

Orwell and the Essay Form: Two Case Studies

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1.

NO CRITIC OF GEORGE ORWELL, SINCE 1998, CAN IGNORE THE IMPACT of Peter Davison's justly acclaimed twenty-volume *Complete Works*. A key effect of this capacious edition is, if not to contradict, to transform Orwell's well-known comment that "good prose is like a window-pane" and the plain-style aesthetics associated with this comment.¹ The obvious prolificacy on offer in the *Complete Works*, the restlessness and sheer quantity of prose, militates, in one important sense, against the aspirations of the plain style. To read Davison's edition is to be plunged into an active network or field of writing and to be caught in the catalytic movement, and dispersion, emerging out of this network. Point A, in Davison's Orwell, always leads to point B, to C, and then to D: window-panes turn into prismatic hinges of crisscrossing reflection.

This perspective on the *dynamics* of the collected edition would begin to foreground what Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*, might call the "writerly" quality of Orwell's work, marked, in the layering and crosshatching of text upon text, by "the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages."² But Barthes, of course, is an avowed opponent of the aesthetics of

¹ From "Why I Write," in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. Peter Davison, 20 vols. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 18:320. All references to Orwell in this essay are from this edition (volume, then page number).

² Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 5.



transparency, and nowhere more so than in *S/Z*. We would be hard-pressed to find a book more antagonistic to Orwell's dictum about "window-pane" prose. In Orwell, however, writerliness doesn't simply negate, or ironically dilute, an equally marked commitment to the plain style. Just as often, it is intertwined with and even intensified by the plain style. The writerly effect, we might say, becomes more precarious in the face of such earnest plainness, and thus more volatile, and urgent. It is, likewise, less readily stabilized as—or reducible to—play. I don't want to wrench Orwell's "window-pane" prose into this Barthesian aesthetics, then, but to trace the uncanny, politically significant ways in which so much of Orwell's most ambitious and effective work is able to be *both* "writerly" and "transparent," simple and complicated, emphatic and open, referential and formally elusive, at one and the same time.³

In this piece, more narrowly, I want to discuss just two of Orwell's multifarious essays (and even here my attention will be unevenly divided). Compelling and thought-provoking pieces, perhaps, they are by no means Orwell's most ambitious or realized work. But arguably they are quite typical or, to put this slightly differently, are two—of many—texts that instantly convey some of the qualities and tenor of Orwell's voice. My essay seeks to break this voice down a bit, to understand voice in terms of writing's procedure. And it touches on various ways that these two pieces can become intertwined—thematically, formally, conceptually, topically. The point, of course, is not to unearth some singular intimacy between these two pieces so much as to model a feeling of interconnection—of surplus and impingement—that is provoked by any number of overlapping texts in Orwell's corpus, any number of "entrance" points. By the time Orwell writes "The Best Novels of 1949" (20:565), after all, we are at text number 3715 by Davison's count. The permutations—how we might combine text and text—are, needless to say, well beyond that large number. So I mean "case studies" in this representative, but not exemplary, sense.

2.

In August 1941 Orwell publishes "Wells, Hitler and the World State" in *Horizon*, and in February 1942 "Rudyard Kipling" appears in the same journal. Both essays are marked by the war, and arguably, the condition of war is a starting point for critical reflection. By this I don't mean only that in each case the surrounding war is an implicit topic (or an occasion *for* reflection) but also—and almost conversely—that both essays concern the fraught relation between war and the activity of reflection itself. The presence and pressure of contemporary war is more immediately obvious in the H. G. Wells essay, which begins, crucially, in critical *media res*, presenting three excerpts from Wells's 1941 *Guide to "The New World."*⁴ This is a collection of Wells's own recent newspaper columns, which has attracted Orwell's polemical focus because of what he takes as its overly optimistic perspective on Hitler's declining strength. We encounter these three comments by Wells before any framing language by Orwell himself. No other major Orwell essay begins

³ The present essay grows out of a longer book manuscript in progress, provisionally entitled *Or Orwell: "As I Please" and the Poetics of Democratic Socialism*.

