

George Orwell and the Classics

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Classically trained at St. Cyprian's and Eton, George Orwell was deeply immersed in the classical tradition. His intellectual relationship to that tradition, however, was never easy or comfortable. It is, in fact, one of the few unresolved paradoxes of Orwell's intellectual life that he both disparaged classics as a snobbish and useless relic of a more benighted age but could never quite free himself from its allure. The ambivalence is striking since, of the intellectuals of his generation, Orwell was unsurpassed in his capacity for self-criticism: "as a writer," it has recently been said, "Orwell was forever taking his own temperature."¹ But as several documents only recently made available attest,² Orwell remained ambivalent about his classical heritage, even on his deathbed. Thus at some point in 1948 he drew up a list of Latin words and phrases to be purged from English usage altogether but a short time later took deep offense at what he characterized as a "blasphemous" advertisement for Wolsey Socks ("Fit for the gods"), which depicts a god of the Greco-Roman type wearing Wolsey's patented "Duo-shrunk" undergarment.³ Near the end of his life, Orwell agonized over whether his adopted son Richard should be sent to a state-run elementary school or a public preparatory school and, with more

¹ C. Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 128.

² Many new documents began to appear in print after the publication of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (hereafter *CEJL*) vols. 1-4 (London: Secker and Warburg: 1968), and these have now been collected in the monumental *The Complete Works of George Orwell* (hereafter *CWGO*) vols. 10-20, edited by Peter Davison, assisted by Ian Angus and Sheila Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998).

³ Latin words to be purged: *CWGO* 19.507-512; socks advertisement (contained in a letter to Malcolm Muggeridge, ca. 25 October 1949): P. Davison and D. J. Taylor, "Like autumn in a garden: New light on the friendship between George Orwell and Malcolm Muggeridge," *TLS* May 30 2003, 14-15.

than a twinge of regret and liberal-democratic guilt, decided on the latter (Westminster, of all places).⁴

Because our knowledge of Orwell has been thus enriched, it is perhaps time to revisit a topic that has never received much attention in any case.⁵ The object here will not be to search for consistency of thought and attitude, which plainly does not exist, but rather to *account* for that attitude. Orwell was a tireless writer (a “graphomaniac”⁶), so the potential field of evidence is vast; on the other hand, a survey of his nonfiction reveals that he also tended to dwell on a rather limited number of specific classics-related themes throughout his life, which can narrow the scope considerably. These themes can most usefully be treated under three heads: education, language, and influence.

Education

Among the most fascinating of the documents that have recently been collected is a series of more than twenty notes from the young Eric Blair to his mother, Ida, charting his progress during his first fifteen months at St. Cyprian’s preparatory school in 1911-1912 (*CWGO* 10.6-19). These are no more than hastily scrawled notes (complete with numerous spelling and grammatical errors: “aclock” for “o’clock,” “aufly” for “awfully,” etc. [*CWGO* 10.9]) in which Blair remarks on his performance in such critical areas as Latin, French, arithmetic—and “footer,” of course. If the young Blair is to be believed,⁷ out of a total of fifteen notes in which his Latin progress is referenced, he was “first” in his Latin class eight times, and “fourth” (the lowest rank he admits to) only twice. Blair seems to have taken to Latin, for as he reflected thirty years later in “Such, Such Were the Joys,” his account of his days at St. Cyprian’s, he was shortly “moved into the scholarship class, which was taught, so far as classics went, largely by

⁴ Orwell’s agonized decision-making: *CEJL* 4.449-52; Westminster: *CEJL* 4.503 and 505.

⁵ A. M. Eckstein, “The Classical Heritage of Airstrip One,” in *The Revised Orwell*, edited by J. Rose (East Lansing: Michigan State U Pr, 1992), 97-116, is the notable exception. In Hitchens’ recent book (above, note 2), he has chapters on “Orwell and the Left,” “O. and the Right,” “O. and Englishness,” “O. and Empire,” “O. and America,” “O. and the Feminists,” as well as an apology for Orwell’s controversial “List” of suspected Communists, but nothing on Orwell and the classics.

⁶ L. Menand, “Honest, Decent, Wrong,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2003, 86.

⁷ There is no reason not to believe him since an adult hand has corrected his letters (thus, in one, his “First” in Latin is corrected to “Second”: B. Crick *George Orwell: A Life* [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980], 18).

Sambo"—Orwell's nickname for his headmaster Mr. Vaughan Wilkes⁸—and in which "Latin and Greek, the main scholarship subjects, were what counted" (*CEJL* 4.336). It was here that, with a mixture of prodding and corporal punishment,⁹ "boys were crammed with learning as cynically as a goose is crammed for Christmas" (*CEJL* 4.336) in preparation for spectacular academic careers at places like Eton, where Blair was indeed eventually sent and would matriculate as a Classical Generalist under the tutelage of the Hellenistic scholar A. S. F. Gow.

Accepted in 1916 to Eton College as a King's Scholar, Blair would prove to be a great disappointment both to his tutors and to his family. Although he began his public school career as a Classical Specialist, he avoided reading the classics curriculum where possible at Eton—he was "always a bit of a slacker and a dodger," according to Gow—and descended to the level of a Classical Generalist (via brief flirtations with General Division and Science), which is where he finished out in 1921, 117th in a graduating class of 140. To Gow at least, this came as no surprise, for Blair had done "absolutely no work for five years."¹⁰ Orwell was inclined to agree: years later he would admit, "I did no work [at Eton] and learned very little" (*CEJL* 2.23).

Controversy swirls around Orwell's mysterious relationship with "m'tutor" Gow. He was one of the last people to see Orwell alive, but claimed that the meeting was purely accidental.¹¹ Gow also denied that he and Orwell "kept in touch" over the years, claiming that Orwell's visit to him in 1927 to seek his advice about starting a literary career was a unique

⁸ On Wilkes, see Crick (above, note 7) 16.

⁹ Orwell recalls Wilkes tapping on his head with a silver pencil to the point of raising welts, pulling his hair, kicking his shins, and pulling him out of Latin class in the middle of a translation, beating him, and then returning him to class to pick up right where he left off—although, Orwell cynically adds, "I doubt whether classical education ever has been or can be successfully carried on without corporal punishment" (*CEJL* 4.338). The young Orwell found corporal punishment "completely disgusting and barbarous," according to a contemporary at Eton: P. Stansky and W. Abrahams, *The Unknown Orwell* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 127.

¹⁰ Gow's comments: Crick (above, note 7), 51 and 73; curriculum and ranking: Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 112-115.

