June 1939, *Coming Up For Air* is often taken to represent the last of Orwell’s so-called ‘realist’ books. And yet, whilst the story of George Bowling, an overweight and disaffected insurance salesman attempting to recapture the past, is resolutely realist in style and tone, the ideas and sentiments expressed place the novel

⁶ Orwell, ‘Letter to Cyril Connolly’, in *The Complete Works*, XI, 127. This was, of course, related to Orwell’s chronic ‘bronchiectasis’ and tubercular lesions, which it seemed were present from a very early age. See ‘Letter to Anne Popham’, 18th April 1946 in *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 248-51(p.249).

more closely with Orwell's anti-totalitarian works of the 1940s, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Somewhat surprisingly, then, it is a mundane note that is struck first in the text, as Bowling, the narrator, relates how a particular idea 'came to me the day I got my new false teeth'.⁷ Within the first few pages, the reader is informed that the protagonist has 'pudgy arms', a 'forty-eight or forty-nine' inch waist, and a nickname of 'fatty'.⁸ Bowling goes on to explain his unease whilst shaving and seeing 'those bloody false teeth [...] magnified by the water in the tumbler [...] grinning at me like the teeth in a skull'.⁹ The teeth and skull, of course, function here as a kind of humorously prosaic *memento mori*, but Orwell is, at the same time, utilising a much wider frame of reference. For, through Bowling's self-portraits, he is immediately drawing upon the comedy trope of the forty-something husband in decay, a well-known stereotype associated with both music-hall, and the humorous postcards of Donald McGill, which displayed 'no pictures, or hardly any, of good-looking people beyond their first youth'.¹⁰ We shall return to the significance of McGill for this novel presently.¹¹ As we have seen with so much of Orwell's fiction, however, a note of disillusion is struck early on in the text when we read Bowling's remark that, 'I'd been a good husband and father for fifteen years and I was beginning to get fed up with it.'¹² Dogged by his nagging wife, Hilda, who seems concerned, not with the ominous international events of the late 1930s, but 'petty disasters' affecting the household, Bowling feels increasingly out of place in both his domestic life and the wider industrialised world.¹³ Like Dorothy

⁷ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air* (London: Penguin, 2001), p.3.

⁸ Ibid., pp.3-4.

⁹ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁰ Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill', in *The Complete Works*, XIII, 23-31 (p.27).

¹¹ Donald McGill (1875-1962) produced an estimated 12,000 postcard designs, and was still working up until his death. In 1954, he was put on trial for breaching the Obscene Publications Act, and was fined £50 with £25 costs. In 1957, he gave evidence to the House Select Committee with a view to amending the 1857 act. Orwell himself had a sizeable collection of McGill's postcards, which can now be viewed in the Orwell Archive.

¹² Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.5.

¹³ Ibid., p.7.

in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, Flory in *Burmese Days*, and Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Bowling is a character who starts out trapped in a suffocating life, an individual whose choices, together with the currents of civil society, have led him into an existential dead-end, where individuality itself has been compromised. In *Coming Up For Air*, it is the homogenising power of the modern industrialised world that keeps Bowling in this state of captivity. He describes his home on the Hesperides Estate as akin to a dungeon, surrounded by a mere 'ten yards by five of grass, with a privet hedge round it and a bare patch in the middle, that we call the back garden'.¹⁴ The self-awareness of his own family's denial is palpable in those two pathetic words, 'we call', and it is a sentiment that is soon reinforced as Bowling embarks on a short tirade in a voice typical of his creator:

Because after all, what is a road like Ellesmere Road? Just a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture-chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, every one of them with the boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches.¹⁵

There is a strong hint of Gordon Comstock's dissatisfaction with the 'Money God' in such descriptions as well as an unusual echo of both *Burmese Days* and the essay 'Shooting an Elephant': where the latter two texts offer the unexpected insight that it is both the coloniser and the colonised who become enslaved under imperialism, *Coming Up For Air* transposes the argument to the British socio-economic system, portraying Bowling trapped in his middle-class existence as breadwinner and mortgage slave. However, unlike those earlier works, in *Coming Up For Air*, Orwell is more successful at implying that his protagonist somehow does not belong in his particular environment. In relating how a spot of soap left on Bowling's neck makes him realise that his 'clothes didn't fit', Orwell metaphorically depicts how the middle classes feel estranged

¹⁴ Ibid., p.3.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.10.

from their societal roles, and are forced into *inauthenticity* in the modern world.¹⁶ Later, Orwell describes how, despite Bowling's portly appearance (one that draws objectifying insults such as 'tubby'), he is 'thin inside', perhaps referring not only to some alienated personal essence, but also that of an England now long gone and replaced by bloated, dehumanising capitalism.¹⁷ And it is here that one arrives at one of the principal themes of the novel.

Using a dark wit that is often overlooked by commentators, Orwell skilfully parodies this modern world of mass-media, convenience foods and supposed progress. Nowhere is this humour more apparent than in Bowling's visit to a milk-bar, where the sensationalist and inhuman methods of the mass media in the reporting of a murder are caricatured:

Outside the door a newsboy yelled 'Starnoosstannerd!' I saw the poster flapping against his knees: LEGS. FRESH DISCOVERIES. Just 'legs' you notice. It has got down to that.¹⁸

Not only is the victim objectified (a particular source of amusement when one bears in mind Orwell's own unwitting mastery of this facility), deprived of even a name, but the shorthand expression of her dismemberment is clearly included to satirise the callous, sales-orientated approach of the mass-media, and a society truncated, robbed of both its intelligence and its heart.¹⁹ Bowling's sense of alienation from the contemporary world reaches its zenith, both existentially and comedically, when he bites into one of the frankfurters that he has ordered:

¹⁶ Ibid., p.9.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.20. Like George Harvey Bone, the protagonist of Patrick Hamilton's 1941 novel, *Hangover Square*, Orwell uses the initials of his principal character to symbolise a Great Britain that is in decline.

¹⁸ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.23.

¹⁹ It is hard not to think that the classically-educated Orwell had Shelley's *Ozymandias* in mind here: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone | Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, | Half sunk, A Shattered visage lies'. Indeed, the line, 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' seems rather apt for the milk-bar scene.

The frankfurter had a rubber skin, of course, and my temporary teeth weren't much of a fit. I had to do a kind of sawing movement before I could get my teeth through the skin. And then suddenly – pop! The thing burst in my mouth like a rotten pear. A sort of horrible soft stuff was oozing all over my tongue. But the taste! [...] It was fish! A sausage, a thing calling itself a frankfurter, filled with fish!²⁰

This 'ersatz' frankfurter, itself a continental foodstuff appropriated and mass-produced by America, embodies for Orwell the insanity and uncertainty of England in the late 1930s. By biting into it with his wholly unsuitable false teeth, Bowling describes his feeling that he has 'bitten into the modern world'.²¹ Far from a gift of convenience, the frankfurter is emblematic of the rootlessness of modern capitalism, as its dubious provenance eschews the permanent and traditional in the name of efficiency and progress. In direct contrast to both Orwell and Bowling's childhood, the modern world is shown to be one of change and unpredictability, an environment where the mass-produced and mass-communicated have supplanted the bespoke and the personal by stealth rather than consent. In *Wigan Pier*, Orwell had commented that:

Twenty million people are underfed but literally everyone in England has access to a radio. What we have lost in food we have gained in electricity. Whole sections of the working class who have been plundered of all they really need are being compensated, in part, by cheap luxuries which mitigate the surface of life.²²

But, in *Coming Up For Air*, these palliative, yet hollow, luxuries of the modern world are shown to be consumed as eagerly by the middle as the working class. Richard White still finds the focus of the novel too narrow, however, criticising Orwell's inability to 'extend his insights to the modern world', and citing a 'resistance to broader theoretical concerns' for its resolute failure to extend its relevance beyond England of the 1930s.²³ Of course, as with virtually all of Orwell's fiction, the political and social concerns are presented without any overt socialist theory attached, but then again, would one expect

²⁰ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.23.

²¹ Ibid., p.24.

²² Orwell, *Wigan Pier*, p.83.

²³ Richard White, 'George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia', *Utopian Studies*, 19 (2008), 73-95 (p.91).

(or want) this? Instead, Orwell uses, as he has done before in his fiction, an implicit existentialism to convey his ideas. In the case of *Coming Up For Air*, we witness once again *Dasein*'s alienation, but not, as in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, from itself, but rather, following *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, from an emerging modern society. And following on from his criticism of socialist techno-fetishism in Part Two of *Wigan Pier*, it is the mass-cultured, machine-world that Orwell appears to blame for this.

Robert Dellen aptly describes how, in *Coming Up For Air*, 'The machine has intruded on the garden, and the garden has turned to dust.'²⁴ More recently, Philip Bounds has portrayed Orwell himself as 'a socialist who always harboured the darkest suspicions about science and technology'.²⁵ There is, to be sure, a great deal of evidence to support such claims, not just in *Coming Up For Air* and *Wigan Pier*, but also in Orwell's portrayal of the technologically-advanced nightmare world of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, Peter Davison is surely right in his corrective of Bounds, drawing attention to how, although 'Orwell was averse to the machine culture and advocated hand craftsmanship [...] he was from childhood deeply interested in science, especially biology'.²⁶ Indeed, as Talks Producer for the BBC Eastern Service during the Second World War, Orwell arranged for numerous renowned experts of the day to broadcast on a variety of scientific and technological advances. As Davison explains elsewhere, many of these talks were based on Bombay and Calcutta University degree syllabuses, and can plausibly be viewed as a forerunner of distance learning, decades before the founding of the Open University.²⁷ The number and quality of these programmes, coupled with the fact that they were the first talks that Orwell sought to

²⁴ Robert Dellen, 'George Orwell's "Coming Up for Air": The Politics of Powerlessness', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 21 (1975), 57-68 (p.59).

²⁵ Philip Bounds, *Orwell and Marxism* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), p.78.

²⁶ Peter Davison, 'Review of "Orwell & Marxism: The Political and Cultural Thinking of George Orwell"', *American Communist History*, 9 (2010), 335-37 (p.336).

²⁷ Peter Davison, 'Orwell at the BBC: Two Wasted Years?', <<http://www.orwell.society.com/2011/11/22/orwell-at-the-bbc-two-wasted-years-by-prof-peter-davison/>> [accessed 21/9/14].

commission is, therefore, ‘an indication of Orwell’s fascination for science, something evident from at least his time at Eton.’²⁸ This poses a problem for the conventional reading of *Coming Up For Air* as an anti-machine novel. For whilst it is clear that the character of George Bowling possesses these reactionary sentiments, it is questionable whether such thoughts coincide neatly with those of his creator. For a more accurate picture of Orwell’s attitude towards science and the machine, it is worth reading his criticisms of H. G. Wells. Not only was Wells a significant influence on Orwell’s imagination as a child, but his picaresque novel *The History of Mr. Polly* shares a similarity with *Coming Up For Air* in its depiction of a downtrodden man who seeks escape from the modern world.²⁹ Despite his admiration, Orwell’s criticisms of Wells, particularly in the years leading up to the Second World War, were often fierce. In a *Tribune* book review of 1940, Orwell criticises Wells’ suggestion that,

The kind of mind that accepts the machine and despises the past is supposed to be, automatically, the kind of mind that longs for a world of free and equal human beings. The same anti-thesis – quite false, as it turns out – runs through all of Mr. Wells’ work: on the one hand the scientist, the man of the machine, offering sweetness and light, and on the other the reactionary, the romantic, the man of the past, prancing about on a horse and starting wars. It never occurred to Mr. Wells that his categories might have got mixed, that it might be the reactionary who would make the fullest use of the machine and that the scientist might use his brains chiefly on race-theory and poison gas. But so it has happened, and now that we are almost within earshot of Hitler’s guns, the Wellsian Utopia [...] constructed by benevolent scientists, is somehow unconvincing.³⁰

What is clear from this attack in the first instance is that he imbues neither science nor technology with any intrinsic ethical value, since it is individuals who appropriate it for good or evil purposes. Orwell is particularly sensitive to the misleading notion, implicit in much of Wells’ writing, that the scientist will always seek to use technology for

²⁸ Ibid. In a 1946 letter to a Mr. Edward R. Ward, Orwell also states how he would like to see more ‘scientific articles’ included in *Tribune* as a ‘regular feature’. See ‘Letter to Edward R. Ward’, *The Complete Works*, xviii, 502.

²⁹ Indeed, this text is overtly referenced in Orwell’s novel. See Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.124.

³⁰ Orwell, ‘Review of “A Hero of Our Own Times” by Mikhail Yurevich Lermontoff; “Priest Island” by E. L. Grant; “Film Stories” by H. G. Wells’, in *The Complete Works*, xii, 189-92 (p.191).

philanthropic rather than malevolent ends. Viewed in this light, *Coming Up For Air's* critique becomes much narrower: it is the misappropriation of technology, and the resulting alienation of modern *Dasein* that is at issue. In his criticisms of Wells, together with the text of *Coming Up For Air* itself, Orwell seeks to draw parallels between the abuse of science and technology and the emergence of fascism. It is not immediately clear how these strands are connected. Therefore, it would be instructive at this juncture to introduce the thoughts of Heidegger on the topic as a means of fully understanding Orwell's position.

As one reads *Coming Up For Air*, one gains an increasing sense of George Bowling's feelings of alienation from the society in which he finds himself. Through his depiction of modern conveniences and mass-media, Orwell allows this mood of suffocation and estrangement to coalesce around the issue of modern technology. But how can technology elicit such sentiments? How can *Dasein* be made to feel 'not at home' in its world? In the previous chapter, we outlined Heidegger's early distinction between the objects of purely theoretical contemplation, the so-called *present-at-hand*, and those items in the world with which *Dasein* maintains an involvement as equipment, the *ready-to-hand*. It was suggested that the latter form nexuses, webs of references, involvements and purposes that are only disrupted when an item somehow fails to accomplish its intended goal. In his later writings, Heidegger develops this idea to link the realm of man-made 'things' (taken in a broad sense to include technology, architecture, music and even poetry) to *Dasein's* very conception of itself and the world. Where, in *Being and Time*, the realm of the *ready-to-hand* is taken to imply a nexus of relations with which *Dasein* is involved practically, Heidegger's more mature work suggests that these relations in turn are the embodiment of a sphere of cultural values

and practices, something akin to what Wittgenstein called ‘a form of life’. In order to illustrate this, Heidegger gives the example of a Greek temple:

It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people.³¹

The temple itself embodies a particular conception of existence and the world held by the ancient Greeks. As Heidegger goes on to explain, it gives ‘to men their outlook on themselves’.³² In his commentary on this aspect of Heidegger’s work, Hubert L. Dreyfus elucidates the point through the example of drinking vessels found in different cultures:

A Styrofoam cup is a perfect example. When we want a hot or cold drink, it does its job, and when we are through we throw it away. This understanding of an object is very different from what we can suppose to be the Japanese understanding of a delicate painted teacup, which does not do as good a job of maintaining temperature and which has to be washed and protected, but which is preserved from generation to generation for its beauty and its social meaning.[...] It is hard to picture a tea ceremony around a Styrofoam cup.³³

By asserting that certain worldly entities ‘gather’ existential beliefs and practices in this way, embodying what Julian Young calls ‘the ethos of a community’, Heidegger at once draws a connection between the way that *Dasein* perceives objects, and its own sense of self and society.³⁴ It is because of this insight that he states, ‘Technology is a way of

³¹ Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), pp.15-86 (p.41).

