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Who's and Whose Orwell?

Why Orwell Matters. By Christopher Hitchens. New York: Basic Books, 2002. 211 pages. \$24.00 US.

Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell. By John Rodden. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003. ix + 331 pages. \$25.00 US.

WITH *GLASNOST*, GEORGE ORWELL came finally, officially, to the Soviet Union. In 1988, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was excerpted in the state-sponsored *Literary Gazette*, which challenged its readership to engage a previously spectral figure of Western intellectualism. "The time has come to free ourselves from the stagnant prohibitions, to discard the myths, to shatter the crooked mirrors, and to read George Orwell thoughtfully and without prejudice." Fifteen years later, at the centenary of Orwell's birth, this Russian call-to-arms, quoted by John Rodden, has become the general sounding for contemporary thinkers seeking to explore how and why Orwell has, since his early death, cut such a powerful figure in intellectual circles and wider culture. As these two books demonstrate, however, the rhetorical gesture of disabusing the reader of misconceptions about Orwell to offer subsequently correct appraisals of the man and his achievements can lead to ever more internecine sniping among scholars, thinly-veiled hoarding of his legacy, and occasionally questionable extensions of his mark.

In *Why Orwell Matters*, Christopher Hitchens complains that George Orwell has become "an object of sickly veneration and sentimental overpraise, employed to stultify schoolchildren with his insufferable rightness and purity." As an antidote, Hitchens proposes that Orwell actually commands a central position in our cultural conscience due to "the extraordinary salience of the subjects he 'took on,' and stayed with, and never abandoned," particularly

the “three great subjects of the twentieth century ... imperialism, fascism, and Stalinism.” Orwell’s massive body of work and omnivorous interests suggest no thinking man’s gadfly but, as Hitchens contends in a series of brisk chapters, the immensity of his commitment to engage the world’s difficulties and to endure in his investigations with measured hope that truth would eventually prevail.

Hitchens attributes the difficulty of comprehending Orwell beyond his coinages to the author’s lifelong “creative tension.” He characterizes this as the product of Orwell’s constant oscillation between love for his native England and disgust at the folly of its imperial endeavours; identifying himself as a “democratic socialist” and attacking socialism through allegory; railing against formal religion and praising the liturgical tradition. This dialectic began for Orwell with his experience as a colonial policeman in Burma, where, he detailed in “Shooting an Elephant,” he began to see “the dirty work of Empire at close quarters.” Out of this experience, Hitchens argues, the young Eric Blair developed “a keen interest in the passivity and docility of the victims” of colonialism, which became a career-long commitment to exposing the plight of weak masses before massive, conglomerated powers.

Hitchens is persuasive until he begins to speculate about the influence of Orwell’s writings upon subsequent academic developments. He inadvertently opens himself to the piling-on charge that he elsewhere levels against simplistic admirers and detractors, in declaring Orwell “a founder of the discipline of post-colonialism” for his reflections on his Burmese days. This claim distorts the contemporary impact of Orwell’s critique of Empire outside of England, and also ignores huge tracts of writing from both sides of the colonial division from the early twentieth century onwards that developed independent of Orwell’s influence.

Hitchens is more convincing in his examination of the relationship between Orwell and his native land; he deftly moves between biographical anecdote and relevant writings by and about Orwell so as to delineate Orwell’s “Englishness” without over-determining its significance to his worldview. Hitchens shows us how Orwell adapted the English pastoral “to evoke the Gulag and the revolution betrayed” in *Animal Farm*, but then decides that Orwell’s more basic “instinct about the balance of nature had nothing specifically English about it. [Rather,] It was a prefiguration of the uni-

versal humanism that is to be found in all his work." These distinctions are elegantly harmonized shortly thereafter, when Hitchens explains that Orwell's *modus operandi*, like that of Rainsborough, Paine, and Milton, places him in the universalizing, libertarian, and at times contrarian "English tradition that has had to be asserted against British authorities time and again."

Unfortunately, Hitchens's understandable admiration (and emulation) of Orwell's Sisyphus push against the complacency of British and Western intellectual culture leads him to political skirmishes that mar many other pages of his essay. This book is billed as a simultaneous corrective to Orwell the myth and introduction to Orwell the thinker. At times, however, it resembles a rather clubby chat about Orwell amongst friends and enemies in the know. With as encyclopaedic a knowledge of his subject's works as Hitchens has, he could have spent more time introducing us to minor works that would be of fresh interest, rather than graciously quibbling with Salman Rushdie's reading or worrisomely clucking about Edward Said's misgivings over Orwell.

This tendency manifests itself most in the book's explicitly political segments. On the Left: Hitchens's over-heated critique of Raymond Williams's response to Orwell could have been simply limited to quoting Williams's embarrassing commentary on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where he essentially ascribed the novel's totalitarian view of the human person to the author himself. More space could have been devoted instead to Orwell's direct engagements with contemporary minds on the Left, such as C.L.R. James, the Trinidadian Marxist mentioned only in passing. On the Right: Hitchens's indulgent reminiscing about his response to Norman Podhoretz's celebration of Orwell as a neo-con forerunner is not nearly as compelling as is his presentation of the traditional, liberal views evident in Orwell's lesser known review of Friedrich August von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. Further investigations into such writings, which register Orwell's fierce individualism and explain in part why he received a sympathetic hearing among many conservatives, would have been welcome.

