

Re-evaluating George Orwell's 1930s Fiction

An Examination of Orwell's Novelistic Style and Development

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Abstract

This thesis is a re-evaluation of George Orwell's 1930s novels, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* and *Coming Up for Air*. Orwell's first novel *Burmese Days* is also examined; however, it is done so in order to throw light upon the progressive nature of Orwell's other fictions, and to demonstrate the seminal beginnings of an experimental voice. Similarly, *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* are referred to in detail because these works go some considerable way in demonstrating Orwell's narratological technique, which is a key feature of these experimental works.

The main thrust of argument running through this thesis is that the three novels under review here have been prematurely undervalued, and that to consider them as less important contributions to the field of literature than *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to do them a considerable injustice. I challenge these assumptions, and argue that they exist because of a critical tradition predisposed to seeing little merit in the literary import of these books (a critical tradition that Orwell played no little part in creating).

Whilst offering extensive textual analysis, this study also looks outside the novels to focus on the political atmosphere of the 1930s, and considers the singular nature of Orwell's socialism; his historically formed political positioning against the more politically partisan anti-modernists, who were arguably shaped by the 1930s in ways that Orwell resisted. It will be seen that politically Orwell had more in common with Charlie Chaplin than with W. H. Auden. This is undertaken with a view to understanding how Orwell's socialist sympathies are worked into his novels, and how he negotiates between aesthetic considerations and the propagandist demands of his own political agenda.

A good deal of research is devoted to establishing the extent of George Gissing's influence on Orwell – an area of study that has been largely neglected, and where it has been forthcoming the conclusions have tended to misread Gissing's significance. I aim to demonstrate how Orwell works, for much of the time, *against* Gissing's models.

Lastly, there is a focus on Orwell's engagement with other writers, particularly looking at the ways in which Orwell 'borrows' from other texts. Research in this area has tended to impact adversely on Orwell's reputation for originality and honesty. This analysis attempts to reveal the uniqueness of Orwell's style, and aims at demonstrating that his literary integrity is not reliant upon strict adherence to truth, and what is more, that Orwell is perfectly aware of this.

This thesis offers readings of Orwell's 1930s polemical works that reveal an author who is far more in control of his prose than has hitherto been appreciated. Similarly, it will be shown in what ways Orwell is not nearly so deserving of the epithet 'awkward', especially in his portrayals of women.

Extensive use is made of both early and current literary criticism that addresses itself to Orwell's novelistic style, and these views are examined in the context of close textual analysis in order to establish the validity of their respective claims, which, of course includes subjecting my own assertions to textual scrutiny.

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List of Abbreviations

<i>D &O</i>	<i>Down and Out in Paris and London</i>
<i>BD</i>	<i>Burmese Days</i>
<i>ACD</i>	<i>A Clergyman's Daughter</i>
<i>KTAF</i>	<i>Keep the Aspidistra Flying</i>
<i>Wigan Pier</i>	<i>The Road to Wigan Pier</i>
<i>HTC</i>	<i>Homage to Catalonia</i>
<i>CUFA</i>	<i>Coming Up for Air</i>
<i>Workers</i>	<i>Workers in the Dawn</i>
<i>TNW</i>	<i>The Nether World</i>
<i>NGS</i>	<i>New Grub Street</i>
<i>Exile</i>	<i>Born in Exile</i>
<i>TOW</i>	<i>The Odd Women</i>
<i>Jubilee</i>	<i>In the Year of Jubilee</i>
<i>Ryecroft</i>	<i>The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft</i>
<i>LoF</i>	<i>The Language of Fiction</i>
<i>ITM</i>	<i>Inside the Myth</i>
'NEM'	'Not Enough Money: A Sketch of George Gissing'
'GG'	'George Gissing'
'ITW'	'Inside the Whale'
'WIW'	'Why I Write'
'Hindrances'	'Hindrances and Help-Meets: Women in the Writings of George Orwell'
'LBOSW'	'Looking Back on the Spanish War'
'W&L'	'Writers and Leviathan'

1) Introduction

This thesis aims at redressing an imbalance in Orwell studies which has insisted that Orwell's reputation as a first-rate novelist relies *solely* upon the continued appreciation of his two forties works, namely *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.¹ To date, little attention has been given to Orwell's other fictional works of the 1930s, and when reviewers have turned a critical eye in their direction, the results have been largely unfavourable. This is not surprising as negative criticism of Orwell's overall fictional capabilities follows in a well-established tradition:

Eight years after his first book, Orwell was still waiting for critical attention. The only comprehensive review of his work had appeared in 1940 by the critic Q D Leavis (1906-81), and even this was brief and decidedly mixed in its assessment. While she praised Orwell's non-fiction, Leavis advised him to give up trying to write novels, commenting that Orwell 'even managed to write a dull novel about a literary man' (*Keep the Aspidistra Flying*).²

I aim to show that Orwell wrote his thirties novels with, firstly, a greater understanding of his creative intentions, and secondly, a much higher degree of artistic competency than critics have acknowledged or, indeed, than he gave himself credit for. Tosco Fyvel, a friend of Orwell's, writes that after the publication of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Orwell 'more or less coasted. Setting himself the task of writing a book a year, he wrote three angry youthful novels'.³ Such commentary is entirely typical. However, to say that *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* are 'angry' is to misread them, or at least to misunderstand the direction of the anger. Labelling them

¹ The following criticism provides a good example of this insistence: 'If we are to measure George Orwell's success in the durability of his two later novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* then we need to examine his projection of Big Brother' (B. Campbell in *ITM*, p.126).

² Lucas, Scott, *Orwell* (London: Haus, 2003), p.58.

³ Fyvel, T. R., *George Orwell: A Personal Memoir* [1982] (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p.52. He also writes that Orwell 'could basically only write about himself', and insists that *A Clergyman's Daughter* is the 'least successful' of his novels. He echoes Meyers in arguing that the Trafalgar Square scene 'is written unsuccessfully in the manner of James Joyce' (p.54).

'youthful' implies immaturity, lack of vision, direction etc. This study of Orwell's thirties fiction challenges this kind of criticism; and through detailed textual analysis it will be seen that Orwell actually succeeds in creating the kinds of fiction that he set out to do, and if he does lose courage, so much so that he wants *A Clergyman's Daughter* suppressed and *Keep the Aspidistra* not to be reprinted, it does not weaken the evidence that reveals his novels to be tightly constructed texts that are highly innovative, and capable of engaging the reader in a number of surprising ways.⁴

1.1) Sinning Deliberately

In reclaiming Orwell's 1930s fiction, I am, to some extent, mirroring David Lodge's 'rescuing' of H. G Wells's 'Condition of England' novel *Tono-Bungay*, where Lodge concludes that Wells, 'used language with more discrimination and a firmer sense of artistic purpose and design than critics have usually given him credit for'.⁵ Similarly, Lodge believes that Wells's book, 'sins, deliberately, against most of the Jamesian commandments' (*L&F*, p.215). I believe Orwell is sinning deliberately against the conventions of the novel, and in light of this fact I wish to argue that his thirties novels are textually rich in ways that *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not. This is not to suggest that Orwell's thirties novels have been written off by all critics. Peter Davison

⁴ *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* suffered from a great deal of in-house censorship, the details of which are well documented by Peter Davison in his 'A Note On The Text'. In his detailed 'note' Peter Davison shows, where possible, exactly what changes were made to the novels and where he has been able to restore the original text. He also details Orwell's frustration and disgust with the results of in-house censorship. Similarly, in *George Orwell: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1996) Davison writes, that it was only after '*A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra* ran into censorship troubles [that] Orwell came to reject both novels' (p.54). There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Orwell was unhappy with the novels when he put them forward for publication initially.

⁵ Lodge, David, *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel* [1966] (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p.220. Lodge 'rescues' Kipling in similar fashion by showing, through his analysis of "Mrs Bathurst", that Kipling 'was a much more selfconscious, artful and experimental writer than he is often given credit for' *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp.31-2.

writes a great deal in support of Orwell's fiction, particularly *A Clergyman's Daughter*, and John Carey maintains that Orwell 'wrote the most vibrant, surprising prose of the 20th Century'.⁶ Roger Fowler, in his book *The Language of George Orwell* provides an excellent study of aspects of Orwell's novelistic technique and personal style. He illuminates many areas of Orwell's work, showing that what has been formerly dismissed as mere dilettantism is actually deliberate construct. For example, many commentators are dismissive with regard to Orwell's representation of thought and speech. It will be seen that many are united in believing (as they are with much of Orwell's prose style) that it is nothing more than a confused muddle of character and author; the authorial narrative voice constantly obtruding on the former. Fowler understands Orwell somewhat differently, and I shall expand on his textual study that concludes:

The Orwellian personal voice is a particular linguistic artifice (this is not negative): linguistic techniques give his written prose a spoken and colloquial, at times vernacular, quality, and consistent stylistic markers provide a sense of individuality, an 'idiolect'.⁷

Fowler details the ways in which Orwell controls his narrative voice, and this, along with many other insights, provided by Fowler on stylistic variation, is used to support the more holistic assessment attempted here.

Chapter one opens with 'the case against' Orwell's thirties novels. This details the nature of the negative criticism directed at Orwell's fiction, including Orwell's own dismissiveness of his work. The focus then shifts to concentrate upon what Orwell considers good prose fiction to be. Orwell would always feel 'strongly about prose style'

⁶ John Carey—in response to D. J. Taylor's book on Orwell—writes '[Taylor] leaves out [Orwell's] greatest achievement. The secret of his style is its invisibility. He wrote the most vibrant, surprising prose of the 20th Century, but disguised it as ordinary prose' ('The Invisible Man' in *The Sunday Times*, 18.05.03), pp.35-6

⁷ Fowler, Roger *The Language of George Orwell* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p.9.

(‘WIW’, XVIII, p.19), and in looking at key essays such as ‘Why I Write’, ‘Writers & Leviathan’ and ‘Inside the Whale’ an understanding of what Orwell considers to be worthy of inclusion in fiction in ‘the political age’ is reached. We can measure, for example, his appreciation of proletarian fiction in relation to the more canonical works of established literary giants such as Swift and Dickens. This will involve assessing Orwell’s response to the political pressures of his writing, and seeing how he deals with the tensions between art and propaganda that will raise him above the position of pamphleteer. Orwell always maintained that ‘acceptance of *any* political discipline seems to be incompatible with literary integrity.... Group loyalties are necessary, and yet they are poisonous to literature’ (‘W&L’). Similarly, he insisted that ‘to yield subjectively’ to ‘group ideology’ is ‘to destroy yourself as a writer’ (‘W&L’). I look at the ways in which Orwell attempts to negotiate these competing claims, with a view to establishing the answer to the critical question of whether Orwell did, in the end, ‘sacrifice literary polish and unity of form where [it] was necessary’.⁸

Orwell will be looked at in context with his fellow anti-modernists, who were criticised for, among other things, pretending that no gulf existed between the classes. Orwell’s regard for Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator* is examined here as it tells us much about how Orwell saw himself in regard to ‘the common man’, and also in regard to the political artist who will experiment with form. An aspect of Orwell’s prose style, at least with regard to his thirties fiction, is that it does not blend well, and also that there is a confusion of character and narrator; seen in context with Chaplin, it will be seen that Orwell is rather more deliberate in his eclecticism and blurring than has hitherto been appreciated.

⁸ Thomas, Edward, ‘Politics and Literature’ in *Orwell*, p.65.

Finally, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming Up for Air* are studied for their Condition of England qualities, and this again, will reveal how these seemingly uneven forms are actually carefully executed constructions, rendered thus because they better reflect the societal 'mess' that is the age being chronicled.

Chapter two aims at establishing the essential ingredients of Orwell's political aesthetic. *Coming Up for Air* is looked at here specifically for how it attacks left-wing politics for failing to appeal to the working class. I detail Orwell's assessment of what exactly he considered as constituting the working class, i.e., what group of people he believes make up its numbers. This is important because Orwell's particular brand of socialism is based on a conviction that the emerging middle class are aligning themselves with the wrong social strata, and this is damaging their spiritual as well as material progress. When this is borne in mind Orwell's socialism is made clearer, and the extent to which it features in his novels can begin to be understood; and when critics insist that socialism does not feature in Orwell's first political novels, it will be seen that this does not take into account the complexity of Orwell's political positioning.

To balance this focus on the political input of Orwell's fiction, attention is given to his aesthetic appreciations, and this demonstrates Orwell's diligence – the extent to which he is determined to perfect the craft of novel writing.

In support of all that has been claimed for Orwell's ability to balance the political with the aesthetic, an example of Orwell's text is minutely examined against an extract from Edward Upward's *Journey to the Border*. The contrast illuminates the subtlety of

Orwell's political aesthetic. A crucial part of this aesthetic is how he represents the process of thought, and the focus moves to look briefly at this area.

Finally, the business of novel writing in the 1930s is set in context, as this form was decidedly out of fashion in this politically charged decade. This leads into a consideration of Orwell's self-deprecatory stance *vis-à-vis* his work of this period—the intention being to demonstrate how it falls in with a pattern of rejection.

Chapter three concentrates on Orwell's style of narration, showing that it is far more controlled than at first appears. It is constantly argued that Orwell could not distinguish between reportage and fiction, and as a result his novels represent a bungled fusing of the two. This line of attack is shown to carry little weight when Orwell's texts are examined in detail, as are the accusations of implausibility and improbability in plot development.

The first detailed textual analysis of both *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* are undertaken here, and I will demonstrate Orwell's awareness of narrative voice, particularly in his development of spatial and psychological point of view. In addition, the authorial intrusions that, for example, give discursive information about third-rate schools in *A Clergyman's Daughter* will be shown as not simply 'stuck on' in order to 'air a grievance' but to be part of the essential fabric of this novel.

Chapter four details the immense influence that the novelist George Gissing had on Orwell. Gissing was Orwell's favourite novelist; and in Orwell's novels, particularly his 1930s works, there are numerous reminders of Gissing to be found in Orwell's themes, characters, settings, and so on.

Little research has been carried out in this area with the exception of the work Mark Connolly has done. However, I profoundly disagree with the conclusions Connolly reaches (although not with his findings on the influence of *Demos* on *Animal Farm*); and through a more extensive and rigorous textual analysis, that examines, for example, Orwell's *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* narrative foregrounding, it will be seen how Orwell works against Gissing's pessimistic outlook and defeatist stance.

Chapter five looks at Orwell's treatment of women in his novels. Again, the influence of George Gissing is strongly detected, so much so that I have found resemblances to a Gissing heroine or female lead in *all* of Orwell's female protagonists. However, there is much to indicate that Orwell is working against Gissing's misogynist tendencies, particularly in his rejection of the Madonna-whore paradigm.

In drawing parallels with Gissing's women Orwell's attitudes to class and femininity surface revealing Orwell to be much more progressive than his literary forebear. Feminists have accused Orwell of portraying women negatively; however, more objective analysis of his work reveals a far greater sympathy to be in operation, and what appears to be exasperated incomprehension at certain behaviours turns out, on closer inspection, to be far subtler and infinitely more forgiving.

Chapter six is an attempt to establish the uniqueness of Orwell's style; it details Orwell's engagement with other writers, and analyses Orwell's representation and management of fact, fiction and truth; detailing the ways in which Orwell negotiates between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood and so on. It looks at how he blurs distinctions and rejects the

limitations that strict adherence to faithful eye-witness would impose. George Gissing, D. H. Lawrence and Bernard Shaw are looked at in some detail as their work provides many illustrations of Orwell's 'borrowing'.

2) Orwell in Context

The centenary of Orwell's birth date (25 June 2003) saw a resurgence of interest in Orwell's work – newspapers, radio and television all played homage to the writer born Eric Arthur Blair. Two weighty biographies, one by D. J Taylor and one by Gordon Bowker, marked the occasion. Both of these books joined the chorus of opinion in praise of Orwell's journalistic output, and, of his other work, praised *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Homage to Catalonia*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Regarding his thirties fiction, there was largely either silence or dismissive criticism. In fact, there was a wide pouring forth of scorn as to Orwell's overall merits as a novelist. Geoffrey Wheatcroft echoed D. J. Taylor in repeating his sentiments thus: 'As a novelist, Orwell scarcely begins to exist'. He writes that Orwell's books are no more than 'projections of his own self-pity'. Wheatcroft sums up by claiming, '[Orwell's] posthumous reputation is close to being literary fraud'. He then quotes Taylor again: "'Once established, [Orwell's] significance naturally had to be pushed back in time, with the result that Orwell's four third-rate novels now crowd out the real heroes of the 1930s'"¹

Similarly, Stefan Collini writes, 'Taylor's [biography] is by some margin the best of the rest; he has a good ear for the tones of Orwell's prose and is particularly shrewd about the weaknesses as well as the strengths of his fiction'. Collini concludes: 'The truth is that Orwell was a writer of very variable quality. He was not for the most part an outstandingly gifted novelist'. And again, 'He is one of the few writers who may have

¹ Wheatcroft, Geoffrey 'George At 100' in *Prospect*, June 2003, pp.10-11.

become more important as a symbol than for what he actually wrote'.² This kind of dismissive judgement follows a well-established tradition. The following is typical:

In all his novels, except the superbly simple *Animal Farm*, Orwell's characterisation is extraordinarily uneven, almost jerky. He seems at times unable to take his characters right through all the stages in their development, or their downfall, even though he is quite clear what these stages are.³

There is no textual example to support this claim, and in providing the absent textual support it will be shown that this kind of criticism is entirely unjustified. One commentator has picked up on this tendency in Orwell criticism. In his extensive study of Orwell's essayistic and novelistic style Håkan Ringbom writes, regarding the general claims made for Orwell's 'windowpane' clarity,

Among other words used to describe [Orwell's] style are 'nervous, flexible and lucid', 'spare, tough', 'direct, active, cogent and epigrammatic', and 'relaxed, flexible, yet balanced'. Only rarely would such statements be supported by explanatory comments or even by illustrative quotations from Orwell's works.⁴

Orwell's early novels are, on the contrary, successful examples of his progress in making political writing into an art, and not as the above would suggest, the half-baked products of an 'odd' and singularly 'prejudiced' writer. Added to this I will demonstrate how truly without foundation Orwell's assertions are *apropos* his own work, and as such should not be used, as it were, in evidence against him.

To argue that Orwell's thirties novels are *resounding* successes, i.e. not merely partly successful, may seem a futile undertaking when the author himself has so vehemently condemned them. But in what ways are *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep*

² Collini, Stefan, 'The Grocer's Children: The Lives and After Lives of George Orwell', *TLS* 20.06.2003, pp.3-6.

³ Calder, Jenni, *Chronicles of Conscience: A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p.84.

⁴ Ringbom, Håkan in *Acta Academiae Aboensis. Ser. A Humaniora*, Vol. 44 (Abo: Abo Akadem, 1973) 'George Orwell as Essayist: A Stylistic Study', Vol. 44 nr 2, p.9.

the Aspidistra Flying ‘weak’ and ‘silly’ books? Orwell, for one, never actually elucidated, he only got as far as denigrating them.

The following line, from a letter to Tosco Fyvel (quoted for his criticism in the introduction), written in late 1949, shows Orwell held such a belief right up to the end: ‘I have sometimes written a so-called novel within about two years of the original conception, but then they were always weak, silly books which I afterwards suppressed’.⁵ Taylor insists that ‘*A Clergyman’s Daughter* is essentially a matter of Orwell making use – sometimes clumsily, sometimes with considerable subtlety – of material drawn from his own life’ (p.138).⁶ His use of the word clumsy operates here to indicate lack of control and ability.

I aim to show that Orwell, despite what he may have later convinced himself of, was far more in control than he is generally given credit for, or gave himself credit for, and as a result his thirties novels are not the botched experiments of a writer who failed to find his form.

2.1) Orwell’s Expectations of a *Political* Novelist

In order to establish exactly what Orwell considered worthy in his work I will look back on his essay, ‘Why I Write’ and also examine his views on what constitutes good proletarian literature as expressed in certain key reviews. In doing this I will be able to show exactly how clear Orwell is about his fictional desires and intents. Orwell informs us in ‘Why I Write’ that he has and will always feel ‘strongly about prose style’ (‘WIW’,

⁵ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XX, pp.85-6 (p.86).

⁶ Taylor writes ‘Orwell came to dislike *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, famously describing it as ‘bollix’, and would never allow it to be reprinted in his lifetime’ (p.139). This is a prime example of an all too prevalent readiness to ‘use’ Orwell in support of their claims.

XVIII, p.319). In examining his thirties novels in detail it will be shown that Orwell's strength of feeling about prose style was far from absent when writing those early fictions.⁷ The critics may not feel satisfied with the end results, because, I suspect, they do not compare neatly with *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or to the established norms of canonical fiction, but Orwell never intended his first novels to be anything like his later work as the following will reveal. Referring to 'proletarian literature' (which these contested novels undoubtedly are) Orwell writes that these books have had a 'reviving effect' and have 'introduced a note of what you might call crudeness and vitality' to the literary world.⁸ That Orwell finds 'vitality' in 'crude' expression again feeds back into his own writing. Undoubtedly critics associate crude writing with failed writing. For Orwell it is the opposite. This ties in with Orwell's views on the *potential* of the new kind of literature i.e. 'proletarian literature'. He writes:

One advantage of the novel, as a literary form, is that you can stuff very nearly anything into it. Fragments of old diaries, scraps of conversation overheard in the street, unpublished poems, disquisitions on politics or life in general, miscellaneous information on every subject from botany to tin-mining—with a very little ingenuity they can all be pressed into service.⁹

Clearly, Orwell relishes in the eclectic gathering together of life's content, and confirms his desire to see it reproduced in fiction in ways that reflects its chaos. What others would simply label a 'dog's breakfast' is to Orwell 'vital' and 'honest' prose. Immediately after

⁷ Gordon Bowker, in his *George Orwell* (London: Little Brown, 2003), p.176, gives a new insight into the lengths Orwell was prepared to go to in order to perfect his prose style. Orwell is seen sitting at his desk reading, then copying out from memory passages from Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and Maugham's *Ashenden*. When asked (by a man named Sayers) what he is doing Orwell replies, 'I'm trying to find a style which eliminates the adjective'.

⁸ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XII, pp.282-4 (p.284). By 'proletarian literature' Orwell is referring to books such as Jack London's *The Road*, Jack Hilton's *Caliban Shrieks* and James Hanley's *Grey Children*. It is worth noting that Orwell insists that there is no certain link between being proletarian and writing proletarian literature: 'W. H. Davies was a proletarian, but he wouldn't be called a proletarian writer. Paul Potts would probably be called a proletarian writer, but he isn't a proletarian' (p.283).

⁹ Orwell, 'Review of *The Porch* and *The Stronghold* by Richard Church', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XVI, pp.326-8 (p.326).

the above paragraph Orwell writes what are perhaps his most illuminating lines in terms of revealing to us just how controlled he is in the production of his art. He writes:

At a time like the present, when the art of pure story-telling is in a bad way, the best passages in many novels are those in which the author forgets about his characters and turns aside to discuss some irrelevant subject which he really understands.

Because Orwell 'turns aside', particularly in *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Coming Up for Air*, we can at least grant that he understands what he is doing, and what is more that he is pleased with the effect. It has been assumed that when Orwell says he 'made a mess' of this novel or that novel that he was referring to just such a state of writing as mentioned above, but this is very far from being the case, although some critics would disagree. Indeed, there is much in Taylor's book on the failure of Orwell's thirties novels. Referring to *A Clergyman's Daughter* Taylor says that it is 'curious' and 'odd', 'awash with personal preoccupations and experiences, it is one of those books in which a writer's private demons contend with a mass of reportage masquerading as background'.¹⁰ Note Taylor's use of the word 'masquerading'; Taylor is attempting to persuade us that Orwell's skill is part sham. Likewise, when he writes that, 'Part Two, on the other hand, is simply an excuse for Orwell to reheat some of his tramping and hopping exploits' (p.139), his choice of the word 'excuse' is deployed to denote, once again, a *failure* in Orwell's novel writing capabilities. But just why Orwell is forbidden to reproduce his own experiences Taylor doesn't expand upon—it is simply, at least as far as Orwell is concerned, *ipso facto* a bad thing.

In 'Why I Write', written in 1946, Orwell tells us that, 'What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art' (p.319). *A Clergyman's Daughter*, though published in 1935, can be safely considered as falling

¹⁰ Taylor, D. J., *Orwell: The Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p.137.

within this decade and so being written with a view to making political writing into an art. Perhaps because it is Orwell's first fictional attempt at bringing art and politics together, critics feel justified in writing it off as a failure. Jeffrey Meyers confidently asserts that '*A Clergyman's Daughter* is pretty well unreadable today'.¹¹ He also tells us that Orwell was 'ill at ease with a dreary female character' (p.120). He does not substantiate his confident assertion with any textual example. Nevertheless, J. Meyers' criticism is helpful because it demonstrates an all too prevalent lack of understanding in terms of what Orwell was attempting to achieve in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming Up for Air*.

Orwell acknowledges that creating political art 'is not easy. It raises problems of construction and of language, and it raises in a new way the problem of truthfulness' ('WIW', p.320). Referring to his experience of writing *Homage to Catalonia* Orwell gives us a detail that is a key component of his political art form.

Among other things [*Homage to Catalonia*] contains a long chapter, full of newspaper quotations and the like, defending Trotskyists who were accused of plotting with Franco. Clearly such a chapter, which after a year or two would lose its interest for any ordinary reader, must ruin the book (p.320).

He goes on to divulge that a respected critic 'lectured' him about the long chapter and actually said "'You've turned what might have been a good book into journalism'". Orwell agrees with him, but says 'I could not have done otherwise' (p.320). At first glance this looks like Orwell admitting that he deliberately 'ruined' his book. However, he is merely stating that he could not do otherwise than to include the journalism. This comes back to Orwell not being able to violate his literary instincts no matter how 'odd' or wrong other people might find them. What this tells us about Orwell's political writing

¹¹ Meyers, Jeffrey, *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation* (London: Norton, 2000), p.120.

is that he is content to let glaring contrasts of styles sit side by side when they serve to fuse his political and artistic purpose, even if this means the work will be subsequently looked on as being compromised in either structure or content. This is not to suggest that Orwell *does* compromise his fiction; as we shall see, the construction of his thirties novels is actually incredibly controlled and fluid.

In 'Why I Write' Orwell says that *Animal Farm* is the first book in which he attempted 'with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into a whole' (p.320). 'Fully conscious' of what he is doing Orwell produces a 'perfect' allegorical tale, but this in no way should detract from what he accomplishes when being (so called) 'half conscious' of what he is doing. His books appear to the critics as failures because of a perceived jarring of style, or questionable authenticity of narration,¹² or lack of sympathy or empathy with his protagonists, or a proliferation of stereotypes. In looking at Orwell's fiction with a more objective eye one can soon discover that there is a dynamic to his technique that incorporates these disparate tones and styles to a rather more successful degree.

After his brief discussion of *Animal Farm* Orwell tells us that he is going to write another book. True to his self-deprecating manner he laments, 'It is bound to be a failure', but he finishes this sentence with the words 'every book is a failure' (p.320). When talking of failure, specifically of general failure, either in his own work, or that of others, we must not take Orwell literally. Orwell finishes 'Why I Write' with the passage:

¹² John Carey stresses that 'Shooting an Elephant' and 'A Hanging' are only 'ostensibly memoirs' because they have never been 'independently corroborated' ('The Invisible Man', *The Sunday Times*, 18.05.03, pp.35-6). In a recently uncovered letter Orwell asserts that 'Shooting an Elephant' 'is an autobiographical sketch' (*The Complete Works: Supplementary Volume: Cumulated Additions and Amendments to First and Second Editions*, ed. Peter Davison (awaiting publishing, Secker & Warburg, 2005), p.9. This is not of course independent corroboration, but it inclines towards verification. However, there is also new evidence to suggest that Orwell did in fact use someone else's account. The implications of such overlapping of fact and fiction are examined in the chapter on intertextuality.

Looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally [His italics] (p.320).

So, far from disliking political infusion, he feels it essential to his prose. It is often said that Orwell's art was compromised because of his political commitments, but here Orwell is heartily thankful for that obligation. We can see this 'obligation' to his political commitments borne out when we compare *A Clergyman's Daughter* with *Burmese Days*. At the beginning of this essay, Orwell tells us of his early desire to write 'enormous naturalistic novels ... full of purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their sound' (p.317), and with *Burmese Days* he tells us he had produced such a novel. The next novel he writes, published a year later, is *A Clergyman's Daughter*. We can see from the opening that it is consciously different. The opening paragraph of *Burmese Days* has the scheming magistrate U Po Kyin sitting on his veranda. Orwell sets the tranquil scene:

Occasional faint breaths of wind, seeming cool by contrast, stirred the newly-drenched orchids that hung from the eaves. Beyond the orchids one could see the dusty, curved trunk of a palm tree, and then the blazing ultramarine sky. Up in the zenith, so high that it dazzled one to look at them, a few vultures circled without the quiver of a wing.

One immediately has a sense of Orwell using words for the sake of their sound. The opening of *A Clergyman's Daughter* could not be in sharper contrast:

As the alarm clock on the chest of drawers exploded like a horrid little bomb of bell metal, Dorothy, wrenched from the depths of some complex, troubling dream, awoke with a start and lay on her back looking into the darkness in extreme exhaustion.

One can feel the difference in energy levels immediately. The former is static and peaceful, somewhat whimsical. The latter by comparison is charged and purposeful, creating a mood that will be sustained throughout the narrative. J. Meyers insists that the style of *A Clergyman's Daughter* is 'as wobbly as the structure' (p.118). He goes on

openly to scoff at its imitation 'Nighttown' scene, and quotes Orwell laughing at his own attempt to imitate Joyce.¹³ Orwell has very deliberately used that scene from *Ulysses*. Had he not intended comparisons to be made, he would not have been so obvious and 'naked' in his imitation. The essential difference between these experimental narratives is that Orwell concludes his with the documentary voice characteristic of *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

[Dorothy] had come, like everyone about her, to accept this monstrous existence almost as though it were normal. The dazed, witless feeling that she had known on the way to the hopfields had come back upon her more strongly than before. It is the common effect of sleeplessness and still more of exposure (p.186).

That Orwell continues the paragraph in the second person singular heightens the sense that he is referring to his own experiences. Concluding, on the varied, or as he would have it, 'wobbly' style of *A Clergyman's Daughter*, J. Meyers recalls Gollancz's reader, Norman Collins, who (referring here to Orwell) felt that "The chaotic structure of the book would suggest some kind of mental instability" (p.119). Douglas Kerr is more constructive and insightful. He details the rich thematic and narrative layering of *A Clergyman's Daughter*. He writes that 'the first part ... is schematic, almost allegorical, in its portrayal of English provincial life' (Kerr, p.26).¹⁴ With regard to the Nighttown chapter Kerr draws out the significance of the omniscient narrative retreat:

¹³ In recently discovered letters between Orwell and the French translator of *Down and Out in London and Paris* Orwell, though calling *A Clergyman's Daughter* 'tripe', recommends that Raimbault read 'the first part of chapter three', which he 'is quite happy with' (CW, Supp. Vol. 21: p.32). This is the Nighttown chapter. See below footnote for details of Raimbault.

¹⁴ Richard Smyer provides an illuminating study of *A Clergyman's Daughter* detailing, with extensive attention to the text, its intense levels of psychological symbolism. Similarly, he delineates the novels tightly constructed plot:

.... another way of looking at these stages of the narrative is to regard the opening section as primarily dealing with the heroine's conscious feelings of discontent; the second (and longest) section as being, for the most part, an interior drama, a descent into a subconscious mis-en-scene where an obscure struggle between guilt and a longing for innocence and peace takes place; and the third, a return to the daylight world of emotional isolation and a life spent trying to muffle an

Here the narrative suddenly disappears, to be replaced by dramatic dialogue, demotic and sometimes surreal. It is a striking and important moment in Orwell's writing, as the destitute grumble and shiver through the merciless night, finally piling together for warmth on a bench 'in a monstrous shapeless clot, men and women clinging indiscriminately together, like a bunch of toads at spawning time' (CD 174). These are the last people in London, and for a while Dorothy is an indistinguishable component of this human heap. They have no possessions at all except their voice, and to tell their story Orwell recognizes that he has to allow them to speak for themselves. So the controlling narrative voice falls silent, and a chattering polyphony takes over ... (Kerr, p.27).¹⁵

Kerr does see limitations with Orwell's narratological organisation. However, as they are on the reappearance of the author narrator (which I feel to be deliberate), they do not detract from the praise already given.¹⁶

The French translator of *Down and Out in Paris and London* R. N. Raimbault, like Kerr, found the structure of this novel to be far from chaotic, recognising that there is a successful textual dynamic at work.¹⁷ Referring to *A Clergyman's Daughter* Raimbault writes:

My second impression has not contradicted the first. You are too harsh about your book. It is a book which is often powerful and makes remarkable observations, strange

anxiety-burdened consciousness, *Primal Dream and Primal Crime* (London: Uni. of Missouri, 1979), p.46.

¹⁵ In showing how Orwell utilises and adapts Joyce's medium of representation to his own dramatic and aesthetic ends, Kerr contradicts those critics who rush to insist that the Nighttown scene 'is written unsuccessfully in the manner of James Joyce' (Fyvel, p.54). Furthermore, Kerr demonstrates the extent to which Orwell reflects the influence of other writers in this scene: 'Orwell's London night also looks like a parodic underground reply to the London day of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*' (p.27). This kind of homage or nod, along with Orwell's direct borrowing from other writers, will be expanded upon in the chapter on Intertextuality.

¹⁶ Kerr writes:

Orwell cannot sustain the formal revolution that allows his huddled mass of characters to speak for themselves. As happens quite often in his early work (and the comparison with the routine boldness of *Ulysses* shows this up very clearly), he seems to lose his nerve. The 'stage directions' get longer, and turn into narrative, and by the end of the chapter the Orwell narrator is back in control with his omniscience, his normative literary English, and his heroine soon to be returned to a version of middle-class existence (p.28).

Whether Orwell loses his nerve, or actively chooses to re-enter as omniscient narrator, is something that can never be asserted categorically. However, given the overall narratorial control and experimentation, there is as much evidence as not to suggest purpose in his choice.

¹⁷ Raimbault was a Professor of English at Le Mans University, and 'a distinguished translator of two American novelists, Upton Sinclair and, most notably, William Faulkner, doing much to keep alive Faulkner's reputation in the 1940s' (Davison, 'Swindles & Perversions' a brief retrospect, pp.1-10 [p.10], awaiting publishing).

– in particular your Trafalgar Square – full of humour, sometimes fierce, and written boldly and with captivating originality... and the characters ... so well observed and so well painted by Dorothy, are typically humane (*CW*, Supp. Vol. 21: p.37).

Raimbault's description of Orwell's prose as 'typically humane' hits on an aspect of thirties literature that is worth considering in order that the special atmosphere of the time be understood. This is the era of The Great Depression; there are general strikes in Europe and in America, with fascist parties rising offering security and stability to the beleaguered masses. Unemployment is at an all time high. In England there is a direct literary response to this situation, which sees the Oxbridge elite (many of whom are members of the Communist Party) championing–what was often referred to as–The Common Man. The alliance of these hitherto opposed groups made many sceptical. Orwell was to be accused, and continues to be accused, of class prejudice. It would be helpful to look at his position within the anti-modernist group, and in relation to The Common Man in terms of establishing legitimacy and influence.

2.2) Orwell, the Anti-Modernists and The Common Man

The anti-modernists were criticised for pretending that no gulf existed between the classes. Virginia Woolf, most notably, saw the Auden-Spender generation as a disingenuous one. She felt that identification with the common man could not exist while the espousers of equality were living an extremely comfortable life. Hence she saw the allegiance to be entirely spurious. She refers to them as 'The Leaning Tower Group' (significantly she does not include Orwell). She accuses Auden and Spender et al. of viewing the world from the privileged position of a gilded tower, although in their case it is a gilded tower that leans to the left. She says of the tower, that 'it decides his angle of

vision; it affects his power of communication'.¹⁸ Moreover, it is with the fact that these new left-wing writers do not acknowledge their advantaged and therefore restricted viewing position that she takes issue.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that Louis MacNeice made comparable criticism of the Georgian poets. He questioned their legitimacy to champion or proclaim themselves to be essentially of nature. He writes, 'They idyllised the countryside without being rooted, as nature poets should be, in their subject.... They are mainly townsmen on excursion'.²⁰ Woolf is making the same accusation only this time it is the fact that the anti-modernists are not rooted in the working-class culture they champion. Orwell too is aware of this aspect of proletarian writing, and sought to expose the duplicity. He thought that his fellow anti-modernists were both privileged and limited in their outlook. In comparing them to the modernists he highlights their far-from-working-class cultural homogeneity:

The outstanding writers of the 'twenties were of very varied origins, few of them had passed through the ordinary English educational mill ... and most of them had had at some time to struggle against poverty, neglect, and even downright persecution. On the other hand, nearly all the younger writers fit easily into the public-school-university-Bloomsbury pattern. The few who are of proletarian origin are of the kind that is declassed early in life, first by means of scholarships and then by the bleaching-tub of London "culture".²¹

The tone of dismissal is clear. Added to this, as mentioned, is Orwell's mistrust of 'the movement's' political persuasion. He writes shortly after the above of a 'left-wing orthodoxy that made a certain set of opinions absolutely *de rigueur* on certain subjects. The idea had begun to gain ground (vide Edward Upward and others) that a writer must

¹⁸ Woolf, Virginia, 'The Leaning Tower' in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 2[1940] (London: Hogarth, 1966), p.169.

¹⁹ Edward Upward, among others, attacks her line of argument. See *Virginia Woolf A-Z: The Essential Reference to Her Life and Writings* by Mark Hussy (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp.143-4.

²⁰ MacNiece, Louis, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (Oxford: OUP, 1938), p.8.

²¹ Orwell, 'Inside The Whale', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XII, pp.86-115 (p.100).

either be actively “left” or write badly’ (‘ITW’, pp.100-1).²² Orwell is repulsed by the idea of having to conform to any political opinion, and is openly exasperated that the anti-modernists are so earnest in the name of the communist party. It is worth pausing here to point out that Orwell was entirely justified in his claim that the British Communist Party was merely an instrument of Soviet foreign policy and as such had long ceased to be active in the promotion of international socialism.²³ Indeed, to belong to the Communist Party meant that you would be actively working against your desired goal, i.e. the introduction of socialism.

What is most striking about ‘Inside the Whale’, the essay that addresses itself to evaluating the writers of the thirties, is that Orwell omits himself. In fact Orwell writes the essay as if he were not himself a writer. This becomes more curious when Orwell is lamenting that Miller does not write about the ‘ordinary man’ in the fuller sense: ‘Miller’s ‘ordinary man’ is neither the manual worker nor the suburban householder, but the derelict, the *déclassé*’ (‘ITW’). Orwell declares, rather extraordinarily, that ‘No English or American novelist has as yet seriously attempted that’ (‘ITW’). By ‘that’ he means writing about the proletariat, and the proletariat (as will be shown) is both, for Orwell, the manual worker and the suburban householder. But Orwell has of course attempted to write seriously about the suburban householder in George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*. Orwell’s reticence is remarkable, and he had been reticent for some time. As he wrote in *Wigan Pier*, ‘It is certain that in Western Europe Socialism has

²² Upward will later be looked at in relation to Shaw with a view to demonstrating what Orwell considers to be the distinction between art and propaganda.

²³ An excellent book on this issue is John Newsinger’s *Orwell’s Politics*. He makes it abundantly clear that Orwell understood better than anyone at the time that Stalinist communism had nothing whatsoever to do with socialism. Rather, it was a brutal dictatorship masquerading under its name. See chapter six, ‘The Destruction of the Soviet Myth’, pp.110-35.

produced no literature worth having'. Modesty would forbid him from adding 'save for the work that I have produced'.²⁴

The socialism in Orwell's thirties fiction is not obvious, and this is something that will be addressed fully in chapter two. Here I would like to explore the wider cultural influences that augmented Orwell's belief in the ordinary or common man, and which directly shaped his fictional sympathies, and equally important, his fictional form.

2.2.1) Orwell, Chaplin and The Common Man

Orwell's notion of, and indeed, his belief in, the common man are foregrounded in his fiction, which is not always detected (particularly in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*). In his review of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (a film, released at Chaplin's own expense in 1940, which sets out to expose Hitler and the fascist cult of power politics) Orwell's essential political and humanist beliefs are clearly defined. Here Orwell talks of Chaplin's 'peculiar gift', and contained within this passage is a summary of Orwell's philosophical, social and political outlook:

It is his power to stand for a sort of concentrated essence of the common man, for the ineradicable belief in decency that exists in the hearts of ordinary people, at any rate in the west.... The common man is wiser than the intellectuals, just as animals are wiser than men. Any intellectual can make you out a splendid "case" for smashing the German Trade Unions and torturing Jews. But the common man, who has no intellect, only instinct and tradition, knows that "it isn't right". Any one who has not lost his moral sense—and an education in Marxism and similar creeds consists largely in destroying your moral sense—knows that "it isn't right" to march into the houses of harmless little Jewish shopkeepers and set fire to their furniture.²⁵

²⁴ *The Road to Wigan Pier, The Complete Works*, Vol. V, p.171. One might be tempted to point out here that Orwell is not strictly a 'socialist' writer in any 'pure' or Marxist sense of the word. However, it will be argued that Orwell's writing from the outset has been socialist in that he vehemently rejects class privilege and the claims of a hierarchical society.

²⁵ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XII, pp.313-5 (p.315).

A belief in the innate decency of 'the common man', distrust of intellectuals and distrust of political orthodoxies; these convictions, particularly the latter two, set Orwell apart from his contemporaries.²⁶

Such was Orwell's admiration of *The Great Dictator* that he wanted the government to subsidise its showing. In his review, Orwell makes much of how, despite a great deal of mixed technique, Chaplin's film succeeds. He talks of how his serious political message is everywhere woven into the scenes, and is essentially what holds the film together—an argument that will be made for Orwell's novels. Where the thread is broken is at the end when the Hitler impostor makes the alternative triumphal speech (although again, Orwell will insist on the overall success of rupture):

And here occurs the big moment of the film. Instead of making the speech that is expected of him, Charlie makes a powerful fighting speech in favour of democracy, tolerance, and common decency. It is really a tremendous speech, a sort of version of Lincoln's Gettysburg address done into Hollywood English, one of the strongest pieces of propaganda I have heard in a long time. It is, of course, understating the matter to say that it is out of tune with the rest of the film (p.314).

That Orwell understands this speech to be 'out of tune with the rest of the film', whilst continuing to appreciate its impact, reflects an attitude to his own work that will be brought out in the course of this thesis. At his point, however, I wish to stay with the humanist values operating in the film.

Orwell's enthusiasm for Chaplin's film is all too evident, and, it is interesting to note again, the inescapable parallels between Chaplin and Orwell, parallels, as touched on above, that Orwell makes us aware of. One of the outstanding features of Chaplin's work is that he confirms the Don Quixote/Sancho Panza duality that Orwell believes is the

²⁶ Orwell, it should be noted, is one of the few writers not to change his deepest beliefs. Most of the Auden-Spender group abandon Marxism for, amongst other things, mysticism, following writers like Aldous Huxley.

essence of the true self. Orwell insists that 'noble folly and base wisdom exist side by side in nearly every human being. If you look into your own mind, which are you, Don Quixote or Sancho Panza? Almost certainly you are both'.²⁷ This assertion is inseparable from Orwell's conviction that 'the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit' (*D&O*, p.152). This is exactly the point Chaplin is making. Orwell applauds the film's brilliant exposure of so-called 'supermen':

From the point of view of anyone who believes in supermen, it is a most disastrous accident that the greatest of all the supermen should be almost the double of an absurd little Jewish foundling with a tendency to fall into pails of whitewash. It is the sort of fact that ought to be kept dark. However, luckily, it can't be kept dark, and the allure of power politics will be a fraction weaker for every human being who sees this film (p.315).

Orwell's character portrayals are at all times acting to undermine the ideal or virtuous, and at the same time insisting that the common man is every man. In the following chapter parallels between Chaplin and Orwell will be examined again in order to illuminate the socialist qualities in Orwell's thirties fiction.