³² Ibid., p.42.

³³ Hubert L. Dreyfus, ‘Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. by Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.289-316 (p.295).

³⁴ Julian Young, ‘Heidegger’s Heimat’, in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 19 (2011), 285-93 (p.289).

revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth.³⁵

The truth revealed by technology is the truth of our current social existence: our conception of the relationships we have with each other and the world in which we live. Dreyfus refers to the broad class of objects capable of revealing human existence in this way as ‘cultural paradigms’.³⁶ Following Heidegger, he goes on to contrast an ‘artistic’ cultural paradigm, the Greek temple, with his own modern example, fast-food chains. Through its natural stone construction, the temple voices a relationship between *Dasein* and the earth in a way that would be impossible for one made from artificial materials. But more than this, the temple, in its very essence, affirms that there is a realm – in this case, the Gods – that is beyond man’s jurisdiction or control. By way of contrast, the fast-food chain’s defining feature of offering cheap, instant meals, and round-the-clock service, attests to the modern desire to master the environment through ever-increasing speed and efficiency, a mastery that is self-serving and perpetuating. Most modern cultural paradigms, from the internet to mobile phones, serve to reflect this contemporary priority of assimilation and control of the world, a determination to cast every aspect of our environment as a resource or utility. A very recent instance of this can be seen in the commodification of friendships and other human relationships accomplished and perpetuated by social media. Heidegger himself, writing in 1951, gives the example of the hydroelectric plant on the Rhine to illustrate the point:

In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command. The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather, the river is dammed

³⁵ Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *Basic Writings: From “Being and Time” to “The Task of Thinking”* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), pp.311-41 (p.318).

³⁶ Dreyfus, ‘Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics’, p.298.

up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station.³⁷

Our modern attitude towards technology perpetuates a view of the world in which everything that stands apart is the object of attempted assimilation and control. Thus, the Rhine is supplemented with a hydroelectric plant so that energy can be produced and stored on demand, our mobile telephones record and store the details of conversations with others, the sum of human knowledge is more or less on standby for us via the internet. This relationship with technology, for Heidegger, becomes almost a mania, in which the world is disaggregated and appropriated not to satisfy an immediate demand, but rather for the very sake of imposing order:

Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [Bestand]. [...] Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object.³⁸

In viewing the world as ‘standing-reserve’, *Dasein* not only alters its comportment with the realm of objects, but eventually, for Heidegger, comes to occupy this realm itself as a mere commodity – hence the neologism ‘human resources’ – subservient to technological society. In a slightly later lecture, Heidegger explains how this way of viewing technology has led to

a completely new relation of man to the world and his place in it. The world now appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is believed able any longer to resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry.³⁹

Moreover, the modern predilection to view the entirety of the world as ‘standing-reserve’, tends towards homogenisation: rather than being allowed to appear in their

³⁷ Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, p.321.

³⁸ Ibid., p.322.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p.50.

true nature, both things and people take on a generic profile characterised by the all-encompassing determination of utility. In this sense, the technological age threatens the dissolution of both the subject and the object. The ramifications of Heidegger's argument extend further, however. For, in a world in which the very earth itself has been homogenised as 'standing-reserve', where one object is deemed the same as another, *Dasein's* sense of kinship with the traditional technologies of its homeland [*Heimat*] is also destroyed:

Hourly and daily they are chained to radio and television. Week after week the movies carry them off into uncommon, but often merely common, realms of the imagination, and give the illusion of a world that is no world. Picture magazines are everywhere available. All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive man – all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world.⁴⁰

Or, as Young succinctly explains:

In the age of jet travel, television, the internet and the cellphone, however, everything is being reduced to a 'uniform distancelessness' in which nothing is 'remote', and so nothing 'near', and so nothing a dwelling-place.⁴¹

The sense of homelessness or dislocation experienced by modern *Dasein* is traceable, then, to this attitude of indifference towards technology, what Heidegger refers to as 'the spirit of the age'.⁴² Let us now explore how these ideas are manifest in *Coming Up For Air*.

Desmond Avery, writing on the Orwell Society website, has lamented how *Coming Up For Air*,

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p.48.

⁴¹ Young, p.285.

⁴² Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, pp.48-49.

Failed to produce even one convincing character or any enduringly strong sensation or idea. It just stuck to the story he had told in all his novels, of an antihero who failed, with an insipid sense of futility and embarrassment rather than tragedy.⁴³

An understanding of Heidegger's later thought can perhaps assist us in identifying Orwell's ideas where Avery could not. For, in the character of George Bowling, we are presented with the malaise of the modern citizen, a member of the 'standing-reserve', immersed in a world in which increasingly pervasive technology threatens total disaggregation and assimilation of the environment: foodstuffs are re-engineered into bizarre combinations; the family unit is homogenised; crimes against individuals are reduced to callous, shorthand news reports. By depicting Bowling's growing unease in this climate, Orwell successfully taps into Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*'s uprootedness or homelessness in the machine age. Through the use of lists in particular, the clutter of suffocating phenomena that have brought Bowling to crisis point is effectively conveyed:

I sometimes think I'd like to have the Hesperides Estate surmounted by an enormous statue to the god of building societies. [...] In one hand it would carry an enormous key – the key of the workhouse, of course – and in the other – what do they call those things like French horns with presents coming out of them? – a cornucopia, out of which would be pouring portable radios, life-insurance policies, false teeth, aspirins, French letters and concrete garden rollers.⁴⁴

There is a hint of James Joyce about this monologue, lending some weight to Martha Carpentier's assertion that Bowling's voice was 'modeled [sic] on the amicable tone of [Leopold] Bloom's stream-of-consciousness'.⁴⁵ It is interesting that she should make such an observation given how Orwell himself connects Bloom with the atmosphere of

⁴³ Desmond Avery, 'Orwell's Nineteen Forty-Two: A Well Spent Year', <<http://www.orwellsociety.com/2012/03/26/orwells-1942-a-well-spent-year-by-desmond-avery/>> [accessed 17 9/14].

⁴⁴ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.11.

⁴⁵ Martha C. Carpentier, 'Orwell's Joyce and Coming Up for Air', in *Joyce Studies Annual*, 12 (2012), 131-153 (p.137). That Bowling is an 'analogue' for Bloom is also suggested by Kevin Kerrane in his essay, 'Orwell's Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 36/37 (2007), 14-32 (p.18). Given Orwell's admiration of Joyce, coupled with his championing of such diverse figures as Dickens and Charlie Chaplin for their ability to represent the 'essence' of the ordinary man, it seems highly likely that the creation of a such an archetype was very much what he had in mind with this novel.

the Donald McGill postcards we referred to earlier. In his essay on McGill, Orwell refers approvingly to the 'low' humour of his postcards and 'the Sancho Panza view of life' expressed within, pointing to Joyce's own creation as one of several examples of this mentality in literature.⁴⁶ And when Orwell comments on how McGill's comic depictions are 'exactly what comic postcards have been any time these last forty years', one cannot help thinking back to Dreyfus' definition of the monolithic cultural paradigm.⁴⁷ As he goes on to explain, 'what you are really looking at is something as traditional as Greek tragedy, a sort of sub-world of smacked bottoms and scrawny mothers-in-law which is a part of Western European consciousness.'⁴⁸ If Bloom embodies the spirit of McGill, then surely Bowling, his nagging wife, Hilda, and his raucous children, are also an echo of this 'belly-to-the-earth' sentiment. But whilst the vulgarity of McGill's postcards encourages the viewer to momentarily embrace 'a sort of mental rebellion', it is only because they simultaneously reflect and restate a very traditional way of life.⁴⁹ They therefore, counter-intuitively, resolve into a safe kind of conservatism in their acknowledgement of cultural norms, one which Orwell evidently found very attractive. Indeed, as embodiments of both traditional British values and the importance of free, individual acts of rebellion against those values, it is tempting to see in McGill's postcards the two conflicting impulses, conservative and libertarian, found within Orwell himself. As with McGill's stock characters, there is something deeply human about Bowling's hackneyed predilection for clandestine, immoral activities – women, alcohol and gambling. Orwell's essay enables us to view these actions as affirmations of a traditional, one might say almost nineteenth-century, notion of individuality. By imbuing Bowling with the spirit of both McGill and Bloom, Orwell

⁴⁶ Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill', pp.28-29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.24.

⁴⁸ Ibid. One might argue that, unlike Heidegger, Orwell recognised that the function of 'cultural paradigm' extended beyond great art to include 'lowbrow' works.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.29.

counters the machine age with the tacit hope that *Dasein's* residual humanity is effectively indomitable.

It is interesting to note how, as a substrate for his critique of mass-society, Orwell should indirectly reference McGill, an artist whose work was itself a part of mass-culture. And perhaps in this detail, we witness the sophisticated play of transience and permanence that is at play within *Coming Up For Air*. For Orwell's use of the enduring downtrodden-husband trope, exemplified through Bowling and his family, allows for a juxtaposition with the ever-changing, disorientating world of 1938. The apposition of the McGill family archetype, which Orwell praised for its tendency to 'at least imply a stable society', with the absurd uncertainties of the machine age also helps to give *Coming Up For Air* its deeply unsettling atmosphere.⁵⁰ For without this permanence, the existential flux that is the by-product of mass-culture would be missing an important referential counterpart.⁵¹ Against this, Orwell is able to skilfully layer in a foreboding sense of war, and the fear that the destruction of these last stable remnants of society is imminent. The periodic wash of such apocalyptic thoughts over Bowling's day-to-day existence is carefully mimicked by their sporadic and violent intrusions into the text:

I can hear the air-raid sirens blowing and the loudspeakers bellowing that our glorious troops have taken a hundred thousand prisoners. I see a top-floor-back in Birmingham and a child of five howling and howling for a bit of bread. And suddenly the mother can't stand it any longer, and she yells at it, 'Shut your trap, you little bastard!' and then she ups the child's frock and smacks its bottom hard, because there isn't any bread and isn't going to be any bread. I see it all. I see the posters and the food-queues, and the castor oil and the rubber truncheons and the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.27.

⁵¹ The identification of the McGill archetype goes some way towards answering Alex Zwerdling's criticism that *Coming Up for Air's* familiar characters clash with Orwell's intended aim of delineating 'alien ways of life'. This clash, of course, only occurs if one accepts Zwerdling's description of this 'intended aim'. On the contrary, it seems more accurate to describe Orwell's intention as showing the reader what is 'under their nose'. See Zwerdling, p.154.

⁵² Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, pp.26-27.

Bowling's premonitions of the coming war represent his fear of the final mobilisation of man and machine in one great act of destructive, totalisation, an act which threatens to level everything belonging to the pre-machine age. And whilst, as we shall see, it is important to differentiate some of the thoughts of Bowling from those of his creator, there is good reason to believe that these particular depressive concerns coincided with Orwell's own at this time.⁵³ In a letter of 1938 to Cyril Connolly, he related, 'This bloody mess-up in Europe has got me so that I really can't write anything. [...] It seems to me we might as well all pack our bags for the concentration camp.'⁵⁴ Two months later, he wrote to Jack Common that if he started writing *Coming Up For Air* 'in August I daresay I'll have to finish it in the concentration camp'.⁵⁵ This is the same fatalistic tone that he had earlier struck at the end of *Homage to Catalonia*, as he lyrically described his arrival back in England:

Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens, and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen – all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.⁵⁶

Now, in *Coming Up For Air*, Orwell offers an almost identical diagnosis through the voice of George Bowling:

I looked at the great sea of roofs stretching on and on. Miles and miles of streets, fried-fish shops, tin chapels, picture houses, little printing-shops up back alleys, factories, blocks of flats, wheel stalls, dairies, power stations – on and on and on. Enormous! And the peacefulness of it! Like a great wilderness with no wild beasts. No guns firing, nobody chucking pineapples, nobody beating anybody else up with a rubber truncheon. If you come to think of it, in the whole of England at this moment

⁵³ David Kubal asserts that, after writing *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell 'slipped into a depression' owing to ill health and the approach of war with Germany. See D. Kubal, *Outside The Whale*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), p.115.

⁵⁴ Orwell, 'Letter to Cyril Connolly', *The Complete Works*, XI, 127.

⁵⁵ Orwell, 'Letter to Jack Common', *The Complete Works*, XI, 149-50 (p.149).

⁵⁶ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, p.196.

there probably isn't a single bedroom window from which anyone's firing a machine-gun.

But how about five years from now? Or two years? Or one year?⁵⁷

It is because of this eschatological aspect that the work is often cited, alongside *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as one of Orwell's most depressive novels. John Wain has commented upon 'the manifest despair and disgust that arises, as physically and concretely as a smell, from *Coming up for Air*, his most depressing book'.⁵⁸ But despite this hopeless tone, there is a certain ambiguity inherent in the book, which also represents that of Orwell at the time.

Whilst Bowling despairs of the modern, mechanized world, Orwell doesn't allow him to fully acquiesce to its imminent destruction. The central movement in *Coming Up For Air*, accordingly focuses upon his quest to confront the realities of this alienating, and suffocating present. On this level, the work can be read not, in the words of Charles Holdefer, as 'a novel obsessed by time', but more accurately as a kind of journey, in which Bowling attempts to regain his own *Heimat*.⁵⁹ In what is probably the best piece of writing in the book, he first seeks a grounding from within his own memory.⁶⁰ His extended reminiscence, triggered involuntarily in the manner of Proust, juxtaposes the world of his, and Orwell's, youth with the modern, machine age. In a counterpoint to the stream-of-consciousness fears of destruction in Bowling's present, lists are once again used, this time to delineate and contrast a more certain past, in which 'it was summer all year round'.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.21.

⁵⁸ John Wain, 'In the Thirties', in *The World of George Orwell*, ed. by Miriam Gross (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), pp.75-90 (p.80).

⁵⁹ Holdefer, p.102.

⁶⁰ It seems likely that Orwell was referring to this section when he wrote to Jack Common, 'There's about 100 pages I'm pleased with'. See 'Letter to Jack Common', *The Complete Works*, XI, 337-39 (337).

