



Dickens in George Orwell's Literary Criticism

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George Orwell (pseudonym of Eric Blair, 1903-1950) born in India, educated at Eton; wounded in action while fighting for the anarchists during the Spanish war. Perhaps all modern readers recognize Orwell as the author of *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Animal Farm*, but only few of people who happen to be Orwell enthusiasts, know him as an excellent essayist, literary critic, political satirist and journalist. This paper focuses on Orwell's literary criticism on Dickens and other writers. Special attention shall be paid to the moral aspect in his criticism.

ملخص البحث

ولد الروائي جورج اورويل في الهند عام ١٩٠٣ وتوفي في انكلترا عام ١٩٥٠. وكانت الروايتين حقل الحيوانات و ١٩٨٤ من اهم اعماله التي جعلته مشهورا. غير ان قلة من القراء تعرف ان اورويل كان كاتب مقالات من الطراز الاول وكان صحفيا ماهرا كما انه مارس النقد الادبي بشكل واضح. وكاتب البحث يحاول ان يسلط الضوء على هذا الجانب غير المعروف عن الروائي المذكور. وسوف نتعرض للنقد الذي وجهه اورويل لجارلس دكنز وبعض الكتاب الاخرين مع التركيز على اضهار العنصر الاخلاقي في نقده الادبي.



Introduction

George Orwell's popularity is on the ascend and shows no sign of diminishing. If the reason for this survival lies in the speculation triggered by *Nineteen Eighty Four* about the year 1984, then as a prose writer, he would have been dead and long forgotten. The fantasy of *Nineteen Eighty Four* has come into end but the Orwellian cult still lives. His authority on prose writing continues to be appreciated and looked up in August Literary Circles. There is no doubt that, on the one hand, he has been universally acclaimed as an excellent writer, no full length studies are available on certain specific aspects of his multi-dimensional work, on the other. From time to time, his role as a literary critic has caught the attention of several critics, though it has escaped detailed analysis sometimes. It has often been referred to a generalized whole and not as specific and classified entity. Christopher Hollis, a close friend of Orwell, acknowledged in 1956 the literary merit of his critical essays. Speaking of his essay on Dickens, Hollis observed:

Orwell had a competence in what he called 'pure' literary criticism. He could analyze as acutely as another the tricks of the trade- show why a writer did what he did in this essay there some very illuminating observations about Dickens(1).

The term 'pure literary criticism' is thought-provoking. In what sense does Hollis claim the validity of this term? Does he means to say it was clean, unmixed unadulterated criticism or he intended to imply that it was based on pure reason? Certainly, the lines which follow the phrase and qualify it suggest neither the implications .The perplexity of the definition is much solved if the word 'pure' is replaced by the word 'descriptive'. Thereby, it can be said that Orwell had a competence in what is called descriptive literary criticism. George Watson in *The Literary Critics* categorized criticism into three different kinds: (1) legislative (2) theoretical and (3) descriptive. Regarding the third category he says, "Is the analysis of the existing literary works". The 'root' or 'stem' of the word 'descriptive' is 'describe' which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary means to: "to trace out, to delineate, to give an account of". Orwell's own remarks give an estimation of the general quality of his prose writing:

... for fifteen years or more, I was carrying out a literary exercise of a quite different kind: this was the making up of a continuous 'story' about myself, a sort of diary existing only in the reflected the styles of various writers I admired at different ages, but so far as I remember it always had the same meticulous descriptive quality (2).

This confession is significant. It clearly indicates that Orwell had a tendency to identify or share an affinity with writers whom he admires when he was in the process of growing up as writer. Meanwhile, he recognized and valued the trait which is so individualistic in his writing "the same meticulous descriptive quality" which predetermined the nature of his works and made his writing spontaneous, vigorous and forceful. He explains, "as for the need to describe things, I know all about it already... I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions." (I, 25) He did write some descriptive novels at the beginning of his carrier. In *Burmese Days* he admits that he failed to obtain



appreciation and acceptance from the readers. During 1939-1940, he took easy writing intensively- a form which best suited his literary needs. He states:

existing only in the mind...The 'story' must, I suppose, have reflected the styles of the various writers I admire at different ages, but so far as I remember it always had the same meticulous descriptive quality. (3)

He altered the modes of his expression but its quality remained in the region of flowing descriptive quality. Thus, the definitive category to which all his literary work belongs is 'descriptive criticism'. In his *Readers Guide* Meyers states that: "All his essays, whether probably classified as autobiographical, literary, social, political or cultural are primarily and essentially descriptive essays." (4) However George Woodcock says: "Against evaluative and formal criticism he practiced descriptive and discriminative criticism" (5). Thus, Orwell can be seen as a creative writer looking at other creative writers with critical eye and describing his observations in his literary essays. His imagination and sensitivity as a writer makes his characteristics descriptions still more glowing and stimulating.