2.3) Orwell's Early Novels: Not Simply an Exercise

Lynette Hunter, referring to *A Clergyman's Daughter*, writes that, 'Orwell was to call the novel simply an exercise, published because he had no money, and an exercise it is' (p.28). Hunter stresses that for a good part of the book the reader is unable to distinguish (in terms of thought) between character and narrator, the exact criticism made by many of *Coming Up for Air*. In terms of Orwell's negotiating between novel and documentary writing, Hunter concludes that 'before [Orwell] discovered techniques adequate to this writing, his conclusions simply failed' (p.35). *A Clergyman's Daughter*, she insists, fails

²⁷ Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill', *Complete Works*, Vol. XIII, pp.23-31 (p.29).

because Dorothy could not find a compromise. The blame for this she puts firmly at the author's door: 'The narrator ... fail[s] to suggest any adequate alternative for the character's way of life' (p.28). This is simply not true; the ending of *A Clergyman's Daughter* is rich in closure, both symbolically and thematically, as we shall see shortly. In the casting of George Bowling, Hunter laments that the narrator is limited 'to a negative rather than a positive perspective. He can indicate his approval or disapproval of what the narrator/character does, but cannot suggest anything further' (p.91). The ending of *Coming Up for Air* is highly suggestive of an alternative course of action, for, just as Dorothy will be reconciled to her lack of faith, Bowling will attempt to alter the negative course of his life through a determination to make his wife understand what he has attempted to do, thereby putting an end to the torture of his secret distress (this will be detailed later).

Terry Eagleton echoes this sentiment when he writes, 'Failure was Orwell's forte, a leitmotif of his fiction. For him, it was what was real, as it was for Beckett. All of his fictional protagonists are humbled and defeated; and while this may be arraigned as unduly pessimistic, it was not the view of the world they taught at Eton'.²⁸ Orwell did not end all of his books on a note of failure—far from it. In actual fact the endings, with the exception of *Burmese Days* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are hopeful, and that this is missed is something that will be borne in mind when undertaking deeper textual analysis.

With regard to *A Clergyman's Daughter* V. Meyers writes:

Orwell realised that he had not been entirely successful in blending the fictional and non-fictional elements in this book. 'It was a good idea', he wrote ... 'but I am afraid I have made a muck of it.... It is very disconnected on the whole, and rather unreal' (p.61).

²⁸ Eagleton, Terry, 'Reach-Me-Down Romantic', *London Review of Books*, 19.06.2003, pp.6-9.

It is worth bearing in mind that because of the alterations Orwell had to make for *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, which were far less than those changes demanded for *A Clergyman's Daughter*, he came to feel that the book was ruined.²⁹ When the American Book-of-the-Month Club insisted that they would not publish *Nineteen Eighty-Four* unless Orwell agreed to drop 'The Principles of Newspeak' appendix and the lengthy essay on 'Oligarchical Collectivism' Orwell refused (even though he stood to lose £40,000 in US sales), reiterating, to his agent, his conviction that the entire structure of the book would be 'ruined' if 'large chunks here and there' were removed.³⁰ Orwell did not have the luxury of standing firm before, and in consequence his early novels suffered. Given Orwell's uncompromising views on 'editing' it is little wonder he became so impatient and eventually totally dismissive of work that had undergone such repugnant doctoring. *A Clergyman's Daughter* suffered greatly from censorship. We now know that Mr Warburton, in the original version, attempts to rape Dorothy.³¹ In light of this we can better understand Dorothy's repulsion towards her would-be suitor. Moreover, her breakdown and subsequent loss of memory have more validity when such a traumatic event surrounds them. V. Meyers too is dismissive of the turn of events in Dorothy's life, claiming that she 'rather improbably suffers amnesia' (p.61). Again, this is unfair to the actual developments in the book.³² Taylor says the book has 'a faintly incongruous air,

²⁹ In a letter to his agent, Leonard Moore (referring to *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*), Orwell writes, 'I have made the alterations Gollancz asked for.... It seems to me to have utterly ruined the book....' (CW, Vol. X, p.434. In this letter he talks to his annoyance at not being told of the changes earlier. I think 'annoyance' is the key word here and could explain Orwell's stubborn refusal to consider these books in a more generous light.

³⁰ Thomas Pynchon reminds us of this factor in his introduction to the Plume (Penguin US) 2003 edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

³¹ Again see Peter Davison's 'A Note On The Text' and his *George Orwell: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.55.

³² The build up to Dorothy's memory loss is actually meticulously attended to in the narrative, and this shall be detailed thoroughly. See 4.3 below.

the feeling of personal experience, peculiar to the author, grafted on to an imagined psychology that is much less able to deal with it' (p.139). He continues,

The novel is consistently let down by sheer implausibility. The whole 'memory loss' episode is as unconvincing as Dorothy's rescue by the wildly improbable figure of Sir Thomas. Mr Warburton, too, seems oddly out of place as a *deus ex machina*, his shiftiness and unreliability now oddly replaced by a resolve to bear good tidings (p.139).

Why Sir Thomas is a 'wildly improbable figure' Taylor does not explain. The book is actually more thorough, and there are no grounds for implausibility.³³ Dorothy's father may be in penurious circumstances, but he is still connected with the upper-middle class, and as such it would be more improbable that there would *not* be a relative in London who could help. And Dorothy is hardly 'rescued', she is merely found a situation. As for Mr Warburton, considering how very little he does in the affair he can hardly be described as Dorothy's *deus ex machina*. Moreover (and this will be brought out in detail later) Warburton is seeking an opportunity to seduce Dorothy into marrying him so that he can leave her to look after his children. Despite V. Meyers' defence of Orwell's characterisation she still falls in line with the familiar pattern of negative criticism. She writes,

Critics have noted that Orwell does not portray Dorothy's loss of faith convincingly. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Orwell was more interested in the social effects of dwindling Christian faith than the individual's sense of loss. Secondly, Orwell fails

³³ Implausibility seems to be the chief complaint against Dorothy and the book as a whole. Daphne Patai writes, 'Dorothy does not suffer a breakdown; she suffers from a creator, Orwell, who, having invented a female protagonist, does not know how to get her out of the house and into the street where he wants to place her' in *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (Amherst: Massachusetts, 1984), p.97. Again, see 4.3 below.

Similarly, Jenni Calder insists that, 'Dorothy ... is the least successful of Orwell's fictional rebels. He is just not able to get far enough inside an unfamiliar consciousness' (p.87). There is not a single example from the text to demonstrate this apparent lack, as there is none when she writes, '*A Clergyman's Daughter* is the least successful of Orwell's novels. He himself acknowledged this. Most of the reasons for its failure stem directly from Orwell's own uncertain position as a member of the middle class' (p.89). With no textual support to lend weight to these assertions, it must inevitably invalidate them.

to maintain Dorothy's consciousness as the controlling point of view in the novel (p.64).

This kind of judgement is exasperating when one examines the actual book in detail. The attention given to Dorothy's loss of faith is considerable. It will be touched on in this chapter, and examined thoroughly anon. The ubiquitous and judgemental word 'fail' – Orwell *fails* 'to maintain Dorothy's consciousness' – is equally frustrating when one takes into account the sustained attention to Dorothy's consciousness. Similarly V. Meyers writes, 'Orwell fails to blend the various kinds of narrative in the novel chiefly because he lacks control over the narrative point of view' (p.72). Not all criticism, however, is dismissive of Orwell's form in this novel. Robert Lee provides an excellent analysis of the ways in which the seemingly incongruous elements of the documentary style combine to produce an overall form that is part of a greater political dynamic operating in the text:

Such passages spoil the conventional unity and justify the designation episodic. But this need not be pejorative. If we think of the novel as picaresque, the seemingly random adventures the protagonist experiences must conventionally be disparate, revealing varied inequities in the society which is explored'.³⁴

Lee is equally incisive regarding the book's attack on the Church of England through Dorothy's father, the Reverend Charles Hare. Lee refers to the 'Miltonic indignation at the corrupt clergy' (p.29) expressed in the book. Lee is also instructive in his understanding of how clearly Orwell understood what he was doing with regard to Dorothy's memory loss. Dorothy not only suffers at the hands of her brutally insensitive father, she daily has to witness her father's callous and dreadful treatment of his parishioners, epitomised by the Reverend's refusal to attend a dying baby because it will

³⁴ Lee, Robert A., *Orwell's Fiction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p.27.

interrupt his breakfast. Lee writes, 'all these reveal him to be enough in himself to drive a person to mental breakdown' (p.30).

Peter Davison, likewise, provides a commentary on the ending of *A Clergyman's Daughter* that demonstrates the book's adherence to continuity and closure in Dorothy's development. Davison begins by recalling Patrick Reilly's observation that 'Dorothy's odyssey [concludes] with her return to her father, the Rector, but not to her Father in Heaven'.³⁵ Davison returns to 'the novel's last few pages'. He points to the symbolism of the glue in both its solution and smell:

And finally, in the last two sentences of the book there comes Dorothy's (and, I think, Orwell's) solution. The problem of faith and no faith has vanished and 'with pious concentration' she works at her task. The word 'pious' and the implicit likening of the smell of the glue to the burning of incense are telling. Where shall she (and Orwell) go? As Basil Willey puts it in his introduction to Rutherford, 'in the direction, perhaps, of what is now (since Bonhoeffer) called "religionless Christianity" (Davison, p.64).

The inescapable symbolism of the glue shows how tightly constructed the text is, especially when considered in relation to the idea of Dorothy's 'odyssey', for this has been a journey.³⁶ Again, if we think of the 'nighttown' scene, whilst it breaks with the narrative pattern, it does not break with Dorothy's journey; it is simply another rhythm and reflects the rupture of her life. Similarly it is more in keeping than first appears given that it, like Joyce's Bloom character, is playing homage to Ulysses' odyssey.

It is on the question of control that critics come together to agree that Orwell, as a novelist, lacked it. V Meyers, comparing *A Clergyman's Daughter* to *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, asserts that Gordon Comstock 'is never able to imagine any positive mode of action' (p.75). She insists that his decision to return to advertising, like Dorothy's

³⁵ Patrick Reilly's *George Orwell: The Age's Adversary* (1986), p.120. In Davison, p.64.

³⁶ Such holistic appreciation of *A Clergyman's Daughter* is refreshing because the majority of positive praise is given only to parts, with statements like the following being typical: 'The fifty pages on the private school are the best writing in the book' *George Orwell* by Laurence Brander (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1954), p.98.

decision to return to Knype Hill, 'is somewhat arbitrary and inconsistent' (p.75). On the contrary, it is neither. When examining the ending to *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* it will be seen that Gordon's 'return' is as planned and well executed as Dorothy's, reflecting a commitment to the trope of 'development' that was there from the beginning. Orwell's endings in fact have something of a heliotrope quality to them, as Orwell's characters turn their heads away from the agonies of their miserable past towards the possibility of a more rewarding future.

I have quoted a good deal from V. Meyers' book because she brings together well many of the spurious arguments that are put forward as 'proof' against success in Orwell's early prose. For example, she suggests that Orwell could have made Gordon a comic character: 'Orwell's depiction of Gordon's anger, frustration and difficulties as a writer are completely serious' (p.79). Comstock is, on the contrary, set up for ridicule, and to miss the 'cues' is to show a curious laxity in the reading of the book. One such indicator comes at the very beginning of the book, which is hardly commented upon by critics. The book is prefaced by an adapted version of I Corinthians, chapter XIII. The word 'charity' has been substituted every time with the word 'money'. In *A Clergyman's Daughter* it is the lecherous, mammon/pleasure-worshipping Mr Warburton who tells Dorothy that 'if you took I Corinthians, chapter thirteen, and in every verse wrote 'money' instead of 'charity', the chapter had ten times as much meaning as before' (p.197). Orwell then is deliberately continuing with this theme, and what this version of Corinthians does is to work as an overture to Gordon's paradoxically mammon code of ethics. Gordon, throughout the book, until his 'conversion' (again, the religious symbolism should not be lost), is to believe that a man is nothing 'if he have not money';

a position that will be continually exposed as indulgent cynicism on Gordon's part. This will be developed fully in the chapter on narrative point of view.

Time and time again V. Meyers returns to the area of narration and concludes that Orwell fails 'to distinguish adequately between the narrator and the central character' (p.78). However, V. Meyers unwittingly hints at Orwell's awareness of what he is doing when she insists that Orwell gives Bowling opinions that shouldn't be his. She writes,

Just as Orwell's recent experience in the Spanish Civil War had clarified his political thinking, so the war itself has shattered Bowling's pre-1914 view of the world, for after 'that unspeakable idiotic mess you couldn't go on regarding society as something eternal and unquestionable You knew it was just a balls-up' (p.91).

The use of the coarse expression 'balls-up' makes the thought Bowling's. Just prior to this V. Meyers has demonstrated how, following Joyce's *Ulysses*, Orwell is able to detail 'the average sensual man' through 'skilful use of colloquialisms, slang and clichés ('scared stiff', 'several quid', 'her main kick in life')'. With the slang term 'balls up' he is employing the same device with Bowling, and yet this is missed.

2.4) Framing Failure: Orwell and the Condition of England Novel

I should like to introduce this area or genre by recalling Lodge's examination of the debate between Henry James and H. G. Wells on the subject of what constitutes good, sound and acceptable prose. Lodge is defending Wells's *Tono-Bungay* against claims by James that it is a failed work of art. I would defend Orwell's novels on the same grounds as Lodge puts forward. Lodge returns to the debate between Henry James and H. G. Wells that was documented by Leon Edel and Gordon N. Ray in order to establish Wells as the victor. Lodge writes (referring to the argument between James and Wells):

It was a classic encounter between a great theorist and exponent of the aesthetically 'pure', modern, international novel, and a redoubtable spokesman for and practitioner

of the rambling, discursive, aesthetically 'impure' novel of the traditional English type (*LoF*, p.214).

Tono-Bungay is told in the first person, and rejoices, according to Lodge, in 'the terrible fluidity of self-revelation' [His italics] (*LoF*, p.215). Lodge informs us that James saw this as a weakness. Lodge asks of what 'type' of novel is *Tono-Bungay*. He notes that 'it is confessional in form': The narrator, George Ponderevo, wants to tell (by way of writing a novel) of his findings with society and of his dealings with men because he has lived a varied and experienced life. Lodge writes,

The Victorians had a name for this kind of undertaking in fiction: the 'Condition of England novel'. This description was often applied to novels which sought to articulate and interpret, in the mode of fiction, the changing nature of English society in an era of economic, political, religious, and philosophical revolution' (*LoF*, p.216).³⁷

Lodge reminds us of Wells's *An Experiment in Biography*. In this book Wells argues that the English novel 'matured' at a time of social stability, and as a result novels were written in a manner that reflected relatively fixed social frameworks. Therefore, the standards by which novels were judged favoured a framework that promoted cohesion, strong character development and closure. But when a novelist (Wells in this case) wants to reflect a fragmented and disjointed society the traditional stable framework will not do. Lodge reflects on what Wells is doing in *Tono-Bungay*:

One might say the frame is the picture. That is, the main vehicle of Wells's social analysis of the condition of England in *Tono-Bungay* is not the story or the characters, but the descriptive commentary which, in most novels, we regard as the frame. I refer to the descriptions of landscape and townscape, of architecture and domestic interiors, and the narrator's reflection on them, which occupy so prominent a place in the novel (p.218).

³⁷ Lodge points out that C. F. G. Masterman's *The Condition of England* ('a book of social criticism in the tradition of Carlyle and Arnold') was brought out the same year as *Tono-Bungay* (1909) and Masterman had read proofs of *Tono-Bungay* when preparing his manuscript (*LoF*, p.217).

I would argue that this is how both *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Coming Up for Air* operate – frame is always foregrounded in these books. Take the following description of Dorothy's new environment:

Southbridge was a repellent suburb.... Brough Road lay somewhere at the heart of it, amid labyrinths of meanly decent streets, all so indistinguishably alike, with their ranks of semi-detached houses ... you could lose yourself there almost as easily as in a Brazilian forest (p.197).

Dorothy is to live in Brough Road, and so will be situated at the 'heart' of this metaphorical forest of sameness and meanness. And being at the heart she couldn't be more framed. Bowling is similarly 'framed' and depressed by sameness:

Down below, out of the little square of bathroom window, I could see the ten yards by five of grass, with a privet hedge round it.... There's the same back garden, same privets and same grass, behind every house in Ellesmere Road (p.3).

Bowling could be seen as symbolically framed by 'the little bathroom window', and from there further framed. The repetition of the word 'same' serves to focus the reader on the dull conformity of Bowling's environment. Lodge talks of how Dickens's Coketown is both a setting and a frame. The examples just given operate in the same way. Lodge argues that Dickens 'invests these inanimate objects and collections of objects with a strange and sinister life of their own' (*LoF*, p.219). Dorothy and Bowling, from the outset, are shown to emerge from their 'frame' depressed by it: 'An insidious and contemptible self-pity' causes Dorothy to bury her head under the bedclothes. This is our introduction to her. Similarly, Bowling tells us, shortly after his description of the sameness of his neighbourhood, that 'nowadays I nearly always do have a morose kind of feeling in the early mornings'.³⁸ This kind of positioning of the individual mirrors Dickens's Coketown treatment, where the individual is secondary to the sinister objects,

³⁸ However, and this cannot be stressed enough, the endings of these two novels are not nearly so pessimistic as they have been perceived, and this is developed fully anon.

and effected by them greatly. Lodge insists that it is through such images that Dickens 'establishes its theme and draws the episodic narrative into a coherent design' (*LoF*, p.219). Lodge concludes that Wells is operating in much the same way as Dickens when writing *Tono-Bungay*, with the result that individual failure is seen as a reflection of a greater societal failure and not as stemming out of something more personal. He writes:

Seen in this perspective, the fact that 'Tono-Bungay', the foundation of Ponderevo's immense fortune, should be a quack *medicine*, which falsely claims to cure all the ills of modern society, from boredom, fatigue, and strain, to falling hair and ageing gums, has a more than fortuitous appropriateness; George's failure to achieve a satisfactory and mature sexual relationship becomes a symptom of the universal disorder ('Love,' he says, 'like everything else in this immense process of social disorganisation in which we live, is a thing adrift, a fruitless thing broken away from its connections (IV,ii,2)' (*LoF*, p.219).

George Ponderevo's failure then is not meant to be a reflection of individual failure but rather as being symptomatic of a universal failing. Orwell's protagonists' relationship to failure is not quite what Ponderevo's is because Orwell does provide resolution as discussed above.

What separates *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* from the latter two books is simply that the former is not truly a Condition of England novel, and for this reason its narrative form and character portrayal are quite different. If we look again at the openings to these three books, we can see that in only two are the Condition of England themes apparent. Dorothy and Bowling are framed in oppressive domesticity; Gordon Comstock, alternatively, is introduced simply as a somewhat idle and callow youth 'bored in advance by tomorrow's tobaccoless hours' (p.1). Having said this, there is a theme here nonetheless and it is not one of social injustice, but one of progeny. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is the story of the Comstock *Family*. The opening paragraph establishes that the

protagonist is the last of his line. The very last sentence of the book confirms the book's theme of progeny: 'Well, once again things were happening in the Comstock family'.

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* there too is a strong sense of destiny, but this time it is fulfilled because the protagonist actually has real social choices at his disposal. In light of this Gordon's relationship and attitudes to poverty, work, marriage, social intercourse and so on are not meant to reflect the Condition of England, but rather, the condition of his own singularly narcissistic frame of mind. Nevertheless this does not stop Gordon being 'framed' by a great deal of the Condition of England themes, one of the most notable being that of decay. However, the frame is not foregrounded to the extent it is in the other novels, probably because the frame is false, being, as it is, imposed by Gordon upon himself.

Interestingly, where Orwell introduces decay or unpleasantness some critics read this as a reflection of Orwell's 'hang-ups', particularly when of the bodily variety. Philip Hensher points out that it is all but impossible to think of any moment in Orwell's writing where the sense of smell is accompanied by pleasure: '*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is saturated in the reek of cabbage and of bodies — sweaty Parsons, or Winston in his cell, stinking like a goat. Orwell is quite clear: people stink'.³⁹ Hensher here is too hasty in his conclusion. In the Condition of England novel decay and bad smells are endemic and

³⁹ Hensher, Philip, 'How calm was the voice of reason?' *The Spectator*, 10.05.2003, pp.33-4. Hensher falls in with a critical tradition that insists Orwell had a pathological aversion to dirt which adversely coloured his judgement of the working class and the poor. Such assumptions have had the effect of fomenting critical prejudice against Orwell. Reception of his work is often tinged with preconceptions about his dislikes. John Rodden has identified an ideological bias against Orwell running through much feminist criticism; his analysis could equally apply to class-sensitive treatment of Orwell's work: '... "gender-tinged" images of the author get disseminated ... gender-sensitive critiques bear on the formation of reputations ... intellectual reference groups and ideological allegiances shape critical response ...' ('"A Sexist After All?" The Feminists' Orwell, *New Orleans Review*, 1990, Vol. 17, pp.33-46, (p.33)). It is my belief that a great deal of critical response to Orwell has been shaped negatively through such processes as Rodden details above. This idea is developed further in 4.1 below.

Orwell uses such smells to operate symbolically; smells acting as signals of a greater societal stench.

In the first-person narration of *Tono-Bungay* (through the voice of aspiring novelist George Ponderevo) Wells may be cleverly anticipating what the likely critical responses to his Condition of England novel might be:

I've reached the criticizing, novel-writing age, and here I am writing mine—my one novel—without having any of the discipline to refrain and omit that I suppose the regular novel-writer acquires.

... I've found the restraints and rules of the art (as I made them out) impossible for me. I like to write, I am keenly interested in writing, but it is not my technique. I'm an engineer.... (p.5)

It is not to be supposed that Wells will suffer from similar shortcomings, for he is a prolific novelist. The organisation of Orwell's novels reveals an equally competent author who, like Wells, can make the episodic cohere through the foregrounding of frame, a commitment to focus, sustained symbolism, character development and so on. Similarly, there is an investment in the individual; it is through their will for improvement that the intolerable conditions of life will change. *Tono-Bungay* ends thus:

I have come to see myself from the outside, my country from the outside—without illusions. We make and pass.

We are all things that make and pass, striving upon a hidden mission, out to the open sea (p.415)

The note may appear melancholy and prosaic, but the heliotrope quality is there—Ponderevo's head turned 'out to the open sea'. At such a point frame vanishes, and the constraining, oppressive effects of its reach are gone, which brings the novel to full closure. It will be seen that Orwell's political novels incorporate this optimism – the incompetent rages and despairing self-pity disappearing to be replaced by something altogether more mature and hopeful. And it is for these reasons that Orwell's novels are not the failures in form and content that they are purported to be.

3) Aspects of Orwell's Political Aesthetic

This chapter will examine the ways in which Orwell achieves the political aesthetic that he desired for his novels. This will involve looking at how Orwell was to weave politics into his narrative, and the extent to which he propagandises his characters' experiences. This will open out into a consideration of what Orwell's politics actually were – an area that needs some clarification still.

George Woodcock's study of Orwell's writing is interesting here. In his lengthy book on Orwell's writing Woodcock has nothing but eulogistic admiration for Orwell's skill as an essayist and documentary writer, but his novels he considers failures:

Orwell's failures in characterisation are closely connected with the failures of general structure in his books. His concentration on the word as the vital unit of literature made him neglect the larger elements of literary planning, so that – except in *Burmese Days* – he never worked out an even approximately satisfactory form for a larger work of fiction.¹

I would contest the assertion that the word is the 'vital unit' in Orwell's writing. I would argue that the strength of his writing lies in the *rhythm* and pattern of his story telling. In 'Why I Write' Orwell stressed, under the title 'aesthetic enthusiasms', the importance in the 'rhythm of a good story'. Rhythm then, is a major part of what constitutes form. One thing we know for certain is that Orwell thought the form of *Burmese Days* to be unsatisfactory for him. It was not an appropriate vehicle for a polemical work: 'It is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages...' ² Orwell came to this conclusion in 1946, and it suggests that, on later reflection, he is rather happy with his political writing. Certainly he doesn't believe

¹ Woodcock, George, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* [1967] (London: Fourth Estate, 1984), p.272.

² Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XVIII, pp.316-321 (p.320).

he has been 'betrayed' into any unsatisfactory form, despite what he may have said to the contrary. Bearing this in mind, I would like (again in regard to the first two) to compare the opening paragraphs of Orwell's four thirties novels. This is the latter part of the first paragraph of *Burmese Days*:

Occasional faint breaths of wind, seeming cool by contrast, stirred the newly-drenched orchids that hung from the eaves. Beyond the orchids one could see the dusty, curved trunk of a palm tree, and then the blazing ultramarine sky. Up in the zenith, so high that it dazzled one to look at them, a few vultures circled without the quiver of a wing.

A Clergyman's Daughter:

As the alarm clock on the chest of drawers exploded like a horrid little bomb of bell metal, Dorothy, wrenched from the depths of some complex, troubling dream, awoke with a start and lay on her back looking into the darkness in extreme exhaustion.

In the latter Orwell has put his narrative energies into making the reader focus intently on his protagonist. In the first paragraph there is no reason for describing 'newly-drenched orchids that hung from the eaves', but in the second there is every reason to describe the alarm clock exploding 'like a horrid little bomb of bell metal'. Orwell, even if he is not fully aware of what he is doing, is nevertheless consistent. The alarm clock can be seen as an extended metaphor – a desire to 'wake up' a nation to the potentially catastrophic nature of the society that they are living in. Orwell's next novel *Keep the Aspidochelone* begins (after the quotation from I Corinthians XIII):

The clock struck half past two. In the little office at the back of Mr McKechnie's bookshop, Gordon-Gordon Comstock, last member of the Comstock family, aged twenty-nine and rather moth-eaten already-lounged across the table, pushing a fourpenny packet of Player's Weights open and shut with his thumb.

This opens with a familiar framing device – the little office – the modern 'cell' that is the destiny of the new middle classes. From within this metaphoric cell the paragraph establishes perfectly the sense of lethargy that will be present throughout the novel, that is, until Gordon's turn-about at the realisation that he must, in light of his status as father,

adopt a mature outlook (not that this provides any neat solution or escape flight). It is merely that being a man with blood running through his veins is preferable to opting out of humanity). All the detail in this paragraph is pertinent to furthering a sense of meanness, a meanness that will be opened out to reflect what is indicative of the age, although (as said above) the principal theme of this work is progeny and also choice. When we get to *Coming Up for Air* this meanness has become specific to one class:

The idea really came to me the day I got my new false teeth.

I remember the morning well. At about a quarter to eight I'd nipped out of bed and got into the bathroom just in time to shut the kids out. It was a beastly January morning, with a dirty yellowish-grey sky.

Again, there is the same highly controlled attention to detail, an attention that will be vigorously sustained throughout the novel. It is interesting that Woodcock looks at the opening chapters of Orwell's three documentary works (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*) and finds 'In each case ... a fine descriptive set piece which serves as a kind of overture' (Woodcock, 267). He does not examine the novels so intimately. If he did, I believe that he would be forced to arrive at the same conclusions. For these opening chapters do act as an overture in that they establish the main themes of the book. For Dorothy it is primarily anxiety and over work that will dominate. For Gordon it is enforced poverty and lethargy. For Bowling it is feelings of restriction, realisation, and jaundiced outlook symbolised by the 'yellowish-grey sky'. Given the consistency with which Orwell creates overtures in his work, it can be seen that he—conscious or not—falls in with a highly effective pattern.

Woodcock is well aware that Orwell is interested in content. He refers to Orwell's comments made in his evaluation of George Gissing. Orwell observes that the novel, above other things, 'is a story which attempts to describe credible human beings, and—

without necessarily using the technique of naturalism—to show them acting on everyday motives and not merely undergoing a series of improbable events’.³ Judged by their own criteria, Orwell’s novels are far more successful than he or others seem to be aware, unless, of course, one does not feel that he has created credible human beings. Many, including Woodcock, do not believe Orwell has created credible human beings. Raymond Williams believes that Orwell failed in his novels because of a ‘characteristic coldness, an inability to realise the full life of another’. He concludes that, ‘Relationships are characteristically meagre, ephemeral, reluctant, disillusioning, even betraying’ (Williams, p.89). One cannot help but feel that Williams is referring specifically to *Burmese Days* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, for the summation just does not fit for the thirties novels.

3.1) *Coming Up for Air* and the Failure of the Left

As said in the introduction, part of Orwell’s characters’ failure (that is their failure to be politically aware) is inseparable from what Orwell perceived to be the failure of the Left to appeal to the majority of the proletariat, i.e. the lower-middle classes. Bowling and his wife regularly attend political meetings, which are common to suburban life in the 1930s. A typical left-wing speaker horrifies Bowling with his mania. Bowling at one point closes his eyes, which has the curious effect of giving him an insight into the speaker’s mind:

I got inside *his* skull. It was a peculiar sensation. For about a second I was inside him, you might almost say I *was* him.... I saw the vision he was seeing. And it wasn’t at all the kind of vision that can be talked about.... It’s a picture of himself smashing people’s faces in with a spanner. Fascist faces, of course (*CUFA*, p.156).

In terms of establishing Orwell’s bitter disappointment with left-wing politics the above passage is highly significant. Bowling should be inspired, instead he is bored and horrified. Bowling reflects, ‘The same thing over and over again. Hate, hate, hate. Let’s

³ Orwell, ‘George Gissing’, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIX, pp.346-52 (p.350).

all get together and have a good hate' (*CUFA*, p156). In the *Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell devotes a large part of the book to what he considers to be the alienating aspects of socialism and socialists. He sees the left as making enemies of would-be sympathisers by promoting a 'god-less concept of progress', and this, coupled with their collective enthusiasm for 'standardisation and mechanisation', 'revolts anyone with a feeling for tradition or the rudiments of an aesthetic sense' (*Wigan Pier*, 206). Of these orthodox Marxists Orwell despairs. He writes:

Sometimes, when I listen to these people talking, and still more when I read their books, I get the impression that, to them, the whole Socialist movement is no more than a kind of exciting heresy-hunt – a leaping to and fro of frenzied witch-doctors to the beat of tom-toms and the tune of 'Fee fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a right-wing deviationist'. It is because of this kind of thing that it is so much easier to feel yourself a Socialist when you are among working-class people (*Wigan Pier*, p.209).

Orwell talks of the 'horrible jargon' used by socialists. He hates such phrases as 'bourgeois ideology', 'proletarian solidarity', 'expropriation of the expropriators' and the 'bubbling about dialectical materialism'. And 'Even the single word "Comrade" has done its dirty little bit towards discrediting the Socialist movement' (*Wigan Pier*, p.210). All these elements can be seen at play in the meetings attended by Bowling.

George Bowling is arguably Orwell's most politically representative character, for he is the stuff revolutions are made of. Orwell's meticulous research for this character, which is driven by a will to capture the essential humanity of 'a typical middle-aged bloke with about £5 a week and a house in the suburbs',⁴ should not be glossed over. This class of man—as Orwell was to write when the war, forecast in *Coming Up for Air*, actually breaks out—'is quite indispensable' in the struggle against fascism:

⁴ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XI, pp.226-8 (pp.226-7). This quotation is taken from a letter to John Sceats (an insurance agent who wrote articles for the socialist monthly *Controversy*) whom Orwell is approaching for details for his character Bowling.

At this moment it is not so much a question of surrendering life as of surrendering leisure, comfort, economic liberty, social prestige. There are few people in England who really want to see their country conquered by Germany. If it can be made clear that defeating Hitler means wiping out class privilege, the great mass of middling people, the £6 a week to £2000 a year class, will probably be on our side. These people are quite indispensable ('The Lion & the Unicorn', p.121).

The 'our side' here is the revolutionary side, and Orwell's argument—that it is in the 'wiping out of class privilege' that the will-to-fight will come—has to be the direct influence of his Catalonian experience, where he believed that the resistance to Franco sprang from a collective will to seize an historic opportunity for overthrowing the existing social system:

Men and women armed only with sticks of dynamite rushed across the open squares and stormed stone buildings held by trained soldiers with machine-guns.... [I]t would be hard to believe that the Anarchists and Socialists who were the backbone of the resistance were doing this kind of thing for the preservation of capitalist democracy, which especially in the Anarchist view was no more than a centralised swindling machine (*HTC*, p.191).⁵

So, for Orwell, the obstacles in the way of revolutionary spirit are leisure, comfort, economic liberty and social prestige. *Coming Up for Air* is very much about the spurious charms of these social temptations, and Orwell is careful to show how 'miserable scraps of privilege' enslave Bowling, and therefore the mass of men whom he represents. Bowling's feelings of social superiority are a gauge of his commitment to the folly of empty class-privilege. And this is something that Orwell is fully aware of when he has Bowling say:

⁵ It should be pointed out that Orwell, according to his own testimony, had found himself in the most revolutionary part of Spain. As Douglas Kerr stresses – 'The book is Orwell's homage to Catalonia (not to Spain....' (Kerr, p.56). In view of this his hope that anarchist fervour could stir in the British seems a large leap of faith.

If you'd suggested to me then, in 1919, that I ought to start a shop—a tobacco and sweet-shop, say or a general store in some god-forsaken village—I'd just have laughed. I'd worn pips on my shoulder, and my social standards had risen. At the same time I didn't share the delusion, which was pretty common among ex-officers, that I could spend the rest of my life drinking pink gin. I'd got to have a job. And the job, of course would be 'in business'—just what kind of job I didn't know (*CUFA*, p.129).

Bowling has distanced himself from grander delusional speculation—he has no choice—yet his character is far from emancipated in terms of buying in to hierarchical notions of social place or position. He continues to get a buzz from being the owner of a motorcar. As a typical middle-aged 'bloke' a great deal of Bowling's character is portrayed negatively (although this should not be taken as Swiftian misanthropy, it is simply that Bowling is in the grip of the English class system). Bowling's reaction to the 'infiltration' of working-class people into his old town is to hate them. Bowling rages: 'Sentimental, you say? Anti-social? Oughtn't to prefer trees to men? I say it depends what trees and what men' (*CUFA*, p.229). He finishes his rant with, 'Not that there's anything one can do about it, except to wish them a pox in their guts' (*CUFA*, p.230). Bowling does not get political, he gets angry. Bowling's hatred is an impotent reaction to a discovery that the landscape of England is changing to accommodate the needs of a growing population. He sounds as if he might be going the way of Birkin, the semi-autobiographical hero of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, a novel Orwell was very familiar with. Birkin growls, 'I abhor humanity, I wish it swept away'.⁶ A little before this Birkin says that 'what people want is hate—hate and nothing but hate'. Bowling is in danger of going down this route, despite the fact that he observed a similarly jaundiced attitude in the left-wing speaker. Bowling's reaction is highly significant. If we go back to the opening quotation from *Wigan Pier*, cited above, we can 'place' Bowling – he is one of the 'many millions' for

⁶ Lawrence, D. H., *Women in Love* [1921] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p.151.

who 'when the pinch came ... would side with their oppressors ... against those who ought to be their allies.' Orwell's fears of fascism taking hold in England were great and *Coming Up for Air* is part propaganda against such a fate.

That Orwell never has characters of the labouring or manual working-class is significant. This is a class of people Orwell seemingly does not need to address. Indeed, it seems that the uneducated, especially if physically strong, fill him with nothing but admiration. The opening chapter of *Homage to Catalonia* is worth looking at in relation to this. Orwell is struck by the face of an Italian militiaman. He says:

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. There were both candour and ferocity in it; also the pathetic reverence that illiterate people have for their supposed superiors.... I hardly know why, but I have seldom seen anyone – any man, I mean – to whom I have taken such an immediate liking.⁷

This was the man who inspired Orwell to write one of his rare poems. The poem finishes with:

But the thing that I saw in your face
No power can disinherit:
No bomb that ever burst
Shatters the crystal spirit.⁸

This is a powerful eulogy. There is nothing in the faces of Hare, Comstock or Bowling to inspire such admiration. The crystal spirit is seen to be the pure spirit, one that has not been tainted, even corrupted with the ideology of class or political thinking – as the following lines from an earlier stanza demonstrate:

And he was born knowing what I had learned
Out of books and slowly.

⁷ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia in Orwell in Spain*, ed. Peter Davison (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p.31.

⁸ Orwell, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIII, p.511.

The idea that humans carry within them the kernel of true humanity is a matter of gospel to Orwell. Winston has to re-learn his humanity, go back, as it were, to his primitive self. Time and time again Orwell uses the word 'civilised' to denote barbarity or crushing mediocrity. The above lines demonstrate Orwell's political and humanist considerations. In discussing Swift's unreasonable condemnation of man, Orwell writes:

[Swift's] vision of society was so penetrating, and yet ... it's false. He couldn't see what the simplest person sees, that life is worth living and human beings, even if they're dirty and ridiculous, are mostly decent.⁹

Undoubtedly Orwell has less anxiety about the dirty and ridiculous. His political sympathies, albeit ambivalent ones, lie with the genteel poor, and the reasons, as outlined above lie in the fact that he believes this class to be fundamental to the cause of socialism – for they are the true masses and without them a fundamental shift in outlook will not come to pass. Many commentators have contended that Orwell's early novels are distinctly lacking in the promotion of socialist values. Rai, for example, writes:

Keep the Aspidistra Flying is instinct with that comprehensive disgust with the bourgeois world which is, so to speak, the substance out of which Orwell's mature political attitudes are formed but ... there is little socialism in it (Rai, p.56).

This kind of criticism fails to take on board the subtlety of Orwell's political writing. Gordon Comstock's brief palliness with a taxi driver is revealing on this score. Gordon has just received a cheque for fifty dollars (from an American magazine) for one of his forgotten poems. He is about to blow the lot. He befriends a taxi driver at his first port of call. This is part of their exchange:

More matily than ever, they clinked glasses.
'Many happy returns,' said Gordon.
'Your birthday today, sir?'
'Only metaphorically. My re-birthday, so to speak.'
'I never had much education,' said the taximan.

⁹ Orwell, 'Imaginary Interview: George Orwell and Jonathan Swift', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIV, pp.154-163 (p. 161). Orig. title: 'Too Hard on Humanity'.

'I was speaking in parables,' said Gordon.
'English is good enough for me,' said the taximan.
(*KTAF*, p.174).

The dialogue ends with the taxi driver astonished to learn that Gordon is a poet. And he exclaims sarcastically 'Poet! It takes all sorts to make a world, don't it now?' Gordon's reply to this is to say 'And a bloody good world it is'. The author's sympathies are firmly with the taxi driver here, and once again Gordon is exposed as someone whose thinking is nothing but an inflated confusion. This feeds back into Gordon's failure to adopt a socialist outlook, indeed, his failure to engage in politics at all. Gordon says to Ravelston:

'All this about Socialism and Capitalism and the state of the modern world and God knows what. I don't give a — for the state of the modern world' (*KTAF*, p.99).

Gordon continues to be 'honest' with Ravelston and admits that all he really wants out of life is more money. He says that he would stop railing against the world if only he had £5 instead of £2. Given Gordon's largesse when he actually possesses money we have to doubt that he would be content with a *little* more. This is just another example of Gordon's hopeless and flawed world-view; and as such it has the effect of throwing into better light the socialism that Gordon rejects.

Orwell's own world-view is expressed clearly in his essay 'Looking Back on the Spanish War'. He finishes the essay by evoking the face of the Italian militiaman. The man's face, he tells us, 'symbolises for me the flower of the European working class' ('LBSW', p.360). He states, 'The central issue of the war was the attempt of people like this to win the decent life which they knew to be their birthright' ('LBSW', p.360). It is not going too far to say that Gordon and Bowling would essentially block the birthrights of the working classes. Bowling would deny them decent housing, and Gordon is indifferent to them when he is not looking down upon them and allowing such people to

call him 'sir'. However, it must be stressed, that the ending of these two books suggests a turning round of cynical disgust with everything, which feeds into a propagandist element of optimism.

This ties in with Orwell's political outlook, which is bound up with saying that individuals have responsibility for shaping the kind of society they live in. This attitude reflects an overall political view that insists on the inherently good nature of the ordinary man:

A Socialist is not obliged to believe that human society can actually be made perfect, but almost any Socialist does believe that it could be a great deal better than it is at present, and that most of the evil that men do results from the warping effects of injustice and inequality. The basis of Socialism is humanism. It can co-exist with religious belief, but not with the belief that man is a limited creature who will always misbehave himself if he gets half a chance.¹⁰

B. Campbell believes Orwell has nothing but contempt for 'the people'. She writes:

Despite his wish to invest his revolutionary optimism in the people, what he feels for the common people edges on contempt. Actually, he thinks they're dead common ('Paterfamilias', p.127).

Orwell's contempt is not directed at the common people and Campbell's insistence that it is in the face of no evidence reveals her own feelings of contempt for Orwell. Campbell insists that Orwell portrays the working class as a class that merely suffers, instead of a class that 'struggles' ('Paterfamilias', p.129). Campbell says 'For some reason, which Orwell never explains, the working class is the material of revolution' (p.134).

Orwell's seemingly ambivalent attitude toward the working class in terms of their capacity as catalysts for change is in reality not so contradictory as it appears. Here, again, we can bring in Chaplin, because Orwell's working-class representative is

¹⁰ Orwell, 'What is Socialism?', *Orwell and Politics*, pp.420-25 (p.424).

practically identical to Chaplin's. Roland Barthes provides an expert analysis of Chaplin's proletarian figures:

It is precisely because Chaplin portrays a kind of primitive proletarian, still outside Revolution, that the representative force of the latter is immense. No socialist work has yet succeeded in expressing the humiliated condition of the worker with so much violence and generosity. Brecht alone, perhaps, has glimpsed the necessity, for socialist art, of always taking Man on the eve of Revolution, that is to say, still blind, on the point of having his eyes opened to the revolutionary light by the 'natural' excess of his wretchedness.¹¹

Whether portraying the lower-middle class—proletarians by economic if not cultural criterion—or the working class proper, Orwell does show *Man on the eve of Revolution*, *blind*, and in an *excess of his wretchedness*. This way of representing, Barthes argues, is effective politically because it reveals what has hitherto gone unrecognised: 'To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see' [his italics] (p.40). I believe this is what Orwell is doing when he details the discontents of his characters.

Orwell's representation of non-revolutionary, apolitical protagonists in the realm of socialist art is not then as incongruous as might appear, especially when considered against Orwell's intractably anti-capitalist position.¹² He does not see the English as enlightened, and believes left-wing politics to be worse than useless contaminated as it is by Soviet foreign policy. Because of the Soviet dominance of the British Left, Orwell loathes politics, 'the smelly little orthodoxies' that preclude free thought. When, referring to *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Newsinger insists that

¹¹ Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* [1957](London: Vintage, 2000), pp.39-40.

¹² Orwell's deep attraction to the socialism of the anarchists he mixed with in the Spanish Civil War is not surprising given their mutual disgust for modern industrial capitalism—something not felt by the working classes of the West who have invested in material progress. Franz Borkenau's *The Spanish Cockpit* (the only book Orwell recommends on the subject) explains the uniqueness of the anarchist attitude:

Anarchism does not believe in the creation of a new world through the improvement of the material conditions of the lower classes, but in the creation of a new world out of the moral resurrection of those classes which have not yet been contaminated by the spirit of mammon and greed (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), p.22.

neither book ‘suggest[s] any socialist solution to their protagonists’ predicament’, he is failing to understand the complexities of Orwell’s political positioning. This is a balance that will be redressed in this study.

3.2) Orwell the Perfectionist

The lengths to which Orwell was prepared to go in order to perfect his prose is something that needs to be looked at in more detail, and such literary pedantry that led him to assert that he was ‘trying to find a style which eliminates the adjective’ will go some way in support of my claim that Orwell was more in control than given credit for.