⁶¹ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.37.

Most sweets were four ounces a penny, and there was even some stuff called Paradise Mixture, mostly broken sweets from other bottles, which was six. Then there were Farthing Everlastings, which were a yard long and couldn't be finished inside half an hour. Sugar mice and sugar pigs were eight a penny, and so were liquorice pistols, popcorn was a halfpenny for a large bag, and a prize packet which contained several different kinds of sweets, a gold ring and sometimes a whistle, was a penny. You don't see prize packets nowadays.⁶²

This is writing that is rich with metaphorical meaning. The sense of permanence and certainty that Bowling associates with his childhood is mirrored in the 'Farthing Everlastings', whilst the broken sweets – surely something discountenanced in the homogenised, machine world – are optimistically designated as 'Paradise Mixture'. Even the pistols are made only of liquorice, while the rueful sentiment that 'You don't see prize packets nowadays' hints at a present that offers little reward for the individual. Yet this also was a past that 'was harsher' than the present.⁶³ In order to emphasise the point, Orwell describes the gruesome details of several high-profile murders (reported in vivid detail, in contrast to the 'LEGS' case), and how, as a gang member, Bowling would stamp on baby birds.⁶⁴ Like his philandering and gambling in the present, these dubious acts are emblematic of a genuine freedom to eschew the totalising norms of society. In a reversal of the world of the 1930s, it was the individual who existed unrestrained whilst the social and cultural background remained monolithic. And for this reason, we are told, people had 'a feeling of security', and a sense 'of continuity'.⁶⁵ A catalogue of objects, from childhood sweets to the scales in his father's shop, anchor Bowling's recollections, and stand as cultural paradigms, gathering points for the beliefs and practices of a bygone age.⁶⁶ His frequent memories associated with fishing operate

⁶² Ibid., p.39.

⁶³ Ibid., p.109.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.65.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.110.

⁶⁶ The eponymous houseplant from *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* serves a similar purpose, embodying, for Comstock, the servile respectability of lower middle-class capitalism.

identically. Where the thoughts of war and destruction intrude into the present, the pleasure of catching fish periodically breaks into the narrative of Bowling's history:

But fishing was the real thing. We went many a time to old Brewer's pool, and took tiny carp and tench out of it, and once a whopping eel, and there were other cowponds that had fish in them and were within walking distance on Sunday afternoons.⁶⁷

Robert A. Lee is quite right to point out that, just as bombs are a recurring symbol of the future in the novel, so fishing is to the past.⁶⁸ And here, of course, lies the text's eponymous metaphor, for it is in his own memories that Bowling is 'coming up for air', attempting to escape the homogenising, dehumanising machine age, in which *Dasein* awaits mobilisation as part of the standing-reserve.⁶⁹ 'Fishing', as he says, 'is the opposite of war'.⁷⁰ Despite Bowling's revelation that he had 'been breathing real air' whilst reminiscing, however, the past is acknowledged as transient, and lacking the reality of the concrete present:

The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time, I suppose an hour never passes without your thinking of things that happened ten or twenty years ago, and yet most of the time it's got no reality, it's just a set of facts that you've learned, like a lot of stuff in a history book.⁷¹

As a method for recovering a more human age, memory, for Bowling, is itself shown to be impotent and ephemeral. And yet, in an incongruously direct address, a slightly different voice also evaluates the role of the past: 'Is it gone for ever? I'm not certain. But I tell you it was a good world to live in. I belong to it. So do you.'⁷² The need to

⁶⁷ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.70.

⁶⁸ Robert A. Lee, *Orwell's Fiction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp.93-96.

⁶⁹ Writing in 1946, Orwell reiterated these fears of dehumanisation by writing, 'the tendency of many modern inventions – in particular the film, the radio and the aeroplane – is to weaken [man's] curiosity, and, in general, drive him nearer to the animals'. See 'Pleasure Spots', in *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 29-32 (p.32).

⁷⁰ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.85.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.31.

assert this world's goodness at once implies that the remark is directed towards those born after 1914 without direct experience of it. If this is the case, then in what sense can they be said to 'belong' to that world? The answer surely lies in the values, beliefs and practices, remnants of which are preserved in enduring cultural paradigms. It is no coincidence that the author of this remark also wrote fondly of McGill's postcards, the pleasure of collecting junk, 'good bad' books, and Boys' Weeklies. Whilst not always agreeing with the 'mental atmosphere' of these artefacts, particularly in the case of the latter, Orwell's passion for them suggests that, unlike Bowling, he views the world they epitomise as more than just a 'set of facts': it is an exemplar of a human form of life, and one that he is passionate about reminding us of by way of the cultural paradigm.⁷³

For Bowling, as for Orwell, it was the First World War that largely ended this bucolic age.⁷⁴ In a metaphor that conjures the concerns of Heidegger, he describes the conflict as feeling 'like an enormous machine that had got hold of you'.⁷⁵ The accompanying loss of autonomy is also expressed through Bowling's thought that 'You'd no sense of acting on your own free will'. Like the fish at the end of a line, the individual is portrayed as helpless and, ultimately, becomes displaced by the irresistible power of industrial society:

The machine had got hold of you and it could do what it liked with you. It lifted you up and dumped you down among places and things you'd never dreamed of.⁷⁶

⁷³ Orwell's 1946 essay, 'Just Junk – But Who Could Resist It?', is a whimsical account of his addiction to visiting junk shops. It is noteworthy for his description of glass paperweights containing coral, the very kind that serves such an important symbolic role in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. See 'Just Junk – But Who Could Resist It?', *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 17-19.

⁷⁴ In a 1944 book review, Orwell refers to 'the golden age before 1914'. See 'Review of *Cricket Country* by Edmund Blunden', *The Complete Works*, XVI, 162. Anna Vaninskaya has wryly observed that Orwell's idea of utopia was 'a cross between revolutionary Barcelona and Edwardian England'. See Anna Vaninskaya, 'The Bugle of Justice: The Romantic Socialism of William Morris and George Orwell', *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice*, 8 (2005), 7-23 (p.14).

⁷⁵ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.115.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.116.

And with the abrupt death of his parents in the narrative, the transformation from antiquity to the modern age is symbolically complete. As Bowling continues to move between memory and aspects of his contemporary life, the overwhelming mood is one of despair as events take on an increasingly nightmarish feel. The meeting of the Left Book Club that he attends, far from offering an answer to the insanity of modernity, becomes a focal point for the premonitions of fascism that Orwell begins to connect with the machine age.⁷⁷ In a motif that was to become increasingly prevalent in his writing, the scene demonstrates how a partisan of the extreme Left comes to resemble a fanatic of the far Right. The lecture itself is given the title 'The Menace of Fascism', which is deeply ironic, given how the speaker himself descends into a Hitlerian maelstrom of hatred.⁷⁸

A rather mean little man, with a white face and a bald head, standing on a platform, shooting out slogans. What's he doing? Quite deliberately, and quite openly, he's stirring up hatred. Doing his damndest to make you hate certain foreigners called fascists.⁷⁹

This is the Orwell of the pacifist I.L.P. speaking, where the impending conflict is defined not by the respective politics of Britain, France and Germany, which were all viewed as variants of capitalism, but the other shared characteristics of totalising machine-worship and the effacement of the individual.⁸⁰ As if to emphasise this commonality, Bowling says of the speaker that, 'If you cut him open all you'd find inside would be Democracy-Fascism-Democracy.'⁸¹ In a disturbing prefiguration of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* 'Two Minutes Hate', however, it appears that it is Bowling

⁷⁷ The Left Book Club, of course, published an edition of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which sold very well. Victor Gollancz was heavily involved with its operation, and it seems likely that this section of the book afforded Orwell an opportunity of taking a swipe at his former publisher, with whom he had an occasionally fractious relationship.

⁷⁸ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, p.151.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.153.

⁸⁰ According to Malcolm Pittock, Orwell's position at the time of writing the novel was that, 'If Britain fought in a war against Hitler it too would become a fascist state.' Malcolm Pittock, 'George Orwell', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 31 (2010), 172-76 (p.172).

⁸¹ Orwell, *Coming up For Air*, pp.153-54.

himself who is becoming infected with a species of fascism.⁸² Reflecting some of Orwell's own most dubious tendencies, he finds himself classifying the audience in brutally stereotypical terms:

Next to these three another Communist was sitting. But this one, it seems, is a different kind of Communist and not quite-quite, because he's what they call a Trotskyist. The others have got a down on him. He's even younger, a very thin, very dark, nervous-looking boy. Clever face. Jew, of course.⁸³

Lorraine Saunders argues that Orwell's principal achievement in *Coming Up For Air* is to allow us 'to see someone who does not see', as Bowling is 'consumed by fascistic emotions', the very ones that he criticises.⁸⁴ And when we witness Bowling's relish in describing his 'vision' of what the speaker sees, it is an interpretation that becomes all the more convincing:

But what he's seeing is something quite different. It's a picture of himself smashing people's faces in with a spanner. Fascist faces, of course. I know that's what he was seeing. It was what I saw myself for the second or two that I was inside him. Smash! Right in the middle! The bones cave in like an eggshell and what was a face a minute ago is just a great big blob of strawberry jam. Smash! There goes another!⁸⁵

In the same way that Winston Smith unwittingly responds to his environment in spasms of violent thought, Bowling is also shown becoming a product of the brutalising, dehumanisation of a machine world. Having given up on the Left Book Club, his journey subsequently takes him to his, somewhat unlikely, friend Porteous, a classical scholar whose estrangement in theory and the distant past ('He's dead', comments Bowling) is represented as even more futile than the narrator's.⁸⁶ Then, in the novel's final act, Bowling, armed with his secret winnings from a horse race, resolves to revisit

⁸² According to John Barnsley, Aldous Huxley, one of Orwell's masters at Eton, shared the belief that 'the spirit of mass production – extended now to the fetus [*sic*] – involves a fundamental change of values.' John H. Barnsley, 'Huxley on Television', *Society*, 19 (1999), 63-65 (p.65).

⁸³ Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, pp.155-56.

⁸⁴ Saunders, p.24.

⁸⁵ Orwell, *Coming up For Air*, p.156.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.168.

Lower Binfield on a clandestine holiday, the very location of his youthful past. Where Bowling's memories were suggested to be impotently ephemeral, Orwell, in typically gloomy fashion, portrays the reality as much worse: the High Street has now been assimilated by chain stores; his parents' shop has been transformed into a generic tea room; the previously impressive Binfield House has been turned into a 'mental home'; and in the ultimate act of blasphemy for Bowling, the secret lake which he had longed to fish since childhood has become a rubbish dump. Drawing the conclusion that 'There isn't any air', Bowling ends the novel pondering the excuse he will give to Hilda, who has now discovered his clandestine holiday.⁸⁷

Coming Up For Air is certainly not a text bereft of ideas, nor does it simply stick to the story Orwell told in his previous novels. Indeed, when one approaches the narrative from the position of Heidegger's critique of technology, one finds a clear subtext identifying *Dasein* as uprooted in the machine world. The comparison becomes especially illuminating, however, when we consider each writer's response to this situation. In his later thought, Heidegger is insistent that our view of technology as 'standing-reserve' levels both human beings and their environment into homogeneity, a state in which *Dasein* loses its sense of self and homeland. The solution to this uprootedness, as Heidegger sees it, is to allow worldly entities – the cultural paradigms referred to earlier – to be seen, not as homogenised 'standing-reserve', but in their true nature, as gathering points for the kind of sophisticated nexus of understandings and beliefs exemplified by Dreyfus' Japanese tea-cup.⁸⁸ This kind of 'meditative thinking', in which we recognise the embodiment of a shared 'form of life' – our culture, practices

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.230.

⁸⁸ Taking inspiration from the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, Heidegger turns to the lyrical description of 'Gods, mortals, earth and world' in order to describe the 'fourfold' gathering of existential beliefs and practices that coalesce when we allow an object to properly reveal itself. For his discussion of this, see Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp.141-59.

and beliefs – can flourish only when *Dasein* has a sense of *Heimat*.⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher himself much-influenced by *Being and Time*, but who turned violently against Heidegger's thought after the latter's association with National Socialism, is one of many who have attacked this dangerous idea. In a 1961 essay concerning our relation to technology, he even begins by parodying Heidegger's concerns:

We must urgently defend man against this century's technology. Man will lose his identity and become a cog in a vast machine that chews up both things and beings.⁹⁰

Whilst admitting that there 'is some truth in this declamation', Levinas is quick to point out the dangers of Heidegger's vision.⁹¹ Dismissing the 'enemies of industrial society' as 'reactionary', he sets about demonstrating that, far from a puerile fascination, technology must be embraced in its capacity for 'shaking up sleepy civilizations, eroding the heavy dullness of the past'.⁹² Once again mocking Heidegger's romanticism, Levinas states that it is not necessary for *Dasein* to,

follow a path that winds its way through fields, to feel the unity created by the bridge that links the two river banks and by the architecture of buildings, the presence of the tree, the chiaroscuro of the forests, the mystery of things, of a jug.⁹³

Referring to Heidegger's approach as 'the eternal seductiveness of paganism', Levinas explains how 'one's attachment to Place, without which the universe would become insignificant and would scarcely exist, is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers'.⁹⁴ The thrust of this attack is clear: in placing a priority on one's sense of

⁸⁹ See Pieter Tijmes, 'Home and Homelessness: Heidegger and Levinas on Dwelling', *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, Ecology*, 2 (1998), 201-13 (p.205).

⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Heidegger, Gagarin and Us', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), pp.231-34 (p.231).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., p.232.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

place or *Heimat*, humanity is polarised on geographical and racial grounds, a clear reference to Heidegger's fascist past.⁹⁵ For Levinas, when *Dasein* is circumscribed via the aspect of race, nationality, homeland (in fact, any predicative language), then its existence is automatically reduced to an approximation, thereby doing violence to the 'infinity' of each individual's Being. As we shall see in the next section, he views such actions as a root cause of tragedies such as the Shoah. The predilection for philosophers such as Heidegger to emphasise the importance of *Heimat*, therefore, is seen by Levinas as a step towards just such a way of thinking.