Orwell and Dickens

Description at its best form is displayed in the essay "Charles Dickens," (1940) one of the earliest and perhaps the longest essays. It deals with the major aspects of Dickens, both the man and the novelist. His attitude to society, class, money, sex, labour, use of details and imagery are explored minutely with the typical Orwellian concern for details. It immediately strikes as the complete study of the world of Dickens's novel presented in a lively and attractive manner.

Orwell views Dickens from the socio-political angle and defends him against the criticism of Mr. T.A. Jackson who called him "a proletariat writer" and Chesterton who saw him a "true revolutionary". According to Orwell, Dickens was neither of the two. He could be called "a rebel" only to the extent that he portrayed revolution "as a case of rioting" and wanted to bring about a change in the existing structure of society through a change in human nature. Orwell states that:

The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral...He attacks the law, the parliamentary government, the educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places...its not that workers ought to be rebellious. (I, 457)

Orwell observes how the comfortable world of Dickens has a special place for innocence, childhood, the zeal for education the quest for an ideal home and security of the presence of the "Good Rich Man." Implicit in Dickens's criticism is Orwell's own understanding of human suffering which comes about from the "abuse of power" and which motivated him to write those two brilliant novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*. The problem which is dealt in both of them is that: "There is always a new tyrant waiting to take over from the old_ generally not quite so bad but still a tyrant". (I, 469) His examination of Dickens is noticeably subtle. He balances and opposes Dickens's strength and weaknesses. He admires Dickens for "loathing the aristocrats and sympathizing with the poor." Though "all his heroes have soft hands" except for one or two none of them works. Orwell interestingly remarks how Dickens "never writes about agriculture" but



“writes endlessly” about food. He is excellent “at evoking visual images” and also at “providing unnecessary details”. His characters are “memorable” but they “behave inconsistently”. Besides “there are large areas of human problems that he never touches,” in his novels.

It has been said repeatedly that writers and critics have special attraction for those authors who have influenced them personally or professionally at some stage in their lives. The resemblances between Orwell and Dickens are immense and it is fascinating to study them at the biographical and psychological level. Both were sent to school at the age of eight; Dickens was sent to the academy of Mr. Giles in Chattam and Orwell to St. Cyprians. Both were bright students and avid readers in spite of unpropitious atmosphere at home. Orwell's cruel treatment at school was the emotional equivalence of Dickens's servitude in the blacking factory. Both men bore scars of humiliating experience of early childhood. Jeffrey Meyers recollects that Orwell's family made “financial sacrifices for his education”.⁽⁶⁾ And Orwell notes how Dickens was brought up “in an atmosphere of struggling poverty”. Both “had grown up near enough to poverty to be terrified of it.”^(I, 475) Orwell's view on the working class quite resembles that of Dickens. His journey into the world of tramps in the late twenties sparked off much speculation but Orwell became their champion not because he was identified with them but because he possessed a kind of “generalized sympathy” with them because they were oppressed. Orwell goes further to say that: “However much Dickens may admire the working class, he does not wish to resemble them. Given his origins and the understanding of time he lived in, it could hardly be the otherwise”. ^(I, 478) Dickens's message is Orwell's message: “If men would behave decently, the world would be decent.” ^(I, 455)

The next essay which exhibits powerful description is “Boys Weeklies”. It is a fairly long essay “written in a lively and entertaining manner”⁽⁷⁾. It presents a complete though occasionally rash view of the world of the boy's two penny weeklies, popularly called the “penny dreadfuls”. (This phrase was coined by Chesterton which Orwell borrowed and made fun of.) After providing the minutest details of the Gem and Magnet, as far as their subject matter, themes, characterization, language, style, social and political milieu, resemblances with works and vast circulation is concerned, Orwell foils them with other weeklies (Modern Boy, Triumph, Wizard, Rover, Skipper, Hotspur and Adventure) to show how the former catered to psychology and the latter attracted by their technical superiority. “Where as the Gem and Magnet drives from Dickens and Kipling, the Wizard, Champion, Modern Boys etc, owe a great deal to H.G. Wells, who...is the father of ‘Scientification’ ”.^(I,521) A noticeable thing here is that Orwell highlights a quality (whether positive or negative) through contrast rather than by comparison in degree, a technique which he employs distinctively in his essays on Dickens and Kipling. He states:

As soon as one looks at these papers one sees their technical superiority to the Gem and Magnet. To begin with, they have great advantage of not being written entirely by one person. Instead of one long complete story, a manner, a number of the Wizard or Hotspur consists of half a dozen or more serials, none of which goes on for ever. Consequently there is far more



variety and far less padding, and none of the tiresome stylization and factitiousness of the Gem and Magnet (I, 519)

In the end what emerges is the panorama of the world of Boys' weeklies. Every minute detail of the paper is displayed with interest and curiosity. It is difficult to get hold of a copy of the Gem or Magnet after an interval of fifty years but a reading of this essay seems to afford the same pleasure as one would have derived if he were going through one of these papers. Philip Mairet writes:

Take the essay on Boys Weeklies. Many hours of intelligent curiosity and alert social interest must have been spent by Orwell upon these superficially insignificant publications, and many remembered since his school days and now his effort to extract their human and social meaning amount almost to a thrilling journey through some darkest Africa of the world of letters, of which he is the only living stone (8).

The third essay to be discussed is "Inside the Whale". Where as the two previous essays provide the graphic description of one particular author and one particular form of literature, this contains multifarious description. Orwell describes more than one author and more than one literary period and he does even more.

"Inside the Whale" begins with the description of Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* (1931) compared and contrasted with Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Voyage au bout de la Nuit*, two novels with which it was "vaguely associated". The description also brings in Whitman whose point of view was the same as that of Miller's in *Tropic of Cancer*.

Miller's outlook is deeply akin to that of Whitman, and nearly everyone who has read him has remarked on this. *Tropic of Cancer* ends with an especially Whitmanesque passage in which...he simply sits down and watches the Seine flowing past, in a sort of mystical acceptance of the thing-as-it-is.(I, 547)

What Orwell is trying to point out is that Miller's attitude towards the war and his age was different from the general attitude of writers in his period. He escaped from the current literary fashion of the period. Instead of rebelling or aligning with the political philosophy of the writers of his time, he preferred to stay aloof.

In an attempt to define Miller's position, Orwell sets out to present the literary environment and the development of English literature, in the first three decades of the twentieth century. He discusses the popularity of Houseman as a country poet of the 1910 which was later eclipsed by the Joyce-Eliot movement of the twenties. "If the keynote of the Georgian poets was beauty of nature, the keynote of the post-war writers would be tragic sense of life". (I, 555) He gives an account of the social political and literary condition of these two decades till they revolve and usher in a third group- the Auden -Spencer group. This group revolted against the negative and pessimistic attitude of their predecessors and introduced 'a serious purpose' into literature. They were moving "in the direction of some rather ill defined thing called communism." (I, 561) Then Orwell gives a long account of the invasion of politics in England and Europe which consequently led to war. He is appalled at the precarious conditions of creative artists who lost their liberty and autonomous will to create independent literature due to the political interference. In



the final section Orwell returns to Henry Miller with whom he shares a sense of impending ruin of the modern civilization. Unlike Orwell, Miller "does not feel called upon to do anything about it". Though it seems justified to Orwell, he feels morally bound to stay out and raise his voice because the age of totalitarian dictatorship was marching ahead, the freedom of thought was on its way to become "a deadly sin and later a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence". (I, 567)

He thinks that something ought to be done about this and the world should be warned even if the warning does no good. Though this essay is devoted to political thought, it has been included in this section with special intention. All three essays, "Charles Dickens", "Boys Weeklies" and "Inside a Whale" were written in 1939 and published in 1940. They contain totally different themes but their treatment demonstrates "the same meticulous descriptive quality" which is so special to Orwell. All the three were much appreciated and revived by critics. In this respect Max Plowman writes:

Ostensibly, his new book [Inside the Whale] consists of three first class essays: on Charles Dickens, on Boys Weeklies and on the writing of Henry Miller. But George Orwell has a unitary in selecting these very different subjects. He wants to examine the nature of the world we live in, and he does it by contrast by examining peculiar in order to show the norm(9).