In his review of *The Two Carlyles* by Osbert Burdett, Orwell refers to Carlyle’s book *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. He says of it that there are ‘Fine panegyrics ... fine adjectives—adjectives which, living a strange life of their own, give an air of profundity—but no real depth of thought. It is only a splendid vestment of words, draped about a few worn, rather mean ideas’ (p.196).¹³ Orwell is extremely sensitive to the ways in which language works, and also punctuation. Here he is talking of Carlyle’s treatment of Marat: ‘Some obscure spite moves Carlyle to damn Marat, and so he damns him, when the facts give out, by tricks of repetition, even by punctuation; every semi-colon is an insult’ (p.197).

In the same way I wish to bring attention to the extent to which Orwell is aware of how a novel, particularly a proletarian novel, fails or succeeds. In a review of *Hunger and Love* by Lionel Britton Orwell says, ‘As a novel *Hunger and Love* is almost worthless’.¹⁴

¹³ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, ‘Review of *The Two Carlyles* by Osbert Burdett’, pp.195-7 (p.196).

¹⁴ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, ‘Review of *Hunger and Love* by Lionel Britton, *Albert Grope* by F. O. Mann’, pp.203-5 (p.204).

Orwell says that the book 'tells the truth about life, but make[s] no attempt to be readable' (p.204). One thinks of J. Meyers' claim that *A Clergyman's Daughter* is unreadable. Note how much more constructive Orwell is in his criticism! It is telling that Orwell does not dismiss other people's work as he does his own. In fact he rarely makes a negative statement without supporting his claims:

The tricks of style, and particularly the repetitions, become very tiresome after a few chapters..... No doubt Mr. Britton would say that his object was to tell the truth, not to compose an elegant novel; but even so, truth is not served by leaving out commas (p.204).

Despite his assertion that every book is a failure Orwell is, as we can see, more instructive than that statement suggests. *Hunger and Love*, as a social document, he says, 'it is entirely sound' but, as a novel, 'almost worthless'. The latter criticism mirrors current criticism of Orwell's thirties novels. He goes on: 'The peculiar merit of the book is that it does approach life from the twenty-seven-shilling-a-week angle.' What *angle* a book is written from is of course something Orwell is acutely aware of. Dorothy and Bowling are always portrayed in relation to the constraints imposed upon them by their income and attitudes, and whilst they are not quite in the same league as the degraded slum class Britton depicts they are nonetheless forced, like Arthur Phelps (the anti-hero of *Hunger and Love*), into 'thinking night and day of the world they live in'. Dorothy reflects less than Bowling, but there is reflection nevertheless. Every one of Orwell's protagonists' minds is, like Phelps's, 'warped by petty discomfort'. In terms of why *Hunger and Love* fails, Orwell is more constructive than his own detractors. Orwell talks of Britton not having 'any sense of selection'. Criticism of Orwell's novels constantly seeks to show his use of selection wanting. Lastly, on the subject of character, Orwell says that Arthur Phelps is 'not very nice' but is 'as nice as you would expect.' Orwell is

accused of 'Swiftian' misanthropy in his treatment of character. Consequently, he is perceived to have failed in characterisation because his men like Bowling and Comstock are simply not very nice, or in the case of Dorothy, insipid. Yes, Bowling is insensitive and Dorothy bland, but their unrewarding and demanding circumstances have made them so—this is the point.

3.3) Politics and Literature: Upward vs Orwell

Orwell's disdain for the political writings, in both poetry and prose, of his contemporaries has been made clear in the previous chapter. Therefore a comparison between Orwell's politically loaded art and that of his contemporaries is necessary in evaluating, or at any rate appreciating the differences. The majority of the Oxbridge writers were members of the British Communist Party, and so the political message or propaganda was straightforward, as the following denouement to Edward Upward's *Journey to the Border* makes clear:

The tutor was passing the refreshment tent. He was approaching the road which led downwards from the racecourse. He had made up his mind what he would do. He would walk into the town. It was not more than five miles away, and he would arrive there within an hour and a half. He would visit the newsagent's shop outside which he had once seen a poster advertising a meeting of the Internationalist Workers' Movement. He would ask the newsagent to put him in touch with the local secretary of the Movement.¹⁵

Joining the Internationalist Workers' Movement is going to save a middle-class private tutor from insanity, which has been brought on by over-exposure to the petty-bullying and stuffy banality of a bourgeois country set. The resolution could not be given in blunter terms, and the narrative is a plodding chronology: *The tutor was passing... He*

¹⁵ Upward, Edward, *Journey to the Border* (London: Enitharmon, 1994) Revised version of the novel first published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press in 1938, p.135.

was approaching the road... He had made up his mind... He would visit the newsagent's shop... It goes in the same strain. Another example:

There would be evenings when with Mr Parkin's knowledge he would go to see the village schoolmaster or the Congregationalist Minister. He would talk to them about the Movement. Mr Parkin would give him the sack if he got to hear about this. In which case the tutor would go to London, where the Movement was at its strongest (p.135)

This narrative is following the tutor's thoughts, but it is given in strictly third person: *In which case the tutor would go to London*. The result again is a little laboured. However, the socialism is abundantly clear. Stephen Spender, in his 1994 introduction to the revised edition, says, 'It is not too much to say that *Journey to the Border* contains some of the most beautiful prose poems of the century' (p.9). The example he gives is: 'It was simple and bold and powerful, crested in front with a rampant brass unicorn, thumping with its pistons like a thumping heart' (p.9). The book clearly does have moments that are more intense and poetic than the examples I have given, but it is where the political is incorporated that is of interest here.

It is fortunate that a large part of the original manuscript of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* survives because it provides a rare insight into the processes Orwell's writing would undergo before it could become the vivid, fluid and symbolically succinct style he is celebrated for.¹⁶ A good place to begin a study of Orwell's political aesthetic would be to focus on his opening of this novel, because, as discussed above, these beginnings are

¹⁶ Peter Davison makes the following comment on the surviving manuscript:

George Orwell was no hoarder of his manuscripts. Of his nine books, a few notes survive for *Burmese Days*; because they were subjected to censorship, a page or two of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* were not destroyed and have come to light in the files of the first publisher of that book; and Orwell's typescripts used by the printers to set *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are in the Orwell Archive. It is, therefore, a particularly happy chance that so much of the preliminary drafting of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should have survived. *George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty-Four. The Facsimile of the Extant Manuscript*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), p. ix.

richly embedded aesthetically, for they act as an overture to the essentially political themes and leitmotifs that will be developed throughout.

The first draft to the opening of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is as follows:

It was a cold blowy day in early April, and a million radios were striking thirteen. Winston Smith pushed open the glass door of Victory Mansions, turned to the right down the passage way and pressed the button of the lift. Nothing happened. He had just pressed a second time when a door at the end of the passage opened, letting out a smell of boiled greens and old rag mats, and the aged prole who acted as porter and caretaker thrust out a grey, seamed face and stood for a moment sucking his teeth and watching Winston malignantly.

“Lift ain’t working,” he announced at last.

The revised version runs:

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats.

This is word for word how the final version was to appear, so we can see the exact transformation. The initial introduction differs from the second in that it labours in comparison. It is a mere sequence of detail, similar to that of *Upward’s*. The latter, by contrast, is a neat conceptualisation of Winston in relation to his environment and home. The clocks ‘striking thirteen’, as opposed to ‘a million radios’, better emphasises the now military status of the traditional timepiece. The second sentence establishes Winston’s status as the embattled figure. He is attempting, futilely, to fortify himself against the elements. His struggle ‘to escape the vile wind’ (emphasised by the adverb ‘quickly’, which is repeated) ends in defeat as ‘the swirl of gritty dust’ enters the building with him. The building is called ‘Victory Mansions’; the victory of the ‘vile wind’ now becomes symbolic, as Winston’s struggle to evade the vile, all-pervasive elements of The Party will also end in defeat.

The first paragraph gives none of this immediate symbolism: 'Winston Smith pushed open the glass door of Victory Mansions, turned to the right down the passage way and pressed the button of the lift'. One can feel the dullness of sentences such as *pushed open the glass door, and turned to the right down the passage*. This is mere detail, void of symbolism and creative action. Similarly, 'a cold blowy day in early April', becomes 'a bright cold day in April', and where the former gives a sense of a specific day, the latter transcends specificity to build atmosphere – it is 'the yellow note' that we meet later. It is also (we can begin making parallels – an indication of the text's imaginative quality) the cold white light of the Ministry of Love. In fact the light of the *bright cold day* suffuses the entire opening scene making it vivid. Taking the adjective 'blowy' out of the first sentence, and transferring it to the second, reduces and hones meaning, bringing Orwell's technique of focalisation to the fore.

Unfortunately we are not able to chart the progress of Orwell's other beginnings, but as they are rich in symbolism, pithy and direct we can, fairly confidently, imagine that the initial attempts were poorer in comparison.

3.4) How Orwell's Characters Think

It will be seen that Orwell's concerns with the ways in which people make sense of their worlds, that is, in the ways that people *think*, is deeply fascinating to him. So strong is Orwell's interest in the subject that it is rarely far from discussion, and a study of how he gives his characters' 'voice' cannot be separated from how he views thought in general, particularly the thought processes of 'ordinary' people. Running through Orwell's treatment of thought is the conviction that people tend to take to thinking only when

forced to. Being forced to think is something typical of the present age. George Bowling summarises: 'People who in the normal way would have gone through life with about as much tendency to think for themselves as a suet pudding were turned into Bolshies just by the war....' (p.127).

As highlighted previously, the general consensus among the critics is that Orwell invests his characters with too much intelligence. Philip Hensher, in the article referred to above, writes of the 'implausibility' of George Bowling's observations. He echoes Zwerdling's sentiment that Orwell creates, at times, a mere 'ventriloquist's dummy'. If this were the case Orwell's characterisation would have failed indeed. Yet one of Orwell's deepest convictions is that man is capable of thought, quiet refined thought even though he may not have learned the language necessary to express it.¹⁷ It is worth looking at the origins of this conviction. Orwell describes it as something of a revelation:

It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that 'It isn't the same for them as it would be for us', and that the people bred in the 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.¹⁸

This is not to suggest that Orwell believes such a girl is typical, or rather such thinking in such a girl is typical. Compare the above to Orwell's treatment of the 'proles' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. When Winston Smith is looking down from his illicit position observing the woman pegging out washing, the commentary runs: 'The woman down there had no

¹⁷ The extent to which Orwell is aware of his contentions is not clear. It is interesting that Orwell completely contradicts Stalin in this, who stated:

It is said that thoughts arise in the mind of man prior to their being expressed in speech, that they arise without language material, without the language shell, in so to speak, a naked form. But this is absolutely wrong. Whatever the thoughts that arise in the mind of man, they can arise and exist only on the basis of language material, on the basis of language terminology and phrases...

'Reply to Krasheninnikova' in *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings 1905-52*, ed. Bruce Franklin [1950] (London: Croom Helm, 1973), pp.430-436 (p.433).

¹⁸ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier, The Complete Works*, Vol. V, p.52.

mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart and a fertile belly' (p.228). This is seemingly a contradiction, but if we look at Orwell's comments on the matter in another paper his position on the subject of uneducated people in relation to intelligent thought becomes clearer. He once wrote that, 'The Russian masses could only practice civil disobedience if the same idea happened to occur to all of them simultaneously'.¹⁹ Orwell's point then is that humans are *capable* of intelligent thought, even if they are not, for the most part, aware of it themselves. What I believe Orwell is doing with his characters is exploring 'ordinary' consciousness when it is, as it were, out of hibernation. Every one of Orwell's characters is, for the most part, broken out of their routine and forced into reflection. The only educated protagonist—Gordon—reflects in a fog of myth and general falsity, created by his prejudice and mistaken beliefs in his talent, and significantly he is not 'ordinary'. In addressing the issue of a character's thought Orwell follows in the tradition of writers like Trollope. In *He Knew He Was Right* Trollope describes the thought processes of the now agonised Trevelyan at Casalunga:

In his desire to achieve empire, and in the sorrows which had come upon him in his unsuccessful struggle, his mind had wavered so frequently, that his spoken words were no true indicators of his thoughts; and in all his arguments he failed to express either his convictions or his desires.²⁰

This is precisely Orwell's view, but what Orwell wants is for his characters' thoughts to be expressed. What Orwell does is to give shape to his characters' thoughts. It is not the case that Orwell is merely obtruding his own voice upon those of his characters. Like the girl unblocking the drainpipe, we are to have more sympathy with human distress because it is all too well understood by the people suffering from it. An episode between

¹⁹ Orwell, 'Reflections on Ghandi', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XX, p.9.

²⁰ Trollope, Anthony, *He Knew He Was Right* [1869] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p.660.

O'Brien and Winston is insightful because it can be seen as an awareness that 'unequal' minds can share equal intelligence, albeit one in a nebulous form:

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. 'I know all about your contempt, your hatred, your disgust. But don't worry, I am on your side!' And then the flash of intelligence was gone (p.19).

The above demonstrates that Orwell is sensitive to and interested in how thoughts are to be communicated. It is not difficult to see Orwell, the author, as playing the part of O'Brien. He can see inside the minds of Dorothy and Bowling. He knows, when no one else can know, all about their contempt, their hatred and their disgust. As argued above, Orwell can be seen as the one who is setting scattered thoughts in order, his intellect, being like O'Brien's to Winston's, 'enormously more powerful, more systematic, less fear-ridden'.

3.5) Going Against the Grain: Novels are out of Fashion

Orwell's decision to write novels in the thirties went contrary to the literary inclinations of his anti-modernist contemporaries. Alex Zwerdling reflects that due to a 'darkening' of the political climate in the thirties 'fiction came to seem more and more of a luxury'. He writes that in 1938, Stephen Spender announced in *Fact* 'that the magazine would no longer review novels'.²¹ Clearly the novel form, with its attendant 'bourgeois' associations of illusion and collusion in a hierarchical society was being ostracised by the trenchantly left wing circles of this time. Orwell, of course, is no less trenchantly left wing, and yet he refuses to denounce traditional prose style and instead chooses to adopt it for himself, following a Wellsian path. Orwell desired to fuse the political with the

²¹ Zwerdling, Alex, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p.161.

literary, and it will be argued that he was far clearer in his literary aims than he is given credit for, or, perhaps, than he himself realised.

Added to this, there is, as mentioned above, a belief that Orwell failed to find an appropriate form. His reportage or documentary writing is seen to intrude into his novel writing and vice-versa.²²

To begin with, Orwell's positioning within the anti-modernist 'school' is, for a number of reasons, worth consideration. Whilst we can claim that Orwell is *of* the Auden, Spender and Isherwood group in broad terms, he does not share the collective ethos of 'the movement'. Of course, the very term anti-modernist directly denotes a reaction against modernism, its antagonistic position is declared openly. For Orwell, there is more ambivalence in his attitude towards the modernists.

On the one hand, whilst admiring the collective talents of writers such as Joyce, Eliot and Lawrence, Orwell is less enthusiastic about the modernist 'attitude'. He talks of its 'defeatism', 'pessimism of outlook', and general feeling of 'tragedy', and asserts that, 'if the keynote of the Georgian poets was 'Beauty of Nature', the keynote of the post-war writers would be 'tragic sense of life' ('ITW'). Orwell feels that as a consequence of such a peculiarly soured vision of life Eliot, for example, in 'Sweeney Agonistes' 'achieve[s] the difficult feat of making modern life out to be worse than it is' ('ITW'). Orwell asks, 'Why the skulls and cactuses, the yearning after lost faith and impossible civilizations?' ('ITW'). With these criticisms Orwell is echoing the criticisms of the anti-modernists. Like his contemporaries he is frustrated by the modernists' refusal to address themselves to the political considerations of their own day. He writes: 'Our eyes are directed to

²² Zwerdling writes 'Orwell's three book-length documentaries ... were products of a similar distrust of fiction' (p.162).

Rome, to Byzantium, to Montparnasse, to Mexico, to the Etruscans, to the subconscious, to the solar plexus' ('ITW'). He points out that Russia means Tolstoy and Dostoevsky but not the Russian revolution. Italy means 'picture galleries, churches and museums – but not Blackshirts', and Germany is psychoanalysis but not Hitler.

On the other hand, despite the politically neutral subject matter, Orwell is as enthusiastic in his admiration of the modernist writers as he is contemptuous of his own group.²³ Paramount in his objection to his peers is the 'taint' of political orthodoxy that surrounds them, and he derides the group by saying they invoke a kind of 'Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing' ('ITW').

Orwell's historical perspective is in a significant degree different to his peers and their predecessors of a decade before. His admiration of Walt Whitman is a good example of this.²⁴ It reflects Orwell's preoccupation with the near past (as opposed to the far past preoccupations of the modernists). In speaking of Walt Whitman's America he comments that 'The democracy, equality and comradeship that he is always talking about are not remote ideals, but something that existed in front of his eyes' ('ITW'). Orwell invokes a sense of lost liberty that exists beyond any immediate totalitarian threat.

²³ Referring to Lawrence's 'noble savages', Orwell writes '... whether Lawrence's view of life is true or whether it is perverted, it is at least an advance on the Science-worship of H. G. Wells or the shallow Fabian progressivism of writers like Bernard Shaw' ('The Re-discovery of Europe', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIII, pp.209-21 (p.214). Orwell goes on to talk of 'Science, Progress and civilised man'; he concludes:

Progress had finally ended in the biggest massacre in history, Science was something that created bombing planes and poison gas, civilised man, as it turned out, was ready to behave worse than the savage when it came to the pinch (p.214).

The notion of what it is to be civilised is something that predominates Orwell's characterisation, and this area will be developed later, as will Orwell's relationship with the writers above mentioned. It should be noted that H. G. Wells, among others, refuted the 'accusations' made by Orwell, which were published in *The Listener* and are reproduced in *CW* immediately after the article and broadcast 'The Re-discovery of Europe'.

²⁴ Orwell's extreme dislike of Wells's scientific writing and Shaw's 'Fabian Progressivism' is inextricably mixed in with his love of the 'pre-machine' writers such as Whitman, and testifies to his anxiety over what progress will mean for mankind.

Similarly, in talking of other American writers he makes the point that ‘When you read about Mark Twain’s Mississippi raftsmen and pilots, or of Bret Harte’s Western gold miners, they seem more remote than the cannibals of the Stone Age’ (‘ITW’). Orwell is insisting, through comparison with the time of mid-century America, that individual freedom in western democracies has suffered greatly, war or no war. In fact, when considering Orwell’s fiction, we can see that the question of individual freedom is constantly woven into the text. Moreover, for Orwell, the question of freedom, as said above, is not a problem strictly of the era that is filled with ‘concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs ... machine guns, putshes, purges, slogans ... gas-masks, submarines, spies, provocateurs, press censorship, secret prisons ... and political murders’ (‘ITW’). This is Orwell’s list, or *series* (as they will be referred to from now on) given to sum up the age in which he is writing.²⁵ It epitomises the era well, and the question of individual freedom in relation to such perilous realities is central to the concerns of the anti-modernists, and in this Orwell can be said to be ‘on board’ with his peers.

However, Orwell is equally concerned with what the role of writer ought to be in response to these immediate threats – he abhors what he perceives to be the ‘responsibility’ of the anti-modernists, their *purpose*, yet he objects to the seeming ‘irresponsibility’ of the modernists, with (as he sees it) their eyes to Rome and Byzantium. Orwell’s ambivalence here is difficult to distinguish from caprice, which brings us to Henry Miller.

Orwell’s essay ‘Inside the Whale’ is part-dedication to Miller, particularly to his first book *Tropic of Cancer*, which came out in 1934. What Miller is doing, according to

²⁵ Ringbom refers to Orwell’s famous lists as ‘series’ and compares them to those of Shaw and Swift’s series. Ringbom’s assessment and comparisons of the various series are illuminating, and shall be returned to later.

Orwell, is effectively insulating himself against an unsavoury world rather as one would do if one were able to climb into the belly of a whale. In this autobiographical book Miller is the antithesis of the man of action. Orwell is struck by the extent to which Miller's book is in the opposite direction of the thirties path. For this reason Orwell likes it enormously, he likes it despite the fact that he has declared it politically 'irresponsible'. In analysing his feelings towards Miller's book, Orwell comes to understand why (as he feels) the great body of politically invested thirties books do not achieve their desired aim. Their failure, he believes, lies in their choice of protagonists. They do not feature what Orwell calls 'the average sensual man'. He writes, 'The average sensual man is out of fashion. The passive non-political attitude is out of fashion. Pre-occupation with sex and truthfulness about the inner life are out of fashion' (ITW). Orwell attacks Louis MacNeice's dismissal of E. M. Forster's appraisal (in 1917) of Eliot's 'Prufrock'. Forster approves of it because in the midst of inhuman misery, "He who could turn aside to complain of ladies and drawing-rooms preserved a tiny drop of our self-respect, he carried on the human heritage" ('ITW'). Forster says that this is a feeble protest, and all the better for that. Commenting on this review ('smugly', as Orwell put it), MacNeice says (in relation to 'Prufrock'), "Ten years later less feeble protests were to be made by poets and the human heritage carried on rather differently". Orwell is completely dismissive of this claim and reiterates Forster's contention that to carry on the human heritage is to 'keep in touch with pre-war emotions'. Orwell writes that he can easily imagine 'What a relief it would have been at such a time, to read about the hesitations of a middle-aged highbrow with a bald spot!' ('ITW'). And this foregrounding of the human spirit is essentially why Orwell promotes Miller.

Interestingly, Orwell compares Miller with Joyce and finds similarity in that the former shows 'a willingness to mention the inane squalid facts of everyday life' ('ITW'). Orwell says that Miller drags the '*real-politik* of the inner mind into the open' ('ITW'). Not that one should over-state Orwell's love of Miller at this time. He understands him to be limited and vulgar, and is positively disgusted by his indifference to the fate of humanity, but over-riding these considerations is the opinion that Miller's voice is a 'human voice among the bomb-explosions, a friendly American voice, 'innocent of public-spiritedness' ('ITW').²⁶

3.6) Orwell and Self-Deprecation

It appears that to write off Orwell's thirties novels is something critics have felt almost duty bound to do given the amount of negative publicity generated by both Orwell himself and like-minded critics.²⁷ In defence of Orwell's thirties novels I wish to say no more here. What I would like to do instead is to look again at just why Orwell is so dismissive of himself as a competent novelist. Here, I will refer back to Orwell's own damaging criticism and attempt to delineate the mechanisms by which Orwell is 'drawn' into rejecting his own claims. If we can look again at that self-damning line to Tosco Fyvel, and then read it in context with the letter, it will be seen that Orwell, given his monumental inferiority complex, has been somewhat forced to make the assertion. For

²⁶ Later Miller was to take a profound interest in the social health of humanity. In a tribute to Henry Thoreau Miller was to mirror Orwell's distrust of the capitalist state. Miller writes: "The fiction that the State exists for our protection has been exploded a thousand times. However, as long as men lack self-assurance and self-reliance, the State will thrive" ("Henry David Thoreau" in *Henry Miller: Selected Prose II* (London: Maggibbon & Kee, 1965). This could be a direct quotation from Mill's '-Dangers to which Representative Government is Liable...' It also shows that Orwell's instinct to spot a fellow humanist was well founded.

²⁷ In 1940 Q. D. Leavis in *Scrutiny* cried 'If he would give up trying to be a novelist Mr Orwell might find his *métier* in literary criticism' (cited in Bowker's *George Orwell*, p.263).

the unhappy and unthinkable alternative would be for him to claim that he has been something of a founding father in the art of creating the contemporary political novel. In this letter Orwell is criticising Fryer for 'attacking' novelists because they are not writing about the 'contemporary scene'. Orwell asks who has *ever* written successfully of the contemporary scene. He asserts that no one has ever managed to successfully because 'one can't see the events of the moment in perspective'. Yet Orwell does give perspective, and this will be brought out in subsequent chapters.²⁸

²⁸ See 7.5 specifically, 'Orwell's Observations: Fact or Fallacy' below.

4) Who is speaking? An Examination of Orwell's Narrative Technique

In this chapter I aim to show that Orwell's style of narration is of a far subtler and more controlled kind than has been widely perceived, and that in many ways his thirties novels are richer textually than his later, more famous works, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I shall argue that Orwell's early fiction demonstrates an acute awareness of concepts such as narrative voice, spatial point of view and, most significantly, psychological point of view, to an extent that has been little acknowledged.

'Narrative point of view is arguably the very essence of a story's style'.¹ This chapter will examine the ways in which Orwell controls narrative point of view. This will involve a study of how Orwell presents psychological perspective, spatial focus and narrative voice. I would like to begin with *Down and Out in Paris and London* because a straightforward, authorial point of view is operating. At all times the speaking voice works as a conduit for the author's thoughts and perspective. This may seem an obvious point to make given that it is a book of reportage. However, because Orwell's reportage and fiction overlap (a feature of his writing that will be dealt with substantially in this thesis) it has led to a charge that, in terms of Orwell's thirties fiction, one cannot distinguish (at times) between Orwell's voice and that of his characters. Exactly *who is speaking* is said to be unclear – is it Dorothy or Orwell? Is it Gordon or Orwell? Is it Bowling or Orwell? I wish to argue that Orwell does make distinctions; what is more, he layers his narrative with different voices, which has the effect of distancing the omniscient narrator and bringing in the fallible human voice. To demonstrate the point

¹ Simpson, Paul, *Language, Ideology and Point of View* [1993] (London: Routledge, 2000), p.5.

(briefly at this stage) a contrast between a passage from *Down and Out in Paris and London* and then one from *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* will be useful:

It is altogether curious, your first contact with poverty. You have thought so much about poverty – it is the thing you have feared all your life, the thing you knew would happen to you sooner or later; and it is all so utterly and prosaically different. You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated. You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring. It is the peculiar *lowness* of poverty that you discover first; the shifts that it puts you to, the complicated meanness, the crust-wiping (*D&O*, p.76).

Women, women! ... Why should one, merely because one has no money, be deprived of *that*? ... What else could you expect? He had no hold over her. No money, therefore no hold. In the last resort, what holds a woman to a man, except money? (*KTAF*, pp.113-4)

In the first passage on poverty there is no uncertainty about who is speaking – it is Orwell. In the second, on the fickleness of women, is it as clear from whom the fictive utterance comes? David Seed puts it neatly when he writes, referring to *Burmese Days*, that Orwell's protagonist 'Flory enacts the novelist's dissatisfaction with the Anglo-Indians by renouncing the club'.² This statement is, of course, entirely valid. To return to the passage cited above, it will be argued that Gordon Comstock in no way enacts Orwell's dissatisfaction with the moneyed world by his renunciation of it, and this chapter is devoted to detailing the various narrative devices that enable Orwell to shift the vocal focus.

4.1) *Down and Out in Paris and London*: Exuding Class Prejudice?

In Lynette Hunter's *A Search for a Voice* Orwell's competency as a narrator is not rated very highly, at least not in terms of his three thirties novels, although in her examination of *Down and Out in Paris and London* Hunter makes some curious observations on Orwell's narrative voice in relation to his descriptions of poverty and the people he

² Seed, David, 'Disorientation and Commitment in the Fiction of Empire: Kipling and Orwell' in *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 1984, Vol. 14, 4, pp.269-80 (p.276).

encounters in Paris. Her conclusions are worth considering because they address the thorny issue of Orwell's supposed upper-class prejudice. She begins by stating that 'Any observer is governed by the condition of his background'.³ She believes that Orwell is conscious of a narratorial prejudice within himself when in the process of describing the poor, so much so that he subtly draws attention to this bias. Her argument is presented thus:

Reading this first chapter alone a reader might well conclude that such a narrator was blinkered, ignorant, prejudiced, sentimental, clichéd, or worse, snide and supercilious. Any judgements made on poverty would be invalid, coloured by his irrevocably narrow perspective (p.15).

Examples of this abhorrent sentimentality, superciliousness, prejudice and so on, are completely absent. Nothing from the text is given in support of the claims above.⁴ It is, then, necessary to examine the first half of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and an effective way of gauging a person's attitude to their subject is by looking at the adjectives they employ. The book opens with Orwell describing a landlady, Madame Monce, who is 'yelling' in the street – 'her bare feet stuck into sabots and her grey hair was streaming down'. The street is described as 'a ravine of tall leprous houses, lurching towards one another in queer attitudes, as though they had all been frozen in the act of collapse' (p.68). The overall impression of the area is as follows:

³ Hunter, Lynette, *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice* (Milton Keynes: OUP, 1984), p.15.

⁴ It seems that Orwell is the victim of ideological assumption, one of the most unshakeable being that Orwell has labelled the working class as 'smelly'. One could turn such criticism around and say (referring here to Hensher's contention) 'it is quite clear: people *think* that Orwell thinks people stink'. A good example of this is to be found in a letter that has recently come to light. In this letter Orwell is defending himself from an accusation, whereby, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he is supposed to have declared that the working class smells. Orwell writes:

The Writer of the article states: 'One thing (Orwell) obviously is in earnest about is his assertion that the working class, as a whole, smells – in fact stinks...'

.... I not only did not say that the working class 'smells,' I said almost the opposite of this. What I said, as any one who chooses to consult the book can see, is that twenty or thirty years ago, when I was a child, middle-class children were taught to believe that the working class 'smells'... (CW, Supp. Vol., p.9).

The Paris slums are a gathering-place for eccentric people – people who have fallen into solitary half-mad grooves of life and given up trying to be normal or decent. Poverty frees them from ordinary standards of behaviour, just as money frees people from work (p.69).

People are referred to as ‘eccentric’ and ‘solitary’. The accusation of ‘blinkered’ and ‘prejudiced’ is extremely difficult to either prove or refute. In describing houses as ‘leprous’ is Orwell doing them an injustice? Madame Monce has her ‘bare feet ... stuck into sabots’ and her ‘grey hair [is] streaming down’ her back. Certainly we get the impression that she is inelegant (‘bare’ feet and ‘stuck’ clearly suggest this) and slovenly (her hair has not been attended to, and it being grey, therefore not youthful, should have been tied up). But there is not the least indication that the observer finds this spectacle either quaint or disgusting. If we look at the above in relation to an instance where Orwell is unequivocally blinkered and prejudiced, then the descriptions of the people and the Paris slums look decidedly free of judgement. Compare the above with the infamous passage taken from *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

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 (p.161).

Without doubt, that is snide and supercilious. It is contemptuous, shows a belief in his sense of superiority, and is just plain nasty.⁵ There is nothing like this kind of invective in his descriptions of the Parisians, at least in the first chapter (the Paris hotels being entirely another matter!). In describing his hotel, Orwell says it is ‘dirty’, but ‘homelike’ and the owners are ‘good sorts’ – all pretty harmless language. In describing the varied population in the quarter, Orwell says of some that they are ‘fantastically poor’. This

⁵ It must be emphasised that this passage has been taken out of context – in the book (and this will be looked in more detail, particularly in the final chapter) it works as part of Orwell’s rhetoric and hyperbole. In short, it was meant to be offensive, whereas Orwell has no reason to offend the genuinely poor he describes.

certainly impresses upon one Orwell's sense of wonder, but no more. Orwell finishes the first chapter with this:

I am trying to describe the people in our quarter, not for the mere curiosity, but because they are all part of the story. Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum (p.71).

This is Orwell's testimony. He knows he is to some extent going to labour with this subject matter: 'I am *trying* to describe'. Moreover he takes pains to tell us that it is not 'curiosity' that motivates him. Rather, it is because they are an essential 'part of the story' that he describes them, and as the story is a political one we can infer that Orwell is quite deliberate with his pen, so it is unlikely that he would fall victim to the vices of cliché, sentimentality and snideness (among others). As for Orwell having an 'irrevocably narrow perspective', indeed one begins to feel exasperated at an obvious blinkered prejudice operating on the critics' part.

To reiterate, Hunter (like Meyers in saying *A Clergyman's Daughter* is unreadable) provides no specific examples to support her argument, although she does insist that Orwell has written the chapter this way deliberately in order to highlight the narrator's, i.e. *his*, lack of objective credentials in dealing with such subject matter. Hunter's analysis of *Down and Out in Paris and London* is interesting because she believes Orwell is self-conscious about his narrative technique, but only in so much as to reflect his personal prejudices. She insists, mainly through an examination of Charlie's three stories, that the narrator moves from ignorance to understanding and in doing so becomes 'less prejudiced'. This is Orwell's 'technique of evaluation'. I see no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Orwell is highlighting a problem with his perspective as narrator, and, if we look at Charlie's stories, they give no indication that Orwell was ever, at any time, 'taken in' by his nonsense talk as Hunter claims. Therefore, he would never have been

attempting to delineate a process of narrative enlightenment. Charlie is simply one of the 'queer' people Orwell meets in the *bistro*. What is more, Charlie is someone, we are told, 'of family and education', so is entirely untypical of the poverty class. Moreover, Orwell's privileged background, in this case, can hardly be put forward as grounds for lack of ability in the art of objective observation. Therefore, the putative journey from ignorance to understanding, in order that the narrator is rendered 'less prejudiced', is the product of an imposed reading. To support her claim Hunter tries to persuade us that Orwell concedes to something of an admission in terms of being taken in by Charlie:

Charlie's third story ... provides the denouement to Part One of the book. He [the narrator] prefaces the story with the remark, 'Very likely Charlie was lying as usual, but it was a good story' (p.165). There is no doubt how we are to read it. Unlike the first tale which took the narrator in ... this tale is retold specifically as a story (p18).

Hunter overlooks the fact that the narrator has included the phrase 'as usual', meaning he has never believed a word that was said. Hunter insists that the reader was encouraged to take Charlie at face value. But Charlie is never presented as credible. The preface to Charlie's initial story runs thus: 'He declaims like an orator on a barricade, rolling the words on his tongue and gesticulating with his short arms.... He is, somehow profoundly disgusting to see' (p.71). There is much more of such description, and it can serve no other purpose than to cast doubt on Charlie's credibility.

It is also worth drawing attention the fact that Orwell is more interested in the truth of Charlie's last story (on 'the death of old Roucolle') for the sole reason that it tells of the demise of a man Orwell had a great interest in. Roucolle had earned himself quite a reputation in the quarter as an eccentric tramp miser. Orwell says 'I should very much like to have known him' (p.153). It is for this reason, and this reason only, that he is

interested to know if Charlie's last tale about Roucolle's cause of death is true, especially as it has to do with this man's being undone by his own greed.

4.2) Representations of Thought

Orwell's style of narration is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, one of the most striking singularities of Orwell's narration is that he seldom uses direct thought presentation. It makes an appearance here and there as it does in this extract from *Burmese Days*: 'Flory yawned as he came out of the gate.... 'Bloody, bloody hole!' he thought'(p.15). Note the use of the exclamation mark. This is one of the strongest indicators in Orwell's narratives that the inner thoughts of a character are being represented in their 'pure' state. So much so that the reported elements 'he' or 'she' 'thought' can be dropped. Dorothy's first thoughts are narrated thus: 'Come on, Dorothy, up you get! No snoozing, please!'(p.1). The narrator prefaces this line with '[she] exhorted herself sharply in the second person plural'. But after this, the narrator does not need to indicate directly that Dorothy is about to think this or that thought: 'She simply hung her gold cross about her neck—plain gold cross; no crucifixes, please!'(p.5).

How a character thinks, and how that thought is represented is Orwell's narrative priority. Contrary to popular criticism, Orwell does not use voice as a mere conduit for his own expression. In *Burmese Days* it is quite straightforward. The book opens with a detailed history of the corrupt Sub-divisional magistrate U Po Kyin. The narrative of his chequered history finishes with a summary of how U Po Kyin intends to mitigate his evil doings against the threat of eternal damnation: 'He would devote his closing years to good works, which would pile up enough merit to outweigh the rest of his life. Probably

his good works would take the form of building pagodas...'(p.4). The final paragraph narrating U Po Kyin's plans for salvation is followed by one that runs:

All these thoughts flowed through U Po Kyin's mind swiftly and for the most part in pictures. His brain, though cunning, was quite barbaric, and it never worked except for some definite end; mere meditation was beyond him (p.4).

The line 'mere meditation was beyond him' is highly interesting, because when U Po Kyin features in the story there is no *reflective, meditative* narrative accompanying his portrayal. And this is the key to Orwell's style.

It is significant that on this level he parts company with H. G. Wells, with whom he has been much compared, particularly in the discursive, proselytising nature of his narration. One commentator writes that Orwell, like Wells, was a sociological writer who criticised society through the medium of the novel. He writes that this was achieved through dialogue, description and 'sometimes through directed authorial comment'.⁶ However, Orwell does not present his fiction in quite the same directly heuristic or didactic manner. Rather, he, to differing degrees, gives us a layering of narrative voices which provide different spatial and psychological viewpoints, so making the texts less authorially hegemonic. It will be seen that what Orwell's novels do *not* do (as is widely perceived) is the following:

[Orwell's novels] are unable to stay within the conventions of the form, and present different views as equal: they are always stepping out of the anonymous voice and giving us some seemingly unarguable but actually rather odd piece of analysis.... Orwell, always presenting himself as rational, was in fact quite unable to escape from his prejudices.⁷

Raymond Williams contends that Orwell, through his narration, presents himself as the rational observer giving the reader 'unanswerable' wisdom. He sees Dorothy, Gordon

⁶ Hammond, J. R., *H. G. Wells and The Modern Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.56.

⁷ Hensher, Philip, 'How calm was the voice of reason?' *The Spectator*, 10.05.2003, pp.33-4.

and Bowling as failed Bloom characters because their range of consciousness is limited. He argues that such characters are 'limited intermediaries'. Williams says that 'Shooting an Elephant' is more successful than *Burmese Days* 'because instead of a Flory an Orwell is present'.⁸ This last point is pertinent because, in Orwell's fiction, it is the *nature* of limitation that Orwell, through various narrative devices, is exploring.

It is Orwell's use of the generic pronouns 'one' 'you' and 'we' that serves to add layers to the narrative voice. However, their use is not arbitrary, nor simply a fudge to avoid the problem of authorial control. They are employed with great precision and demonstrate a commitment to spatial and psychological points of view.

Point of view, I will say, designates in the third- or first-person narrative the orientation of the narrator's attitude toward the characters and the characters' attitudes toward one another. This effects the composition of the work and is the object of a "poetics of composition".⁹

I would argue that Orwell is doing this within the second-person as well and the third- and first-, and is highly successful at controlling attitudes, however subtle or unsubtle they are, and that Orwell is operating within his own 'poetics of composition'.

In contrasting *A Clergyman's Daughter* with *Burmese Days* we can see how the use of pronouns is used in the art of Orwell's 'political' storytelling, for he was largely to abandon the more formal 'one' and replace it with 'you' which leads to many notable changes.

One of the most striking features of Orwell's fiction is his use of an active sentence over a passive one in his narration. This has the effect—due to the insistence of a subject—of making the narrator akin to a character in the story and distances the

⁸ Williams, Raymond, *Orwell* (Glasgow: Collins, 1978)[1971], p.49.

⁹ Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.93.

authorial figure.¹⁰ Orwell has the narrator effectively shadow his subject, which means that, for the most part, the narrator is 'limited' to the same spatial and temporal viewing point. In *Burmese Days* we don't get the generic pronoun 'one' until Flory is introduced on page fourteen: 'The first thing one noticed in Flory was a hideous birthmark...' The next 'one' comes a little after this: 'Beyond that was the European club, and when one looked at the Club ... one looked at the real centre of the town'. The narrator occupies the same space as his protagonist, and this is a feature of Orwell's narration that appears throughout all his literature. Furthermore the narrator shares his protagonist's experiences. Flory is pictured walking to the Club in the sweltering morning sun: 'It was nearly nine o'clock and the sun was fiercer every minute. The heat throbbed down on one's head with a steady, rhythmic thumping like the blows from an enormous bolster' (p.15). The distinct impression given is that this is not Flory's head being baked, but the narrator's.

There is an aspect here in the narration of *Burmese Days* that mirrors the kinds of authorial asides that pepper H. G. Wells's *Condition of England* fiction. In the description of the racist and bigoted Ellis the narrative runs:

Ellis really did hate Orientals—hated them with a bitter, restless loathing as something evil or unclean.... Any hint of friendly feeling towards an Oriental seemed to him a horrible perversity. He was an intelligent man and an able servant of his firm, but he was one of those Englishmen—common, unfortunately—who should never be allowed to set foot in the East (p, 21).

There are few who would argue that last sentence was not the voice of the author. In any case, it is the voice of someone who does not share the unpleasant predilections of Ellis. It is the voice of a balanced and objective narrator. This is a cardinal point, because

¹⁰ The effect is significantly different in *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*. Here, it operates to a great extent as the voice of Gordon Comstock.

Orwell was largely to abandon the authorial 'obligation' to objectivity in favour of a subjective indulgence, and the change is made through the use of the generic second person pronoun 'you'.¹¹

The generic pronoun 'you' does not make an appearance until about a third of the way through *Burmese Days*. The effect on the narrative voice is a highly significant one and it mirrors a similar use in his subsequent fictions. What 'you' effectively does is distance the author from a controlling authorial narrative voice. It will be helpful to recall Lynette Hunter's view of Orwell's narration of *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

Reading this first chapter alone a reader might well conclude that such a narrator was blinkered, ignorant, prejudiced, sentimental, clichéd, or worse, snide and supercilious. Any judgements made on poverty would be invalid, coloured by his irrevocably narrow perspective (p.15).

While I do not believe such conclusions can be reached in relation to Orwell's narration of that documentary book, I do believe that Orwell 'invests' his fictional narrators with elements of these negative qualities, so that the narrator is like that of a first person as opposed to omniscient third person. If we look at the first passage in *Burmese Days* to contain 'you' we can see the effect.

What was at the centre of all his thoughts now, and what poisoned everything, was the ever bitterer hatred of the atmosphere of imperialism in which he lived. For as his brain developed—you cannot stop your brain developing, and it is one of the tragedies of the half-educated that they develop late, when they are already committed to some wrong way of life—he had grasped the truth about the English and their Empire (p. 68).

There is a strong suggestion that the confident aphorism inserted there could be made invalid because of the supercilious tone. 'It is one of the tragedies of the half-educated'

¹¹ David Seed argues that the inability to distinguish between Flory's thoughts and Orwell's impairs the artistic and political credibility of the novel: 'The combination of guilt and over-involvement with his protagonist ... vitiates Orwell's presentation of empire' (Seed, p.278). It is difficult to dispute this claim. However, if we consider an alternative—that Orwell *means* to keep events within the subjective realm, firmly attached to the authorial umbilical cord, as it were—then the book would seem less of a failure and more artistically inclined to representations of the personal. Orwell's increasing use of the pronoun 'you' would suggest this.

could have dropped from the mouth of any one of Oscar Wilde's impossibly snooty and mordant social observers. But who is speaking? Whose unquestionable wisdom is it? I would argue that there is a strong element of persiflage operating which is there to undermine the narrative authority. Orwell, here, is distancing himself from one who claims 'unanswerable wisdom'.

This kind of narrative device, which might be described as the renunciation of authorial hegemony, is in keeping with a general style of narration that refuses omniscience; one that gains ground steadily in *Burmese Days* and is, more importantly, a feature of subsequent novels from the outset. There is a crucial point in the book where Flory is tormented because he believes the woman he loves may be having an affair with the handsome and wealthy young officer, The Honourable Verrall:

But meanwhile, was it true, what he suspected? Had Verrall really become Elizabeth's lover? There is no knowing, but on the whole the chances were against it, for, had it been so, there would have been no concealing it in such a place as Kyauktada (p. 236).

This kind of narration demonstrates that there is restricted vision, and this serves to limit the powers of the narrator. Again, it is the deliberate use of a 'limited intermediary' and this brings the reader into play. A sense, almost of deficiency, is woven into the narrative and therefore the asides, reflections, casual comments and universal truths expressed cannot be taken at face-value as the 'integrity' of the speaker is not, in a sense, known. Toward the end of the story, Verrall leaves without saying goodbye to Elizabeth. The narrative runs, 'Whether Verrall had started the train early to escape Elizabeth, or to escape the grass-wallahs, was an interesting question that was never cleared up' (p. 279). Similarly, from *A Clergyman's Daughter* we have the narrator adding this comment: 'It would be interesting to know whether this was another of the occasions when Mrs Creevy

laughed (*ACD*, p.269). There is also a sense that this is a playful aspect of the narration.¹²

In any case, there can be no doubt the author is relinquishing his hold or reach.