⁴ The first excerpt, also simply the first words of Orwell's text, are thus: "In March or April, say the wiseacres, there is to be a stupendous knockout blow at Britain . . . What Hitler has to do it with, I cannot imagine. His ebbing and dispersed military resources are now probably not so very much greater than the Italians' before they were put to the test in Greece and Africa" (12:536). This is followed by two other comments before Orwell begins, in his own voice, "These quotations are not taken from the *Cavalry Quarterly* but from a series of newspaper articles by Mr. H. G. Wells, written at the beginning of the year and now reprinted. Since they were written, the German Army has overrun the Balkans and reconquered Cyrenaica, it can march through Turkey or Spain at such time as may suit it, and it has undertaken the invasion of Russia" (12:537).

in this abrupt, and immediately secondary, manner. Confronting these three unadorned quotations, we're thrust into the *middle* of a chain of reading (Orwell's reading of Wells's own reading of contemporary news) and also a chain of history—the series of German conquests, each connected to past conflicts and propelling toward future ones, that iconically constitute the form of Hitler's aggression. Orwell's opening entangles these two quite distinct kinds of sequence.

The beginning of “Rudyard Kipling” also places us in the midst of a longer chain of reading and argument, by different means. Instead of starting with Orwell's response to Kipling (or, as in “Wells, Hitler and the World State,” with Kipling's own words), the essay starts with a response to a response. Thus, Orwell takes issue, before anything else, with T. S. Eliot's recent introduction to an anthology of Kipling's verse, published in December 1941. The first sentence begins:

It was a pity that Mr. Eliot should be so much on the defensive in the long essay with which he prefaces this selection of Kipling's poetry, but it was not to be avoided ... (13:150).

Orwell's opening quickly encompasses critique (Orwell's own regret about Eliot's choice), praise (Eliot's, of Kipling), and what we might think of as neutrality (Eliot's defensiveness, though regrettable, “was not to be avoided”). In this way, terms of conflict—and conflict *about* conflict—suffuse both openings. This becomes clearer still when we see the full arc of the opening sentence in “Rudyard Kipling”:

... but it was not to be avoided, because before one can even speak about Kipling one has to clear away a legend that has been created by two sets of people who have not read his works. (13:150)

It takes a while to discern precisely what two groups of readers Orwell has in mind, but they can be predicted from his work: doctrinaire left-wing readers who too quickly reject Kipling and “blimps,” who endorse or claim Kipling without actually reading the poet (because, in a larger sense, they are unable to read poetry as such). Kipling needs to be distinguished from his uncultured, nationalist admirers and from his political detractors. As Orwell continues:

Kipling is in the peculiar position of having been a by-word for fifty years. During five literary generations every enlightened person has despised him, and at the end of that time nine-tenths of those enlightened persons are forgotten and Kipling is in some sense still there. Mr. Eliot never satisfactorily explains this fact, because in answering the shallow and familiar charge that Kipling is a “Fascist,” he falls into the opposite error of defending him where he is not defensible. (13:150-51)

As this opening unfolds, multiple currents of disagreement, response, and conflict complicate the otherwise plainspoken analysis. Having triangulated his relationship to Kipling, through Eliot, Orwell *pentagonalizes* it, we could say, situating his own response to Eliot's reading of Kipling, in turn, between two additional readings. There's quite a lot here then. What's most striking is that Orwell sketches this full structure so quickly (in the first, extended sentence of the essay), suggesting that the lineaments of the structure, its form, are of most interest and importance. This form puts Orwell's own prospective view of Kipling in a quite precarious position, situated between two kinds of misreading or nonrecognition of Kipling (blimp and doctrinaire) *and* a further reading (Eliot's) that, in rejecting these forms of negation, works too quickly toward a stable and affirmative comprehension of the writer. With this elevation of form over content,

Orwell's opening emphasizes the process, not the substance, of disagreement—or works to separate, almost as though by surgical procedure, substance and process. For this reason, Orwell's position is highly volatile; he takes strong issue, ironically, with the very impulses of both agreement and disagreement themselves.

Orwell goes on to level fairly tough criticism at Eliot's "defense," and this is embedded in a critique of Kipling himself:

It is no use pretending that Kipling's view of life, as a whole, can be accepted or even forgiven by any civilised person. It is no use claiming, for instance, that when Kipling describes a British soldier beating a "nigger" with a cleaning rod in order to get money out of him, he is acting merely as a reporter and does not necessarily approve what he describes. (13:151)

This comment directly engages a specific (though uncited) moment in Eliot's essay, when Eliot, himself quoting Edward Shanks's earlier criticism of Kipling's poem "Loot"—as a "'detestable' poem that 'makes the commentator on Kipling turn red when he endeavours to explain it'"—argues:

This is to read an attitude into the poem which I had never suspected. I do not believe that in this poem he was commending the rapacity and greed of such irregularities, or condoning rapine.... [H]is concern was to make the soldier known, not to idealise him. He was exasperated by sentimentalism as well as by depreciation or neglect—and either attitude is liable to evoke the other.⁵

"It is no use claiming" this for "Loot," Orwell insists, tersely paraphrasing—and isolating—both the repulsiveness of Kipling's poem, unmentioned by Eliot (where Kipling writes, originally, "if you treat a nigger to a dose of cleanin'-rod, 'e's like to show you everything 'e owns," Orwell substitutes "beating a 'nigger' with a cleaning rod in order to get money out of him"), and Eliot's exculpatory claim (for Eliot's "his concern was to make the soldier known," Orwell substitutes "acting merely as a reporter"). Instead, Orwell continues, and this rounds out the opening paragraph:

There is not the slightest sign anywhere in Kipling's work that he disapproves of that kind of conduct—on the contrary, there is a definite strain of sadism in him, over and above the brutality which a writer of that type has to have. Kipling *is* a jingo imperialist, he *is* morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting. It is better to start by admitting that, and then to try to find out why it is that he survives while the refined people who have sniggered at him seem to wear so badly. (13:151)

At the end of the paragraph, then, Orwell is insisting on an uneasy position between the dismissal of Kipling's work and its stable recuperation. What interests him most is precisely to hold on to work that *does* make the reader turn red.

The more explicit turn toward contemporary events (i.e., toward the position from which Orwell himself writes) begins after this initial arc, as Orwell starts the second paragraph: "And yet the 'Fascist' charge has to be answered, because the first clue to any understanding of Kipling, morally or politically, is the fact that he was *not* a Fascist" (13:151). By this Orwell wants to insist

⁵ T. S. Eliot, introduction to *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), 26–27. Crucially, Eliot, unlike Orwell, does *not* actually quote from "Loot," offering only this anodyne redescription.

that the harsh moral and political judgment that any reader of the last fifty years (or “five literary generations”) is compelled to make about Kipling will be disrupted (but not negated) by a more strictly historical awareness. Eliot, conversely, seeks to smooth over the moral “insensitiv[ity]” of Kipling in more properly ethical terms: Kipling, for Eliot, does not “commend,” “condone,” or “idealise” but only “make[s] known,” a mimetic capacity underwritten by the aesthetically valorized balancing act that avoids both “sentimentalism” and “depreciation.” This is an ethical position to which the reader can wholly assent—and it is just this implicit collapse of any distance between reader and text (itself, arguably, a species of “sentimentalism”) to which Orwell objects. Orwell seeks to answer the “Fascist’ charge” in a quite different way. Rather than collapsing the ethical distance between the reader and Kipling, he wants to insist on a historical distance. “Kipling belongs very definitely to the period 1885–1902” and “the nineteenth-century imperial outlook” (13:152); he is “pre-Fascist” (13:152). This doesn’t, Orwell underlines in a striking phrase, “unsay what I said above about Kipling’s jingoism and brutality” (13:152). This is an interesting turn. We are so used to historicist criticism that cordons off the possible virtues of an earlier text, but Orwell inverts this gesture: the earlier text is not yet “capable,” as it were, of profound and essential *flaws* that will soon become politically all-too-available. Orwell is playing here with the same historical irony that Erich Auerbach deploys, in the famous conclusion of *Mimesis*, when he ruefully praises “our epoch for the . . . incomparable historical vantage point which it affords.”⁶ The point here is not a nostalgic idealization of the past—thus Orwell’s immediate insistence, by means of a double negative, that he won’t “unsay” what he has said about Kipling’s brutality—but a double negation, in which the “vantage point” that historical displacement necessarily offers can be deployed back on the present, thus operating as a source of reverberating critique (of both past and present) rather than of projection (from a knowledgeable present onto the more ignorant past).