If we accept the truth of this counter-argument, then can Orwell be said to flirt with the same dangerous tendencies in *Coming Up For Air*? I would suggest not. For in describing the folly of Bowling's attempt to recover the *Heimat* of his childhood, Orwell demonstrates that the past 'is not a place for visiting or for seeking refuge from bombs'.⁹⁶ And in allowing his creation to veer worryingly close to a violent, fascist strain of thinking, he exhibits some awareness that the individual is at risk of dehumanisation not just from the modern world itself, but through reactionary responses, such as those exemplified in Heidegger. Furthermore, although Orwell implies that our customs and practices, as gathered within cultural paradigms, need to be preserved, perhaps even rediscovered, his wider work focused on technology expresses simply a warning of technology's potential for dehumanisation and destruction. For these reasons, Orwell's response to the modern world can more accurately be viewed as akin to the early Heidegger's concept of 'heroic alienation', a

⁹⁵ Eubanks and Gauthier neatly summarise this fear in arguing that Heidegger 'substituted collective subjectivism for individual subjectivism'. See Cecil L. Eubanks and David J. Gauthier, 'The Politics Of The Homeless Spirit: Heidegger and Levinas On Dwelling and Hospitality', *History Of Political Thought*, 32 (2011), 125-46 (p.128). For an interesting account of the extent of Heidegger's Nazi activities, long after he claimed to have repudiated the party, see Victor Farias, Joseph Margolis, and Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

⁹⁶ Jefferson Hunter, 'Orwell, Wells and, "Coming Up For Air"', *Modern Philology*, 78 (1980), 38-47 (p.47).

stoic determination to somehow remain human in the face of the uprooting, homogenising forces of mass-society and the machine age.⁹⁷ In this, one can detect not only the sentiments of McGill once more, but also traces of his early admiration of Henry Miller. Reading Orwell's 1940 essay, 'Inside the Whale', one senses his envy when he describes Miller's ability to remain 'passive to experience', and how 'against major events he is as helpless as against the elements'.⁹⁸ And when Orwell asserts that perhaps the best way of remaining human might be a 'gesture of helplessness, even of frivolity', one more motivation for Bowling's illicit escapades becomes clear.⁹⁹ Jeffrey Meyers observes how 'Miller's extreme immorality and sensuality [...] are precisely the qualities that Orwell lacks'.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, Bowling represents Miller through the more conservative lens of Orwell: an individual who comes to see the futility of hanging onto the past and who resolves to exist in the picaresque, McGill manner in order to remain human in the face of the machine.¹⁰¹ The 'Sancho Panza view of life' espoused in the McGill essay and embodied in *Coming Up For Air* can be viewed as Orwell's version of Millerian hedonism.

If Heidegger represents a reactionary response to the modern world, and Levinas a radical, then perhaps Orwell, in modifying Miller's species of quietism, offers a path between them at this time in his career.¹⁰² However, over the course of the war,

⁹⁷ See Julian Young, 'What Is Dwelling? The Homelessness of Modernity and the Worlding of the World', in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus. Vol. 1*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus, Mark A. Wrathall and Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), pp.187-203 (p.190).

⁹⁸ Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', *The Complete Works*, XII, 86-115 (p.91). This interpretation is, of course, the source of the essay's eponymous metaphor.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.110.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Meyers, 'Orwell's Apocalypse', *Modern fiction Studies*, 21 (1975), 69-80 (p.77).

¹⁰¹ In 1946, Orwell described Miller's opinions as 'a sort of nihilistic quietism', see 'Words and Henry Miller', in *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 117-19 (p.118). Robert Dellen takes this argument much further, insisting that 'the polemical intent of all his novels is to depict the consuming nature of the whale'. See Dellen, p.67.

¹⁰² Although commentators such as Steven Foster argue that the message of Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* 'is not one of detachment or withdrawal', this is certainly not how Orwell viewed it, and it is Orwell's perception of the work that is the issue here. See Steven Foster, 'A Critical Appraisal of Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 9 (1964), 196-208 (p.198).

Orwell's response to the modern world, and particularly the threat of totalising political systems, was to evolve. By the time he wrote his final novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he had earned a reputation as a fierce opponent of all forms of totalitarianism. Where his pre-war work flirted dangerously with the Heideggerian idea of homeland, his later work would take a more definite turn away from this philosophy, sharing more in common with the ethically-focused writings of Levinas. In the following section, we shall trace the course of this evolution as we examine *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The Basis of Socialism is Humanism

Nineteen Eighty-Four, published in 1949, presents a frightening and disturbing extrapolation of the totalitarian tendencies that Orwell saw in so many contemporary political systems. In literary terms, two approaches have dominated criticism of the text. The first is to consider it in isolation (or sometimes as a companion piece to *Animal Farm*), disregarding the works of the 1930s and positing it as the only novel-length achievement in Orwell's career. The second tendency, somewhat more prevalent, is to view *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Orwell's final flourish, the epitaph of a relatively short career, in which he presented the summation of his life's experience for posterity.¹ Our studies of his works from the 1930s should be enough to call the first approach into question. And whilst, as we shall see, there are aspects of several of Orwell's previous works reflected in his final novel, the second approach, too is flawed. For, although his health was deteriorating as he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is clear that Orwell did not anticipate his death in January 1950. Indeed, as he lay in his hospital bed at the beginning of that year, having married his second wife, Sonia Brownell back in

¹ See Sheldon, *Orwell: The Authorised Biography*, p.434.

October, Orwell was preparing for the future, and not eternity: arrangements had been made to fly him to Switzerland by specially chartered plane at the end of the month (it was thought the low pressure would reduce the chance of his lungs haemorrhaging);² he had, in a Bowling-esque act, bought himself a new fishing rod with some of the money that was now coming in (this, poignantly, lay unused at the foot of his bed after he died);³ he had even sketched out plans for a new novel, *A Smoking Room Story*, set on board a ship returning from the East.⁴ He was, judging by his letter to publisher Frederic Warburg, preparing not to die, but to live on as what doctors called ‘a good chronic’.⁵ A pulmonary haemorrhage on the night of January 21st 1950 ended this hope. Our approach to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will therefore be guided by Crick’s assertion that it was ‘no last testament: it was simply the last major book he wrote before he happened to die’.⁶ With this in mind, we shall seek to locate the novel, not as a summative final statement, but as part of a continuum of work – a strategy that will ultimately enable us to speculate on a possible trajectory for Orwell’s thought had he lived beyond 1950. By outlining *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s thematic continuity with *Coming Up For Air* in particular, we shall explore how Orwell’s Heideggerian conception of objects becomes an aspect of an implicit model of humanity in the latter text. And, by introducing the Levinasian notion connecting ethics with the face of the Other, we will show how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not only depicts a world without genuine value, but also contains within it a warning against certain humanistic worldviews.

Coming Up For Air demonstrated that Orwell shared much of Heidegger’s diagnosis concerning the role of the machine in modern society, specifically its potential

² Crick, George Orwell: A Life, p.403.

³ Ibid., p.404.

⁴ See ‘Appendix 1: Unfinished Projects’, in *The Complete Works*, xx, 188-200.

⁵ Orwell, ‘Letter to Fredric Warburg’, *The Complete Works*, xx, 116-17 (116). For the ‘good chronic’ prognosis, see ‘Dr Andrew Moreland report’, *The Complete Works*, xx, 122-23 (122).

⁶ Crick, George Orwell: A Life, p.385.

for dehumanisation and the supplanting of culturally-imbued objects and practices. However, where Heidegger advocated the dubious practice of returning to the *Heimat*, both physically and existentially, in order to effect a more primordial relationship with technology, Orwell in 1938 had opted for a form of Millerian quietism: stressing the value of both high and lowbrow cultural paradigms in preserving the pre-machine way of life, Orwell nevertheless manoeuvres George Bowling to admit his helplessness in the face of overwhelming historical and political trends. Ultimately, Bowling is forced to retreat ‘inside the whale’, clinging to his ‘Sancho Panza’ attitude towards living as the only means of remaining human. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often seen as both bleak and despairing in its depiction of a land, Oceania, in which no such consolations remain under the political system called Ingsoc.⁷ The novel begins with the protagonist, Winston Smith, arriving home at his flat in the ironically named Victory Mansions, ‘a swirl of gritty dust’ threatening to blow through the door with him.⁸ That technology has advanced from the world familiar to Orwell’s 1949 reader is indicated through one of the most famous opening sentences in literature: ‘It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen’.⁹ Its rhythmic beauty, founded upon a near perfect caesura, is offset by the reference to April, instantly recalling the bleak sense of loss in Eliot’s *Wasteland*. The jarring detail of the clocks striking thirteen indicates a world not merely in the thrall of military precision, but one in which something appears to have gone terribly wrong.¹⁰ And yet, notwithstanding the mild science-fiction overtones of this opening, there is some truth to Gorman Beauchamp’s assertion that Oceania is ‘a

⁷ ‘Ingsoc’ is a contraction of ‘English Socialism’, allowing Orwell to emphasise, as he did in *Animal Farm*, that totalitarianism is not exclusive to the right wing.

⁸ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Orwell’s original draft describes how ‘a million radios were striking thirteen’ – another reference to the dehumanising effects of the mass media. See Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: Facsimile of the Extant Manuscript* (San Diego Weston, Massachusetts: Harcourt Brace, 1984), p.3.

technologically primitive society'.¹¹ For, aside from the helicopters, speakwrites (a kind of Dictaphone), and two-way telescreens, through which the Party's supposedly ubiquitous (but oddly absent) Thought Police monitor citizens, the world of Oceania is characterised by deprivation.¹² The 'smell of boiled cabbage' in Winston's hallway together with the references to broken lifts, power cuts, 'coarse soap and blunt razor blades' (the shortages of which form a running joke), conjure not a technological fantasy realm so much as the austerity of post-war Britain. Such prosaically familiar details allow Orwell to present Oceania, disturbingly, as just 'one-step' away from the world of the reader.¹³ And this surely is an aspect of the text's enduring power. For, unlike the fantastical world of Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian *We*, a source of inspiration for Orwell's novel, the reader of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes submerged within the oppressive state of Oceania by virtue of its partial familiarity. Jeffrey Myers' assertion that 'England and America today bear no significant resemblance to Oceania' is, in this light, something of an overstatement.¹⁴ Indeed, it also calls into doubt Douglas Kerr's assertion that Oceania was 'Orwell's first completely imaginary fictional context'.¹⁵ It is the backdrop of everyday objects and technology that contributes to *Nineteen Eighty Four's* impact as a 'satirical fantasy', giving even the hyperbolic perversions of the Party an unsettling plausibility.¹⁶

¹¹ Gorman Beauchamp, 'Technology in the Dystopian Novel', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 32 (1986), 53-63 (p.55).

¹² We therefore dispute, at this point, Irving Howe's assertion that 'progress realized' is the 'nightmare' envisioned in this, and other, dystopian fictions. See Irving Howe, 'The Fiction of Anti-Utopia', in Howe *George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*, pp.303-09 (p.304).

¹³ Irving Howe, '1984: History as Nightmare', in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp.41-53 (p.46).

¹⁴ Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Life and Art* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p.136.

¹⁵ Kerr, *George Orwell*, p.3. A reading of parts three and four of *Gulliver's Travels*, one of Orwell's favourite books, shows that he certainly lifted a number of the Party's oppressive practices from this source, a fact acknowledged by Bernard Crick who has identified *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* 'Swiftian' qualities. See Crick, 'Orwell and Biography', *Biography*, 10 (1987), 283-300 (p.284).

¹⁶ Hammond, p.172.

The Party is instrumental in controlling the rate of technological advancement in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ensuring that it only occurs ‘when its products can in some way be used for the diminution of human liberty’.¹⁷ This determination to keep the populace in a fettered, animal-like state, extinguishing ‘once and for all the possibility of independent thought’, becomes a kind of mania, and is itself a tacit acknowledgement of the potentially disruptive power that resides in the individual.¹⁸ The monolithic class divisions of Oceania, with the God-like Big Brother at the head, followed by his elite Inner Party members, are instrumental in maintaining the Party’s hegemony, and are preserved by enforcing a state of ‘poverty and ignorance’, wealth and knowledge being strictly controlled.¹⁹ Indeed, the only real technological advancements are in the dark arts of ‘war and police espionage’.²⁰ It is against this backdrop that Winston Smith seeks to rebel against the system by writing in a diary – a forbidden private act, which he undertakes hidden in an alcove away from the glance of the all-seeing telescreen in his flat. Orwell’s reverent description of Winston’s newly-acquired diary instantly alerts the reader to its importance:

It was a peculiarly beautiful book. Its smooth creamy paper, a little yellowed by age, was of a kind that had not been manufactured for at least forty years past. He could guess, however, that the book was much older than that. He had seen it lying in the window of a frowzy little junk-shop in a slummy quarter of the town (just what quarter he did not now remember) and had been stricken immediately by an overwhelming desire to possess it.²¹

It is difficult to believe that Winston’s fascination with this object rests merely upon its aesthetic characteristics. The use of the word ‘stricken’ is important in this sense, suggesting how Winston is, to echo Sartre, ‘touched to the quick’ by his desire for this object. And later in the text, Orwell describes an almost erotic relation between Winston

¹⁷ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.222.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.223.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.219.

²⁰ Ibid., p.223.

²¹ Ibid, p.8.

and his diary, his pen sliding ‘voluptuously’ across the page as he writes, before he slumps back in his chair, ‘ashamed of himself’.²² What Winston apprehends in the object is, of course, its status as a Heideggerian cultural paradigm, one which embodies human practices – writing, reflecting, thinking – long since suppressed in the automata-like populace: it is these mirrored fragments of humanity, so missing from Oceania, that charge his sense of love.²³ Later in the narrative, Winston returns to the junk shop from which he acquired the diary and purchases an antique glass paperweight containing a small piece of coral. This object too forms a crucial motif in the story, Winston being drawn to it in similar fashion. His fascination with such seemingly useless artefacts has led Patricia Rae to argue that Winston Smith bears the strongest resemblance to his Orwellian predecessor, George Bowling.²⁴ Our discussions concerning cultural paradigms tend to support this assertion. For just as fishing represented the pre-machine past, and a forgotten relation towards nature, in *Coming Up For Air*, so the diary and paperweight in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provide a pathetic echo of a time in which writing, thought and aesthetic appreciation were the norm rather than something remote and alien. As Stephen Spender eloquently explains,

Civilised values in 1984 resemble survivals of vestigial physical organs – the tonsils or the appendix. Their significance is precisely that they are survivals, nostalgically useless in a world dominated by the mechanical means serving the depersonalised ends of power.²⁵

²² Ibid., pp.21-22.

²³ There is a potential philosophical oversight within this detail, for how would a person with such a fragmented memory of the past automatically know about the very particular practice of keeping a diary? It would be like a person from the 21st century happening upon a Victorian vinaigrette and instinctively understanding the rituals behind its use. Perhaps we can be charitable to Orwell here and assume that Mr. Charrington, the junk shop proprietor, explained the diary’s use to Winston, as he would do later with the glass paperweight.

²⁴ Patricia Rae, ‘Mr. Charrington’s Junk Shop: T. S. Eliot and Modernist Poetics in Nineteen Eighty-Four’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43 (1997), 196-220 (p.209).