This is not to assert, of course, that Orwell does not at times make use of an omniscient narrator, for he does. We are given a potted history of Verrall's exploits for example. However, the interesting detail is that when there is no limited viewing position, no specific spatial angle, the narrative is more objective, operating with the minimum of bias or psychological point of view. Take the use of the word 'offensive' that appears in Verrall's history (of which an omniscient narrator would have to be relied upon because no character in the story has prior knowledge of him): 'Somehow, nothing very serious ever did happen to Verrall, however offensive he made himself' (p. 210). This is simply a statement of fact about Verrall's behaviour to his fellow countrymen. This is not the case when the word is employed as an adverb to describe Verrall sitting on his horse.

He sat on his horse as though he were part of it, and he looked offensively young and fit. His fresh face was tanned to the exact shade that went with his light-coloured eyes, and he was as elegant as a picture with his white buckskin topi.... Flory felt uncomfortable in his presence (P.190).

The use of the modal adverb 'offensively' is from the perspective, the viewing position, of the older, and somewhat jealous Flory, who is neither young nor fit, but dearly wishes to be both. Similarly, the adjective 'fresh' is selected from the psychological point of view of Flory who, with his 'hideous birthmark', is far from 'fresh faced'. If readers are sympathetic, or even share Flory's sense of inferiority, then they could well agree with this description of Verrall, or alternatively, they could see that this is merely the opinion of a disgruntled man and think of Verrall with, for instance, more objectivity. The

¹² It is interesting to note Orwell's own commentary on the 'lighter' aspects of his narration: 'I have not altered except in minor details the account of Dorothy's difficulties with the children's parents, and the row over 'Macbeth', as, making for the slight touch of burlesque, this is the kind of thing that does happen in these schools'. From, 'List of Pre-Publication Revisions, 1934-5', *The Complete Works*, Vol. III, p.301.

essential point is that the reader is not necessarily being ‘nudged’ into a specific way of viewing Verrall’s character by an author who has his own opinions on the merits, or otherwise, of his characters.

This is borne out when one examines the excessive use of the second person pronoun ‘you’ in Orwell’s thirties novels that are written in the third person. The presence of the generic, more formal pronoun ‘one’ is markedly absent in the narration of *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, and unlike *Burmese Days*, it opens with the informal ‘you’. Again, it gives the illusion that the narrator is actually, somehow, an active participant in the story: ‘The alarm clock continued its nagging, feminine clamour, which would go on for five minutes or thereabouts if you did not stop it’ (p. 1). It would be natural enough to write this as a passive sentence and avoid the ‘you’: ‘which would go on for five minutes or thereabouts if it were not stopped’, but to do that would create a more objective commentary.

The passive sentence is practically non-existent in the thirties novels; moreover, it is the narrator behind the ‘you’ that is significant. Who is speaking here? Who would be inclined to describe the alarm of a clock as a ‘nagging, feminine clamour’?

Patai views the description of the clock as unwittingly betraying a masculine bias that will fall short in portraying a female character with any real sympathy: ‘If the book’s title prepares us for a narrative about a woman, the novel’s second line reveals that this woman and her story will be judged from a conventionally biased masculine perspective’ (Patai, p.99). Patai does not consider that Orwell has intentionally opted for this patriarchal inferiorization of female association in the description. This is more likely to be Dorothy’s *feeling* toward the clock that might wake her father, which, if it did, would

certainly be viewed by him as ‘nagging, feminine clamour’.¹³ It smacks of a rather impatient male, as it most certainly does when the narrator says at another point, regarding Mr Warburton’s ‘hold’ over Dorothy, ‘[it] was in the fact that he was a man and had the careless good humour and the intellectual largeness that women so seldom have’ (p. 81). Here, one cannot help but conclude that the narrator is prejudiced and even a little snide. However, what it also does is make the narrator a very *human* one, replete with the common limitations of prejudice and subjectivity. Furthermore, it is significant that the narrator is somewhat chameleon-like, and this occurs right from the beginning. Dorothy, having just got out of bed, is on her way downstairs to the kitchen to clear the ashes from the range. She has to feel her way about ‘With care—for the kitchen table had a nasty trick of reaching out in the darkness and banging you on the hip-bone’ (p. 2). As it is the hip-bone that is bashed—females being generally shorter, so more at table height, and their hip-bones more prominent, i.e., more likely to be bashed—one gets the sense that it is a female voice speaking. This is reinforced quite starkly later in the book. When the inside of the women’s hut is described in the hop-picking scenes it is from the unmistakable perspective of a woman: ‘At half past five, at a tap on the wall of your hut, you crawled out of your sleeping nest and began searching for your shoes, amid sleepy curses from the women’ (p. 108). Indeed, throughout the hop-picking scenes a more feminine voice surrounds the descriptions. Take the following detailing of the actual hop-picking:

¹³ Smyer argues persuasively that Dorothy is suffering from a deeply traumatizing incest anxiety around her father. Smyer provides numerous indications of this, the most striking being her father’s surname of Hare, which takes on more significance when one considers Dorothy’s revulsion at the thought of furry animals. Warburton too is seen as compounding Dorothy’s anxiety, particularly because he is another ‘father’ figure (Smyer, p.43).

As the afternoon wore on you grew almost too tired to stand, and the small green hop lice got into your hair and into your ears and worried you.... Yet you were happy, with an unreasonable happiness. The work took hold of you and absorbed you ... and yet you never wearied of it; when the weather was fine and the hops were good you had the feeling that you could go on picking for ever and for ever (pp. 113-4).

It is particularly that last sentence verb, 'for ever and for ever'. It has a romantic, whimsical strain that one more readily associates with a young woman, rather than a 'hardened' and objective political journalist. At such moments the narrator and subject are conflated. Again, this has the effect of distancing the authorial voice.

Hunter comments on the use of 'you' in Orwell's early novels. Referring to *A Clergyman's Daughter* she concludes that there are often ambiguous uses of this pronoun so making it impossible to know whether we are being given Dorothy's thoughts or the narrator's. She highlights a comment made in church: 'You could have imagined that there was only a dry skeleton inside the black overcoat' (p.14). She writes, 'But for the measured discursive structure of the note it could be Dorothy speaking; and even then one is not sure that it is the narrator alone for, after all, the macabre observation is appropriate to her state of mind' (Hunter, p.29). Yet, Dorothy is seen to flinch at harbouring the slightest unkind or harsh thoughts, hence the endless pinching of herself in penance for the merest transgression. For example, when Mrs Pither wants her rheumatoid legs rubbing down, Dorothy 'gave herself a severe pinch ... she really did *not* enjoy rubbing Mrs Pither down. She exhorted herself angrily. Come on, Dorothy! No sniffishness, please! John xiii. 14' (p.54). A mind so full of girlish, no-nonsense is quite incapable of the kind of detached reflection cited by Hunter above. Moreover, Dorothy is never portrayed as macabre. This is the girl whose heart rejoices at the first signs of spring.

In contrast, there are times when the narrative point of view strongly suggests the author himself, and it is for this reason that the narrative of this novel is so textually rich. The effect is the fading in and fading out of a character by a narrator who occupies the same spatio-temporal point. Observe the following narration of Dorothy's 'plight':

... there were other times when her nerves were more on edge than usual, and when she looked round at the score of silly little faces, grinning or mutinous, and found it possible to hate them. Children are so blind, so selfish, so merciless. They do not know when they are tormenting you past bearing, and if they did know they would not care (p.250).

We can see a pattern here. There is a detailed description of hardship – Dorothy's hardship – and then, through the use of 'you', a figure, more mature, who has clearly had experience of such children, the figure of Orwell himself, fades back in again. It is different from the more frivolous uses of 'you' where the narrator is passing judgement on an inferior as observed in *Burmese Days*. This is about shared experience and this objective figure suggests Orwell, the former teacher. As it does in the following:

... and yet if you are forced to bore them and oppress them, they will hate you for it without ever asking themselves whether it is you who are to blame. How true—when you happen not to be a schoolteacher yourself—how true those often-quoted lines sound—

*Under a cruel eye outworn
The little ones spend the day
In sighing and dismay!*

But when you yourself are the cruel eye outworn, you realise that there is another side to the picture (pp.250-1).

More and more there is a strong sense that Orwell, with his multiple uses of 'you' and 'you yourself', is referring to himself. This increasingly becomes the case, so much so that Dorothy is quite forgotten, such is the presence of this other voice. Moreover, the language employed by the 'other' narrator becomes more and more familiar:

There are, by the way, vast numbers of private schools in England. Second-rate, third-rate and fourth-rate (Ringwood House was a specimen of the fourth-rate school), they exist by the dozen and the score in every London suburb and every suburban town (p.239).

It is in the use of the term 'by the way' that the narrator moves the reader even further away from Dorothy's point of view. The reader is being 'hailed' in the Althusserian sense by a narrator who strongly resembles the author. The important feature is that Orwell 'exposes', with such interpolation, an awareness of an authorial intrusion. This 'by the way' is an instance of what Goffman would call 'breaking frame'.¹⁴ It allows the narrator to talk comfortably, at some length, about such schools—the percentage that will come under government inspection; how such schools are started and so on. Again, the emphasis here is on the *deliberate* inclusion of such a device.¹⁵ It allows Orwell to show that Dorothy's experience is not unique but *typical*: the individual is also a representative type. Here, discursive information about third-rate schools and the like is not 'stuck on' in order to 'air a grievance' but is part of the essential fabric expressing the purpose of the book—the controlling point of view. Similarly, when Orwell wants to talk about teaching, he does not feel the need to disguise the fact that he is imparting *his* wisdom derived from *his own* experience:

There is no dealing with children, even with children who are fond of you, unless you can keep your prestige as an adult; let that prestige be once damaged, and even the best-hearted children will despise you (p.245).

There is now an overwhelming sense that this is the author speaking about his personal experiences, and that he is happy to continue making his presence felt through such interruptions. Take the following, which is describing the eagerness of the girls to be elected as helpers to their teacher, Dorothy:

¹⁴ Goffman, Erving *Frame Analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). Goffman uses his concept of 'frame analysis' to aid in the understanding of different sorts of 'reality'.

¹⁵ Orwell, having had experience of such 'fourth-rate' schools did, of course, wish to expose them, and it was a matter of great annoyance, as has been detailed above, that he had to 'ease-off' because his publisher Gollancz feared another libel suit. He wrote 'The description of Dorothy's first lesson at the school has been toned down, with a view to giving a less exaggerated impression of the low standard prevailing in these schools', *The Complete Works*, Vol. III, 'List of Pre-Publication Revisions, 1934–5', p.301.

The two girls who were 'monitors' for the week, and whose job it was to clean the blackboard, collect exercise books and so forth (children will fight for the privilege of doing jobs of that kind), leapt from their place to fetch the half-finished contour map...(p.242).

Orwell is increasingly interrupting now. In the above it is in parenthesis. Taylor insists that such digressions and interruptions give one 'the sense of a novel endlessly pulling itself back from the brink of turning into a *New Statesman* article' and this is 'rather too strong for comfort' (Taylor, p.139). Not being 'comfortable' with Orwell's style is a common complaint. I would suggest that one is not meant to be wholly comfortable with it. Instead one is meant to reflect on the issues being raised, which is precisely what makes it a *political* work.

4.3) Orwell's Hold over His Fictional Reality

In many ways Orwell's technique anticipates the analysis of Roland Barthes:

We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.¹⁶

What is pertinent here is that this kind of narrative device is perfectly suited to dealing with 'Condition of England' themes. For Orwell, the overriding condition of the peoples of England in the 1930s (the proletarians and much of the middle class) was money, or rather, the lack of money. Consequently, having a job was paramount in life. In *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Coming Up for Air* the background of socio-economic climate must necessarily pervade every corner of the characters' lives. In *A Clergyman's Daughter* the necessity of keeping hold of one's job is referred to as 'the eleventh commandment which has wiped out all others: "Thou shalt not lose thy job"' (p.239).

¹⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Image, Music, Text*, "The Death of the Author", pp.142-54 (p.146).

After this paragraph comes the description of 'the swindle' that Mrs Creevy calls 'practical teaching': 'Her oft-repeated phrase, "It's the fees I'm after," was a motto that might be ... written over the doors of every private school in England' (p.239). Again, the narrator has turned aside from his character in the familiar way. To suggest, as Taylor does, that this kind of narrative intrusion exposes an author who cannot make up his mind as to which medium to use, is to diminish severely the potential of Orwell's art.

In fact, there is a further dimension created by such authorial intervention. It serves to weaken the commitment to one person's point of view and development. Consider the following assertion:

Spatio-temporal point of view allows access to the 'fictional reality' which unfolds in the course of a story. The linguistic co-ordinates of space and time serve to anchor the fictional speaker in his or her fictional world, which, in turn, provides a window and vantage point for readers (Simpson, p15).

If differing voices emerge from the space where only one occupant stands what fictional reality is the author committed to? Clearly, the linguistic co-ordinates often do not serve to 'anchor' the character or fictional speaker in his or her fictional world. In doing this Orwell could be said to be violating accepted paradigms with regard to the *position* of the narrator. Two narrative positions have been proposed:

That where a narrator is *outside* the story and that where a narrator is a character *within* the story. The terms reserved for these positions are, respectively, *heterodiegetic* (meaning 'different to the story') and *homodiegetic* (meaning 'same as the story') [His italics]¹⁷

Orwell is flouting this 'law' by shifting from one to another. I believe that this works and offers the reader a double insight. If one were to think of the effect from a visual, camera point of view, one could see how this would work well cinematically. The reading experience is enriched by (as mentioned above) the fading in and out of the author or an

¹⁷ This is attributed to Genette (Simpson, p. 32).

author-like figure. Politically, this is an effective device because it shows the experience of Dorothy – her fatigue and weariness – to be a natural, typical and common experience, indeed one that can have an etiolating effect on both sexes in equal measure. In terms of how such narrative technique affects the ‘development’ of Dorothy’s character, in the past there has been a general consensus that argues that Orwell largely fails to develop it, and this is because Dorothy is, they suggest, such a weak character from the outset. One critic, for example, asserts that,

Orwell adds to his difficulties by deliberately selecting a watery personality as his centre. Dorothy is not only pale in appearance, she is pale in her responses. There are no extremes in her personality, no energy in her actions. At times she seems to fade into the detailed background (Calder, p.87).

Dorothy does actually fade into the detailed background, but this is not a failure of narrative control.¹⁸ Again, it is allowing the frame to dominate. Consider this typical criticism against the following extract, where again, Orwell, through the use of the second person ‘you’ has arguably brought himself into the picture¹⁹:

It was a life that wore you out, used up every ounce of your energy, and kept you profoundly, unquestionably happy. In the literal sense of the word, it stupefied you. The long days in the fields, the coarse food and insufficient sleep, the smell of hops and wood smoke, lulled you into an almost beast-like heaviness. Your wits seemed to thicken, just as your skin did, in the rain and sunshine and perpetual fresh air (p.121).

Here, Orwell demonstrates how personality is submerged into non-existence through laborious work. In many ways Dorothy’s character has been submerged from the outset by her upbringing. Indeed, our first glimpse of Dorothy is to see her lying ‘on her back looking into the darkness in extreme exhaustion’ (p.1). Dorothy is presented spatially as barely distinguishable from that background. This is not a weakness, but the very dramatisation of Dorothy’s nature and situation. The point is *not* to view this kind of

¹⁸ Note also the first sentence ‘Orwell adds to his difficulties’. Critics are forever suggesting that Orwell struggles with his novel writing.

¹⁹ D. Beddoe in her book constantly refers to Dorothy as ‘pathetic’.

'fading' as flawed, because background, the *causes* of the 'fading', is the focus of the novel. To look for strong personalities in Orwell's novels is as futile as it is pointless. They are not meant to be exceptional, outstanding or gregarious. They are meant to be ordinary, beaten down by circumstances – by 'the condition of life'.

V. Myers observes that Orwell 'fails to maintain Dorothy's consciousness as the controlling point of view in the novel' (p.64). It is the various narrative voices that combine as the controlling point of view of the novel, and this is for rather a practical reason, that reason being that Dorothy does not have a consciousness adequate for the articulation of her inner self. One very telling piece of narrative in relation to Dorothy's mental powers comes right at the end:

The smell of glue was the answer to her prayer. She did not know this. She did not reflect, consciously, that the solution to her difficulty lay in accepting the fact that there was no solution; that if one gets on with the job that lies to hand, the ultimate purpose of the job fades into insignificance; that faith and no faith are very much the same provided that one is doing what is customary, useful and acceptable. She could not formulate these thoughts as yet, she could only live them. Much later, perhaps, she would formulate them and draw comfort from them (p.295).

'She could not formulate these thoughts as yet, she could only live them'. Not formulating thoughts is what Dorothy has been doing throughout the book, and an examination of how this is dealt with will be undertaken shortly. It is interesting that the narrator uses the word 'perhaps' in relation to how Dorothy might formulate her thoughts in the future. Again this demonstrates a spatio-temporal consistency. We see Dorothy only at this time and place, and as the narrator is situated in that same time and place, he has no powers to see what will happen beyond. It has the effect of visually enlarging the moment because of the concentration of focus. Indeed, magnification is a feature of Orwell's novel writing that will be looked at in more detail.

If we look at the build up to her memory loss, we can observe a meticulous attention to the study of Dorothy's mental activity. The first thing to notice is the proliferation of exclamation marks that go with her thoughts: 'Come on, Dorothy! In you go! No funkng, please! Then she stepped resolutely into the bath ... and let the icy girdle of water slide up her body' (p. 2). The narrator constantly gives the reader direct insight into her thoughts by letting them speak for themselves, and they are almost invariably of the above kind punctuated with an exclamation mark. Clearly, there is not much mental activity going on at all. The line immediately before 'Come on, Dorothy' is 'She drove herself forward with her usual exhortations'. One gets a sense of cattle being herded, with Dorothy effectively being her own herder. Throughout the book Dorothy's state of mind is compared to that of an animal: the 'beast-like heaviness' etc. When she loses her memory the narrator tells us 'she merely *saw*, as an animal sees, without speculation and almost without consciousness' (p, 85), but this is not that different from how she has been perceiving all along. The essential point is that she is being *prevented* from thinking by the pressures of her over-worked life:

Dorothy pressed her fingers against her eyes. She had not yet succeeded in concentrating her thoughts—indeed, the memory of Cargill's bill was still worrying her intermittently. The prayers, which she knew by heart, were flowing through her head unheeded (p, 7).

A picture of a girl struggling under the weight of immense tensions builds and builds with pressure-cooker intensity. There is Cargill's bill; the jumble sale to raise money for the collapsing belfry floor; the three pounds nineteen and fourpence that has to last her 'thirty nine further days' (note the precise details of figures, there is no vague notion of money being owed but a very exact tally and so much the more menacing); the costumes she has to make for the school play: 'For the moment she had even forgotten the bill for

twenty-one pounds seven and ninepence at Cargill's. She could think of nothing save that fearful mountain of unmade clothes that lay ahead of her' (p. 61). So it goes on. On top of this there are the extremely upsetting feelings caused by the repulsive sexual attentions of the obscene Mr Warburton. There are moments of respite from her heightened sense of *taedium vitae*, and they are revealing. Here is a description of Dorothy when she has finished her morning's round of unpaid curate-duty to the parishioners: 'She was always extravagantly happy when her morning's "visiting" was over; and curiously enough she was not aware of the reason for this' (p. 55). Similarly, the narrator 'confides' in us vis-à-vis Dorothy's absolute aversion to sexual relations with men: 'In a sense she did not want to overcome it. For, like all abnormal people, she was not fully aware that she was abnormal' (p. 82). The narrator never fails to make the reader aware of Dorothy's mental state. What is more, the reader is invited to share the narrator's 'privileged' position of seeing Dorothy's blinkeredness.

D. J. Taylor insists that the 'memory loss' development is implausible and unconvincing. I find this an astonishing conclusion, given the build up that is given to it in the book, and also the known fact of cutting (garbling) that the book suffered, not to mention the potency of the rape attempt, or strong sexual advance, that Orwell was prevented from detailing (that is now well documented). The three scenes prior to Dorothy's memory loss are assiduous in their commitment to detailing the exhausting and intolerable pressures she is undergoing, and particular attention is given to showing how they are impeding her powers of mental calculation. Also there is the symbolism of the jackboots working through these scenes, which, if we think of the brutal *boot stamping on a human face forever* in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, lend the text a further layering of

meaning associated with ideas of 'pressure', this being the most extreme form of pressure that can be applied to the head.

The crucial beginning point of Dorothy's breakdown begins when she appears at the 'noisy rehearsal' of *Charles I*: 'It was horribly hot in the conservatory, and there was a powerful smell of glue and the sour sweat of children. Dorothy was kneeling on the floor, with her mouth full of pins' (p. 58). We are told that 'with half her mind' Dorothy is meditating upon the two pairs of jack boots she must make for Charles I. 'With the other half' she is listening to the 'angry shouts' of the schoolteacher Victor who is barking out his commands to the unruly children. Dorothy here is framed mute and kneeling in the thick of a hot, stuffy hall amid 'angry shouts', her mind equally choked by consideration of the boots and Victor's shouting. We are told that she is working 'against time' as the play is only 'a fortnight distant'. Her work is described as 'feverish' (p. 61). When the play rehearsal is at an end, Victor engages Dorothy in conversation; and here we see a very tightly controlled narrative, often working symbolically when it shows Dorothy as literally impeded in her effort to talk because her mouth is often 'gagged' with the tools of her present occupation. It is also significant that Victor, the moment the rehearsal is over, is described thus: 'He watched the children out, and then, having forgotten their existence as soon as they were out of his sight, produced a page of music from his pocket' (p. 62). Victor's mind, then, has been divested of the burden of the play and he can move on to other, more indulgent, pursuits. Dorothy in contrast enjoys no such privilege. What is more the narrative takes care to show it. The conversation between them opens (somewhat ironically) thus, "'I was thinking'", said Dorothy as she stopped her machine and snipped off the thread, "we might make those helmets out of old

bowler hats” (p.63). Notice that her sentence is broken by the narrator detailing her preoccupation with her work. Practically all of her conversation is given in this manner: ““You know he’ll only say no,” said Dorothy, threading a needle to sew the buttons on the doublet’ (p. 63) ““I know it’s dreadful,” admitted Dorothy, sewing on her button’ (p. 65). ““No, I’m afraid I didn’t,” said Dorothy, holding another button in position with her thumb’ (p. 66). ““That’s not true!” said Dorothy rather sharply as she pressed the third button into place (p. 67). The subject matter between the two has been varied and discursive, ranging from the possibility of Dorothy asking her father if they might have a catholic style procession, to a discussion of Bertrand Russell on Modernism and Free Thought. However, Dorothy is shown to be more engaged with her work than the conversation. The scene builds to give a firm impression that she is never free of some other pressing activity. The impression of intolerable weights pressing or bearing down on Dorothy could extend to a sense of an Oedipal psychosis she suffers in the wake of her father’s brutal neglect. Indeed, if one thinks of her having to reconcile the demands of these men, the only two men in her emotional life, it is not difficult to appreciate a ‘painful’ confusion battling in Dorothy’s subconscious.

The next scene is the penultimate one where Dorothy visits Mr Warburton’s house. The most telling detail comes when she is getting ready to leave. Mr Warburton asks her another of his ‘clever’ questions. The narrator tells us:

Dorothy did not answer. Her conscience had given her another and harder jab—she had remembered those wretched, unmade jackboots, and the fact that at least one of them had got to be made tonight. She was, however, unbearably tired. She had had an exhausting afternoon, starting off with ten miles or so of bicycling to and fro in the sun, delivering the parish magazine, and continuing with the Mothers’ Union tea in the hot little wooden-walled room (pp. 74-5).

The catalogue of her duties performed that day ends with: ‘and after supper she had weeded the pea rows until the light failed and her back seemed to be breaking. With one thing and another, she was even more tired than usual’ (p. 75). On top of her physical exertions Dorothy is also having to contend with her impossible piety: ‘She would, she suddenly decided, make two jackboots tonight instead of only one, as a penance for the hour she had wasted’ (p. 76). To compound her anxiety Mr Warburton makes yet another of his sexual advances whereupon Dorothy is filled with the repugnant vision of the ‘furry thighs of satyrs’ once again. The chapter ends with her ‘aching’ and ‘sticky eyed’ boiling up the glue pot in readiness to make the jackboots. The narrator comments:

Moreover, there was a somehow exceptional quality about her tiredness tonight. She felt, in an almost literal sense of the words, washed out. As she stood beside the table she had a sudden, very strange feeling as though her mind had been entirely emptied (p.84).²⁰

If we were merely told that Dorothy’s tiredness was of ‘exceptional quality’ immediately prior to her breakdown then there might be grounds for accusing the text of inadequacy. However, as the above detail shows, there is a tremendous amount of attention given to the build up of her breakdown, and if one reads the text carefully, then the breakdown should not come as a surprise.

4.4) *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and Psychological Perspective

The narration of this novel is highly interesting for it is heavily written from the psychological perspective, the singularly soured perspective of its ant-hero Gordon

²⁰ Calder, in her critique of *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (and with practically no textual support) states that ‘... there are a number of aspects of the plot which it is difficult to take seriously—the cause of Dorothy’s loss of memory for example. It seems that Orwell deliberately removed from her actions all sense of motive’ (p.88). This kind of summation is exasperating because it is merely groundless assertion.

Comstock, which is surprising in a third person narrative that appears to have an omniscient narrator. Roger Fowler explains:

Keep the Aspidistra Flying takes a long stride toward a richer psychological presentation, for in his novel, as in *Coming Up for Air* three years later, Orwell makes use of modern linguistic techniques to suggest unique mind-styles for his heroes. In a nutshell, he had read and was influenced by *Ulysses* (Fowler, p.140).

Fowler demonstrates how much of the viewpoint in the narrative is focalised through Gordon's consciousness, a technique adopted by Joyce to represent the thoughts of Bloom. It has been labelled *free indirect thought*. Fowler lists the various stratagems employed to denote it; these include colloquial terms, exclamation marks, orientating words and so on (see Fowler, pp.140-8). My aim here is to further scrutinize the various representations of Gordon in order to understand how they tie in with Orwell's larger thematic and artistic purposes. When free indirect thought is used it will be highlighted in order to establish that it is not the voice of an omniscient or authorial narrator.²¹

To begin with, it is important to establish that, in many ways, Gordon is not an anti-hero; he is certainly not the anti-hero his descendents are – the most famous, arguably, being Jim Dixon of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. One empathises with anti-heroes, and there are clear strategies put in place to prompt our sympathies for the hapless tryer who is fighting a losing battle with the forces of conventionalism or whatever it might be. There is virtually no prompting for the reader to get on Gordon's side. This is an

²¹ To understand that it is Gordon's thoughts, and not narrative commentary that is being presented is essential to any appreciation of this novel, as it is with Orwell's other experimental novels of the thirties. The following criticism demonstrates the results of misreading character thoughts for authorial reflection:

Instead of allowing the money theme to develop out of the talk and behaviour of his characters, Orwell tells at the start that his novel is going to be about money. He hammers this into us page after page: 'For after all, what is there behind it, except money? Money for the right kind of education.... Give me not righteousness, give me money, only money'.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying is not, by general consent, a very good novel. But are the others so very different? In *Coming Up for Air* ... there is a similar intrusion of Orwellian prejudice', John Mander, *The Writer and Commitment* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), p.74.

Orwell undoubtedly is dealing with prejudice, however, and this is of paramount importance, here, the prejudice is not his.

important point because it begs the question: *What* then does Gordon represent? Given that Orwell is writing, and Gordon is living, in a time of 'dole queues, hunger marches and the Jarrow Crusade' (Rai, p.55), and that Orwell is well aware of it (hence the frequent references to 'the unemployed of Middlesborough'), suggests that Gordon is representative of the hopeless class instinct that exists in England at that time. Moreover, that Gordon should possess such a high opinion of himself, when he is of decidedly average talent (and also shallow, cruel and amoral), demonstrates that his beliefs in his superiority are founded on nothing. His 'second-rate' public school may have taught him that society regards him as above other men, but reality is all too apparently against him. Such a view of Gordon is suggested from the outset, and when one considers the closure of the book (where Gordon comes to see himself for what he is: a 'regular' bloke with an ordinary outlook), it is all but confirmed. Such an ending testifies to the thematic consistency of the book; and it will be shown that *Keep the Aspidistra* is not only technically tightly controlled from beginning to end, but has also a well-defined socio-political agenda running through it.

Our introduction to Gordon shows a 'moth-eaten' man 'loung[ing]' across a table. He is in the bookshop where he has come in order that he will be free 'to write'. The following passage is typical of Gordon's thought processes, and demonstrates well his misguided arrogance:

There were fifteen or twenty shelves of poetry. Gordon regarded them sourly. Dud stuff, for the most part. A little above eye-level, already on their way to heaven and oblivion, were the poets of yesteryear, the stars of his earlier youth. Yeats, Davies, Housman, Thomas, De La Mare, Hardy. Dead stars. Below them, exactly at eye-level, were the squibs of the passing minute. Eliot, Pound, Auden, Campbell, Day Lewis, Spender. Very damp squibs, that lot. Dead stars above, damp squibs below. Shall we ever again get a writer worth reading? But Lawrence was all right, and Joyce even better before he went off his coco-nut (p. 12)

There is no reported thought; it is pure statement, and yet there can be little doubt that this is Gordon's perspective. The histrionics (dead stars above, damp squibs below) and slangy language (went off his coco-nut) combine to exude nothing but Gordon's mean outlook, to say nothing of the literary greats that he is dismissing so casually. So, when we read the question 'Shall we ever again get a writer worth reading?' we do not assume that the author is asking this question. In terms of the general question of 'Who is speaking?' at least we can say when it is not Orwell speaking in this instance. Similarly, as one after another of the bookshop customers is described, it soon becomes clear that they are described from Gordon's point of view. Not only are we, the reader, positioned directionally to see from Gordon's viewing position as I shall examine shortly, but we get his attitude. One of the most telling devices is that the working class are described as 'lower class', and this is something of a theme in the book. Ravelston, the editor of *AntiChrist*, has to chastise his upper-class girlfriend for referring to the 'lower classes'. Her reply is this: 'the working class, if you like then. But they smell just the same' (p. 109). Hermione goes on to say that Ravelston's liking for the 'lower classes' is 'disgusting'. In *Burmese Days* it is the insufferable Mrs Lackersteen who talks of the 'lower classes' back in England being as ungovernable as the Burmese 'coolies'. To use the term means one thing, that you are an insensitive snob. In terms of an authorial point of view that is usually common to a third person narrative; it can be said that Orwell is not always attempting to 'use' his fiction to 'confide in us' in that Barthesian sense.²²

²² Orwell's fiction often takes care to demonstrate that the narrative is not reflecting 'the voice of a single person, [that of] the *author* confiding in us.' Barthes, Roland, 'The Death of an Author', pp.142-48 (p.143) in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977). Barthes also talks of an image of literature 'tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions' (p.143). I argue that Orwell's layered narrative approach anticipates such a debate.

In light of this, it is useful to take the following guide on 'authorial point of view' into consideration:

There is an interesting, if complex, relation between (1) what a fictional character (or incident) is, (2) the point of view from which the character (or incident) is presented, and (3) the attitudes and judgements towards the character (or incident) invited of the reader.²³

There are specific devices employed within the narrative which operate to indicate whether it is Gordon or his narrator who is communicating. Take the following sentence: 'His eyes refocused themselves upon the posters opposite. Foul, bloody things' (p.5). The expletive language is Gordon's, coming as it does in the wake of his focus. Yet, there is the voice of a narrator who is 'other' to Gordon. This narrator, as we saw earlier, introduces Gordon as 'rather moth-eaten' who 'lounged across the table ... a small frail figure, with delicate bones and fretful movements' (p.1). Note the adjective 'fretful'; it sums up well Gordon's state of mind, and this kind of carefully chosen description is consistent with a narrator who mediates Gordon's voice with a view to exposing the inadequacies within. We are told that Gordon has only 'Fivepence halfpenny – twopence halfpenny and a Joey' to his name. There follows a description of Gordon examining the money: 'Beastly, useless thing! And bloody fool to have taken it!' (p.1). Reported speech is absent, but no one can really be in doubt as to whose thoughts these are. The next sentence runs: 'It had happened yesterday, when he was buying cigarettes. "Don't mind a threepenny-bit, do you, sir?" the little bitch of a shop-girl had chirped'. Again, the use of the exclamation mark signals Gordon's thoughts. Calling the shop assistant a 'little bitch' also reveals Gordon's hard, suspicious coldness. However, this could also reflect the feelings of the narrator, and as such indicate that he too is a rather hard-boiled character.

²³ Lamarque, Peter and Olsen, Stein Haugom, *Truth, Fiction, And Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.140.

The narrator, who clearly, it seems, knows his subject all too well tells us (referring to the offering of that ignominious threepenny-bit) ‘And of course he had let her give it him. “Oh no, not at all!” he had said—fool, bloody fool!’(pp,1-2). The sentence finishes with the already familiar exclamation mark that indicates inner thought. The use of the second person ‘you’ is used throughout this novel in an entirely different way from that of *A Clergyman’s Daughter*. In that book it serves to evoke a voice that has some authority and wisdom. Moreover, it is not used for the purpose of transcribing Dorothy’s thoughts; her feelings and emotions yes, but not thought processes, because they are largely absent. This is not the case with Gordon. His thoughts are highly active and come to us as if the book were written in the first person:

His heart sickened to think that he had only fivepence halfpenny in the world, threepence of which couldn’t even be spent. Because how can you buy anything with a threepenny-bit? It isn’t a coin, it’s the answer to a riddle. You look such a fool when you take it out of your pocket, unless it’s in among a whole handful of other coins (p.2).

The switch from third person singular ‘he’ to second person ‘you’ is characteristic. The above paragraph ends with ‘and you stalk out with your nose in the air, and can’t ever go to that shop again’. Again, there is a strong feeling of histrionics and superciliousness. This would be an example of what Peter Davison calls the ‘ironic detachment’ that exists in the novel.²⁴ This is evident in the narrator’s belittling descriptions of his subject: ‘Gordon was not impressive to look at. He was just five feet seven inches high, and because his hair was usually too long he gave the impression that his head was a little too big for his body’ (p.3). Alongside these unflattering descriptions there is insight into Gordon’s hypocrisy and bitterness. On Gordon’s hatred of *all* of the books in the shop, we are told that ‘it was the snooty “cultured” kind of books that he

²⁴ Peter Davison writes that Orwell is always ‘ironically detached’ from the character of Gordon Comstock, in *George Orwell: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.65.

hated the worst ... [books] that Gordon himself might have written if he had had a little more money' (p.8). Indeed Gordon's rants and tirades against, 'the money God' and the 'money stink' are shown to be rather disingenuous. We are told that it is economic forces that stifle and extinguish Gordon's creativity: 'He couldn't cope with rhymes and adjectives. You can't, with only twopence halfpenny in your pocket' (p.5). But this "can't" is used too often. We are told that 'You can't be friendly, you can't even be civil, when you have no money in your pocket' (p.27). Clearly this position is ludicrous. Gordon's enjoyment of sex likewise is soured because he has only eightpence clinking in his trouser pocket. Gordon blames everything on money and his soured vision is parodied over and over again.²⁵

There is, however, the same system of deixis adopted by the 'other' narrator that puts him in the story with Gordon at the same shared spatial and temporal spot: 'This was the lonely after-dinner hour, when few or no customers were to be expected' (p.2). A more detached narrator would substitute the demonstrative pronoun 'this' for the neutral pronoun 'it'. Similarly, sentences such as 'In the shelves to your left as you came out of the library the new and nearly-new books were kept' (p.6) give the impression that the narrator is sitting in the same position as Gordon, so that our view is steered from that 'shared' viewing position. In fact, there is a sustained commitment to both spatial and temporal deixis that demonstrate the narrator is, as it were, *right there*, with the protagonist of his narration.

²⁵ It is interesting to compare Orwell's experience of poverty with Gordon's. Orwell writes 'And there is another feeling that is a great consolation in poverty.... It is a feeling of relief, almost of pleasure.... You have talked so often of going to the dogs – well, here are the dogs, and you have reached them, and you can stand it. It takes off a lot of anxiety'. *Down and Out in Paris and London in Orwell and the Dispossessed*, ed. Peter Davison (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p.78-9.

In *A Clergyman's Daughter* there is at times a conflation of the narrator and Dorothy. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* there is a distinct separation between Gordon's narration and the narration of a more impartial observer, except in his descriptions of Gordon. The descriptions of the people who frequent the shop are highly interesting in terms of highlighting the dynamic tensions set up between these two narrators. One of the first people to come into the shop is described thus: 'A decentish middle-aged man, black suit, bowler hat, umbrella and despatch-case—provincial solicitor or Town Clerk—keeking at the window with large pale-coloured eyes. He wore a guilty look' (p.5). That is a description that is fairly judgement free. But then the next sentence runs 'Gordon followed the direction of his eyes. Ah! So that was it! He had nosed out those D. H. Lawrence first editions in the far corner. Pining for a bit of smut, of course'. Again, there is no 'reported thought' tag here.²⁶ But the exclamation marks and the fact that we have become spatially aligned with Gordon strongly indicate that we, the reader, are receiving his reactions to the 'gentleman'. It continues:

He had the regular Dissenting pouches round his mouth. At home, president of the local Purity League or Seaside Vigilance Committee (rubber-soled slippers and electric torch, spotting kissing couples along the beach parade), and now up in town on the razzle. Gordon wished he would come in. Sell him a copy of *Women in Love*. How it would disappoint him!

But no! The Welsh solicitor had funk'd it. He tucked his umbrella under his arm and moved off with righteously turned backside. But doubtless tonight, when darkness hid his blushes, he'd slink into one of the rubber-shops and buy *High Jinks in a Parisian Convent*, by Sadie Blackeyes.

Gordon turned away from the door and back to the bookshelves (pp.5-6).

The descriptions are lively, cynical and highly derogatory, in other words *not* those of an objective narrator. Indeed, it will be seen that Gordon is most animated in thought when thinking ill of others. Yet, is it possible to say who is talking? The indication is that it is

²⁶ It does, at one point in the paragraph, say 'A bad face he had, Gordon thought', but this instance of reported thought does not directly give any indication that it is Gordon who is thinking that the man with the 'bad face' is also 'pining for a bit of smut'.

Gordon because not only are there the ubiquitous exclamation marks, but more significantly, the description stops when Gordon averts his gaze. This kind of positioning of Gordon in relation to description is typical throughout the book. Take, again, the description of the books in the shop that ends 'And if we did get a writer worth reading, should we know him when we saw him, so choked as we are with trash? Ping! Shop bell. Gordon turned' (pp.11-2). The harsh, dismissive voice is strongly indicated to be Gordon's, especially as the caustic observation stops at 'Ping! Shop bell'. But as one line of thought ceases, another begins, and how are we to know whose voice we are getting? 'A youth of twenty, cherry-lipped, with gilded hair, tripped Nancifully in. Moneyed obviously'. Because the narration continues with a great deal of bias and bile we can safely assume it is Gordon's, with his 'soured' and jealous vision. Such narrative construction demonstrates that Orwell had a keen sense of what has come to be termed, the 'conditions of utterance' (Lamarque, p.72). Thus, the 'truth value' of statements is purposely made unclear.

For many, the narrative voice in Orwell's novels is highly problematic, not least because the ideas and values circulating are largely perceived to be the author's (to repeat):

[Orwell's novels] ... are always stepping out of the anonymous voice and giving us some seemingly unarguable but actually rather odd piece of analysis.... Orwell, always presenting himself as rational, was in fact quite unable to escape from his prejudices.²⁷

Again, any example, that would demonstrate an instance of where Orwell is presenting himself as rational when he is really deeply prejudicial, is absent; so it is impossible to challenge such criticism on a specific point. However, the conclusion reached appears to reflect a lack of engagement with the sophistication of Orwell's narration.

²⁷ Hensher, Philip, 'How calm was the voice of reason?' *The Spectator*, 10.05.2003, pp.33-4.

4.5) Intrinsic and Extrinsic Points of View

One criticism of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is that Gordon is supposed to be taken seriously: 'Orwell's depiction of Gordon's anger, frustration and difficulties as a writer are completely serious' (V. Myers, p.79). Such criticism ignores the complexity of this text, a complexity that will engage the reader on numerous levels.

One of these levels involves a development of what have been called *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* points of view. Intrinsic point of view is where the author employs descriptive language to determine or influence our perception and therefore opinion of a character.

As Lamarque and Olson put it (here referring to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*):

An intrinsic point of view is that which informs the characterization itself. It is manifest in the descriptive predicates chosen by an author to present the character... In the passages just quoted the characterization of Casaubon is being deepened and extended. We are offered a network of concepts—'blankness of sensibility', 'expectant gladness', 'weary experience', 'condemned to loneliness' ...—to articulate an attitude of mind which must figure in a rounded understanding of Casaubon and must temper a reader's imaginative response to him (L&O, p.142).

So clearly the author is seen to manipulate reader sympathies through their portrayal, bringing the reader closer emotionally, or alternatively, distancing the reader by way of employing negative predicates. Then there is the *extrinsic* point of view:

This is the point of view *on* the characterization, not *in* the characterization. George Eliot as an author is particularly prone to an overt kind of intervention: 'I protest against all our interest, all our effort of understanding being given to the young skins (L&O, p142). [Their italics]

H. G. Wells is another author who is 'prone' to the above kind of extrinsic intervention. Lamarque and Olsen talk of readers, through such a narrative technique, being 'nudged' into certain attitudinal directions. *Keep the Aspidistra* is highly interesting in relation to these concepts because Orwell goes some way to turning our reliance on them on its head.

5) The Influence of George Gissing

I would like to introduce this section on Gissing's all-pervasive influence by saying something about Orwell's posthumous essay on his 'favourite novelist', entitled 'George Gissing', which he wrote around 1948, but due to the folding of the publication *Politics and Letters* was not published until 1960 (see *CW*, Vol. XIX, p.346). This piece on Gissing is a continuance of a much shorter, published one (1943) entitled 'Not Enough Money: A Sketch of George Gissing' (*CW*, Vol. XV, pp.45-47). In the later essay, which is not only an in-depth study of Gissing's novelistic technique, but also a summary of Gissing's social, moral and political outlook, Orwell provides many important insights into how he comes to view his own work in a much lesser light. Consider the following:

The writers commonly paraded as 'great English novelists' have a way of turning out either to be not true novelists, or not to be Englishmen. Gissing was not a writer of picaresque tales, or burlesques, or comedies, or political tracts: he was interested in individual human beings, and the fact that he can deal sympathetically with several different sets of motives, and make a credible story out of the collision between them, makes him exceptional among English writers.¹

Perhaps because Orwell's experimental fiction incorporates the picaresque, is prone to burlesque, is often comic, and is of course political, Orwell cannot regard himself as a 'true novelist', according to his own definition. However, through an understanding of what constitutes Orwell's exacting novelistic criteria, of which only Gissing can make the standard, one begins to understand better why Orwell is so self-deprecating when it comes to his own worth as a 'great English novelist'. Nevertheless, it has been stated that 'to understand Orwell fully, one must first read Gissing',² and I would certainly agree.

¹ Orwell, 'George Gissing', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIX, pp.346-352 (pp.350-1).

² Lewis, Arthur, "Mark Connolly. *Orwell and Gissing*" in *Utopian Studies*, Book Reviews, pp.181-3 (p.181). Lewis here is reiterating and reinforcing Connolly's conclusion. Lewis, 'despite reservations', recommends Connolly's paper on the nature of Gissing's influence on Orwell because it 'has pushed the

Indeed, critics are increasingly coming to acknowledge the legitimacy of this claim, concluding that Orwell's novels do, "owe much to Gissing".³ However, much of the research so far has tended to reach the conclusion that Orwell simply borrowed from Gissing, whether for character, setting or plot. Critics draw many parallels between, most notably, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *New Grub Street, A Clergyman's Daughter* and *The Odd Women, Coming Up for Air* and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, Animal Farm* and *Demos*.⁴ Certainly there are parallels, and these will be looked at. However, the relationship between these novels (and novelists) is not as straightforward as has been suggested, and Orwell, for much of the time, is reworking the texts to suit a rather different political and moral agenda. It is significant that Orwell feels Mark Rutherford to be the nearest 'great' English writer to Gissing, and some of the reasons he gives for this go some way to highlighting the essential differences between Orwell and Gissing. Orwell says of Rutherford that there is a 'haunting resemblance' to Gissing, which he argues, is 'probably explained by the fact that both men lack that curse of English writers, a "sense of humour". A certain low-spiritedness, an air of loneliness, is common to both of them' ('GG', p.351). Ostensibly, Orwell's novels would seem to embody these melancholy traits, but as we shall see, simmering beneath the surface of Orwell's fiction is a defiant spirit of optimism; and this explains why the resemblance between Gissing and Orwell is more interesting than haunting.