In marking this historical difference, Orwell points primarily not to the now-evident unforgivability of Kipling’s comments in a poem like “Loot” but to their dialectical opposite: the author’s overconfident belief in theologically grounded norms or laws. Kipling’s critique of power relies on spiritual authority, and:

No one, in our time, believes in any sanction greater than military power; no one believes it is possible to overcome force except by greater force. There is no “law,” there is only power. I am not saying that that is a true belief, merely that is the belief which all modern men do actually hold. Those who pretend otherwise are either intellectual cowards, or power-worshippers under a thin disguise, or have simply not caught up with the age they are living in. Kipling’s outlook is pre-Fascist. He still believes that pride comes before a fall and that the gods punish hubris. He does not foresee the tank, the bombing plane, the radio and the secret police, or their psychological results. (13:152)

This (finally) returns us to the state of war that also features at the start of “Wells, Hitler and the World State” and, more specifically, with this mention of “the bombing plane,” to the air raids which England suffered in 1940 and 1941 and, as Orwell writes in January 1942, could (and would) experience again.

⁶ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 553.

In another 1941 essay, aptly titled “English Writing in Total War,” Orwell comments on “the sense of impermanency that everyone now has” and, touching on the air raids in particular, adds that “you can see how hard it is at present to settle to any serious work, except on a very small scale” (12:529). This relationship between current crisis and the uneasy temporality of writing also echoes the closing lines of *Inside the Whale*, published in March 1940, when Orwell concludes that Henry Miller’s flawed achievement “is a demonstration of the *impossibility* of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape” (12:112, italics in original). (*Inside the Whale* is Orwell’s first collection of essays and also the last *book* that he will publish until *Animal Farm* in 1945.) This same vulnerable sense provides another important connection between the Wells and Kipling pieces and also intensifies Orwell’s argument with Eliot. In his catalog description, Orwell puts the “bombing plane” that had so recently terrorized London within a wider spectrum encompassing different kinds of “force.” One effect of this list is to generalize the recent British condition. Orwell conjoins the Axis planes that have directly menaced England (and, earlier, of course, Spain and Ethiopia) and the tanks that embody Nazi force in mainland Europe. He unsettles the specific reference to German bombers still more by associating this force—which, as in the opening of the Wells essays, causes borders to be “overrun,” territories “invaded” and “marched through,” and states “reconquered”—with the radio, a tool of cultural propaganda, and the secret police, which carries out, unlike the mass violence inflicted through tank or plane, a more strictly political terror.

This is a conflict-laden world and a vulnerable one, and we’ve seen that Orwell’s two essays also situate the act of reading in a matrix of argument and precariousness. This link is crucial. Likewise, there’s a continuity between Orwell’s rejection of Kipling’s static or abstract “law” and his initial quarrel with Eliot’s “defensive” mode of reading, which works too hard at stabilizing Kipling’s text, drawing a harmonious, and thus complacent, relationship between form and content, technical skill and ethical authority. Orwell’s more historicist perspective refuses Eliot’s desire for such ethical continuity with Kipling even as it rejects Kipling’s own sense of transcendent norms in the face of “the tank, the bombing plane, the radio and the secret police.” Orwell is skeptical, in other words, of any aesthetic “law” as well, as it risks vitiating what we would now (perhaps too stably) understand as “difference”—the difference, here, that persists between the reader and the text even in the face of our immersion, our pleasure, or our critical desire to justify and synthesize.⁷

Orwell doesn’t view this difference as absolute. On the contrary, the realm of criticism, for him, is animated—perhaps even structured—by a complicated play of distance and proximity. We’ve already seen how Orwell’s critique of a totalized, and thus potentially complacent, relationship between content and form, in Eliot’s introduction, unfolds in relation to the axiological instability of his own essay. In an analogous manner, Orwell wants to understand Kipling’s “power” together with his “limits,” as he writes at the end of the fourth paragraph:

He was the prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase . . . and also the unofficial historian of the British Army, the old mercenary army which began to change its shape in 1914. All his confidence, his bouncing vulgar vitality, *sprang out of limitations* which no Fascist or near-Fascist shares. (13:152, italics added).

⁷ In “Fascism and Democracy,” Orwell notes, “the implied argument all along the line is that a difference of degree is not a difference” (12:378), and much of his work, I would argue, hinges on how to ride the propulsion of thinking without collapsing this kind of contingent difference.