On the Feminists: Hitchens feels the need to defend Orwell from the fact that he seemed to have had little interest in the complexities of female experience. Examining the biography and fiction, Hitchens decides: "Orwell liked and desired the *feminine* but was somewhat put on his guard by the *female*." This bland, gradu-

ate-student-sounding contention makes Orwell little different from contemporaries such as Joyce, Eliot, Hemingway and Faulkner. From the likes of Hitchens, we would expect, and indeed welcome, a more provocative, rigorous defence of Orwell's attitude towards women.

Hitchens is strongest when he engages Orwell and contemporary issues directly and jointly, thereby making a clear case for why Orwell ought to be every intellectual's Everyman. But in concluding his argument with a final estimation of Orwell's as a life of the mind to follow, Hitchens skirts a dangerous line:

what [Orwell] illustrates, by his commitment to language as the partner of truth, is that 'views' do not really count; that it matters not what you think, but *how* you think; and that politics are relatively unimportant, while principles have a way of enduring, as do the few irreducible individuals who maintain allegiance to them.

To claim that the substance of one's thoughts matters less than *how* they are thought would seem to invoke Orwell's insistence on the sanctity of the independent mind. One worries, however, that a contemporary audience may hear (and follow) this as a post-modern celebration of the meaningful gesture as an end in and of itself. Orwell himself provides the best response to a potential misreading of Hitchens's compliment, in "Politics and the English Language": "What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around. In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them."

Hitchens's apology for Orwell and engagement with his various intellectual respondents is informative in many places, though, like another Orwell man, his desire to salvage an accurate portrait of Orwell seems to be more an attempt, ultimately, to polish him into a mirror. At least John Rodden admits his own guilt more than once while pointing out this tendency among others, in his latest book on Orwell, *Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell*. But Rodden also provides a convincing rationale for why so many cannot invoke Orwell without claiming him for their side: "The rougher the waters, the greater has been the tendency of intellectuals to look to Orwell as anchor, compass, and weather

prophet." Rodden explores this phenomenon in a very uneven study of how, "more than a half-century after his death, even his very name still wields a rhetorical and political force sufficient to stimulate public argument."

Rodden's unevenness has a great deal to do with the questionable value of the book's first two sections, in which he explores Orwell's posthumous influence upon the cultural landscape, from the 1980's telephone wars in America to the various appearances of his books behind the Iron Curtain. In the first section, Rodden claims that Orwell is responsible for the onset of "popular cultural studies as a formal domain of academic inquiry" and then subjects Orwell's legacy—how his ideas and his famous catchwords have been used—to a rather standard, academic analysis of popular culture. At best, Rodden demonstrates the dangers and unintentional ironies that arise when language is unhinged from its original meaning. At worst, he blurs the line between following Orwell as an example of how to be a culture critic and treating Orwell as a culture object, though at an academic remove from more unseemly deployments.

The second section comes across as nearly devoid of genuine insight about Orwell's legacy; it is a lengthy, meandering documentation of various parallels between the ideas and realities imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and life in East Germany. Will anyone's understanding of Orwell or the Eastern Bloc be enriched by being told today that "the deteriorating, now-defunct German Democratic Republic (GDR) bore comparison with the mass devastation and economic shortage in Orwell's Oceania"? For a self-described expert on utopias and dystopias, Rodden seems blind to the fact that these literary forms posit a future in direct response and allegorical resemblance to the writer's present. Orwell completed the novel in November, 1948; the title's inversion is meant to suggest how, with totalitarian regimes evermore arrogating power to themselves, human reality itself was *then* becoming inverted from its naturally reasoned, free state.

The book's final section, in which Rodden conducts an inquiry into Orwell's relationships to various political and religious groups akin to Hitchens's approach, does make up for the book's other two sections, which seem to be a great deal of filler in comparison. Indeed, Rodden actually discounts his earlier analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* impact by pointing out the ease with which

the book became a cultural marker and Orwell a cultural icon due to the calendar correlation invited by its title. Elsewhere in this section, and unlike Hitchens, Rodden provides a running commentary on the political spectrum's different responses to Orwell while remaining above the fray. Rodden thankfully focuses more on what various thinkers discern as sympathetic in Orwell, rather than seeking to protect him from them. Alas, Rodden is also unlike Hitchens in his skills as a writer; his prose is endnote heavy and occasionally prone to mouthfuls of academic language ("my aim here is to challenge all reductionistic approaches"). Moreover, there is a curious lack of quotation from Orwell's work. To determine accurately a writer's legacy (beyond a straightforward, academic critique of the-writer-as-object) compelling, explicit juxtapositions of his ideas with those of his would-be descendants are of undeniable importance.

Near the end of his book, Rodden offers a very strange compliment to Orwell by suggesting that "Just as he was a half-century ago, he continues to be almost every intellectual's big brother." Lower case modification notwithstanding, we must imagine Orwell would find such a compliment – given the connotations of what it means to be Big Brother – unsettling, whereas, with a clarification or two, he would likely agree with Hitchens's concluding explanation of why he matters today. Regardless, one senses that both Hitchens and Rodden enjoy the idea of Orwell watching them, even though such a presence—no matter how admirable an example of the independent mind—can be constricting. One hopes that, in the future, the competition over who owns Orwell's legacy will be replaced by attempts to follow his most difficult challenge, which, he explained in "Why I Write," was "to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us." This call to integration and a consistent, honest engagement with the wider world is one for all ages and all of us, whether Big Brother Orwell is watching or not.