Gissing-Orwell relationship farther than have other critics' (p.183). It is for this reason that I shall make much use of Connolly's paper on the relationship between Orwell and Gissing.

³ Connolly, *Mark Orwell and Gissing* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p.11. Here quoting J. R. Hammond.

⁴ *Demos* is almost certainly the parent novel to *Animal Farm*—as soon as the young radicals gain any power they begin to betray 'the cause' and simultaneously begin to adopt bourgeois values and adornment whilst using elaborate language to deceive themselves and others. Referring to *Demos* Orwell says that 'Gissing shows great prescience, and also a rather surprising knowledge of the inner workings of the Socialist movement' ('NEM', p.334). Connolly provides an excellent study of the comparisons between these two novels.

I would like to begin by examining *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* in relation to *New Grub Street*. Much attention will be given to the ways in which Orwell and Gissing make use of *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* narration, which, as established above, is essential to the understanding of character, and therefore of character portrayal. In addition, there will be occasional focus on the literary tastes of the authors, in order to show where their literary sympathies might be expected to lie.

To demonstrate one of the most striking differences in narrative approach between Orwell and Gissing I will examine two quotations (from *New Grub Street* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* respectively) as they appear in Connolly's paper. It is important to note that Connolly gives the quotations as an example of similarity between Gissing and Orwell:

To have money is becoming of more and more importance in a literary career; principally because to have money is to have friends.

Gissing, *New Grub Street*

Money, money, all is money. Could you write even a penny novelette without money to put heart in you? Invention, energy, wit, style, charm—they've all got to be paid for in hard cash . . . You can't even be friendly, you can't be civil, when you have no money in your pocket.

Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

To present two such passages as equal is to misunderstand the nature of Orwell's narrative style. To have 'Gissing' written beneath the first quotation, as if those words were attributable to the author's sentiment, is valid because the unfolding story bears strong testament to the fact that money is indeed essential to the pursuit of a professional literary career. However, in the second instance, it should better read 'Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*' because 'money, money, all is money' etc., is an

expression of character point of view, and is most definitely not the author's as we shall see. It is only Gordon who cannot be civil or friendly without money. Connolly repeats this kind of author-centred reading many times. He writes, 'Similarly, Comstock regrets the fact that he has no hold over Rosemary. "In the last resort," Orwell asks, "what holds a woman to a man, except money?"' (p.40). To write 'Orwell asks' is reading the book as if Orwell were speaking, at least at that particular place. Unmistakably, it is Gordon's voice, and this will be examined in detail below in the 'Female Portrayal'). This quotation is contrasted with one from the narrator of *New Grub Street* (unproblematically interpreted as Gissing), who laments thus on the subject of 'educated women': "... not one in fifty thousands would share poverty with the brightest genius ever born" (p.40).⁵ Whilst there is reason to take the latter bitter reflection seriously, there is no such imperative in the former instance. To confuse the narrator with the author is not a problem when an author's views resemble his narrator's, but when they are wholly at odds, as I would argue in much of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, then such a reading distorts the meaning of the text enormously. Consequently, practically all of the specific parallels observed by Connolly (and he is echoing many critics) between the characters of these two books are rendered invalid based as they are on the false assumption that Orwell's narrator is reflecting 'sensible' views.

⁵ Orwell comments on Gissing's *legitimate* despair of middle class, educated women as they were in the nineteenth century, at least to a man of Gissing's precarious status. Orwell expands on this miserable state of affairs:

People who might, without becoming less efficient, have been reasonably happy chose instead to be miserable, inventing senseless tabus with which to terrify themselves. Money was a nuisance not merely because without it you starved; what was more important was that unless you had quite a lot of it—£300 a year, say—society would not allow you to live gracefully or even peacefully. Women were a nuisance because even more than men they were the believers in tabus, still enslaved to respectability even when they had offended against it. Money and women were therefore the two instruments through which society avenged itself on the courageous and the intelligent ('George Gissing', *CW*, Vol. XIX, pp.346-53 (p.348).

Rosemary, Gordon's girlfriend, has nothing in common with such moribund social mores, and the narrator, it will be seen, takes good care to demonstrate her liberality and magnanimity.

5.1) Moving Away from Martyrdom in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

The narration of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is not straightforward because it is not constant. This does not mean it is haphazard; it is simply that different voices are employed, allowing the text to be less author-centred, which, when considered in the light of Gissing's clear influence, seems to suggest that Orwell is consciously working 'against' his model. Again, echoing the summaries of many critics, Connolly writes (referring to *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*):

The Dominant themes of Orwell's novel—the crushing effect of poverty on artistic sensibility, sex starvation, envious hatred for the literary elite, resistance to slick commercialism, and masochistic martyrdom—are drawn from *New Grub Street* in great detail (p.39).

The understanding here is that the treatment of these themes is similar if not equal. However, owing to essential differences in the make-up of Gordon Comstock and Edwin Reardon it will be shown that Orwell is approaching these 'grand' subjects from an entirely different angle, which has everything to do with the fact that he is writing in the 1930s and not the 1880s, and, moreover, wishes to reflect certain key historical 'climate' changes.⁶ Orwell was keenly aware that as bleak as the thirties were, in many ways, at least for the middle classes (in all their gradations) life was much improved upon the 'fog-bound, 'gas-lit London of the 'eighties, a city of drunken puritans, where clothes, architecture and furniture had reached their rock-bottom of ugliness' ('GG', p.347). In this essay he also writes: 'There are many reasons, and George Gissing's novels are among them, for thinking that the present age is a good deal better than the last one' (p.347).

⁶ *New Grub Street* was published in 1891, however, Gissing began getting published from 1880.

Connolly, echoing Meyers, claims that, 'The Gissing influence helps to explain the confusions and flaws in Orwell's third novel' (p.38), the first flaw being the apparent incongruity of, 'writing a "novel of poverty" in the 'depths of the Depression... [with] an highly unrepresentative character'. Orwell, it seems, should have chosen a 'laid off factory worker' instead of 'a poet' (p.38). Calling Gordon 'a poet' as if there were no equivocation about it rather suggests some confusion on the critics' part to read the signs indicating otherwise. Connolly quotes from Stansky and Abrahams on their evaluation of Gordon as an unlikely protagonist for the time. It finishes with: "'The Socialism espoused by his friend Ravelston... elicits from Gordon a profound boredom, a cynical No to everything Socialism claims to stand for. . . (123-124)'" (p.39). Connolly shares Stansky and Abrahams' cry of, 'what then does Gordon and the novel represent?' Their conclusion is that Gordon represents some sort of 'malignant' alter ego that Orwell had to 'exorcise'. To understand what Gordon represents in the novel is to go some way to understanding the somewhat complex nature of the relationship between Orwell and Gissing.

The similarities between Gordon and Reardon are obvious enough in that they are impoverished, thirty-something men failing in their attempt to be productive writers. However, Gordon resembles Reardon as tin resembles gold. Reardon's plight is real; Gordon's (for the greater part) is not. Reardon starts out in London with no friends or connections, and finds that his literary aspirations are coming to nothing. Then he manages to get a menial post in a hospital, and this is what happens:

When he had recovered from his state of semi-starvation, and was living in comfort (a pound a week is a very large sum if you have previously had to live on ten shillings), Reardon found that the impulse to literary production awoke in him more strongly than ever (p. 61).

Reardon begins to produce novels of merit, and is beginning to get talked about in prominent literary circles. He then inherits some money, and relishes in the prospect of the break, and subsequent travel, it will afford him. Upon returning from his travels abroad Reardon meets Amy Yule, who is greatly impressed by the soon-to-be acclaimed author. Of Reardon's literary powers we are informed that though, 'the author had no faculty for constructing a story ... strong characterisation was within his scope, and an intellectual fervour ... marked all his pages' (p.62). Then comes a psychological profiling that will go far in aiding good understanding of his later literary struggles:

He was the kind of man who cannot struggle against adverse conditions, but whom prosperity warms to the exercise of his powers. Anything like the care of responsibility would sooner or later harass him into unproductiveness. That he should produce much was in any case out of the question; possibly a book every two or three years might not prove too great a strain upon his delicate mental organism, but for him to attempt more than that would certainly be fatal to the peculiar merit of his work (p.63.)

And so it turns out to be. Gordon, by contrast, has established literary connections in London from the outset; indeed, his best friend is the editor of a left-wing publication that is quite willing to promote his work. He has had one volume of poetry published entitled *Mice*, which falls into obscurity immediately. Of Gordon's talents we know only that, '*The Times Lit. Supp.* had declared that it showed "exceptional promise"'(p.11). Exactly why Gordon's talents have atrophied so suddenly is not spelled out, but much can be inferred, and this is where the 'peculiar' talent of Orwell's style can be seen at work.

Orwell writes that the atmosphere of *New Grub Street* is 'horribly intelligible, so much so that I have sometimes thought that no professional writer should read [it]' ('*NEM*', p.46). *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, whilst sharing obvious enough elements, is an entirely different kind of book in that it is not addressing the plight of frustrated literary talent, but rather, the folly of egotistical youth. One of the most significant departures for

Orwell is that, where Gissing is writing about the 'exceptional' man, Orwell is writing about the 'ordinary' man. And Gordon, for all his aspirations, is ordinary in the author's eyes. In terms of authorial alignment, Orwell says of Gissing that, 'He wanted to speak not for the multitude, but for the exceptional man, the sensitive man, isolated among the barbarians' ('GG', p.348). Reardon is such a man. Gordon indubitably feels he is such a man, but, from the outset, he is shown to be far nearer the 'barbarian' than he knows. On one level this novel is about exposure. Gordon is simply a representative of the lower-middle class, perhaps one whose education has given him certain pretentious ambitions. Throughout the book there is reference to 'the unemployed of Middlesborough'. Of these people Gordon never thinks – they don't exist; it is the, or rather, a narrator (as the narrative voice constantly shifts) who keeps mentioning 'the unemployed of Middlesborough'. The effect has to be to limit sympathy for Gordon's 'struggle'. In many ways one is struck by the extent to which the book is about life-chances. Gordon's are actually pretty good. Life-chances are, of course, inseparable from class, and there is much in the book about Gordon's family. It is necessary to detail his background at this point as it is essential to an understanding of what Gordon represents.

Gordon belongs to the Comstocks, who are an impoverished middle-class family who could only afford a 'third-rate' school for their son. The Comstock family are, to put it crudely, representative of the 'losers' in the capitalist system: 'Every one of them seemed doomed, as though by a curse, to a dismal, shabby, hole-and-corner existence' (KTAF, p.41). The problem with the Comstock family is that they are pre-occupied with money, and yet have none. They are also ashamed of their poverty and try to hide the fact of their penury – 'It was not poverty, but the down-dragging of *respectability* that had

done for them' (*KTAF*, p.47). Gordon's sister is described as living, 'the typical submerged life of the penniless unmarried woman', and this life she accepted, 'hardly realising that her destiny could ever have been different' (*KTAF*, p.62). The reason for the Comstocks' collective failure is their middle-class inhibitions. They are contrasted, in Gordon's way of thinking (a rare moment of his humanity intruding), with the 'lower classes' who are seen as thriving:

They [the Comstocks] never had the sense to lash out and just *live*, money or no money, as the lower classes do. How right the lower classes are! Hats off to the factory lad who with fourpence in the world puts his girl in the family way! At least he's got blood and not money in his veins (*Aspidistra*, p.47).

To reiterate, this is a rare moment in Gordon's thought processes (although, it will be shown, that it is this way of thinking that eventually 'saves' him, or even redeems him). For the most part, Gordon can only think in terms of ambition. He is extremely bitter not to have financial independence. It is his greatest desire to have money so that he might become something of note in the world of art and literature:

It was the snooty 'cultured' books that he hated the worst. Books of criticism and belles-lettres. The kind of thing that those moneyed young beasts from Cambridge write almost in their sleep—and that Gordon himself might have written if he had had a little more money (*KTAF*, p.8).

This passage is crucial in terms of establishing that there could be no authorial sympathy for Gordon's literary aspirations. That Gordon would be writing in the belles-lettres style if he had had money was something that would elicit scorn from Orwell. This is important because Gissing would clearly have nothing but sympathy for *his* protagonist's courageous yet futile endeavours, because Reardon is a *true* writer. Orwell's love of John Galsworthy tells us much with regard to Orwell's views on the writer in relation to his

art. He writes of Galsworthy, 'There is nothing about him of the elegant gentleman-littérateur'.⁷ Actually, Gordon sees writing primarily as an escape route:

In a way the utter contempt that he had for his work made things easier for him. He could put up with the meaningless office-life, because he never for an instant thought of it as permanent. Somehow, sometime, God knew how or when, he was going to break free of it. After all, there was always his 'writing'. Some day, perhaps, he might be able to make a living of sorts by 'writing'; and you'd feel you were free of the money-stink if you were a 'writer' would you not?' (*KTAF*, p.51).

Again, there is the shifting narrative voice; it begins with straightforward third-person and ends with a blurring of boundaries between Gordon's inner thoughts and seemingly those of an 'other' narrator whose sympathies it would seem are equally blurred. The word 'writing' is all the time placed in inverted commas. Certainly, it is unlikely that Gordon is going to think of his writing in this lesser way; so the thought represented cannot strictly be his. Similarly, the assertion that office-life is 'meaningless' cannot be absolutely believed in because this is another of those passages that represents Gordon's bias. The afterthought, 'Somehow, sometime...' serves to confirm that the previous thought was his own because here is his solution to his problem.

5.2) Comstock and Garrett: Gauging Narrative Sympathy

In terms of understanding what Orwell's feelings toward his literary protagonist might have been, it is interesting to look at Gordon in relation to George Garrett (Matt Lowe), an ex-seaman and (largely unemployed) docker whom Orwell met in Liverpool. He was a communist and wrote for the *Adelphi*. He had had many an adventure in America during prohibition. Orwell confided to Richard Rees that, 'I had some long talks with G. and was

⁷ Orwell, 'John Galsworthy', *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, pp.138-42 (p.138).

greatly impressed by him'.⁸ So much so in fact that Orwell urged him to write his biography. However, Garrett was never able to manage the biography, and Orwell provides the reason:

As usual, living in about two rooms on the dole with a wife (who I gather objects to his writing) and a number of kids, he finds it impossible to settle to any long work and can only do short stories.⁹

That is real life. The fictional Gordon has no such encumbrances and yet cannot even manage to finish his poem *London Pleasures*. Orwell must have been aware of the contrast he had set up. Thinking again of Orwell's belief that the age he is living in is a great deal improved from the one Gissing inhabited, Gordon could be seen, on one level, to represent the attitude of many writers in the thirties, who, for Orwell, 'achieve the difficult feat of making modern life out to be worse than it is'.¹⁰ He laments that "Disillusionment" is all the fashion'. The trend, as he views it, is to indulge in *taedium vitae* and 'facile despairs'. He writes that the modernist 'despair-of-life reaches a Turkish-bath atmosphere of self-pity' ('ITW', p.116). Orwell has aligned Gordon with this way of thinking. Gordon begins to resemble one of the hollow men of Eliot's 'Sweeney Agonistes'. Again, he is living in a time of 'dole queues, hunger marches and the Jarrow Crusade' (Rai, p.55). Yet all he cares about is finishing his *London Pleasures* and seeing it in print:

In his mind's eye he saw the 'slim' white buckram shape of *London Pleasures*; the excellent paper, the wide margins, the good Caslon type, the refined dust-jacket. And the reviews in all the best papers. 'An outstanding achievement' – *The Times Lit. Supp.* 'A welcome relief from the Sitwell school' – *Scrutiny* (KTAF, p.71-2).

There is, as usual, a strong sense of how Gordon 'sees'; how he perceives, and this is a wonderful evocation of the falseness of externalities, of how things 'look'. However, it

⁸ Orwell, *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, pp.441-42 (p.442).

⁹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier Diary*, *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, pp.439-41 (p.439).

¹⁰ Orwell is referring particularly to T. S. Eliot's poem 'Sweeney Agonistes', 'Inside The whale', p.114.

works to draw attention instead to Gordon's limited ways of seeing. Given the paucity of Gordon's *one* poem (and herein lies the subtlety of Orwell's narrative 'persuasion' – neither intrinsic nor extrinsic – which marks his difference) we can read for ourselves that this young man's thoughts are nothing but vainglory, and as such are leading him wildly astray.

Gordon's talent is actually 'attacked' in the narrative, although not in any direct sense. Take the chapter that opens with an imitation of bucolic poetry, and ends with a tirade against any modern attempt to bring 'the seasons' into London:

Spring, spring! Bytuene Mershe an Averil, when spray beginneth to spring! When shaws be sheene and swards full fayre, and leaves both large and longue!... See almost any poet between the Bronze Age and 1850.

But how absurd that even now, in the era of central heating and tinned peaches, a thousand so-called poets are still writing in the same strain! For what difference does spring or winter or any other time of year make to the average civilised person nowadays? In a town like London the most striking seasonal change, apart from the mere change of temperature, is in the things you see lying about on the pavement (p.248).

Gordon's poem is about winter in London, and for all its gritty realism (*They think of rates, rent, season tickets,*) it has much of the romantic strain (*Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over/ The bending poplars, newly bare*) that is seen by the narrator (here) as irrelevant to the modern era. In terms of narrative voice, this is clearly not Gordon's, as beneath these two paragraphs all about spring (it is now spring in the story) there follows the line, 'If it was spring Gordon failed to notice it'. So, clearly, he could not be reflecting upon spring in London. There is also a nice irony in the use of the word 'failed' – Gordon failing even in his perception of the seasons; so much for the sensitive poet!

But if there is little sympathy for the poet, there is more for the man. Although Gordon the poet receives much harsh treatment, there is sympathy at work in the novel.

Initially it takes the form of showing that it would be difficult for Gordon to have turned out much differently:

Gordon thought it all out, in the naive selfish manner of a boy. There are two ways to live, he decided. You can be rich, or you can deliberately refuse to be rich. You can possess money, or you can despise money; the one fatal thing is to worship money and fail to get it (p.47).

This crude philosophy has been born of a natural enough contempt for a family that has merely atrophied instead of having *lived* as Gordon had wanted them to. Similarly:

He took it for granted that he himself would never be able to make money. It hardly even occurred to him that he might have talents which could be turned to account. That was what his schoolmasters had done for him; they had rubbed it into him that he was a seditious little nuisance and not likely to 'succeed' in life. He accepted this. Very well, then, he would refuse the whole business of 'succeeding'; he would make it his purpose *not* to 'succeed'. Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven; better to serve in hell than serve in heaven, for that matter. Already, at sixteen, he knew which side he was on. He was *against* the money-god and all his swinish priesthood. He had declared war on money, but secretly, of course (p.48).

Contained in that passage is Gordon's motivating psychological force. At the beginning we can be sure the comments about the de-motivating schoolmasters are not Gordon's because of the line, 'It hardly even occurred to him that he might have talents which could be turned to account'. The narrator here strikes a rare chord of empathy with Gordon, for (with the exception of a narrative bias working in favour of Rosemary when Gordon is behaving badly to her) there is practically no sympathetic voice in attendance. Yet it returns as soon as Gordon makes his decision to return to 'civilisation'. Connolly draws attention to the curious passage in *New Grub Street* where Gissing, quite as the undisguised author (in the classic, extrinsic manner of George Eliot), makes direct appeal to the reader on Reardon's behalf. It begins, 'The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you....' (p.425). It is an extraordinary inclusion because it rather suggests that the narrator does not believe he has done his job in steering reader sympathy along

the right path. I would argue that it is something of a mischievous little aside, something of a *j'accuse* against the reader for being in support of the 'villain' of the day Jasper Milvain:

You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on; why don't they bestir themselves, push and bustle, welcome kicks so long as halfpence follow ... in short, take a leaf from the book of Mr Jasper Milvain? (p.425)

Connolly cites the passage to highlight that Orwell never gave Gordon like support: 'Orwell, however, did not defend his protagonist, repeatedly demonstrating that Gordon Comstock is passive, spiteful, and masochistic' (p.45). It is certainly true that Orwell employs no such extrinsic authorial voice to rally support for this beleaguered soul. However, his narrative operates on a subtler level, and in the rest of this chapter I should like to examine the ways Gissing and Orwell promote understanding and compassion for their 'heroes'.

For the frustrated Edwin Reardon there is nothing but understanding from the beginning, which makes Gissing's blatant extrinsic defence all the more intriguing. The significant detail is that it points to a high degree of narrative awareness. Are we really to suppose that the narrator believed himself to have failed in his endeavour to create an impression on the reader; to temper the reader's 'imaginative response' to Reardon? Highly unlikely, and we can see from the following extracts that only the most heartless of readers could be 'angrily contemptuous' in response to the inaction of Edwin Reardon:

He seldom slept, in the proper sense of the word; as a rule he was conscious all through the night of 'a kind of fighting' between physical weariness and wakeful toil of the mind. It often happened that some wholly imaginary obstacle in the story he was writing kept him under a sense of effort throughout the dark hours.... In his unsoothing slumber he talked aloud.... Once Amy heard him begging for money—positively begging, like some poor wretch in the street (p.189).

There is a textual richness here as intrinsic and extrinsic narrative is blended. There are intrinsic descriptive elements employed to stir readers' sympathy: 'physical weariness and wakeful toil'. Such descriptions are 'supported' by an extrinsic voice that seeks to further secure the correct emotional responses to Reardon: 'But the short relief thus afforded soon passed in the recollection of real distress'. Compare this with Gordon's 'weariness':

Under ground, under ground! Down in the safe soft womb of earth, where there is no getting of jobs or losing of jobs, no relatives or friends to plague you, no hope, fear, ambition, honour—no *duns* of any kind. That was where he wished to be.

Yet it was not death, actual physical death, that he wished for.... Before he had fought against the money-code, and yet he had clung to his wretched remnant of decency. But now it was precisely from decency that he wanted to escape (p.227).

Here Gordon is cast as a rather pathetic Dostoyevskian character; the allusion to *Notes from Underground* is inescapable. Clearly, this is a childish position (babyish even if we consider the womb analogy); another example of his 'naive selfishness'. Gordon, unlike Reardon, is an unmanly figure. He isn't a 'nancy poet', clearly (one of Orwell's pet hates), but there is his desire for the easy life, replete with fame and wealth. So, where Gissing could have nothing but sympathy for his ill-fated protagonist, Orwell could not be other than out of sympathy with the position of his.

An awareness of extrinsic and intrinsic narration is something Connolly does not consider. Take the following analysis of what Connolly terms the 'shame-faced sensitivity' shared by many of Gissing and Orwell's characters. The first is detailing Gordon, who is squirming because of his possession of a threepenny-bit:

Because how can you buy anything with a threepennybit? It isn't a coin, it's the answer to a riddle. You look such a fool when you take it out of your pocket, unless it's in among a whole handful of other coins... The shopgirl sniffs. She spots immediately that it's your last threepence in the world.... And you stalk out with your nose in the air and can't ever go to that shop again (Connolly, p.21).

Connolly writes immediately after this that, ‘the hero of Gissing’s *Born in Exile*, Godwin Peak, is equally distressed when he scrutinizes the “shamefaced change”’. It is interesting to look at the passage from *Born in Exile* detailing the incident. Godwin, at the end of a school term finds himself in the rare position of getting drunk with ‘acquaintances’. He recklessly spends the few precious coins (and they are precious) that he will need for his transport home and to pay the last of his rent. Moreover, he will actually face the shame of having to tell his landlady that he cannot pay his meagre bill:

And he hated the thought of leaving his bill unpaid; the more so because it was a trifling sum, a week’s settlement. To put himself under however brief an obligation to a woman such as the landlady gnawed at this pride.¹¹

The shame is real enough because he will have to expose his poverty as well as asking for an unpleasant favour. The next instance of ignominy (much increased in comparison) is where Peak is considering quitting Whitelaw College because his uncle is about to set-up “Peak’s Dining and Refreshment Room” near the campus. Connolly quotes from the book thus:

If indeed that awful thing came to pass, farewell to Whitelaw! What possibility of pursuing his studies when every class-companion, every Professor,—nay, the very porters,— had become aware that he was nephew to the man who supplied the meals over the way? Moral philosophy had no prophylact [sic] against an ordeal such as this.

The key point to make here is that Connolly divines no difference in the narration of this passage with the ‘threepenny-bit’ one above, and so renders the treatment of such ‘shame-facedness’ as equal. However, it is not quite equal, and this is one of the essential differences between Gissing and Orwell. But to start with the similarities – we can see that there is a similar treatment of thought processes, i.e., one that does not have recourse to direct representation. They both employ, for the most part (throughout their novels),

¹¹ Gissing, George, *Born in Exile* [1892] (Brighton: Harvester, 1978), p.58.

what has been termed free indirect thought, which is a technique that makes it difficult to locate the speaking voice. It has been said of this kind of representation that, 'It is often regarded as a fusion of narratorial and character voices, a 'dual' voice in the terms of Pascal' (Simpson, p.23). When we read, 'If indeed that awful thing came to pass, farewell to Whitelaw!' we get a sense of the protagonist's voice. However, it is that last sentence that is most significant. The summation that 'Moral philosophy had no prophylact against an ordeal such as this' is typical of the extrinsic intervention of a sympathetic narrator/author. In addition, the use of such a rare word as 'prophylact' suggests an 'older' head than that of young Peak's. There is absolutely nothing to suggest that Peak could do otherwise than think of fleeing from such ignominious association. His mother, an intelligent and sensible woman, talks to her son on the subject:

After much musing, the mother ventured a timid question, the result of her anxieties rather than of her judgment on the point at issue.

'Godwin, dear, are you quite sure that his shop would make so much difference?'

The young man gave a passionate start.

'What! To have the fellows going there to eat, and hearing his talk, and—? Not for a day could I bear it! Not for an hour!

He was red with anticipated shame, and his voice shook with indignation at the suggested martyrdom. Mrs Peak dried a tear (p.91).

The opening line indicates that his mother knows well enough how impossible the situation would be for her son. Alas, given the uncle's (almost comically) crude vernacular and behaviour, the shame is all too real. Undoubtedly, he would make Godwin Peak a laughing stock among the rich and cultured youths.

In contrast, there is every suggestion, particularly when one becomes familiar with the narration of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, that Gordon is deceiving himself as to the extent of scorn the threepenny-bit will generate: 'She spots immediately that it's your last threepence in the world'. But how could she? This is nothing more than Gordon's

paranoia, a perverse feeling that he is always 'exposed' to ridicule through lack of money. This sort of conviction happens time and time again. Gordon surmises thus on his penurious situation: 'The way it gives everyone the right to stamp on you. The way everyone *wants* to stamp on you' (p.110) [his italics]. This way of thinking leads Gordon to reject a very important literary friend, Paul Doring, simply because there is a mix-up in the date of a party. He receives a letter of apology from Doring and a renewed invitation for another time. Gordon is beside himself: 'So Doring was pretending that it was all a mistake—was pretending not to have insulted him' (p.111). So worked up does Gordon get in his absolute conviction that Doring, his wife and all their connections are laughing at him he makes what will be a thorough exposure of himself by replying to the invitation with this: 'Dear Doring,—With reference to your letter: Go — yourself'(p.112). It works to great comic effect in the book, the reason being, of course, that we do not share Gordon's point of view, and see his reaction as it should be seen as foolish paranoia. Indeed, extrinsic narration is practically absent in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. We are never quite 'told' how to view Gordon.

Yet there *is* shown to be a seismic shift in Gordon's mental development, and therefore in his human development, and this is demonstrated most in the representation of his own thoughts. Here is Gordon at an early point musing on the people of London:

Gordon caught a glimpse of a withering aspidistra in a lower window. London! Mile after mile of mean lonely houses, let off in flats and single rooms; not homes, not communities, just clusters of meaningless lives drifting in a sort of drowsy chaos to the grave! He saw men as corpses walking (p.93).

After his decision to return to civilised life his musings are much altered:

He wondered about the people in houses like those. They would be, for example, small clerks, shop-assistants, commercial travellers, insurance touts, tram conductors. Did *they* know that they were only puppets dancing when money pulled the strings? You bet they didn't. And if they did, what would they care? They were too busy being

born, being married, begetting, working, dying. It mightn't be a bad thing, if you could manage it, to feel yourself one of them, one of the ruck of men. Our civilisation is founded on greed and fear, but in the lives of common men the greed and fear are mysteriously transmuted into something nobler.... They 'kept themselves respectable'—kept the aspidistras flying...

The aspidistra is the tree of life, he thought suddenly (pp.267-8).

Again, see how Gordon's thoughts are indicated unmistakably. The above musing can only be Gordon's because of his reflection (given unequivocally in direct thought representation) that 'the aspidistra is the tree of life'. There is of course humour at play – the reflection that the aspidistra is the tree of life is another of Gordon's dreadful poetical musings or analogies. However, there is also a serious point as this is Gordon's moment of transition from insufferable prig to compassionate human being. If we remember Orwell's insistence that 'the basis of Socialism is humanism' (CW, Vol. XVIII, p.61) we can see this 'message' being delivered through Gordon's metamorphosis.

It is immediately after this that Gordon throws his manuscript of *London Pleasures* down a drain, symbolically working in favour of his newfound status as a man. This transition is cardinal. The cross-section of workers that Gordon evokes above is significant because they would be able to find employment, albeit precarious, in 1935. Their Depression is somewhat easier than that faced by 'the unemployed of Middlesborough', but their 'plight' as people no less valid.

In terms of whose social plight is the more worthy in the eyes of a socially aware author, Orwell and Gissing make for an interesting contrast – something of which Orwell is all too aware.

5.3) Gissing's Politics

Orwell writes that Gissing is 'Anti-Socialist and anti-democratic.... As for the working class, he regards them as savages, and says so with great frankness' ('NEM', p.46). So, for Orwell, there stands Gissing in the humanist debate. Orwell's thirties novels are practically dedicated to this debate. Thinking again of his comments on Swift:

His vision of society was so penetrating, and yet ... it's false. He couldn't see what the simplest person sees, that life is worth living and human beings, even if they're dirty and ridiculous, are mostly decent.¹²

Clearly, Orwell believes Gissing also feels strongly that 'dirty and ridiculous' human beings are most definitely not decent. Undoubtedly, this is borne out when one reads Gissing's novels, staggeringly so in *Demos*, and yet it is not true of *The Nether World*, a novel that devotes itself exclusively to the plight of the poorest of London. Orwell, as with many of Gissing's novels during this time, was only able to obtain a 'soup-stained' library copy of *The Nether World*, and, interestingly, he does not comment on it. Clearly, it did not sway his conclusion that:

Gissing grasped that the middle classes suffer more from economic insecurity than the working class, and are more ready to take action against it. To ignore that fact has been one of the major blunders of the Left, and from this sensitive novelist who loved Greek tragedies and began writing long before Hitler was born, one can learn something about the origins of Fascism ('NEM', p.46-7).

Narratorially, *The Nether World* stands apart from Gissing's other works, and it is something Orwell must have been aware of. The book is a total departure from his others in that there is nothing but total, unequivocal empathy for the degradations and vices of the poor, so much so that it can be read as a kind of *experiment in identification*. There is

¹² Orwell, 'Imaginary Interview: George Orwell and Jonathan Swift', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIV, pp.154-163 (p.161).

one exception; although, she is excused, even venerated – to a point. This is a description of Clem Peckover:

Her forehead was low and of great width; her nose was well shapen, and had large sensual apertures; her cruel lips may be seen on certain fine antique busts; the neck that supported her heavy head was splendidly rounded. In laughing, she became a model for an artist, an embodiment of fierce life independent of morality.... One would have compared her, not to some piece of exuberant normal vegetation, but rather to a rank, evilly-fostered growth.¹³

Clem is described as being on a par with ‘the noble savage running wild in the woods’ (*TNW*, p.6). She is simply of a class that is still, as the narrator of *Demos* puts it, ‘in an elementary stage of civilisation’.¹⁴ In *Demos* this ‘elementary stage’ of humanity is manifested in the character Mutimer, the working class parvenu who inherits money and also power only to misuse it. He is described thus:

The thin crust of refinement was shattered; the very man came to light, coarse, violent, whipped into fury by his passions, of which injured self-love was not the least.... Whosoever he had shown anger in conversation with her, she had made him sensible of her superiority; at length he fell back upon his brute force and resolved to bring her to his feet, if need be by outrage. Even his accent deteriorated as he flung out his passionate words; he spoke like any London mechanic, with defect and excess of aspirates, with neglect of g’s at the end words, and so on. Adela could not bear it; she moved to the door. But he caught her and thrust her back; it was all but a blow (*Demos*, p.367).

Nowhere is there any sympathy with or justification for Mutimer’s behaviour; he is simply the savage barbarian run amuck in ‘the upper world’. Sentences, such as ‘the very man came to light’, ‘betray’ a belief in a hierarchical structure of men. Certainly the above scene tends to promote the idea of an insurmountable divide between one class and another. Here is a similar sketch of the social interloper Lord Dunfield:

His crude gaiety gave place to bilious pessimism; his coarse good-nature corrupted into brutal harshness; the varnish of gentle breeding was rubbed away, and showed the

¹³ Gissing, *The Nether World* [1889] (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p8.

¹⁴ Gissing, *Demos: A Story of English Socialism* [1886] (London: Harvester, 1972), p145.

cheap, rough fibre beneath. In a word, this young man became precisely what he would have been had he grown up in a low station and amid unkindly circumstances.¹⁵

This is clearly narrated from a contemptuous point of view, similar to the narrative stance in *Demos* and many others. However, this is most certainly not the case for the 'low' born denizens of *The Nether World*. Be they ever so humble they are shown to be every bit as psychologically complex as their 'higher' born counterparts:

[Clara] bore her degradations with the sullen indifference of one who is supported by the hope of a future revenge. The disease inherent in her being, that deadly outcome of social tyranny which perverts the generous elements of youth into mere seeds of destruction, developed day by day..... Like a creature that is beset by unrelenting forces, she summoned and surveyed all the crafty faculties lurking in the dark places of her nature (*TNW*, p.86).

There is like sympathy with practically all the inhabitants of Clerkenwell and its environs. Jane Snowden, abandoned by her profligate father Joseph,¹⁶ has suffered a life of mal treatment (at the hands of the only absolute villains of the piece portrayed), but natural coarseness she has none. Her nature is gentle, generous, sweet and intelligent.

There is a description of Jane, which, typically, broadens into wider social reflection:

With wonder he recognised that the poor little serf of former days had been meant by nature for one of the most joyous among children. What must that heart have suffered, so scorned and trampled upon! But now that the days of misery were over, behold nature having its way after all. If the thousands are never rescued from oppression, if they perish abortive in their wretchedness, is that a reason for refusing to rejoice with the one whom fate has blest? (p.139)

¹⁵ Gissing, 'Lord Dunfield' in *Human Odds and Ends* [1898] (New York: Garland, 1977), pp.257-262, p.258.

¹⁶ Even this man, scoundrel though he is, is given sympathetic treatment as he is unequal to the ruthless scheming of his wife and mother-in-law:

In pursuance of Mrs. Peckover's crafty projects, he was constrained to an assiduous hypocrisy in his relations with Michael and Jane [his father and daughter] which wearied him beyond measure. Joseph did not belong to the most desperate class of hungry mortals; he had neither the large ambitions and the passionate sensual desires which make life an unending fever, nor was he possessed with that foul itch of covetousness which is the explanation of the greater part of the world's activity (p.192).

Note that the narrator's judgement is not aimed at one class, but at an entire society.

Jane is perhaps not typical of her class, and she does seem to have a refinement that distinguishes her from the 'ordinary' working girls: 'What sweet laughter is was! How unlike the shrill discord whereby the ordinary workgirl expresses her foolish mirth' (p.138). However, as the story unfolds, we learn that Jane is not exceptional either, which is the reason why she cannot take upon herself the charitable duties demanded by her zealous grandfather.

It is this *balance* of judgement on individual virtue that marks out *The Nether World*. Take the following passages, and note the narrator's compassionate sentiments:

It is a virtuous world, and our frequent condemnations are invariably based on justice; will it be greatly harmful if for once we temper our righteous judgement with ever so little mercy? (*TNW*, P.302)

Then take the following:

The day's work had tired him exceptionally, doubtless owing to his nervousness, and again on the way to Sidney's he had recourse to a dose of the familiar stimulant. With our eyes on a man of Hewitt's station we note these little things; we set them down as a point scored against him; yet if our business were with a man of leisure, who, owing to worry, found his glass of wine at luncheon and again at dinner an acceptable support, we certainly should not think of paying attention to the matter. Poverty makes a crime of every indulgence (*TNW*, p.296).

It is interesting that the narrator addresses a certain class of person; someone of the same class and perhaps temperament as his own. He uses the pronouns 'we' and 'our', so a shared perspective is implied. In the following extract the position of the 'we' becomes clearer as it turns into 'you' and 'I'. In this scene 'Philanthropic ladies of great conscientiousness' take over a 'working soup-kitchen'. They think soup (by way of improving the lower class) should be dispensed with a better accent and more grace of behaviour. The citizens revolt and ditch the soup on the floor. The narrative comment runs:

Vast was the indignation of Miss Lant and the other ladies. "This is their gratitude!" Now if you or I had been there, what an opportunity for easing our minds! "Gratitude, mesdames? You have entered upon this work with expectation of gratitude?—And can you not perceive that these people of Shooter's Gardens are poor, besotted, disease-struck creatures, of whom—in the mass—scarcely a human quality is to be expected? Have you still to learn what this nether world has been made by those who belong to the sphere above it?—Gratitude, quotha?—Nay, do *you* be grateful that these hapless, half-starved women do not turn and rend you. At present they satisfy themselves with insolence. Take it silently, you who at all events hold some count of their dire state; and endeavour to feed them without arousing animosity!" (TNW, p.252).

There is highly interesting narrative play at work here. The narrator places himself as one of the judgemental readers, i.e. one of the middle classes for whom such a display of native ingratitude would be a reassuring welcome lest they should feel guilty that something must be done for these, their (in truth) *equal* humanity. He brings to life a speaker – such as one might find at Speakers' Corner (much featured in the novel). The speaker makes a passionate tirade against their (including the narrator's) prejudice that would seek to confirm its low opinion of the poor – 'what an opportunity for easing our minds!'. The speaker, who has been clearly marked as other than the narrator (inverted commas being used), resembles the egalitarian narrator who ordinarily speaks in this novel. How then are sympathies being 'manipulated'? A further examination of the narrative is necessary. Here are some key characters, who, in other novels, would certainly be condemned.

John Hewitt is a working class man who begins to make speeches against the injustices of the capitalist society. After money has been embezzled from the burial fund of his club, with the result that he cannot give his long-suffering wife a decent funeral, he rages thus:

I've been drove mad, I tell you—mad! It's well if I don't do murder yet; every man as I see go by with a good coat on his back and a face fat with good feeding, it's all I can do to keep from catchin' his throat an tearin' the life out of him!' (p.191).

Nowhere is there any censure of such an outpouring; it is totally understandable. John Hewitt is at no time portrayed unsympathetically; he is simply seen as struggling to keep as decent as possible under the weight of impossible burdens and the oppression of others – typified by the embezzler of the burial fund. Nearly all of the characters in this novel succumb to ignoble temptations, and the strongest censure applied is along the lines of, ‘as in almost all cases, his nature was corrupted’ (p.194). Note, ‘his nature’. The nature vs nurture debate is foregrounded in this novel, and, with the exception of Clem and her mother, the narrator is firmly in the nurture camp. If Orwell believed Gissing to be unequivocally sincere in this book he would not have said this of him: ‘[Gissing] did not see that they [the working class] were capable of becoming civilized if given slightly better opportunities’ (‘GG’, p.351).

Orwell undoubtedly perceived that this book is an exception. *The Nether World* smacks of sympathies rather too generous; practically every page is devoted to excusing ‘wrong’ behaviour. There is certainly Dickensian imitation. Connolly gives a good account of Gissing’s socio-political history, and it is clear that Gissing is no advocate of socialism. However, here I would like to continue with an examination of the narrative. It could be seen that the narrator is in character; here, playing ‘devil’s advocate’.

On the outcome of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, i.e. on Gordon’s return to the advertising agency, Connolly writes that Gordon, ‘terminates his money-strike ... abandons his literary career, and becomes what he—and Orwell—always despised, a little man in a little job’ (p.46). Gordon is not to be confused with one of the scurrying beetle-like men of the ministries that Orwell famously despises, nor with Gordon’s earlier view of the ‘bowler-hatted sneak ... the docile little cit who slips home by the six-fifteen

to a supper of cottage pie and stewed tinned pears [etc]' (p.47), and an evaluation of Gordon's altered outlook will be examined in the next section.

5.4) Gissing: the 'Pure' Novelist

Gissing and Orwell are entirely different writers, and cannot be read in the same way. Orwell's thirties novels are experimental, so by their nature demand more of readers. Orwell valued Gissing's writing, and believed him to be 'the best novelist' England had produced ('NEM', p.45). His reasons are as follows:

Gissing is a "pure" novelist, a thing that few gifted English writers have been. Not only is he genuinely interested in character and in telling a story, but he has the great advantage of feeling no temptation to burlesque. It is a weakness of nearly all the characteristic English novelists, from Smollet to Joyce, that they want to be "life-like" and at the same time want to get a laugh as often as possible. Very few English novels exist throughout on the same plane of probability. Gissing solves this problem without apparent difficulty, and it may be that his native pessimism was to help him ('NEM', p.45).

Reading that, it is easier to understand why Orwell remarked to Julian Symons that he was 'not a real novelist anyway'. Going by the above criteria he does not consider most novelists 'real', certainly not 'pure'. There is much humour in Orwell's novels, and he does not resist the 'temptation to burlesque'. Perhaps his native optimism got in the way! However, the enormous influence of Gissing is inescapable, and the declaration that 'to understand Orwell fully, one must first read Gissing' I would repeat, although with the caveat that the influence is not as obvious as it might first appear.

6) Orwell's Women: Working against Gissing's Models

In Gissing's portrayals of women (as many commentators have noted) there is, notwithstanding the complexity of characteristics invested in all of his protagonists, a Madonna-whore dichotomy at work. There is, on the one hand, the ideal, chaste, demure and intelligent woman. On the other, there is the debased, coarse, 'loose' woman. The paradigm is largely class-bound, with the women of the 'lower' world representing the worse of the two examples. There is particularly harsh treatment of women who are beginning to climb the social ladder, which at times reaches the intensity of misogyny. Orwell notes this imbalance in Gissing's work, and sums up Gissing's overall view of women:

The connecting link between them however, is that all of them are miserably limited in outlook. Even the clever and spirited ones, like Rhoda in *The Odd Women* ... cannot get away from readymade standards. In his heart Gissing seems to feel that women are natural inferiors. He wants them to be better educated, but on the other hand, he does not want them to have freedom, which they are certain to misuse. On the whole the best women in his books are the self-effacing, home-keeping ones ('GG', p.350).

Orwell's depictions of women are by no means as balanced as the above might suggest, and in some respects suggest a prejudice of equal weight. However, the ways in which his treatment of 'the fairer sex' differs from Gissing's reflects a preoccupation with Gissing 'types'. Orwell's female characters, in fact, are somewhat the inverse of Gissing's, and in comparing the ostensibly similar types it soon becomes clear that in Orwell's novels there is bias running *against* the 'civilised' and 'well-bred' woman (which corresponds with a like treatment of male characters). This class of woman is often raised to the platform of saint in Gissing's work. Orwell, instead (and this is where the inverse class prejudice surfaces) determines to champion the proletarian woman,

which for Orwell, as has been made clear in chapter two, extends to the lower-middle classes.