²⁵ Stephen Spender, ‘Introduction to 1984’, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984*, pp.61-72 (p.64).

In their embodiment of obsolete human activities, the diary and the paperweight therefore stand apart from the other enduring low-tech items – soap, razorblades, saucepans – which surround Winston. As he explains, ‘That’s what I like about it. It’s a little chunk of history that they’ve forgotten to alter. It’s a message from a hundred years ago, if one knew how to read it.’²⁶

In a society in which knowledge of the past is carefully rationed and manipulated by the Party, objective historical truth becomes possible only through its embodiment in such fragile relics. In a moment of realisation, Winston elucidates this idea:

Do you realize that the past, starting from yesterday, has been actually abolished? If it survives anywhere, it's in a few solid objects with no words attached to them, like that lump of glass there. Already we know almost literally nothing about the Revolution and the years before the Revolution. Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. [...] I know, of course, that the past is falsified, but it would never be possible for me to prove it, even when I did the falsification myself. After the thing is done, no evidence ever remains. The only evidence is inside my own mind, and I don't know with any certainty that any other human being shares my memories.²⁷

Nineteen Eighty-Four goes further than *Coming Up For Air* in its critique of modernity by depicting not simply a brutal depravity, but the fragility of the individual’s sense of self, a sense that, dependent upon its anchor to the past, is easily manipulated by nefarious governments. In order to reinforce the idea, we are shown how even the memory of the ‘proles’, who for Orwell occupy the exalted role of ‘ordinary man’, and, for Winston, represent the last hope for humanity, has been fragmented to the point of near insanity: as he puts questions about the past to an elderly man in a pub, Winston realises that the rambling, incoherent answers he receives betray a mind that is just ‘a

²⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.178.

rubbish-heap of details'.²⁸ In another echo of the concerns of both *Coming Up For Air* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell satirises the dehumanising effects of American mass-culture, showing how the proles are kept in this state of reduced consciousness by means of

rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means on a special kind of kaleidoscope known as a versificator.²⁹

Given the Party's perverse and often self-contradicting revisionism, in which it alone determines historical truth – it claims to have invented the aeroplane – it is only the object, and not personal memory, that can anchor the past, and hence the individual mind.³⁰ In his search for a long-forgotten humanity, it is therefore unsurprising to see Winston attach such importance to (and, indeed, find comfort in) both his diary and his illicit visits to the junk shop, a pattern of behaviour that is entirely in keeping with his creator's conception of objects and history.³¹ As E.M. Forster so perceptively said in

²⁸ Ibid., p.105.

²⁹ Ibid., p.50. It is surely no coincidence that the currency of Oceania is the dollar.

³⁰ Ibid., p.177. It is, of course, another object – a photograph – that offers him incontrovertible evidence that the Party has altered history in order to implicate several suspected subversives. It is because of this disconcerting atmosphere of uncertainty conjured by the text that David Dwan has claimed, 'All attempts to demonstrate what truth is in the novel fail.' See David Dwan, 'Truth and Freedom in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four', *Philosophy and Literature*, 34 (2010), 381-393 (p.381).

³¹ It was Orwell's experience of the Communist Party's manipulation of facts during the Spanish Civil War that triggered his fears for the status of objective truth in the world. In an 'As I Please' column in 1945, he stated that, 'During the Spanish Civil War I found myself feeling very strongly that a true history of this war never would or could be written.' See 'As I Please #10, in *The Complete Works*, xvi, 88-91 (p.88). Later that year, he admitted in a letter that, 'My attention was first drawn to this deliberate falsification of history by my experiences in the Spanish Civil War.' See 'Letter to Frank Barber', in *The Complete Works*, xvi, 497-98 (p.498).

relation to the text, 'Look to the rose or the toad or, if you think them more significant, look to art or literature. There, in the useless, lies our scrap of salvation.'³²

That Winston is initially unable to begin writing in his diary and spends a period of time 'gazing stupidly at the paper', his thoughts having 'dried up' is testament to how alien such human practices have been made to the average Oceania citizen. When the words do come, they are a childish, violent, and disturbed stream of near-gibberish, whose fanatical sentiments are conveyed in an unpunctuated stream of consciousness:

Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. [...] you saw a lifeboat full of children with a helicopter hovering over it. there was a middle-aged woman might have been a jewess sitting up in the bow with a little boy about three years old in her arms. little boy screaming with fright and hiding his head between her breasts as if he was trying to burrow right into her and the woman putting her arms round him and comforting him although she was blue with fright herself, all the time covering him up as much as possible as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him, then the helicopter planted a 20 kilo bomb in among them terrific flash and the boat went all to matchwood. then there was a wonderful shot of a child's arm going up up up right up into the air a helicopter with a camera in its nose must have followed it up and there was a lot of applause from the party seats.³³

What should be clear from this enthusiastic embrace of violence, is that, at this stage of the narrative, Winston is an extremely disturbed individual. He is, as Fredric Warburg noted in his report on the novel, a depiction of 'man unmanned, of humanity without a heart'.³⁴ A 'smallish, frail' thirty-nine year old, with a varicose ulcer, who has trouble walking up the several flights of stairs to his flat, Winston is a character who shares a

³² E. M. Forster, 'George Orwell', in *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*, ed. by Irving Howe (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), pp.375-76 (p.376). In the kind of cruel irony that typifies many of Orwell's narratives, it is an object from the past which helps to ultimately betray Winston's subversions: his use of an old fashioned twelve-hour clock in his illicit hideaway causes him to sleep right through the next day without realizing it is evening and not morning. After the arrival of the Thought Police, and as if to reinforce the fragility of the notion of an objective past, his precious paperweight is smashed on the floor. It is also worth noting how Mr Charrington, the junkshop owner, is revealed to be a member of the Thought Police in this section. Is Orwell, as he did in *Coming Up for Air*, casting doubt on the strategy of retreating into the past?

³³ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.11. Orwell's 1943 notes for this novel make clear that the anti-Semitic subtext to the Party's belief system – in this case shown through the label of 'jewess', a term from his own prejudiced vocabulary of the 1930s – was entirely intentional, reflecting the role of such bigotries in German and Russian totalitarianism of the 1930s and 40s.

³⁴ Fredric Warburg, 'Report on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*', in *The Complete Works*, XIX, 479-81 (p.480).

physiological shabbiness with his predecessor, George Bowling.³⁵ Unlike Bowling, however, Smith is also, by any normal standard, psychologically damaged. But perhaps the word ‘damaged’ is misleading here, since it implies a prior, immaculate state: thanks to the socio-economic system of Ingsoc, Winston has remained inhuman from childhood. It is this detail which has prompted Philip Zimbardo’s perceptive description of the text as ‘an unnatural experiment in the negation of human nature’.³⁶ However, the novel’s original title, *The Last Man in Europe*, often confuses the matter: it is assumed that Winston begins the story as the last true human being. Such a reading is contradicted not only by Winston’s early violent outbursts, but also Orwell’s summation of totalitarian systems, which aim ‘not merely to make sure that people will think the right thing, but actually to make them less conscious’.³⁷ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thus offers a depiction of *Dasein* ontically modified by totalitarianism; it describes an attempt to quash those very human *existentialia* that are so evident in his earlier works. As his diary entry is supposed to show, Winston thus begins as just another emotionally stunted and animal-like Outer Party member, albeit one who has committed a subversive act in acquiring a diary. Winston becomes the ‘last man’ through a gradual process of humanisation, one that has ironically been surreptitiously engineered – and will be violently reversed – by the Party, in the most painful of honey traps.

At the beginning of the novel, Orwell illustrates how inhuman the people of Oceania have become through the ritual assembly known as the ‘Two Minutes Hate’. Here, party members gather to abuse the enemies of the state, projected on giant telescreens, whilst reaffirming their love for Big Brother. In a manner mimicking Napoleon’s demonization of former comrade Snowball in *Animal Farm*, itself a parody

³⁵ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.4.

³⁶ Zimbardo, Philip G., ‘Mind Control: Political Fiction and Psychological Reality’, in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. by Peter Stansky (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1983), pp.197-215 (p.197).

³⁷ Orwell, ‘Politics Vs. Literature’, in *The Complete Works*, xviii, 417-32 (p.424).

of Stalin's betrayal of Trotsky, the elusive Jewish intellectual, Emmanuel Goldstein, is held up as the enemy of the people:

In its second minute the Hate rose to a frenzy. People were leaping up and down in their places and shouting at the tops of their voices in an effort to drown the maddening bleating voice that came from the screen. The little sandy-haired woman had turned bright pink, and her mouth was opening and shutting like that of a landed fish. Even O'Brien's heavy face was flushed. He was sitting very straight in his chair, his powerful chest swelling and quivering as though he were standing up to the assault of a wave. The dark-haired girl behind Winston had begun crying out 'Swine! Swine! Swine!' and suddenly she picked up a heavy Newspeak dictionary and flung it at the screen. It struck Goldstein's nose and bounced off; the voice continued inexorably. In a lucid moment Winston found that he was shouting with the others and kicking his heel violently against the rung of his chair. The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in.³⁸

As is so often the case with Orwell, there is a degree of dark humour intermingled with this disturbing picture, notably in the detail of the fish-like woman and the dictionary bouncing off Goldstein's nose (presumably a veiled reference to the crude physical anti-Semitism encouraged by the totalitarian regimes of Orwell's time).³⁹ But the scene also clearly illustrates how far the citizens of Oceania have regressed, their simple conditioned reflexes making it 'impossible to avoid joining in'. This is *bad faith* taken to a perverse extreme: unlike Sartre's young woman, who is perfectly aware of her attempt to suppress her freedom, the braying, and violent Party members are seemingly oblivious to even the idea of autonomy. The reader is, of course, deeply unsettled by this depiction of herd-like human beings. However, Orwell seeks to demonstrate that totalitarianism reaches much further than simple behavioural control. For, as we shall see, morality itself is eliminated when individual consciousness is so reduced.

As a means of total social control, the Party has inculcated the populace with only the broad responses of love – exclusively for Big Brother – and hatred, for

³⁸ Ibid., p.16-17. As Melvyn New observes, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell demonstrates that 'the totalitarian state can never afford to run out of Jews'. Melvyn New, 'Orwell and Antisemitism: Toward 1984', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 21 (1975), 81-105 (p.100).

³⁹ The novel is, as Orwell himself pointed out in a statement released in 1949, meant as a satire.

anything that is deemed undesirable. This binary form of emotional indoctrination not only affords unwavering enthusiasm for the perpetual war fought by Oceania, it allows for the object of hatred to be switched as the enemies of the state alter: ‘The rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp.’⁴⁰ It is in this aspect that Orwell connects his account of the destruction of the individual to his broader aim of showing up the ‘perversions to which a centralized economy is liable’.⁴¹ For Oceania’s rulers also adhere to a policy of ‘continuous warfare’ with one of the other two totalitarian superstates, Eurasia or Eastasia, as a means of both disposing of surplus production and maintaining the populace in a state of frenzied patriotism. Satirising the perverse balancing of power in the nascent Cold War, Orwell depicts Oceania periodically switching sides as a means of maintaining the existing world order. In each case, the state’s absolute control of historical media – newspapers, photographs, television and radio – allows it to pretend that the new state of affairs had always been in existence.⁴² Moreover, by keeping party members in a state of reduced consciousness, Oceania’s rulers are easily able to manipulate their rudimentary emotions of love and hate to suit the particular political situation. This curtailed emotional palette of the protagonists is illustrated in a number of other ways at the beginning of the novel, most notably in the love affair that Winston begins with a young woman named Julia. Having initially taken a misogynistic dislike to her, thereby revealing his own sexual frustrations – ‘He disliked nearly all women, and especially the young and pretty ones’ – Julia’s regular

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.17.

⁴¹ Orwell, ‘Statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’, in *The Complete Works*, XX, 134-36 (p.135).

⁴² As well as James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution*, which predicted the emergence of three great superstates, Orwell clearly aimed to satirise Hitler’s betrayal of the Molotov-Ribbentrop ‘non-aggression’ pact in 1941 here. In one of the novel’s most memorable moments, Orwell even shows a public speaker altering the content of his speech without breaking step, as news of a switch of allegiance filters through.

glances trigger his paranoid suspicion that she is a member of the Thought Police.⁴³ His programmed tendency to default to violent hatred is shown in no uncertain terms when he is seen emerging from the forbidden junk shop by Julia, after acquiring the paperweight:

As he turned it occurred to him that the girl had only passed him three minutes ago and that by running he could probably catch up with her. He could keep on her track till they were in some quiet place, and then smash her skull with a cobblestone. The piece of glass in his pocket would be heavy enough for the job.⁴⁴

But it is, of course, not just Winston who responds to situations with such unrefined emotions. In one of the most touching moments of the novel, Julia later feigns a fall in front of him, relying upon his assistance as a pretext to pass him a note – their first direct communication. As a means of reflecting Winston's growing sense of humanity, Orwell describes the incident in terms recalling the penetrating force of his own epiphanies:

A curious emotion stirred in Winston's heart. In front of him was an enemy who was trying to kill him: in front of him, also, was a human creature, in pain and perhaps with a broken bone. Already he had instinctively started forward to help her. In the moment when he had seen her fall on the bandaged arm, it had been as though he felt the pain in his own body.⁴⁵

What is 'curious' about the emotion from Winston's point of view is, of course, that it involves genuine solicitude for another. One cannot help thinking back to the girl in a Wigan back yard, in this respect. Presumably, the humanising activity of committing thoughts to the diary – and it is worth remarking that Orwell himself was a regular diarist – has begun to have a restorative effect. The note that Julia subsequently passes to Winston (in 'large unformed handwriting' – an apposite detail) contains the heartbreakingly childlike message, 'I love you'. As if to underline the paucity of

⁴³ Ibid., p.12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp.115-16.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.121-22.

emotional responses conditioned by the Party, Julia's words default to an inappropriate extreme – the only sentiment aside from hatred of which she has been made capable.⁴⁶ Michael Clune has observed how 'Oceania's regime causes its citizens always to experience everything as if for the first time'; and this assertion is borne out, as we witness Winston and Julia's affair unfold.⁴⁷

The sexual relationship at the heart of the novel is presented as a principal means of breaking the violent indoctrination of the Party, operating alongside the forbidden paperweight and diary as an affirmation of the outlawed human practices of the past. As Winston, in a mock-Marxian formulation, later says of the 'proles': 'Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.'⁴⁸ This seemingly unsolvable conundrum contains within it the key to Winston's own re-humanisation: through engaging in rebellious acts of humanity – another echo of Orwell's 'Sancho Panza' approach to life – Winston enables himself to become increasingly conscious of his reality.⁴⁹ Thus, as the couple meet more regularly (and it is worth noting how they hire a room above the junk shop for these illicit and anachronistic affirmations of humanity), the narrative depicts Winston's growing range of emotional responses, principally through his ongoing diary. Not only is the diary an expression of *Dasein's* need for a private mental space, away from state interference, a

⁴⁶ It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Orwell's own predilection for the objectification of others and occasional obtuseness in relationships was serendipitous when it came to portraying such emotionally limited characters.

