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INTRODUCTION

Orwell, My "Orwell"

Rationale of the Book

Becoming George Orwell: Life and Letters, Legend and Legacy pursues the bizarre saga of a leitmotif: the posthumous pilgrimage of author into apocrypha. What concerns us is the metamorphosis of a man of letters, the writer George Orwell, into a titanic totem, the icon "Orwell." Throughout the following dozen chapters, I draw a distinction between Orwell's "work" and his "Work." That distinction emerged vividly in our account in the Prologue of how the media's feeding frenzy about "alternative facts" eclipsed and elided the writer Orwell into the *bête noir* "Orwell." (Recall that one reporter dubbed the Trump spokeswoman's now-famous euphemism "a George Orwell phrase.")

This same distinction between Orwell and "Orwell"—between the work and the Work—is also captured in my subtitle. Essentially, the book is divided into two sections. The first half-dozen chapters address the "Life and Letters" of Orwell. The subsequent pages ponder the "Legend and Legacy" of "Orwell," with the concluding chapters meditating on "Orwell, *My* 'Orwell,' " in which I speak in a very personal way about Orwell's patrimony in terms of my own inheritance. I call Orwell "my intellectual big brother," and I can jest that I could have subtitled this book "Scrivener and Soul Brother."

As it proceeds to discuss in detail all these topics sequentially, *Becoming George Orwell: Life and Letters, Legend and Legacy* begins

with a consideration in Part 1 of Orwell's personal life and literary achievement, spotlighting variously the eccentricities of the English Quixote, his lifelong disputatious debate with a schoolmate acquaintance, his little-noticed transition from apprentice writer "Eric Blair" into prose laureate "George Orwell," and both the fictional masterpieces of his last years and his accomplishments in nonfiction.

The chapters in Part 2 explore diverse aspects of Orwell's colossal reputation and checkered heritage. Here the scope broadens further as the narrative ranges across Orwell's ambiguous afterlife. An opening pair of chapters addresses Orwell's uncanny resemblance to a pair of *engagé* leftist French contemporaries, illuminating aspects of his stature both as a *littérateur* and *intellectuel* and as a figure of world literature. As we shall see, he bears comparison in striking respects with a fellow odd fellow, the little-remembered novelist Jean Malaquais, and with a famous odd man out, the heterodox radical Albert Camus. (Orwell's mother was partly French, and France was the only European nation outside Britain in which Orwell spent any substantial length of time—except for his months as a militiaman on the Catalonian front in the Spanish Civil War—having lived as a young man in Paris during his late 20s and returned there as a war reporter for the *Observer* in 1945.)[1]

Succeeding chapters explain the how and why of Orwell's posthumous fame and, in particular, the astonishing apotheosis of "the Orwell legend" and the birth of the canonical figure of mythic proportions, "St. George" Orwell. Those developments have resulted in a strangely silhouetted afterlife, one both radiantly shining and ruthlessly smeared, as the next pair of chapters discuss. The outcome is an image ever oscillating between light and darkness. First he is exalted as a "pious agnostic" and religious fellow traveler (indeed a near-saint for many Catholic intellectu-

als despite his anti-Catholic animus). Moments later he is the Big Brother bogeyman, the "Orwellian" doomsday prophet of endless warfare, whether cold or cyber.

As the book presents these episodes in Orwell's controversial afterlife, we witness the interplay of legend and legacy in world history. Our gaze then lowers from these scenes on the international stage and the study closes on a personal note, concluding with a meditation about Orwell's influence on my own political and moral outlook and, in a final contemplation, with a speculation on the future of his heritage, "Whither Orwell—and 'Orwell'?"

"Double" Trouble

But who—or what—*is* this haunting, spectral presence "Orwell"? And what indeed *is* the relationship between Orwell and "Orwell," work and Work?