¹¹ Gow claimed to have come to visit another former pupil at University College Hospital in January 1950 when he saw Orwell; Crick (above, note 7) 403 (followed by Eckstein [above, note 5], 116 n. 49) speculates that because years later Gow could not remember the name of the pupil, he "was probably making an excuse in case [Orwell] thought that he had turned soft."

event and that on that occasion he tried to be noncommittal.¹² Gow was angered when “Such, Such Were the Joys” appeared posthumously in 1953 and was still angry in 1967 when he wrote to Sonia Orwell objecting to her late husband’s “monstrously unfair” depiction of St. Cyprian’s and its master, Mr. Vaughan Wilkes, in that essay.¹³ Late in his life, Gow fiercely denied, against Orwell hagiographers, that he ever saw “an authentic intelligence” or potential in the young Blair.¹⁴

What matters here, however, is *Orwell’s* view of Gow. According to Denys King-Farlow, the teenaged Blair “disparag[ed] ‘Grannie Gow’s’ love of Homer as sentimentality,”¹⁵ and even published a wickedly satirical poem about him in the Eton *Election Times* of ca. 1919. “Up Waddled Wog” is a comic scene involving Gow (“Wog”) and John Crace, Master in College at Eton and himself a classicist:

Then up waddled Wog and he squeaked in Greek:
 “I’ve grown another hair on my cheek.”
 Crace replied in Latin with his toadlike smile:
 “And I hope you’ve grown a lovely new pile.
 With a loud deep fart from the bottom of my heart!
 How d’you like Venetian art?” (CWGO 10.52)

This could simply be good-natured ribbing by a waggish, precocious public-school boy (indeed, Eton encouraged such antinomianism, especially in this period¹⁶), besides which satire can, of course, cut both ways. But the testimony of Orwell’s contemporaries, like King-Farlow, as well as his

¹² “I seem to remember that as [Orwell] seemed fairly determined [to pursue a literary career] and had nothing else in mind, I said in a rather noncommittal way that he might as well have a try” (Gow quoted in Crick [above, note 7], 63; Stansky and Abrahams’ exegesis of this statement is overwrought and seems to conflate Orwell’s conversation with Gow with those he had with his father Richard Blair: Stansky and Abrahams [above, note 9], 219).

¹³ Crick (above, note 7), 31.

¹⁴ The opposite is claimed by Denys King-Farlow (quoted in A. Coppard and B. Crick, *Orwell Remembered* [New York: Facts on File, 1984] 57, whence Stansky and Abrahams [above, note 9], 107); Crick (above, note 7), 63, sets the record straight with Gow’s own testimony; Eckstein (above, note 5), 108-109, registers the dispute but does not commit himself.

¹⁵ Crick (above, note 7), 58; Coppard and Crick (above, note 14), 57.

¹⁶ Cf. Crick (above, note 7) 48-49 (with Ronald Knox’s famous quotation, “College shows a healthy spirit of antinomianism—the surest proof of internal soundness”); Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9) 122 (on the antinomianism of Orwell’s Election).

notorious work-shyness at Eton strongly suggest, at least on the surface, that Orwell had little patience for men like “Grannie Gow” and John Crace—and the classics they taught and adored.¹⁷

On the other hand, it is rather odd that Orwell sought Gow’s advice about his decision to become a writer after he resigned from the Imperial Police in Burma in 1927. This was a decisive moment in Orwell’s life, and that he traveled to Cambridge (where Gow was now a Fellow of Trinity College) to consult his old tutor shows, at the very least, that Orwell respected his opinion. There may even be a hint of affection here,¹⁸ as there certainly is in Orwell’s polite letter to Gow in 1946 (*CEJL* 4.148-150, in response, it should be noted, to a letter from *Gow*) describing his activities since he decided to become a writer, that is, after their last meeting in 1927.¹⁹ On the other hand, one visit, one exchange of letters,²⁰ and one (perhaps accidental) hospital visit over the course of twenty-three years do not add up to much.²¹ Perhaps the most that can be said is that this was an extremely complicated relationship between two very different and complex men—as all such master-pupil relationships inevitably are. The young Blair did not seem as concerned as the mature Orwell to seek—and then only *very* occasionally—Gow’s approval, while Gow’s unpleasant memories of Blair the slacker could very well have been informed by his later anger over “Such, Such Were the Joys,” and thus overwhelmed any residual affection he may have felt for his former student.²² Whatever the

¹⁷ Crace once punished Blair for impertinence in the usual way by making him “take a *Georgic*”—writing out four or five hundred lines of Latin verse—but the punishment was rescinded: Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 106.

¹⁸ Crick (above, note 7), 105, followed by Eckstein (above, note 5), 109; cf. Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 122.

¹⁹ In the letter Orwell offers to send Gow a copy of *Animal Farm*, but there is no evidence that his tutor took him up on it.

²⁰ Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 219, seem to believe in “a few exchanges of letters,” as does Eckstein (“a few letters did pass between them”: 109), but I doubt whether they exchanged any until 1946, because Orwell’s letter to Gow of that year fills him in on all that has happened since their last meeting in 1927. Nor is there any evidence for further exchanges between 1946 and the hospital visit in 1950, when Orwell was documenting himself fairly assiduously.

²¹ *Pace* Eckstein (above, note 5), 108.

²² “The old sceptic [Gow], crippled in everything but mind and memory, still felt and showed bitterness that Eric Blair had wasted his own chances and Gow’s time and had ‘written thus venomously’ about St. Cyprian’s” (Crick [above, note 7], 63).

case, Orwell's relationship with and attitude towards Gow is a perfect metaphor for Orwell's ambivalent relationship towards the classics: respectful but distant, contemptuous but perhaps not wholly lacking in affection, sporadic but never completely severed.

Orwell's memories of men like Gow, Crace and Wilkes would haunt his literary imagination for the rest of his life. Characters like Macgregor, the fictional Deputy Commissioner of *Burmese Days* and the very model of a colonial sahib mindlessly quoting "Latin tags"; Mr. Tallboys, the deranged former vicar on the bum in Trafalgar Square in *A Clergyman's Daughter* who randomly spits out bits of garbled classical and liturgical Latin; from the same novel, Mrs. Creevy, the money-grubbing, social-climbing headmistress of a seedy girls' public school who always puts Latin on the prospectus because "it looks classy" to the children's parents; and, most vividly, Porteous, the retired public school master, in *Coming Up for Air*, whose "whole life [is] lived in an atmosphere of Latin, Greek, and cricket"—all of these creations were informed by Orwell's intimate knowledge of such people and his ambivalent reactions to them.

The figure of Porteous is an especially fascinating and informative example of Orwell's mixed feelings towards the classics and his classical education. On the one hand, he is a somewhat sympathetic figure whose retreat from the modern world into classical antiquity is meant to parallel, in a more genteel way, "the shallow and imperceptive nostalgia of George Bowling,"²³ the chief protagonist of *Coming Up for Air*. Bowling is amused and mystified by this strange man who "never reads a modern book [and] refuses to know their names," and whose house has "the classy Oxford feeling of nothing mattering except books and poetry and Greek statues, and nothing worth mentioning having happened since the Goths sacked Rome."²⁴ To a man like Porteous, Hitler and Stalin are little more than names who cannot stand comparison with the great figures of antiquity: "nothing new under the sun," he tells Bowling and then "hauls a book out of the shelves and reads . . . a passage about some Greek tyrant back in the B.C.s who certainly might have been Hitler's twin brother" (*CUA* 185-186). Bowling clearly admires Porteous' learning, and even envies his obliviousness (which can "sometimes . . . be a comfort": *CUA* 182), but his account of their meeting also contains an undertone of frustration and contempt. Porteous only talks "about things that happened centuries ago. Whatever you start off with it always comes back to . . . the Greeks and

²³ Crick (above, note 7), xxi.

²⁴ George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (hereafter *CUA*), reprint (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 183 and 182.

Romans. If you mention the *Queen Mary* he'd start telling you about Phoenician triremes Even if you bring up things like aeroplanes he tells you that they probably had them in Crete, or Mycenae, or wherever it was He thinks [the Great War] was a poor show compared with the siege of Troy" (*CUA* 183-186).