If this comment explicitly links force and “limitations” (a tension aptly crystallized in the phrase “bouncing vulgar vitality”), it also distinguishes Kipling as an “unofficial historian.” The phrase leads back to Eliot’s own description of Kipling’s ability “to make the soldier known,” which we’ve seen that Orwell translates as “acting merely as a reporter.” Significantly, both essays argue for this mimetic or referential capacity of Kipling’s work. For Orwell, however, mimesis is born out of conflict and partiality rather than resolving it (as we’ve seen in Eliot). His valorization indeed hinges on this quality of Kipling’s:

How complete or truthful a picture has Kipling left us of the long-service, mercenary army of the late nineteenth-century? One must say of this, as of what Kipling wrote about nineteenth-century Anglo-India, that it is not only the best but almost the only literary picture we have. He has put on record an immense amount of stuff that one could otherwise only gather from verbal tradition or from unreadable regimental histories. . . . [F]rom the body of Kipling’s early work there does seem to emerge a vivid and not seriously misleading picture of the old pre-machine-gun army—the sweltering barracks in Gibraltar or Lucknow, the red coats, the pipeclayed belts and the pillbox hats, the beer, the fights, the floggings, hangings and crucifixions, the bugle-calls, the smell of oats and horse-piss, the bellowing sergeants with foot-long moustaches, the bloody skirmishes, invariably mismanaged, the crowded troopships, the cholera-stricken camps, the “native” concubines, the ultimate death in the workhouse. It is a crude, vulgar picture, in which a patriotic music-hall turn seems to have got mixed up with one of Zola’s gorier passages, but from it future generations will be able to gather some idea of what a long-term volunteer army was like. (13:156).

This is a strikingly idiosyncratic passage within Orwell’s essay, and one committed—both formally and conceptually—to the aesthetics of representation. The catalog list is thus at once an ambitious representation of Kipling’s writing and an effort to frame this writing in terms of representation. Orwell offers a number of different terms for this referential quality—in addition to the enigmatic idea of an “unofficial historian,” Kipling’s writing gives “a picture,” “put[s] on record,” is “truthful” or “complete” or “not seriously misleading.” These terms are not equivalent to each other, and their uncertain juxtaposition suggests—much like Auerbach’s work indeed—how this kind of representation is aesthetically unstable.⁸

In a crucial development of such instability, Orwell continues by returning to the “limitations” that enable such representation and suggesting their structural nature:

It is an error to imagine that we might have had better books on these subjects if, for example, George Moore, or Gissing, or Thomas Hardy, had had Kipling’s opportunities. That is the kind of accident that cannot happen. It was not possible that nineteenth-century England should produce a book like *War and Peace*, or like Tolstoy’s minor stories of army life, such as

⁸ “Not only the best but almost the only literary picture we have”: with this phrase Orwell, seeming to expand the quality of Kipling’s work, also undermines it, or at least shifts the question of its value to a different register. Kipling’s work is *not* really better than any other “picture,” since it is the “only” picture of this kind. To be the “best” in a category of one is a limited aesthetic feat (like the White King in *Through the Looking Glass* on “eating hay when you’re faint”: “I didn’t say there was nothing *better*,” the King replied. “I said there was nothing *like* it”). On the other hand, and by this same principle of exclusion, Kipling’s distinctiveness is now connected, more directly and urgently, to the representation of history. Similarly, we could note the (structural) way in which Orwell characterizes the two forms that might otherwise make this history available: as either outside writing altogether (“verbal tradition”) or *overly* textual and thus impossible to get through (“unreadable regimental histories”).

Sebastopol or *The Cossacks*, not because the talent was necessarily lacking but because no one with sufficient sensitiveness to write such books would ever have made the appropriate contacts. (13:156–57)

This passage focuses on the problematic social proximity of the writer to the experience that underlies the text. Such proximity rests, quite troublingly, in an inverse proportion to the “sensitivity” of the writer. There is thus a kind of uncertainty principle at work here. The very faculties of the successful writer—“sensitive” observation, cultivated perception, finally the strength of thinking itself—can come to interfere with what the writer might otherwise see or record, even as, conversely, the literary comprehension of certain social worlds—as with Kipling’s picture of a “long-term volunteer army”—can produce a *flawed*, fragmented, and idiosyncratic corpus of writing, torn, for example, between different, more stable genres, as Orwell’s reference to a music-hall piece “mixed up” with Zola suggests.

This distinction between Kipling’s “contacts” and other writers’ “sensitiveness” is not an incidental trade-off. Versions of this seesawing relationship between lack and comprehension, I would argue, run throughout Orwell’s work and are at the core of his engagement with the problem of literary representation. We’ve already seen, as well, that a similarly intermediate zone—cast not in terms of representation but in terms of readerly cathexis or detachment—structures this essay’s argument as a whole. We can find a connection, in other words, between the unstable tone and perspective of Orwell’s essay—as it is situated so stubbornly between the dismissal and the recuperation of Kipling—and this inner, technical claim about the nature of Kipling’s representation (hinging on that unsettling trade-off between proximity and sensitivity).