"Orwell" is a half-sibling of the man and author Orwell. Forever in stealthy, shadowy pursuit of Orwell, the apparition "Orwell" frequently impersonates Orwell; conversely, Orwell is commonly mistaken for "Orwell" in public discourse. Locked in a *Blutsbrüderschaft*—indeed a death embrace borne in the dying writer's throes of fathering *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—the pair have come to share numerous (elective) affinities that all too often render them easily confused doubles. The *doppelgänger* motif in general and the issue of mistaken identities in particular is a recurrent theme of this book, but it is less a question of the historical George Orwell meeting the apparition "Orwell" than a matter of us twenty-first-century citizens lighting upon "Orwell" and—with a shock of recognition—glimpsing ourselves in the Other. Our encounter with the *doppelgänger* "Orwell" is an uncanny experience of the strange (*das Unheimliche*). Abruptly we glimpse ourselves

in an unfamiliar way—not unlike Dr. Frankenstein beholding himself with awed horror in the fantastical creature to whom he has given life.[2]

Throughout the following chapters, I draw attention to the diverse manifestations of the *doppelgänger* "Orwell" and its complex relation to Orwell the man and writer. To remain alert to such matters keeps us poised on the precipice of mass psychodrama, for "Orwell" is typically perceived as a Frankenstein monster—or a Mr. Hyde—who disturbs and dims our proud personae as fair Children of Light. "Orwell" holds up the mirror to ourselves, tilting it so as to provoke us into endless rumination and self-interrogation: Are we really the grand heirs of Enlightenment liberalism, deputized to advance Liberty, extend Equality, and foster Brotherhood?[3] It is a sign of our cultural neurosis that such an examination necessarily exposes the precariousness of identity for us postfactual postmoderns.

Let us return to the relation between the man and author Orwell and "Orwell." From one angle, it is of course unfortunate that George Orwell is doubled with the dark and often dastardly phantasm "Orwell." Yet, in another sense, the pairing points to the doubleness within the writer Orwell himself, who was the author not only of the limpid, plain prose of the fine essays, but also of Newspeak and the party slogans of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As a result, the literary artistry of Orwell brilliantly enables us to recognize the "Orwell" within ourselves, even as we might hear him say: "*Nineteen Eighty-Four, c'est moi!*"[4]

And yet, even as we concede that point, we may imagine that if Orwell met his spectral double in a Fleet Street pub, he might well not recognize himself in the Other—any more than we tend to recognize ourselves in "Orwell" either. The distance between the Prose Laureate of English and the quacking duckspeaker of Newspeak is so great as to seem incommensurable. The Orwell

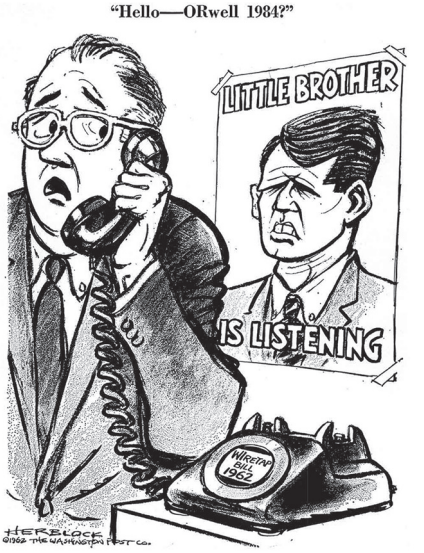

FIGURE 4. As this Cold War cartoon attests, the language and imagery of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were already being used to satirize wiretapping in the 1960s, long before the twenty-first century. Moreover, not only Republican presidents such as George W. Bush (and Donald Trump, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, etc.) have been deemed "Orwellian." Here the famous political cartoonist Herblock mocks the administration of a Democratic president, John F. Kennedy. The cartoon depicts a citizen of the (Amerikan?) Empire picking up the phone, only to realize that the Thought Police agents of "Little Brother" (aka the president's younger brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy) are on the line.