The sense of frustration generated by Orwell here is no accident, of course. Although on one level Porteous is indeed a sympathetic figure, whose escapism mirrors Bowling's own,²⁵ his refusal to engage with the modern world is as deeply problematic as the "gross nostalgia" of the novel's hero.²⁶ Orwell began *Coming Up for Air* long after (and in part because) he intuited that a world war was coming and as early as 1936-37 expressed deep suspicion of political quietism and pacifism—an attitude that would culminate in his branding pacifists during the war as "objectively pro-Fascist."²⁷ It is thus hard to see how the attitudes of Bowling and Porteous wholly reflect Orwell's own at the time of writing. With his head buried more firmly in the sand than Bowling's, Porteous is a classic example of the perennially out-of-touch classics professor under whose watchful eye "probably the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton, but the opening battles of all subsequent wars have been lost there" (*CEJL* 2.68-69)—and who, Orwell believed, had much to answer for. For it was precisely Porteous' sort of willful ignorance and devotion to outmoded public-school values ("Character" rather than intelligence) that landed the world in the predicament it was in by the late 1930s. Porteous is a profound anachronism, one of that Edwardian tribe of "narrow-minded, profoundly incurious people, predatory businessmen, dull squires, bishops, and politicians who could quote Horace but had never heard of algebra . . . pedants, clergymen and golfers [and] dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags" (*CEJL* 2.143-144).

The same line of thinking appears again in Orwell's review of Evelyn Waugh's *Scott-King's Modern Europe*, one of the last pieces he ever wrote. Orwell was sharply critical of Waugh's protagonist:

²⁵ So Eckstein (above, note 5), 108.

²⁶ Cf. Crick (above, note 7), 254: "the gross nostalgia of George Bowling may well have been intended to show both what held him back from being an effective man and what prevented his class from fulfilling an active and distinct political role The nostalgia of the novel as a whole was deliberately ambivalent."

²⁷ Critique of pacifism and pacifists: George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (hereafter *RWP*) (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 170 (pacifism is one of the many "half-baked antinomian opinions" of the period) and 206 (pacifists are "cranks"); cf. *CEJL* 1.280 (a letter to Rayner Heppenstall in which he disagrees with Heppenstall's "pacifist attitude"); "objectively pro-Fascist": *CEJL* 2.180; cf. 2.167 and 3.289.

We are meant to infer [that] in the chaos that is shortly coming, a few moral principles that one can cling to, and perhaps even a few half-remembered odes of Horace or choruses from Euripides, will be more useful than what is now called "enlightenment." There is something to be said for this point of view, and yet one must always regard with suspicion the claim that ignorance is, or can be, an advantage. In the Europe of the last fifty years the diehard, know-nothing attitude symbolized by Scott-King has helped to bring about the very conditions that Mr. Waugh is satirizing. (CWGO 20.45-46)

So, in a tragic inversion of Santayana's famous maxim, those who learn from history—indeed those who immerse themselves so deeply in it that they cannot see what lies in front of their nose—are doomed to repeat it. Just as the "profoundly incurious" Edwardian establishment had absent-mindedly stumbled into the tragic mess of the Great War, so too the Edwardian anachronisms of the interwar years did not wake up until it was too late. For Orwell, the retreat from modernity by the "know-nothings" simply allowed modernity—in the figures of Hitler and Stalin—to ride roughshod over everything that was decent and humane about pre-World War II civilization. As Orwell trenchantly observes, Scott-King would have been better off "reading a sixpenny pamphlet on Marxism" than using Classics as "the best prophylactic against insanity" (CWGO 20.46).²⁸

Orwell's hostility to such men was clearly derived from his low estimate of the curriculum they taught. In certain moods, Orwell was contemptuous and dismissive of classics. With apparent glee he notes in 1944 that "classical education is going down the drain at last," (CEJL 3.210), and a few years later that "the classical languages [in American schools] have been almost completely killed" (CWGO 18.139). In his famous essay on Dickens, Orwell criticizes the great author for doing to his sons exactly what Orwell himself would do to his own son Richard a decade later—"sending them to public schools to be stuffed with Greek" and "blown up with Greek until they burst" (CEJL 1.467 and 488). Orwell's criticisms, of course, stem partly from his socialist revulsion against the public schools ("festering centers of snobbery") and the private preparatory schools ("commercial undertakings" that "deserve nothing except

²⁸ My interpretation of Orwell's attitude here is decidedly different from Eckstein's (above, note 5), 109-111. He argues that Orwell's assessment of Scott-King and his sort is positive and quotes in support, as I have, the passage that begins "in the chaos that is shortly coming . . ." and ends with ". . . 'enlightenment.'" But Eckstein leaves out the crucial opening words "we are meant to infer . . .," by *Waugh*, that is, not by Orwell himself (*pace* Eckstein [above, note 5], 110)—distancing language that gives the lie to Orwell's true feelings. This is perfectly consistent with Christopher Hollis' comments in Coppard and Crick (above, note 14) 49, about Orwell's attitude as a schoolboy: Orwell "disliked [classical education] because it diverted the mind of the pupil from the real problems of the day."

suppression”), places where he, himself, had indeed been stuffed full of Latin and Greek (*CEJL* 2.98). He was perhaps thinking of the classics he studied for so long at Eton when he wrote, in 1948, that “the training [Eton] offers was originally intended for a landowning aristocracy and had become an anachronism long before 1939.”²⁹

Looking back on his career at St. Cyprian’s, Orwell was appalled at what passed for quality education in that period: “Latin and Greek . . . were deliberately taught in a flashy, unsound way. We never, for example, read right through even a single book of a Greek or Latin author; we merely read short passages which were picked out because they were the kind of thing likely to be set as an ‘unseen translation’” (*CEJL* 4.336-337). There is a direct line between these observations and Orwell’s description of Dorothy’s experiences at Mrs. Creevy’s girls’ school in *A Clergyman’s Daughter*. Mrs. Creevy indeed wants Latin on the prospectus because it looks “classy to the parents,” but, she assures Dorothy, “you won’t have to teach it. None of *our* parents’d want their children to waste time over Latin.”³⁰ Elsewhere Orwell states that “[the] educational level [of the prep schools] is actually lower than that of the [state-run] elementary schools” (*CEJL* 2.98) and even claims that “public schools aren’t so bad, but people are wrecked by those filthy private [prep] schools long before they get to public school age” (*CEJL* 1.363).

Thus a complex picture emerges: Orwell opposed prep and public schools as a matter of (socialist) principle, prep schools in particular because of the appalling quality of education that puts profit ahead of pedagogy. On the other hand, public schools like Eton, although “festering centers of snobbery,” are not so bad, for they have “a tolerant and civilised atmosphere which gives each boy a fair chance at developing his individuality.”³¹ Where this leaves the specific issue of a classical education is unclear, however. Aside from those few gleeful comments (made in jest, perhaps³²) about classics going down the drain and his cynical mantra about stuffing boys full of Latin and Greek, Orwell never seriously criticized the *content* of a classical education per se, only the *manner* in which it was taught. Perhaps the most that can be concluded from all this is that, while he deplored the pedagogical style of most classics teachers, Orwell may have

²⁹ Coppard and Crick (above, note 14), 45.

³⁰ George Orwell, *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (hereafter *ACD*), reprint (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 257.

³¹ Coppard and Crick (above, note 14), 45.

³² Eckstein (above, note 5) 98 (Orwell was a “an ‘Old Boy’ having a good laugh . . . a mischievous prankster [whose] jokes about the Classics were an insider’s jokes”).