⁴⁷ Michael Clune, 'Orwell and the Obvious', *Representations*, 107 (2009), 30-55 (p.40).

⁴⁸ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.81.

⁴⁹ What causes Winston to begin his rebellion in the first place? Orwell's narrator informs us that it was suggested to him partly by the opportunity presented by the alcove in his flat, but this does not ring true: presumably Winston has lived there for some time, so why would the thought occur now? Orwell's explanation of Winston being 'stricken' by the sight of the diary is more plausible, suggesting that, as an emblem of another age, the diary itself demanded to be utilised for its projected purpose. But there is a third aspect encouraging his rebellion: in an Orwellian epiphany mirroring those we discussed earlier, Winston catches the glance of O'Brien, a senior member of the Inner Party, during a meeting. As their eyes meet, Orwell describes Winston's belief that 'an unmistakeable message had passed. It was as though their two minds had opened and the thoughts were flowing from one into the other through their eyes. 'I am with you,' O'Brien seemed to be saying to him.' (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.20.)

concept denigrated and forbidden by the Party through the officially-sanctioned word 'Ownlife', but it is a fine measure of Winston's burgeoning humanity. (And, in a neat metafictional twist, Orwell also underlines its power as a repository for personal history by using it to relate aspects of Winston's own past to the reader). Indeed, his growing humanity can almost be measured by the sophistication of the language used for each entry. The following excerpt, Winston's third, recalls his experience with an elderly prostitute, and introduces Orwell's discussion of the sexual politics of Oceania:

It was three years ago. It was on a dark evening, in a narrow side-street near one of the big railway stations. She was standing near a doorway in the wall, under a street lamp that hardly gave any light. She had a young face, painted very thick. It was really the paint that appealed to me, the whiteness of it, like a mask, and the bright red lips. Party women never paint their faces. There was nobody else in the street, and no telescreens. She said two dollars.⁵⁰

Unlike the initial entry, this appears more controlled and less animalistic. Nevertheless, the rather stunted sentences retain a childlike quality, giving an indication that Winston is still learning to think and express himself properly. At around this time, we are shown that his self-awareness has grown to a point where he has started to recognise the conditioned reflex within others, as when he notices the doctrinaire recitations of his colleague, Syme: 'Winston had a curious feeling that this was not a real human being but some kind of dummy. It was not the man's brain that was speaking, it was his larynx.'⁵¹ Winston, it would seem, is now in a position to apprehend what the Party does to people. Even so, the violence inculcated within him – the 'flame of the blowlamp' – is never far from the surface, as when a colleague prevents him from sitting with Julia in the canteen and he has 'a hallucination of himself smashing a

⁵⁰ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

pickaxe right into the middle' of the man's face.⁵² This, of course, recalls Bowling's fascistic sentiments at the Left Book Club meeting, but it is interesting to note how, once again, it is the face that is Orwell's focus: even in a society characterised by dehumanised homogeneity, it is the face of the Other that is the defining feature. We shall return to this idea below in our discussion of Levinas. Later in the narrative, following a fatal bombing raid, Winston notices a 'bloody stump' that was a human hand lying in the street, and callously kicks 'the thing into the gutter'.⁵³ As a counterpoint to this brutality, sometime afterwards, he is able to reflect how the 'proles', in their commitment to individual relationships, had 'stayed human':

They had not become hardened inside. They had held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to re-learn by conscious effort. And in thinking this he remembered, without apparent relevance, how a few weeks ago he had seen a severed hand lying on the pavement and had kicked it into the gutter as though it had been a cabbage stalk.

'The proles are human beings,' he said aloud. 'We are not human.'⁵⁴

There is an admirable, and often unappreciated, subtlety to such parts of the novel. Winston, unlike the reader, is initially unaware that it is this reflection on the proles' humanity that has dragged up the brutal and contrasting memory of his own callous behaviour. And Orwell allows the reader to conclude that confronting his past self in this way – the self manufactured by the Party – is part of Winston's human re-education, one that he finally apprehends by blurting the epiphanous statement, 'We are not human.'⁵⁵ If there could be any doubt, this decisively underscores for the reader that, up to this point there was no 'last man in Europe'. A few pages later, as Winston

⁵² Ibid., p.128. This desecration of the face, which prefigures O'Brien's method of torturing Winston in Room 101, serves to underline, once again, the importance of the face and eyes for Orwell in conferring humanity on an individual. As such, the inhumane world of the novel is further emphasised by the Party member whose glasses create the impression of 'two blank discs instead of eyes' (p.62).

⁵³ Ibid., p.97.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.191.

⁵⁵ That this conversation takes place whilst in bed offers yet another affirmation that, for Orwell, the so-called base tendencies he so fondly described in the McGill essay, are instrumental in maintaining our humanity.

meets with Julia in a street, the reader is left in no doubt concerning his emotional re-education:

But after the second time it was different. The smell of her hair, the taste of her mouth, the feeling of her skin seemed to have got inside him, or into the air all round him. [...] She gave the tips of his fingers a quick squeeze that seemed to invite not desire but affection.⁵⁶

Through a re-engagement with past practices and activities, first through the power of obsolete objects and then the rebellious act of sex, which gives way to love, Winston is successfully able to push back the dehumanising indoctrinations of the Party. And it is perhaps here that one finds the ‘flickering candlelight of hope’ that Fredric Warburg felt was absent in this otherwise bleak text.⁵⁷

What the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does to its members is to maintain them in a state very much like Sartre’s *Being-in-itself*. In this mode, as we have seen, *Dasein* strives to abrogate his or her responsibility and freedom, seeking to relegate its being to the realm of the *in-itself*. But perhaps, for reasons that will become clear, it would be more instructive to return to Emmanuel Levinas in order to understand the process at work in this novel. For Levinas asserts that Sartre’s account is a reversal of the true process. Eschewing prior terminology for the realm of worldly ‘things’ in favour of his own expression, *il y a* (there is), Levinas seeks to deny what Sean Hand has referred to as the ‘inner peace’ associated with Sartre’s *in-itself* and the generous truth-conferring properties of Heidegger’s equivalent, ‘*es-gibt*’ (literally, ‘it gives’), both of which ignore the fundamental horror associated with this aspect of existence.⁵⁸ For Levinas, ‘the *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is ‘being in general’.’⁵⁹ By way of

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.161.

⁵⁷ ‘Warburg’s Report on 1984’, in *The Complete Works*, XIX, 479-81, p.480.

⁵⁸ Sean Hand, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.29.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘There is: Existence without Existents’, in *The Levinas Reader*, pp.30-36 (p.30). For the sake of clarity, we shall adopt the French variant, *il y a*, from here on.

illustration, he goes on to describe phenomenologically a typical encounter with the *il y a*:

When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence. In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not 'something'. But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.⁶⁰

Continuing, Levinas explains how, 'The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not.'⁶¹ The *il y a* operates, according to Simon Critchley, 'like a shadow or ghost that haunts Levinas's work'.⁶² And far from seeking Sartrean dissolution, *Dasein* feels horror at the prospect of sinking into this undifferentiated mass of 'things'. Despite Levinas' disavowals, there is a strong pre-sentiment of Sartre's *Nausea* in this idea, where the protagonist, Roquentin, experiences the sickening epiphany of the world's underlying existence whilst looking at the root of a tree.⁶³ But the notion of having no choice but to 'participate' in this play of Being is crucial in accounting for the resulting sense of horror. If we follow Michael Morgan in thinking of the *il y a* as 'Nature', taken in its broadest sense to include not just worldly entities but also the physical processes and laws that determine their movements, then one can see how, far from Sartre's idea of wanting to dissolve ourselves within, 'our emphasis on our individual distinctiveness and the virtues of the self is a strategy to avoid the dread of being swallowed up by Nature, by the threat of insignificance.'⁶⁴ That one is part of a natural process, that one's

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.30.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.31.

⁶² Simon Critchley, 'Il y a - Holding Levinas's Hand To Blanchot's Fire', in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers: Levinas, Phenomenology and his Critics*, ed. by Claire Katz with Lara Trout, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2005), I, 75-87 (p.80).

⁶³ 'And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself[...] the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, p.183

⁶⁴ Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.196.

thoughts and actions are subject to naturalistic determinations binding one to the physical world, that, to use the words of Critchley, one experiences ‘the facticity of being riveted to existence without an exit’, is, for Levinas, a constant source of dread.⁶⁵ In these terms, the horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as indeed with totalitarianism in general, lies in the attempt of the Party to quash *Dasein*’s differentiating individuality, in effect returning humanity to the status of the *il y a*. Robbed of access to those human practices that Orwell champions throughout his later writing, and denied even a past, members of Oceania’s Outer Party exist as mere cells in a deterministic natural order. And the acknowledgment that this mode of Being is imposable through the violent pressures of totalitarianism can be seen as one of the novel’s greatest but most frightening achievements: the inhuman Winston Smith depicted at the beginning of the narrative is an entirely plausible construct, a malleable, semi-conscious drone and not a reasoning, free, and ethical being. When one considers this aspect of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* against Orwell’s previous works, one notices that, for the first time, he is utilising a protagonist who is rigidly ensconced in a life of oppression. On each previous occasion, Orwell’s fictional characters, Flory, Dorothy, Comstock, and Bowling, have conveyed experiences of oppression from the perspective of the middle-class, often through the guilt of being the oppressor themselves, and frequently with the ability to escape into their previously comfortable lifestyles: this, of course, mirrors the reality of their creator. Bowling, as we have seen, comes closest to being a protagonist immersed in oppression, surrounded as he is by the suffocating modern world, but the relegation of Winston Smith to the status of *il y a* is of an entirely different order. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we witness Orwell, for the first time, creating a protagonist who speaks to

⁶⁵ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.60.

us from a position of utter inhumanity, and the result is a powerful reminder of how tyranny can force any human being to occupy such a role.

As a means of underscoring this satirical warning, Orwell accordingly depicts a number of the brutal techniques used by totalitarian regimes ‘to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought’: the vocabulary of the English language is systematically reduced through the introduction of a truncated dialect, Newspeak; a blind faith in the leadership is necessitated via the manipulation of history; the omnipresent technological surveillance forces citizens to slavishly follow Party orthodoxy, eliminating the need for individual thought; and personal relationships and emotions are eliminated except where they serve to reinforce love for Big Brother or hatred of Oceania’s enemies.⁶⁶ But, in such a world, as Orwell demonstrates with the Two-Minutes’ Hate, there is only the rule of law and deterministic processes; there can be no genuine choice, and so no genuine values. The Party of Oceania thus displays what Howard Caygill, with regard to Nazi Germany, has described as ‘an exterminatory logic that would incarnate the universal’: it is a world of facts and not values, of the mechanistic *il y a* and not individuals.⁶⁷ Levinas reflects this idea when he says that, in the horror of the *il y a*, ‘a subject is stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalized’.⁶⁸ Orwell’s text augments this idea, suggesting that, when taken to an extreme, dehumanisation eliminates even the subject’s ability to recognise its situation: thus, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the sense of horror is manifest primarily in the reader. But, as we alluded to above, the *il y a* is, in a limited way, a part of our own world as well: we experience such undifferentiated Being when

⁶⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.223.

⁶⁷ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.39.

⁶⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘There is: Existence without Existents’, in *The Levinas Reader*, p.33. Levinas spent five years in a military prisoners’ camp, having been captured by the Germans in 1940. Several members of his close family were executed at the beginning of the war in the Nazi’s anti-Semitic pogroms. It is clear that Levinas’ subsequent fears for the denial of humanity have a very firm grounding in his own experiences.

absorbed in the ‘they’, or when treated as an homogenous consumer; more seriously, it can be foisted upon us through racial, sexual or social discrimination. How can a society resist it on a day-to-day basis, and is there any remedy expressed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?

For Levinas, *Dasein* differentiates itself from the *il y a* by affirming its most human quality – its sense of freedom, the ability to choose how to behave and therefore to view the world in terms of values rather than facts. It is partly for this reason that, throughout his career, he refers to ‘ethics’ as first philosophy. Crucially, Levinas argues that this ethical realm derives from authentic contact with the Other (*L’Autrui*), an encounter where, echoing Sartre, the limits of my own freedom are made apparent by the presence of another subject.⁶⁹ But the tendency of Western philosophy, he explains, has been to attempt to actually describe this relation between *Dasein* and the Other, reducing it, in Critchley’s words, to one ‘of equality, symmetry and reciprocity’.⁷⁰ On such models, even those espousing some kind of equality between individuals, the Other is rendered through epistemological terms such as Being, ‘mind’, or even Heidegger’s the ‘they’, and consequently reduced to a mere object of comprehension. Levinas strongly resists this tendency, arguing that to circumscribe the Other using any such language is to not only fall into the inappropriate mode of epistemology, but also to engage in a dangerous reductivism: ‘Our relation with the Other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension.’⁷¹ One can detect a resonance here with our earlier critique of Orwell’s objectifying language and how the Other breaks free of such constraints through the epiphany of eye

⁶⁹ In this discussion, we shall use the capitalised word ‘Other’ to translate the French expression ‘*L’Autrui*’, meaning a specifically human Other. The lower case English word will be used to render Levinas’ ‘*L’Autre*’, meaning any other entity.

⁷⁰ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p.59.

⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’, in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, trans. Alphonso Lingis and others (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp.1-10 (p.6).

contact. And, for Levinas, it is just such objectifying practices which foster the dehumanising racial tagging that fuelled catastrophes such as the *Shoah*.⁷² In using any category to describe the Other, one is guilty of reducing them to fit one's own comprehension – a process which Levinas memorably describes as 'transmuting' them in the 'melting pot' of 'the knowing I'.⁷³ Such language is endemic in Oceania, where the Other is habitually reduced through labels – Inner Party, Outer Party, Jew, Prole, Eurasian, Eastasian – and, more subtly, a slew of animal epithets – beetle, rabbit, horse, duck, insect – employed by Winston in free indirect speech. As Lisa Guenther has identified, this rationalising, measuring activity has the somewhat absurd yet dangerous corollary of then ascribing some 'more alterity than others'.⁷⁴ But it is important to recognise that, for Levinas, any account of the Other as my counterpart or equivalent – one thinks of the Party members habitual use of the term 'brother' – will not do either. Such reductions present a violently distorted picture and fail to respect the Other's distinctiveness. Diane Perpich spells out the objectifying process with great eloquence:

Levinas's discussions of alterity are meant to show that beyond every characterization of a person in terms of what she is—e.g., a lawyer, a mother, blue-eyed—there is an irreducible who that is not just the sum of the person's social roles, relationships, or descriptors. This "who," however, cannot be stated without turning into a "what" and without thereby reintegrating the face into the social fabric in a way that makes of it nothing more than the cloth from which it is cut.⁷⁵

Rather than a finite substance to be described and posited as an object of knowledge or understanding, Levinas' Other 'overflows' our attempts to absorb him in a system of totality. Recalling Descartes' assertion that human beings are capable of possessing an 'idea' of infinity, even though its content necessarily exceeds one's comprehension,

⁷² Heidegger and his shameful association with the Nazi party in 1933 and beyond is certainly alluded to by Levinas in this respect.