The cartoon's title, "Hello—ORwell 1984," reflects the characteristic blurring and conflation of the bogeyman behemoth "Orwell" and George Orwell, the author renowned for intellectual integrity, encapsulating the Frankenstein "creature vs. creator" motif that we have highlighted throughout this book. (Was Herblock's "ORwell 1984" title also meant to imply that the last four digits of the Justice Department's hotline are 1-9-8-4—and thus perhaps to allude to the John Birch Society, which had by this time adopted those digits in the phone number of its Washington office?)

avatar appears at a glance to bear no relation to the noble Defender of the King's English. Nonetheless, given its multifarious low-toned hues and somber shadings, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may stand as Orwell's truest autobiography—as well as a most revealing biography of the post–World War II age.

As I have repeatedly discovered throughout my work, this imponderable figure, "Orwell," contains multitudes. In this respect Orwell/"Orwell" invites us to approach him as a character in a novel—a novel co-authored, as it were, by Orwell himself and by the literary acquaintances who have memorialized him. Their memoirs make it clear that the greatest character that Orwell (and Eric Blair) ever invented was in fact George Orwell.

His Ever-Living Voice

These figurative pairs—Orwell and "Orwell," work and Work—function as personified metaphors to guide local argument and furnish global structure in this book. As such, they mark a new and exciting departure from my previous studies of Orwell and his heritage. Never before have I devoted so much attention to matters of biography and literary criticism, the "Life and Letters" of Part 1. Nor have I ever dared to broach at such length the issue of Orwell's complex heritage in terms of my own personal legacy—or pondered how my intellectual life and scholarship have unfolded in and through my engagement with him.

To address how the interpretive frame of Orwell/"Orwell" and work/Work configures Western cultural politics and current events of social consequence, let me share here a pair of questions I am often asked: Is George Orwell as important today as he was a few decades ago? Is Orwell's work still pertinent to and powerful for a new generation of readers and intellectuals?

I shall return to these subjects in the Conclusion, but my immediate response is this: the work is arguably not as important today, but the Work indisputably is. The distinction mirrors that between Orwell, the writer and man on the one hand, and "Orwell," the literary figure, political icon, and cultural talisman on the other hand. Given this kind of distinction, I would say that his Work, that is, the work of "Orwell," is not only as important today, but almost as timely as it was during his lifetime and in the later twentieth century. So too is the work represented by widely anthologized essays such as "Why I Write" (1946), which shows how an engaged citizen speaks out and maintains moral and intellectual integrity. And to no small extent because it flowed from the pen of a committed writer who was himself perceived to have exhibited a high degree of literary and ethical integrity, such prose has resonated deeply with successive generations of readers. For it is the work of a man and author, George Orwell, who possessed an artistic power and moral credibility borne of writing from the bones, whereby you live what you write and write from the depths of your experience.

This capacity to *speak* so compellingly on paper represents one of the vigorous and enduring strengths of Orwell's prose style, the perception that readers gain of an ever-living voice and of an honest human being expressing difficult truths. It is a plain, unadorned style, empowered by a voice so fresh, direct, and clear that we feel we are holding audiobooks of our own making, what the Germans call *sprechende Bücher*. And it is an artfully simple (deceptively so!) style through which we encounter a very humanizing portrait of the intellectual.

Ultimately, Orwell's work has given rise to the Work of "Orwell," and this latter pair is as important and timely as ever. That is the case not only because of the fact that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become a generic metaphor in the war of words—given its

warnings against excessive government power, invasions of privacy, abuses of freedom, violations of human rights, bowdlerization of language, and on and on. As I have emphasized, it is also because Orwell's own life exemplifies how to be an outspoken citizen generally and how to be an intellectual in particular. As magnificent as some of Orwell's literary essays are, he was not first and foremost an armchair critic pronouncing his views about high culture and the classics, but rather an intellectual who wrote for the age, not the ages. Ironically, he has managed to speak powerfully to his time and our own.

Although I have written books on American and European public intellectuals, the English novel, the politics of culture in Germany, Latin American fiction, the literary interview, human rights abuses, comparative communist and capitalist education, and other topics, I have always returned to Orwell. His life and letters, his legend and legacy, have all preoccupied me. I have felt a powerful connection with him and with particular aspects of his thought and literary personality or persona.