For Gissing, class and sexual morality are inseparable, and, in comparing Orwell's women with Gissing's, it will be shown that Orwell appears consciously to engage in challenging Gissing's class assumptions. The following extract demonstrates well Gissing's treatment of women (here in the process of class ascendancy) that declares, quite openly, a contempt and even disgust for such social aspiration, reflecting a belief in the inherent superiority of one class over another:

They spoke a peculiar tongue, the product of sham education and mock refinement grafted upon a stock of robust vulgarity. One and all would have been moved to indignant surprise if accused of ignorance or defective breeding.... The truth was, of course, that their minds, characters, propensities had remained absolutely proof against such educational influence as had been brought to bear upon them. That they used a finer accent than their servants, signified only that they had grown up amid falsities, and were enabled, by the help of money, to dwell above-stairs, instead of with their spiritual kindred below.¹

Gissing's ideas of social Darwinism are here unmistakably apparent; words such as 'stock', 'defective breeding' and 'their spiritual kindred' swing him firmly back into the *nature* camp. The Miss Frenches are shown as proof against the successful aspirations of Professor Higgins's Eliza Doolittle.

6.1) Women, Class and Stereotyping

Feminist interpretations of Orwell's novels tend to reflect a belief that Orwell too sees women as natural inferiors, unequal in conversation and outlook to their male counterparts. Julia's failure to engage in 'The Book' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often cited as reflecting a view that women cannot understand politics like men (see B

¹ Gissing, *In the Year of Jubilee* [1894] (Brighton: Harvester, 1976), p.7.

Campbell's 'Paterfamilias', p.133) even though it is her *age* that is given for her indifference. There is a belief that Orwell's female characters ultimately have a negative impact in the story, and never developed beyond sexist, patriarchal stereotypes. Whilst this may be partly true of Elizabeth Lackersteen in *Burmese Days*, and of Hilda Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*, it is not true of either Rosemary in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* or Dorothy Hare in *A Clergyman's Daughter*. It will be shown that Elizabeth and Hilda are shown as entirely different 'animals' from Rosemary and Dorothy, and an examination of narrative treatment reveals that they are no less to be understood in terms of class than Gissing's women, but, with the important difference that the 'better' natures are to be found in those of the less 'distinct' class – the class Orwell is attempting to persuade into an understanding of their proletarian status. Deirdre Beddoe, for example, views the ending of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as depressing because 'Rosemary has of course eventually trapped [Gordon]' (Beddoe, p.146). On the contrary, Rosemary has saved Gordon from a futile and suicidal life; what is more, Gordon comes to understand this perfectly:

What had he done? Chucked up the sponge! Broken all his oaths! His long and lonely war had ended in ignominious defeat... He was coming back to the fold repentant. He seemed to be walking faster than usual. There was a peculiar sensation, an actual physical sensation, in his heart, in his limbs, all over him. What was it? Shame, misery, despair? Rage at being back in the clutch of money? Boredom when he thought of the deadly future? He dragged the sensation forth, faced it, examined it. It was relief (KTAF, p. 265).

There is a dramatic build-up to the 'relief' felt by Gordon, which makes it more keenly felt by the reader. It is clear in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* that the narrator is entirely 'with' Rosemary in terms of sympathy, and a look at the novel in more detail will illuminate the narrative bias.

Unequivocal support for Rosemary is nowhere more apparent than when Gordon is indulging in one of his tirades against women: ““You won’t sleep with me, simply and solely because I’ve got no money.... You’ve got that deep-down mystical feeling that somehow a man without money isn’t worthy of you.... Women!”” (p.127) Gordon goes on for quite some time on the subject of women’s meanness of outlook. Rosemary interrupts him to stand up for her sex, but Gordon dismisses her claims. In the end she bursts out laughing. The narrator steps in:

She was really extraordinarily good-natured. Besides, what he was saying was such palpable nonsense that it did not even exasperate her. Gordon’s diatribes against women were in reality a kind of perverse joke; indeed, the whole sex-war is at bottom only a joke. For some reason it is great fun to pose as a feminist or an anti-feminist according to your sex (p.127).

This is a rare occasion in the story: an omniscient, authorial narrator explicitly condemning Gordon’s opinion. It can have no other effect than that of saying that on this issue understanding of Gordon’s sexist views will not be left to chance. Elsewhere, Gordon’s ‘palpable nonsense’ is simply reported, with no specific commentary afterwards – no *reaction* from the narrator. One is therefore ‘at liberty’ to agree with Gordon, although to do so is to read against the grain of the text; for the text is constructed in ways that allow the reader to see Gordon’s jaundiced view of life for what it is. In the following passage Gordon is inwardly declaiming with his usual vituperation:

The types he saw all around him, especially the older men, made him squirm. That was what it meant to worship the money-god! To settle down, to Make Good, to sell your soul for a villa and an aspidistra! To turn into the typical little bowler-hatted sneak ... who slips home by the six-fifteen to a supper of cottage pie and stewed tinned pears ... and then perhaps a spot of licit sexual intercourse if his wife ‘feels in the mood!’ What a fate! (p.51)

Gordon’s viewpoint is indicated in the familiar way: the viewing position is established as his: ‘the types **he** saw all around him’, and the observations that follow are replete with

exclamations, typical of character observation. However, the wider narrative works to undermine this negative, male-centred view, and here it is worth considering, for a moment, George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*. His wife has turned out to be a miserable disappointment. She has no conversation, is perpetually 'glooming', and constantly nags him about saving money. She is an her-in-doors stereotype of the worst kind, and if a young George Bowling had reflected as Gordon does above on the fate marriage has in store, he would have been spot on. However, Gordon has no grounds for making such a damning forecast. He has been 'blessed' in comparison with Bowling, and the authoritative narrator takes care to show just how compatible Gordon and Rosemary really are, despite Gordon's 'nonsense' talk about women. As they continue arguing, along the clichéd lines of 'men are brutes and women are soulless', the narrator tells us:

Gordon and Rosemary never grew tired of this kind of thing. Each laughed with delight at the other's absurdities. There was a merry war between them. Even as they disputed, arm in arm, they pressed their bodies delightedly together. They were very happy. Indeed, they adored one another. Each was to the other a standing joke and an object infinitely precious (p.128).

This is the only other occasion when the narrator will not leave the reader's understanding to chance.² Gordon would clearly not be 'selling his soul' in marrying a mate so companionable as this. Another clear indication of their supreme compatibility is the 'merry war' allusion, for this is a direct reference to the 'merry war betwixt Signoir Benedick and her' in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. With this nod to Leonato's observation on courtly harmony Orwell is repeating the example of love that can tease without wounding. If we accept this then the novel cannot end with Gordon having been trapped, and it is because of this that Rosemary is free from all negative

² Except for the final line of the book, which runs, 'Well, once again things were happening in the Comstock family'. The note is positive because it means the sterility of the Comstocks has come to an end. Stasis has transformed into life: Gordon daring to *live* as his family had not.

stereotyping. Hitchens believes Orwell to have botched the ending of this novel through a failure to maintain any meaningful symbolism:

At the beginning of the book, Gordon's puny volume of poems is likened to a row of fetuses ... the very image of the sterile and abortive. Redeeming this by means of a hastily conceived pregnancy is not Orwell's most innovative fictional resolution (p.132).

Such dismissive commentary is typical and unjust. Rosemary's pregnancy has been planned from the beginning; this is most certainly a wanted pregnancy. The symbolism is there too, for it is Gordon's poetry that will be aborted, and not (mercifully) Rosemary's baby.

Orwell's depiction of Rosemary reveals a warm regard for everything that is robust and alive in women, a quality that is demonstrably lacking in Gissing's heroines, who, as we shall see, are generally punished if they display anything approaching natural vitality.

6.2) Punishing Nancy Lord: Gissing's Misogynist Leanings

In *Rosemary* there are striking resemblances to Nancy Lord of *In the Year of Jubilee*, and in comparing the two one feels strongly that Orwell has Gissing's model before him, and, as usual, is doing something quite different with it; something that will reflect how attitudes have moved on from those 'fog-bound' (a fitting metaphor) days Gissing is writing in. I shall examine *In the Year of Jubilee*, particularly Nancy Lord's development and fate in some detail, as the book is highly representative of Gissing's position on female equality.

Nancy Lord is very much one of Gissing's 'modern' women, although one of quite a different stamp from that of the Miss Frenches, she being of decidedly better

'stock'. Of a sudden Nancy Lord is to be given more social and domestic liberty, as the care of her father is now to be undertaken solely by the housekeeper (just promoted to a position of equality in the household). Nancy's nascent outlook is given as follows:

Thus, by aid of circumstance, had she put herself into complete accord with the spirit of her time. Abundant privilege; no obligation. A reference of all things to her sovereign will and pleasure. Withal, a defiant rather than a hopeful mood; resentment of the undisguisable fact that her will was sovereign only in a poor little sphere which she would gladly have transcended (p.96).

The note of disapproval is abundantly clear – 'reference of all things to her sovereign will and pleasure'. The understanding is that women are gaining freedoms without any mature understanding of social obligations ('abundant privilege, no responsibility'). She is depicted as representing an age of selfish hedonism, and in this she does resemble the Miss Frenches. The overriding impression is that of strong-willed pride mixed with arrogance. Moreover, it is an arrogance that is totally misplaced, as her reality is woefully short of her ideal. In portraying Nancy Lord thus, Gissing, with typical misogynistic flare, is giving us a cocktail of feminine hubris and independence that is set up only so that he can knock it down, which he will do with the full force of his retributive pen.³

Orwell will have nothing to do with such reactionary and domineering patriarchy. Rosemary, likewise, has abundant privilege (in the sense of being obligated to no one but herself), but she is definitely hopeful and considerate instead of defiant. Neither is Rosemary resentful because her social sphere is 'little', so much so that it does not allow her the simple comfort of meeting her boyfriend in private. And here is one of the essential differences between Gissing's and Orwell's sexual politics: In Gissing,

³ Jacob Korg points out in his essay, 'George Orwell and His Favorite Novelist' in *The Gissing Newsletter*, Vol. XXI, no. 4 (Bradford: The Gissing Trust, 1985), pp.1-11 (p.8) that Gissing 'has earned something of a reputation as an early feminist. He took the 'woman problem' as one of his themes, favored better education and self-determination for women in economic and sexual life, and treated with complete respect their intellectual capacities and the economic problems they confronted' (p.8). Gissing's attitudes towards women are far more complex than the above suggests, and this area will be expanded upon in detail.

meanness of outlook is shown to be a trait of nearly all women save those of the 'upper' world in Gissing. Nancy's independence allows her to go about the streets of London, a taste for which she develops after her experience among the crowds on Jubilee night (a further sign of her decadence).⁴ Yet her new enjoyments are made enjoyable largely because she feels her 'advantage' in this sphere, which again increases our sense of her insularity:

Part of the pleasure she found in Crewe's society came from her sense of being so undeniably his superior; she liked to give him a sharp command, and observe his ready obedience. To his talk she listened with a good-natured, condescending smile, occasionally making a remark which implied a more liberal view, a larger intelligence, than his (p.102).

This insight into her thoughts comes shortly after *her* reflection that the house of Champion Hill was 'an abode of arrogance and snobbery' (p.97). When she and Crewe are on top of the Monument surveying 'the vision of London's immensity', the narrator tells us:

In her conceit of self-importance, she stood there, above the battling millions of men.... Here her senses seemed to make literal the assumption by which her mind had always been directed: that she—Nancy Lord—was the mid point of the universe (p.104).

There can be no mistaking the narrative view of her independent state: Nancy has transgressed into a sphere that she is not fitted to inhabit; the language chosen here works

⁴ The first 'sign' that Nancy is becoming less 'ladylike' is given (symbolically) immediately after a description of the housekeeper, Mary, attending her father 'assiduously'. Nancy, by contrast, is shown to be completely idle. Moreover, she has turned her back on the improving study that once marked her out as desiring to be cultured:

Nancy no longer inclined to study, and cared little for reading of any sort. That new book on Evolution, which she had brought from the library just before Jubilee Day, was still lying about.... Evolution! She already knew all about Darwinism, all she needed to know.... She wanted to live in the present, to enjoy her youth. An evening like that she had spent in the huge crowd, with a man like Crewe to amuse her with his talk, was worth whole oceans of "Culture"(p.97-8).

There is a typical Gissing stab in there: one feels the presence of a narrator with eyebrows raised in reproachful irony at Nancy's arrogance in her assertion that she 'knew all about Darwinism'. The implication is unmistakable: Nancy's weak nature has been corrupted by the shallow pleasures of the vulgar, and if she had read her Darwin she may have understood the perils in wait for her. Interestingly 'culture' is understood only from what would now be called a 'high' point of view; working-class culture is not yet recognised. Orwell was a pioneer in addressing this imbalance, and this will be looked at later.

to undermine her *right* to inhabit even a symbolic position. She is 'above the battling millions of men', but she is no wise and kind Goddess at this 'mid point of the universe'. On the contrary, she is full of vain 'conceit' with no heed for the social struggle, taking place below. Again, Gissing hits a misogynistic note as he does on many occasions when detailing Nancy's interactions with men. Crewe is awe-stricken by Nancy as he observes her looking down upon London, clearly not reading the true direction of her thoughts: "I never saw you looking so well. I believe you're the most beautiful girl to be found anywhere in this London!" (p.104). We are told that there is 'genuine emotion in this voice' as he speaks. This is in stark contrast to the disingenuous Nancy, whom we subsequently learn is prepared to marry a man she obviously despises if he can earn 'twenty thousand a year'. Crewe becomes uneasy here and says, "But you have thoughts above money." Her reply is, "My thoughts are my own. I may think as I choose." (p.105). Given the outcome of her life, it can be seen that Nancy will be punished for her presumption of independence, and again, there is an interesting contrast with Rosemary.

Nancy is desperately in love with Lionel Tarrant, the man who lives in Champion Hill (the 'abode of arrogance and snobbery'). He is her social superior, both in education and class (Nancy becoming acquainted with the family through their governess – her best friend Jessica Morgan). Tarrant pursues her, although never with any serious intentions: 'Miss Nancy Lord was not by any means the kind of person that entered his thoughts when they turned to marriage. He regarded her in every respect his inferior' (p.145). Nancy encourages him, and deliberately flouts convention by being alone with him at hours when it is highly inappropriate. She clearly encourages her seduction, and afterwards, working on his sense of honour (which, in turn, shows up of her *lack* of it),

immediately secures his hand in marriage. There is no doubt that she has 'trapped' him, for he is appalled by the whole affair: 'Could it be sober fact? Had he in very deed committed so gross an absurdity?' (p.145). He contemptuously reflects that Nancy is 'a sample of the pretentious half-educated class ... turned out in thousands every year, from so-called High Schools' (p.145). His contempt matches hers when directed against Crewe. Although Nancy gains in Tarrant's regard he never acknowledges her to the outside world as his wife, even when they have a child; and they never live together as man and wife, she is merely, though legally wed, his mistress. Nancy has been effectively condemned to a life of miserable solitude and ignominy for her initial 'unladylike' behaviour; she transgressed her 'proper', feminine and class social sphere and must forever pay the price.

6.3) Ladylike and Unladylike Figures

For Gissing's female characters there is (with notable exceptions, which will be examined shortly) a feminine-unfeminine, ladylike-unladylike criterion from which they cannot escape.⁵ Orwell identifies these polarisations in Gissing's work and believes that such divisions 'invalidate his implied condemnation of the female sex in general' ('GG', p.350). A good deal of criticism, particularly feminist criticism, believes that Orwell condemns much of the female sex. On closer examination, however, it can be seen that Orwell's work attempts to redress this imbalance, particularly where it is weighted in favour of the unladylike; and when compared to Gissing's women, Orwell's are, despite appearances, treated with a great deal of empathy and respect.

⁵ Significantly, the narrator's full sympathy returns to Nancy once she has reconciled herself to motherhood and quiet domesticity.

Shortly after the passage telling of Nancy Lord's newfound independence we learn how 'her personal demeanour showed a change. So careful hitherto of feminine grace and decorum, she began to affect a mannishness of bearing' (p.97). The words 'mannish' and 'mannishness' appear frequently in Gissing's novels and signify an unattractiveness in 'strong' women. Again, Orwell seems consciously to move away from such oversensitivity. Rosemary's demeanour, in contrast, never loses any of its feminine charm when she is going about independently:

Rosemary met him on time. It was one of her virtues that she was never late, and even at this hour of the morning she was bright and debonair. She was rather nicely dressed, as usual (p.138).

That the narrator explicitly mentions Rosemary's 'virtues' is typical of a desire to reflect her admirable traits. Moreover, there is a gentleness in the quality of the narration – 'she was rather nicely dressed, as usual' – the 'as usual' strikes a deferential chord, and so has an elevating effect. It works to counter-balance Gordon's often ungracious treatment of her. When Rosemary does concede to have sex with Gordon it is his heedless behaviour that ruins the day, as he brings no contraception. Rosemary's embarrassed reaction is understandable. Moreover, it confirms her sound reasons for 'holding out' thus far. Connolly argues that Gordon is as much a victim to chaste, feminine social outlooks as Reardon:

By embracing poverty, Gordon only guarantees that he will suffer the loneliness of "The womanless bed" just as Gissing's Reardon loses his wife, "He had won the world's greatest prize—a woman's love—but could not retain it because his pockets were empty (p.40)

On the contrary, Gordon guarantees his loneliness because he is thoughtless and uncaring at moments when the opposite behaviour is required of him. If we look at the episode in

some detail we can observe that all narrative sympathies are with Rosemary (the first speaker is Gordon):

'May I?—now?'
'Yes. All right.'
'You're not frightened?'
'No.'
'I'll be as gentle as I can with you.'
'It doesn't matter.'
A moment later:
'Oh, Gordon, no! No, no, no!'
'What? What is it?'
'No, Gordon, no! You mustn't *No!*'

Rosemary's assertion that 'it doesn't matter' demonstrates that she *had* fully committed herself to what they were about to do, and had made herself completely ready, so that her abrupt rejection of him 'a moment later' is shown as totally spontaneous, and her repetition of 'no' together with the violence of her expression (completely out of character) demonstrates a sincere strength of feeling. The scene ends thus:

'I didn't expect *this*,' he said bitterly.
'But I couldn't help it, Gordon! You ought to have—you know.'
'You don't think I go in for that kind of thing, do you?'
'But what else can we do? I can't have a baby, can I?'
'You must take your chance.'
'Oh, Gordon, how impossible you are!'

She lay looking up at him, her face full of distress, too overcome for the moment even to remember that she was naked. His disappointment turned to anger. There you are you see! Money again! Even in the most secret action of your life you don't escape it; you've still got to spoil everything with filthy cold-blooded precautions for money's sake. Money, money, always money! (p.157)

The contrast in Rosemary and Gordon's dialogue works to heighten our sense of Rosemary's humility, particularly when the narrator reminds us of her nakedness. Gordon's use of the word 'cold-blooded' works ironically – one cannot escape noticing that his response to Rosemary's obvious embarrassment – 'you must take your chance', is extremely cold-blooded, but as usual, he is wholly without the faculty of *self-censure*. Furthermore, his belief that it is money that is the sole cause of this present calamity is,

rather, just another example of his 'perverse' take on life. At first glance there appear to be striking similarities to Reardon and Biffen's encounters with women in that Gordon is frustrated and rejected, but Reardon and Biffen are rejected as *partners*, not merely rejected at a moment of extreme sexual confusion. Orwell comments directly on the sexual politics of women in Gissing's time, concluding: 'Women of refinement and sensibility will not face poverty. And here one notices again the deep difference between that day and our own' ('GG', p.349). Again, in terms of gender relations, there is a sense that Orwell, at times (clearly not with other female characters, as we shall see), consciously works against Gissing's 'outmoded' models; so, in the above scene, it is Gordon who is tormenting Rosemary, and, importantly, not the other way about.

We can contrast the above episode of female rejection and male disappointment with the following scene from *New Grub Street*. When Reardon begins to fail in his writing he implores his wife (Amy), at the end of a particularly fruitless day, to come and sit with him. It is a clear plea:

"Come and sit by me, dearest."

"What's the matter? Can't you do anything?"

"No; come and talk to me; we can understand each other better."

"Nonsense; you have such morbid ideas. I can't bear to sit in the gloom"(p.47).

The harshness of her replies is unmistakable. In fact, Amy Reardon, at least in comparison with her intensely sensitive husband, turns out to be almost a sinister character; she witnesses the decline of her husband, and only becomes more contemptuous of his determination to abandon writing in order to reclaim his mental health. One of the last visions of Amy is of her seated at an elegant dinner table where she is hostess. She has married her husband's opposite, Jasper Milvain, the man who cynically sees writing as a lucrative trade and nothing more.

When she bent her head towards the person with whom she spoke, it was an act of queenly favour. Her words were uttered with just enough deliberation to give them the value of an opinion; she smiled with a delicious shade of irony; her glance intimated that nothing could be too subtle for her understanding (p.511).

The portrait is now complete, and any thoughts that Amy was not playing a part to her former husband are banished; she hated him because he could not provide her with the sort of company that would allow her to smile 'with a delicious shade of irony'.

There are contrasts set up between Reardon and his wife Amy that are clearly meant to demonstrate Reardon's sensitivity and generosity of feeling against Amy's insensitivity and lack of generosity; and as this is a commonly established dichotomy in Gissing's gender sparring there is a strong sense that Gissing is attempting to reveal generic truths about the nature of male and female relationships, feeding into a conviction that man is not only the first sex, but, moreover, the *nobler sex*. Similar contrasts are set up between Gordon and Rosemary, but, as demonstrated above, it is the male sex which is shown to be wanting.⁶

In Gissing's work intelligence and sensitivity in women (with the notable exceptions of *The Nether World* and *The Odd Women*) are seen to be manifest mainly in women of the 'upper world'. In the 'lower world' women are usually portrayed as innately immoral, of decidedly 'easy virtue', and generally insensitive and coarse – shop girls and factory girls are always of this stamp. The result is a Madonna-whore division, which suggests a Darwinian view of seeing humans as biologically destined. In stark contrast there is, in Orwell's work, a strong sense that he constantly has in mind a conviction that, 'the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new

⁶ Significantly it is Gordon who is shown to have a meanness of outlook, and he, alone of the two, who has a strong sense of class feeling. This 'exposure' of meanness in class-bound people can be observed in *A Clergyman's Daughter*. As Peter Davison points out: 'Whereas [Dorothy] is unworldly and has a sweet and gentle disposition, her father is described by Orwell as 'a "difficult" kind of man' of 'almost unflinching ill-humour (Davison, p.54).

suit' (*D&O*, p.152) – this naturally applying to women no less than to men. Orwell was interested in precisely *why* Gissing should hold such a damning view; he concluded thus:

As for the working class, [Gissing] regards them as savages, and says so with great frankness. However wrong he may have been in his outlook, one cannot say of him that he spoke in ignorance, for he himself came of very poor parents, and circumstances forced him to live much of his life among the poorest of the working class. His reactions are worth studying.⁷

When thinking of Orwell's declared political imperatives: 'I write ... because there is some lie that I want to expose' ('*WIW*', p.462) Orwell, it would seem, feels that Gissing is unfair to women, as he is to that class as a whole, particularly in the belief that working-class women are the natural inferiors of upper-class women, and there is much evidence to suggest that Orwell is (quite deliberately) contradicting Gissing's prescriptive, limited and detrimental slanting, although to what extent he replaces it with his own is open to conjecture.

One can observe this counteraction from the outset when looking at Orwell's Madonna-whore model in *Burmese Days*.

6.4) Inverting the Madonna-whore paradigm

Connolly argues that Orwell, in *Burmese Days*, is mirroring Gissing's Madonna-whore theme, with Elizabeth cast in the model of Helen Norman, the intelligent, saintly Madonna figure with whom Arthur Golding falls desperately in love, and in whom he hopes to be saved from a life of degradation with the alcoholic prostitute Carrie. The similarities in the men's respective situations are obvious enough: like Golding, Flory is in a miserable relationship with a dependant woman (Ma Hla May) who is his social

⁷ Orwell, 'Not Enough Money: A Sketch of George Gissing', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XV, pp.45-47 (p.46).

inferior, and who, like Carrie, is also a whore. Connolly writes of Elizabeth: 'Fresh from Paris, [she] represents everything Flory has long felt exiled from—art, intelligent conversation, Western civilisation, youth and decency' (p.55). Flory certainly feels this to be the case:

Elizabeth, by coming into his life, had so changed it and renewed it that all the dirty, miserable years might never have passed. Her presence had changed the whole orbit of his mind.... Where is the life that late I led? he thought. Just by existing she had made it possible for him, she had even made it natural to him, to act decently (p.156).

For all her appearance of culture and refinement, Elizabeth is actually unintelligent (to the point of vacuity), self-serving, and racist; and in this she is shown to be highly representative of her class – the ruling class Flory is so desperate to escape from. We are told of her time spent in Paris, and learn that she took no part in life there, and that 'she disliked all foreigners *en bloc*' (p.95) – clearly not a hopeful sign. She declines to partake of Parisian culture, preferring instead to pore over the English illustrated papers such as *Tatler* and *The Sporting and Dramatic*:

Ah, what joys were pictured there!' Hounds meeting on the lawn of Charlton Hall, the lovely Warwickshire seat of Lord Burrowdean.... 'Sunbathing at Cannes. Left to right: Miss Barbara Pilbrick, Sir Edward Tuke [etc] (p.96).

This is her 'lovely, lovely, golden world!', a world that she might have been part of if the family money had held out; as it was she merely had a taste of it via an expensive boarding school. However, it was to seal her character, enslaving Elizabeth to a life of bitter disappointments and perpetual disgust with her environment. And this is where Orwell's sympathetic treatment of class is brought out. He resists the easy option of merely sneering at upper-class prejudice:

It was not unnatural, with the example of her mother before her eyes, that Elizabeth should have a healthy loathing of Art. In fact, any excess of intellect–'braininess' was her word for it–tended to belong, in her eyes, to the 'beastly'. Real people, she felt,

decent people—people who shot grouse, went to Ascot, yachted at Cowes—were not brainy.... “Highbrow” was a bitter word in her vocabulary (p.96).

As a suitable partner for Flory, of course, nothing can be hoped, and Flory’s poetic ‘Where is the life that I late led’ now becomes highly ironic. That Flory thinks of Elizabeth as some saving intellectual grace begins to look like a parody of the Gissing model. Indeed, practically all the exchanges between Elizabeth and Flory are a demonstration of his blind infatuation and her increasing uneasiness that she is in the grip of a ‘beastly’, ‘brainy’ ‘highbrow’:

‘Whatever is that noise?’ said Elizabeth, stopping. ‘It sounds just like a jazz band!’

‘Native music. They’re having a *pwe*—that’s a kind of Burmese play; a cross between a historical drama and a revue, if you can imagine that. It’ll interest you, I think (p.104).

Not surprisingly, her response is, “Oh,” (the narrator adding) ‘she said rather doubtfully’. The only comments that Elizabeth makes are negative and demonstrate unequivocally the paucity of her outlook: ‘Do they always have their plays in the middle of the road?’ (p.104). Flory begins a spirited explanation, of the kind that has clearly failed to notice criticism in the comment, even after she has said, ‘... they are *allowed* to—blocking up the whole road-way?’ [Her italics. Elizabeth’s speech will always be represented as it appears]. His answer is, ‘Oh yes. There are no traffic regulations here. No traffic to regulate, you see’ (p.105). Needless to say, she does not see. They watch the sensuous dance – Elizabeth ‘with a mixture of amazement, boredom and something approaching horror’ (p.107). Flory, showing that he is in his truly ‘native’ element, begins a lengthy explanation of all that the dance signifies. Failing to note the signs of mingled amazement and horror in Elizabeth, he begins, ‘I knew this would interest you; that’s why I brought you here’ (p.107). We know what is coming, and indeed witness

Flory digging himself deeper into an already considerably deep hole: 'There's a touch of the diabolical in all Mongols. And yet when you look closely, what art, what centuries of culture you can see behind it!' (p.107). Flory's allusion to art and culture alert the esoterically privileged reader to Elizabeth's 'horror' at the mention of such things. We know that "'Highbrow" was a bitter word in her vocabulary', and so her disgust is easily imagined by us, if not by Flory. Flory goes on and on talking 'discursively and incautiously' (again the word incautious operates to enlighten the reader) with the result that Elizabeth is more discomforted than ever: 'What *was* the man talking about?'

There is humour here, for the reader is all the time waiting for Elizabeth's bathetic responses – her dumbfounded 'oh?' or 'oh!'. The scene reaches a comic climax when Elizabeth announces that she has had enough and is leaving. Flory is naturally dismayed, and begins to apologise for the Burmese lack of 'decency', but even this he cannot manage without plunging himself into the mire of cultural reflection: 'I ought to have thought.... These people's sense of decency isn't the same as ours—it's stricter in some ways—but—'(p.110). All is lost; she cannot bear to listen to another 'beastly' word, and cuts him short. There is also a telling play on the word 'decency' here; it serves (in the colonial cultural context of extreme social hegemony) to foreground and so question the concept of good or decent behaviour. It is notable that Elizabeth is desperate to escape the dance only to be 'rescued' by the white man's Club, which is itself a veritable hotbed of some very indecent racist behaviour.

When they get back to The Club Flory is anxious not to have more censure heaped upon him and suggests that they should keep their 'episode' to themselves. She readily assents, and the narration runs: 'She agreed with a warmth which surprised him. After

that he knew that he was forgiven. But what it was that he was forgiven, he had not yet grasped' (p.111). Flory never grasps Elizabeth's true nature, although there are times when he comes close. The following conversation between them is particularly interesting because Elizabeth echoes views on phrenology that feature in Gissing's portrayals of 'the wicked', which again highlights her ignorance, and so is also a volley at Gissing's Swiftian portrayals of *naturally* 'low' types. Here they are talking about the Burmese – Elizabeth is commenting on how '*revolting*' they are. Flory insists that they are 'charming' with 'splendid bodies'. Elizabeth is disgusted; she says, "But they have such hideous-shaped heads! ... And the way their foreheads slant back—it makes them look *so wicked*. I remember reading ... that a person with a sloping forehead is a *criminal type*" (p.122).⁸ Flory's response (not quite exasperated) is, "Oh, come, that's a bit sweeping! Round about half the people in the world have that kind of forehead." To this she says (sounding exactly like the bigoted racist Ellis, from *The Club*, whom Flory is thoroughly sickened by) "Oh, well, if you count *coloured* people, of course——!" The conversation ends in typical fashion, with Flory digging himself deeper into his 'beastly', 'brainy' hole, and Elizabeth demonstrating that she is as empty-headed as she is shallow:

'But, you know, one gets used to the brown skin in time. In fact they say—I believe it's true—that after a few years in these countries a brown skin seems more natural than a

⁸ Two women, who are decidedly of the criminal type, are described thus in *Workers in the Dawn*:

The two faces were a study for Hogarth: that of Polly Hemp, round, fair, marked with an incomparably vicious smile, the nose very thin and well-shaped, the lips brutally sensual, the forehead narrow and receding; that of Mrs Pole altogether coarser and more vulgar.... At the present moment both faces, different as were their outlines, vied in giving expression to the meanest phase of the meanest vice, that of avarice (Vol. III, pp.288-9).

It is typical that the word 'sensual' is used when describing such 'lower-class' women, and it is typical that the word 'brutal' collocates with the word 'sensual' – the two characteristics seemingly inseparable in the criminal class. Similarly words such as 'vicious', 'meanest' and 'avarice' are commonly employed to describe the 'whore' type. Gissing's Madonna women (the 'real' ones, and not the fraudulent ones such as Amy Reardon) are never sensual, brutal, mean or avaricious. Orwell's Madonna figures, on the other hand, have many such qualities. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the face of Winston Smith's wife is described as 'aristocratic', but she is totally empty-headed.

white one. And after all, it *is* more natural. Take the world as a whole, it's an eccentricity to be white' (p.122).

Her response is (with the usual italicisation denoting the thoughtless, but polite 'lady' type), 'You *do* have some funny ideas!' Immediately after this exclamation the narration runs, 'And so on and so on' (p.123). The unmistakable hint is that this folly will continue in exactly the same manner *ad infinitum*, and therefore it is not worth documenting any more of it. One is reminded of Lenina in *Brave New World*. Flory is trying to get Elizabeth to understand his way of thinking, but at all costs Elizabeth resists thinking, and this reflects an intuitive sense of his subversiveness: 'She felt all the while an unsatisfactoriness, an unsoundness in the things he said' (p.123), which is why, of course, she is so encouraging when he wants to keep their *pwe* excursion a secret. The resemblance to Lenina's reaction to Bernard Marx's unorthodoxy is inescapable: 'Odd, odd, *odd*, was Lenina's verdict on Bernard Marx' (p.78). Similarly, in response to Bernard's asking her to understand his need for them to be alone: "I don't understand anything," she said with decision, determined to preserve her incomprehension intact' (p.82). Orwell is demonstrating this exact thought-prevention trait in Elizabeth (and thus in an entire class). Her use of words such as 'beastly' and 'brainy', particularly when italicised (especially coming at the end of a sentence, like Lenina's 'odd, odd, *odd*') are her *crimestop* words – the invaluable aid to ensuring that her incomprehension will not be stirred into troublesome thought.

Gissing's well-bred, civilised, Madonna figures, in stark contrast, are intelligent—highly intelligent in many cases. Helen Norman's Diary is testimony to this. There are detailed descriptions of the German landscape reflecting an active and sensitive mind; there is also much on the subject of conventional and orthodox Christianity, and she is

learning Latin in order to read the New Testament. She clearly thinks for herself too. Of one of her theological tutors, Dr. Eidenbenz, she reflects: 'To maintain his position he has recourse to sophisms which a healthy-minded child could at once see through'.⁹ Helen's mind is admirable too because she is an atheist, as are the more remarkable of Gissing's intellectual heroes (she is similar in outlook to Godwin Peak, the autobiographical protagonist of *Born in Exile*). Arthur Golding, like Flory, is in raptures every time he lays eyes on Helen: "'She is indeed a goddess!" he exclaimed to himself.... "And she is far superior to me as a 'Madonna' of Raphael is to this miserable smudge which I call a picture"' (*Vol. I*, p.384). Many times Helen is beatified by the worshipping Arthur: 'A halo seemed to play around her head and glorify her' (*Vol. III*, p.332). In Helen's case, sainthood is deserved because she sacrifices her chance of happiness to duty – Arthur must support his wife and she must bear the disappointment as best she can.

6.5) Blurring Distinctions

Orwell's portrayals of women indicate strongly that he is 'out of patience' with such impossible paragons of virtue as those given to us by Gissing, particularly when women of a 'better' class are shown as its exclusive inheritors. Hilda Bowling's class and history are interesting here. Without doubt Hilda Bowling is an extremely unattractive figure; she has no conversation, is perpetually 'glooming', and is someone whose 'main kick in life [is] out of foreseeing disasters' (p.7). Bowling tells us that when he married her she was 'very pretty' (p.137). The similarity to Elizabeth Lackersteen is striking when we learn that Hilda's background is exactly that of Elizabeth's:

⁹ Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn* [1880] (New York: Garland, 1976), p.314.

Hilda belonged to a class I only knew by hearsay, the poverty-stricken officer class. For generations past her family had been soldiers, sailors, clergymen, Anglo-Indian officials and that kind of thing. They'd never had any money, but on the other hand none of them had ever done anything that I should recognise as work. Say what you will, there's a kind of snob-appeal in that, if you belong as I do to the God-fearing shopkeeper class (p.137-8).

This is an admission by Bowling that he was seduced by class status. However, he has come to understand just how feeble was his belief in the innate prestige of the 'officer class'. It is this characteristic debunking of social myths that marks Orwell's depictions of women.

Ma Hla May is pertinent here. She is the lower-class 'whore' figure, who, like Carrie, is responsible for making her lover miserable. Yet it becomes clear in Orwell's treatment of Ma Hla May that the descriptions work to humanise rather than demonise her. Furthermore, she is cast as the person being exploited by 'the rich' with, what turns out to be, pitiable consequences.

Our introduction to Ma Hla May, reflects a narratorial attitude that, from the outset, seeks to deflect attention away from her.¹⁰ From the beginning our attention is directed at Flory, whose behaviour is outrageously hypocritical as it is very much that of the exploitative colonial – the very type that he is waging a secret war against. He allows her to come to tea, although she cannot wear her sandals 'in her master's presence' (p.51). It is clear that she sleeps with Flory only for money and gifts; however, despite this, she is treated by Orwell sympathetically from the beginning. Flory, we are told, 'had bought [Ma Hla May] from her parents two years ago, for three hundred rupees' (p.52). She has had no choice, clearly, but to be what she is, and her nature, far from being embittered, is

¹⁰ Even the fact that she is a whore is given quite matter-of-factly without any trace of censure: 'Flory's embraces meant nothing to her (Ba Pe, Ko S'la's younger brother, was secretly her lover)'(p.53).

by contrast, shown to be rather innocent; she is certainly not of the scheming and murderous type that mark out many of Gissing's 'whores':

Flory's embraces meant nothing to her ... yet she was bitterly hurt when he neglected them. Sometimes she had even put love philtres in his food. It was the idle concubine's life that she loved, and the visits to her village dressed in all her finery, when she could boast of her position as a *bo-kadaw*—a white man's wife; for she had persuaded everyone, herself included, that she was Flory's legal wife (p.53).

That she believes herself to be married tells us that the girl, slave though she is, has some pride. Her main fault seems to be that she has failed to understand how grossly she is being exploited, which highlights Orwell's political foregrounding. Where Gissing's 'nether world' whore types are menacing and harbour sinful and deviant natures, Orwell's merely reflect a harmless, self-deluding and at worst silly nature. Despite Flory's rejection of her after sex Ma Hla May continues with her caresses:

She had never learned the wisdom of leaving him alone at these times. She believed that lechery was a form of witchcraft, giving a woman magical powers over a man, until in the end she could weaken him to a half-idiotic slave. Each successive embrace sapped Flory's will and made the spell stronger—this was her belief (p.54).

This insight into her psyche makes her more human, and therefore works to create empathy for her character. Again, this works rather to explode the Madonna-whore mythology that Gissing indulges in. The final undoing of Flory – Ma Hla May's public denunciation of him in church – is not of her doing, as it states clearly in the book. She is merely a pawn (yet again) in the political scheming of the all-powerful magistrate U Po Kyin (and therefore of men), who wishes to become the first non-white man to be admitted to The Club. Through Flory's efforts and support the honour is going to go to one Dr Veraswami. Flory's disgrace means the disgrace also of the doctor. Elizabeth's reaction to the scene shows her hard nature:

The thought that he had been the lover of that grey-faced maniacal creature made her shudder in her bones. But worse than that, worse than anything, was his ugliness at this

moment. His face appalled her, it was so ghastly, rigid and old... She hated him now for his birthmark. She had never known till this moment how dishonouring, how unforgivable a thing it was (p.286).

Outside the church Flory begs Elizabeth to listen to an explanation, but she pretends that there has never been anything between them to make such an explanation necessary. Her treatment is seemingly ruthless and heartless given his visibly miserable distress. In nature she could not be further away from a woman like Helen Norman. Arthur wants Helen to be his guide and mentor; his saviour from a life away from art: 'Whatever you say I will do! Whatever you say *must* be right! (Vol. III, p.90). Likewise, Flory wants Elizabeth to save him from a life of futility and loneliness: "'Try to realise what it means, and that you're the sole person on earth who could save me from it'" (p.289). Helen understands Arthur and grants him the guidance and commitment he seeks. Elizabeth, in contrast, is neither able to understand Flory nor to commit to him. Yet, and this is where Orwell's magnanimity comes into play, Elizabeth is redeemed to some extent by circumstance.

To outward appearances Elizabeth is quite ready to 'compromise' herself in the pursuit of a *suitable* husband, but, she is actually just as much a victim as Ma Hla May, being as she is merely a pawn in her aunt's determination to triumph in her matrimonial pursuit for her niece. Furthermore, Elizabeth's pursuit of Verrall (literally, in the final stage, as she makes for the train on which he is making his getaway) is very much her aunt's pursuit too. In any case, the ignominious dash to reach Verrall, when he is clearly absconding, is not the action of dignity. So, on this footing, the respectable white women are inferior even to Ma Hla May as they do have a choice. All class distinction is now eradicated, and the Madonna-whore division collapses. When Elizabeth finally marries the aged Mr Macgregor, whom she has flattered for some time by pretending his

conversation to be riveting – naturally, he is an old bore – the cycle of her desperation is completed.

Elizabeth's 'end' is interesting, especially when one thinks of like outcomes for Gissing's 'scheming' women, who, *if* they achieve their end will triumph. Elizabeth has decided to marry Mr Macgregor, the Deputy Commissioner, because he 'is not to be despised' (p.299), and not, importantly, because of any secret or declared ambition of her own. The description of Elizabeth at the close of the book could be read as a damning criticism of her as an individual:

Elizabeth has grown mature surprisingly quickly, and a certain hardness of manner that always belonged to her has become accentuated. Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese. She has an exhaustive knowledge of the Civil List, gives charming little dinner-parties and knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their places—in short, she fills with complete success the position for which Nature had designed her from the first, that of a *burra* mensahib.

Orwell's use of the words 'Nature' and 'design' here work together ironically, for Elizabeth is the product of an immense man-made system that has nothing natural about it, but has everything to do with design. It must not be forgotten that Elizabeth was being sexually harassed by her uncle, so her choice, the narrative highlights, is not a surprising one. There is a crucial scene in the book where Flory arrives back from Kyauktada with the express purpose of making Elizabeth understand the extent of his love for her. Elizabeth's language and behaviour are detailed as follows: "“You *have* been away a long time, Mr Flory! You're quite a *Stranger!* We've *so* missed you at the club!” etc. etc. She was italicising every other word' (p.226). This kind of conversation goes on for some time with Flory increasingly tormented by her refusal to acknowledge his clear desire to be serious. He tries to summon the courage to speak plainly; however,

Not a word could his tongue utter except futile trivialities. How could he plead or argue when that bright easy air of hers, that dragged every word to the level of Club-chatter, silenced him before he spoke (p.227).

The sentence immediately after this passage is 'Where do they learn it, that dreadful tee-heeing brightness? In these brisk modern girls' schools, no doubt'. The narrative voice here is interesting; it could be read as Flory's internal thoughts, but the indication is that of a narrator other than Flory – the coolness of the observation is out of step with Flory's tumultuous emotions. The point is that Orwell makes an important social observation in the subtlest manner. The effect is to reduce the condemnation of Elizabeth's conduct by showing it to be the result of learned behaviour. So, where Gissing's narratives often prompt an angry response to a character's shortcomings, Orwell's, more often, tend to deflect censure away from the individual, especially where women are concerned, and this denotes that he is altogether less 'worked up' on 'The Women Question' than Gissing is.¹¹

6.6) Orwell's Happier Endings

The ending of *New Grub Street* resembles the final scene in *Burmese Days* in that a full transformation from a gentle woman into a harder specimen has been made. Amy is still more significant, in terms of the Madonna-whore dichotomy, because she is someone who is portrayed, quite consciously, as embodying both 'traits'. She did not marry Edwin

¹¹ Further sympathy is summoned for Elizabeth when we see that her final rejection of Flory (she had begun to take him seriously) is brought about because of his public disgrace. The narration runs:

Her aunt would be furious when she heard that she had refused Flory. And there was her uncle and his leg-pinching—between the two of them, life here would become impossible. Perhaps she would have to go Home unmarried after all. Black Beetles! No matter. Anything—spinsterhood, drudgery, anything—sooner than the alternative. Never would she yield to a man who had been so disgraced! Death sooner, far sooner.