⁷³ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Height', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, pp.11-31 (p.11).

⁷⁴ Lisa Guenther, 'The Ethics and Politics of Otherness: Negotiating Alterity and Racial Difference', *philoSOPHIA*, 1 (2011), 195-214 (p.201).

⁷⁵ Diane Perpich, 'Figurative Language and the "Face" in Levinas's Philosophy', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 38 (2005), 103-21 (pp.113-14).

Levinas talks about the Other as ‘infinite’, always resisting our totalising tendencies.⁷⁶

As Christina Howells explains,

It is not so much that the Other is unknowable, as if he had some content which was incommunicable; it is rather that the terminology of knowledge is inappropriate to describe relations between two transcendent, non-identical free consciousnesses.⁷⁷

In direct contradiction with Heidegger’s assertions that there is no aspect of Being that lies beyond *Dasein*’s grasp, Levinas seeks to position the Other in just such a role. An acknowledgement of this offers not only a remedy for the society of Oceania, but also our own. But if the Other is, in effect, outside my apprehension, then how is it possible for me to have any sort of encounter with him? To be sure, this difficulty remains an ever-present issue for both Levinas and his commentators: if positing the Other thereby reduces or distorts him, how can we begin to describe or even think about human relationships?

Levinas’ solution is to avoid the kind of rigid terminology that, for him, has characterised Western philosophy. He thus introduces into his discussion the idea of the *face (le visage)*. But it is important to recognise immediately that he does not mean the physical face by this term, which would be far too reductive. Instead, the word loosely denotes something like the Other’s general being or, to use the succinct words of Bernhard Waldenfels, ‘the other as such’.⁷⁸ As Atterton and Calarco explain:

The face rather is personification in that it presents - rather than represents - the Other in person. It is the very presence of that which does not present itself to knowledge and understanding in the manner of things.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Indeed, this argument provided the title for his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, in 1961.

⁷⁷ Christina Howells, ‘Sartre and Levinas’, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi & David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.91-99 (p.92).

⁷⁸ Bernhard Waldenfels, ‘Levinas & the Face of the Other’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, pp.63-81 (p.65).

⁷⁹ Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, *On Levinas* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), p.27.

Where the Other always exceeds the totalising categories with which we would seek to circumscribe him, the face can be thought about as that ‘infinity’ of his being that ruptures our homogenous perception of the world. Hence Levinas’ statement, ‘It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalisation, but the infinity of the Other.’⁸⁰ There is a similarity to Sartre’s account of wrestling for subjectivity with the Other here, but we must recognise that, for Levinas, whilst similarly asymmetrical, the process of encountering the Other is a necessary and positive one. For it is only through the Other that the possibility of an ethical choice arises:

This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: “you shall not commit murder.”⁸¹

This unspoken demand precedes and founds every aspect of *Dasein*’s interactions with the Other, and so allows the ‘commencement of moral consciousness’.⁸² Whether we choose to act upon it or not, the call for an ethical choice follows ineluctably from the face of the Other. This interaction also demonstrates the limits of my own power, for the Other will always outstrip any attempt to thematise him, and thus the encounter ‘involves a calling into question of oneself’.⁸³ It is for this reason that Levinas calls our relation with the Other asymmetrical, and sometimes describes the Other as possessing a ‘height’ with respect to us.⁸⁴ The ethical demand that is accordingly conferred upon me affirms my own status as a free, moral human being: the Other’s height, in this

⁸⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p.80.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.199.

⁸² Ibid., p.84.

⁸³ Ibid., p.80.

⁸⁴ Barbara Davy points out that the idea of ‘height’ should not be taken literally, and merely signifies the Other being ‘beyond’ rather than ‘above’ us. But Levinas clearly means to emphasise the moral imperative issuing from the Other by use of this term. See, Barbara Davy, ‘An Other Face of Ethics in Levinas’, *Ethics & the Environment*, 12 (2007), 39-65 (p.44).

sense, sustains my own humanity. Thus, 'Levinas reinvests with value precisely those elements of the existential world-view which seem to Sartre most negative'.⁸⁵

As we have suggested, Oceania is a society where the leadership attempts to reduce the populace to the *il y a*. Orwell allows us to see that this involves, not only a disavowal of Otherness, but a repudiation of the very world of value that emerges through the face:

The terrible thing that the Party had done was to persuade you that mere impulses, mere feelings, were of no account, while at the same time robbing you of all power over the material world. When once you were in the grip of the Party, what you felt or did not feel, what you did or refrained from doing, made literally no difference.⁸⁶

And where Levinas' Other occupies the God-like position of 'infinite', presenting a face that exceeds our grasp, it is the omnipotent Big Brother (whose actual face is depicted on almost every Oceania wall) together with his Inner Party acolytes, who exclusively inhabit this elevated role in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: unlike the proles and the subjugated Outer Party members, it is they alone who have a private, 'inner' life. Orwell's exaltation of the Levinasian *visage* neatly meshes with his own lifelong tendency to imbue the face with humanity, and is perhaps further evidence of its centrality to his thinking. But it is also interesting to note Levinas' tendency to refer to the Other as infinite, and God-like, because the practices of the Party are described throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in mock religious terms: St. Martin's church has become a museum, housing 'propaganda displays of various kinds';⁸⁷ members of the Inner Party wear black overalls,⁸⁸ recalling at once the SS and the priesthood; and the text of Oceania's principal enemy, Goldstein (actually composed by O'Brien and his cronies)

⁸⁵ Howells, 'Sartre and Levinas', p.94.

⁸⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.190. The enemies of Oceania are, of course, viewed as Other, but not in the sense that Levinas requires: rather than respect being afforded to the 'infinite' face, the Party seeks to circumscribe them in the crude, totalising racialisms of Newspeak.

⁸⁷ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.113.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13.

is referred to reverently in biblical terms as the book.⁸⁹ During the Two Minutes' Hate, a woman throws her arms towards Big Brother's image on the telescreen exclaiming, 'My Saviour!' before 'uttering a prayer'.⁹⁰ And the entirety of Winston and Julia's illicit initial meeting with O'Brien recalls precisely the details of Holy Communion.⁹¹ Indeed, like God, Big Brother himself is never seen in the novel, and is most likely a fabrication, known only through his 'disembodied sadism'.⁹² As Patrick Reilly has correctly asserted, 'Everything slots into place once we recognise that Oceania is a theocracy.'⁹³ For Orwell, religion is yet another threat to the autonomy of the individual. Like his long-standing hostility to Soviet Communism, indeed doctrinaire politics in general, Orwell is keenly aware of forces that can tempt *Dasein* into a species of unthinking acquiescence. His clever parallel between Catholicism and totalitarian leader-worship in the novel, must therefore be seen as affirming their equivalence as aspects of the 'they'. This religious imagery persists into the last third of the novel, where Winston is arrested, tortured and dehumanised once more by the Party, O'Brien overseeing this 're-education'. Written whilst he was extremely unwell, some commentators have interpreted the relentless sadism of this part of the book as reflecting Orwell's own innermost despair.⁹⁴ But given the religious imagery that

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.16.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.19.

⁹¹ Not only do Winston and Julia share wine and eat a 'flat white tablet', but they also engage in a catechism in response to O'Brien's questioning before sharing the hymn-like details of a nursery rhyme. And, of course, in O'Brien himself, Orwell has utilised an Irish name. See Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp.197-206.

⁹² Isaac Deutscher, '1984: The Mysticism of Cruelty', in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984*, pp. 29-40 (p.39).

⁹³ Patrick Reilly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: Past, Present and Future* (Boston: Twayne's Masterwork Studies, 1989), p.81. We must demur with Reilly's assertion that the novel is not an attack on organised religion, however (p.85). Given Orwell's hostility to Catholicism throughout his career, it is likely that the pervasive religious symbolism is also a convenient swipe at dogmatic theists.

⁹⁴ See John Strachey, 'The Strangled Cry', excerpt in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984*, pp.54-61 (p.59).

pervades the entire narrative, it is difficult not to think of Winston's being tortured whilst strapped to a gurney more in terms of the Flagellation of Christ.⁹⁵

Whilst Winston believes himself to have capitulated under torture by both confessing his crimes and surrendering to Party doctrine, he remains oblivious to the fact that it is a far greater submission that O'Brien seeks. Not content with asserting the Party's hegemony over objective truth (Winston is coerced into seeing five fingers held up as four), O'Brien and his men seek to systematically rebuild the prisoner in an image of their choosing. Thus, after the initial torture sessions, Winston is first restored physically, like a domesticated animal, allowed to 'grow fatter and stronger every day'.⁹⁶ He is given a more comfortable cell, washed, provided with new clothes, and has his physical ailments attended to. And, underlining the Party's resolve to demonstrate their absolute control, he is provided with a slate upon which to write, an appropriation of the very practice that sparked his initial humanisation. At this point in the narrative, Winston assumes he has given the Party everything they seek, and that he is simply awaiting his final execution. However, O'Brien remains determined to excise the last remnant of his humanity by not only brainwashing him into loving Big Brother, but forcing him into a betrayal of Julia, the only human being for whom he has genuine affection. After taking him to the infamous Room 101, O'Brien places Winston into a torture device containing rats, aware from seven years of covert observation that this is his biggest phobia. At the point of releasing the creatures to bore into his face, attacking 'the eyes first', Winston finally capitulates:⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Indeed, the messianic 'rise and fall' that Winston undergoes in the text as a whole is mirrored in the restoration and subsequent final destruction that he is led through in the Ministry of Love.

⁹⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.315.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.328.

Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!⁹⁸

Having exercised their total power by building Winston up from the *il y a*, to the status of a sensual, thinking human being, the Party is able to instantly dehumanise him by threatening that very Orwellian emblem of humanity, the eyes. After remaining loyal to Julia for both personal and ethical reasons, Winston's eventual betrayal of her is the final step in his dehumanisation, involving not just the denigration of an Other, but the abandonment of his own burgeoning ethics. Under the pressure of torture, the Party has forced him to repudiate their only rival for Levinasian face and height, subordinating her to his own well-being. Winston is ruined when he treats Julia as *il y a*, pleading for the destruction of her face rather than his own, an act which returns him to the conditioned-reflex mentality he had at the beginning of the narrative, devoid of morality.⁹⁹ With his extraction from the ethical world complete, the torture is ended and the now-broken Winston is released into the limbo of the Chestnut Tree Café, awaiting his final execution. As if to pursue the messianic allegory, Orwell describes how alcohol now 'had become the element he swam in. It was his life, his death and his resurrection'.¹⁰⁰ But, whilst Winston is made out to be the Christ-like martyr, it is O'Brien and his Party that Orwell has shown to be the absolute religion.

Throughout the entire torture sequence, O'Brien displays a level of omniscience that borders on the comical, perhaps appropriate in a work intended to be satirical. Not only does he know what Winston thought and believed in the past, down to the details

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.329.

⁹⁹ Orwell seems to diverge from Levinas at this point, implying that it is possible to disavow the face and wholly inhabit the realm of the *il y a*. For Levinas, the face cannot be dismissed so lightly: like Sartre's *in-itself*, the *il y a* is a mode of being that we can never fully retreat to, since the ethical demand of the Other can never be effaced. But, of course, Orwell's work is a satire, not a philosophical treatise, and in such a text we might expect a certain hyperbole. However, as we discuss below, Orwell too hints that the Party is delusional in thinking it can crush the face.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.338.

of a dream he had seven years ago, but he is able to predict almost everything that he will say.¹⁰¹

There was no idea that he had ever had, or could have, that O'Brien had not long ago known, examined and rejected. His mind contained Winston's mind.¹⁰²

This, it would seem, is nothing less than the mind of God, reflecting the virtual omnipotence of the totalitarian who controls reality. And, having crushed down Outer Party members to the status of the *il y a*, it is Big Brother, and by extension O'Brien, who attempt to take on the role of the infinite, the sole possessors of height, and the elusive face in Oceania. Continuing in the language of religion, O'Brien explains, 'The command of the old despotisms was "Thou shalt not". The command of the totalitarians was "Thou shalt". Our command is "Thou art".'¹⁰³ Occupying the role of the Almighty, the Party does not command action so much as Being, relegating its outer members to the mindless, object-like realm of the *il y a*, devoid of any interior life. It is this conception that founds O'Brien's assertion that 'the individual is only a cell'.¹⁰⁴ And, as if to emphasise their programme of dehumanisation, he utters the famous line, 'If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.'¹⁰⁵ Like Levinas's *visage*, the face, as we have previously shown, is emblematic of the human Other in much of Orwell's work: it is the inner life, the hidden quiddity from which ethical behaviour is derived. It resists totalising objectifications and, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, thus represents a challenge to the Party's hegemony. But O'Brien's assertion that 'The face will always be there to be stamped upon', rather than a dispiriting statement of oppression, can be read as a tacit acknowledgment of its

¹⁰¹ This, surely, is the decisive confirmation that Winston's entire narrative has been orchestrated by the Party, and even suggests that they were responsible for implanting the contents of his dream seven years in the past, where O'Brien predicted 'we shall meet in the place where there is no darkness'.