Much of a person's response to anyone has to do with his or her generational relationship. This is also true with respect to a writer, as I discovered in conducting numerous interviews both with Orwell's old friends and acquaintances and also with several of his immediate intellectual contemporaries who responded to him as generational coevals in his own life. By contrast, I am two or three generations removed not only from Orwell's era but even from the posthumous publication of his writings, most of which appeared by the mid-1950s, before I was born. As a result, by the time I embarked on a serious inquiry into Orwell's *oeuvre*, the scholarly ground had already been well tilled. By the mid-1980s, more than three decades after his death, his books had sold in the tens of millions in five-dozen languages, and I beheld a Brob-

dingnagian spectre ("Call me 'Orwell'") straddling the planet and dwarfing (and overshadowing) the now-famous man of letters. The writer George Orwell had become a world-historical figure, but the ever-lengthening ("Orwellian") shadow of "Orwell" had become far more visible and widely known. And so the critical task was at least as much to make sense of his Work, of the unique phenomenon of "Orwell," as it was the investigation and interpretation of his writings themselves.

My point here is that historical timing induced me to make "Orwell," even more so than George Orwell, the focus of my work decades ago—and the media attention riveted ever after on this spectral presence has continued to direct my own critical inquiries during the last 30-odd years. For if the analysis of his writings had already reached a very sophisticated and, in certain areas, near-definitive status by the early 1980s, this was not at all true of "Orwell" as a literary icon, cultural symbol, and political talisman. No scholar or intellectual had closely investigated his outsized reputation. In my first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, published in 1989, I set myself this challenging task. My aim was to discuss not only Orwell's writings, but also the phenomenon of "Orwell."

"If you want to understand Orwell," Richard Rees once remarked, "you have to understand Blair." Even more so, I would contend: If you want to understand "Orwell," you have to understand Orwell. And so, while much has been written about the process of "Eric Blair" becoming "George Orwell" (one biography refers to it, in its subtitle, as *The Transformation*), the following pages discuss what might be called the transmogrification of Orwell into "Orwell." This is a much bigger, more far-reaching, and more nebulous matter, virtually unbounded in scope, as a series of studies I have conducted about the history of Orwell's reputation and impact in the modern world attest. Indeed, I might

title them *Orwell Unbound*, or rather *"Orwell" Unbound*, thereby highlighting the immense, incalculable, and seemingly measureless character of the reception and influence of "Orwell."

And yet: Might it be that the genius of Blair/Orwell is not to be found, at least not chiefly, in his writings, whether fiction or nonfiction? A case can be made that the greatness of Orwell was in the man, whose originality and uniqueness inspired a wide circle of friends and acquaintances to apotheosize him almost immediately upon his death. This is another sense in which we can speak of "Orwell." In this characterization, the quotation marks refer not to a bogeyman, but to a literary figure "transfigured" by those who met him, the figure of "George Orwell" in all of his endearing eccentricities (his love of schoolboy papers such as boys' weeklies), odd-man-out oddities (his acrid shag cigarettes that he proudly rolled himself), and outlandish proclamations ("All tobacconists are fascists!").

In saying all this, I reverse the judgment of Bernard Crick in his biography of Orwell: "The work is greater than the man." Certainly a touch of genius is there in the books, especially in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and arguably in *Homage to Catalonia* and several of the brilliant essays. Yet it strikes me forcefully, on turning from the books to the memories of those who met Blair/Orwell, whether they loved or hated him, that his literary gifts represent only a fraction of his curriculum vitae.[5] Orwell stands, as A. N. Wilson once wrote of a very different writer and thinker, Hilaire Belloc, "at the opposite end of the spectrum from Shakespeare, a genius wholly subsumed in his work and who, by all accounts, 'gave' little in actual meeting." Orwell was much more like Dr. Johnson, whom Wilson also places at the Belloc pole as a man who was mythologized "by his intimates" even though he too composed "no one literary work by which this belief could be sustained."[6] Perhaps to an extent even greater than that of John-

son, the enduring power of this figure "Orwell" consists not so much in what he wrote as in what he was—or rather "became." Or still better: is *perceived* to have become.