(at best) approved of a classical education or (at worst) thought it unworthy of serious discussion. Whatever the case, that Orwell chose for his adopted son Richard a traditional classical education at the Westminster school (perhaps with a view to Eton later on) must be significant. Working through an all-too-familiar liberal-democratic dilemma, Orwell acknowledged that public school training, while perhaps not *actually* the best, was at least *in principle* the best *available*, given the social realities of England at the time (*CEJL* 4.451).

Language

Wars, particularly patriotic wars, encourage the corruption of language and distortion of thought and fact: “when the general atmosphere is bad,” says Orwell, “language must suffer” (*CEJL* 4.137). The Spanish Civil War taught Orwell much about the cynical manipulation of fact by yellow press (as well as the true methods and purposes of the Comintern), but it was his experience of World War II that compelled him to think more deeply about the political uses of language. Orwell believed (perhaps naively) that “good prose is like a window pane” (*CEJL* 1.7) and that the simple, clear style of English prose (such as he himself had cultivated since the mid-thirties) protected freedom of thought (and thus freedom itself) against the manipulative obfuscation of politically- and ideologically-driven cant. For Orwell, the use of jargon in any profession (medicine, business, sports, and especially politics) was a “perversion of the language” (*CEJL* 3.26), and the use of ready-made stale phrases and euphemisms—what is now called “spin”—betrayed a weak and fundamentally dishonest intellect. Orwell recognized an even more sinister feedback effect: “if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought” (*CEJL* 4.137), such that the man on the platform mechanically spouting hackneyed phrases and euphemisms eventually comes to believe in what he is saying and convinces others, for good or ill, to do so as well. Because, for Orwell, “all issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasion, folly, hatred and schizophrenia”; political *language* “is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” So, he concludes, “if you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself” (*CEJL* 4.137 and 139).

A key component of Orwell’s attack on slovenly language is his disparagement of the use of Latin and Greek, as well as Latin- and Greek-derived English words in popular discourse. He regarded it as “a strange and ironical fact that Latin and Greek took their firmest hold on the English language at just about the time they lost their dominant position as school subjects” (*CWGO* 18.141). Throughout his writing life, “Latin tags”

had been typical Orwellian shorthand for all manner of social and intellectual *bêtes noires*—fatuous snobbery, inconsequentiality, and faulty language. Thus we have already noted Macgregor, the puffed up Deputy Commissioner in *Burmese Days*, quoting snatches of Horace, the Edwardian “politicians who could quote Horace but had never heard of algebra,” and “dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags.” During the second World War, however, his thinking on the subject became far more acute and systematic. It perhaps began with minor irritants, like the trend towards giving flowers manufactured Greek and Latin names rather than their more picturesque Anglo-Saxon ones (*antirrhinum* for snapdragon, *myosotis* for forget-me-nots, *calendula* for marigold, *dianthus caesius* for Cheddar Pink, etc.: *CEJL* 3.131; cf. *CEJL* 4.131 note 1). Fairly soon, however, Orwell nourished his resentment into a systematic attempt to eradicate Latin and Greek and their English derivatives from the English language entirely. Thus in early 1941 he sniped at “the extreme left, with their heresy-hunting and their Graeco-Latin jargon” (*CWGO* 12.349), and a few years later he began talking about “the encroachment of Latin and Greek” in English writing, noting with satisfaction that “many necessary abstract words, especially words of Latin origin, are rejected by the working class because they sound public-schoolish, ‘tony’ and effeminate” (*CEJL* 3.26 and 29).

Shortly after the war, and after long reflection, Orwell worked up his thoughts into his masterful “Politics and the English Language.” Alongside the various stylistic guidelines (“Never use a long word where a short one will do,” “never use the passive where you can use the active,” and so on) comes this: “never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent” (*CEJL* 4.139). Latin and Greek and their English derivatives are included in here, of course. Orwell deplores “a mass of Latin words [falling] upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up the details” (*CEJL* 4.136-137), and pretentious writers who “are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin and Greek words are grander than Saxon ones” (*CEJL* 4.131).³³ The practice of coining new words by adding affixes to Greek and Latin roots and liberally using the typically Greek “-ize” formation is similarly criticized, especially because it increases “slovenliness and vagueness” in English usage (*CEJL* 4.132).

Should there be any doubt about Orwell’s seriousness about this, we now have available the contents of a notebook containing his lists of Latin phrases to be scrapped, dated to around 1948 (*CWGO* 19.507-512). The

³³ For a practical example, see Orwell’s vitriolic attack on J. D. Bernal (the father of Martin Bernal, interestingly enough in the present context) in an editorial to *Polemic* magazine (*CEJL* 4.153-160).

first list contains 94 words and phrases ranging from the fairly banal (*status quo*, *per se*) to the relatively obscure (*tertius gaudens*, *lapsus linguae*). Of the 94 items on this list, Orwell would scrap them all save fourteen—*prima facie*, *persona grata*, *data*, *genus*, *maximum*, *minimum*, *minus*, *plus*, *nil*, *quietus*, *sic*, *propaganda*, *ex cathedra* (“papal pronouncements only”), and *exit/exeunt* (“as stage directions only”). A second list, largely derived from the first but also including French and “Other Languages” (German, Italian, Greek, and Hebrew), is “a list of foreign words & phrases unnecessarily used in English.” Orwell further explains, “N.B. [!] that this list is not exhaustive but is intended to include only those words & phrases which would be used by people who would agree in principle that the importation of foreign words is undesirable [Orwell’s emphasis].” Interestingly, after vetting the first list to create the second, Orwell banishes all fourteen of the words and phrases he chose to keep earlier (perhaps reconsidering, in the case of *exit/exeunt* and *ex cathedra*, his previous concessions to the stage and the Vatican). Orwell would even scrap very common and useful abbreviations (*i.e.*, *e.g.*, *etc.*, *vide*, *viz.*, *N.B.* [again, !], *pro tem*, *infra dig.*, etc.) from English usage entirely.

On the other hand, it is also significant that Orwell could never have functioned as a political writer without the use of Latin- and Greek-derived English words. Thus “honor, justice, morality, internationalism, democracy, science and religion”—all banished from the Newspeak vocabulary in 1984—were words Orwell found indispensable in his political writings.³⁴ He was apparently willing to be flexible. Perhaps this is why he says in “Politics and the English Language” that the rule against using Greco-Latin language “does [not] imply in every case preferring the Saxon word to the Latin one” (note, too, his sixth rule: “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous” [CEJL 4.138-139]). Nor was Orwell above coining awkward Greek- and Latin-inspired portmanteau words as well: so “depauperize,” “proletarianise,” “Marxised,” and perhaps most grotesquely, “bourgeoisification.”³⁵

But perhaps most strikingly paradoxical is Orwell’s persistent use of Latin words and phrases (“tags”) in his essays and fiction—indeed even in his letters to friends—until the end of his life. Having analyzed and compiled most of these, and allowing for some distortion,³⁶ I have

³⁴ Eckstein (above, note 5), 102.

³⁵ “Depauperize”: *Down and Out in Paris and London* (hereafter *DOPL*), reprint (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 206; “proletarianize”: *RWP*, 257 and 261; “Marxised”: *CEJL* 1.512; “bourgeoisification”: *RWP* 146.