It should be accepted that the kind of criticism Orwell produced should be regarded as valid only for the period in which he lived and wrote. Literary criticism, like creative writing, is not stagnant. It is an ever evolving process an ever changing phenomenon. Every age has its own peculiar creative and critical bent of mind and all literary artists are affected by their local atmosphere. Orwell's age was more political than the period immediately preceding it; it was one beset by various contradictory ideological and nationalistic interests. It was a matter of great distress that both the creative writer and the literary critic were being involved into the political process, more than perhaps what would be considered healthy for the freedom of the intellectual. It is admirable that when other critics had either turned their backs or contributed willingly to it, Orwell dared to raise his voice against it. An overriding purpose did impose certain limitation on his work but he seems to have been content to work amidst them. His "message" was all important for him and it is precisely this message which made him a moralist critic of the highest order.

Most English critics before Arnold assumed that all poetry was morally edifying. Dryden thought that "delight" and "instruction" ought to be the two equal contents of all poetry. Johnson, in his "Preface to Shakespeare" said that "it is always the writer's duty to make the world better", but in the twentieth century, the shape of moralistic criticism changed and Arnold may well be considered the turning point. The modern moralist does not take for granted the literature is basically edifying; he attempts to show how and where life needs to be edified and uses literature as an instrument to communicate, to get across to his readers. Orwell was essentially a "moralist". He could not accept the degenerating state of literature or literary criticism. He vehemently attacked all those forces which, he thought, were harming



the writer or the critic and directed his attack at the root causes. The essay “Charles Dickens” displays his moral viewpoint at its best. He appreciated Dickens’s sense of decency which he had inherited from the novelists and shared with him a special affinity even where his morality was concerned.

Orwell’s moralism was all embracing. Whether he was criticizing the impact of politics on literature or talking about society or popular literature, his tone was always that of moralist aiming at reformation. George Watson in *The Literary Critics*, has pointed out that the critical interest in Orwell was “a late extension of some wider moral purpose”. He said:

George Orwell...may be taken as the eternal model of modern English moralist ... the influence of such men(Orwell and Lawrence) stands highest in an age which, like thirties and forties is avid for moral certainties of a novel kind(10).

It is a false charge that the range of his criticism is limited. One has only to perceive that instead of looking back to the literature of the past – that of Chaucer or Spencer, he widened his critical canvas to include contemporary European consciousness. He talks about Ignazio Silone, Andre Malraux, Victor Serge, Celine and devoted full length essays to Arthur Koestler and Leo Tolstoy. Secondly, he turned to the criticism of popular literature – that of P.G.Wodehouse, comic postcards, boys weeklies, and stepped into an area which was scorned and looked down upon. He first and foremost a moralist literary critic but in a wider sense, he falls in direct line with cultural critics, a tradition beginning with Arnold and further carried on by F.R. Leavis ,Orwell himself, Trilling and George Steiner. Literary Criticism in the twentieth century did not remain a domain of one particular type of criticism. It was divided into areas of specialized approaches. The neo-critics, structuralists, formalists, and psychological critics focused on particular works of art. The biographical critics and cultural critics asked questions related to a total world view, to cultural influence and to human freedom. Where on the one hand there was a tendency to limit the critical approach to the written word, to the world of the text, there was on the other, an impulse to use the text as a take off point so that all the factors that had gone into the making of it could be properly understood and explained.

The concentration on the political issues and ideological commitments in the 1930s and 1940s pointed to a narrowing down of the horizon. At this period, the moral note and the stance of neutrality which Orwell tried to strike was unique. He tried to free the literary critic from the ideological hold and to render him as objective as was possible. It was Orwell’s message – off sincerity, of truthfulness of “disinterestedness” , as Arnold called it, that has been left behind for all creative writers and literary critics to follow.



Notes

- (1) Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell*. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956), p.120.
- (2) "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, Penguins, 1970 I, 24.
- (3) "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, Penguins, 1970I I, 34.
- (4) Jeffery Meyers: *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell* (London: James and Hudson, 1975), p.49.
- (5) George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit*, (Penguin Books, 1966), p.63.
- (6) Jeffrey Meyers, *A Readers Guide to George Orwell*, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1975) , p.21.
- (7) Frank Richards, "Frank Richard Replies", *CEJL*, I, 531.
8. Philip Mairet , *New English Weekly*, (14 March 1940), p.307.
- (9) Max Plowman, *Adelphi* (April, 1940) p. 316.
- (10) George Watson, *The Literary Critics*, (Penguin Books, 1962), p.219.

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