“Rudyard Kipling” and “Wells, Hitler and the World State” form a characteristic tandem in Orwell’s work: the counterintuitive elevation of a disregarded, disturbing, or “unforgivable” text, on the one hand, and the polemical critique of a text that *shares* some of the author’s own values, interests, or aspirations, on the other. In some ways, Kipling and Wells are quite similar figures for Orwell. Each writer was a source of childhood cathexis for him, and in each case Orwell focuses on how the writer failed to anticipate the real turn of historical events. “Somehow history had not gone according to plan,” Orwell writes about Kipling’s imperial investments, continuing that, after World War I, Kipling “could not understand what was happening, because he had never had any grasp of the economic forces underlying imperial expansion” (13:152). Likewise, with Wells, “a lifelong habit of thought stands between him and an understanding of Hitler’s power” (12:538), and again, “[h]e was, and still is, quite incapable of understanding that nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity” (12:540). In a more conceptual sense, though, these two essays are intriguingly antithetical: while Kipling’s value, as we’ve seen, is vexingly linked to (both historical and ethical) limits, Wells’s limits are connected by Orwell to his abiding (and worthy) aspiration for logic, rationality, and fairness. As Orwell puts it late in the essay, “Wells is too sane to understand the modern world” (12:540). When Orwell claims that “a lifelong habit of thought stands between” Wells and the political force he seeks to understand, he doesn’t simply mean one mode of *inadequate* thought but the very “habit” of thinking itself. Orwell’s meditation on Wells works to displace thought from itself, to refuse a secure, internally coherent identity for the thinker, even as the Kipling essay lingers on the way that Kipling’s power—finally, for Orwell, a power of representation—is threaded in and through the qualities that repulse the reader, that make him turn red.

Wells's failure and Kipling's particular power, his "vitality" or "vividness," are, ultimately, of interest to Orwell, not in their distinctive idiosyncrasy—despite, for example, that long bill of particulars detailing the recurrent, historically specific images of Kipling's verse—but in their structural force. As so often, Orwell gravitates toward the "hard question," toward the place (in the instance of Wells) where instrumental rationality strains against itself, becoming a distorting rather than illuminating faculty, or toward an aesthetic achievement (in Kipling) that occurs through—rather than merely despite—its vulgarity, its "snack-bar wisdom" (13:157), and "platitudes" (13:160): "At his worst, but also his most vital . . . Kipling is almost a shameful pleasure, like the taste for cheap sweets that some people secretly carry into middle life. But even with his best passages one has the same sense of being seduced by something spurious, and yet unquestionably seduced" (13:158). Orwell homes in on this division within the reader's mind, impelled toward the thing that it resists even as, in the Wells essay, thought is displaced from its own foundations, pushed suddenly against (and thus forced to reflect anew upon) the underlying principle of rationality—or "sanity"—itself.

A "shameful pleasure" and a "spurious" seduction—the thrust of the Kipling essay is to linger on these discredited categories and to make room, by an act of critical representation, for this paradoxical reading experience. Again, it's crucial to see how important the Eliot counterexample is to Orwell's project. The essay means to resist two different and natural inclinations in the face of these complicated terms: first, the tendency to bear down on the (genuine) "spurious[ness]" or "shameful[ness]" of the work, until this has produced a stable form of indictment or withdrawal, and, second, the tendency to defend, and thus again to stabilize, the "pleasure" and "vitality" of the writing, absorbing the recalcitrant material into a more secured aesthetic framework. Eliot goes in this second direction: he is a determined appreciator, and his critical skills, propelling his recuperative essay forward, cause him to overshoot the mark. (The more skill he marshals, the more he could overshoot: here, too, a valuable form of "thought" or "sensitivity" is partially at odds with proximity.) Orwell thus zeroes in on that key pressure point within the Eliot introduction, when Eliot effaces, or transcends with far too much alacrity and ease, the "spurious" dimensions of Kipling's writing, losing hold of its obvious, persistent connection to imperial violence.