³⁶ Thus I have chosen to exclude terms that are commonly used in English discourse, such as *status quo*, *non sequitur*, etc. I have also left out longer quotations from

discovered that before his own personal “linguistic turn” in the early 1940s, when he started thinking seriously about language, Orwell’s Latin usage was indeed relatively high (7 instances in 1933, 12 in 1935, 8 in 1936), reaching a peak in 1937 (14 instances), and then declining thereafter as the author consciously tried to reduce his Latin usage (one instance in each of 1939, 1941, and 1946; three in 1942, 1943, and 1945; and four in 1940).³⁷ This effort thus coincides with the period that Orwell knew to be the turning point in his life—“the Spanish war and other events in 1936-37.” “Thereafter,” he writes in a 1946 essay, “I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it” (*CEJL* 1.5). Thus Orwell’s crusade against the ancient languages (like his disparagement of elitist education) was an important part of his self-education as a Socialist.

Given the close associations in Orwell’s mind between classics, public school, snobbery, and “tony and effeminate” language, this should come as no surprise. What is striking, however, is that one of the events that “turned the scale”—Orwell’s sociological study of the miners of Wigan in 1936—results in a book where the author’s casual use of Latin reaches its career apogee. In the pages of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the reader encounters *obiter dicta, credo, vide, advocatus diaboli, et hoc genus, mutatis mutandis, in vacuo, in saecula saeculorum, contra mundum, pace*—as well as, improbably, a reference to a caryatid.³⁸ This is the same book in which Orwell condemns himself at age fourteen as “an odious little snob” and distances himself from his public school heritage and classical education by claiming (probably disingenuously) that “I studied Greek for eight or ten years, and now, at thirty-three, I cannot even repeat the Greek alphabet” (*RWP* 167).

Even after Orwell’s “linguistic turn” of the 1940s, he continued to use Latin fairly consistently in his journalism at precisely the time when he was condemning it in his essays. Viewing the corpus as a whole, although many Latin words and phrases that Orwell employed before 1936-37 dropped out by the 1940s, several persisted—even the “tony” Livian tag *vae victis!* Most of these holdovers also appear, incidentally, on his 1948 lists of condemned Latin words (only *in terrorem* and *in propria persona* are spared—most likely an oversight). Even more remarkably, after 1937 Orwell

Latin authors, Orwell’s wordplay with such phrases, and his etymological speculations (many of which are discussed below).

³⁷ But note, too, the seven instances in 1944 and eight in 1948.

³⁸ Latin: *RWP* 21, 165, 170, 189, 190, 205, 209, 210, 211, 212, 225, 244, 247; caryatid: 21.

continued to employ more complex pet phrases such as *anima naturaliter [nonconformistica, anarchistica]*, *eheu fugaces* (Horace), and *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Augustine), and even added some new ones: *taedium vitae, cui bono, vox populi . . . vox Dei, ne plus ultra, in situ, tu-quoque, ignis fatuus, index expurgatorius*, and *D[eo] V[olente]* all make their first appearance after 1937. Most of these make his scrap lists too—some at precisely the same time as he was introducing them into his prose for the first time.³⁹

On the other hand, as a total percentage of Orwell's output, his Latin usage represents but a tiny fraction. Thus, for example, out of 99,850 words written and published by Orwell in essay form from July 1943 to December 1945,⁴⁰ only twenty-eight of those are in Latin. This is not a very good average for someone so steeped in the classical tradition (and Latin in particular) and indicates that Orwell was fairly successful in purging Latin from his prose. Once again, the distancing of Orwell the socialist political writer from Blair the prep- and public-school educated bourgeois has a distinct effect on his writing but not the purifying effect he was aiming for.

Influence

Other considerations, however, complicate the picture. It is surely important, after all, that the nickname for the Ministry of Peace in 1984 is

³⁹ *Ignorantia invincibilis*: CEJL 1.80; *patria*: CEJL 1.96; *in articulo mortis*: CEJL 1.102; *in partibus infidelium*: CEJL 1.102 and 163; ACD 21; *casus belli*: DOPL 192; *apologia pro vita sua*: CWGO 10.310; *in vacuo*: CEJL 1.126; RWP 212; *omnium gatherum*: CEJL 1.126; CWGO 10.398 and 524; *ex officio*: George Orwell, *Burmese Days* (hereafter *BD*), reprint (London: Heinemann, 1967), 34; *ex colore*: *BD* 34 and 238; *infra dig*: *BD* 130; *via media*: ACD 73; *in latebra pudenda*: ACD 243; *memento mori . . . memento senescere*: ACD 280; George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (hereafter *KAF*), reprint (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), 15 and 45; *ad infinitum*: ACD 310; *ad nauseam*: George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (hereafter *HTC*), reprint (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), 63; *terra incognita*: ACD 311; *magnum opus*: *KAF* 45; *more*: CEJL 1.247; *in saecula saeculorum*: RWP 225 and CEJL 1.308; *vae victis!*: CEJL 1.34; 2.323; 3.218; 4.26; *mutatis mutandis*: CEJL 1.96; 2.5; RWP 210; *ipso facto*: DOPL 200; George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (hereafter 1984), reprint, (New York: Plume, 2003), 313; *a priori*: DOPL 201 and *HTC* 161; *et hoc genus*: CWGO 10.317, CEJL 1.189 and 2.252; RWP 209; *in terrorem*: *BD* 225; ACD 138; CWGO 12.223; *in propria persona*: CWGO 10.371 and CEJL 3.346; *in toto*: ACD 81 and CEJL 4.196; *vide*: CEJL 1.250 and 253; RWP 190, 211 and 244; CEJL 2.257; *corpus vile*: CWGO 11.247 and CEJL 3.354; *pace (tua)*: RWP 21 and 247; CWGO 20.84; *anima naturaliter Nonconformistica*: ACD 27; *anima naturaliter anarchistica*: CWGO 19.423; *eheu fugaces*: *BD* 29 and CWGO 2.238; *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: ACD 25; CWGO 13.271 and 16.438; *taedium vitae*: CEJL 1.510; *cui bono*: CWGO 12.244 and 16.71; *vox populi . . . vox Dei*: CWGO 12.313; *ne plus ultra*: CWGO 12.543; *in situ*: CEJL 2.428; *tu-quoque*: CWGO 15.113 and 16.123; *ignis fatuus*: CWGO 16.72; *index expurgatorius*: CEJL 3.180-81; *D[eo] V[olente]*: CEJL 4.448 and 449.

⁴⁰ Crick (above, note 7), 321.

"Minipax," not "Minipeace," and Newspeak itself is a send-up of various, rather ill-advised (though well-intentioned) attempts at linguistic orthodoxy.⁴¹ In order to appreciate more fully the influence of the classics on Orwell's thought, we must widen our perspective beyond *Wortstudien* to take in his more substantial allusions and references to the classical tradition.