That she would *honestly* face such a wretched future rather than submit to a comfortable life, because of the feeling of disgrace that would be attached to it, shows an honourable quality in her hitherto not acknowledged. Furthermore, attention is deflected away from her onto her scheming aunt and lecherous uncle an who are quite dishonourable in their treatment of their charge.

for love, her coldness and disappointment in his inability to succeed are testimony to this. However, as such, she is something of an anomaly in Gissing's female types. For the most part they do fall into the angel-harridan, Madonna-whore categories. Whilst Amy Reardon is a departure, the following passage confirms the prevalent way of seeing women:

Could Amy's voice sound like that? Great Heaven! With just such accent he had heard a wrangling woman retort upon her husband at the street corner. Is there then no essential difference between a woman of this world and one of that? Does the same nature lie beneath such unlike surfaces? (228-9)

I used the word 'prevalent' above because Gissing does break his 'moulds', and where he does Orwell recognises and applauds his departure. A case in point is *The Odd Women*. Orwell writes that *The Odd Women* is Gissing's 'most perfect and also his most depressing novel' ('NEM', p.46). Significantly, there are Madonna-whore distinctions operating in this book, but there is a different dynamic in place, which works, quite deliberately, to expose the iniquitous unfairness contained in what is (the text states both implicitly and explicitly) no more than a patriarchal imposition upon women. Monica Madden consents to marry Edmund Widdowson, a man old enough to be her father, in order to escape from having to earn her own way in life. There is no censure of her behaviour (at least from the narrator); she, like her sisters, has been suddenly ejected from a comfortable life and forced to make her way in a world that—because she is unskilled—she is totally unfitted for. Widdowson idolises his wife in much the same way Arthur Golding does Helen (although there is no intellectual understanding whatsoever). The significant detail of Widdowson's brand of worship is not that it is misplaced, but that it is grievous to his wife's mental health. Such is the explicitness of the

condemnation of Widdowson in his attitude to his wife that commentators frequently refer to Gissing's feminist stance here. Adrian Poole summarises:

After their marriage, it becomes clear that Widdowson is the precise embodiment of the conventional, 'Ruskinian' attitude towards woman, that ostensibly enthrones and idolises her as queen of the domestic virtues, and in actuality censors brutally any attempt to transgress the narrow limits of the domestic prison.¹²

The narrator of *The Odd Women* is quite outspoken on the reactionary and harmful way Widdowson treats his wife: 'Never had it occurred to Widdowson that a wife remains an individual, with rights and obligations independent of her wifely condition' (p.168). Monica comes to feel oppressed by her lack of freedom, but her husband refuses to acknowledge her needs. Again, the narrator points out what amounts to the blind bigotry of Widdowson's attitude: 'Everything he said presupposed his own supremacy' (p.168). Increasingly weary and disgusted by her husband, Monica is drawn to a younger man whose nature is the very opposite to Widdowson's. Poole highlights the inescapable Madonna-whore choice laid before Monica: 'Monica finds herself forced to choose between the definitions of wife or whore for herself, and of husband or adulterer for the Other' (Poole, p.188).

A Clergyman's Daughter plays homage to *The Odd Women*, particularly in its portrayal of Monica Madden. There is the quite obvious 'nod' to Gissing where Dorothy is reading *The Odd Women* over a lonely lunch on Christmas Day. Here, there is a strong resemblance to Monica Madden's sister, Alice, who reads the bible as '*her* refuge from the barrenness and bitterness of life'.¹³ The reason for the italicised '*her*' is because their sister Virginia has taken refuge in 'the bottle', with dire consequences for her health and

¹² Poole, Adrian, *Gissing in Context* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp.186-7.

¹³ Gissing, *The Odd Women*, ed. Arlene Young [1893] (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1998), p.305.

mind, to the extent that she is a hopeless alcoholic.¹⁴ However, it is in Monica Madden's rejection of her oppressive husband that the subtler, but more significant influence lies. In this same chapter we see Alice telling Monica that it is her 'duty' to return to her husband. The scene is this:

“Don't use that word to me!” exclaimed [Monica] angrily. “It is *not* my duty. It can be no woman's duty to live with a man she hates — or even make a pretence of living with him” (p.304).

In Dorothy's rejection of Mr Warburton one can readily imagine that Orwell had Monica and Mr Widdowson in mind – the scene where Dorothy rejects his proposal of marriage suggests it strongly (the names 'Widdowson' and 'Warburton' too distinctly chime the same three syllable note). It begins with Mr Warburton making a blunt reference to her 'odd-woman' status: “Consider what your future will be like.... It's the same future that lies before any woman of your class with no husband and no money” (p.280). These were the exact inducements that made Monica consent to marry Mr Widdowson, and in Warburton there is more than a hint that Dorothy is wise not to accept him, even after he has told her that she will be 'all the time withering, drying up, growing more sour and more angular and more friendless' (p.283). We are told that Dorothy is 'half hypnotised' by his words, and that she is on the brink of saying 'Yes, I will marry you', but then Warburton pulls her to him and:

It broke the spell. The visions that had held her helpless—visions of poverty and of escape from poverty—suddenly vanished and left only a shocked realisation of what was happening to her. She was in the arms of a man—a fattish, oldish man! A wave of disgust and deadly fear went through her.... His thick male body was pressing her backwards and downwards, his large, pink face, smooth, but to her eyes old, was bearing down upon her (p.283)

¹⁴ In this too one detects Gissing's influence. Dorothy, on observing her lonely friend's indulgence of tea, comes to understand its significance:

Dorothy perceived that by one of two well-beaten roads every third-rate schoolmistress must travel: Miss Strong's road, via whisky to the workhouse; or Miss Beaver's road, via strong tea to a decent death in the Home for Decayed Gentlewomen (p.259).

The last sentence is highly symbolic of rape – the ‘thick male body’ together with the words ‘large’, ‘pink’ and ‘smooth’ suggest the phallus, especially when coupled with ‘pressing her backwards and downwards’, and again with ‘bearing down upon her’. This could be read as Dorothy’s personal revulsion – her unnatural abhorrence of sex that have her imagine the ‘furry thighs of satyrs’, but the narrative also states quite plainly at this point that Warburton is a ‘fat, debauched bachelor’. Moreover, we are told, after Dorothy’s firm rejection of him, that ‘Mr Warburton remained on his feet, regarding her with an expression of resigned, almost amused disappointment’ (p.284). There is every suggestion here that Warburton is callous – ‘almost amused’, and so Dorothy is right in her instincts not to trust either her well-being or her future happiness to him. Like Widdowson, and the furry animals of Dorothy’s imagination, Warburton, it would seem was more than likely to ‘turn dangerous at any minute’, particularly given that he has attempted ‘seductions’ (culminating in actual attempted rape) on many occasions in the past. There is also clear admiration for Dorothy’s spirit. Warburton continues to question her ability to return to her old life. He puts before her again the details of the tedium she will have to face; it finishes with, “‘Holy Communion twice a week and here we go round the doxology-bush, chanting Gregorian plain-song.... You can manage it?’” We are told that ‘Dorothy smiled in spite of herself. “Not plain-song. Father doesn’t like it”’(p.286). There is a shift here in how Dorothy is to be perceived. Her sense of humour demonstrates strength of composure, and moves her away from the duped victim of moments ago—she is back in control. As it does at the end of their conversation when Dorothy tells him that she will ‘kneel down on Miss Mayfill’s right instead of on her left’. The reader is invited to smile at this point because Miss Mayfill is the old dowager

who slobbers copiously on the communion chalice. In seating herself to the right of Miss Mayfill, Dorothy will leave the slobber on the chalice for some other poor wretch to tackle – a sure sign that her youthful piety has now left her (before she sat purposely on the left that she would receive the wetted cup as punishment for uncharitable thoughts).

The tone of the narrative, then, at the point where Dorothy is returning to the world of spinsterhood is positive—hopeful even. Deirdre Beddoe describes Dorothy as a ‘pathetic drudge’ and insists that ‘the novel ends with her returning to the pathetic role of middle-class spinster’ (‘Hindrances’, p.141). There is certainly poignant resignation to a destiny she is powerless to resist, but the humour, as stated above, works to deflect any pity. Again, this is where Orwell differs from Gissing. His thirties novels, with the exception of *Burmese Days*, end positively, even for George Bowling in a sense because the suggestion is that he is going to make Hilda understand him. Of the three choices Bowling has before him, after his return from his boyhood home, to explain his absence to his wife (who firmly believes he has been having an affair) he says ‘But, damn it! I knew which it would have to be’ (p.247). The three choices are:

- A. To tell her what I’d really been doing and somehow make her believe me.
- B. To pull the old gag about losing my memory.
- C. To let her go on thinking it was a woman, and take my medicine.

Given that Bowling had already resigned himself to the C option a moment earlier – ‘no use playing injured innocence any longer’, the last sentence of the book, through the exclamation mark in ‘But, damn it!’ suggests action and not resignation – Bowling *will* make his wife understand him! and in doing so will put an end to the malaise of his home life. This is not how the novel is read, however, most critics agreeing that ‘Hilda will

believe for ever that [George] has been with a woman, [and that] the love affair George has attempted is with his boyhood past and it has proved impossible to realize'.¹⁵

Beddoe writes that in Elizabeth Lackersteen and Hilda Bowling Orwell gives us 'some of the most obnoxious portrayals of women in English fiction ('Hindrances', p.141). Whilst it is true that they are obnoxious I would argue that in characters like Mrs Pole, Polly Hemp, Clem Peckover and the Miss Frenches it is Gissing who deserves that accolade. When one examines the narrative treatment of women such as Hilda and Elizabeth as a whole it can be seen that they are not so odious as may appear; at any rate they are a product of a certain class upbringing, which again lessens their negative impact – something that cannot be said of Mrs Pole et al. But it is in Orwell's unequivocal rejection of the Madonna-whore 'choice' for women that he can be seen as progressive, and in this strides ahead of his mentor.

¹⁵ Wykes, David, *A Preface to George Orwell* (London: Longman, 1987), p.106.

7) Orwell's Unique Style

'Dickens is one of those writers who are well worth stealing', so runs the first line of Orwell's essay on Charles Dickens. In this final chapter I would like to examine the ways in which Orwell develops his fictional style through the use of other writers' material, particularly in his adoption of their ideas for his own representations of truth.

The most obvious examples of Orwell's 'stealing' are to be found in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the boot stamping on a human face, *forever* is taken directly from Jack London's *The Iron Heel*. The illicit bedroom scenes, above Mr Charrington's antique shop, where Julia eschews the party overall for a dress, and where she will wear makeup and 'be a woman', are strongly reminiscent of the scenes between the *femme fatale* I-330 and the sexually inexperienced protagonist, D-503 of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. The scenes that depict Julia falling asleep as 'The Book' is read out to her by Winston recall Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*. Clearly, there is a direct engagement with these utopian texts. Interestingly, Aldous Huxley insisted that he had never read Zamyatin's *We*, and yet there are inescapable similarities in the 'OneState' structure and ideological nature of *Brave New World*. However, as I do not wish to dwell on these instances of appropriation, preferring to remain within the 1930s era, we shall move swiftly on.

The extent to which Orwell 'borrows' is great. This chapter will examine Orwell's magpie plundering of the literary nest and will further endeavour to illuminate the ways in which Orwell's presentations of fact are not necessarily reliant upon a strict faithfulness to real-life detail, and this important because recent criticism, in the form of literary investigation, calls into question Orwell's claims to honest reportage:

The resilient myth of George Orwell as a blunt, contentious, but fundamentally honest writer draws much of its force from Orwell's position as an eye-witness to crucial events or significant situations.... Modern critical debate, however, has called into question the capacity of the author to depict reality, objectively or otherwise; the terms themselves—'author', 'depiction', 'reality' and 'objectivity', are viewed with varying degrees of scepticism. The role and status of the eye-witness, the 'I' in literature, are under scrutiny.¹

Peter Davison has identified a key element in Orwell's method, which, when understood, serves to 'justify' or at any rate legitimise Orwell's claims to honesty and clarity even when the truth is not strictly being observed. Davison points to one of Orwell's earliest writings entitled 'A Short Story', written around 1928 or 1929, and finds in it a crucial detail that will shed much light on the way in which one is to read Orwell. The story, written in high burlesque, is about a thorough cad (though a perfect gentleman in society's eyes) who jeopardises his chances of marriage to a wealthy woman by keeping a mistress. He is caught stepping from the house of this mistress by his future brother-in-law. Happily this man mistakes the house for a brothel 'so his good opinion of me was restored'.² What makes this story interesting for Davison is not the parody of social mores, but a note on the text made by Orwell. Beneath the title 'A Short Story' is written in brackets, 'This never happened to me, but it would have if I had the chance'. Referring to this statement, Davison writes:

This seems to point to Orwell's capacity for writing on that narrow edge that separates fact and fiction, the edge which would distinguish elements of his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Davison, p.27).

¹ Marks, Peter, '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* (London: Pinter, 1991), eds. Philip Shaw and Peter Stockwell pp.85-92 (p.85). The works in question are 'A Hanging' and 'Shooting an Elephant'. The conclusions of this particular 'investigation' are largely favourable to Orwell, recognising his awareness and handling of the 'I' in his story-telling: '... subtly, however, the narrator is shown to be acutely self-aware and disarmingly honest about his prejudices' (p.90). Similarly: 'Orwell's use of the personal in eye-witness, then, has importance both in terms of the narrative and ideology.... It seems clear that it is unnecessary to situate Orwell within either piece to validate interpretation.... The invocation of Orwell as narrator is superfluous to an understanding of that tale' (p.91).

² Orwell, 'A Short Story', *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, pp.115-6 (p.115).

Davison goes on to discuss the autobiographical aspects of Orwell's fictional novels, prompted by Orwell's review of Alex Comfort's *No Such Liberty*, where Orwell writes, that though it is not strictly autobiographical, it is "in the sense that the author identifies with the hero, thinks him worthy of sympathy and agrees with the sentiments that he expresses" (Davison, p.38).³ Davison then points to Orwell's essay, 'The Prevention of Literature', 'in which he declares that the imaginative writer "may distort and caricature reality in order to make his meaning clearer, but he cannot misrepresent the scenery of his own mind"' (Davison, p.38). Davison stresses that it is the *imaginative* in Orwell's work that counts and not whether he, for example, 'witnessed a hanging or shot an elephant' (p.46). Davison is able to cite many instances of where Orwell is giving fiction as fact and, also, where he is passing off fact for fiction – to give one instance, Orwell insists in 'Shooting an Elephant' that he is 'a poor shot', but the reality is quite the contrary (p.46). Davison shows how Orwell deliberately makes complex the distinctions between fact and fiction, and in doing is 'complicating the categorisation of his writings', so much so, Davison tells us, that librarians and publishers will differ in placing *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Down and Out in Paris and London* as fiction or autobiography. Similarly, Davison writes, '*The Road to Wigan Pier* is social reportage – well, Part One – but Part Two?' (p.42). Davison's conclusion is that 'Orwell's fictionalising ... is acceptable because the 'truth' being offered is independent of the artistic reorganisation' (p.43). I wish to consider these views when comparing Orwell to the writers mentioned above.

³ As Davison makes clear, Orwell's sympathies with his protagonists vary, and these differences are addressed at other places in the paper.

7.1) Taking from Gissing

Of all the writers mentioned in the heading, it is Gissing who dominates in terms of influence. One cannot read far into a Gissing novel before some feature of Orwell's narrative is suggested. To recall Gissing's depiction of the citizens' so-called 'soup-kitchen revolt' in *The Nether World* (detailed above), the note of patronising charity is the same note that is struck in *Down and Out in Paris and London* in the tramps-in-church scene, where they attend service in return for the bread and tea. A brief contrast will suffice in demonstrating the similarity. The first is from *The Nether World* and details the misbehaviour of the poor from Shooter's Gardens as they object to the quality of the soup:

"Gratitude, quotha?—Nay, do *you* be grateful that these hapless, half-starved women do not turn and rend you. At present they satisfy themselves with insolence. Take it silently, you who at all events hold some count of their dire state; and endeavour to feed them without arousing animosity!" (p.252).

Then this from *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

What could a few women and old men do against a hundred hostile tramps? They were afraid of us, and we were frankly bullying them. It was our revenge upon them for having humiliated us by feeding us (*O&TD*, p.198).

However, it is not the mere echoing of sentiment that I wish to examine here; suffice to draw attention to the omnipresent 'ghost' of Gissing. It is rather, the more explicit 'borrowing' that Orwell practices in relation to his declared favourite. Consider Orwell's declaration on his idea for *Animal Farm*. Orwell had wanted to write a story that would expose the 'Soviet myth' after his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, where, after fighting for a workers' revolution, he became hunted down as a fascist collaborator.⁴

⁴ Orwell writes, 'For the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement' in 'Preface to the Ukrainian Edition of *Animal Farm*' [March 1947], *The Complete Works*, Vol. XIX, pp.86-89 (p.88).

However, it was some four years later until he felt able to write it. He explains the moment of the realisation of *Animal Farm*:

The actual details of the story did not come to me for some time until one day (I was then living in a small village) I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat (Preface to the Ukrainian Ed., p.86).

This sounds perfectly reasonable until one reads an almost identical experience in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, which, undoubtedly, Orwell had read because he comments on it in 'Not Enough Money: A Sketch of George Gissing' (1943). The unmistakable passage comes at a moment when Henry Ryecroft is discussing his reading preferences. One of Ryecroft's literary heroes, M. de Tillemont, whilst on a vigorous walk in the country, is arrested by the sight of small children in command of large cattle; Tillemont is compelled to ask the following question: "How is it that you, a little child, are able to control that animal, so much bigger and stronger?"⁵ Leaving aside for a moment the implications of this 'discovery' – on the very opposite page to the one just cited above (featuring M. De Tillemont) one is reminded again of a memorable passage in Orwell's writing. Ryecroft is eulogising over his classical books; he writes, 'a perfume rises from the page as one reads about them'(p.172). In his review of Salvador Dali's autobiography Orwell writes, 'It is a book that stinks. If it were possible for a book to give a physical stink off its pages, this one would'.⁶ When reading *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, as with many of Gissing's books, one is reminded almost without intermission of *A Clergyman's Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, and *Coming Up for*

⁵ Gissing, G, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* [1903] (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p.173.

⁶ 'Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dali, *The Complete Works*, Vol. XVI, pp.233-41 (p.236).

Air.⁷ This is not to suggest that Orwell is merely copying from Gissing, 'lifting' his ideas and passing them off as his own. Far from it, and a more detailed look at *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* will make clearer the ways in which Orwell 'uses' Gissing.

The narrator and protagonist Henry Ryecroft has retired to an idyllic retreat in the country, and is writing his memoirs. At once there is a contrast between town and country. Ryecroft remarks that in town 'season made no perceptible difference' (p.19).

Orwell echoes this sentiment on many occasions:

In a town like London the most striking seasonal change, apart from the mere change of temperature, is in the things you see lying about on the pavement. In late winter it is mainly cabbage leaves. In July you tread on cherry stones, in November on burnt-out fireworks. Towards Christmas the orange peel grows thicker. It was a different matter in the Middle Ages (*Aspidistra*, p.248).

Orwell (and this is not meant negatively) is somewhat anachronistic in his avowed love of his land; the culmination of which can be read in his later treatment of an Englishman in relation to his country:

Above all, it is *your* civilisation, it is *you*. However much you hate it or laugh at it, you will never be happy away from it for any length of time. The suet puddings and the red pillar-boxes have entered into your soul. Good or evil, it is yours, you belong to it, and this side of the grave you will never get away from the marks that it has given you.⁸

This is clearly passionately felt – the italicised 'you' marking the urgency of the need to rouse identification. This was written at the beginning of WWII when, as Orwell puts it, 'highly civilised beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me' (p.392).

⁷ Orwell points out that 'the central plot of Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, is lifted straight out of [Smollet's] *Peregrine Pickle*' (CW, XVI, p.275). Orwell highlights this 'fact' because the oversight testifies to the neglect of Smollet. I include this because it demonstrates Orwell's awareness of intertextuality. I would like to add that D. J. Taylor's *The Comedy Man* is deliberately reminiscent of George Bowling's casual manner of narration, even using the word 'gloomng', which is the highly unusual adjective Bowling adopts to describe his wife.

⁸ Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XII, pp.391-434 (p.393).

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* there are many interesting Gissingesque juxtapositions that work to highlight the poverty and ugliness of modernity against the spiritually rich aspects of nature. The following—the view from outside McKechnie’s bookshop—contrasts nature with advertising:

To the left ... stood a great elm-tree, leafless now, its multitudinous twigs making sepia-coloured lace against the sky. Opposite, next to the Prince of Wales, were tall hoardings covered with ads for patent foods and patent medicines exhorting you to rot your guts with this or that synthetic garbage (*Aspidistra*, p.4).

The ‘synthetic garbage’ of modern civilisation is a line that could have come out of any one of Gissing’s novels – the following is typical:

Mrs Abbott gazed upwards with unspoken delight.

‘There are no paths’ said Harvey. ‘It’s honest woodland. Some day it will be laid out with roads and iron benches, with finger-posts, “To the summit”.’

‘You think so?’

‘Why, of course. It’s the destiny of every beautiful spot in Britain’ (*The Whirlpool*, p.143).

Portraying nature as *honest* against an encroaching modernity that is its very antithesis is something that Orwell does with an energy that matches Gissing’s, although, as will be shown, there are notable differences.

When one contrasts Gissing’s outlook with Orwell’s it is evident that there is a high degree of shared sentiment. Moreover, their preoccupations coincide on nearly all subjects, whether it be the decline of the countryside or the horrors of town living, or the worth of individuals, or the importance of faith, or the impact of advertising — the list goes on and on, and this seems to suggest that Gissing’s influence is *inescapable*.

One recurring subject in Gissing’s writing, which is almost ‘taken up’ by Orwell, is that of the modern condition of ennui; the mental fatigue induced by city living: ‘I remember afternoons of languor, when books were a weariness, and no thought could be squeezed out of the drowsy brain’ (Ryecroft, p.20). These themes are suffused into

practically every one of Gissing's novels, as they are in Orwell's, and this is something that marks Orwell out amongst his contemporaries, for such concerns are not particularly notable in writing of the thirties. Significantly, the emphasis in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not on the horror, but the boredom of life: 'The truly characteristic thing about modern life was not its cruelty and insecurity, but simply its bareness ... its listlessness' (p.77). It is the same for Dorothy Hare, Gordon Comstock and Bowling—all are in the grip of an anti-social paralysis. Orwell, mirroring Gissing, seems to have the question 'What makes life worth living?' constantly before him, and the overriding answer for both is arguably 'having a relationship with nature'. However, and this is where it can be seen that Orwell is very far from copying Gissing, the subject is handled somewhat differently. Take the following rhapsodic description of nature by Ryecroft:

Could anything be more wonderful than the fact that here am I, day by day, not only at leisure to walk forth and gaze at the larches, but blessed with the tranquillity of mind needful for such enjoyment? (p. 73)

Compare this with Bowling's description of an encounter with nature:

I bent down to pick a primrose. Couldn't reach it—too much belly. I squatted down on my haunches and picked a little bunch of them. Lucky there was no one to see me. The leaves were kind of crinkly and shaped like rabbits' ears.... I was alive that moment when I stood looking at the primroses and the red embers under the hedge. It's a feeling in side you, a kind of peaceful feeling, and yet it's like a flame (p.172).

In the first passage there is an idealised response; it is a perfect and pure soul eulogising. In the second, while ultimately no less emphatic, there is a greater sense of this being a *real* person. Bowling is a ridiculous spectacle, but this in no way diminishes his right to such enjoyments. Orwell certainly wishes to distance himself sentimentally, but this perhaps has more to do with the age in which he is writing than with a feeling that Gissing is sentimental.

Orwell spent his writing career in 'the machine age', and is never far away from alluding to the radio, the motorcar, steel and concrete. In his depictions of man's involvement with nature it is clear that Orwell is aware of a substantial left-wing celebration of all that is man-made, against that which is natural. He makes his views clear in his later essay 'Some Thoughts on the Common Toad'.

The point is that the pleasures of Spring are available to everybody, and cost nothing. Even in the most sordid street the coming of Spring will register itself by some sign or other, if it is only a brighter blue between the chimney pots or the vivid green of an elder sprouting on a blitzed site.⁹

Orwell talks of Nature (like spring, given with a capital letter) 'existing unofficially' in the city. Orwell is alarmed that the love of nature has become somehow wrong in a modern urbanised world. He asks, 'Is it wicked to take a pleasure in Spring and other seasonal changes?' (p.239). Orwell is writing here for the left-wing publication *Tribune*, and informs his readers that articles on the appreciation of nature always bring in 'abusive letters'. He writes 'People, so the thought runs, ought to be discontented, and it is our job to multiply our wants and not simply to increase our enjoyment of the things we have already' (pp.239-40). Orwell argues that the left has become suspicious of what they perceive to be a spurious 'townie' love of the soil. Orwell defends his preference with typical rhetorical aplomb: 'If a man cannot enjoy the return of Spring, why should he be happy in a labour-saving Utopia?' He adds that ideally (if economic and political problems are solved) life should become simpler, and in such case, suspects that 'finding the first primrose will loom larger than the sort of pleasure one gets from eating an ice to the tune of a Wurlitzer' (240). Here one cannot help but think of the enormous proliferation of theme parks that are now so common to England and other countries.

⁹ Orwell, 'Some Thoughts on the Common Toad', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XVIII, pp.238-41 (p.239).

It is clear that Orwell does not wish to eulogise sentimentally about nature in the way that, for example, Ryecroft does, and Orwell gives a description of Gissing, which testifies to a belief that Gissing resembles his last, most gracious hero, Henry Ryecroft:

A bookish, perhaps over-civilised man, in love with classical antiquity, who found himself trapped in a cold, smoky, Protestant country where it was impossible to be comfortable without a thick padding of money between yourself and the outer world ('GG', p.347).

Henry Ryecroft has cut himself off from the outer world thanks to a thick padding of money. Ryecroft celebrates his solitary existence and is forever marvelling at the peace he now enjoys. In Orwell's fiction there is great disdain for those who seek a solitary life (Gordon Comstock), and great compassion displayed for those who cannot avoid what is a pitiable fate (Gordon's sister, Dorothy in London, along with her fellow spinsters, Winston Smith).

Another matter which is of deep concern to both Gissing and Orwell is reading – for Gissing at its most intense in *New Grub Street*, which is a novel all about the nature of reading and writing at the end of the nineteenth century, and for Gissing there is little doubt that both are in crisis.¹⁰ Gissing is deeply frustrated by the idea that most people are either too overworked in dull jobs, or too lonely and depressed (usually both) to have the energy to read decent literature. Dorothy Hare (like Gordon Comstock) loses her 'appetite' for good books – 'After a while nearly all books seemed wearisome and unintelligible' (*ACD*, p.257). Immediately after this sentence comes the line, 'for the mind will not work to any purpose when it is quite alone.' Eventually Dorothy cannot

¹⁰ Gissing is scathing about the Forster Education Act of 1870, which gave every child the right to elementary education. He sees it as simply having spawned vast swathes of semi-literates who fuel demand for rubbishy easy reading.

‘cope with anything more difficult than a detective story’ (ACD, p.257). Time and time again, Gissing’s men and women suffer the same fate.

In Orwell’s treatment of reading and its importance in modern life, as well as what constitutes good literature, we can observe a reaction against Gissing. Gissing was a classical Greek scholar, and his struggling writer-hero Reardon in *New Grub Street* is also a lover of classical Greek. Reardon constantly reads out excerpts from his prized collection to his wife Amy. At one point he reads from the *Odyssey*. He quotes Odysseus addressing Nausicaa, and on finishing he exclaims to his wife ‘*That* was not written at so many pages a day, with a workhouse clock clanging its admonition at the poet’s ear. How it freshened the soul!’¹¹ Immediately after this sentence he says ‘How the eyes grew dim with a rare joy in the sounding of those nobly sweet hexameters’ (NGS, p.125). In *Coming Up for Air* Orwell pays homage to Gissing’s sentiment by having Bowling react in a similar way to what is clearly a Gissing figure—Porteous, the Greek scholar who lives quietly by himself, surrounded by Greek classical literature, paying no heed to the modern world. Porteous reads aloud for Bowling. Bowling is comforted by this. He reflects, ‘It’s all kind of peaceful, kind of mellow’ (CUFA, p.164). He goes on to say ‘soothing’, and Bowling adds characteristically ‘While you listen you aren’t in the same world as trams and gas bills and insurance companies’ (CUFA, p.164). This is where the homage ends, however, because in the next moment there is an all too evident ‘dig’ at Gissing. Bowling tries to engage Porteous in a conversation about the current political climate. Porteous refuses to see any *new* threat to world order. When asked his opinion of Hitler Porteous merely says, “‘Hitler? The German person? My dear fellow, I *don’t* think of him”” (p.165). Porteous dogmatically sticks to a belief that ‘there is nothing new under

¹¹ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode [1891] (Oxford: OUP, 1998) p.125.

the sun'. Bowling tells us that Porteous finally 'hauls a book out of the shelves and reads me a passage about some Greek tyrant back in the BC's who certainly might have been Hitler's twin brother' (p.166). Bowling becomes increasingly exasperated with his friend's cultural preference for everything Greek and Latin. Bowling concludes that Porteous is '*dead*. He's a ghost. All people like that are dead' (p.168).

It is worth noting too that Orwell disliked the dominance of Greek and Latin studies in public schools, and tells how he relished learning that Caliph Omar had 'destroyed the libraries of Alexandria ... and great numbers of tragedies by Euripides and others are said to have perished quite irrevocably'.¹² Orwell tells of his sense of relief because the reduction of Greek texts would mean he would not have so many more words to look up in the dictionary. However, his overriding dislike of the preference for Greek and Latin is that it is given prevalence over English literature:

Classical education is going down the drain at last, but even now there must be far more adults who have been flogged through the entire extant works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Virgil, Horace ... than have read the English masterpieces of the eighteenth century (XVI, p.275)

Interestingly, this piece is written in language that invokes the crude, embittered voice of characters like Gordon Comstock and George Bowling: 'going down the drain', 'people pay lip service to Fielding and the rest of them, of course, but they don't read them' (p.275), and in this light one gains a sense that Orwell is drawing attention to the extremity and imbalance of his argument. Nevertheless, Orwell clearly feels that the Classics should be subordinated to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, with authors like Smollet, Fielding and Swift being given as much respect.

¹² Orwell, 'As I Please', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XVI, pp.275-7 (p.275).

7. 2) D. H. Lawrence: Metaphor and the Political Aesthetic

In the following extract it will be seen that Orwell interrupts the referential metonymic language of the documentary style and moves into the realm of the poetic and metaphoric. What is more, he self-consciously invites the reader to consider his choice of metaphor against one that Lawrence has employed, and in doing so he subtly invites the reader to acknowledge that one writer looks at life in a gentle, rather innocent way, while the other insists on viewing life in more crude, animalistic terms. Here is the passage:

In a crowded, dirty little country like ours one takes defilement almost for granted. Slag-heaps and chimneys seem a more normal, probable landscape than grass and trees, and even in the depths of the country you half expect to lever up a broken bottle or a rusty can. But out here the snow was untrodden and lay so deep that only the tops of the stone boundary-walls were showing, winding over the hills like black paths. I remembered that D. H. Lawrence, writing of this same landscape or another near by, said that the snow-covered hills rippled away into the distance 'like muscle'. It was not the simile that would have occurred to me. To my eye the snow and the black walls were more like a white dress with black piping running across it (*WP*, pp.15-6).

What is significant about Orwell's description is the way he explicitly draws attention to the *choice* of language by which it is invoked. Orwell's 'white dress with black piping running across it' is gentle – reminiscent of nothing more nocuous than a ladies' draper's shop. Lawrence's 'rippling muscle' is more representative of aggressive Darwinist symbolism because it suggests a fascistic celebration of strength, specifically the male form. Moreover, Lawrence is rendering nature masculine whereas Orwell is rendering nature feminine. Referring to the Modernists, Orwell writes, 'Those who followed them have had to undo a great deal of what they did' (*CW*, XIII, p.216). Orwell's gentler dress motif could be understood as following in the spirit of 'undoing'.

Orwell makes an interesting comment about Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot et al. Despite what he perceives to be a collective failure in their writing to address the political

concerns of their day, Orwell prefers the content of their work to that of H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. Talking of the literary development between 1910 and 1920 Orwell notes that themes of 'revenge, patriotism, exile, persecution, race hatred, religious faith, loyalty, leader-worship, suddenly seemed real again' (*CW*, XIII, 216). He argues that the writers of such themes were 'more grown-up' in their outlook than were the generation before, 'when Bernard Shaw and his Fabians were—so they thought—turning the world into a sort of super garden city' (p.216). Orwell's contempt for ideas based on utopian socialism is clearly discernible here. Orwell writes:

To Bernard Shaw most of the past is simply a mess which ought to be swept away in the name of progress, hygiene, efficiency and what-not. H. G. Wells ... looks at the past with the same sort of surprised disgust as a civilised man contemplating a tribe of cannibals (*CW*, XIII, p.212).

The notion of what exactly it is that constitutes a 'civilised man' is something that Orwell engages with, almost to the point of preoccupation, and in this respect he strongly resembles Lawrence. Orwell summarises Lawrence thus:

The ultimate subject matter of nearly all Lawrence's books is the failure of contemporary men, especially in the English-speaking countries, to live their lives intensely enough.... What he is saying is simply that modern men aren't fully alive, whether they fail through having too narrow standards or through not having any (*CW*, XII, p.213).

Orwell could perhaps not have summarised his own novels better. Orwell's characters, like Lawrence's, are thrown into depressed relief by the tightly structured modern world that they do not get along with.

Southbridge was a repellent suburb.... Brough Road lay somewhere at the heart of it, amid Labyrinths of meanly decent streets, all so indistinguishably alike, with their ranks of semi-detached houses ... you could lose yourself there almost as easily as in a Brazilian forest. Not only the houses themselves, but even their names were the same over and over again. Reading the names on the gates ... you were conscious of being haunted by some half-remembered passage of poetry; and when you paused to identify it, you realised that it was the first two lines of *Lycidas* (*ACD*, p.197).

Orwell's use of the word 'you' extends the range of alienation to the reader. This is important because we are not to look upon Dorothy as some lone pathetic figure who finds the world so because of a certain timidity within herself. The narrator makes it a statement of fact the Southbridge *is* 'a repellent suburb'. The image of regimentation, 'ranks of houses', works to show society as having been organised like an army. But then the narrator looks back in time (and this is the Lawrencean touch) evoking Milton's 'Lycidas'. The poem begins:

*Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-sear,
I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
And with forc'd fingers rude,
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,*

With its passion and force the sentiment is dryly ironic when contrasted to the drab repellent suburb with its 'meanly decent streets' where the atmosphere is stifling and dead: Lycidas is dead and so is life in this modern place. Similarly, *With ivy never-sear* – it is the idea of ivy never-fading, always green and everlasting. Again, there is a bitter irony at play because of what is in place of the *ivy never-sear*. It is this repellent suburb; and is such a place to be 'everlasting'? Again, as Orwell is less pessimistic than Lawrence, his choice of Milton is significant. In bringing back Milton Orwell is calling on the voice of one of his favourite defenders of all that is free and liberal. In praise of Milton he wrote:

If Milton did a service to the human intellect, it was not by writing pamphlets against Salmasius but by weaving noble words round comparatively simple thoughts. For instance:— *I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs, By the known rules of ancient liberty....* Over a period of 300 years, how many defenders of free speech must have drawn strength from that line, "By the known rules of ancient liberty"!¹³

¹³ Orwell, 'Review of *Milton: Man and Thinker* by Denis Saurat', *The Complete Works*, Vol. XVI, pp. 338-340 (p. 340).

Where Orwell departs from Lawrence is in the fact that Orwell is a political writer and a socialist. Here a contrast with Bernard Shaw is pertinent.

7.3) Orwell and Bernard Shaw: More than Pamphleteers

Orwell, it is abundantly clear, does not admire Shaw's Fabian Socialism. However, he does admire his work as a playwright, even though it incorporates Shaw's politics. In fact, what Orwell says in praise of Shaw's art would not be misplaced if it were said in relation to his own work. Orwell writes:

It would be an absurdity to regard Shaw as a pamphleteer and nothing more. The sense of purpose with which he always writes would get him nowhere if he were not also an artist. In illustration of this I point once again to *Arms and the Man*.... Nowhere is there a false emphasis or a clumsily contrived incident; the play gives the impression of having grown as naturally as a plant. There are not even any verbal fireworks; brilliant as the dialogue is, every word of it helps the action along (CW, Vol. XIV, p.326).

However, it is Shaw's vocal discussion of his own art that I wish to examine here. In his preface to *Widowers' Houses* Shaw is responding to negative criticism of his play. He writes,

It was further objected that my play, being didactic, was therefore not a work of art—a proposition which, if examined, will be found to mean either that the world's acknowledged masterpieces are not works of art, or else exactly nothing at all.¹⁴

This is strongly resonant of Orwell's attitude to his own art:

When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art'. I write because there is some lie that I want to expose.... But I could not do the work of writing a book ... if it were not also an aesthetic experience ('WIW', p.318).

Orwell's essays on his own writing read like Shaw's prefaces, and the replies to his critics, where, most notably, Shaw is proud to call himself a 'propagandist', strongly foreshadowing Orwell. But there is something in Shaw's understanding of his own

¹⁴ Shaw, G. B., *Widowers' Houses* in *Collected Plays with their Prefaces* [1898] (London: Max Reinhardt, 1970), p.43.

person, character and approach to his art that could have been written by Orwell. Shaw explains why it is that he couldn't have written a 'beautiful play':

It is not my fault, reader, that my art is the expression of my sense of moral and intellectual perversity rather than my sense of beauty. My life has been passed mostly in big modern towns, where my sense of beauty has been starved whilst my intellect has been gorged with problems like that of the slums in this play, until at last I have come, in a horrible sort of way, to relish them... (p.45).

Orwell has been criticised for the relish with which he describes dirt and squalor – the Brooker's tripe shop with its overflowing chamber pot, for example.¹⁵ Shaw says, just before the passage quoted immediately, 'modern commercialism is a bad art school'. Again, there are strong echoes of Orwell, for he regards his age in much the same light, and feels impelled to respond to it in much the same way that Shaw does (and, of course, Gissing):

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written ... *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism.... It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing on such subjects ('WIW', p.319).

Perhaps where Orwell resembles Shaw most is in the foregrounding of his moral convictions. Shaw writes, 'I am convinced that fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective instrument of moral propaganda in the world....' one could readily read it as an Orwellian peroration, as one could with the last line of the preface to *Widowers' Houses*, which reads, 'I am no novice in the current critical theories of dramatic art; and what I have done I have done on purpose'. There is undeniable proof of *purpose* in Orwell's thirties novels, although it would not be difficult to imagine Orwell having to point out the fact.

¹⁵ Goodall's comments are telling here. When he turns to *The Road to Wigan Pier* in his essay 'Orwell and the Problems of Realism', it is to note the 'strong feelings of physical revulsion' (p.7) revealed in Orwell's description of the Brooker's tripe shop. If Orwell has attempted to counter-balance any subsequent idealisation of the working class life then he has probably failed. At any rate, given the continuing bad press on this issue, he has paid dearly for such a beginning.

Like Gissing (and Orwell) Shaw invests in moral certainties, particularly in the area of debate surrounding what it is that constitutes fundamental human material. Shaw, a contemporary of Gissing (Gissing just one year senior) takes rather an opposite view to his peer, seeing all men as essentially equal. The leitmotif of human equality is always circulating in the writings of Gissing, Shaw, Wells, Lawrence and Orwell; it is an all-pervasive propaganda that alternately whispers and shouts either that men are biologically determined to be superior to the multitude as a consequence of social competition (based on Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest), or, on the other side, that all men are essentially equal – 'the average millionaire [being] only the average dishwasher in a new suit'. Mrs Warren's profession is prostitution, but where Gissing portrays *sensual* women of the lower class who have an *inclination* for prostitution, Shaw simply highlights its economic necessity. Shaw, talking of the various strata of society that gain from prostitution (in particular the church from its rent from brothels) writes, 'These are the people who declare that it is feminine vice and not poverty that drives women to the streets, as if vicious women with independent incomes ever went there' (CP, p.263). Shaw insists it is mere economic necessity. The following belief informs the entirety of *Mrs Warren's Profession*: '...we praise female virtue highly and pay it poorly, and pay feminine vice highly whilst we deplore it verbally' (CP, p.365).

A letter Shaw wrote to the editor of *The Daily Chronicle* in 1898 could have been entitled 'Why I Write'. There is, he says, discussion as to whether his dramatic works are 'due to the influence of Ibsen or Maupassant' (CP, p.267). Shaw, however, insists that it is the real-life social conditions which he encounters daily, in his St Pancras parish, that inform his writing: 'If a dramatist living in a world like this has to go to books for his

ideas and his inspiration, he must be both blind and deaf. Most dramatists are (CP, p.270). A writer's literary activity, in terms of his actively seeking out books for inspiration and ideas, is of course, impossible to scrutinize with any certainty – we cannot say finally that Orwell got his idea for *Animal Farm* from reading a line about 'small children in command of large cattle' in Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Indeed, the origins of Orwell's ideas are complicated by his insistence that they have very definite origins. However, there are moments in his writing where familiarity tends to confirm real experience. Take the following portrayal of Boxer, the indefatigable workhorse in *Animal Farm*:

Boxer could not get beyond the letter D. He would trace out A, B, C, D in the dust with his great hoof, and then would stand staring at the letters with his ears back, sometimes shaking his forelock, trying with all his might to remember what came next and never succeeding (p.21).

We have met Boxer before in the opening pages of *Homage to Catalonia*. This is the description of the Italian Militiaman he meets in the Lenin Barracks in Barcelona:

He was standing in profile to me, his chin on his breast, gazing with a puzzled frown at a map which one of the officers had open on the table.... Obviously he could not make head or tail of the map; obviously he regarded map-reading as a stupendous intellectual feat (p.1).

Boxer, like the Italian Militiaman, represents the working man, on whose 'powerful shoulders' successful revolutions must inevitably rest. Such depictions of touching, yet pathetic human ignorance are undoubtedly controversial for some, and will always land Orwell in the political mire where he will struggle to emerge unstained from accusations of class prejudice and patriarchal condescension. However, given the admiration and compassion with which he writes and repeats such observations, we must grant that he believed what he saw, and recorded faithfully. He may not have viewed the girl

unblocking the drainpipe from the window of a train, but there is no reason to doubt that he was sincere in his belief that he read an intelligence of awareness in her face.

To refer again to 'Shooting an Elephant, it is impossible to know from the essay whether Orwell did in fact shoot an elephant, although there is strong evidence to suggest that he did (fns 1 and 2 *CW*, Vol. X, p.506). New evidence has come to light which shows that when Orwell was stationed at Moulmein in 1926 (where 'Shooting an Elephant' is set) a report appeared in the *Rangoon Gazette* entitled 'Rogue Elephant Shot'. Peter Davison points out that key details of the report appear in Orwell's essay:

The similarities to 'Shooting an Elephant' will be apparent: the killing of a villager, ravaging plantations, the uncertainty as to whether the elephant belongs to a powerful trading company or not, and the little detail about the delight of the villagers.¹⁶

The coincidences are too strong to be ignored *on the one hand*. However, to recall Davison's conclusion that 'Orwell's fictionalising ... is acceptable because the 'truth' being offered is independent of the artistic reorganisation' (p.43); it applies to this essay no less than to any other work, because the essential detail of 'Shooting an Elephant' is its quality as a fable:

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism (*CW*, Vol. X, p.502).

Orwell, while perhaps misrepresenting what actually happened, is not 'misrepresenting the scenery of his mind', as referred to above. What matters for Orwell is his point.¹⁷

¹⁶ Davison, Peter, *The Complete Works: Supplementary Volume*, 2003, p.39.

¹⁷ Two engaging studies in this area (also recommended by Douglas Kerr) are: Peter Goodall's "'Was the So-called Melon Actually a Pumkin?": Orwell and the Problem of Realism', *AUMLA (Journal of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association)*, Vol. 75, 1991, pp.3-20. And, Peter Marks's 'The Ideological Eye-Witness: An Examination of the Eye-Witness in Two Works by George Orwell' (see fn 1).