Such internal propulsion of either moral condemnation or aesthetic approbation interests Orwell beyond the confines of Kipling in particular. It is difficult to appreciate without transmogrifying or absolutizing our appreciation. Condemnation works in the same way. An internal momentum operates in each case. And it is because Orwell views these tendencies as central to the core act of criticism—and of reflective thinking—that their confusion and destabilization command his attention. We can find similar tensions at play in a number of Orwell's other essays, such as "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool," his piece on Tolstoy's polemical attack on Shakespeare (which Orwell understands as an extreme—and failed—version of ethical criticism), or "Benefit of Clergy," his piece on Salvador Dali (which probes, on the contrary, the difficulties of dissociating aesthetic judgment completely from ethical evaluation).

Just as the Kipling and Wells essays are not strictly idiosyncratic assessments—not just subjective and impressionistic accounts, however much they might appear this way—we can't understand them merely as returns, whether nostalgic or skeptical, to the materials of childhood reading. These early reading experiences also function in a more narrowly structural (and thus conceptual) way for Orwell. Such reconsideration of past reading works to stage the reflective

mind trying to scrutinize the experiences that generate and shape the process of reflection itself. This is one way to account for Orwell's gravitation toward such childhood material, here and in many other texts (most famously, perhaps, "Boys' Weeklies" and "Such, Such Were the Joys"). This two-way relationship between childhood and thinking is most apparent in the Wells essay, as Orwell veers in the final section of the piece to the question of intellectual formation:

But is it not a sort of parricide for a person of my age (thirty-eight) to find fault with H. G. Wells? Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells's own creation. . . . I doubt whether anyone who was writing books between 1900 and 1920, at any rate in the English language, influenced the young so much. The minds of all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed. (12:539)

We can notice here again the emphasis on thought as such ("thinking people," "the *minds* of all of us"): on thinking as a process or "habit" rather than on a particular mode or habit of thought. These comments work to align Orwell, in other words, with the seemingly excessive rationality that he dissects and polemicizes against in the bulk of the essay, even as the topos of childhood reading also functions, ironically, as another structural exterior *to* thought. (The sheer fact of this kind of genealogy—where very particular cultural experiences, in childhood, are intimately connected with the ways in which we dream, desire, and think—cuts against a strictly rationalist perspective.) As with Kipling, this is a "love-hate" relationship, and Orwell's appreciative sense of Wells's profound (conceptual) impact is an important ending note for the essay, even as the recognition of Kipling's barbarity and vulgarity is the starting point, in Orwell's view, for any aesthetic engagement with this author.⁹ Bernard Crick notes the following compact summary of Kipling in an earlier piece that Orwell wrote for the *New English Weekly*: "I worshipped Kipling at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty, despised him at twenty-five and now again rather admire him" (10:409).¹⁰ Orwell's tongue-in-cheek catalog, putatively describing a temporal unfolding, of course means to suggest a continual condition: what makes Kipling persist as an interest for Orwell is not any quality that finally emerges but the uneasy predicament, which Kipling consistently prompts, of "loath[ing]" and "admir[ing]" at the same time.

Embedded in this same penultimate paragraph of the Wells essay (before Orwell pivots back to polemical critique) is another turn of the discussion, which brings us back to the question of representation. Earlier on, Orwell stigmatizes the airplane, in particular, as an icon of progress—or of the ideology of scientific progress—gone awry. "But unfortunately the equation of science with common sense does not really hold good. The plane, which was looked forward to as a civilizing influence but in practice has hardly been used except for dropping bombs, is

⁹ As we've seen, Orwell notes at the beginning of the essay, "it is better *to start* by admitting that [Kipling is an imperialist, morally insensitive, etc.] and then to try to find out why it is that he survives" (13:151, italics added). He uses the same term later in the essay, returning once more to Eliot: "The trouble is that whenever an aesthetic judgment on Kipling's work seems to be called for, Mr. Eliot is too much on the defensive to be able to speak plainly. What he does not say, and what I think one *ought to start by saying* [italics added] in any discussion of Kipling, is that most of Kipling's verse is so horribly vulgar that it gives one the same sensation as one gets from watching a third-rate music-hall performer recite 'The Pigtail of Wu Fang Fu' with the purple limelight on his face, *and* yet there is much of it that is capable of giving pleasure to people who know what poetry means" (13:158). The repeated phrase suggests how Orwell wants to put the paradoxical quality of Kipling at the center of the analysis ("any discussion"); this should be the "starting" point for Orwell not as a paradox that can be transcended but as the controlling frame of interpretation.