Orwell's penchant for certain turns of phrase in classical authors has already been noted. A thorough examination of his published work reveals that he also enjoyed playing with the Latin language, making inside jokes and spinning nonsense phrases from familiar scraps of Latin verse. Thus Mr. Tallboys in *A Clergyman's Daughter* spouts *non sum qualis eram boni sub regno Edwardi* (167) a parody of Horace's *non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae* (*Odes* 4.1.3-4). The *Odes* also figure in Gordon Comstock's anguish in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, where he compares himself to Regulus marching to his doom: *atqui sciebat quae sibi Barbara* (216) is a direct quotation of Horace's *Ode* 3.5.49 (but for the change of gender in the final word). Comstock also indulges in Vergilian language: his *difficilis ascensus Averni* (*KAF* 216) is a parody of Vergil's *facilis descensus Averno* (*Aen.* 6.126). Vergil also makes his appearance in Orwell's prose in a letter to Brenda Salkeld from 1934 (*CEJL* 1.138): *o mihi praeteritis* is derived from *Aen.* 8.560.⁴²

Clearly Orwell had been stuffed with Horace and Vergil in school, but he never seems to have lost his affection for the former poet at least. He mentions in a letter to Eleanor Jaques in 1932 that he is reading "some odes of Horace, whom I wish I hadn't neglected hitherto" (*CEJL* 1.82). About eight years later, in the unpublished essay "New Words," Orwell acknowledged his fondness for the first line of Horace's *Odes* 3.26: "I say to myself *vixi puellis nuper idoneus*, and I repeat this over and over for five minutes for the beauty of the word *idoneus*" (*CEJL* 2.7). Orwell's thorough familiarity with Horace (or at least the *Odes*) is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated in a 1944 article where he quotes a poem by C. S. Calverley, including the line "Care, at the horseman's back, perching, unseatest," and recognizes that "Calverley is not afraid . . . to drag in a recondite Latin

⁴¹ Eckstein (above, note 5), 102-103. Orwell had plenty of firsthand experience with such linguistic systems: his aunt's lover, Eugene Adam, was an Esperantist (advocating a language that was "characterless and lifeless" according to Orwell: *CEJL* 2.7), and Orwell himself flirted with "Basic English" during his BBC years (W. J. West, *Orwell: The War Broadcasts* [London: Duckworth/BBC, 1985], 8, 47-48, and 62-64; cf. also *CEJL* 3.26, 85-86, and 210).

⁴² Cf. also the reference in *Burmese Days* to the British chieftain Calgacus' "[the Romans] make a desert and call it peace" from Tacitus' *Agricola* (ch. 30): in Orwell's version, Flory criticizes British rule in Burma by saying "they build a prison and call it progress" (*BD* 42).

allusion”—that is, to Horace *Odes* 3.1.40 (*post equitem sedet atra Cura*). The absence of any books of Horace, including the *Odes*, in Orwell's book collection at the time of his death raises the intriguing possibility that he knew the poet's work by heart.⁴³

Orwell's knowledge of Latin authors does not stop at Horace and Vergil, however. A reference to "Petronius the Arbiter" appears as early as 1929 in one of his first published pieces (in the French journal *Le Monde*: CWGO 10.142). In the 1930s, Orwell recommended to Brenda Salkeld that she read, among other authors, Petronius.⁴⁴ In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell sourly remarks that "some [inventions] which threaten to reduce profits are suppressed almost as ruthlessly as the flexible glass mentioned by Petronius" (RWP 239-239). In this case, Orwell perhaps consulted his shelves since, unlike Horace's works, Petronius' *Satyricon* is in the final catalogue of his books. Orwell's apparently lifelong enjoyment of the *Satyricon* may owe something to its author's puncturing of bourgeois, nouveau riche pretensions, particularly those of Petronius' best-known character, Trimalchio.

Clearly, and not surprisingly given his education, Orwell was a highly skilled Latinist and an enthusiastic aficionado of certain Latin writers. Thus his self-proclaimed "ignorance of Latin" (CEJL 2.7) is surely disingenuous—a distancing tactic perhaps used to reassure himself as well as his readers of his proletarian sympathies and socialist "street cred."⁴⁵

But what about Greek authors? Orwell had only marginally less exposure to Greek, having started learning it at age ten at St. Cyprian's (Latin was begun at eight: CEJL 4.336) and studying it for six hours a week for several years at Eton.⁴⁶ Knowledge of Greek, like "Latin tags," symbolized for the mature Orwell the pompous snobbery of the aristocracy

⁴³ The catalogue of Orwell's books is at CWGO 20.286-299. Mabel Fierz recalled, "Latin poetry [Orwell] used to know by heart. Yards and yards of it" (Coppard and Crick [above, note 14], 96).

⁴⁴ The full list is in CWGO 10.308-309.

⁴⁵ In light of all the preceding evidence, too much should perhaps not be made of Orwell's admission that he erroneously thought that a *vomitorium* meant a place in a Roman house where diners went to throw up (CEJL 4.256). This is, in fact, a rather common mistake—even amongst professional classicists. What matters here is that Orwell "looked up the word *vomitorium* in the Latin dictionary" that was, presumably, on his bookshelf. Elsewhere he effortlessly makes the etymological link between the English term for a pavement artist (a "screever") and *scribo*, "to write" (DOPL 175).

⁴⁶ Eckstein (above, note 5) 97 (following Crick [above, note 7], 55); cf. Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 113.

and public school education. In his essay on H. G. Wells (the same one in which he lampoons Edwardian “dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags”) he contemptuously lumps “Greek professors” in with other undesirables of the period (nationalism, religion, monarchy: *CEJL* 2.142). In “Charles Dickens,” the same essay in which he deplores “little boys [being] blown up with Greek until they burst,” Orwell notes that “[Dickens] sees the idiocy of an educational system founded on the Greek lexicon and the wax-ended cane”—note again the connection between learning ancient languages and corporal punishment—“[but] what he appears to want is . . . the old type of school but with no caning, no bullying or underfeeding, and not quite so much Greek” (*CEJL* 1.426).

And yet in this very same essay, Orwell ostentatiously displays his own (albeit imperfectly remembered) knowledge of Greek literature in identifying an anecdote Dickens has plagiarized from “some ancient Greek writer” (Orwell admits that he is unable to find the passage,⁴⁷ “but I read it years ago as a boy at school”). He then proceeds to tell the story of the Thracian who, upon being told by his doctor that if he drinks a flagon of wine it will kill him, promptly drinks it and leaps off his rooftop in order to prove that the wine did not kill him (*CEJL* 1.451). This story may have been part of the “flashy, unsound” curriculum at St. Cyprian’s—one of the “short passages which were picked out because they were the kind of thing likely to be set as an ‘unseen translation’” (*CEJL* 4.337). Slipshod pedagogy may indeed account for Orwell’s imperfect recall here (unless that, too, is a distancing tactic), but what the passage also shows, more importantly, is that substantial portions of his Greek lessons stuck with him throughout the years. And despite what he says about the Edwardian Greek professors in his essay on H. G. Wells, it should be noted, Orwell speaks with deep admiration about Field Marshal Edmund Allenby’s ability “to identify the trade-routes across the desert mentioned by Strabo and translate the passage from the original Greek without difficulty” and his general ability “to read Greek with facility” (*CWGO* 12.292-293 and 16.).

One of Orwell’s favorite Greek authors was clearly the comic playwright Aristophanes. Note the following passage in *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

Take the word ‘barnshoot’—a corruption of the Hindustani word *bahinchut*. A vile and unforgivable insult in India, this word is a piece of gentle badinage in England. I have even seen it in a school text-book; it was in one of Aristophanes’ plays, and the annotator suggested it as a rendering of some gibberish spoken by a Persian ambassador. Presumably the annotator knew what *bahinchut* meant. (176)

⁴⁷ I must confess I have been unable to find it either.