So "Orwell" is not just a matter of haunting catchwords and horrifying nightmare visions. It is equally, if not more so, about the man whom we have caricatured and canonized. In this sense "becoming George Orwell" is also fundamentally about the process of what could be called "figuration." Or, as his friend Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in a diary entry shortly after Orwell's death, marveling at the memorial tributes to and growing reputation of "George," the story of Orwell's afterlife is also about "how the legend of a human being is created," about how a man "becomes" a myth. It is both fortunate and unfortunate that Orwell was memorialized not by one Boswell, but by several well-intentioned yet partial memoirists—among them Muggeridge, Julian Symons, George Woodcock, Tosco Fyvel, Cyril Connolly, Bertrand Russell, Stephen Spender, and Richard Rees. They have all bequeathed us vivid portraits of the author as a middle-aged man.

Freelancing in the Footsteps of "St. George"

Not only for me but also for many of my peers and elders, Orwell seemed, as I titled a later book, "every intellectual's big brother." Decades earlier I had already discovered that I was simply following in a long line of impassioned readers, whether enthusiasts or enemies. In *Every Intellectual's big brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings* (2006)—the lowercase usage is meant to specify Orwell rather than "Orwell"—I described how other intellectuals have responded to Orwell and how we are all part of a literary family. My own stirring and powerful attraction to Orwell, both his life and his *oeuvre*, eventually led me to study the writing of

his admirers and even his antagonists. I found myself ardently drawn to those who esteemed Orwell, albeit often at a different historical moment and for different reasons than myself, such as the group of New York intellectuals associated with *Partisan Review* between the 1930s and 1990s, one of whom (Dwight Macdonald) became personally acquainted with Orwell through extensive correspondence. I began to interview and write about many of these generational peers of Orwell, who were my own American intellectual elders. If I could not meet Orwell personally, I could at least get to know them. I could in fact visit and get to know them far more easily than I could Orwell's aging British colleagues across the Atlantic.

On a more personal (or more visceral) level, I feel a special affinity with Orwell because I identify with his battle, like my own, to become an independent writer and intellectual. That struggle has never been easy, but it is even more difficult today than it was in Orwell's time, because the Western academy has swallowed up intellectual life and regurgitated academic specialists, most of whom do not write for the public or in an accessible idiom. There is no institution—whether in the form of Ph.D. or creative writing programs or law schools or think tanks—that forms intellectuals.

Today as ever—all the certification bodies, credentialing institutions, MFA workshops, and graduate and postgraduate fellowship programs notwithstanding—the vocation of the intellectual can only be pursued and practiced in the time-honored way that, assisted by his generational ancestors, Orwell also followed. What way is this? Sustained by yearning and will, you immerse yourself in the work of those who have gone before you and have become serious writers and intellectuals themselves.

Or, as I put it in *Every Intellectual's big brother*, you "adopt" an intellectual big brother or big sister. You ingest his or her work as a way of realizing your own best self as a writer and human being.

Orwell had the advantage of belonging to a large London literary community supported by numerous little magazines and intellectual quarterlies. Nowadays these urban communities, whose hubs were typically literary reviews or cultural quarterlies, have almost vanished. The university has replaced them with remunerative employment that is far more comfortable yet forms a very different creature than the traditional intellectual. I have written about this shift in my forthcoming book *The Intellectual Species: Evolution or Extinction?*, in which I describe how the "species" of the traditional literary intellectual, who addresses the broader public on issues of common national and international concern, is gravely endangered today. The rise of the adjective "public," as in "public intellectual," has coincided with the death of the species. Decades ago, one never needed to distinguish between a "public" intellectual and other kinds of intellectuals. But now that the academic or the policy intellectual—the resident species of the higher education institutions or Washington think tanks—dominates the scene, a sea change has occurred: a loose fish swimming freely against the nets that would hold him (such as in Melville's *Moby Dick*) and speaking out to the wider public on diverse issues of common interest is all too uncommon.