¹⁰ Quoted in Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 157.

the symbol of that fact” (12:539). This is a criticism that Orwell will make a number of times in the mid-1940s.¹¹ But at the end of the essay Orwell presents the relationship between Wells and flight in a different light.

Back in the nineteen-hundreds it was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H. G. Wells. There you were, in a world of pedants, clergymen and golfers, with your future employers exhorting you to “get on or get out,” your parents systematically warping your sexual life, and your dull-witted schoolmasters sniggering over their Latin tags; and here was this wonderful man who could tell you about the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who *knew* that the future was not going to be what respectable people imagined. A decade or so before aeroplanes were technically feasible Wells knew that within a little while men would be able to fly. He knew that because he himself *wanted* to be able to fly, and therefore felt sure that research in that direction would continue. On the other hand, even when I was a little boy, at a time when the Wright brothers had actually lifted their machine off the ground for fifty-nine seconds, the generally accepted opinion was that if God had meant us to fly He would have given us wings. Up to 1914 Wells was in the main a prophet. (12:540, italics in original)

Imagining flight functions here as a concise figure for the flight of thought (or imagination) itself, in rebellion against ossified social conventions. Like the aerodynamic machine that he envisions, Wells’s own thinking takes off from the given—“the generally accepted opinion” and the continuation of a “respectable” status quo—to broach something fundamentally different or new. The long time frame in this passage suggests how, after 1914, technological reality catches up with Wells’s imaginative vision, collapsing the difference between thought and its material ground. But this extended chronology echoes a much shorter time frame, signaled in that brief, wavering act of elevation, when the Wright brothers “lifted their machine off the ground for fifty-nine seconds.” This represented event offers another important image of reflection—unstable, precarious, short-lived—that connects back to the conceptual work and manner of the essay, as form, for Orwell.



The Wright brothers’ short flight took place, in fact, in 1903, the year of Orwell’s birth. Orwell’s valorization of *unrealized* flight in this passage is quite similar to André Bazin’s mind-bending claim, in “The Myth of Total Cinema,” that the idea of filmic representation precedes—ontologically—its technological realization.

¹¹ In *As I Please*, no. 24—the weekly column that he wrote for the democratic socialist newsweekly *Tribune* between 1943 and 1946—Orwell argues that “the effect of modern inventions has been to increase nationalism, to make travel enormously more difficult, to cut down the means of communication between one country and another, and to make the various parts of the world less, not more dependent on one another for food and manufactured goods” (16:182). Like many of Orwell’s columns, this topic triggered responses from readers. In *As I Please*, no. 57, he returns to the earlier discussion, noting that “some months ago, in this column, I pointed out that modern scientific inventions have tended to prevent rather than increase international communication. This brought me several angry letters from readers, but none of them were able to show that what I had said was false. They merely retorted that if we had Socialism, the aeroplane, the radio, etc., would not be perverted to wrong uses. Very true, but then we haven’t Socialism. As it is the aeroplane is primarily a thing for dropping bombs and the radio primarily a thing for whipping up nationalism” (17:39).

The way things happened seems to call for a reversal of the historical order of causality, which goes from the economic infrastructure to the ideological superstructure, and for us to consider the basic technical discoveries as fortunate accidents but essentially second in importance to the preconceived ideas of the inventors. The cinema is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds . . . and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers. . . . Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins.¹²

In a similar way, H. G. Wells “invented” flight, in thought, and the technological realization of flying has only diluted this original invention. This is not a pure idealism, however, for either Orwell or Bazin, since the “idea” at stake, in each instance, is so rooted in the process of material actualization. In Bazin’s work, of course, this materiality—through the indexical capacity of film representation—is intimately connected to the project of mimesis. The “idea,” in a further turn of the paradox that Bazin is playing with, revolves around nothing other than such “complete representation”: “In their imaginations they saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality; they saw in a trice the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief.”¹³ In Orwell, too, imagination takes flight from, but thus also emerges in relation to, the real—and his distinction between the (wavering) inception of flight and the (mechanical) consummation of flying works to capture a related tension between the generative, and precarious, impulse of thought (equivalent to that short-lived, fifty-nine-second flight) and its systematic, rote extension. Orwell’s most iconic affirmation of realism—his aphoristic dictum that “good prose is like a window-pane”—is written in 1946, the year in which Bazin’s essay appears, and also the same year as the publication of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*. A

¹² André Bazin, “The Myth of Total Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 234, 236.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 235.