7.3.1) Orwell, Shaw and The Series

Ringbom has noted that like Shaw a striking characteristic of Orwell's work (both factual and fictional) is his use of the series for rhetorical and dramatic effect. Not that Orwell mimics Shaw's series, for he does not, and in fact does something quite different with his, which shall be examined in a moment. Where there is common ground is in the negative force produced:

A feature common to both Orwell's and Shaw's series is the frequency of words with a negative connotation. Shaw's catalogues of invectives make up one of his most obvious stylistic characteristics, and Orwell resembles Shaw in his highly critical attitude to most things. Also, when positive words occur they are often used ironically, especially in his early work (Ringbom, p.16).

To stay with Ringbom's excellent analysis; he shows us how Shaw employs, for the most part, what has been termed the 'Static' series. This 'shows no direct relationship with what precedes or follows' (p.18). His series is frequently complex and goes off on a tangent 'in a sort of zig-zagging forward movement. The result is a certain fullness of style: Shaw manages to squeeze a tremendous amount of material into one sentence' (Ringbom, pp.18-9). Ringbom gives the following example from the 'Preface to *Heartbreak House*:

War cannot bear the terrible castigation of comedy, the ruthless light of laughter that glares on the stage. When men are heroically dying for their country, it is not the time to shew their lovers and wives and fathers and mothers how they are being sacrificed to the blunders of boobies, the cupidity of capitalists, the ambition of conquerors, the electioneering of demagogues, the Pharisaism of patriots, the lusts and lies and rancors and bloodthirsts that love war because it opens their prison doors, and sets them in the thrones of power and popularity (Ringbom, p.399).

The above is, according to Ringbom, an example of the *ramifying* series. It builds into a crescendo of consequences, culminating in a firework of rhetorical condemnation on those in power who are its target. What distinguishes it from Orwell's series is that it looks out, and can be entirely distinct from what has gone before, whereas Orwell's,

more often, looks back, and is a representation of all that has preceded it. Ringbom summarises:

Orwell, on the other hand, employs the series for a different purpose. Most of his series have a direct connection with what precedes them, and they are more closely knit, more functional than Shaw's in that they generally provide concrete illustrations of a general point made earlier (Ringbom, p.19).

Ringbom identifies this as representing the *exemplifying* series. With this in view I would like to examine one of Orwell's more memorable series and see how it compares to Shaw's in terms of rhetorical balance, impact, and also humour. The series is from *Coming Up for Air*. It begins as Bowling turns his car on to the Oxford Road that will 'deliver' him back to his boyhood town of Lower Binfield. He is suddenly gripped with the paralysing thought that there is a citizens' army after him led by his wife:

Hilda was in front, of course, with the kids tagging after her.... And Sir Herbert Crum and the higher-ups of the Flying Salamander in their Rolls-Royces.... And ... all the poor down-trodden pen-pushers from Ellesmere Road ... some of them wheeling prams and mowing-machines and concrete garden-rollers.... And ... the people whom you've never seen but who rule your destiny all the same, the Home Secretary, Scotland Yard, the Temperance League, the Bank of England, Lord Beaverbrook, Hitler and Stalin on Tandem bicycle, the bench of Bishops.... I could all most here them shouting:

'There's a chap who thinks he's going to escape! There's a chap who says he won't be streamlined! He's going back to Lower Binfield! After him! Stop him! (pp.182-3)

This series is a summary of everything that has brought Bowling to his present malaise. Yet it is brilliant in terms of the visual effect that is both comic and serious. It is the forerunner of what have come to be classed as classic comedy scenes today, for it is a Monty Python montage, giving chase a la Benny Hill – we can visualise Hitler and Stalin on a Tandem followed by the seated bench of Bishops on wheels. And there is a nice touch when Bowling says, 'It's queer. The impression was so strong that I actually took a peep through the little window at the back of the car to make sure I wasn't being followed' (p.183). That action of Bowling turning back heightens the visual effect, and allows it to linger that bit longer.

Orwell saw a resemblance in Gissing's work to Mark Rutherford's, notably in their lack of a 'sense of humour' ('GG', p.351). Orwell recognises that Gissing's novels do not lack 'funny passages', but what chiefly impresses him is Gissing's unconcern with 'getting a laugh'. Bernard Shaw at times consciously omits humour from his work. In an interview regarding *Widowers' Houses* Shaw replies to the question "“May we anticipate some of your unrivalled touches of humour, Mr Shaw?”" His reply is, "“Certainly not. I have removed with the greatest of care every line that could possibly provoke a smile”" (CP, p.126). Even if not entirely in earnest here—there is an element of Wildean 'sauciness' in the very reply, for in the word 'line' we understand my '*unrivalled* touches of humour'—it still demonstrates that humour is seen to militate against serious intent. Orwell, I would argue, manages to use humour without undermining the serious intent. Bowling's anxiety is not lessened or undermined by imagining Hilda, Hitler and Stalin after him. If these spectres were in isolation it would be different. However, the build up of numbers works to reveal the extent of Bowling's paranoia and anxiety – this is more than a brief, illusory comic moment. It is the outpouring of a despair that has been mounting for years, bringing in, as it does, almost every class of person that Bowling has had to deal with his entire adult life.

The series in the preface to *Heartbreak House* that Ringbom singles out is also an example of Shaw's not-so-brilliant rhetoric. There is some awful alliteration in it: 'light of laughter', 'blunders of boobies', 'cupidity of capitalists', 'Pharisaism of patriots', and so on. Nowhere does Orwell adopt such grating repetition, which is truly unreadable.

7.4) Unexpected Beginnings: the Alien Focus

Regarding 'Such, Such were the Joys', Davison writes,

Orwell starts this essay, not as might be expected with what forms its second section, a description of this 'expensive and snobbish school' (pp.360-66), but with a vivid and painful account of how, soon after his arrival, he reverted to wetting the bed and the physical punishment that induced. Because he writes so personally this has been assumed by many readers to be factual. However, it is likely that he has imaginatively taken the experience of another boy as his own for dramatic effect.¹⁸

Orwell starts *The Road to Wigan Pier* unexpectedly. One might anticipate, from a sympathetic, socialist voice (on conditions of the working-class poor in the North) a description that is typical of the environment. Orwell, in detailing graphically the filth and squalor of the Brooker's tripe shop, focuses on the atypical. The deflection could be seen as a device for stirring the reader out of a complaisant position, calling for greater critical attention. Kerr considers the implications of such a beginning to a socialist documentary of working-class life where one might expect a sympathetic response, but instead get the revulsion of someone who is witness to exploitation, greed and squalor of the meanest kind:

In its way it is a memorable portrait, but it is not one that you would choose to illustrate a theme of the dignity of working people, nor (since the narrator, a middle-class visitor from the south of England, is the principal victim of the Brookers) their exploitation. It raises the question of what the narrator is doing, and what he is doing there. These are questions that open into the perennial Orwell issues of subjectivity and genre (Kerr, p.40).

Undoubtedly, this is true, and I would like to further consider why Orwell would wish to begin in this deliberately incendiary manner.

One answer could be that Orwell prefers to upset expectation; desiring to lift the subject matter from its traditional and perhaps dull framework in order that life be

¹⁸ Davison, Peter, *Supplementary Volume*, pp.58-9. Source's Bernard Crick's *Orwell: A life*, p.69. Davison adds, 'A fuller analysis, which points to other ways in which Orwell distorted and caricatured reality ... will be found in Robert Pearce's "Truth and Falsehood", *Review of English Studies*, ns, 43, No.171' (1992), p.373)

injected anew. Wal Hannington's *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, which was published by Victor Gollancz in the same year as *The Road to Wigan Pier*, provides an excellent contrast in the different approaches to reportage.¹⁹ The contrast in focus could not be more different. Orwell begins his report on the conditions of the poor in northern industrial England, as we have seen, with a description of a filthy lodging house, where he slept in a room that stank like a 'ferret's cage'. Images such as the dirty black thumbprint on the bread-and-butter and the over-flowing chamber pot under the table in no measure intended to pull the reader into sympathetic alignment with the subject under observation. The contrast to Wal Hannington's book could not be more different. Hannington's book begins:

During the winter months of 1933-4, the Distressed Areas of South Wales, Cumberland, Durham, Northumberland, and the West of Scotland were the scenes of turbulent working-class demonstrations and agitations against the Government on the question of unemployment.²⁰

Hannington was also the national leader of the N.U.W.M. (National Unemployed Workers' Movement), and Orwell had heard him speak. Actually he didn't think much of Hannington as an orator, as his Wigan diary shows, but he wrote a review of *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* praising it strongly (see *CW*, Vol. XI, pp.98-9). Orwell was in the thick of trade union activity during his stay in Wigan as Bernard Crick's biography details, but he was to ignore it effectively in his account of the industrial working class.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that Orwell was not impressed with Hannington, either as a representative socialist or an orator. See fn. 27 below.

²⁰ Hannington, Wal, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (London: Gollancz, 1937), p.13.

Orwell certainly acknowledged his debt to such men in his diary, but the point, as has been made by John Newsinger, is that Orwell is not writing of activists but of the working class:

More important is the way that he makes invisible in the book the network of political activists who assisted him in his investigations. The point is, of course, that he was not writing about working-class political activists, but about the working class. This is not to say that he ignores the role of the left. According to Orwell, 'the best work for the unemployed is being done by the NUWM.'²¹

From Crick's biography, as with subsequent biographies, we know that Orwell was staying in a decent lodging house before he removed himself to one that was infinitely worse. Quite deliberately then Orwell wishes squalor to be his beginning. From the outset attention is diverted away from the subject Orwell has been commissioned to report on. The introduction of the working class of the north is not a flattering portrait. There is a 'Scotch miner' who is 'a bore' (p.6). Joe, an unemployed man on the PAC (Public Assistance Committee) is described as looking 'more like a neglected little boy than a grown-up man' (p.7). The owners of the trip-shop are dealt with in a similarly derogatory fashion:

By local standards [the Brookers] were not so badly off, for, in some way I did not understand, Mr Brooker was dodging the Means Test and drawing an allowance from the PAC, but their chief pleasure was talking about their grievances to anyone who would listen. Mrs Brooker used to lament by the hour, lying on her sofa, a soft mound of fat and self-pity, saying the same things over and over again (p.10).

It does beg the question of what Orwell can mean by such abusive treatment of his subject. Perhaps it is precisely because he feels expected to report sympathetically and respectfully that he chooses (at least initially) to do otherwise, although this is certainly not meant to suggest that he is perversely contrary. Yet, Orwell had been staying in a

²¹ Newsinger, John, *Orwell's Politics*, [1999] (London: Palgrave, 2001), p.37.

'clean and decent' lodging house before the Brookers' and gives no account of it.²² A clue as to why Orwell seeks out the seedier side of working-class life could be found in a review of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Orwell's praise of this book says much about his own dislike for the idealisation of humanity. Despite what Orwell sees as a 'callous coarseness' in the treatment of the sexual encounters of Miller's characters (whom Orwell describes as the 'out-at-elbow, good-for-nothing type' of American in Paris), Orwell praises the book because he finds it a welcome departure from 'the monstrous sopification of the sexual theme' which he believes has been prevalent 'in most of the fiction of the past hundred years'.²³ Orwell admires Miller for 'brutally insisting on the facts', and while Miller may, as far as Orwell is concerned, have swung 'the pendulum too far', he adds that nevertheless Miller 'does swing it in the right direction' (p.405). The pendulum analogy is useful in thinking of Orwell's treatment of his subject in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In this piece on Miller Orwell writes that, 'Man is not a Yahoo, but he is rather like a Yahoo and needs to be reminded of it from time to time'. Orwell concludes that such honest treatment of human behaviour, even if debased and seemingly cruel, is preferable to, for example, 'the tee-heeing brightness of *Punch*' and equally to H. G. Wells's 'Utopiae infested by nude school-marms' (p.405). Perhaps Orwell feels the pendulum is swinging too far into an idealised view of the working-class in books such as Hannington's. In view of this kind of alignment it could be seen that Orwell is wishing to smear a little dirt on what he perceives to be an all too squeaky clean portrayal of the

²² See Bernard Crick's *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), p.183. Despite Orwell's diary account that insists he was compelled to leave his reasonably comfortable lodgings, there is evidence to suggest that he decamped voluntarily. In any case, it is clear enough that Orwell had enough contacts with I.L.P. and N.U.W.M members to get 'decent' accommodation if he wanted it.

²³ Orwell, 'Review of *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller; *The Wolf at the Door* by Robert Francis', *The Complete Works*, Vol. X, pp.404-6 (p.405).

working class and unemployed. Yet, more than this Orwell will feel himself to be humanising rather than insulting and dehumanising his subject. Orwell insists that *Tropic of Cancer* while appearing to be 'a vilification of human nature' (p.404) is in fact something approaching its opposite. This article was written two years before Orwell went to Wigan, and of course written after his tramping exploits chronicled in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, so we must grant that Orwell certainly would have known what his motivations were in focusing on the Brookers, their lodgers, and the filth.

Another contributing factor to this uncompassionate start has been suggested to me by David Seed in his identification of what he terms the conscious 'masquerading' quality of the authors of empire fiction. In his discussion of Kipling, T. E. Lawrence and Orwell, Seed writes:

... Lawrence diagnoses one of the central anxieties in imperial fiction, namely a recognition that identity is relative to cultural context. He hints at the element of masquerade in his imitation of the Arabs.... Since he can identify with neither culture he is left suspended in a limbo of isolation (Seed, p.270).

Seed goes on to delineate Orwell's like dilemma for the construction of narrative sympathies in *Burmese Days*. And later, referring to Orwell's essay 'Shooting an Elephant', he writes:

Orwell expresses his revulsion at being forced into stereotyped actions through figures which suggest a discrepancy between role and feeling, between inner self and outer facade (p.278).

This could be extended to Orwell's anxiety about the cultural context he finds himself in as a member of the ruling class (also a southerner) visiting and describing the plight of the oppressed in the North (of which he has formerly known nothing). Perhaps, in some symbolic way, he wishes to expose his revulsion, and therefore the discrepancy.

The insulting and provocative elements of Orwell's 'attacks', which feature in all forms of his writing, ensure that Orwell constantly alienates himself not just from individuals, but from entire bodies of people — Crick talks of 'the long-suffering inhabitants of Wigan', and says that 'Wigan is, to this day, collectively touchy about the tripe shop issue' (Crick, p.184).²⁴ As for the individuals he attacked – Orwell makes an intriguing defence of his bellicose mud flinging. In the following letter, written in reply to one from Stephen Spender (with whom he became good friends), Orwell makes his position clear:

Dear Spender,

....You ask how it is that I attacked you not having met you, & on the other hand changed my mind after meeting you.... I had certainly in passing made offensive remarks abt [sic] "parlour Bolsheviks such as Auden & Spender" or words to that effect. I was willing to use you as a symbol of the parlour Bolshie because (a) your verse ... did not mean very much to me, (b) I looked upon you as a sort of fashionable successful person, also a Communist or Communist sympathiser, & I have been very hostile to the CP since about 1935, & (c) because not having met you I could regard you as a type & also an abstraction (Crick, p.243-4).

Orwell goes on to say that even if he had not liked Spender upon meeting him he would still have changed his mind because having once met a person he is bound thereafter to regard them as 'a human being & not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas'. Orwell maintains that it is for this reason he does not mix in literary circles, because, again, once he has met the person he can never again 'show any intellectual brutality towards him, even when I feel I ought to, like the Labour MP's who get patted on the back by dukes & are lost forever' (p.243). I am reminded here of Orwell's diatribe against the left in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which must be the most quoted of Orwell's infamous attacks, and anyone familiar with Orwell will know which it is going to be:

²⁴ I recently gave a talk on *Homage to Catalonia* at the Wigan and Leigh Arts Festival (March 2005) and the co-ordinator Alan Barton confirmed that *The Road to Wigan Pier* is still an extremely sore point with the people of Wigan.

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 (p.161).

It is usually quoted in isolation as if it were nothing more than an example of Orwell's having-a-go, reflecting that darker, crankier 'other' Orwell, who does not wish for debate, but merely to hurt people for his own perverse pleasure.²⁵ I would argue that the above is deliberate hyperbole, employed to rouse debate; for that piece of criticism reflects a deeply held conviction that socialists are alienating the ordinary non-political working class. This is brought out most forcefully in the final chapter:

As I have pointed out already, many people who are not repelled by Socialism are repelled by Socialists. Socialism, as now presented, is unattractive largely because it appears, at any rate from the outside, to be the plaything of cranks, doctrinaires, parlour Bolsheviks and so forth. But it is also worth remembering that this is only so because the cranks, doctrinaires, etc., have been allowed to get there first.... (p.204-5)

Keith Alldritt provides a helpful insight into Orwell's invective. Commenting on Orwell's attack on W. H. Auden as 'a sort of gutless Kipling' Alldritt writes, 'The bad temper which informs these value judgements derives most significantly from Orwell's sense of the triviality of contemporary literary culture'.²⁶ I believe this is true and that Orwell uses insult to reflect his frustration, although (and this is equally important as it testifies to Orwell deliberately softening his blows) there is more often than not an element of humour present. With regard to the infamous condemnation of modern socialists, you cannot take a man seriously when he attacks feminists with the same vigour, and in the same context, as nudists and fruit-juice drinkers. In the pages prior, and leading up to this quotation Orwell is cataloguing the failure of the left to get 'the people'

²⁵ At a lecture held at Wedgwood Memorial College to commemorate the centenary of Orwell's birth (June 25th, 2003) Colin Ward was asked to leave out this quotation from his talk as it had been used countless times already. Colin Ward writes an excellent article entitled 'Orwell and Anarchism' in the book *George Orwell at Home (and Among the Anarchists): Essays and photographs* (London: Freedom Press, 1998).

²⁶ Alldritt, Keith, *The Making of George Orwell: An Essay in Literary History* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), p.81.

on their side when England and Britain, as Orwell puts it, is 'in a very serious mess' (*WP*, p.158). His frustration is everywhere apparent: 'Yet the fact that we have got to face is that Socialism is *not* establishing itself' (p.159) [his italics]. He talks of socialism 'visibly going back', which he sees as disastrous because 'everyone who uses his brain knows that Socialism, as a world-system and wholeheartedly applied, is a way out' (p.158). Orwell rejects the Marxist view of socialism arriving 'by some mysterious process called "historical necessity"' (p.160). Orwell, it seems, has put his faith in socialists leading by example, and has already ruled out the educated, jargonised speaker.²⁷ He details an encounter with the ordinary people and two of the sandal wearing type of socialists, which he gives to have happened on a bus during the ILP summer school being held at Letchworth. The men were wearing khaki shorts and shirts, were hatless, with a number of other eccentricities such as 'long grey hair bobbed in the Lloyd George style'. Orwell recounts, 'The man next to me, a commercial traveller I should say, glanced at me, at them, and back again at me, and murmured, "Socialists", as who should say, "Red Indians"' (p.162). Whether the event happened like this is immaterial; what is important is that Orwell believes in the chasm between that ILP type socialist and the 'respectable' working-class person who needs socialism, but is repelled by it because of these 'crank' types. Again, his art, his propaganda or simply his reportage is rarely separated from his

²⁷ Peter Davison summarises Orwell's negative views of the left-wing intelligentsia in his *Orwell's England* footnotes:

Orwell, in his diary for 11 February 1936, described hearing [Wal Hannington] speak at Wigan Co-op Hall. Hannington was, he wrote, 'A poor speaker, using all the padding and clichés of the Socialist orator, and with the wrong kind of cockney accent (once gain, though a Communist entirely a bourgeois)....' (X/424). In his London letter to *Partisan Review*, 23 May 1943 (XV/2096), Orwell included him with Harry Pollit [a founding member of the British CP, who gave *The Road to Wigan Pier* an adverse review – see *OP*, p.49] among those who, 'After all the years they have had on the job', cannot imagine 'any occupation except boosting Soviet Russia (p.220).

message. This, to put it dramatically, is Orwell's truth and he will adopt what he deems to be the most effective medium to deploy it.

7.5) Orwell's Observations: Fact or Fallacy?

How trustworthy or otherwise Orwell's observations are is something that runs deep through Orwell criticism. Here, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia* will be looked at in order to demonstrate some instances where Orwell is attempting to draw distinctions between propaganda (which loosely could be truth presented in your own way, with all the personal bias and prejudice that implies) and 'concrete' truth (which is telling of what you see in the simplest and most objective manner). The following, taken from *The Road to Wigan Pier*, involves Orwell's reactions to various establishment attacks on the working class. When the miners are accused of over-eating Orwell makes a spirited defence, writing: 'I notice that the Rev W. R. Inge, in his book *England*, accuses the miners of gluttony. From my own observation I should say that they eat astonishingly little' (p.35). Orwell goes on to say that most miners insisted that they could not do their work on a heavy meal, and what they took for their lunch struck him to be merely a snack of bread-and-dripping and tea. If this were a false statement by Orwell in his defence of a people whom he clearly admires, then one could dismiss him as an unreliable witness. However, later in the book, he comments on how the left are incensed when the working class are criticised and tutored by middle- and upper-class women on nutrition. Orwell, whilst understanding the resentment they cause, shares their view (though importantly, not their conduct). He writes:

The working-class palate now rejects good food almost automatically. The number of people who *prefer* tinned peas and tinned fish to real peas and real fish must be increasing every year, and plenty of people who could afford real milk in their tea

would much sooner have tinned milk – even that dreadful tinned milk which is made of sugar and cornflour and has UNFIT FOR BABIES on the tin in huge letters (p.92).

There are countless people who would be enraged and indignant at reading this, as Orwell suggests himself, and would dismiss it as the blind prejudice of a snob. There is little ground, however, for believing that this is a false account given the balance of his general observation overall.

Orwell's observations in 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' are interesting at this point, because time and distance are to change the ways he views events. He begins this essay with, 'Early one morning another man and I had gone out to snipe at the Fascists in the trenches outside Huesca....' They had had no luck in spying a fascist until finally a man came within sight. Orwell aimed his rifle and made ready to fire. However, the man 'was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him'. The reason Orwell gives for staying his shot is this: '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' (CW, Vol. XIII, p.501). Why was this account not included in Orwell's original documentary? One answer could be that he had not thought of it then, and this is not meant flippantly. Orwell writes immediately after the above, 'What does this incident demonstrate? Nothing very much, because it is the kind of thing that happens all the time in all wars'. However, the answer is implicitly suggested, which is, that basic human feeling must come before party allegiance, lose sight of this and the war is not worth winning. Again, whether or not that incident actually happened as Orwell describes it is irrelevant because the moral 'lesson' of the episode overrides all other considerations.

Kerr has identified this trait in Orwell's approach to his subject. Referring to the beginning of *Homage to Catalonia*, where Orwell has an encounter with the Italian militiaman puzzling over a map, Kerr gives a brilliant insight into the subtle, yet powerful symbolism that Orwell is capable of achieving:

It is one of those vivid, almost allegorical encounters with some other that punctuate Orwell's writing about his life. Whether or not it actually happened, or happened like that, the meeting is highly charged, crackling with ideological and personal significance. The handclasp represents entry into a community (Orwell was there to enlist), masculine like Orwell's other communities.... The image might be that of a propaganda poster – Peasants and Intellectuals Unite! (Kerr, p.54)

Clearly for Kerr any fidelity to actual events as they happened is unimportant in instances such as this where the ideological impact is paramount.

This is of course not the case when considering the representations of truth that must be historically responsible. Interestingly, when considering his thoughts whilst on the run in Spain, after the POUM has been suppressed, Orwell reflects that he was unable to see events clearly:

I [was] conscious of nothing save physical discomfort and a deep desire for this damned nonsense to be over. Afterwards I can see the significance of events, but while they are happening I merely want to be out of them (p.167).

When Orwell insists that he was 'conscious of nothing save physical discomfort' at this critical time we need to be guarded. This description of himself is too closely aligned with the 'unexceptional man', the man who is 'a poor shot', wet the bed as a child, was 'afraid of looking a fool'; all of which (as outlined above) seem highly unlikely. Indeed, for Orwell to maintain that he needs distance in order that he can see events clearly becomes doubtful when we examine his later reflections of the Russian agenda in revolutionary Spain:

As to the Russians, their motives in the Spanish War are completely inscrutable. Did they, as the pinks believed, intervene in Spain in order to defend democracy and thwart

the Nazis? Then why did they intervene on such a niggardly scale and finally leave Spain in the lurch? Or did they, as the Catholics maintained, intervene in order to foster revolution in Spain? Then why did they do all in their power to crush the Spanish revolutionary movements, defend private property and hand power to the middle class as against the working class? Or did they, as the Trotskyists suggested, intervene simply in order to *prevent* a Spanish revolution? Then why not have backed Franco? (p.508)

The motives of Stalin were not so inscrutable for Orwell when he was actually in Spain:

The only unexpected feature in the Spanish situation—and outside Spain it has caused an immense amount of misunderstanding—is that among the parties on the Government side the Communists stood not upon the extreme left, but upon the extreme Right. (p.198).

Perhaps, because the Soviet Union is now helping England and the allies defeat Hitler, Orwell simply cannot detach emotionally.²⁸ Orwell's clarity on the Russian position whilst in Spain is unequivocal. As he writes many times over, 'The Russians were in a position to dictate terms. There is very little doubt that these terms were, in substance, "Prevent revolution or you get no weapons"' (p.195).²⁹

Bill Alexander's attack on Orwell's account of the Spanish Civil War is interesting here. In his article Alexander claims that Orwell was to 'obscure and denigrate the real issues in the struggle against fascism'.³⁰ It is further maintained that the 'great merit' of *Homage to Catalonia* to the establishment lies in 'his contention that the revolution was cynically betrayed' (p.98). There is little doubt that the revolution *was* cynically betrayed. We now know that Stalin had decided to eliminate the POUM and

²⁸ It is not entirely certain when 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' was published. Peter Davison suggests 1942 (CW, Vol. XIII, p497).

²⁹ It is recorded in *Pravda* (17 December, 1936) that Stalin will eliminate both the POUM and CNT (Trotskyists and Anarcho-Syndicalists). *Pravda* records that the hunting down of these groups 'will be carried out with same energy as in USSR' i.e. as in the 1936 Purge trials (For more details visit Felix Morrow's website, which gives detailed information of Stalin's counter-revolutionary politics of this time). Similarly, a document found by Karen Hatherly, in the National Historical Archive (Madrid, 1989), shows that the KGB wanted both Eric and Eileen Blair arrested on suspicion of treason against the government. Among the list of grievances against them were, 'Their correspondence reveals that they are rabid Trotskyites', and 'Eric B. took part in the events in May'. Information kindly supplied by Peter Davison. Bill Alexander dismisses Orwell's claims that he had to flee Spain for his own safety. See fn. 30 below.

³⁰ Alexander, Bill, 'George Orwell in Spain' in *Inside the Myth*, ed. Christopher Norris (London: Lawrence and Wishart), pp.85-102 (p.90).

CNT (see fn. 29 below) from the outset. In light of this, the subsequent charges by the government that the anarchists were fascist collaborators can be seen for what it is—a deliberate lie. Alexander does not address this gross misrepresentation that had soldiers, who were sincerely fighting for the liberation of Spain, locked up and then executed for treason. Given that Alexander was in a position to see events clearly in Spain, as he was ‘a political commissar and commander of the British Battalion of the XVth International Brigade’ (CW, Vol. XI, p.32), his claims to honest reportage become highly questionable. His example has been used here to show that even the most vigorous attacks on Orwell’s representations of truth do not stand up to scrutiny.³¹

As we have seen Orwell employs many devices in the service of his truth and rhetoric, often with the result that he is flatly disbelieved. A good example of this would be one commentator’s reaction to Orwell’s explanation of how his conversion from pacifist to hawk (in his outlook on the Second World War) came about. Orwell had been both writing pamphlets and making speeches against support for the war. However, he tells us that on ‘the night before the Russo-German pact was announced I dreamt that the war had started’ (CW, Vol. XII, p.271). This dream was to ‘reveal the real state’ of his feelings, which were that he was a true patriot after all. Scott Lucas is not impressed with Orwell’s explanation of a dream, and writes, regarding Orwell’s dilemma in justifying his turn around: ‘There remained a problem. Given his strident calls against a war with

³¹ A book, published by Lawrence and Wishart (the publishers of *Inside the Myth* where Bill Alexander’s attack on Orwell appears), by Georges Soria entitled *Trotskyism in the Service of Franco: Facts and Documents on the Activities of the P.O.U.M.* insists that the POUM is ‘one of the most important instruments which the Spanish rebels use in their struggle against the legitimate Spanish Government’. Orwell had seen this, as it had first appeared in the *Daily Worker* (14 Sep. 1937). Orwell categorically rejects these claims in Appendix II of *Homage to Catalonia*. Again, he was absolutely correct as to the deliberately spurious nature of such accusations. It is now known that this article and many like it were part of a Communist misinformation deluge ‘timed to “appear before the trial of Trotskyist leaders...”’. Peter Davison in *The Complete Works*, Vol. XI, pp.30-7 provides further detailed account to that given here of the underhand political machinations happening at the time, and Bill Alexander’s name appears frequently!

Germany, how could Orwell justify this sudden shift beyond the rather lame excuse of a portentous dream?' (Lucas, p.59).

One could imagine Orwell raising a posthumous smile at his dream being dismissed as a 'rather lame excuse'. Would he care that he had been 'seen through' – if indeed he had, and would it matter to him if he were unfairly criticised? As he has undoubtedly been 'guilty' of such misrepresentations of truth in the past one would imagine that he would not be overly concerned (the pattern is too frequent to deny *some* licence will inevitably be taken). In any case, if Orwell has succeeded in getting his point across then one feels he must be satisfied, and Lucas does understand that the dream is Orwell's way of introducing his views on Englishness and patriotism as a potential force for socialist change: 'The answer came through the elevation not of "socialism" but of "Englishness". *Patriotism of the middle classes is a thing to be made use of*, the new Orwell assured his public' (Lucas, p.59). Lucas understands that Orwell, through the dream, is demonstrating the patriotism in his own middle-class bones that the British are going to be able to make use of. Moreover, one suspects, given the obvious respect Lucas has for Orwell's writing, that he would be in agreement with Thomas, who writes, 'If [Orwell] can convince us of the truth of what he has experienced, we are ready to tolerate greater rhetorical play with our emotions'.³²

Connolly, in noting similarities between Orwell and Gissing, presents both men as equally disgusted by everything squalid. This conclusion is based on readings of the novels. Connolly finds much evidence of this disgust in all the novels, but chooses *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to demonstrate his claim most fully. He quotes three lengthy passages (from Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* and *Nineteen*

³² Thomas, Edward, M., *Orwell* [1965](Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1971), p.45.

Eighty-Four). In each there is much enthusiastic description of 'swarming' 'proles' at play in grimy surroundings. Dickens has his underclass 'wallowing in filth' and Gissing has his 'mauling each other with vile caresses'. From these extracts the following summation follows:

These passages exhibit a common pattern of development, attention to detail, and tone. Following a graphic description of extreme squalor, the inhabitants are revealed to be brutish "wrangling" subhumans prone to drink and violence. The authors' reactions express both fear and disgust. In all three scenes, the viewpoint is that of a shocked outsider. In all three passages, the poor are represented as a separate species who are granted no individual identity or compassion (p.29).

This conclusion is perfectly valid as far as Dickens and Gissing are concerned, but it is not valid for Orwell. Clearly, Connolly is inferring the authors' predilections from the texts, but there are ways in which Orwell's texts resist being used as a conduit for the author's opinion. The passage cited has Winston walking through the 'prole' quarters. The narrator tells us that 'It was nearly twenty hours, and the drinking shops which the proles frequented ("Pubs," they called them) were choked with customers'. The fact that the time is given in the twenty-four hour clock and further, that the narrator feels the need to inform us that 'drinking shops' are 'pubs' to the proles distances the narrator from the author figure and places him in the world of Winston Smith at the time of 1984—a figure aligned with The Party because of his sense of alienation. The reader of 1948 is only too familiar with the word 'pub', as that is the common word for licensed establishments at the time Orwell is writing, as it is of course today. If this were Orwell speaking it would not make sense to have such an 'aside' as "'pubs" they called them'.

Again, when critical analysis of the text is undertaken, what at first glance appear to be examples of Orwell's class prejudice and petty snobbery turn out, on closer inspection, to be examples of someone else's.

Charles Dickens is conspicuously absent from this more detailed study of how writers directly influence or impact on Orwell. This might seem surprising in light of the fact that this chapter began with the quotation, 'Dickens is one of those writers who are well worth stealing'. However, where the borrowing is obvious or suggestive of Dickens, at least in terms of character—we have already seen how Dickens has influenced Orwell in using setting as frame—it does not appear to go beyond a love of how Dickens encapsulates the 'otherness' of human types, which is at its height when rendered in caricature. In reading *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* it is not until the description of Mr Cheeseman that Dickens comes to mind:

Mr Cheeseman was a rather sinister little man, almost small enough to be called a dwarf.... As a rule a dwarf, when malformed, has a full-sized torso and practically no legs. With Mr Cheeseman it was the other way about. His legs were of normal length, but the top half of his body was so short that his buttocks seemed to sprout almost immediately below his shoulder blades. This gave him, in walking, a resemblance to a pair of scissors (p.223).

Douglas Kerr's parallels between Boxer and Joe Gargery suggest a similar reading to that just given above: 'Boxer's alphabetical agonies recall those of Joe Gargery in Dickens's *Great Expectations* ...' (Kerr, p.90).³³ Such tender portraits of bafflement (often criticised for their patronizing quality) echo the map-reading difficulties of the Italian militiaman who is featured in the opening scene of *Homage to Catalonia*, and in light of this one can imagine Orwell 'enhancing' real-life portrayals by infusing them with memorable fictional ones.

To conclude, there is certainly originality in the way Orwell unites fact, fiction and purpose (his own and other people's), and in this Orwell stands out, as does Gissing:

³³ Kerr continues that sentence with 'and in a different way, of Mr Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*'. The word 'different' suggests a more complex textual relationship in this case, resulting in a proliferation of meaning, similar to the 'parodic underground reply' Kerr ascribes to the Nighttown scene. See fn. 16, p.18 above.

What I want to make a claim for is the uniqueness of Gissing, his specific effectivity. Like Bennett and Orwell, I feel that it is not merely the centrality of Gissing's themes which needs to be affirmed, but the "originality" of their realisation.³⁴

There is much originality in the realisation of Orwell's themes, particularly in the subtlety of narrative 'authority', which appears consciously to resist the explicit proselytising and didactic voice prevalent in his documentary and essay writing. As a result, questions surrounding fact and fallacy, originality and imitation diminish in importance.

³⁴ Goode, John, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision, 1978), p.14.

8) Conclusion: Turning the Critical Tide

This thesis has attempted to correct hasty and unfair criticism that will cavalierly assert, with exiguous recourse to textual example, that '[Orwell's] four pre-war efforts constitute a sort of amateur throat clearing' (Hitchens, p.133) and, equally reductive, that '[Orwell's] whole work is a kind of didactic monologue'.¹ These novels are demonstrably more than that, and it has to be understood that Orwell was a ruthless and blinkered critic when it came to his own work. Moreover, he was never constructive when criticising himself; he was merely emotional, and a good demonstration of this is the fact that he 'destroyed an entire manuscript after a single publisher's letter' (Taylor, p.94). His pronouncement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was: 'I have just finished a novel I have been tinkering about with since the summer of 1947.... I am not pleased with it, but I think it is a good idea'.² The word 'tinkering' is wholly unwarranted. It is worth noting that the book he was 'not pleased with' was voted *the* representative English novel by the BBC in 2003.

Rare praise has come to light recently through the discovery of a number of letters between Orwell and the translator of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (R. N. Raimbault). The comments made by the latter demonstrate that Orwell was judged more objectively than by most English speaking critics of the time, with the result that the qualities of his technique have been recognised. This letter refers to *Burmese Days*:

Ici, dans "Burmese Days", c'est vous qui dominez votre sujet, vous devenez un constructeur, vous vous élevez admirablement, à travers l'analyse que vous livre

¹ Concannon, Gerald J., *The Development of George Orwell's Art* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1977), p.17. Here reiterating John Manders' assertion in *The Writer and Commitment* (1926).

² Orwell, Letter to Malcolm Muggeridge [Dec. 1948], *The Complete Works: Add. & Amend.*, pp.17-19 (p.18). It should be said that Orwell had been *thinking* of the book for much longer.

votre sens aigu de l'observation, jusqu'à; la synthèse qui fait la vraie et durable force de votre oeuvre.

Vous avez évité tous les défauts qu'on reproche généralement aux romans anglais, en particulier ces débuts interminables qui, sous couleur de créer une atmosphère, retardent indéfiniment l'action.³

The letter goes on to say that from the outset one is 'at the heart of the subject'. It is Orwell's ability to get at the heart of his subject that I hope has been established in this assessment of his work, along with the acknowledgement that he can do this because of the high degree of control that he exercises over his prose. One commentator sums up Orwell's novels thus:

Orwell could be said to have written four variations on the same novel during the 1930s and to have reworked it one last time with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Certainly, the chief ingredient remains constant: a lonely protagonist struggling for a modest share of dignity and happiness against insuperable social odds. The settings change, from Burma to Oceania via London and the Home Counties, but the root conflict remains, as does its inevitable outcome – that characteristic sense of defeat, of exposure to forces too powerful to be resisted, even when they can somehow be survived.⁴

I would agree with the first part of this summation, but completely reject the latter, beginning with the line 'but the root conflict remains...'. This is the common misconception with regard to Orwell's 1930s novels, for, as we have seen, Orwell turns the lonely protagonist around – the Winston of his last novel may be defeated as is the Flory of his first, but Dorothy, Gordon and Bowling are not; for there is hope on the horizon. Dorothy's maturity and humour will save her from being a stereotyped spinster who will always incite pity; Gordon has at last come to see himself as a man among

³ Raimbault, R. N., 216A. X, 359 [1934]. Reproduced courtesy of Peter Davison. The translation given is as follows:

In 'Down and Out', the events have dominated and controlled you, you had been only a truthful narrator and wise observer. Here, in 'Burmese Days' it is you who dominate your subject, you become the constructor, you raise yourself admirably, through the analysis you deliver your sharp sense of observation until the conclusion giving a true and lasting strength to your work.

You have avoided all the flaws for which one generally criticises English novels, in particular their never-ending beginnings which, under the disguise of creating an atmosphere, indefinitely delay the action.

⁴ Spencer, L., 'The Novels of the 1930s' pp.46-67 in *George Orwell* by J. A. Jowitt & R. K. S. Taylor (Bradford Centre Occasional Papers No. 3, 1981).

many, having woken from his narcissistic slumber (at the end he cannot even get out of bed, and here again the symbolism is powerfully at work, especially when we think of Rosemary's attendance upon him there – it is a fairytale kiss that will turn him from frog into prince). And Bowling, it is strongly suggested, is going to break the habits of a lifetime, which will begin with him actually *talking* to his wife.

These endings locate Orwell firmly within a humanist tradition that lends itself to an affirmation of life. However, as seen above, his fictional denouements are conversely perceived as reflecting a resigned pessimism:

... even though [Orwell] is somewhat optimistic, he is more inclined to nourish his imagination on the ills of society than on its potentialities for a richer existence, and he often seems too greatly alarmed by the sense of present deterioration to be able to envision a more humanly rewarding future (Smyer, p.42).⁵

Peter Goodall (unintentionally) provides a good demonstration of the tendency to critical oversight when it comes to seeing the scope and harmony in Orwell's experimental fiction. In Goodall's analysis of the eclectic mix of topic in Orwell's 'As I Please' articles for *Tribune* he affords an insight into the intentionally eclectic nature of Orwell's fictional aesthetic:

Orwell himself said that many people wrote concerning his scraps of useless information ... but presumably as many were turned off by the 'bourgeois' references to gardening and country life. Certainly the juxtaposition of details is always surprising and, no doubt, occasionally deliberately provocative. For instance, a piece about the criminality of the acts of Nazi leaders is followed immediately and without transition by: "As the 53 bus carries me to and fro I never, at any rate when it is light enough to see, pass the little church of St John, just across the road from Lord's, without a pang.".... The scraps of information seem to function in a way comparable to the fool's speeches in *King Lear* — a reminder, amidst all the murder and folly, that ordinary life still trickles on (Goodall, p.11).

⁵ Whilst agreeing with a great deal of Smyer's findings on the textual richness of *A Clergyman's Daughter*, it is with his insistence on its pessimistic end that I part company, completely rejecting Smyer's assertion that Dorothy returns to a 'world of emotional isolation and a life spent trying to muffle an anxiety-burdened conscience (p.46).

Goodall underscores Orwell's design in bringing unrelated pieces together with the quite deliberate intention of marking their arbitrary arrangement ('followed immediately and without transition'), in order that the humane essence of life, which will carry on regardless in a politically defiled age, might be captured or conveyed. What may seem like incongruity is actually more dynamic and harmonious.

Goodall does not extend his appreciation of Orwell's journalistic aims to Orwell's experimental novels: 'The few occasions when Orwell tried to write in a different, more experimental vein were not successful' (p.3). Instead of analysing the content and arrangement of this allegedly unsuccessful prose Goodall examines Orwell's views on the nature of realism, with the result that he finds contradictions, and these contradictions seemingly explain Orwell's difficulties with his own realist fiction: 'There is even a kind of perverseness here: valuing experimental stylists for their realism and realist writers for the aesthetic qualities of their prose' (p.4). Goodall subsequently, and curiously, then highlights a shortcoming in Raymond Williams' criticism that sees 'a lack of integration' in the mixing of styles in Orwell's fiction. Goodall draws on Anne Cranny-Francis's comment that 'Williams is applying too simple a realist aesthetic to the work' (p.8), and, in quoting this, one might expect that Goodall would question his own negative pronouncements based as they are on a rigidly realistic approach to Orwell's fiction. It is precisely Orwell's fusion of opposing mediums that lifts his novels out of specific categorization, and therefore its reach as something to be measured against. Orwell brings together the allegorical with the documentary, the polyphonic with the monophonic, the elegiac with the fairytale, and the elenctic with the deictic (Comstock's insistence that money is the cause of all dysfunction being an example of the former, and the reportage-

type commentaries about the reason for poor schools in *A Clergyman's Daughter* being an example of the latter). He constantly plays with authorial presence and didactic voice; and with regard to the intelligence his characters possess, one is reminded of Henry James's defence of the mature voice given to the eponymous child heroine of *What Maisie Knew*:

Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them: their vision is at any moment richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible vocabulary.⁶

The perceptual is not confined to language, which is why the discourse of language, thought and perception is often difficult to separate in Orwell's novels. Again, this is not down to confusion on the author's part, but a reflection of a view that such elements are not distinct from each other.

To reiterate Orwell's views on 'proletarian literature', Orwell writes that these books have had a 'reviving effect' and have 'introduced a note of what you might call crudeness and vitality' to the literary world. There is a vitality in Orwell's novels that needs to be more generally acknowledged. This has been picked up by those who have examined Orwell's prose in detail; Ringbom, for example notes that 'some of the vigour and liveliness that characterizes Orwell's style is owing to his punctuation and typography, which are unorthodox at least when judged by the rules found in manuals of style' (p.19).

Such criticism is essential in reclaiming Orwell's 1930s novels, and goes far in counter-balancing the more common dismissiveness that will confidently assert, without a shred of textual support, that *Coming Up for Air*

⁶ Quoted in David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*, p.27.

...display[s] two obvious weaknesses. Like his other novels, this too deals with a solitary character, but Orwell has compounded this fact with the greater failing—as he himself was soon to pronounce it—of making it a first-person narrative (Wykes, p.106).

These bland statements are practically meaningless, and the ‘obvious weaknesses’ are far from obvious—a solitary figure coupled with a first-person narrative does not equal inevitable failure. Again, Orwell’s own negative pronouncement is used to support evidence of failure. The operative word here is ‘evidence’. I have found these 1930s novels to be alive with the energy of a highly charged and purposeful organising will. The aim of this thesis has been to provide evidence of this. If acknowledged, then it is surely time to both stem and turn the tide of negative criticism that has surrounded these novels in order that they may be read as valuable examples of experimental political fiction.

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