Presumably Orwell had seen the Greek text of Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (an annotated edition, apparently) either at St. Cyprian's or Eton, or perhaps at one of the schools where he taught in 1932-33. Orwell mentions in another context that "at fourteen I wrote a whole rhyming play, in imitation of Aristophanes, in about a week" (*CEJL* 1.2). It is perhaps in this context that the vicious schoolboy satire "Up Waddled Wog" belongs (see above). In his mature years, Orwell began to see another virtue in Aristophanes. In 1944 he stated that "the plays of Aristophanes were popular entertainments" (*CEJL* 3.260), which is high praise indeed from an author who spent a good deal of his life searching for (and trying to achieve) an authentic proletarian literature.⁴⁸ Orwell also singled out Aristophanes as the only ancient writer remarkable for his "brutality and coarseness" (*CEJL* 3.285), qualities he admired.⁴⁹

Besides Aristophanes, Orwell also had a taste for the dialogues of Plato. Contemporaries at Eton were struck by Orwell's Socratic style of argumentation.⁵⁰ Thus it is perhaps not surprising to find him mentioning to Brenda Salkeld in 1933 that "I have read nothing lately except a smelly little pamphlet on Plato and Aristotle which doesn't tell you anything much about Plato and Aristotle" (*CEJL* 1.129). Note that it is the exegesis on Plato, not Plato himself, that the author objects to. It may be another nod to Plato when Orwell informed his *Tribune* readers in 1944 that "every system of philosophy springs ultimately from the Greeks" (*CEJL* 3.121), and he casually mentions the Platonic Absolute in a later book review (*CWGO* 17.404). Of course, the society depicted in *1984* owes something to the Utopian scheme in the *Republic*, with its complex hierarchy of inner and outer Party members and the mass of proles. "Utopia" itself is a word and concept Orwell spent some time analyzing. Writing under the pseudonym "John Freeman" in 1943, he attempted to clear up a common confusion by noting (correctly) that "the coined word Utopia doesn't mean 'a good place,' it means merely 'a non-existent place'" (*CWGO* 16.37).

Orwell seems to have had a soft spot for the philosophical *Meditations* of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius as well. Composed in Greek, the *Meditations* will surely have been cannibalized by Orwell's teachers for suitable *mots* that might appear on Greek exams. Orwell himself quoted a

⁴⁸ For Orwell's praise of proletarian literature, see "The Proletarian Writer" in *CEJL* 2.38-44 and his correspondence with Jack Common, a self-styled proletarian writer (esp. *CEJL* 1.314). In *RWP* 207, Orwell notes with regret that "it is doubtful whether anything describable as proletarian literature now exists."

⁴⁹ On Orwell's masculine ideology of "toughness," see D. Patai, *The Orwell Mystique* (Amherst: The U of Massachusetts Pr, 1984).

⁵⁰ Crick (above, note 7), 50.

passage from a translation for his *Tribune* readers in 1947. The quotation exhorts the reader to rise willingly and early in the morning to work, for work is part of human nature (5.1). Orwell advises his readers “to print this well-known exhortation in large letters and hang it on the wall opposite your bed.” Failing that, he remarks sardonically, get an alarm clock and place it where you will have to get out of bed and maneuver around pieces of furniture to shut it off (*CEJL* 4.268). Note here that Orwell’s assessment is—predictably—ambivalent: the emperor’s words are worth memorializing, but equivalent to (and easily replaceable by) a shrill alarm clock. But clearly this is a case of the “Old Boy having a good laugh”⁵¹ rather than sheer malevolence, for the translation Orwell quotes from here (George Long’s) was still to be found in his collection at his death, inscribed “E. A. Blair. Eton 1917-1921. With good wishes.”

Beyond this, and despite his dismissal of A. S. F. Gow’s enthusiasm of the same author as sentimentality, Orwell often spoke highly of Homer (*CEJL* 3.259 and *CEJL* 4.104), and a copy of E. V. Rieu’s Penguin translation of the *Odyssey* was amongst his books when he died. Orwell also once paraphrased Simonides’ famous epitaph for the Spartans who fell at the Battle of Thermopylae in a poem of his own (*CEJL* 1.118). Herodotus, too, must have been a favorite, for in one of his “As I Please” columns, Orwell amusingly relates that while reading over the *Matrimonial Post* he had been reminded of Herodotus’ famous description of Babylonian marriage customs; he then “looked in the Penguin Herodotus for [the] passage [which] I vaguely remembered,” quotes the passage (Herodotus 1.196) for his readers, and dryly notes that “this custom seems to have worked very well and Herodotus is full of enthusiasm for it.” He adds, however, that, “like other good customs, it was already going out round about 450 B.C.” (*CEJL* 3.167-168). Ironically, in less than a month he would write in the same column about the joy he felt as a child when he read about Caliph Omar destroying the library of Alexandria and the tragedies of Euripides and others along with it: this “simply filled me with enthusiastic approval,” Orwell relates, because “it meant less words to look up in the dictionary” (*CEJL* 3.178, the same article in which he rejoiced that “classical education is going down the drain at last”). Attentive readers of *Tribune* will have noticed the strangely ambivalent relationship that the author of “As I Please” had with his classical heritage.

Orwell’s familiarity with the classical canon pushed him into interesting literary directions throughout his writing life. While in Morocco in 1938, he discovered Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, a historical fantasy about the

⁵¹ Eckstein (above, note 5), 98.

(fictional) daughter of Hamilcar Barca, the father of Hannibal.⁵² *The Gladiators*, Arthur Koestler's historical novel about Spartacus' slave rebellion, sparked Orwell's interest as well, although, to Orwell, it did not stand comparison with Koestler's other works—or with *Salammbô* (*CEJL* 3.198 and 236-238). His admiration of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is infamous, as is his commentary on the book, contained in a 1933 letter to Brenda Salkeld. Orwell's exegesis, it has been pointed out, "lay[s] out in masterful fashion . . . just which characters in Joyce's *Ulysses* correspond to the characters in Homer (down to Nausicaa)."⁵³ Orwell also admired George Gissing, an "over-civilized man, in love with Classical antiquity," and whose ideal was to be a comfortably well-off country bachelor, "wallow[ing] in books, especially the Greek and Latin Classics" (*CEJL* 4.430 and 435). Such an assessment is not wholly positive, of course. Even Swift, arguably Orwell's favorite writer, is criticized for his "almost unreasoning admiration for some of the leading figures of the ancient world," including Brutus, Socrates, Epaminondas, and Cato the Younger. Like Gissing, Swift "reveres the past, especially Classical antiquity," but like Porteous and Scott-King, he "believes that modern man has degenerated sharply" in recent times (*CEJL* 4.211-212).

Despite his evidently shoddy training in history at St. Cyprian's, at Eton Orwell specialized, at least for a time, in ancient history.⁵⁴ The impression this experience left on him may be reflected in the Herodotus anecdote noted earlier. He was also familiar with Cato's *De Agricultura*, for he mentions in *Down and Out in Paris and London* Cato's rule that "a slave should be working when he is not sleeping" because work is good for a slave (119). Orwell also had a lifelong obsession with the slave systems of antiquity and often used them as analogues to the totalitarian states of the twentieth century. Thus in *The Road to Wigan Pier*: "the Socialist world is always pictured as a completely mechanized, immensely organized world, depending on the machine as the civilizations of antiquity depend on the slave" (221). Orwell was clearly horrified by the indifferent cruelty of the Roman slave owner (*CEJL* 1.460), the "utter mercilessness" and "stony

⁵² For discussion, see Eckstein (above, note 5) 105-107 ("Orwell's early exposure to ancient history at Eton, as part of his Classics curriculum, helps explain why he picked up a book like *Salammbô* in the first place").