I have embraced Orwell warmly, if also gingerly and cautiously, as an intellectual big brother. I once wrote an open letter to voice my debt to him and explain why I have devoted such a substantial part of my life and intellectual energy to him and his heritage. I began to realize in the 1980s that I had adopted Orwell as my intellectual big brother as a way of discovering and resolving my own issues of personal identity as a writer and aspiring intellectual. Orwell came into my life at a moment when my needs and dreams could be clarified by glimpsing the Orwell in myself, that is, by seeing how we were indeed brothers of a different generation, elder and (very) junior men of letters.

If I have also devoted myself to "Orwell" and to his Work—and thus to the author's literary and political legacy—I discern that this decision also has had to do with his influence on me—or rather on my wider worlds of culture, society, and politics. Orwell lends himself to this purpose in a distinctive way, because he has become a world-historical individual, what Jean-Paul Sartre referred to as a "singular universal," a rare being whose existential trajectory (inadvertently?) situates him at a historical crossroads where he somehow manages to touch on universal concerns through his singular life.

The Effluence of His Influence

Orwell is the most important writer since Shakespeare and the most influential writer who has ever lived. Quite a bold claim! Let me clarify it, if not qualify it. I do not say that he is the greatest imaginative writer, nor even the leading novelist of his generation. I do not even mean that he is the best-selling writer of all time. I make no exalted claims for the intrinsic quality of his work versus that of other writers.

Rather, I'm speaking simply about cultural impact and the effluence of his influence.[7] No English-language writer in recent generations has aroused so much controversy and inspired so many younger writers and intellectuals. Certainly no one before or after Orwell has contributed so many incessantly quoted words and phrases to our cultural lexicon. "Big Brother is watching you!" is the most famous and frequently cited line in twentieth-century literature—and no runner-up is even close.[8] Indeed his very name as a proper adjective is quoted in numerous languages tens of thousands of times per year. His appeal both to serious readers and to academics and intellectuals—his "literary band-

width," as it were—knows no comparison. It is in these respects that I use the phrases "most important" and "most influential."

Undeniably, I was not alive either when he lived or when most of his posthumous work was published in the first post–World War II decade. As the year 1984 crept ever nearer and the "countdown" mentality took hold, however, I witnessed with fascination the rise of the world-historical "Big O," that ever-looming leviathan that incarnated the severely abridged, sensationalized Work and came to be represented by the master sign "Orwell" and mobile-missile-metaphor "Orwellian."

Of course, "Orwell" is a double-edged sword. This is the bogeyman behemoth, the "Orwellian" spectre of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Big Brother who is quoted and misquoted in legions of contexts.[9] Both the Work and "Orwell" (or "Orwellian") have been invoked *ad nauseam* in contemporary discussions about the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Saddam Hussein and Vladimir Putin (and Donald Trump—and Barack Obama), and so forth. "Orwell" possesses a dark, sometimes raven-black, side, but I have been concerned with both the darkness and the light, that is, the full palette of the literary legacy—the iridescent, multicolored portraits as well as the sketches in sepia gracing the gallery in all their wondrous variety and ambiguity. "Orwell" can be used for positive ends, but typically he has been abused for ends that the man and writer would never have endorsed and perhaps never even have imagined. Surely George Orwell would have objected to the monochromatic view of him as a Cold Warrior and even more fiercely, as he did late in his lifetime, to his reputation in some quarters as an antisocialist.

I have sought to clarify with scholarly accuracy his legacy and not to indulge in the practice of robbing his grave or moving his coffin to the left or to the right for my own political purposes. I readily grant, however, that every person has his or her blind spots

and biases. And so I have aimed here again in the present study to declare my own interests and convictions, thereby to render my "color filter" discernible so that the reader may know: *Caveat lector!* And so forewarned may you perceive how I inevitably, inescapably (re)construct my storied Orwell—and "Orwell"—through the lens of my own history and subjectivity.

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