¹⁰² Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.293.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.292.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.302.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.307.

immutability: tyranny against the Other is only possible because the Other possesses a Levinasian face. That the Party responds to the Other's ethical demand through violent oppression is, in this sense, self-defeating since such actions merely reaffirm that the victim is sentient, and therefore, a threat (perhaps this is why the boot is required to stamp down 'forever'). As Levinas stated early in his academic career, 'The Other bears alterity as an essence.'¹⁰⁶ If this is so, then the Other can only truly be reduced to homogeneity and the *il y a* through death. The orchestrated 'rise and fall' of Winston Smith can, on these terms, be seen as a desperate act of denial, the kind of denial of humanity and, by extension ethics, that Levinas witnessed as a victim of the Nazis. And it is here, perhaps, that putting his thought into dialogue with Orwell becomes the most instructive. For, within O'Brien's claims for the Party's omnipotence, claims that the Levinasian conception of the face calls into question, a perverse humanism emerges, one which enables Orwell to satirise the entire philosophy of Ingsoc and, indeed, many totalitarianisms. Because of the grip the Party holds on objective truth, manipulating historical records and using coercion to the point at which no standard of objectivity exists, O'Brien is able to make the extraordinary assertion that 'there is nothing that we could not do. Invisibility, levitation – anything.'¹⁰⁷ Through a process of collective assent, whatever the Party wishes to assert can be instigated. In his review of the novel, John Strachey claims that Orwell was keen to show how 'human consciousness might be made to diverge permanently from objective reality into a land of subjective nightmare'.¹⁰⁸ However, this is not quite accurate, for it is subjectivity itself that is the target of the Party's violence. According to Irving Howe, the disconcerting thesis underlying the novel is that the notion of a personal 'self' is 'a cultural idea', able to be

¹⁰⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other (and Additional Essays)* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp.87-88.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.303.

¹⁰⁸ John Strachey, 'The Strangled Cry', p.55.

manipulated or even removed by nefarious regimes.¹⁰⁹ Philip Rahv argues that the destruction of subjectivity characterises totalitarian regimes in general, explaining how ‘they explode the human character from within, exhibiting the pieces as the irrefutable proof of their own might and virtue’.¹¹⁰ In its manipulations of Winston throughout the narrative, not only does the Party exercise such power, it also, as we have seen, advocates a mastery over reality through the monopolisation of truth, historical fact, and the dissolution of ethics.

Shortly after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell reflected that ‘danger lies also in the acceptance of the totalitarian outlook by intellectuals of all colours’.¹¹¹ This ‘totalitarian outlook’ is precisely that which is championed in Oceania: a world with man (or, at least, certain privileged men) at the centre. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not only satirises the logic of such a world, but also that of its disciples. Throughout the text, we read numerous references to ‘Party intellectuals’, and Orwell describes the ‘new aristocracy’ as consisting of ‘bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians’.¹¹² O’Brien himself, described by Orwell as having ‘the air of a doctor, a teacher, even a priest’, exemplifies this class.¹¹³ His arrogant variety of humanism, with rationalising man at the centre of his own modern technological domain, is what Orwell really feared. As the torturous Room 101 is to Winston, so *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depicts Orwell’s idea of the worst possible society. It was an image that he had in his mind as early as 1943:

¹⁰⁹ Irving Howe, ‘The Fiction of Anti-Utopia’, p.306.

¹¹⁰ Philip Rahv, ‘The Unfuture of Utopia’, in *Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*, pp.310-16 (p.313).

¹¹¹ Orwell, ‘Statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’, p.134.

¹¹² Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.235.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.281.

We are in danger of quite a different kind of world, the centralised slave state, ruled over by a small clique who are in effect a new ruling class, though they might be adoptive rather than hereditary. Such a state would not be hedonistic, on the contrary its dynamic would come from some kind of rabid nationalism and leader-worship kept going literally by war, and its average standard of living would be low.¹¹⁴

Writing in the *Observer* in 1945, the year before he began work on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in earnest, Orwell stated that ‘when men stop worshipping God, they promptly start worshipping Man, with disastrous results’.¹¹⁵ It is a statement that resonates with the sentiments of Levinas, who states that the *il y a* ‘leads us to the absence of God, the absence of any being’.¹¹⁶ For both men, the collapse of religious belief leaves a dangerous ethical vacuum. The God that is the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, of course, what both Orwell and Levinas feared would emerge. It is a false God, a humanist God, its defeat hinted at through the summative, past tense of the book’s appendix.¹¹⁷ As Alexander Nehamas has written, humanism ‘is a little like attributing God’s features to his erstwhile creatures’.¹¹⁸ And *Nineteen Eighty-Four* satirises this belief in human omnipotence, the Wellsian idea that man is the measure of all things, the devastating effects of which Orwell had seen in the ‘cult of personality’ surrounding both Hitler and Stalin, and witnessed first-hand through the communist purges during and after the Spanish Civil War. But, as late as 1946, he was, rather confusingly,

¹¹⁴ Orwell, ‘Letter to S. Moos’, in *The Complete Works*, xv, 308-09 (p.308).

¹¹⁵ Orwell, ‘Review of “Man The Measure” by Erich Kahler’, in *The Complete Works*, xvii, 225-27 (p.227).

¹¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘There is: Existence without Existents’, in *The Levinas Reader*, p.33.

¹¹⁷ The phraseology of this part of the text, which refers to ‘archaic formulations which were due to be suppressed’ (p.343) and words that would be ‘barely intelligible to an English speaker of our own day’ (p.344) strongly hints at a narrative perspective in the distant future, long after the defeat of the Party. It is difficult to believe that Orwell was oblivious to this, particularly as Jack London used a similar device in *The Iron Heel*, a dystopian text whose socialist message he admired. For an interesting discussion of the issues surrounding the Appendix, see both Richard K. Sanderson, ‘The Two Narrators and Happy Ending of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34 (1988), 587-95. and André Brink, ‘Writing Against Big Brother: Notes on Apocalyptic Fiction in South Africa’, *World Literature Today*, 58 (1984), pp.189-94.

¹¹⁸ Alexander Nehamas, ‘Foreword’, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity* by Alain Renaut (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.vii-xviii (p.xiv).

claiming that ‘the basis of Socialism is humanism’.¹¹⁹ Such a statement sits uneasily with the text of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. How does one marry these two sources? Is Orwell simply advocating a kind of anarchistic humanism, with power removed from the state?¹²⁰ Crick argues that his statements imply an individualism that is

not of a liberal kind but either of a republican (sometimes called “civic humanism”) or of a modern socialist kind; a person cannot be truly human except in relationships with others. My uniqueness consists not in my “personality” but in the “identity” by which others recognize my actions: it is a mutual, social process, not solitude.¹²¹

That one’s humanity is affirmed through relations with the Other is, as we have seen, at the heart of Levinas’ philosophy, and is also the basis of Orwell’s belief that ‘The real object of Socialism is human brotherhood’.¹²² However, if this is so, then it represents, not, as Crick believes, a ‘civic humanism’, but, rather perversely, an anti-humanism, one which acknowledges a realm, that of the Other, which is constitutive for *Dasein* but beyond its direct control. It accordingly aligns his last conception of the individual with that of Levinas, as being governed or called into question by the determinative face of the Other. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* satirises a world in which the opposite of this, the humanistic impulse, has triumphed (or so it is believed), where even the Other has been brought under the control of the God-like Party.¹²³ This, it would seem, is the nightmare shared by both Orwell and Levinas.

¹¹⁹ Orwell, ‘The Intellectual Revolt’, in *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 60-63 (p.61).

¹²⁰ In the same sequence of articles as his comments concerning Socialism, he stated that ‘the aim of progress is to abolish the authority of the State and not to strengthen it’. See, *The Complete Works*, XVIII, 66.

¹²¹ Bernard Crick, ‘Reading Nineteen Eighty-Four as Satire’, in *Reflections on America, 1984: An Orwell Symposium*, ed. by Robert Mulvihill (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp.14-45 (p.22).

¹²² Orwell, ‘Can Socialists Be Happy?’, in *The Complete Works*, XVI, 37-45 (p.42) . In this respect, it is interesting to note that Orwell christens the (illusory) opposition group in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ‘The Brotherhood’.

¹²³ Orwell, ‘Statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’, p.135.

Conclusion

We have noted throughout this project that Orwell had little formal knowledge of philosophy in general, and that, on occasions when he mentioned existentialism (almost always in relation to Sartre), he showed no overt interest in the subject. And yet, throughout his work, one is presented with observations and experiences cast in such a way as to imply an understanding of the very themes that so preoccupied thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Levinas. It is a puzzling phenomenon, and one that, I suggest, may be partly accounted for by the unusual grounding that so much of Orwell's writing has in his own experiences: where the philosophers derive their existential insights from a process of cerebration, Orwell arrives at a similar end-point by seeking out different experiences and presenting them in a uniquely truthful fashion. It is this grounding in real life, one that Orwell's relatively limited imagination made a necessity, that binds together so much of his work. I have attempted to demonstrate how existential motifs can be found not only in his documentary essays, but in the novels, journalism and even personal correspondence. In this sense, the phenomenological-existential approach affords Orwell's work a unity that is comparable to that of the political angle taken by so many commentators. Moreover, Orwell's work is capable of offering an exemplification of existentialist ideas in a manner that is much more accessible than their, often opaque, presentation in works of Continental Philosophy. Stephen Ingle has claimed that, 'We could be sure that, if he had understood them, Orwell would have been offended by the relativistic tendencies of existentialism.'¹ At first glance, one might agree with such statements. Orwell appears to have had a deeply positivistic mind: he resolved to classify each aspect of his world in a, sometimes offensively, detached manner; he had, as we have shown, a deep interest in science; and his writing

¹ Stephen Ingle, 'Lies, Damned Lies and Literature: George Orwell and "The Truth"', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 9 (2007), 730-46 (p.734).

shows a commitment to rational, logical thought. But Orwell was also a man of contradictions, and any work that fails to acknowledge this risks the charge of reductivism. Despite the aforementioned attributes, he had no aptitude for analytic philosophy, as is shown by his misinterpretation of a Bertrand Russell syllogism in a letter written near the end of his life: 'I can never follow that kind of thing. It is the sort of thing that makes me feel that philosophy should be forbidden by law.'² Whilst Orwell's mind was logical after a fashion, it operated best when it was pinned to experience, away from abstractions. What he said of Swift was thus true of himself: he had an 'intensity of vision' that picked out and magnified fundamental insights from his manifold experiences (this, despite his widely-acknowledged awkwardness with human relationships). Our study has sought to present, for the first time, this side of the man, but with the understanding that it is one of many sides.

Despite the presence of numerous, sometimes conflicting, facets, it is possible to offer some general observations on Orwell's body of work, particularly his fiction, in the hope of indicating profitable avenues for future research. Throughout this study, we have implicitly noted how, in every one of his novels, Orwell is keen to depict the limits of the individual's power, whether it is in contradistinction to imperialism, socio-economic realities, the Other, historical processes, or the state: the thought of Heidegger, Sartre and Levinas has allowed us to understand the existentialia that are alluded to in this respect. The presence of such ideas in the work of somebody with no knowledge of existentialism is, we suggested, because existentialia, by definition, are common to all human beings, albeit often obscured in everyday living. However, Orwell also shares with these philosophers an ambiguous stance on the question of humanism. In repeatedly demonstrating the illusory autonomy of the individual,

² Orwell, 'Letter to Sir Richard Rees', in *The Complete Works*, XX, 52-53 (p.52).

Orwell's work undermines his own championing of humanism, which he memorably described as the basis of socialism. For this reason, Orwell's contradictory thinking bears a resemblance, and in some ways prefigures, that of the anti-humanists of the late 1960s. This movement, dubbed '*La Pensée '68*' by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, comprised thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Althusser, each of whom sought to show how 'the autonomy of the subject is an illusion', and each of whom was influenced to some extent by the philosophy of Heidegger.³ Alexander Nehamas sums up the movement neatly, explaining that their anti-humanist philosophy:

holds that individual human beings are of no consequence in the universe, that they are totally controlled, even constituted, by outside forces (economic, social, sexual) that are the real subjects of history, that they are essentially incapable of seeing themselves for what they are.⁴

And perhaps Orwell's repeated mission to show his readers what is 'in front of their nose' constitutes his own commitment to that last sentence. Heidegger himself famously alluded to man's powerlessness during a hugely controversial 1966 interview by claiming that 'Only a God can save us'.⁵ That single remark contained within it the path linking his anti-humanism to the cults of personality that had arisen through the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Heidegger's stance was antihumanist in stripping the individual of much of his autonomy, but perversely his thought contained within it a dangerous seed of humanism in its consequent empowerment of certain racial and social groups. It is this philosophy that caused a fundamental fault to emerge within the work of the socialist Heideggerians of *La Pensée '68*. As Nehamas has pointed out, such a right-wing philosophy was 'extraordinarily ill-suited to the radical left-wing, and

³ Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p.xxiii.

⁴ Nehamas, p.xiv.

⁵ Richard Wolin, 'Only a God Can Save Us', in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Richard Wolin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp.91-116 (p.107). This interview has achieved some notoriety for Heidegger's unconvincing defence of his associations with the Nazi Party.

utopian uses to which Heidegger's French followers put it'.⁶ Orwell, of course, nowhere espouses extreme right-wing views, but, like the philosophers of *La Pensée* '68, he often purveyed a variety of anti-humanism that had much in common with Heidegger (one thinks particularly of his construction of different versions of the 'they' in his novels and essays). And, in his concerns about *Dasein*'s alienation from technology, his commitment to preserving the earlier human practices embodied in cultural objects, and his tendency to objectify the Other, one observes a pull from the reactionary Right within Orwell. Against this, of course, Orwell committed to a sort of community-minded socialism, in which the cause of the Left was furthered through writing, summer schools, investigative social exploration, and, in the case of Spain, fighting against fascism. And in works such as *A Clergyman's Daughter*, we witness an espousal of the possibility of individual freedom and autonomy in a way that recalls Sartre's humanism. Thus, within the man and his work, becomes apparent a tension between the active and passive, the humanist and anti-humanist, the Left and the Right.

As we have seen, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular represents a fascinating battleground where these impulses emerge and compete. It contains within its underlying philosophy the sort of contradictions that have led commentators such as Gordon Beadle to conclude of its author that 'the precise nature of his political posture simply cannot be defined and analysed within the context of any identifiably modern political ideology, party, or movement'.⁷ In a fascinating recent article, Rodden and Rossi whimsically ponder Orwell's likely position on a number of key issues of the late twentieth century, had he lived a normal lifespan. Whilst clearly erudite and measured, both authors fall into the trap of assuming that his views would have remained as they

⁶ Nehemas, p.viii.

⁷ Gordon B. Beadle, 'George Orwell and the Victorian Radical Tradition', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 7 (1975), 287-99 (p.287).

were at his death.⁸ As our study of Orwell and his work shows, his ideas were anything but static: this is one reason why they do not resonate with the thought of just a single philosopher. Approaching Orwell from the standpoint of existentialism has offered not only a method of explaining several fundamental ideas implicit within his writing, but also suggested that the topic of humanism would be a profitable avenue for future research. It has allowed us to offer an account of many of the personal and political contradictions within the man and his work, with the suggestion that these, rather than an ossified set of doctrines from the 1940s, would have fuelled his future output.

⁸ See John Rodden & John Rossi, 'If He Had Lived, or A Counterfactual Life of George Orwell', *Prose Studies: Theory, History, Criticism*, 32 (2010), 1-11.

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