⁵³ Eckstein (above, note 5), 104.

⁵⁴ On Orwell's experience with the teaching of history at St. Cyprian's ("the greatest outrage of all"), see *CEJL* 4.337; cf. 2.197 and 4.306-307. These memories are distilled in Dorothy's failed attempt to teach history properly at Mrs. Creevy's school in *A Clergyman's Daughter*. Ancient history was one of the subjects Orwell chose as a General Division specialist at Eton: Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 114.

cruelty of antiquity" (*CEJL* 3.236-237), and sympathized with "the condemned slaves in the Roman arena" (*CEJL* 3.221), going so far as to assert that "the medieval village was almost certainly better than the Roman slave farm" (*CWGO* 12.459) and that "the modern factory-worker is . . . happier . . . than, say, a mediaeval serf or a Roman slave" (*CWGO* 16.434). He was deeply disturbed that "those hundreds of millions of slaves on whose backs civilization rested generation after generation have left behind no record whatever" (*CEJL* 2.260). Orwell himself could only recall the names of three ancient slaves—Spartacus, Epictetus, and Aesop—although his discovery of a glass jar in the Roman room at the British Museum with the inscription *Felix fecit* caused him to reflect, "I have a vivid mental picture of poor Felix (a Gaul with red hair and a metal collar round his neck), but in fact he may not have been a slave" (*CEJL* 2.260 and 3.198).⁵⁵

The hopelessness of the lives of ancient slaves informed much of Orwell's deepest pessimism about the human condition. In "Looking Back on the Spanish War," he expressed a genuine fear that the modern totalitarian slave state might be here to stay since "civilizations founded on slavery have lasted for such periods as four thousand years" (*CEJL* 2.260; "five thousand years" at *CEJL* 3.198). We desperately want to believe that "a regime founded on slavery *must* collapse" (*CEJL* 2.260), but the "utter silence" of ancient slaves—and the *failure* of ancient slave rebellion—do not inspire hope. For Orwell, Spartacus' Utopian dream of the City of the Sun failed utterly "because of the impossibility of combining power with righteousness" (*CEJL* 3.238). The same can be said of Big Brother and Ingsoc in *1984*. In that novel, Winston Smith encounters this passage in his reading of Emmanuel Goldstein's subversive book:

Socialism, a theory which appeared in the early nineteenth century and was the last link in a chain of thought stretching back to the slave rebellions of antiquity, was still deeply infected by the Utopianism of past ages. But in each variant of Socialism that appeared from about 1900 onwards the aim of establishing liberty and equality was more and more openly abandoned. (*1984* 208)

Goldstein's book, of course, turns out to be a contrivance worked up by the Party to trap lapsed Party members and rebels like Winston Smith. Winston's arrest, torture, and reeducation thus reinforce Orwell's utterly bleak view of revolution and rebellion—whether by slaves of the modern state or those of ancient ones.

⁵⁵ We also know that the mature Orwell also visited the Bronze Age room in the British Museum (*CEJL* 3.329) and once sought permission to excavate a Roman-era barrow on Southwold common (but only found a bronze soldier's button): Coppard and Crick (above, note 14), 67; Stansky and Abrahams (above, note 9), 279.

Orwell's knowledge of ancient slavery may explain another apparent classical reference in *1984*:

To keep [the proles] in control was not difficult. A few agents of the Thought Police moved always among them, spreading false rumors and marking down and eliminating the few individuals who were judged capable of becoming dangerous; but no attempt was made to indoctrinate them with the ideology of the Party. (73)

This is startlingly reminiscent of the plight of the helots of ancient Sparta, the class of semi-servile serfs who farmed the rich soil of Laconia and Messenia for their Spartan overlords. The Spartans employed a secret police force known as the *krypteia* in order to keep the helots from revolting. Their job was to "liquidate" (a euphemism Orwell despised) the strongest and smartest helots, presumably because they would be the natural leaders in any rebellion.

The decline and fall of the Roman Empire also provided Orwell with important historical parallels to stimulate his thinking. Orwell had read his Gibbon—as indeed had most Englishmen of his time, place, and education up until relatively recently. A twelve-volume 1791 edition of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was amongst his books when he died. This collectible did not sit neglected on his shelf, however, for Orwell cites Gibbon numerous times.⁵⁶ Just how deeply Gibbon penetrated Orwell's consciousness is especially apparent in those places in his work where he is thinking about imperialism and the cataclysmic changes to the world order caused by the events of the late 1930s and 1940s. On the eve of World War II, he condemned "the stiff upper lip of the pukka sahib somewhere East of Suez, carrying on with his job without believing in it, like an Antonine Emperor" (*CEJL*. 1.507). The shade of Gibbon is again traceable in Orwell's wartime diary, where he writes (apropos of the House of Lords, the League of Nations, and Indian politicians), "I always remember that the Roman senate still existed under the later Empire. This is the twilight of Parliamentary democracy and these creatures are simply ghosts gibbering in some corner while the real events happen elsewhere" (*CEJL* 2.423-424).

The darker realities of contemporary history kept calling Gibbon to Orwell's mind. So, in a little-known review of a performance of Shakespeare's *King John*, he writes:

[A great deal of ancient literature] seems far more modern and intelligible now than it would have done a few years ago. Think for instance of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with its endless succession of intrigues, assassinations,

⁵⁶ *CEJL* 2.197-98 and 206; cf. *ACD* 307 (a reference to "Gibbon's fifteenth chapter").

treacheries, massacres, civil wars. How remote and incredible it all seemed a little while ago, and how familiar it all seems now!
(CWGO 12.531-532)

Here Orwell uses Gibbon in a way that was unthinkable to the Porteouses and Scott-Kings of his day—as an instructive negative example from which to learn.

Despite all this, the influence of ancient history generally on Orwell's thought seems not to have been very profound—and for good reason, perhaps: As Christopher Hollis has noted, Orwell “disliked [classical education] because all his own interests were in the present and the future and he did not care greatly about the past, whether of Greece or Rome or any other land or period.”⁵⁷ Apparently Orwell's primary training in history had been sufficiently bad to cause him to maintain only a dilettante's interest in ancient history throughout his life, but, as we have seen, certain aspects of the discipline penetrated deeply enough to make a lasting impression.

Conclusion

Towards the end of the autobiographical second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell remarks with regret that “it is in fact very difficult to escape, culturally, from the class into which you have been born” (257). He was often frustrated that his gentlemanly accent and comportment gave him away when he tried to go “down and out” amongst the tramps, hop pickers, and coal miners of England (*RWP* 182 and 187; *CEJL* 1.37). The imprint of his education was always upon him, and, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, Orwell's classical learning also left an indelible mark. Despite his democratic-socialist leanings, Orwell could never quite tear himself away from his preparatory- and public-school heritage. The influence of the authors of Greek and Roman antiquity is everywhere apparent in his writing, and his attitudes have even been compared, not implausibly, to those of the most highly principled politicians of the Roman Republic.⁵⁸ Orwell's career and his relationship to the classics aptly demonstrate the principle that nature and nurture are often doomed to clash. Simply put, you can take the Old Boy out of the public school, but you cannot necessarily take the public school out of the Old Boy.

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⁵⁷ Quoted in Coppard and Crick (above, note 14), 49-50; again, note the contrast with Porteous and Scott-King.

⁵⁸ Crick (above, note 7), 208 and 258.